

Ethical analysis of images of distant suffering

Case study on photography of migration



[\(NOS, 2020\)](#)

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Introduction

Background

In this thesis, I will seek to analyze the ethical potential and weaknesses of images of distant suffering. As my case study, I will study an image of migration. In particular, I will focus on the image on the cover of this thesis. An image of migrants in fully loaded rubber boats, trapped at sea, aiming to cross a European border in order to apply for asylum in a European country. An image which I take to be an example of an image of distant suffering.

There are a few things that I would like to discuss in this introduction: the term migrants, my understanding of ethical potential and limitations, and what I mean by distant suffering. I will treat these matters in this order. To start, I will refer to the people in the image on the cover as migrants. To me, a migrant is anyone who leaves their current place of living with the intention to temporarily or permanently settle in another place. My definition of migration is very broad, and essentially applies to anyone who aims to settle elsewhere than where they were born, regardless of their reasons for doing so.

Yet, the people on the cover are more commonly referred to as asylum seekers or irregular migrants. An asylum seeker is someone who aims to apply for asylum in a host country, and whose case is yet to be processed by the associated government (European Commission, 2021). An asylum seeker can also be an irregular migrant, which is “a person who, owing to irregular entry, breach of a condition of entry or the expiry of their legal basis for entering and residing, lacks legal status in a transit or host country” (European Commission, n.d.). In other words, from the point of view of the European Union, an irregular migrant has entered one of the member states in an irregular way (such as by rubber boat), and/or has resided in one of the member states in an irregular way (such as by staying after a temporal visa expired). These ‘irregular acts’ are illegal in the European Union. Yet, they speak of irregular rather than illegal migrants, because it is controversial to refer to people as illegal (Brouwer, *et al.*, 2017, p. 103). The term ‘irregular migrants’ must thus also be understood as a more politically correct term of illegalized types of entry and residence in the European Union.

Theoretically, irregular migrants and asylum seekers must be guaranteed “access to effective asylum procedures” at all times (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights and Council of Europe, 2020, p. 4). Nonetheless, while access to an asylum system is a right, asylum itself is not (*ibid.*, 2020, p. 5). A right to asylum only follows from a refugee status, which is granted when someone can prove that they have fled armed conflict in their home country and/or out of fear for persecution (European Commission, 2021). When someone does not flee armed conflict or persecution, but rather flees social and/or political instability, poverty or a lack of labor opportunities, this person is not eligible for asylum in the Netherlands or elsewhere in the European Union (European Commission, 2021).

So, I will refer to the people on the cover image as migrants, but they are more commonly referred to as asylum seekers or irregular migrants. They can also be refugees, as we do not know their reasons for migrating by rubber boat; perhaps they fled political instability (irregular migrants) or perhaps they fled armed conflict (refugees). What I mean to say here is that there are many terms to refer to migrants and migration, all of which have nuances and differences (in the way there are differences between refugees and irregular migrants). I will proceed by using the terms migrants and migration only, but I wanted to highlight that reality is more complicated than I present it here.

Moving on, I am interested in the ethical potential and limitations of images of distant suffering. To start with ethical potential, I want to study if an image of distant suffering can mediate an ethical relation between the spectator (the person watching an image) and the spectated (the people depicted in the image). In the context of images and spectators, I define an ethical relation as follows: a relation of care between a spectator and the people depicted in an image of distant suffering; and I define care as being attentive to the ethical responsibilities we have towards a suffering other, as feeling somehow responsible for the suffering other's survival. Moreover, I will look into the ethical limitations of photography of distant suffering. Here, I am specifically interested in the extent to which images of distant suffering can harm ethical relations between spectators and the people in an image.

Lastly, I speak of images of distant suffering, rather than images of suffering. Distant suffering is a term I borrowed from Luc Boltanski (1999). Briefly put, distant suffering is an event of suffering made proximate through a media report. There usually is time and space between the event of suffering and the spectator (or reader) of a media report, and these gaps are bridged through a media report. The media report functions as a mediator, making an event elsewhere in the world somehow proximate to the spectator (or reader).

