The images speak for themselves? Reading refugee coffee-table books

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The practice of collecting photographs of refugees in 'coffee-table books' is a practice of framing and thus inflecting the meanings of those images. The 'refugee coffee-table books' discussed here each approach their topic with a particular style and emphasis. Nonetheless, while some individual images offer productive readings which challenge stereotypes of refugees, the format of the collections and the accompanying written text work to produce spectacle rather than empathy in that they implicitly propagate a world view divided along imperialist lines, in which the audience is expected to occupy the position of privileged viewing agent while refugees are positioned as viewed objects.

To suffer is one thing; another thing is living with the photographed images of suffering. (Sontag 1979, 20).

Judith Kumin, in the foreword to Exodus: 50 Million People on the Move (Signum-Fotografie et al. 1997), a large-format collection of photographs of refugees, celebrates the ability of images to attract a viewer’s attention and to evoke understanding: ‘Pictures are often better suited than words to arouse our interest in what happens to others.’ She goes on to ask: ‘What does it really mean to be a refugee?’ and to respond to her own question: ‘In this book the refugees themselves give us the answer’ (Signum-Fotografie et al. 1997, 26).

As Allan Sekula (1982) has noted, the meaning of a photograph cannot be discovered outside the context in which it is published. The photographs discussed in this article are published in large-format books with glossy pages, in which careful consideration has been given to format and presentation. They are also explicitly photographs of people defined as ‘refugees’. It is therefore implied that the value of the images is both in their status as photographic art, and in their status as social reportage and humanitarian record. The very existence of such books, in which the suffering of others is made into an aesthetic object, seems to invite questions about the politics and ethics of collecting and consuming images. This article is concerned with the implications of such texts and of the statements, such as Kumin’s, by which they are framed. What, indeed, are the effects of portraying refugees through photography? And in what sense can these effects be understood as messages from refugees ‘themselves’? If these images speak, on whose behalf do they speak and what do they say?

According to the attitude expressed by Kumin, photographs have an immediacy and intimacy that engages the viewer. In the worldwide project of arousing sympathy for refugees, such photographs seem to offer a field for the development and expression of empathy. They draw on the tradition of socially concerned photography which has sought to provide a factual record of the suffering of the poor, and on a tradition of humanist discourse which emphasises the value of perceiving and portraying the ‘humanity’ of people across the globe. 1 ‘Documentary photography has come to represent the social conscience of liberal sensibility presented in visual imagery’ (Rosler 1989, 303). But as Rosler emphasises, the politics of sympathy are complicated. In this article I argue that even as they appear to promote intimacy and empathy, ‘refugee coffee-table books’ emphasise, in both concept and content, the distance between the refugees on display and the readers of the book. ‘The refugee’ is a figure which is always imagined in the context of borders. And the books examined here are constructed both visually and verbally so as to make it clear that one of the most persistent and telling of these lines of demarcation is that between ‘us’ and ‘them’. The end result is that in spite of their professed humanitarian concern, such books seem designed to reiterate, rather than challenge, the uneven distribution of suffering across the globe.

I will state at the outset that I do not mean to legislate altogether against the production of images of suffering. As commentators, including Susan Sontag (2003), Kleinman and Kleinman (1997) and Judith Butler (2004), have pointed out, invisibility does little to help victims of atrocity and injustice. People living on the
margins often struggle to be heard and seen, and the denial of representation can thus be a damaging injustice in itself. It is, however, precisely because of this that it is important to look carefully at the ways in which such images are presented. Here I discuss several examples of one particular method of propagating images of the victims of war, disaster and genocide: the coffee-table book. It is a form in which the immediacy of war journalism is replaced by the retrospective portrayal of events, and thus seems designed to promote an emotional response rather than immediate political intervention. What, then, are the precise forms of engagement encouraged by these texts? My focus here is not only on the existence of such texts, but also on the ways in which they are inflected. The criticisms made here are offered the hope and belief that other, more productive representational structures are possible.

I examine three books: *Images of Exile* (UNHCR 1991), published by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR); *Migrations* (Salgado 2000), a vast project by internationally prominent Brazilian documentary photographer Sebastião Salgado; and *Exodus* (Signum Fotografie et al. 1997), produced by Signum Fotografie, a photographic agency devoted entirely to the portrayal of refugees. Each book is large format and almost entirely pictorial. Together, they contain something in the order of 1000 photographs. It has not been possible, therefore, to elaborate on all the nuances of meaning available. I have focussed on recurring themes which have implications for the ways in which ‘refugee’ is produced as a meaningful figure. Read as rhetorical projects, these books seem to propose that photography alone is a sufficient means through which such refugees can be known and described. The existence of such books, each representing many years of work, also declares refugees as a significant topic of interest among documentary photographers. Refugees, it seems, are exemplary subjects for documentary photography, and conversely, documentary photography has been one influential factor in the construction of the refugee.

In reading these texts, I draw on Mieke Bal’s concept of *expository discourse*. Bal (1996) defines this discourse as a discourse of display. It involves an implied speaking subject, the ‘expository agent’, who not only tells about an object, but ‘shows’ it. Hence an expository statement is not only a constative statement, telling what happened, but is one in which the object spoken about is also in some way present. As Bal puts it, the expository gesture implicitly says: ‘Look! ... That’s how it is’ (Bal 1996, 2). The paradigm of expository discourse, according to Bal, is the museum exhibition, but the books I examine here also undertake such a project. They put photographs of refugees on display, and in doing so purport to tell us something about both refugees and photography, whether purely visually or through the use of accompanying textual arguments and captions. The statements made through this combination of visual and textual representation are supported by the presence of the photographs as visual evidence. They both illustrate the argument and enhance its status as ‘truth’, by appearing to be mimetic images of ‘what really is’, ‘out there’. Expository discourse is thus intrinsically realist in tone (Bal 1996).

To analyse a piece of expository discourse as such, it is necessary to look not only at the content of the images, but at the way those images are framed. An exposition is not only a collection of images, it is also a collection of images presented in a certain format, with a suggested order of viewing, and with accompanying interpretations (Bal 1996). The following analysis, then, considers not only particular photographs, but also the effects of each collection of photographs as a whole, and the relationships between these photographs and the accompanying written text, or in some cases absence of written text. Each statement (or absence of explicit statement) conveys particular messages which inflect the meanings of the photographs, propagating in the process a particular view of the truth status of the images, and of photography in general. Such framing does not prevent an audience from making its own interpretations out of the inevitable polysemy of all texts, and of visual imagery in particular, but it works to encourage some readings and to inhibit or even foreclose others. One of the ways in which it does so is by positioning the audience in certain ways in relation to the material on offer. Indeed, I suggest here that one of the implicit effects of expository discourse is that it positions the viewed as being precisely that: ‘on offer’ for the consumption of an interpretive viewer.

