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ALTERNATIVE PHOTOGRAPHIC PRACTICE
IN SYRIA

THE USE OF CITIZEN PHOTOGRAPHS AND SOCIAL
MEDIA WITHIN THE SYRIAN CIVIL WAR

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for the degree of Master of Arts by Research

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Abstract

Syrian society has been affected by one of the most complex modern conflicts for the last six years. Alongside participation in protests and riots, Syrian citizens took advantage of developing technology and access to social media, recording as many events as possible and sharing them with the world. The revolution has been an opportunity for the Syrian citizens to try to redeem their freedom, but also the power to represent themselves, showcase their life in Syria and also raise awareness of their protests through photography. Social media is the channel that offered them this chance and they have used it intensively since the start of the unrest. Still, the internet and photography are tools used by both oppressors and the oppressed in Arab countries where the unrest turned into a visual conflict as well as a military one.

This thesis analyzes the visual discourse developed by various parties involved in the Syrian conflict and considers how the immediacy of modern technologies allowed these images to be created and disseminated through social media platforms like Facebook.

Digital photography and social media have definitely changed the way we comprehend the authority of documentary photography as fundamentally realistic. Deeper understanding of the subjectiveness of the photographic medium could make us (photographers, spectators, publishers) recognize alternative photographic practices to express our own subjectivities, assimilate the subjectivities of others and acknowledge documentary photography as a creative treatment of reality.

Key words: appropriation, citizen photographs, democracy, documentary photography, photography, Syria

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Alex Beldea

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Introduction

Power, a resource of the human body, must be extracted; without possessing, exploiting, and completely colonising millions of individual, anonymous bodies, the elite cannot build upon its power base. That is the secret of the powerful/powerless relationship. Once this is known, resistance becomes possible (Morrison, 2009, p. 57)

One of the most complex modern conflicts has been dissolving Syrian society for the last six years, causing distress and casualties on a daily basis since its outbreak in March 2011. Related to numerous protests from places such as Bahrain, Egypt, Jordan, Libya or Yemen, the Syrian uprising joined the movement which originated in Tunisia, following the suicide of Mohamed Bouazizi in the town of Sidi Bouzid on 17 December 2010 (Abouzeid, 2011). Protests have been spreading since then. Syria is one of the countries that has not reached peace yet.

Alongside participation in protests and riots, Syrian citizens took advantage of developing technology and access to social media, recording as many events as possible and sharing them with the world: 'in many cases, people attending a rally would document it with a video camera or smartphone, and then upload footage to Facebook... One protest – and the footage documenting it – would catalyze more protests, inspiring nascent activists into action' (Carvin, 2012, p.7). The revolution has been an opportunity for Syrian citizens to try to redeem their freedom, but also the power to represent themselves, showcase their life in Syria and also raise awareness of their protests through photography. Social media is the channel that offers them this chance and they have used it intensively since the start of the unrest:

It wasn't until that day in March when those teenagers were detained by police that the people of Daraa decided they'd had enough. They organized protests on the model of other Arab Spring countries, and posted videos of police cracking down

on rallies. As in Tunisia, word began to spread. Protests erupted all over the country (Carvin, 2012, p. 213).

Thus the internet and the photographs shared on web platforms provided citizens with a tool to mobilize themselves and to raise awareness of the situation in their country, therefore generating 'people power through the use of social media (Facebook, Twitter, YouTube), mobile phones and satellite TV' (Alianak, 2014, p. 7). Still, as highlighted by Sonia Alianak (2014), the internet and photography are tools used by both oppressors and oppressed in Arab countries where the unrest has turned into a visual conflict as well as a military one.

This thesis analyzes the visual discourse of photographs taken by various parties involved in the Syrian conflict and examines how the immediacy of modern technologies allowed these images to be created and disseminated almost instantly, through social media platforms like Facebook. This text focuses on three types of photographs taken from Syria and sourced via social media, and addresses how they have been used by their authors, appropriated by mass media and social media users, and showcased to spectators worldwide. These three types of photographs taken by Syrian citizens, protesters and embedded journalists encourage us to reflect upon the power of photography and how this mode of expression has distinct purposes, depending on the person who holds the camera and thereafter showcases the visual result.

Taking into account my documentary practice background, this text also explores new ways of creating photographs and working on documentary projects with direct input from participants and the appropriation of citizen photographs. As presented in the following chapters, the use of appropriated imagery within documentary projects and in the media could be a practice exercised more often with the scope of empowering the protagonists. This discloses a more democratic photographic practice and exposure in magazine pages or gallery walls.

The hope of democratic photography

...to see themselves as others see them. What was once the exclusive luxury of the rich and great is now within reach of all (Douglass, 1861, p. 12)

Twenty-two years after the invention of photography, Frederick Douglass expressed a very optimistic response towards this medium that was still new at that time. He was a republican social reformer, a strong believer in the equality of all humans, regardless of their gender, origin and colour. Douglass himself was a slave until he freed himself in 1838, escaping from Maryland and finding refuge in New York. After a life focused on abolitionism and equality, Douglass ended up being the most photographed American of the 19th Century – 160 photographs have survived, therefore he was very familiar with the photographic medium (Varon, 2016). According to Douglass, photography is the platform that eventually, in 1839, brought a basic sense of equality between people from different backgrounds, races and social classes. Photography allows a moment of self-objectification, different from one of objectification by a more powerful other (Dinius, 2015). As a very simplified axiom, Douglass' perception of photography is not fully true nowadays. He considered photography an essential tool against racism and slavery, believing that the camera would not distort reality even in the hands of a racist white person: 'He hoped that people's perceptions of blacks would change by seeing his likeness. It would refute their racial stereotypes and encourage equality. To Douglass, photography equaled freedom... Douglass therefore called photography a democratic act' (Varon, 2016). Unfortunately photography's perceived objectivity has been exactly what powerful institutions based their discourses on, in an effort to gain control and expand their power. Wearing an aura of realism, photography started being more and more popular, representing a successful credible tool for those who had the power to use it. Photographs, sequences cropped from reality, often proved to be the opposite of a democratising instrument degenerated into a means for indoctrination and propaganda. Photographs can be used within a discourse of civil rights, justice and freedom, as Douglass envisioned, or,

simultaneously, can be used within a discourse of social hierarchies, inequality and oppression. Series of photographs like colonialist images were never (only) about the subjects portrayed. Photography is often a means of establishing hierarchies, classifying people and justifying various actions towards them, exactly the purposes of photography created under Western hegemonic processes in colonies.

In his book *Orientalism*, Edward Said focuses exactly on this Western domination over occupied territories. Photography is one of the fields where this domination is visible while also being one of the colonialists' weapons of oppression and demonstration of superiority:

Orientalism is...a collective notion identifying "us" Europeans as against all "those" non-Europeans, and indeed it can be argued that the major component in European culture is precisely what made that culture hegemonic both in and outside Europe: the idea of European identity as a superior one in comparison with all the non-European peoples and cultures (Said, 2003, p. 5)

The power to control colonized people also implies the power to represent them according to Eurocentric interests to place the West as a superior rank. Therefore, the photographs recorded during the colonial period are a reality presented from only one side of the camera, the colonialist's view over a so-called inferior being. Colonized people were not allowed to represent themselves, to speak for themselves. In the introduction of *Orientalism*, Said describes this situation through the encounter of Gustave Flaubert with an Egyptian woman, Kuchuk Hanem: 'she never spoke of herself, she never represented her emotions, presence, or history. He spoke for and represented her' (2003, p. 6). Said argues that Flaubert's status allowed him to dominate Kuchuk Hanem not only physically but also to speak for her and present her to his readers as "typically Oriental". Analogically, the relationship between photographers and their subjects was identical. At that time photographs were used to record the mentally ill, spot criminals and classify racial and ethnic groups encountered by explorers in the course of colonization and enslavement (Squiers, 2003). Until now the possession of a camera still presumes the ability to

represent reality at the will of the photographer. What could and should complement this process is a negotiation with the person depicted on film or through the digital sensor.

Although always a representation of reality, of something that has happened, photography is a depiction of a framed, constructed and interpreted reality. Every photograph is a selected, subjective fragment of the world viewed by a photographer; the outcome of the photographic process is showcased afterwards by an authority that has the power to broadcast it in a manner that serves its interests. In print, online or on television, photographs are placed in a certain context and usually joined by commentaries or captions. The construction of this presentation will give directions to the spectators, helping them to interpret the image and learn about a reality that went through two filters, to then also be filtered by their preconceptions and views.

Every single photograph is an index to something that 'was there' and, when it comes to documentary practice, images generally point at people. Documentary photographers focus on conditions, predicaments in which people find themselves and, through photography, they turn them into subjects. According to Clive Scott (1999) documentary photographers tend to be visual advocates for subjects that don't have the wherewithal to take photographs. This assumption leads to an idea of hero-like photographers who place their skills and means at these unfortunate people's disposal in order to empower them and raise awareness about their situation. David Levi Strauss (2003) reflected on what right photographers have to represent other people and their condition through documentary photography. How can a photographer claim to 'speak for' anyone else, without affording them an opportunity to speak for themselves?