I must note though, my thesis does not focus on media reports per se. I focus on images. This is not to say that there is no connection with media reports. My case study, an image of migrants in a rubber boat at sea, is taken from a news platform (namely, NOS, the Dutch public news channel). Although I will say a little about this platform later on, and how my particular case study relates to the wider visual representation of migration, I am first and foremost interested in the ethical potential and weaknesses of images of distant suffering.

I must also note that not everyone may agree with me that an image of migrants on a rubber boat at sea is an event of suffering, or a tragic event. Images can mean different things to different people. While I may think that we need to relieve the suffering of these migrants, someone else may think that we should deny these migrants entrance to the European Union and the Netherlands at all costs. Images are ambiguous, meaning that we may not actually be seeing the same thing upon watching the same image (Sontag, 2003, pp. 1-4). To address this issue, I will build a broad theoretical framework that can be applied to different case studies of distant suffering; it is not necessarily tied to

the example of an image of migration. In case we cannot agree that an image of migration can represent an image of distant suffering, I invite the reader to think of other examples of distant suffering (e.g. images of conflict, poverty, famine, sickness). And to apply the theoretical framework that I present in this thesis to other kinds of images of distant suffering.

Research question and theoretical framework

So, I am interested in the ethical potential and limitations of images of distant suffering. I will use this in order to finally answer my research question: to what extent can images of distant suffering create an ethical relation between the spectator (the person watching an image) and the spectated (the people depicted in an image)?

To examine this tension between on the one hand the limitations of images of distant suffering, and on the other hand its ethical potential, I am using a theoretical framework that is based on Susan Sontag and Judith Butler. To start with Susan Sontag, I will use two of her books: *On Photography* (1977) and *Regarding the Pain of Others* (2003). In both books she is highly critical of the ethical potential of photography and images. She holds that photography is an instrument of surveillance, and that images of distant suffering fit wider trends in American and European photography throughout the twentieth century. Throughout photography's history, capturing marginalized subjects and 'exotic' (non-white) subjects has always been popular (respectively a byproduct of bourgeois and colonial traditions in photography, according to Sontag). Adding to that, Sontag holds that the omnipresence of images of (distant) suffering paralyzes us, and inhibits rather than instigates mobilization. Because Sontag is highly critical of photography, and images of (distant) suffering in particular, she is an excellent author to study the ethical limitations of photography and images of distant suffering with.

As I also want to study the ethical potential of images of distant suffering, I will incorporate Judith Butler's work in my theoretical framework. My research question specifically focuses on the extent to which images of distant suffering can create an ethical relation between the spectator and the spectated. Briefly put, interpreting Butler's ethical framework in their book *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Justice* (2004), they would think of images of distant suffering as obvious ethical mediators, because images can convey 'the face'. 'The face' is a technical term and refers to a non-linguistic expression of ethical demands, which follows from our recognition of the other (and we recognize the other by recognizing 'the face'). 'The face' does not need to be a literal depiction of a face; sometimes the contours of a body are sufficient to recognize the other in it. To Butler then, images of distant suffering show us that we are ethically responsive to the other on the basis of 'the face' only. In other words, images confirm that we do not need to know anything of the other in order to understand their ethical demands. Images can thereby confirm that our ethical responsiveness to the other comes prior to any sense of boundaries between ourselves and the other.

To summarize then, I want to examine if images of distant suffering can create an ethical relation between spectator and spectated. In order to study this, I will look at a case study (the image on the cover of this thesis), and apply a theoretical lens that combines Susan Sontag (ethical limitations) and Judith Butler (ethical potential).

Research methods

My research method is best summarized as a combination of methods. Although I focus on a single image as my case study, I will also complement this with earlier academic work on the visual representation of migration in media discourse and my own empirical findings regarding the use of images of migration on NOS.

To start with my focus on a single image as my case study, it shows a group of migrants on a rubber boat. The photographer is Aris Messinis, who is chief photographer for AFP (French international news agency) in Greece. He has experience with photographing migrants and migration, but mostly he seems to cover big events in Greece (like sports events, the Pope visiting Athens) (AFP, n.d.; Messinis, n.d.). I found his photograph on NOS (Dutch public news channel), where it was published in a news report about migrant smuggling (NOS, 2020). Besides on NOS, the image has also been published on a Hungarian news website called 'Origo', where it accompanies a news report about European Union migration policies (Origo, 2020).