As Bal points out, academic discourse itself often draws on the expository tradition (1996). This article is not exempt: like the books I criticise here it shows, and frames, pictures of refugees and is thus potentially implicated in the very dynamic that it seeks to challenge. As Bal puts it, it is impossible to ‘show’ something and to say ‘no’ to it at the same time. Visual presentation, particularly when embedded in the kind of realist assumptions which tend to accompany both refugee discourse and photography, is ultimately affirmative: it says ‘this exists’. The reproduction of photographs here, then, provides evidence for my viewpoint, and/or the
chance for readers to make alternative interpretations of the images. But it also provides visual ‘evidence’ of the very ideas I identify as problematic – for example, the suggestion that the state of ‘refugeeness’ consists of a passive, speechless and anonymous visual availability. In addition, the text of this article does little to address the absence of commentary from people who identify as ‘refugees’. Its viewpoint remains that of an outsider, and thus replicates to some extent the problems of exposition. I include this comment in order to try to mitigate these effects. I have also tried to include images which can be read as offering a challenge to the expected viewing positions. This may mean that my sample is not a ‘representative’ one. Nor could I hope to reproduce here the effect not only of individual photographs, but also of leafing through 500 of them in a row, an effect which inevitably inflects the meaning of any individual photograph. In other words, this article is, like the texts it examines, a particular reading. I concentrate here on the question of what kind of worldview accumulates through the repetition on a mass scale of such images, and through the ways in which those images are framed and presented. In other words, this article seeks to add an extra frame to the one through which these pictures were originally presented, a frame which tries to make visible not only refugees but the assumptions surrounding them, assumptions visible as both visual and verbal representational practices.

**IMAGES OF EXILE: REFUGEES AS RECIPIENTS OF AID**

*Images of Exile*, a text produced by the UNHCR to celebrate 40 years of the 1951 Geneva Convention on the Status of Refugees, offers a useful introduction to the visual dynamics at work in the construction of such a thing as ‘the refugee’. The inside front cover offers the UNHCR’s summary of this state of being:

> When men, women and children decide to leave their homelands and to abandon their roots, it is after a period of agonizing appraisal. It is because they are finally convinced that this is their only chance of survival. Some flee political terror, others actual violence. Many flee to escape persecution because of their race, religion or political beliefs.

> They are all victims.
Nobody takes the road to exile lightheartedly, because to flee means to be uprooted. Despite the pain of leaving, the alternative – staying behind – could be far worse.

When all other rights have been violated, one remaining right – the right to seek asylum – is the only hope. If all goes well a safe haven will be reached and a life rebuilt. (UNHCR 1991, inside front cover).

Apparently the state of being a refugee can be described in these simple terms, despite the vastly different histories and events which cause displacement in disparate locations around the globe. The assumptions encoded in this statement are those which recur throughout the various discursive fields through which ‘refugees’ are managed and discussed. First, there is the assumption that there is indeed a kind of person that can be called a refugee, and that this person thinks and feels in a particular way. Second, that ‘these people’ are ‘all victims’. Third, that the discourse through which this problem should be addressed is that of human rights. And finally, that in spite of the myriad political, historical and personal trajectories involved in displacement from different locations around the globe, the state of being a refugee can be characterised by a standard narrative form: persecution, flight, exile, and finally rescue and resettlement.6 (As the global body with the responsibility for arranging this outcome, the UNHCR does not emphasise the alternatives if all does not ‘go well’.)

The inside front cover of the book is followed by two double-page photographic images. The first (Figure 1) shows a refugee camp, seen from the hillside so that we look down upon the many canvas tents which stretch to the far horizon, the stones of the foreground giving way to a dusty haze in the background, marked by tracks along which distant figures seem to walk forlornly. There are clearly emblazoned UNHCR logos on the foreground tents, which, positioned up the hill from the rest of the camp, are perhaps the camp administration. Viewers are thus introduced to a hierarchy of viewpoints – looking at the UNHCR, which in turn looks down upon the refugees it manages.

The second introductory photograph (Figure 2) shows a crowd of women in long printed skirts, accompanied by
occasional men and children, walking down a dusty road past a densely crowded settlement of straw buildings. Each carries a glowing white bag on her head. No captions are given for these photographs, but the 'photo credits' at the end of the book say that this is 'After food distribution to Cambodian refugees at Site 8, Thai-Cambodian border, 1986', while the first photograph is 'Hawai refugee village for Afghan refugees, North-West Frontier Province, Pakistan, 1989' (UNHCR 1991, 126).

These two introductory photographs reinforce the rhetoric of the inside-front cover, now inflected with signifiers of 'Third World' poverty. Refugees appear as a homogenised, faceless crowd of what Ghassan Hage has called, referring to the value of such images in the 'First World' cultural imaginary, 'Third World-looking people' (Hage 1998, 58). In neither photograph is a face visible – in the first the people are all too far away, in the second they have their backs turned. They are surrounded by signifiers of poverty, transience, and in the second photograph, exoticism. Clear enough in the foreground to show their patterned skirts and headscarves, these women walk into a distance which is softened by mist or dust, trees showing faintly through the softness, a symbolism which to this viewer at least suggests that they walk into 'the mists of time', outside contemporary history or specific location. And in both images, the involvement of aid organisations is literally foregrounded.

The rhetorical argument presented by the first few pages of *Image of Exile*, then, is largely one which positions the UNHCR as the object of discussion, with images of refugees serving as the metonymic representation of the UNHCR’s work. The effect is to position refugees as, by definition, passive recipients of aid. Indeed, given that the UNHCR is the body that has the main responsibility for both defining refugees and aiding them, this relationship between the existence of refugees and their passive receipt of aid is entirely naturalised. The result is an essentialism, which suggests that 'refugeeness' is an intrinsic state of being, rather than the effect of particular and changeable historical and political processes. The lack of specific geographical or historical information both exacerbates and naturalises the effect.

There is a clear distribution of subject positions encoded in these paradigmatic scenes. There are those who examine refugees, define them and manage them, and there are those who are defined as the problem, and must wait patiently for aid, incarceration or deportation. Visually, refugees are positioned by a panoramic gaze as manageable objects located within a field of view. This hierarchy of viewpoints is a recurring feature both of refugee discourse and of photography. As Abigail Solomon-Godeau has reminded us in an essay appropriately titled 'Who is Speaking Thus?' (in Solomon-Godeau, 1991), documentary photography partakes of a monocular perspective which perceives the world as a panorama laid out before a singular and commanding viewpoint. Indeed, the camera was designed precisely to reproduce this perspective, which since the Renaissance had become so prevalent in the visual arts as to appear 'natural' (Solomon-Godeau, 1991, 181). The reproduction of this visual structure in refugee discourse is both a sign of the influence photographic images have had in the construction of 'the refugee', and a product of the fact that such epistemic relations are deeply coded into modernity.