A complex insight into this relationship between photographers and the unfortunate people who are depicted in their photographs is Martha Rosler's essay *In, Around and Afterthoughts* (1989). Documentary photography, although maybe a sincere and compassionate practice in its beginnings, was later on blended in combinations with exoticism, tourism, voyeurism, trophy hunting and careerism. Photographers and publishers would focus on photography as a commodity, a source of profit or fame, while

the people photographed would provide the depiction of an unfortunate social group. According to Rosler these images are mostly handled by viewers by leaving them behind: 'it is them, not us'. She finds fault with the photographers, those people amongst us who save us the trouble:

Documentary testifies, finally, to the bravery or the manipulateness and savvy of the photographer, who entered a situation of physical danger, social restrictedness, human decay (Rosler, 1989, p. 308).

Rosler mentions few iconic photographs that have been celebrated in the past asking herself what happened to the people in those photographs. In this case the subject in the photograph is an object and the photographer is an author, not necessarily the people. The exploitative nature of documentary photography taints this practice which is supposed to be valuing and empowering the other, setting in as the confirmation of an untouched 'Us'-'Them' gap. Photographs tend to be reiterations of what we already know, tautologically assuring the viewer's superiority: the poor remain poor, the refugees remain stateless etc.

Having a similar perspective, Christopher Pinney believes in a tedious predestined function of photography, not bringing to light anything unexpected or contingent, following a systematic demand for complementary imagery and only allowing photographers to photograph what they must photograph – images that confirm what the viewer has already seen and learnt about the world:

...the image is conscripted and tamed as confirmation ("reaffirmation") of what the analyst has learned by other means (Pinney, 2016, p. 25)

A significant number of documentary series, although well intended, are usually a visual and conceptual interpretation of the editorial of the publication or the ideological and racial assumptions of the photographer, the only participation of the subject being his bare existence and condition. Therefore this kind of practice leaves us with a lack of balance between the entities involved in the photographic act, the power of photography not being

shared between the person holding the camera and the human subject. How often do the unfortunate people who take part in documentary projects get to have a participation that is not truncated or delivered to serve other purposes than highlighting their plight? As an analogy to Foucault's conception about power, photography is not necessarily a power that can have direct repercussions, but it definitely represents knowledge. Francois Chatelet framed the duo that exists in a mutual presupposition: 'power as exercise, knowledge as regulation' (1981, p. 1085). The knowledge that photography offers can trigger specific emotions, thoughts, conceptions, and stereotypes, when placed in the right context for a specific purpose. Of course, in the case of documentary photography, the knowledge captured by photographers is previously possessed by the subjects: their stories, their opinions, their actions and their existence. However, they often do not have the power to use these assets in their advantage, therefore this knowledge, through photography, will most likely be broadcast in the way the authority that has the power wants.

One eloquent case is the 'Marlboro Marine' photograph taken by Luis Sinco in Fallujah, Iraq, on 8th November 2004 (Fig. 1). 'On a rooftop in Falluja, Miller was captured in a picture that has become one of the enduring images of the Iraq war. It showed his wan face, streaked with mud and blood, in a moment of reflection. His eyes stared out, tired yet determined. From his lips drooped a cigarette, curling a wisp of thin pale smoke' (Harris, 2006). This description from the Guardian emphasizes the traumatic experience of war that can be read on James Blake Miller's face. The photograph taken by Sinco should maybe make us reflect on what a soldier's life is like, what outrageous violence occurs in the context of a war and for what price. Sinco remembers his thoughts before triggering the camera, confirming the interpretation from the Guardian: 'His expression caught my eye. To me, it said: terrified, exhausted and glad just to be alive. I recognized that look because that's how I felt too' (Sinco, 2007a).

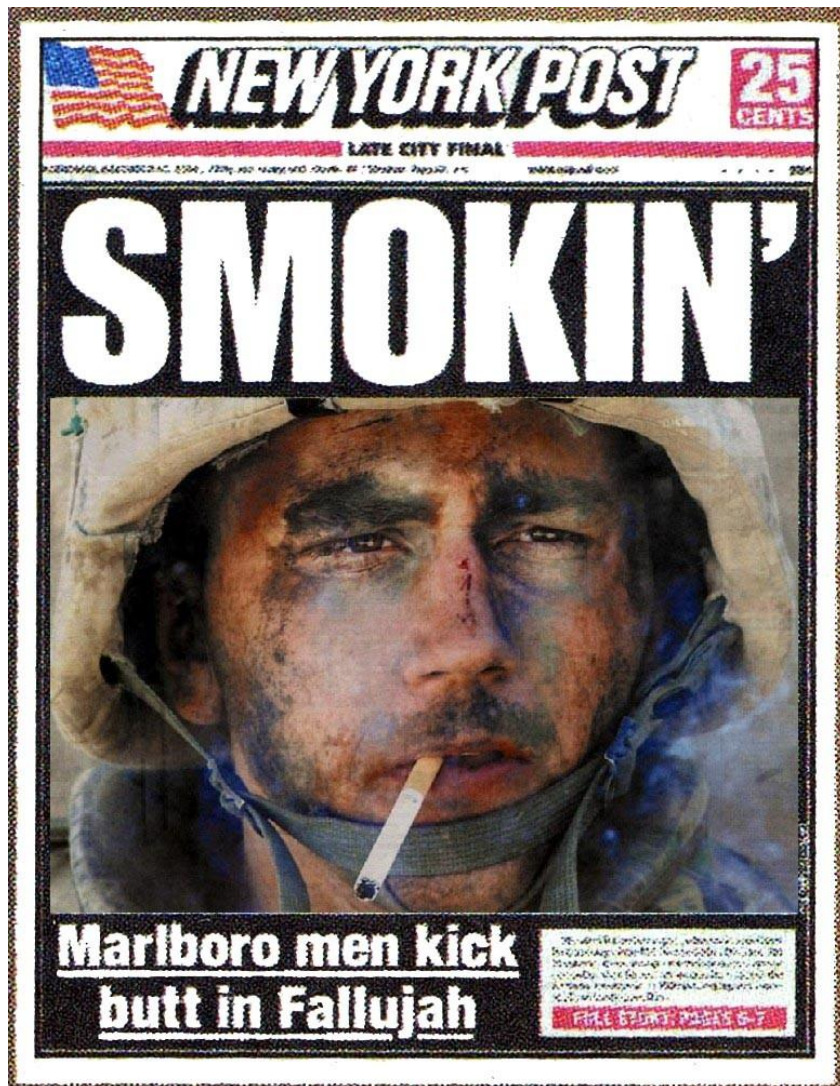


Figure 1

Still, when the photograph was published, the American press transformed this image into a heroic symbol of soldiers who fight for the country and are superior to their opponents, a fact proven by Miller still being alive and presumably enjoying his cigarette. In the New York post, for example, the photograph made the cover with the caption 'Smokin' Marlboro men kick butt in Fallujah'.

After three years Sinco met the Marlboro Marine again to contemplate their traumatic experience. Miller was still haunted by the war in Iraq and by the faces he saw down the barrel of his rifle, but for him it was never about sharing his story under the aura of a heroic deed in war, rather about exposing the depression that his killings have brought to

him: 'It's an insane connection that you make with that person... to see somebody in your sights, and to pull that trigger...' (Sinco, 2007b). This sight that Miller shares with the readers seems so similar to photography, but with a devastating outcome. His portrait in Fallujah does not signify heroism for him or for Sinco who took the photograph out of an impulse of empathy. The means and the power of publishing were the facts that led to a distorted presentation of the image, one that had the purpose to reassure American (Western) citizens of their dominance and safety guaranteed by the troops. The focus on the blood and the exhaustion on Miller's face can be easily diverted by the Marlboro cigarette between his lips, a gesture that, in the press' context, can be read as the confidence and easiness that the American soldier can confront war with.

The outcome of the photographic process, the way that photographs become visible and interpreted by the public have a lot to say about the triangular relationship between photographer, subject and spectator. According to Ariella Azoulay (2008), photographs enable unfortunate parties to present their grievances, 'in person or through others'. In *The Civil Contract of Photography* she does not take into consideration any inequality between professional or citizen photographers, the citizenry that she proposes are based not only on a simple plurality of photography, but on a shifting one, allowing the photographer, the person being photographed and the spectator to swap positions in a photographic triangle. Every photograph is defined by this formula (photographer-subject-viewer) which is unique when it comes to one single image, but it could be permutable in the context of a wider collection of images. This is when documentary photography could and should be, alongside a way of depicting reality, a mediating means in the social and visual relation between what is supposed to be 'the subject' and spectator. Although its denomination suggests objectivity and cynicism, documentary photography should also allow subjectivity, interpretation and imagination to flow in tandem with the spectator's contemplation. Although there could be a deficit of power when it comes to showcasing photography, nowadays, it at least represents a means to create images, theoretically, anywhere in the world:

Photography provides modern citizens with an instrument enabling them to develop and sustain civilian skills that are not entirely subordinate to governmental power and allows them to exercise partnership with others not under the control of this power or acting as the extension of this power's operations and goals (Azoulay, 2008, p. 105).