Before turning to other elements of my research method, I will explain why I believe my case study is an example of an image of distant suffering (even though others may disagree with me on that). To me, this image is an iconic visualization of what is more commonly referred to as 'irregular migration'. Even though irregular migration comes in many forms (by rubber boat, by foot, by hiding in trucks, etc.), migration by rubber boat is highly mediatized type of irregular migration (Kassar & Dourgnon, 2014, p. 1). As I noted earlier, 'irregular migration' refers to illegalized ways of entry to or residence in the European Union (European Commission, n.d.). In other words, irregular migrants would engage in criminal acts. Yet, regular ways of entry, and regular types of residence, are not available to the people that try to settle in Europe in an irregular way, because their motivations for migration do not make them eligible for asylum – as a result of which these people turn to irregular ways.

To illustrate this, we can look at the criteria for a refugee status, which only include fleeing armed conflict or persecution (European Commission, 2021). This definition of a refugee is extremely narrow, and does not account for the wild variety of (oftentimes overlapping) issues that push people into migrating (Brouwer, *et al.*, 2017, p. 103). Right now, the reality is that someone who is fleeing poverty and instability does not have a chance at asylum in the European Union, even though they feel probably as threatened, and as urged to migrate, as someone who flees armed conflict or persecution. As the Commissioner for Human Rights in the Council of Europe writes in 2009: "many migrants

cannot claim refugee status, even if their enforced return would amount to personal tragedy and/or economic disaster” (Hammarberg, 2009, p. 383).

In the end I want to focus on this single image of migration, because to me, it represents the issues that I see with the current governance of migration and the massive sufferings this produces. This makes it an excellent example of an image of distant suffering (but again, other spectators may see this differently).

Besides my single case study image, I will also present a simple empirical study to support an argument that I will make later on. My research data consists of all images of migration on NOS. In NOS’ online news archive, I searched for all news reports on ‘migrants’ or ‘migration’. There are 315 news reports with a cover image, dating from 2014 to 2021 (and more news reports without images from before 2014). I downloaded all images without their news reports (except for my case study image), because my primary focus lies with my single case study image. A profound empirical study of all images and their associated news reports would be unnecessarily complicated, considering the scope of my thesis. I must note though, that in focusing on images only, I separate them completely from the context in which they were once published. The only common context that remains intact, is that all images are connected to a news report that mentions either ‘migrants’ or ‘migration’.

I will use this simple empirical study to support the argument that images of migration are racialized, and to further illustrate how the current governance of migration relates to criminalization. As a final element of my research method, I will triangulate my own empirical findings with earlier academic work on the role of race in discourses of migration (Bosworth & Guild, 2008; Johnson, 2011; Weber & Bowling, 2008; Wilmott, 2017). In this way, I aim to demonstrate that while my case study is a single image, it also fits larger trends in photography of migration, and the images published on NOS.

In sum, my research method is best described as a combination of methods: (i) a case study analysis of a single image and its context (photographer, news report, publication history); (ii) a brief empirical study of all images of migration on NOS (N=315), specifically focused on racialization and securitization, and (iii) supporting academic work on the visual representation of migration. For details about my empirical study, please see the appendix.

Academic and societal relevance

The question that is left, is why my thesis topic is relevant (and interesting) research. I am interested in images of distant suffering, because they seem horrible at first sight. They present me with suffering, which I am not able to relieve, because of the distance in space and time between me and the suffering I witness. They confront me with my own powerlessness. At the same time, images of distant suffering provide insight into an otherwise unknown event. And whilst I may not be in a position to

change this event, to relieve the suffering, I do find myself in a position to feel care for the suffering others I witness. I care for their survival. This ambiguity shows that images of distant suffering have both potential and limitations, which led me to research it.

The reason that I want to focus on an image of migrants on a rubber boat specifically, is because I see serious issues with the current governance of migration in the Netherlands and the European Union (and of course elsewhere in the world, but my focus lies with my own geographical location). It is impossible to list all of those, but I will highlight a few to give an impression.