Solomon-Godeau describes the implications of the reproduction of this viewpoint within documentary photography thus:

We must ask whether the place of the documentary subject as it is constructed for the more powerful spectator is not always, in some sense, given in advance. We must ask, in other words, whether the documentary act does not involve a double act of subjugation: first, in the social world that has produced its victims; and second, in the regime of the image produced within and for the same system that engenders the conditions it then re-presents. (Solomon-Godeau 1991, 176, emphasis in the original)

In other words, ‘dominant social relations are inevitably both reproduced and reinforced in the act of imaging those who do not have access to the means of representation themselves’ (Solomon-Godeau 1991, 180).

The structure of expository discourse must be understood as one of the means by which this ‘place of the documentary subject’ is constructed. Expository discourse positions in certain ways not only the object or person displayed, but also the implied author of the exposition and the intended audience:

In expositions a ‘first person,’ the expositor, tells a ‘second person,’ the visitor, about a ‘third person’, the object on display, who does not participate in the conversation. But unlike many other constative speech acts, the object, although mute, is present.... The 'first person' remains invisible. The 'second person', implicitly, has a potential 'first-person' position....
as a respondent; his or her response to the exposing is the primary and decisive condition for the exposing to happen at all. The ‘third person’, silenced by the discursive situation, is the most important element, the only one visible. (Bal 1996, 3–4, emphases in the original)

It can be seen that this structure of speaking and listening positions is precisely that identified above as crucial to the production of ‘the refugee’ as a recognisable figure – and a figure inextricably associated with passivity. The world constructed by expository discourse is one in which those who speak are not visible, while those who are on display are not expected to speak. Expository discourse, including the display of photographs of ‘others’, is not only an exercise in ‘humanising’, or creating ‘sympathy’ for, those others, it also an exercise in defining the difference between ‘us’ and ‘them’. ‘We’, the exposition implicitly argues, are those who look. ‘They’ are those who are looked at.

Martha Rosler, in her influential essay on documentary photography, notes that ‘Documentary, as we know it, carries (old) information about a group of powerless people to another group addressed as socially powerful’ (1989, 307). She names the milieu in which this occurs as ‘imperialism’ (1989, 321). Such an invocation would seem particularly relevant when the project involves the production of images of those from what is usually (and problematically) called the ‘Third World’, for the consumption of an audience assumed to live far away from such problems. Arthur and Joan Kleinman argue that suffering has become a highly tradeable commodity on the international media market. Images of suffering in the ‘Third World’ not only provide sources of profit, fame and Pulitzer prizes for individual photographers and media companies, they also reinforce a binary view of the world which implies that suffering takes place ‘elsewhere’.

One message that comes across from viewing suffering from a distance is that for all the havoc in Western society, we are somehow better than this African society. We gain in moral status and some of our organizations gain financially and politically, while those whom we represent, or appropriate, remain where they are, moribund, surrounded by vultures. This ‘consumption’ of suffering in an era of so-called ‘disordered capitalism’ is not so very different from the late nineteenth-century view that the savage barbarism in pagan lands justified the valuing of our own civilization at a higher level of development – a view that authorized colonial exploitation. Both are forms of cultural representation in which the moral, the commercial, and the political are deeply involved in each other. (Kleinman and Kleinman 1997, 8)

It is no coincidence that Mieke Bal defines expository discourse as reaching its height during the Victorian era, the age of the museum and of ‘High Imperialism’ (Bal 1996). It is also no coincidence that photography assumed its importance during the same period. That the division between speaking, looking subject and silenced object should be at work in relation to such a modern phenomenon as ‘refugees’ suggests not only that Western epistemology and traditions of representation are deeply embedded in colonialist histories, but that the figure of the refugee itself is implicated in ongoing relations of domination. The image of the dislocated and suffering person can be used to bolster the subjectivity of the privileged viewer, while those in whose name the images are made continue to be silenced, objectified and finally obscured altogether in the name of the project of producing global truths.

**MIGRATIONS: TIMELESS MONUMENTS**

*Migrations* is the product of six years spent by Salgado photographing migrants and refugees. The result undoubtedly demonstrates that Salgado is an enormously skilled photographer. There has been much debate about whether his photographs can be described as beautiful (Alexanian 2000; Kimmelman 2001; Sontag 2003). They seem to invoke Walter Benjamin’s caustic comment about the tendency for photography to aestheticise.

[Photography] is now incapable of photographing a tenement or a rubbish-heap without transfiguring it. Not to mention a river dam or an electric cable factory: in front of these, photography can only say, ‘How beautiful’… It has succeeded in turning abject poverty itself, by handling it in a modish, technically perfect way, into an object of enjoyment. (Benjamin 1972, 94–5)

(I must add here that there are several photographs of rubbish heaps in *Migrations*, one of which I will discuss below.)

As Sontag (2003) points out, it is common, particularly in relation to Salgado’s work, to suggest that beauty is inappropriate in representations of suffering, since it threatens to produce an aesthetic response in place of a moral or political one. Other commentators point out...
that it is the beauty which encourages more people to look at the images and remember them (Kimmelman 2001). Both these arguments, while they disagree about the most effective means, agree that the purpose of the photographs is to induce an emotional response in the viewer – preferably one of compassion. But what is achieved by this invocation of compassion in the viewer, almost always characterised as somehow being good for both viewer and viewed? As Lauren Berlant describes it in discussing the media proliferation of images of exploited sweatshop workers, the assumption seems to be that the circulation of such images ‘has to be a good thing, because it produces feeling and with it something at least akin to consciousness that can lead to action’ (1999, 49, emphases in the original).

But much can go astray with this projected progression from feeling to action. Not least, as Berlant argues, is the tendency for such images, which always seem to depict something occurring ‘elsewhere’ and at a distance, to induce mourning – a distinctly non-active response. Summarising Freud’s essay ‘Mourning and Melancholia’ (1991), Berlant points out that mourning is the response to the sense that an object is lost.