Photography is not a luxury anymore, as it used to be during Frederick Douglass' life, considering that even affordable phones have a camera as a standard component. In this way unfortunate people or people who are not necessarily conventionally educated in the photographic field are able to produce images. Azoulay describes photographic citizenship, where people can create photographs without a pre-existing agenda established by a powerful authority, with their own will and purposes and, if it is the case, creating their own discourse around the images that they produce:

...photography appeared as a new tribunal, a universal and impartial judge that could do justice to the past, present and future... an instrument capable of perpetuating everything that was lost yesterday and of saving what may vanish tomorrow' (Azoulay, 2008, p. 121)

Being an accessible medium, photography can now help people to not only be represented by outsiders, conventional documentary photographers, but also represent themselves through their own images, bringing to light visual captures of their own life. In the past documentary photographs were disseminated by traditional platforms (newspapers, magazines) while today with the eruption of the internet, anyone can showcase personally produced images through social media channels. Traditional media used to reach a wide audience globally but now photographs and news can be disseminated from almost anywhere within seconds. In May 2015 Facebook said that there are 2 billion photographs shared daily on their services (Bandaru, 2015). Technological development and social media have led to new and facile ways of recording images and publishing them on public platforms like Facebook. Like any other photographic genre or style, documentary practice has been strongly influenced and improved by modern technologies that now allow citizen

photographers to document injustices occurring throughout the world and share their photographs with others in order to raise awareness about unjust events. In an endeavour to reinvent themselves, documentary photographers should turn their attention towards the capabilities possessed by citizen photographers. Reflecting on the purpose of documentary photography and taking into account its contemporary photographic potential, the exchange between photographer and protagonist and how the power of photography can be shared by these two parties, one can argue that a more negotiated and participative practice should arise in the documentary sphere, allowing subjects to also play the role of narrators of their own plight. New technology also provides a universal platform for a photography without borders, as Azoulay suggests. Viewing facilitates the empowerment of photographers and spectators alike:

Photography is one means for the deterritorialization of national boundaries: in the modern era the spectator can be anywhere at any time (2008, p. 144).

In a more recent essay about the human condition in relation to photography, Ariella Azoulay expands on how spectators should not only be passive viewers but participate in the photographic process. According to Azoulay spectators are potential participants in new actions triggered by documentary photographs with the goal of reclaiming and restoring the human condition (2016). As spectators, people should resist contemporary injustices, disagree with them and try to militate and contribute towards a better and fairer world. If in the past physical film or prints were defined by time and space, digital data can now escape those boundaries and reach the eyes of infinite viewers at various times and places simultaneously. In the past people could read the same newspaper, at the same time in multiple locations, but the Internet has heavily expanded this capability.

It appears that this era leaves us with limitless and instant means of producing and circulating images. There is still a complex process between creating a photograph and reaching the point where the image can have an influence on the audience, but the possibility is out there for any person with a camera and access to the Internet. As will be explored in the next chapters, the idea of photographic citizenry that Azoulay puts forward,

is a concept that has been consolidated through some platforms (Facebook, Twitter, YouTube etc.) and occasionally brings all the citizens of photography together: amateur photographers, professionals, publishers and spectators.

Citizen Photographs

...the increasingly widespread use of digital cameras also means that those involved in the events can become their own recorders (Ritchin, 2010, p. 23)

The following chapter explores how vernacular photographs from Syria, with no political agenda behind them, could be a powerful visual statement for challenging stereotypes and for displaying a more human image of people who experience the Syrian unrest on a daily basis. To suggest how these images can do more than just being available on a Facebook photographic album, I will also compare these images to similar photographs that have already been published in two photographic series: Baghdad Calling (Geert van Kesteren) and Valid for Travel (Alex Beldea).

In December 2015 a Syrian friend from Al Qamishli sent me some photographs showing how the local community celebrated Christmas (Fig. 2 and Fig. 3). Arab, Christian and Kurdish people were decorating the streets and the restaurants in the centre of his hometown. The first photograph shows three children posing next to an inflatable Santa Claus and a Christmas tree, totally different from the images that the media is inundated with. The second photograph was taken next to a restaurant called Miami, showing a street being traditionally lit for Christmas. To me, these photographs suggested cultural communion and survival, in a country devastated by oppression and war. When the media was mostly filled with negative news and stories about Syria, its citizens tried, using social media, to expose a brighter and more optimistic side of their life to what used to be one of the most liberal states in the Middle East. Besides suffering and grief, Christmas was an occasion for them to celebrate an event that they wanted to document and share with the world.

The author of these photographs is a visual militant for the humanity that Syrian people have been deprived of since the start of the Arab Spring. In a bloodless way, the citizen photographer makes us turn away from the mass of imagery depicting tragedy and see

them as fellow human beings. Modern life has normalized but also fantasied tragedy and war through the countless ways of regarding other people's pain.



Figure 2



Figure 3

Susan Sontag indicates how being a spectator of violence taking place in another part of the world is a 'quintessential modern experience' offered by professional photographers: 'wars are now also living room sights and sounds' (Sontag, 2004, p. 50). These images of atrocities may lead to different responses: wishes for peace or demands for revenge. Because of their infinite repetition in the media, they might only represent passive awareness that horrible things occur in other parts of the world. Violence has also become acceptable in the last few years as a result of sadism in mass culture: movies, television and computer games. Interestingly, the starkest representations of atrocities are of those people who are most foreign, most different. When subjects are closer to home, photographers become more discreet (Sontag, 2004). Therefore foreign victims do qualify to being shown as bodies violently dispossessed of their life and human existence - in this way, through the depiction of their tragic death, they are objectified and dehumanized.

In *Recovered Memory*, Adam Phillips looks at how war photographs require some sort of censorship in order to be bearable (1999). The traumatic events depicted in photographs often shock us, but by being unbearable they make the viewer turn the page or close the website. Phillips legitimizes the censorship and aestheticization of images, making them acceptable for the spectator and available for consideration, the traumatic experience being softened in order to lead to a deeper and more promising engagement with the photographs. Although this strategy could be seen as damaging to the idealistic objectivity of documentary, it can still showcase the plight of unfortunate people in a non-disturbing way, keeping it imaginably real and visually accessible to the spectator. Usually joining soldiers in their missions, commissioned photographers do not come across peaceful moments very often. Therefore vernacular images like the ones taken in Al Qamishli, that serve as family photographs, could reinforce a non-violent and non-stereotypical perspective on the unfortunate citizens of Syria.

Graham Spencer argues that 'peace depends on tolerance, which depends on understanding, which depends on information which depends on the media' (2005, p. 1). Still, the vast majority of the photographs linked to Syria that end up in today's media are

focused on either the conflict between the Government, rebels and ISIS, or showcase Syrian refugees on their way to Europe, mostly in boats, refugee camps or next to the newly improvised border walls and fences. These photographs always show something exceptional when put in balance with the life of a Western population of the last few decades, therefore the viewer of these images will most likely see himself or herself as different from the 'unfortunate' Syrians. It is important to reflect on what the photographs circulated in the media tell and do to us. Do they facilitate a better understanding of the situation of those photographed and the reasons that brought them there, do they allow us to relate to those people, or do they just lead to a 'how awful' refrain and a page turn? The pictures that we see every day in newspapers, on our Facebook News Feed or on television could hardly place us in a position of equality with these people as they only show the violent and miserable side of their stories; these photographs do show an important part of reality, but a cropped reality, a reality that, in analogy to Spencer's view on peace, does not provide enough visual information for understanding, tolerance and, eventually, peace.

The Internet and social media allow us to see photographs based on first-hand experiences. These platforms strongly support photographic citizenry even in places where the Government's hegemony is restrictive: 'Bashar-Al Assad introduced the Internet in the country in 2000, arguably allowing the previously isolated inward looking Syrian society a degree of openness, albeit with heavy restrictions' (Sacranie, 2013, p. 140). What was supposed to be an example of Syria's openness to Western ideals of freedom and seen at that time mainly as a means of information, also became a means to speak out about Bashar-Al Assad's repressive regime. As information of the various social uprisings in the region spread with the help of the Internet, social media became a tool of online expression, visual counter-attack and self-representation. As Lina Khatib states, the Arab Spring has not just provided a new way of looking at the Arab dictators, but, through the new means of representation and expression, such as social media, has announced the end of the age of the 'demi-gods' (Khatib, 2013). Considering the amount of images shared

daily only on Facebook – 2 billion – one can understand what an important and powerful medium photography is.