First, the strict distinction between political asylum (refugees) and economic asylum (irregular migrants) has received much criticism, as it oversimplifies the many complex and entangled reasons for migration. Van Houtum and Van Naerssen speak of an “arbitrary and abstract difference that is currently upheld between economic and political asylum [...]” (2001, p. 129). In addition to this, these authors argue the distinction between economic and political asylum (and the respective ineligibility and eligibility for asylum that follows from this) stimulates migration without identificatory documents. As they phrase it: “it [the distinction between economic and political asylum, NI] eventually produces *gens sans papiers*, since migrating without a passport increases the chance of getting political asylum” (2001, p. 130). In other words, if someone does not strictly flee armed conflict but rather political and social instability, they are usually aware of their ineligibility for asylum in the European Union. Thus, to have chance at being granted asylum, it makes more sense to destroy identity documents, and make a case for political asylum.¹ This does not only create a population of undocumented people, but also makes these people vulnerable to human trafficking and other criminal networks and activities.

Other than this reductive distinction between economic and political asylum and its implications, there are so-called ‘push-backs’. As mentioned, asylum seekers have a right to apply for asylum (while asylum itself is not a right). In order to prevent asylum seekers from exercising this right to an asylum procedure, they are literally pushed back onto the sea by coastal guards, or moved across borderlands (NOS, 2021a; NOS, 2021b; NOS, 2021c). As if they had never reached a European border, thereby denying them their right to apply for asylum. Push-backs are also not isolated events, but rather fit into a larger pattern in which particularly ‘irregular migrants’ face coercive, violent and restrictive treatment. Punitive and coercive policies traditionally belong to the field of criminal justice, but they are spilling over to other fields of governance like that of migration. This is what is sometimes referred to as the crimmigration thesis: the convergence of criminalization and immigration both in discourse and in policies (Guild and Bosworth, 2008; Stumpf, 2006).

¹ Neske Baerwaldt (researcher border studies) created a podcast on this issue (and others). It is called *De Verbranders* (The Burners), referring to the act of burning passports. See *De Verbranders* by Neske Baerwaldt & Wiebe Ruijtenberg (2021).

To end, it is relevant to study images of distant suffering, because they are omnipresent and ethically ambiguous. It is relevant to study an image of migration as an example of distant suffering, because the current governance of migration demonstrates a need for ethical relationship-building between migrants and citizens of the Netherlands and in the European Union (whom are usually exposed to images of migration as well).

Structure

Regarding the structure of this thesis, I will start in the following chapter by setting out my theoretical framework to study images of distant suffering. Here, I will not discuss anything related to migrants and migration; I only focus on Sontag and Butler's take on the ethical limitations and potential of images of distant suffering. After this, my third chapter is about my research method. In this chapter, I will explain the context of my case study, and how it relates to wider characteristics of photography of migration. In other words, I present all supplementary evidence that I need to draw conclusions in my analysis in chapter four. This chapter is an application of my theoretical framework to my case study of an image of distant suffering. The final chapter, chapter five, provides an overall summary, a set of conclusions and a reflection on the implications of my conclusions.

Theoretical Framework: Sontag and Butler

Introduction

In this chapter I will set out my theoretical framework in order to (i) identify ethical potential and limitations of images of distant suffering, and (ii) to determine if images of distant suffering can create an ethical relation between the spectator and the spectated. In order to weigh the limitations against the potential of images of distant suffering, I will create a theoretical framework that is based on Susan Sontag and Judith Butler.

Sontag on photography

Colonial and bourgeois endeavor

In this section I will set out Sontag's core critiques of images of distant suffering; namely, their roots in century-old bourgeois and colonial traditions. This has resulted in a historic preoccupation with images that depict 'exotic', colonized people (2003, p. 30), and people that are in a position of suffering and marginalization (1977, p. 55). These two characteristics have also mixed in the history of photography, thereby conflating colonized people with marginalization and *vice versa*. I will start this section by discussing how and why photography, as well as images of distant suffering, are embedded in colonial traditions. Thereafter, I will turn to how bourgeois influences manifest in photographic trends, to end with a problematization of the mix of both.

First, Sontag argues that photography is embedded in colonial relations, because images establish unequal hierarchies between spectator and spectated (Sontag, 1977, pp. 14-16; Sontag, 2003, p. 63). This relates to a spectator's power to attribute meaning to an image and the people in it, while the depicted people cannot speak for themselves. Images appear to have straightforward meanings, but in fact, different spectators can see different things in an image (Sontag, 2003, pp. 1-4). This is why I mentioned in the introduction that my case study may not be an example of an image of distant suffering to everyone. I may think of this as a tragic event, but other spectators may see an image of migrants on a rubber boat and think of this as a problem that needs to be taken care of.