Mourning is what happens when a grounding object is lost, is dead, no longer living (to you). Mourning is an experience of irreducible boundedness: I am here, I am living, he is dead, I am mourning. It is a beautiful, not sublime, experience of emancipation: mourning supplies the subject the definitive perfection of a being no longer in flux. It takes place over a distance: even if the object who induces the feeling of loss and helplessness is neither dead nor at any great distance from where you are. In other words, mourning can also be an act of aggression, of social deathmaking: it can perform the evacuation of significance from actually-existing subjects. (Berlant 1999, 51)

One does not try to help the already dead. And so there is a risk that Salgado’s pictures, unparalleled in provoking feeling, also tend to provoke resignation and passivity. Sontag suggests that all photographs produce this sense of temporal distance. By freezing a single moment of time, they render even the most immediately present person or event into a signifier of the past. Photography is thus not only intrinsically about death, but about the collection of pieces of the past: in other words, nostalgia.

As the fascination that photographs exercise is a reminder of death, it is also an invitation to sentimentality. Photographs turn the past into an object of tender regard, scrambling moral distinctions and disarming historical judgments by the generalized pathos of looking at time past. (Sontag 1979, 71)

It is, of course, possible to make photographs which problematise this relation to time. But many of Salgado’s images seem rather to capitalise on it. In part this effect is produced by his use of archetypal imagery. The print on page 74,12 for example, showing half a dozen people walking in different directions along a dirt road in Afghanistan, one woman’s burqa flowing in sculptured folds in the wind, while the long shadows of evening or early morning dramatically pick out a series of tall bombed-out buildings dominating the background, immediately evokes not just the exotic ‘East’, but images of long-lost ancient civilisations in ruins.13 The archetypal style of the images makes them multi-layered, but at the same time produces a sense of timelessness which is easily read both as inevitability and as invoking nostalgia, with the latter’s tendency to emphasise the distance between the viewer and (any responsibility for) the geo-political realities that have created this particular scene. In another image a bearded man is soaping himself on a railway siding. In the background, parked semi-trailers provide a blurred industrial context, but the focus of the picture is the way the soap in the man’s hair picks out its sculptured form with intense sharpness. Combined with his muscled arms, naked torso and narrowed, thoughtful gaze seen in profile, the effect is uncannily that of a classical Greek statue. On page 245, a black woman is shown wearing only a waistcloth into which is tied a thoughtful-looking child. The woman bends forward over her mattock, framed by lush vegetation seemingly as tall as she is, while the slanting light picks out highlights in the grasses surrounding her, and she appears perhaps as an earth mother surrounded by signs of fertility. These images refer not to historical contingency, but to timeless, archetypal images of humanity’s mythical origins. It is difficult to see how they might support Salgado’s written argument, offered in the introduction, that inequality, urbanisation and globalisation are ‘of our own making’ (2000, 8).

The nostalgic effect is enhanced by the soft, slightly purple toning of the photographic reproductions. It is not sepia, but somehow seems to invoke sepia, more than the greyish newsprint black in which the other books discussed here are printed. One Internet reviewer had the following reaction to the black and white:

The pictures remind me of photographs I saw as a child … my father, who was a child of the
Great Depression and a veteran of World War II, kept a box of photographs filled with images from the 1930s and 1940s, a box I would periodically sift through. They were black-and-white photos of his youth.... They were all black-and-white. And I was now living in a color world...

Looking at Salgado’s photographs brings back a similar feeling: that this is something that no longer exists, a stark, black-and-white world where people live in squalor, where they bathe in mud and where every field is bare and every road a heap of dirt.

Perhaps that is why Salgado is chronicling these human tragedies in black-and-white to give viewers a sense of how ugly and desperate these lives are, to suggest that we are living in the future, in a full color world, and a large swathe of humanity is still trapped in the Great Depression, in war, in struggles for daily existence (Barboza 2001).

Even the less archetypal images, then, are easily inserted into a temporal narrative, one which is easily extended into the conclusion that these displaced people are not only aesthetically, but ‘developmentally’ positioned in the past: an attitude deeply embedded in both imperialist epistemology and contemporary development discourse. To be clear, I am not intending to criticise Salgado’s images here on the grounds that they are beautiful. To legislate against beauty as such does not seem to me to be the point. The point here is that the particular forms this beauty takes, in this context, reinforce discursive assumptions which, as I have argued, work only to justify the continued positioning of the ‘Third World’ as temporally ‘behind’ and therefore evolutionarily or developmentally ‘backward’. As Sontag puts it, the problem in Salgado’s pictures is ‘their focus on the powerless, reduced to powerlessness’ (Sontag 2003, 70).

However, there are photographs in Migrations that achieve an integration of aesthetics and analysis in which both work together to problematise the photographic project rather than to reinforce its most essentialising tendencies. In my encounter with the ‘rubbish heap’ on page 206, for example, I see at first rubbish, covering the floor of a large room, backlit by glowing windows. It is only after gazing for a moment that I realise that those round things are skulls, and that the mouldering rags must have been clothing. This rubbish heap is an unredeemed killing field. It is not one of Salgado’s more romantic photographs – the tone is very straightforward – but if I had seen beauty at first, that sight is now rendered tasteless by the revelation of the subject matter. In this way this photograph can be read as narrating its own critique of the practice of turning atrocity into aesthetics.

And what of the image on page 195? Here three small African children are lined up, folded into a striped blanket so that only their eyes show. All gaze at the camera, but I am captivated by the look of the central child, eyes impossibly round in a moment of what can only be sheer terror. These eyes seem to enlarge infinitely, breaking the very borders of the photographic print, and to position the viewer, standing in the place of the camera, as the source of that terror. The sentimentality of an image of tiny, innocent black children lined up is broken by this gaze. It is a moment of pure dissolution. This is not a matter of subjectifying the refugee, with all the implications of the sovereign, unitary subject invoked by that effort. I feel I am witnessing the radical cracking open of the subject, in which viewer and viewed become inseparably locked together in a moment of violence and terror, a moment which, tellingly, cannot be separated from the moment of photographing.

There is, then, a potential for such photographs to cut through the proliferating representation of refugees as objects, by affecting the viewing subject strongly enough that the photograph itself seems to have an agency, to ‘speak back’ in some way. But it needs to be remembered that the subject whose perception of the world is enhanced here is the viewing subject, the person who is able to buy or to borrow this volume and peruse it at leisure. What can this really achieve for refugees? Was the photographic encounter enlightening for them too? Or is the packaging of the experience of authentic dislocation in miniaturised form merely an exercise in commodification, in which, as Rey Chow warns, the ‘surplus value’ (Chow 1993, 30) of ‘their’ suffering can become ‘our’ meaningful experience? My next example addresses this issue.