In conjunction with their distribution via social media channels, citizen photographs have recently been appropriated by documentary photographers who include them in their own projects. Being limited by lack of access or geographical distances, these images often offer a deeper insight than any professional photograph could provide. Leaving discussions on authorship and ownership open, these extended documentary pieces are negotiated projects that aim to give voice to their subjects. In *After Photography*, Fred Ritchin imagines an alternative photographic practice that would encourage the documentary photographer to think of himself not as a reporter but as a recorder for the protagonists of the events photographed, allowing a dialogue between themselves, the 'authoritative professional', and the 'knowledgeable insider' (2010). Testimonies and appropriated imagery are primary sources that, included in these projects, empower the protagonists. Dutch photographer Geert van Kesteren has successfully used photographs borrowed from Iraqi citizens within his projects:

That image echoed the stories I had recorded during the many extensive interviews. I asked around and most refugees received digital images over the internet from friends and family that stayed behind... I decided to let the pictures of ordinary, non-professional photographers tell the story (van Kesteren, 2008)

Having this strategy in *Baghdad Calling*, van Kesteren empowers his subjects and brings to light imagery that would normally be inaccessible to Western audiences (Fig. 4). The images appropriated by van Kesteren, in the context of the Iraq War, are in opposition to the mass of photographs circulated by the media at that time and which were orientated towards the political or the conflictual side of Iraq, leaving the not involved citizens unrepresented. Van Kesteren was not necessarily interested in new technological means that allow almost anyone to take photographs; he was attempting to subvert his embedded photographer status and overcome the limits set by the NATO rules of the invasion of Iraq. He was not allowed to photograph certain details of the military intervention in Iraq, but

he managed to contact Iraqi citizens who took photographs of what they experienced in Iraq or, as refugees, in other countries. Traumatic images from Fallujah, falling statues of Saddam Hussein or images of G. W. Bush wearing military clothing were amongst the iconic photographs picturing the conflict. W. J. T. Mitchell (1994) refers to a visual 'common stock' of knowledge that is constructed by iconic images distributed by the media. In this way, these images become embedded in cultural and societal beliefs, thus creating and promoting dominant ideologies through reified assumptions and stereotypes. In the case of Iraq and, nowadays, Syria, the spectator's consciousness can be visually monopolized by images depicting inhumane situations and actions, extricating themselves from the human status of these unfortunate people, thus seeing them as different: 'Meaning inheres not in the photograph itself, but in the relationship between the photograph and the matrix of culturally specific beliefs and assumptions to which it refers' (Brothers, 1977, p. 23). Citizen photographs like the ones appropriated for *Baghdad Calling* challenge stereotypes and cultural beliefs and, through dissemination and repetition, could occupy a bigger share in the global preconceptions applied to different groups of people.



Figure 4

Seven years later, following a similar path, in *Valid for Travel*, I included 'family photographs collected from the refugees, images taken by them shot on camera phones, documenting the conditions they have endured in their escape from Syria' (Padley, 2015, p. 20). Being a collaborative document, *Valid for Travel* gives viewers an insight into the many facets of migration – from their place of origin to their arrival in the United Kingdom. These images do not only challenge the Syrian authorities, but also the conditions of travel and accommodation throughout Europe (Fig. 5). In addition they can make us contemplate the power and utility of mobile phones and social media when almost any person can portray himself or herself or show what he or she has been through. According to GSMA Intelligence, there are 7.22 billion mobile phones on Earth, more than people (Boren, 2014). Taking advantage of this technological outburst, Syrian people have been first hand photographers of their own unrest and European experience, at home or during their trips: on boats and lorry journeys, in refugee camps and during bureaucratic struggles.



Figure 5

The types of images used in complex documentary series by photographers share similar ways of production as the ones taken during Christmas in Al Qamishli. Simultaneously they do not have a clear propagandistic reason for being recorded. Outside of the context of the Syrian civil war, these images could just be seen as family photographs taken during the Christmas holidays. This would be the 'studium' (Barthes, 2010) of these photographs mostly taken with phone cameras, a façade that shows the grim plight of the Syrians who are still home, but also a more human side of a complex and difficult life that they have to endure over there.

The photographs from Al Qamishli definitely show a different image than what mass media has to offer. A simple search for 'refugees' on Google would exclusively reveal images of their struggle: crying children on the shore, people climbing fences, life vests and a lot of boats. These photographs show us groups of people in a wretched state, crawling towards Europe. The media agenda, even when it is well intended, tends to follow a discourse based on stereotypes. When it comes to the visual discourse, the media aims to create meaning and propagate knowledge and information through photographs. According to Michel Foucault (1972) a discourse is a series of ideas that provide a language for speaking

about a particular subject. This language constructs that subject in a particular, strategic way, which eventually produces knowledge. As seen before, the concept of knowledge is not only inseparable from the concept of power, but it also fuels power. According to Georg Simmel:

...the consciousness of having only the absolutely general in common has exactly the effect of putting a special emphasis on that which is not common. For a stranger to the country, the city, the race and so on, what is stressed is again nothing individual, but alien origin, a quality which he has, or could have, in common with many other strangers. For this reason strangers are not really perceived as individuals, but as strangers of a certain type (Simmel, 2003, p. 105)

When it comes to mass media content, it is sensible to observe that there are not a lot of photographs focused on individuals. When certain characteristics and statements are constructed around a group of people, every single person from that group obviously gets to be catalogued according to those characteristics that, through repetition, end up forming stereotypes:

Stereotyping...sets up a symbolic frontier between the 'normal' and the 'deviant', the 'normal' and the 'pathological', the 'acceptable' and the 'unacceptable', what 'belongs' and what does not or is 'Other', between 'insiders' and 'outsiders', Us and Them (Hall, 2013, p. 10).

In a place where physical borders do not really exist anymore, Europe, seeing people who put all their effort into illegally crossing borders can catalyze an attitude towards superiority and repulsion. Being a citizen of the European Union one is granted free movement between the countries of the Union, yet the European Union still preserves an external border acting almost like a fortress. Europeans would not cross borders illegally (anymore) because they do not have to, hence they are the 'acceptable' whilst the refugees are the 'unacceptable'. Refugees are trying to reach a place and a status similar to inhabitants of Europe, but how could they gain that when they are not like us? Roger

Silverstone (2007) considers that we refuse to recognize not only that others are not like us, but that they cannot be made to be like us. We are hardly able to accept and appreciate differences, therefore it is also very difficult to respect and value the 'stranger', the 'outsider'. Citing Simmel, Hall also underlines this challenge for Western society: 'the presence of the stranger presents democracy with this radical new double challenge: for equality and social justice and for the recognition of difference' (2003, p. 12). Moreover, as seen previously in Edward Said's *Orientalism*, tensions between the notions of 'Us' and 'Them' have been consolidated through biased representations of the 'Other' at least since the colonialist period, especially through the medium of photography.

However, the images taken by the people of Al Qamishli do exactly what we do not expect from a photograph of them – they show us that they are exactly like 'us', like Westerners. They celebrate Christmas, probably the most popular holiday in the West, and the only element missing from these images is the Coca-Cola truck. These Syrians challenged all stereotypes about them, ignored the war and the injustice surrounding their country and pictured themselves as global citizens. Unintentionally, they managed to arrange their world in order to create a strong message about their status as human beings, similar to what some documentary photographers or filmmakers set out to do: 'documentary filmmakers take the world as it comes, or arrange the world so that it comes in particular ways' (Ellis, 2012, p. 15).

A few days after I received the images from Al Qamishli, on 30 December 2015, the city was under terror after a string of three explosions, one target being the festively lit restaurant *Miami*. Amateur photographs and social media were, again, the way to report the events and bring into attention a traumatic incident widely ignored by the Western press (Fig. 6). The strength that citizen photographers have in a case like this, unlike a professional photographer, is that they are invested in this place. The citizen photographers were perhaps born there; they visited that restaurant several times and walked down that street on their way home. They would see and photograph a place like Miami restaurant in a way that a professional photographer could never do. Moreover,

were it not for the omnipresence of photography and the access we have to this medium and to the Internet, we would never be able to see and learn about the unfortunate situation that led to 16 deaths and 35 injuries (RT, 2015a).



Figure 6

The authoritarian power of the Syrian Government or of ISIS, who presumably put up the attacks, could not diminish the basic civilian skills that photography and Internet facilitated these people with. According to Michel Foucault, 'power relationships will often be unstable and reversible' (Hindess, 1995, pg. 97) and it was the case here, as well. Syrian citizens, firstly, portrayed themselves as they wanted to be seen during a global celebration, normal, present and part of a wider citizenry, and not only the inhabitants of a country destined to damnation. Secondly, when the rest of the world seemed to ignore real facts, they took over what the media should normally do and they became the visual narrators of their own horror. As Foucault explains:

Domination refers, in other words, to those asymmetrical relationships of power in which the subordinated persons have little room for manoeuvre because their "margin of liberty" is extremely limited (Foucault, 1988, p. 12).

Could photography be a tool for bending and breaking those margins of liberty mentioned by Foucault? Serving as knowledge, photography combined with modern technologies can offer a weak power for unfortunate citizens. Photography's omnipresence could represent a weak but meaningful counter attack towards dominant authorities and media that have monopolized photography in their own interests.

In *Syrie: pourquoi l'Occident s'est trompé* the French historian Frederic Pichon managed to comprehensively analyze the Syrian problem, tackling the media involvement as well and its use by different forces:

It is supposed that the state has the monopole for legitimate violence. For a long time it controlled everything that was said about or what was seen in regards to military evidence. But these two privileges have been questioned in a period of time in which groups and militias having their own weapons, but also their own mass-media, have proliferated (2014, pg. 49)

These unstable relationships of power and control led to more versions of reality, which have always happened when it comes to war, but they reached a paroxysm in the case of Syria. Media resources are vital in Syria and have specific aims: to truncate reality, to stir up emotions and to provide news agencies and TV channels with what they expect to receive. When it comes to the Western media, the main provider is the SOHR (Syrian Observatory for Human Rights) which, according to Pichon (2014), serves various interests in the region through its president, Rami Abdel Rahman. Therefore the Western newsfeeds (AFP, Reuters, CNN) rely on information delivered by unknown reporters led by Rahman who has been away from Syria for the last 16 years (RT, 2015b). The question is if news agencies and journalists should double-check these sources or, if possible, diversify their 'good authorities'. As seen above, citizen photography could be an option, but what if sometimes it clashes with the media's agenda?