To elaborate on this meaning-making process a bit more, the relation between image, meaning and spectator is best captured as a representation. A representation, as Karen Barad describes it, implies a tripartite relation between an entity to be represented, a status to be attributed to this entity and a person who does the act of representing. In this relationship, the entity to be represented will be attributed a description and/or evaluation by a third party. There is a person, who serves as mediator and interpreter, who conveys what the entity is through a status attribution (Barad, 2008, pp. 122-125).

This can be problematic, for the portrayed entity does not have the agency to speak for itself, but rather gets spoken for through a status attribution. In other words, the spectated is defined by the spectator, and the spectator does not run the risk that the spectated will 'speak back' to object how

they have been interpreted (if necessary) (Sontag, 2003, pp. 1-4, 63). For the spectator, their agency is only confirmed by a photograph, whereas that of the spectated is necessarily denied. This is then also why Sontag speaks of mastery in reference to photography; it indeed rests upon a power imbalance between the spectator and the people depicted in an image. The spectator finds itself on top of the newly established hierarchal relation between themselves and the spectated. And while the spectator may feel as if it gets know the spectated, it is a “deceptive mastery of experience” (1977, p. 81).

This is not say, however, that spectators can attribute any meaning to any image. Whatever is depicted in the image (as well as the context in which an image is published), informs the scope of potential meanings. An image like my case study may arouse different sentiments in different spectators (compassion, anger, sadness), but this comes from a common basis; namely that we are actually viewing an image of people on a rubber boat. It is unlikely a spectator will judge this as (for example) an image of an elephant. So, the visual content (and the context) of an image directs the meaning-making process. And yet, images do not have universal or inherent meanings. There is always a plurality of meanings attached to a single image, even though these meanings are bound to a certain scope of meanings.

Moving on, I will explain what Sontag means with the bourgeois tradition in photography. In the early days of photography (1850s), the technology is “the toy for the clever, the wealthy, and the obsessed” (Sontag, 1977, p. 7). Whereas photography is “almost as widely practiced an amusement as sex and dancing” in the second half of the twentieth century (Sontag, 1977, p. 8), it used to be available to a handful of well-off people and inventors, later on followed by a larger group of middle class people and eventually lower-middle-class people (Sontag, 1977, pp. 7-9). Following painting traditions, photography was first and foremost popular to capture family portraits. Also in 1977, when Sontag publishes her book, the portrayal of family members as well as their achievements is still a central feature of photography (1977, pp. 8-9). Besides this, also the poor and marginalized are longstanding subjects of interest, because of the initially exclusive availability of the camera to the well-off (Sontag, 1977, p. 55). As Sontag writes: “social misery has inspired the comfortably-off with the urge to take pictures, the gentlest of predations, in order to document a hidden reality, a reality hidden from them” (1977, p. 55). In other words, she explains the interest in capturing poor, marginalized and suffering others as a kind of voyeurism, in turn a byproduct of photography as a bourgeois endeavor.

Illustrative of this voyeuristic and bourgeois influence in the history of photography, is an exhibition by the photographer Roy E. Stryker. According to Sontag, he sought to portray social life in the rural areas of the US. With undoubtedly good intentions, his exhibition consisted of images of the suffering and the poor (1977, pp. 61-62). Sontag notes: “the purpose

of the project was to demonstrate the value of the people photographed. Thereby, it implicitly defined its point of view: that of middle-class people who needed to be convinced that the poor were really suffering, and that the poor were dignified” (1977, p. 62). In other words, many photographers in the late nineteenth century and throughout the twentieth century have sought to capture poor and marginalized subjects out of interest into a reality that was foreign to their own, and perhaps even out of the intention to show beauty, value and other positive traits in their depicted subjects. In so doing, however, photographers showed their own tacit assumptions; namely, the suffering subject is not valuable at all, and an exhibition of their suffering is needed to make spectators believe otherwise.