**EXODUS: AGENCY AND OBJECTIVITY**

*Exodus: 50 Million People on the Move* (Signum-Fotografie et al. 1997) explicitly attempts to respond to the kind of critique of documentary photography that I have articulated here. Indeed, Hans Christoph Buch’s opening essay seems very keen to pre-empt the discussion:

The SIGNUM photographers do not wish to shock but to enlighten. They show living people...

in all their dignity and beauty. Here, the individual is more than a drop in a vast ocean of misery, and war is not depicted as an anonymous twist of fate visited upon a people like some natural disaster – indeed, it has a name and an address. The third world does not appear as a conglomeration of hopeless misery but as a creative chaos in which people with imagination and a talent for improvisation find a way to survive. The slum dwellers of Monrovia, the residents of refugee camps in Bosnia or Sri Lanka and the homeless people living in the ruins of Grozny or Kabul are not presented as recipients of aid and passive objects but as subjects who, under conditions unimaginable for us, gain mastery over a life that is more than mere survival. (Signum-Fotografie et al. 1997, 30)

When compared with the other books addressed here, the photographs in Exodus do offer a noticeable sense of human agency and historical specificity. To a large extent this effect is created by the emphasis on images of activity. While the migrants portrayed by Salgado often stand and gaze hauntingly at the camera, or walk dejectedly past, the refugees in Exodus are shown engaged in every activity of daily life: singing in church, staring from behind prison doors, sleeping, carrying flags, carrying children, eating in cafes on the street, eating behind barred windows, watching the camera, running, demonstrating, swimming, in hospital, flying kites, waiting, wearing mini skirts, wearing hair curlers, wearing handcuffs, blind, on crutches, repairing cars, crying on a bus, washing pots, writing, sitting pensively, pumping water, baking bread, panning for diamonds. They are easily conceived as thinking, decision-making beings, rather than just victims.

In addition, while Salgado’s photographs tend to show the suffering of refugees as though it were a vast force of nature, the Signum photographers more often include the techniques of control which contribute to this suffering within the photographic frame. The photograph on pages 22–23, for example (Figure 3), shows two men in the back seat of a van. The strongly symmetrical composition of the picture is given tension by the lines of the seatbelts, which draw my eye inexorably downward, from the man on the left’s outward gaze to where two sets of handcuffs lie on the seat at the centre of the picture. This makes me look again. Yes, both men are wearing handcuffs. A set of binoculars hanging from the back of the seat between them, and the wire barrier behind the seat, show that this is a regime of control and surveillance. Looking for the caption, I find it says ‘Refugees being returned to Poland by German border police, Bademeusel, Germany, 1996’ (Signum-Fotografie et al. 1997, 24). Such images give a sense of the political agency and historical specificity involved in producing the suffering of refugees, and show the extent to which passivity and suffering can be imposed from the outside, rather than being an inherent characteristic of ‘refugeeness’.

But although ‘war’ may have a ‘name and address’ in Exodus, these contextualising details are located well away from the photographs. Eleven pages of photographs at the beginning of the book must be leafed through before encountering any text at all. All the photographic pages in the book are without captions or even page numbers. The explanations Buch makes so much of are collected together on the double-page spread of text which introduces each chapter – offering a one-paragraph statement of the location and the conflict to be shown, a timeline which offers significant dates in the history of the conflict, and a list of captions, unmarked as such, in the lower-right corner of the left-hand page. Timeline and captions are printed in very small type, and even the chapter headings are in a light, italic typeface, as if to de-emphasise their importance. The captions themselves are very minimal, often giving little more than a location, such as ‘Cholera station in Monrovia, Liberia, 1996’ (Signum-Fotografie et al. 1997, 68). Matching caption with photograph, in the absence of page numbers, is a tiresome process of leafing back to the chapter introduction, and then counting forwards page by page. The overall statement seems to be that textual information is not important. These photographs are expected to ‘speak for themselves’. The foreword quoted at the beginning of this article argues as much: ‘What does it really mean to be a refugee? In this book the refugees themselves give us the answer’. The tone of the exposition presented by Exodus, then, is one of hands-off non-involvement on the part of the expository agent. We cannot tell you the truth, the authors say – you must read it for yourselves in the photographs. They can tell you more than we can. The effect is to enhance the tone of objectivity. No subjective viewpoint, the viewer is told, has mediated these photographs. You can encounter them as they are, and by extension, encounter refugees as they are, unmediated.

At the same time, the photographers are given credit for offering their own subjective take on this objective reality. Mark Sealy, in his essay at the back of the book, reinforces this argument that the photographs...
themselves can narrate: ‘The strength of these photographs lies in their capacity to tell us small stories, narratives, that give us, the viewer, the chance to piece together and contemplate the overall scenario’ (Signum-Fotografie et al. 1997, 205). Sealy goes on to give page 47 as an example of a photograph offering a narrative (Figure 4). Here, he says, photographer Andreas Herzau has empowered a mother and child in Rwanda by photographing them from below.

From Herzau’s photographs we gain a sense of the tragic scope of the situation, but we are also introduced to more detailed human moments which show these people as dignified subjects in their own right. His photograph of the mother and child on the bed of the shelter staring back at the camera is both confrontational and elevating. Photographing the woman and child from below, he has empowered the mother and child by providing them with the opportunity to look down on us, creating an uneasy tension within the photograph for us to resolve. (Signum-Fotografie et al. 1997, 205)

On reading this description I expected to see this woman and child on a bunk bed. Instead, they are positioned only slightly above the viewer, and at some distance, so that they fill only a small portion of the frame. They hardly loom, and appear isolated by the space of the tent that surrounds them. Even so, I can read this woman’s gaze as somewhat confronting. But if Herzau saw something powerful in this solemn woman, and attempted to convey it through perspective, this is not Sealy’s interpretation. Rather, Herzau is credited with giving her the power to look down: apparently ‘he has empowered’ them. The tension offered in the photograph is thus cancelled by the congratulatory voice of the expository agent, which gives the power, and the credit for the subjectivity of the refugee, back to the photographer.