Images created outside the mainstream, i.e., the amateur photographs disseminated through cell phones, personal email accounts or on Web Logs,

represent a threat to the hierarchical order in which news has traditional been ordered and controlled by mass media (Al-Harithy, 2004, p. 14).

The citizen photographer is usually self-taught; he or she starts alone, developing his or her skills and framework in a primitive, independent way. Therefore, the citizen photographers are not aware of the traditional conventions or they are intentionally disobeying them. In *About Looking*, John Berger looks into the development and reasons of 'primitive artists' who create their work far from art conventions and techniques:

The will of primitives derives from faith in their own experience and a profound skepticism about society as they have found it.. What it is saying could never be said with any ready-made skills. For what it is saying was never meant, according to the cultural class system, to be said (2009, p. 55)

As an analogy to John Berger's view, the Syrian amateur photographer who wanted to show us Christmas in Al Qamishli ignored the expectations that the media and we respectively had from a photograph taken in Syria. If he were a traditionally instructed photojournalist, he would probably show us debris and misery. It does not necessarily matter if the photographer had a clear reason for recording these images and furthermore disseminate them online; these photographs visually fulfil the hopes of Syrian citizens and refugees, namely to be seen as represented as any other human being. When needed, they also revealed raw, uncensored images of the aftermath of what was supposed to be their Christmas celebrations.

With conflicts that tend to spread more than cease, time will reveal how the expanding power of citizen photographers can be explored by the media and artists and ultimately be appropriated and circulated for a wider coverage. Their work is not as generic as traditional photojournalism and documentary photography, but more personal, deeply involved and maybe a more credible envision of the world.

Protest Photographs and the Impotence of Photography

It is no longer just about looking but can be more ongoing, engaged and potentially even helpful, with work submitted by outsiders and insiders alike (Ritchin, 2010, p. 25)

The following paragraphs explore how images taken by non-professional photographers and disseminated through social media platforms can eventually be appropriated by the mass media. In this way, from time to time, citizens are not only allowed to speak for themselves but they are also given a showcase channel, having the privilege to be heard and seen by a wider audience. As I will analyze later, a feature in the media does not necessarily conclude with a solution for unfortunate events around the world. The expectations that several people have from the media and photography are usually higher than the response they can trigger from institutions of power. Nevertheless, centering this chapter on the Syrian example, it is clear that the unrest still persists while more and more photographs have been circulated in the mass media.

The Syrian unrest has been a continuous fight between two different eras that implement specific means of attack and counterattack. On one side, stuck in the old days of political and military hegemony, groups like the Syrian Government, ISIS and various rebel gatherings prefer the use of 'primitive weapons to oppress the people: knives, real bullets, torture, corpse mutilation' (Mrone, 2015, pg. 198). On the other side, civilians armed with tools of this new digital era – cameras, mobile phones, Internet and wireless gadgets – fight with records and reports of what they go through, at this exact moment, in Syria. Using photography alongside conventional tools of war, different groups fight for control in Syria, while civilians are caught in a violent maelstrom. They are fighting to be seen, to be heard and to be remembered. One of their main concerns now is to manage to keep a record, a proof of the oppression and injustice that they suffer from. Consequently, these records are also a strong evidence for their resistance to their plight, through photography.

On October 3rd, 2011, I open my morning paper and look down onto a street in Homs, Syria, directly into the eyes of a protester (Gottke, 2015, p. 225).

A few months after the burst of the Syrian revolution, a striking image from Homs was featured on the first pages of Western publications like the New York Times: photographed from above, a protester expresses his demand in an active, participative manner (Fig. 7). His message is as clear as his cutting gaze, he is directly asking for freedom and, maybe, indirectly, for peace and love, given the heart-shaped pillow that he used as a 'banner'. This is not a war photograph, nor was it taken by an appointed photojournalist. It is not even only a photograph, but a complex discourse performed to the camera, shared online and, eventually, published by mainstream media. It is a protest image constructed by at least two individuals, the person that we see in the photograph and the photographer, an image created with the hope that their message will not be ignored by us, the viewers. One cannot ignore the resemblance with a SOS message, the Syrian protester asking for the restoration of his human condition. He is demanding attention, awareness and action intended to overthrow the regime.



Figure 7

To have one's portrait done was one of the symbolic acts by which individuals from the rising social classes made their ascent visible to themselves and others and classed themselves among those who enjoyed social status (Tagg, 1988, p. 37).

Although the protester is not seeking to hedonistically boast his rank in society, he is trying to reinforce his social status as a protester. He is proudly 'admitting' that he is amongst the people who are opposing the Syrian Government but, at the same time, he is anonymous to us. In this context, revealing his social status through his beliefs makes it dangerous for him to show his identity, as well. He is aware of the fact that his and the photographer's visual offensive could attract a violent or deadly response from authorities. Documentary photographer Donna De Cesare learnt through her projects how children from Guatemala and Colombia know that showing their face while speaking honestly can get them killed (Ritchin, 2010). Identically, Syrian people have been tortured and killed for not obeying various ideologies put forward by the Government, ISIS or the rebel groups. Indisputably an active protest and disagreement with the authoritative powers would increase one's chances of being chased down and sanctioned for his or her disobedience.

The protesters had clear reasons for creating this photograph but what is surprising is the step taken by major publications like the New York Times to publish this image on their front cover. One cause could be the lack of sources in Syria at the time the revolution started. In this case the photograph taken in Homs was unique yet the New York Times' decision to publish it was a political one, the editors considering that this image has to be seen. A photograph like this played neatly into the Western romanticized notions of the 'Arab Spring' in which Arabs rise up to demand 'western style' freedoms. The filmmaker Wim Wenders states that 'the most political decision you can make is where you direct people's eyes' (Stack, 2015, p. 54). What is also important is that the New York Times published this photograph at a time when the North American media suffers from the sin of omission. Recently in the United States the coverage of foreign news have been under a 50% cut (Jacobson, 2002), shrinking down the awareness and knowledge that American

spectators have when it comes to the rest of the world. Taking this into consideration alongside the expansion of photography as a medium accessible from almost anywhere, editors should become more adept at utilizing the growing visual archive produced by citizen photographers. For now the use of this type of photograph is an exception.

Florian Gottke underlines the prudence that this kind of image is treated with. They are always published with the mention that their veracity cannot be independently verified (2015). As previously mentioned, the Western media relies on images and information provided locally by journalists and photographers, through the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, who might be embedded with rebel groups or regime forces. Therefore, how can these definitely contain information that can be confirmed as more 'real' than the photograph taken in Homs? Even without being shown in major publications, the photograph taken in Homs would have existed at least in the protesters' camera and online, on social media, thanks to the wide distribution of photographic means that citizens have access to nowadays.

Stuart Franklin, author of the iconic image of a man standing in front of four tanks in the Tiananmen Square, Beijing, has recently released a book centered on his concept of 'documentary impulse', analyzing how and why humans have developed an interest in seeking an understanding of our place in this life and how everything on this planet interconnects through the means of photography. Amongst various documentary practices he also looks into how the omnipresence of photographic means can secure a democratic way of seeking social justice:

The power of advocacy has extended geographically and numerically. The means to record events visually exists in almost every town and village. The documentary impulse and the gift of being able to tell one's story in the pursuit of social justice have never been more widespread. This can only be beneficial for democracy and for the future of civil society (2016, p. 63)

Possessing a democratic characteristic as a result of its accessibility throughout the globe, photography can reinforce the 'power of the people' allowing citizens like the protester in Homs to represent themselves and the community they belong to. In this way they can defend their human condition and raise awareness of their predicaments. Syrian protesters are not the only ones putting forward a visual discourse that connotes their struggle for freedom. Mohammed Al-Hams is one of the self-taught photographers from Palestine who document the fighting in Gaza. He does not see himself as an advocate against war but a photographer who records the situation of his people. Moreover, similar to the image from Homs, the photographs taken by Al-Hams were featured in the mass media, reaching a wide audience: 'I was sure that people abroad would be moved by the pictures I sent out. Sometimes I saw on TV many of my pictures used in antiwar demonstrations' (Franklin, 2016, p. 75). Taking part in an older conflict than the Syrian one, the self-taught Palestinian documentary artists have built up a larger archive focusing on their situation with some creations like the film documentary *5 Broken Cameras* that reached a global audience. Recorded by Emad Burnat in his village Bil'in, the documentary reveals the struggle that Palestinians face because of the Israeli State's authoritarian rule over parts of the West Bank. Emad initially used his camera to record family events but in time he realized the power of the medium that he could control and use to make political assertions: 'His camera became a way of uniting his fellow citizens, publicizing their struggle and becoming a witness for posterity when the Israeli authorities sent in troops to deprive them of land to create a defensive barrier of steel wire that later became a high concrete wall' (French, 2012). Comparable to the Syrian situation, citizens found in self-taught documentary practice a way of reprisal for the cruel measures used by authoritative institutions of exerting their power. It is hard to predict whether the Syrian conflict will cease soon enough or not, but there will hopefully be more visual material sourced from autochthonous photographers disseminated by the media.