So, capturing the suffering of others is a longstanding trend in photography, which Sontag explains as a byproduct of photography’s bourgeois tradition (a tradition which in turn accounts for the interest in ‘hidden’ realities of poverty and marginalization). In addition to this, Sontag notes that the camera’s aggression also plays a role in the popularity of capturing poor and suffering subjects. She writes: “the camera is a kind of passport that annihilates moral boundaries and social inhibitions, freeing the photographer from any responsibility towards the people photographed” (1977, p. 41). What she means here, is that we often (falsely) think of photographers as silent visitors; they do not mix with their environment and the people in it, but silently zoom in on certain events and people; the photographer can simply take a photo and leave, without ever thinking back of whether they were allowed to (1977, pp. 41-42, 88). This is what Sontag means with the camera as an aggressive technology. With this in mind, she explains the popularity of marginalized subjects (also) as follows: “[...] the search for “real” faces, generally sought among the anonymous, the poor, the socially defenseless, the aged and the insane – people indifferent to (or powerless to protest) the camera’s aggressions” (1977, p. 104). In other words, marginalized subjects are not only photographed out of interest for marginalization, but also because this specific situation of marginalization makes the subject defenseless to the camera.

Up until now, I have discussed Sontag’s critiques of photography of suffering in relation to photography’s history in bourgeois and colonial traditions. In light of this, it can be concluded that an image of distant suffering is anything but unique. Rather, it follows longstanding trends in photography. I will now turn to the combination of colonial and bourgeois influences in photography. First of all, the risk of these two trends in photography is that images of marginalization can overlap with images of historically colonized people – Sontag mostly speaks of Africa and Asia, but it applies to more regions in the world (2003, p. 63). Consequently, this may disproportionately associate marginalization with (formerly) colonized people.

In addition to this, the suffering of ‘exotic’ and (formerly) colonized others is typically more intimately depicted, because there is a perceived distance between them and the photographer and their audience. When suffering people are captured in detail, they are most likely to come from a different (perceived) community than that of the photographer and their audience (Sontag, 2003, p. 61). And this is not just an individual choice by the photographer. Rather, it is a form of self-censorship that follows from collective norms about what should and should not be photographed (Sontag, 2003, p. 60).

To illustrate this, it is highly uncommon for photographers and photographs to display the faces of deceased soldiers. This is partly related to the fact that relatives of the deceased may step forward and object the disclosure of the deceased’s identities. More important, however, are the norms that govern ‘good taste’ and ‘bad taste’ in photography of atrocities. Images of suffering run the risk of being perceived as morbid or lugubrious, especially if it concerns a detailed exhibition of the suffering of those who are perceived to be in the same community as the photographer and their audience. Such an image of suffering is more likely to be perceived as morbid (and thereby less likely to be taken or published), because it contradicts our ideas of how to treat those within our own communities with respect and dignity (Sontag, 2003, pp. 60-61). As Sontag notes:

“With subjects closer to home, the photographer is expected to be more discreet” (2003, p. 53).

“With our dead, there has always been a powerful interdiction against showing the naked face. [...] This is a dignity not thought necessary to accord to others. The more remote or exotic the place, the more likely we are to have full frontal views of the dead and dying” (2003, p. 61).

In other words, the publicity of a depicted subject’s suffering and/or violence is also dependent on the extent to which this subject is considered an outsider to a certain community. So, with photographs of marginalized subjects, there also tends to be more intimate visual material of outsiders or ‘others’ (in turn informed by colonial ideas of ‘exoticness’) (Sontag, 2003, p. 61). As Sontag writes: “Generally, the grievously injured bodies shown in published photographs are from Asia or Africa. This journalistic custom inherits the centuries-old practice of exhibiting exotic – that is, colonized – human beings [...]” (2003, p. 63).

Even if these images serve to address injustices, they simultaneously “nourish belief in the inevitability of tragedy in the benighted or backward – that is, poor – parts of the world” (Sontag, 2003, p. 62). What she means here, is that atrocities of those we perceive as ‘others’ are more likely to be captured and exhibited in detail. Since we are less likely to capture and exhibit the suffering of people that we identify with, with whom we think we share a community, there is also less visual material, and less graphic material, of them. This makes it

seem as though these ‘other’ people are disproportionately violent, victimized or any other way marginalized and unfortunate. To end with Sontag’s words:

“When they will not give a doir to relieve a lame beggar, they will lay out ten to see a dead Indian. The exhibition in photographs of cruelties inflicted on those with darker complexions in exotic countries continues this offering, oblivious to the considerations that deter such displays of our own victims of violence; for the other, even when not an enemy, is regarded only as someone to be seen, not someone (like us) who also sees” (2003, p. 63).