Such an act of appropriation, in which the ‘other’ is apparently granted ‘subjectivity’ by the benevolence of the expository agent, is an imperialist move. To demonstrate its dynamics, I would like to offer my own narrativised photographic reading. Looking for a problematisation of the photographer’s position and a depiction of refugees as agents, I find a productive story in the photograph on page 95 (Figure 5). It shows a group of teenage girls gathered in a square, fashionably dressed and with braided hair. They seem to be enjoying posing for the photograph. One, cigarette in hand, bends over, swivels her mini-skirted hips toward the camera, and engages the photographer with a coquettish gaze. A second leans casually against the stonework, hand on hip. A third girl, in sandshoes and shorts, laughingly sends up the first girl’s pose by swinging a pointed knee at her behind. According to the caption (located 9 pages back), these are ‘prostitutes, Havana, Cuba, 1994’ (Signum-Fotografie et al. 1997, 86). This caption complicates the reading of the image. Is the central girl hamming it up for the camera, or is she soliciting the attention of the photographer? Read the second way, her attitude brings him into the picture, not as sympathetic viewer, but as potential client; the camera is no longer the reason for the encounter, but simply part of the trappings which contrast his wealth with her financial need. The reworking of the photographic moment as potential monetary transaction gives her a role as active participant, whose pose is not necessarily given for free. At the same time the third girl, with her pointed gesture, makes it clear that this attitude of desire for the West on the part of a young ‘Third World’ girl is a pose and a fiction, not to be taken seriously. Rather than appearing as simple innocent victims, these girls emphasise, capitalise on and laugh at their construction as saleable authentic others whose desire is for the West. Continuing the joke, one might notice that in this context, to give the photographer credit for these girls’ subjectivity would position him as nothing so much as a pimp. It is one thing to perceive a photographed other as a desiring agent. It is another to take the credit, financial or otherwise, for the sale of that desire.

Exodus’ celebration of the subjectivity of the photographer as well as the objectivity of the exposition produces a conflict within the text over the truth value of the meanings produced, a conflict which problematises the documentary project.

Western documentary photographers are often accused of being purely objective, of providing a cold snapshot of someone else’s existence, photographed from a purely voyeuristic first-world perspective. In many respects this is true. However, it is crucial to document and record world events. It is essential that we get some sense of what these events look like above and beyond the immediacy of television. The photograph allows us to transfer our own meaning to the given situation in a quiet, considered manner.

Projects like Exodus provide the space for contemplation. They open doors to a world in which reality and meaning are contested, where the individual can choose to engage himself or
simply to walk away. The photographs in Exodus are therefore catalysts. The combination of photographer, subject and viewer can crystallize and produce intense new meanings for the way in which we conceive our world and construct our futures. (Signum-Fotografie et al. 1997, 205)

As well as propagating a worldview in which ‘they’ suffer while ‘we’, ‘the individual[s]’ can choose to contemplate or walk away, the somewhat contradictory nature of this justification addresses the conflict at the heart of documentary photography. Here, we are told, are artistic photographs, photographs that do not try to fix reality into a cold objectivity, that allow reality to be ‘contested’. And yet, they are photographs that allow ‘us’, who apparently need to know, to see ‘what these events look like’ – in reality.14 The positioning remains one in which the ‘Third World’ plays the role of objective reality so that the ‘First World’ viewer can remain the one who is able to see, consider, create meaning and decide whether or not to be involved – the individualist subject by definition. The attempt at a critique of objectivity here allows Bal’s ‘second person’, the viewer, a share in the meaning-making activity of the invisible first-person photographer whose expository agency provides the pictures. But the ‘third persons’, the refugees on display, do not join in this questioning of reality. Rather it is their adequacy at standing in for reality that is under question.

Thus the celebrated ‘agency’ of these photographic subjects does not include access to the position of expository agent, in which they could present their own views and interpretations. In the vast majority of photographs they seem to be going about their daily life as if the photographer were not present, rather than participating in the process of meaning making. Viewers are left with the sense that they are privy to a pre-existing reality occurring ‘out there’, unaware of the photographer’s gaze. At this point the proliferation of signifiers of everyday life in Exodus begins to have an effect analogous to Barthes’ description of ‘the reality effect’ in realist literature (Barthes 1989, 141). These seemingly coincidental, uncontrived and meaningless details which attempt to bypass the tripartite structure of the sign by moving directly from signifier to referent, without the meaning implied by the signified, in fact do have a meaning – they connote ‘reality’ itself – thus confirming the verisimilitude of the text, or in this case

![Figure 5](image_url)
the image. The scopic vocabulary of *Exodus* thus makes the 'truth effect' of photography seem still more unassailable. The sheer scope of *Exodus*’ viewpoint can be read not only as the true detail of refugees’ lives, but as a celebration of the ability of these dedicated photographers to penetrate and view every detail of the truth itself.

There are, however, certain photographs in *Exodus* that seem to offer a critique of this penetrative, objectivist viewpoint. I have remarked that several photographs include within the frame the techniques of control and surveillance that are imposed on refugees, and these photographs work against essentialist understandings of refugees’ suffering. There is also a sense in which such photographs problematise the position of the viewer. It is perhaps due to the difficulty of gaining access to the Hamburg ‘deportation arrest facility’ that the photographer must take photographs from the point of view of the authorities – from outside the fences, from the front seat of the prison vans. But the effect is to align the viewer’s line of vision in parallel with the viewpoint of those in power. This can work to naturalise the perspective of the powerful – indeed, that point has been a part of my critique here. But when the authority included in the frame is visibly armed, or ominously rubber-gloved, and the refugee is physically disempowered or intimidated, such an alignment sits uncomfortably with a discourse of compassion. At their best, such images might encourage reflexivity on the part of the viewer. One of the most telling of such images in this respect is on page 110, ‘identity check in the Hamburg Deportation Facility’ (Signum Fotografie 1997, 97), in which we look over the shoulder of a guard who aims his camera at a seated asylum seeker (Figure 6). The guard’s arm forms a dark frame within the picture, in which the refugee is wholly enclosed. It is difficult not to make an equation here between the visible photographer making an identity mugshot, and the documentary photographer making his statement on the condition of refugees. Their viewpoints, and their methods, are aligned. Read this way, the photograph suggests that the act of humanising refugees through concerned photography and the act of dehumanising them through imprisonment share a common regime of visual surveillance.

In general, photographs which produce such a self-criticism of the structure of expository discourse should be productive (Bal 1996). At least the imposed nature of the silence of the ‘third-person’ objects whose images are so instructive for the second-person viewer is here all too visible. But I have reservations. Was the asylum seeker shown on page 110, located at the end of a converging series of lenses, in a position to have freely consented to his exposure? What about the photograph on page 199, in which one man seems to be trying to hide his face? I have chosen not to reproduce this image, nor another apparently involving an imminent strip search, since I cannot know how much intrusion, humiliation and possible danger is involved. Perhaps these photographs were elaborately staged. Perhaps the people depicted chose to allow the photographer access to their moments of humiliation because they wanted to alert the world to the way in which they were being treated. But no reference is made to such arrangements in the text. The assumption, therefore, is that the viewers will not be interested in the consent, or lack thereof, of the photographed subjects. They are not expected to wonder whether these images, in the process of educating the viewer about the objectification of the viewed, might be sacrificing the very people in whose name they are constructed. In other words, the status of the ‘subjects’ of the photographs as ‘subjects’ is forgotten. Refugees are reduced to performing as symbols of their own persecution.