We now live in a world where conflict photography is highly constrained by the authorities involved. From the start of the Iraq War, the embedding of journalists and photographers

has become a necessity for the parts involved in conflicts to portray the events in a way that would serve them. During the Iraq War and further conflicts, photographers were placed in dangerous circumstances, protected by soldiers, but given access to spectacular events. Obviously, they were encouraged to construct what they saw in a positive way. We learn from Julian Stallabrass' essay 'The Power and Impotence of Images' (2013) how photographers are often stopped from reporting and recording scenes that were not supposed to be shown later on in the media or directed towards what they should photograph. Moises Saman, author of the 'Discordia' photobook, reveals how his photographic practice in Libya was strongly steered by the dominating government. Saman showcases photographs taken in all the countries involved in the Arab Spring in an exceptional self-published photo book, enjoying total control over its production after the limitations he faced in the field:

We were only allowed to move in herds, like children on a field trip, unsure of where we were going or why, but ecstatic at the opportunity to get out of the hotel. These outings were brief and led by a nervous cast of regime minders working from a rigorous script, guiding us through a parallel reality of fear and deception in which everyone we met referred to Qaddafi by the name he had grandly bestowed upon himself: Our Dear Brother Leader (2016, p. 102)

Moreover, a conventional war can nowadays easily also become a war against photographs and news that are forbidden, with troops being sometimes responsible for the deaths of journalists who disobey their control: 'Terry Lloyd of ITN was assassinated by them, and the Baghdad office of Al-Jazeera was attacked by missiles in April 2003, killing Tareq Ayyoub, its correspondent in the city' (Stallabrass, 2013, p. 45). Going back to the photograph of the protester from Homs, one should not wonder why he is not disclosing his face. Given the embedding of photographers the reliability of what photographs circulated in the media suggest to us can be debatable, allowing us at least the curiosity to see what the citizen photographers from conflict zones have to show and say about themselves. In the same text, Stallabrass highlights the rise of amateur photography:

Against this scenario of the failing power of critical images within the mainstream media, the image world is being changed by the increasing circulation of amateur photographs and video. The camera has long been a weapon of war in the hands of amateurs (2013, p. 47)

We do not have any statement from the protester in Homs, yet we can be sure that he was aware of the power of photography and the chance of being seen thanks to the facile image dissemination we have access to through contemporary media. He was not only unhappy with the Syrian political regime, but he was probably also dissatisfied with what the media had to visually offer to the Syrian revolution and to what the citizens demanded. Unlike the citizens from Al Qamishli who probably challenged stereotypes without a clear intention, the protester from Homs deliberately uses photography as a weapon of war against the oppressive regime and the ignorant/absent Western media. Despite the visual strength of this photograph and the protester's hope for freedom, photography does not necessarily lead to immediate changes. Sadly, Homs is a place that was not saved by the circulation of such an image:

On 29 October (2011), more than 40 people were reported to have been killed in the city of Homs, and President Bashar al-Assad warned against foreign intervention (Strategic Comments, 2011).

Besides the impact that photographs have on us as individuals, we might also frequently expect reactions from powerful authorities that could balance social injustice and maltreatment in various parts of the globe. Unfortunately these expectations are usually set very high, mistaken for a zenith of responsibility and response from governments that photography cannot reach. Hence many iconic photographs do not cut across a short momentum facilitated by the media, a media that bombards us with additional information every minute, making the attempt to focus on a particular image increasingly difficult.

The name Nilüfer Demir might not trigger recognition in the reader, but she is the hopeful photographer who captured the most influential image related to the situation of refugees in Europe:

If the picture makes Europe change its attitudes towards refugees, then it was right to publish it. I have taken many photographs of the refugee drama and none had such an effect on the public consciousness. But I certainly don't wish for more of those pictures (Kupeli, 2015)

On 2 September 2015, Nilüfer Demir was documenting a group of people from Pakistan starting their journey from Bodrum beach (Turkey) on a rubber boat. It was during this journey that she photographed the body of Aylan, a three-year-old child who drowned in the Mediterranean Sea whilst fleeing the war in Kobane, Syria (Fig. 8). The controversial image was globally published afterwards prompting much criticism that thought this image disregarded the boy's dignity. Aylan's drama is not an isolated event, though. The IOM estimates that, in 2015, 3092 refugees have died in the Mediterranean or are still missing. It is certain also that these numbers also include children. What is special about Demir's photograph is that it illustrates the plausible outcome of a journey that refugees have to go through in order to reach a safe area.



Figure 8

With publications like The Independent, El Mundo or De Morgen publishing the photograph the response was immediate. The political reply was prompt, considering that until then

there had been a huge delay on any concrete European solution for the refugee crisis. Undoubtedly, photography cannot change the world. But it can change individuals' perceptions and it can lead to actions. Soon after the image of Aylan was published, few political leaders confined themselves to sharing their compassion and grief, while others changed their agenda regarding refugees. In the autumn of 2016 we have seen refugees being welcome in countries like Germany and Croatia, or people driving from Austria to Hungary in order to take refugees to Wien or Salzburg.

Unfortunately, the power and the effect of photography, especially when it comes to news images, are ephemeral. A collective European response still sums up to an incomplete plan that talks more about numbers and less about humans. Syrian, Eritrean, Iraqi, Sudanese, Burmese, Somalian, Pakistani, Yemeni or Palestinian people are still trying to reach Europe with minimal help from European authorities, although their drama has been widely propagated in the media in the last couple of months. On the other hand, the public opinion has been deeply moved by the latest portrayals of the crisis, a huge amount of individuals supporting refugees in various ways: crowdfunding campaigns, vans full of clothes and food travelling from the UK to Northern France (Calais or Dunkirk) or car washes donating part of their income (Fig. 9).



Figure 9

The photograph of Aylan is part of a wide series of images that did not necessarily change the world, but became iconic. In order for these images to change something, there might be a need of constant exposure. Otherwise these photographs might end up as one majority of the news does and lose their impact in days or weeks. Kevin Carter won the Pulitzer Prize for his image taken in March 1993 and first published by The New York Times, dramatically picturing the Sudan famine (Fig. 10). Waiting to board a UN flight Carter photographed a young girl with a vulture in the background gazing at her. His photograph has everything that it needs in order to be world changing. Yet after 24 years Sudan still suffers from internal conflicts, low human development and poor human rights. Photography can only showcase and explain, it can be a catalyst and a language whose words, if put together the right way, can make a difference.



Figure 10

Triumphalist Selfie

A foul society has flung itself, like Narcissus, to gaze at its trivial image on metal
(Baudelaire, 1859)

A complex conflict like the Syrian one has naturally led to a flourishing use of photographic means from all the parties involved. As seen in the previous chapters, citizens with or without a political agenda have made use of cameras to record every day events or in an endeavour to demand freedom. This third chapter focuses on the use of photography in favour of the oppressive Syrian regime, precisely on the terrifying selfie posted on Facebook by a pro-Assad journalist (Fig. 11). The technical developments that led to the invention of phone front cameras and photo cameras with flip screens have allowed the expansion of the narcissistic photographic fascination of the self - a fascination that people shared since the invention of the camera but broadened by the habit of selfies. Our social media accounts are studded by common selfies but the ones taken in war zones do not cease to shock us.



Figure 11

On 27 April 2016, Kinana Allouche, a reporter of the pro-regime Sama TV, uploaded a distressing selfie taken in the surroundings of an aftermath of a clash between the Syrian army and rebels. At first sight it could be a holiday selfie, given the smile and the sunglasses, only for the viewer to notice four cadavers just above her head, indicating that she deliberately framed this image. The photograph was taken in Aleppo, the wrecked city in Northern Syria, following a battle between the Syrian army and a group of rebels. Allouche presented all this information in a caption alongside her selfie: 'A salute to the brave Syrian Arab army which succeeded in repelling an attack from armed gangs and prevailing over their attempt to infiltrate into safe areas of Western Aleppo' (The New Arab, 2016). Her selfie is a celebration of the army's insignificant victory against four rebels and also a way to share her appreciation towards the government's success with fellow Syrian citizens who should be thankful that the authorities bravely protect them from revolutionary 'armed gangs'.