Altogether, Sontag is critical of images of distant suffering, because they are a product of bourgeois and colonial influences in the history of photography. These influences have led to a preoccupation with colonized and marginalized subjects in photographic trends – and a preoccupation with aestheticizing these subjects. Images of distant suffering thereby fit into this historical pattern. In some cases, the marginalized and colonized subject can also overlap (especially since marginalization of ‘exotic’ subjects is more likely to be captured in full detail). In these instances, the colonized other becomes associated with marginalization and *vice versa*.

Surveillance

Whereas the previous section focused more specifically on images of suffering, Sontag is also critical of photography in general, because of its capacity for surveillance. Although Sontag does not explicitly define surveillance, I argue that it bears two meanings in her books (1977; 2003). First of all, Sontag speaks of surveillance in the relation between images and truth. As I will discuss later, what is unique about an image as a technological mediator, is that we expect it to present something ‘true’; that is, something that actually happened, or someone who was actually present on the location where and at the time when the image was taken. This characteristic of photography makes that images can serve as evidence, in turn making it suitable means for surveillance, according to Sontag (1977, p. 178; 2003, p. 40).

Besides surveillance being related to this image-truth relation, it also relates to framing. In particular, Sontag holds that images are always subject to framing by the photographer (or the media outlet where an image is published). There are always choices behind an image, choices on what is left out in the image, and what should be, and thus has been, captured (Sontag, 2003, pp. 10, 39). This framing makes that images themselves are a way of demanding attention for certain events or people, while neglecting others (Sontag, 1977, p. 3; Sontag, 2003, p. 38). In this section I will elaborate on both these elements of Sontag’s critique of photography as a means for surveillance. I will start by discussing the image-truth relation and surveillance, after which I will turn to framing and surveillance. Finally, I will end with a brief reflection on the implications of these critiques for images of distant suffering.

To start then, I will further discuss the relation between images and truth, and how this links to Sontag's critique of photography due to its suitability for surveillance. As I noted already, when we view an image, we typically expect it to be representative of reality; that is, images are supposed to show us reality, and the events that took place in it. Images appear neutral, transparent windows to reality; oftentimes images are invisible mediators (Sontag, 1977, p. 86; Sontag, 2003, p. 47). It is an excellent example of an embodiment relation, according to mediation theory. In an embodiment relation, a technology gives us access to the world. We look through the technology to the world, thereby forgetting the mediating role of the technology. Peter-Paul Verbeek gives the example of glasses, "which we do not look *at* but rather *through*" (2012, p. 392). The same type of mediation is visible in images.

If we compare images with paintings, here it seems more obvious that they do not just show reality, but construct one (Sontag, 1977, p. 92). After all, a painting is created by a painter with certain values, tastes, ideologies, techniques, and so on – which in turn are shaped by the painter's place and time and the collective norms associated with those. According to Sontag, images have this expectation of truth specifically because they followed up paintings, which are more clearly marked by their painter (Sontag, 1977, pp. 154-155). As Sontag writes: "The painter constructs, the photographer discloses" (1977, p. 92).

This expectation of truth makes the camera and images excellent tools for surveillance (Sontag, 1977, p. 178). It is because of this expectation that images can function as evidence (Sontag, 2003, p. 40). When we treat images as evidence, we simultaneously assume that what we see is what we know. When we expect an image to disclose a (visual) piece of reality, we are assuming that we can know reality through an image (Sontag, 1977, pp. 156-158). As Sontag writes: "Our inclination to treat character as equivalent to behavior makes more acceptable a widespread public installation of the mechanized regard from the outside provided by cameras" (1977, p. 177). In this quote, "treating character as equivalent to behavior" refers to the idea that seeing (behavior) is knowing (character). For Sontag, the blurred distinction between seeing and knowing, in turn embedded in our historically grounded belief in the image's truth, paves the way for the normalization of cameras and images as tools for surveillance (1977, pp. 176-178).