This is precisely the dynamic of ‘objectivism’ as defined by Bourdieu:

Objectivism constitutes the social world as a spectacle presented to an observer who takes up a ‘point of view’ on the action, who stands back so as to observe it and, transferring into the object the principles of his relation to the object, conceives of it as a totality intended for cognition alone, in that all interactions are reduced to symbolic exchanges. (Bourdieu 1977, 96)

In other words, it is all too easy for refugees as people to be obliterated in favour of refugees as symbol for something else. ‘The thing on display comes to stand for something else, the statement about it. It comes to mean. The thing recedes into invisibility as its sign status takes precedence to make the statement’ (Bal 1996, 4, emphases in the original). This is arguably the effect of any semiotic system of meaning, but in expository discourse the reductive effect is exacerbated by the seeming ‘presence’ of the ‘thing’, which can thus apparently be absorbed in its entire being by the signifying system.

This reductive effect is exacerbated still further by the discourse of photographic transparency in which the ‘unmediated’ presence of the image can be confused with the actual presence of the ‘refugee’. The difference
between the image and the referent is obscured, and engaging with the photograph can become an adequate substitute for engaging with the person. Thus the fact that some of these photographs can somehow tell a story stands in for the absence of actual words from these still-nameless informants: the ‘blind man in a refugee camp, Monrovia’ (Signum-Fotografie et al. 1997, 68), ‘illegal immigrants from Mexico’ (Signum-Fotografie et al. 1997, 154) or ‘woman wearing a veil, outskirts of Kabul’ (Signum-Fotografie et al. 1997, 136). Perhaps they look like subjects, but we still cannot hear their words, and they are only visually, not nominally, individuals. To suggest that this amounts to ‘the refugees themselves giv[ing] us the answer’ is to confuse the ‘speaking back’ of the image with the speaking of the image’s referent itself.

CONCLUSION

If Migrations tends to distance refugees temporally, locating them elsewhere in time, Exodus distances through a discourse of objectivism which depends on the separation between viewer and viewed. In each case refugees are reduced to symbols of something else. In Migrations they appear as metaphoric figures of the timelessness, inevitability and spirituality of human suffering. In Exodus they become metonymic figures of an objectively defined reality, the portrayal of which is necessary in order to enhance the awareness of the viewer.

The result is demonstrated by the following review from the back of a fourth refugee coffee-table book, Forced Out: The Agony of the Refugee in Our Time (Kismaric 1989):

This book is both prophecy and history, a gift from those who have witnessed the unspeakable future in our time. We must not ignore their testimony. The world that most of us know is not the real world, which is why we need a book like Forced Out. There are no other books like it. And that it exists at all, that it is so painfully eloquent, so heartbreakingly beautiful, is cause for hope. You will read it and weep, to be sure, but you won’t stop there. That’s how powerful it is. (Russell Banks quoted in Kismaric 1989, rear cover, my emphasis)

In spite of Banks’ optimism, his own comment hardly seems to induce a commitment to changing the status of
displaced people. Rather, the message of this book seems not to be a message about refugees, but a message about ‘us’ (implicitly defined as ‘not-refugees’) and ‘our’ future. Refugees are reduced to the bearers of the message, and the signifiers of the authentic ‘reality’ that viewers in the West are so sorely lacking. Indeed, it seems but a short step from needing the existence of traumatised, persecuted and displaced people – in order that they can keep us in the West alerted to the nature of the ‘real world’.

As Rey Chow points out, ‘sanctifying’ the image of the other is as reductive and essentialist as degrading it. And it also satisfies the desire of the critic, or perhaps the enlightened photographer, to demonstrate his or her own ability to see the ‘truth’.

Our fascination with the native, the oppressed, the savage, and all such figures is therefore a desire to hold on to an unchanging certainty somewhere outside our own ‘fake’ experience. It is a desire for being ‘non-duped’, which is a not-too-innocent desire to seize control.

… yes, ‘natives’ are represented as defiled images – that is the fact of our history. But must we represent them a second time by turning history ‘upside down’, this time giving them the sanctified status of the ‘non-duped’? Defilement and sanctification belong to the same symbolic order. (Chow 1993, 53)

At this point one must also confront the commodification of the image. The problem is not only that the coffee-table book is a medium through which the suffering of others is appropriated, turned into a ‘thing’ and sold for profit. It is that the surplus value of that suffering – its ‘meaning’ for the Western viewer in search of truth and authenticity – threatens to obscure and render irrelevant the existence of those who actually suffer, even as it exposes them in all their detail. This is an effect of the discourse of display. However successfully a collection of photographs can ‘educate’ its viewers, it cannot overcome the allocation of speaking positions in which the expository agent and the viewer engage in a conversation over the silent and frozen faces of the viewed. It is here that the border between ‘us’ and ‘them’ is reproduced within the very attempt to make refugees look like human subjects. Even when a photograph can be read as ‘speaking back’, this must not be equated with the speech of refugees themselves. To do so is a final act of obliteration, in which the commodified photograph no longer refers to, but entirely replaces, that which it purports to display.

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NOTES

[1] ‘What is this humanity?’ asks Susan Sontag. ‘It is a quality things have in common when they are viewed as photographs’ (1979: 111). The inauguration of this tradition of photography might be considered Edward Steichen’s ‘Family of Man’ exhibition of 1955. The founders of the genre of socially concerned photography are often named as Jacob Riis, Lewis Hine and Dorothea Lange, whose work photographing America’s poor was explicitly linked to an agenda of social reform (Rosler 1989; Solomon-Godeau 1991). As I imply here, a third precursor for the practice of refugee photography might be named as ‘colonial photography’ – the practice of photographing those defined in developmental, racial and geographic terms as ‘other’.