Allouche is one of the embedded journalists who embraced her role as a propagandist reporter, photography being one of her main assets. Through her post on Facebook she deliberately denies the legitimacy of the rebels as combatants, describing them as a gang and not as a significant perilous opposition. Simultaneously she implies a message from the government that is capable of protecting its citizens but also harm them if they overstep Assad's rule:

The intention of pictures like this from the Assad regime and its surrogates is to say: We're tough enough to protect you – or to hurt you if you abandon us – so stay with us. It's both a threat and an inducement (Rampen, 2016)



Figure 12

A journalist like Kinana Allouche knows better than anyone how the authorities work, therefore even her action to photograph that scene and upload it is a way of reconfirming her position in relation to the government. She is showing and saying out loud that she is supporting the regime, reinforcing her status as a pro-Assad reporter. Following a deeper analysis of her online activity, Allouche's social media activity is a flamboyant, yet intelligent parade of photographs and videos intended to empower the public's perception of the government. She keeps her viewers updated with the government's latest achievements and successes, highlights the values of the Syrian society that are still protected by the state and obsessively focuses on the symbol of peace (V sign) in her pictures with Syrian soldiers (Fig. 12). The latter one is definitely an oxymoron when displayed next to the Syrian army's soldiers following atrocious killings. Being contested by several groups and armies since the summer of 2012, Aleppo is definitely not a city where Syrians could find peace anymore.

The narcissistic nature of Allouche's selfie is reminiscent of Martha Rosler's view on modern journalism and how 'what has ceased to be news becomes testimonial to the bearer of the news' (1989). The Syrian reporter of Sama TV entered a dangerous situation and risked her life alongside her armed compatriots, bravely informing her spectators about the government's new military success and celebrating the denouement of the rebels through a selfie of death. Allouche's image is an extreme example of embedded journalistic practice and the nadir of the self-obsessed nature of the selfie. As an embedded journalist, not only did she accompany the soldiers but she also joined their triumphalist victory celebration by taking this photograph.

The practice of photographing enemies tortured or fallen in battle is an old one. American soldiers of the Vietnam War are known for taking visual souvenirs from the battleground, citizens of countries assaulted by ISIS take advantage of any triumph against them and pose next to their bodies or, better known, the photographs that slipped out of the Abu Ghraib jail from Iraq. If paper prints generally stayed undisclosed, shared between soldiers and their families or destroyed, the digital photographs are harder to keep private. The photographs from Abu Ghraib are probably the most notorious disturbing images that were unveiled from a war zone during the digital era. They not only unveiled torture but also brought into light how photography can be a tool used for torture (Fig. 13).

The photographs from Abu Ghraib were revealed on 27 April 2004 by CBS news, allowing a wide audience to eventually comprehend some of the common atrocities of war that were not necessarily visible before. Moreover they allowed us to see how the means of photography can be misused, in this case the use of torture for the sake of entertainment. Besides having the capacity to inform and raise awareness, photography can be directly used to produce suffering through the very representation of it. In prisons, torture has been always achieved conventionally without the aid of cameras, but in Abu Ghraib cameras were tools used to harm and humiliate detainees. Often we may think of photography as a passive and voyeuristic practice. Yet, photography is not a passive act; whether it ends up being a material print or a multitude of pixels, recording a person on

camera will have a smaller or bigger psychological impact on the subject, depending on the context. While the photographs from Abu Ghraib were used to humiliate and threaten prisoners, the selfie taken in Aleppo would not affect the dead rebels anymore, but it could cause distress amongst their families and friends. These images showed us what we never wanted to see or to acknowledge as real, yet they made us aware of the sometimes harmful power photography has and of how easy images can be leaked and rendered visible on the Internet:

The explosive photos of abuse in an Iraqi prison drive home a defining fact of 21st century life – that the pervasiveness of digital photography and the speed of the Internet make it easier to see into dark corners previously out of reach for the mass media (Simon, 2004)

The Internet is now the platform that can firstly disseminate photographs easily and, secondly, store them forever. In the era of 'Share' and 'Like' a photograph such as the one taken by Kinana Allouche, which was quickly removed by the author from her Facebook account, will never disappear thanks to viewers who were able to save it and share it. This case outraged Facebook users who expressed their disagreement towards Allouche's picture, making her delete the photograph. By the time she removed it, the image was shared by other users and some media websites had already appropriated the image and published articles exposing her lack of any professional, ethical or moral character: 'Kinana Allouche, a reporter for the pro-Bashar Assad channel Al-Sama TV, posted a selfie of herself in April in which she was seen grinning beside the bodies of dead rebels, leading to condemnation and disgust by users on Twitter and Facebook' (Times of Israel, 2016). Yet, according to Mark Reinhardt, various people assimilate photographs of this kind differently:

They often come to us unbidden and unanticipated, with the turn of a page, and the contours of consciousness are changed. Receptivity to such photographs is partly a matter of individual temperament and conviction but also a matter of social location, collective identification and political affiliation. The meaning and effects of

the images are at once singular and shared, intimate and public (Reinhardt, 2007, p.14).

Therefore we have to presume that there are viewers who do not disagree with the government's actions depicted in the selfie and maybe celebrate the army's success in Aleppo alongside Kinana Allouche. Depending on personal beliefs and the external influences that form one's knowledge, photographs will always be comprehended through a filter that determines the viewer's reaction to what they see:

Regardless of how much we may strain to maintain a "disinterested" aesthetic of apprehension, an appreciation of the "purely visual", when we look at an image it is instantly and irreversibly integrated and collated with the intricate psychic network of our knowledge (Burgin, 1980, p. 70).

Whether the reaction to the photographs from Aleppo and Abu Ghraib is positive or negative, they definitely lack any trace of respect towards the rebels and the prisoners depicted. There is little dignity that these people were left with; these photographs do the exact opposite of what Frederic Douglass hoped for – a photographic practice that would commensurate freedom. Besides being assured through killing or torture, humiliation was also reached through the nakedness of the subjects (only one of them in Allouche's selfie). If the Syrian rebels are now dead and no compensation for the horrid selfie is possible, the detainees from Abu Ghraib have been offered a chance to be seen as humans. Approximately two years after the photographs from Abu Ghraib were revealed, photographer Chris Bartlett started off a project with the aim to restore the humanity that the detainees from Abu Ghraib were deprived of (Fig. 14). He understood the unethical use of photography not only as a means of recording but also as a tool for torture, wanting to rectify what was done in Abu Ghraib and represent the former prisoners through portraits as individuals who deserve to be respected:

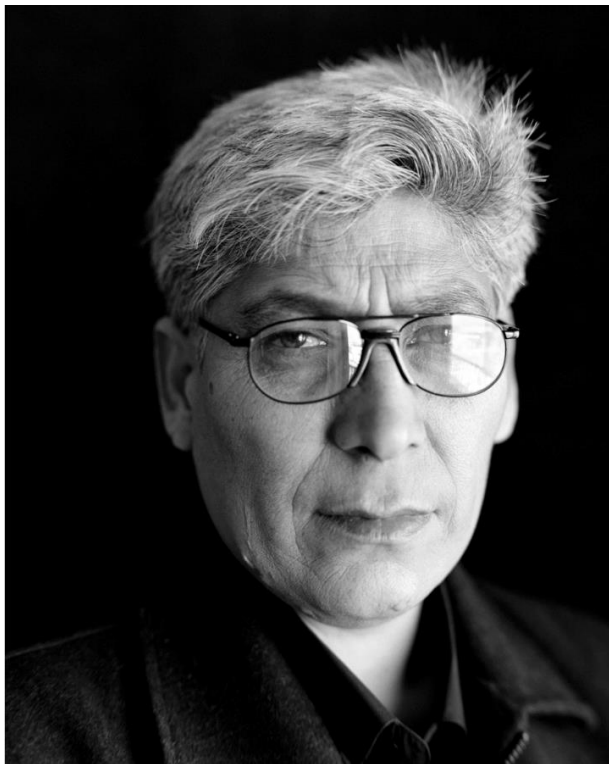
I wanted to take the camera – an instrument of their torture – and redeem it... I wanted them to have a glimmer of hope, for the audience to connect with them

through their eyes. The aim was to give them as much humanity as I could (James, 2015)

Bartlett's project was made in total contrast with the digital 'point-and-shoot' process used by the American soldiers who humiliated the detainees. In his photographs the participants pose, look straight into the lens, being represented in a respectful manner and, very important, being given a face. The most noticeable example is the case of the 'hooded man', the Iraqi prisoner later on identified as Ali Shalal Qaisi, who was photographed while standing on a box and connected to what appear to be two electrical wires (Reinhardt, 2007). In his endeavour to restore dignity to prisoners, Bartlett met Qaisi, revealed his face through a photograph and also gave him a voice, allowing him to tell the viewers about his experience. The American soldiers were exploiting the means of photography for torture and humiliation that led to inconceivable scars and depression borne by the prisoners, while the photographs taken by Bartlett have the potential to rehabilitate some dignity, offer the victims a way of seeing a different kind of representation of themselves and make us, the viewers, understand how relative and multi-faceted the use of cameras can be. Chris Bartlett was aware of all the implications of the images from Abu Ghraib and built up his project as a visual antithesis, ensuring a 'very slow, meditative process with natural light' and using 'one of the instruments of their torture to bring some of their humanity back to them' (McKelvey, 2014).



Figure 13



detained october 13, 2003 - october 13, 2004

he was the "other" hooded man, photographed at abu ghraib while standing on a cardboard box holding electric wires. they forced him to lie on the ground, loudspeakers blasting music into his ears. the ordeal lasted only a day, "but it felt like two years." they beat him regularly, and, on three occasions, subjected him to electric shock treatments. "it feels like your eyes will explode." a soldier said, "we are doing what the interrogators want. they want us to make your life very difficult so you will answer the questions." after his release, he founded the association of victims of american occupation prisons in baghdad. "there is not one person in prison in iraq who has not been subjected to some kind of abuse."

Figure 14

Susan Sontag recalls how 'ever since the invention of the camera in the 1839, photography has kept company with death' (2004). Following this script, Kinana Allouche's selfie imitates the photographs taken in Abu Ghraib, being an image of cruel joy over the pain of the other, a photograph that seems to be a reproduction of hell, a tool to propagate the authoritative government's superiority and a selfie of death – unambiguous death of the rebels and potential death of whoever would dare to diverge from Assad's domination. Allouche's photograph therefore completes the circle of different ways photography is being used in the context of the Syrian unrest. What makes it stand out is the use of a contemporary practice that usually depicts daily life in the context of war and how, akin to the Abu Ghraib images, it has been recorded by a person who represents an institution, the media (Sama TV) in her case. Photography should mirror events from around the world and be used to fight against ignorance, but, when used to entertain or to bolster propaganda through torture and celebration of death, it has definitely lost the desire of being an apparatus bound for implying freedom.

Conclusion

The photographs taken in Al Qamishli, Homs and Aleppo, like many other photographs depicting people, imply the reinforcement of social status. The photographs taken during Christmas allow us to see the Syrian people as any other citizens in any other country celebrating the birth of Jesus Christ. The image taken in Homs clearly shows us on which side of the conflict the protagonist is. Being tired of the government's oppression and demanding freedom, the protester could be seen as sympathizing with the rebel groups. The third photograph, the selfie taken by Kinana Allouche, places the journalist alongside President Assad's supporters, being an advocate of the regime and assuring visual notifications for the other followers. At the same time, in both positive and negative manners, all of these photographs are a means of self-exploration for the authors and a way of investigating and responding to reality through images.

Owing to the Internet, images like the ones selected from Syria reach viewers in a more immediate way than through traditional press (newspapers, magazines), allowing them to have an almost instant glimpse at what a photographer decided to capture and share on social media. If photography represents a form of visual knowledge, then it can aid the photographer's and the spectator's endeavor to reflect upon and understand the world:

Photography is a small voice at best... Then why photograph? Because sometimes – just sometimes – photographs can lure our senses into greater awareness. Much depends on the viewer; but to some, photographs can demand enough of emotions to be a catalyst to thinking (Smith, 1974, p. 33)

For the past six years, the Syrian Civil War has been constantly generating imagery due to the need for media coverage, but, more interestingly, as a result of the citizens' urgency to raise their voice and represent themselves through photography and social media. Associating their practice to Eugene Smith's opinion on photography, their fascinating images have definitely steered us towards thinking and attempting to understand the complex Syrian situation. We may expect a multitude of images taken by citizen

photographers to be showcased on social media and some of them to be appropriated by the mass media. Among these we should be longing for at least some strong photographs that will have the power to trigger human morality and contribute to the end of the Syrian tragedy.

Digital photography and social media have definitely changed the way we judge the authority of documentary photography as fundamentally truthful. Moreover, the deeper understanding of the subjectiveness of the photographic medium could make us (photographers, spectators, publishers) recognize alternative photographic practices used to express our own subjectivities, assimilate others' subjectivities and acknowledge documentary photography as a creative pursuit to reveal, understand and respond to the surrounding world.

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The research on citizen photographs from Syria has led to the development of a personal project that has challenged my own approach towards documentary practice. Being fascinated by the production and dissemination of this type of imagery and how they can be valued as more than 'amateur pictures', I have incorporated photographs taken on phone cameras by refugees in the *Asma* series, a project about them and, moreover, a project in which their input is vital. As a documentary practitioner, the research undertaken led to some answers but also to questions regarding ways of building up a multivocal project where protagonists also have the authority to speak and represent themselves.

Students, engineers, bird keepers, families, children and journalists. They all fled war or social instability and found shelter in Europe. This idealistic place, as they were imagining it, is supposed to be their new home, a home that comes with both comfort and struggle. Many of them are still waiting for their asylum approval, while learning new languages, adapting themselves and embracing a different way of life. Shadows of what pushed them towards leaving their homes still persist, being in contrast with this new chapter of their life which they have not chosen. This fresh start in Europe is their hope for a comeback to being treated with the decency demanded for a normal life.

Built up in Salzburg, Austria, the project represents a photographic immersion into the regrettable events that these people have experienced, but also an acknowledgement of the ordinary life they had before any social or political crisis. For most of them this normality and stability is the aim that they endeavor to reach after resettling. By asking for refuge they also try to reclaim basic human prestige and dignity that they have lost. *Asma* project brings together a series of 'networked' images that still exist thanks to internet and social media, taken by refugees from the Middle East on phones or cameras. The use of these images challenges conventional documentary practice and seeks for a multivocal photographic approach, allowing protagonists not only to be represented, but also to represent themselves and visually reveal their own stories. The phone photographs are incorporated as core aspect of the project. In addition, the portraits seek to imply the individuality and importance of every human being facing this situation, stepping away from stereotypical representations of 'groups of X migrants'.

أسماء
ألكس بالديا

ASMA
Alex Beldea

ASMA

أسماء















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ASMA

Students, engineers, bird keepers, families, children and journalists. They all fled war or social instability and found shelter in Europe. This idealistic place, as they were imagining it, is supposed to be their new home, a home that comes with both comfort and struggle. Many of them are still waiting for their asylum approval, while learning new languages, adapting themselves and embracing a different way of life. Shadows of what pushed them towards leaving their homes still persist, being in contrast with this new chapter of their life which they have not chosen. This fresh start in Europe is their hope for a comeback to being treated with the decency demanded for a normal life.

Built up in Salzburg, Austria, the project represents a photographic immersion into the regrettable events that these people have experienced, but also an acknowledgement of the ordinary life that they used to live before any social or political crisis. For most of them this normality and stability is the aim that they endeavor to reach after resettling. By asking for refuge they also try to reclaim basic human prestige and dignity that they have lost. *Asma* project brings together a series of 'networked' images that still exist thanks to internet and social media, taken by refugees on phones or cameras that they still possess or that were left back home or drowned in the sea. In addition, the portraits seek to imply the individuality and importance of every human being facing this situation, stepping away from stereotypical representations of 'groups of X migrants'.

I never met Asma, but I was given this picture she drew.

ASMA



أسماء

طلبة ، مهندسين ،مربي عصافير، عائلات، أطفال و صحفيين، كلهم فروا من فظاعة الحرب و غياب الإستقرار الإجتماعي و وجدوا ملجأ في أوروبا .ذلك المكان المثالي ، الذي لطالما تخيلوه،اصبح موطنهم الجديد، موطننا وجدوا فيه أمانا و سلام و لكن ايضا مشقة و معاناة. العديد منهم لازالو ينتظرون حظهم في اللجوء السياسي بفارغ الصبر فتعلموا لغات أجنبية و حاولوا التأقلم في بيئة مختلفة وتبني طريقة عيش جديدة. صور الحرب التي دفعتهم لهجر موطنهم لازالت تسكن اذهانهم و تعيق تكيفهم مع حياتهم الجديدة التي فرضت عليهم. هذه البداية الجديدة في اوروبا هي املهم الوحيد لاسترجاع كرامتهم و حريتهم.

تم تصوير هذا المشروع في سالزبورغ ،النمسا وهو عبارة عن مجموعة من صور فوتوغرافية تجسد احداثا مؤلمة عاشها هؤلاء الاشخاص، و كذلك ذكرياتنا عن حياتهم قبل الازمة السياسية و الاجتماعية، حياة يطمح الكثير اليها عند قدومهم الى النمسا، بحثا عن الإستقرار و الأمن الذي حرموا منه لعدة سنوات.

'اسماء' هو مشروع يجمع سلسلات من الصور التي نشرت على عدة مواقع تواصل اجتماعي، و التي التقطها لاجوون بهواتفهم او كاميراتهم ولازال البعض منهم يحتفظ بها، ولكن تركها آخرون في موطنهم او اضاعها في قاع البحر اثناء مفرهم من الحرب. و تهدف المجموعة ايضا إلى التذكير بقيمة الإنسان وكل شخص يواجه هذه الأحداث ، بعيدا عن كل الأحكام المسبقة عن اللاجئين.

لم التقي يوما بأسماء لكنني اعطيت هذه الصورة التي رسمتها •













بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

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Strudel

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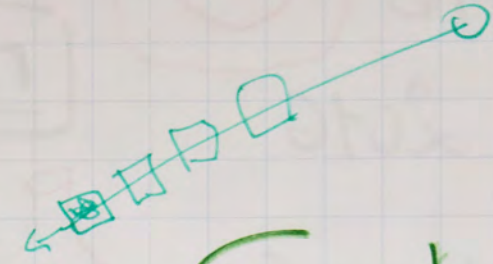
die Torte

Pfirsich

ein Zahn

der Zahnarzt

Geschirrspüler



Seh Zacherlor
+e

der Kuchen

Pflaume

die Zähne

der Zahnarzt

Geschirrspüler