[2] Indeed, I will admit to being ambivalent about these books. They raise many emotional responses. Many of the images fascinate me, and some seem paradoxically to portray the very unimaginability of atrocity and horror. Some leave me feeling uncomfortable or embarrassed with what I am asked to look at, as though I have unintentionally intruded on someone’s privacy. At other times am less involved. I see what I expected so see, or, too often, I find myself simply wanting to buy a Leica and be able to produce such beautiful images myself. Finally, I sometimes find myself disappointed, as if the photographs promised a sense of encounter that they have failed to produce, leaving me aware that I still know nothing about these people: who they are, what they would say to me if we were to meet. This last feeling, I think, is productive in that it makes me aware of my own will to knowledge. Why would I expect a visual image to provide me with such knowledge, and why, indeed, should I think that I am entitled to know and see the personal lives of these strangers, simply because they are refugees? This article springs from all these feelings, but it is especially this last feeling that I do not find echoed in the commentaries and reviews that accompany the images. While the effects of voyeurism and spectatorship
are sometimes debated, I find no questioning of the transparency or informativeness of the images, or of the right of the implicitly Western viewer to knowledge and visual access. In other words I find these books silent on the issue of the culture of imperialism, and its contemporary manifestation in a worldview in which the right of the ‘developed’ to assess and intervene in the destinies of the less privileged is taken for granted.

Valerie Holman (2002) argues that news photography during the Second World War was influential in constructing the familiar features of the refugee. Liisa Malkki concurs, writing:

The visual representation of refugees appears to have become a singularly translatable and mobile mode of knowledge about them. Indeed, it is not far-fetched to say that a vigorous, transnational, largely philanthropic traffic in images and visual signs of refugeeness has gradually emerged in the last half-century. Pictures of refugees are now a key vehicle in the elaboration of a transnational social imagination of refugees. (Malkki 1997, 234)

Terence Wright (2000) notes that much of the resultant imagery draws on religious tropes, an insight which seems particularly applicable to the work of Salgado discussed below.

Of course, refugees are not present in the photographic text as corporeal or subjective entities. Hence such a text is not exactly the same as an exposition which tells the reader about an object, such as a work of art, which is physically present in a museum. It is more like an ethnographic or archaeological museum exhibit which, by showing objects made or used by a certain ‘kind of people’, apparently tells the reader about those people. Books that tell about refugees by showing pictures of refugees use expository evidence one or more steps removed from the people the books purport to show. As will become clear in this article, this distinction is an important one. For now it is necessary to note that the effectiveness of these books as exposition – as display in which we seem to be able to see what is being argued – already relies on the assumption that a photograph is a mimetic representation of external ‘reality’ – the ‘truth effect’ of the photograph.

Those interested in the point of view of one person who identifies as a refugee can visit the website of Osam Altaee, an Iraqi refugee living in Lebanon, at http://www.unhcr.info/human-buttons.htm. ‘Sam’ objects passionately to the use of photographs of refugee women and children on buttons asking for donations on the UNCHR’s website. He finds the pictures humiliating and offensive to the dignity of the people depicted, and to Islamic values, and believes that ‘the UNCHR have worked hard to establish a deep-rooted connection between poverty and refugees’ – a connection which he notes makes people surprised that he himself has access to the Internet.

Liisa Malkki (1992, 1995, 1997) has described in detail the way in which the concept of ‘refugee’ as an identifiable kind of person has been constructed through the discourses of international law, aid agencies, development studies, anthropology, refugee studies and the media. Her 1997 essay ‘Speechless Emissaries’ offers an incisive critique of the way aid workers expect refugees to be helpless victims, and the importance of visual images propagated by the media in producing such expectations. Holman (2002) also identifies passivity and poverty as significant tropes in Second World War depictions of refugees in France.

Hage defines the term ‘Third World-looking people’ as that which ‘sums up best the way the dominant Whites classify those ‘ethnics’ with very low national capital and who are invariably constructed as a ‘problem’ of some sort within all White-dominated societies’ (1998, 59).

Rosler’s critique of documentary photography was originally published in 1981, and Solomon-Godeau’s in 1987. According to Derrick Price, such critiques have resulted in many photographers abandoning both documentary photography as a socially concerned project and the belief that it can portray ‘truth’ (2000, 111). The field of refugee photography seems to be an exception to this movement. The criticisms seem only to have had the effect of occasionally making refugee photographers or their supporters defensive, as discussed below in relation to Exodus. It is interesting to note also that Price associates colour with the new forms of documentary, linking the use of black and white with a discourse of authenticity. The texts examined here remain resolutely monochrome.

Anne Maxwell (1999) discusses ways in which photography was used within the colonial project to construct and reinforce certain images of the colonised ‘other’ in opposition to the ‘European’. Anne McClintock (1995) points out that photography is also implicated in the development of imperialist epistemologies based on a voyeuristic desire to visually ‘penetrate’ the mystery of the colonised world.

For further analysis of the operation of imperialist tropes in contemporary refugee discourse, see Szőrényi 2004.

In an extended contribution to this debate, Jonathan Friday (2000) has argued that the display of beautiful images of disaster, injustice or suffering can be morally justified if it also ‘manages to transform the human evils it depicts into valuable meaning’ (2000, 358) – for example, ‘to make a point about the human condition’ (2000, 360). This seems to beg the question as to what a ‘valuable meaning’ is and who decides. I argue here that especially when the project also claims to ‘speak for’ those on display, such a focus on meaning can amount to an appropriation and a disavowal of the experience of the visible subjects in the name of the edification of the audience.
Unfortunately, for copyright reasons images from Migrations could not be reproduced here. Readers are encouraged to view the book itself, which will in any case offer a better sense of the rhetorical effects of this vast collection of photographs.

Terence Wright (2004) describes the repeated use of very similar imagery in his analysis of media coverage of Afghan refugees after the bombing of the World Trade Centre on September 11, 2001.

This division between ‘us’ and ‘them’ is based on the assumption that refugees cannot also be audiences of texts about refugees. Given the percentage of people in the English-speaking world who are in a position to self-identify as ‘refugees’ or descendents of refugees, this assumption is by no means self-evident. Rather, it is produced by the kind of discursive distancing that I am describing here, in which refugees are constructed as ‘other’ and ‘over there’ by definition.

It should not be necessary to point out that there are very valid reasons, not limited to the ethics of the encounter between photographer and subject, why an asylum seeker may not wish their photograph to be distributed. Such publicity, if it falls into the hands of the wrong authorities, can be very dangerous for the asylum seeker themselves or for their family.

Refugees and asylum seekers sometimes make this decision to sacrifice their own sensitivities in order to alert the world to their predicament – which does not render it less of a sacrifice. My point is that such acts of sacrifice are not even alluded to in the texts described here, and the visual availability of people defined as refugees is thus effectively naturalised.

A more detailed discussion of Forced Out is outside the scope of this essay. It differs significantly from those discussed here in that it includes a large component of written commentary, including some by self-identified refugees. I would argue that such inclusion of refugees as ‘authors’ significantly refigures the structure of the text. Nonetheless, as indicated by the subtitle, The Agony of the Refugee in Our Time, the overall aesthetic of Forced Out, and particularly its visual tone, is one of sensationalism.

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