Moving on, Sontag also thinks of photography as surveillance in relation to framing. Before linking framing to surveillance, I must note that framing in itself is a counter-argument to the perceived neutrality and transparency of images. While images may appear to disclose parts of reality, they are always subject to choices. Let me give an example: a photographer (much like the painter) is guided by their personal values, interests and ideologies in deciding what to capture with the camera and what not (Sontag, 2003, pp. 10, 39). Besides this, there are usually financial interests at stake. If a photographer needs to sell their work, they will be guided by the sorts of images that are in demand by

potential buyers (Sontag, 2003, pp. 59-60). Also, a photographer's individual choices are grounded in a certain place and time with specific norms. An illustration of those norms would be the level of detail in images of suffering, which inhibits photographers from displaying too much detail in images of suffering people who are perceived to belong to the same community (Sontag, 2003, pp. 61, 63).

With these choices and conditions in mind, images can never be 'just' windows to reality. They are always subject to framing. Sontag relates this framing to surveillance, because images are a way of demanding attention for whatever is depicted in it (and not demanding attention for whomever is left out). In other words, images foster the idea that whomever they depict, ought to be looked at (Sontag, 1977, p. 3; Sontag, 2003, p. 10).

Finally, what do these critiques of photography mean for images of distant suffering? First of all, it means that images of distant suffering are not just documentations of sufferings that took place in reality. Like any other image, they are subject to framing, in turn influenced by all sorts of factors ranging from a photographer's skills to a history of colonial and bourgeois traditions (Sontag, 2003, pp. 10, 39). So, when we expect an image of distant suffering to simply inform us about the sufferings in and of reality, to document them, we overlook the way in which the image in itself already directs our awareness (and potentially our caring) to certain events and people while neglecting others. In other words, we overlook the framing that precedes any image.

To summarize, Sontag critiques photography for its capacity for surveillance. Photography is suitable for surveillance, because we expect images to be windows into reality. Images are supposed to represent truth. This expectation is historically grounded in the transition from painting to photography as a way of documenting reality (Sontag, 1977, pp. 154-155). This expectation of truth also makes that images and the camera can respectively serve as proof and a surveillance technology (Sontag, 1977, pp. 177-178). This is not to say that images stand in direct relation to truth, nor that they are neutral. Images are always subject to choices and collective conditions, which together form the framing which precedes any image. And because images are a result of framing, images in themselves are a way of demanding attention for certain events and people while neglecting others (Sontag, 2003, pp. 10, 39).

Paralysis

In this final section, I will discuss the extent to which images of distant suffering can create a moral position in a spectator, according to Sontag. This topic is central to my research question, which is about the extent to which images of distant suffering can create an ethical relation between spectator and spectated. For Sontag, this would not be the case. First of all, the wide circulation and vast volume of images of suffering have made us indifferent and paralyzed (1977, p. 20). Sontag describes this as follows:

"To suffer is one thing; another thing is living with the photographed images of suffering, which does not necessarily strengthen conscience and the ability to be compassionate. It can

also corrupt them. Once one has seen such images, one has started down the road of seeing more – and more. Images transfix. Images anesthetize. An event known through photographs certainly becomes more real than it would have been if one had never seen the photographs [...] But after repeated exposure to images it also becomes less real.” (1977, p. 20)

In addition to this, Sontag holds that images cannot build a specific moral position, because they are ambiguous. The meaning of an image depends on the context in which images are published, the spectator’s interpretation, as well as how the spectated is framed by the photographer. Consequently, images cannot determine any specific (ethical) relation between spectator and spectated (Sontag, 1977, pp. 17, 19, 24). To illustrate this, an image of migrants on a rubber boat cannot determine that I, being a spectator, will feel a sense of care towards these migrants. I do feel this care, but this is a result of the interaction between what I see and how I feel about migrants and migration as a person (a consciousness which comes prior to what I see – in fact, this consciousness influences what I see). This is why Sontag argues that images can only influence a spectator’s prior consciousness (1977, p. 17).

Moreover, although Sontag is not convinced that images of distant suffering can foster political mobilization (because of their volume), it is worth noting that even if images could do so, they could incite political mobilization in multiple directions. Because images are ambiguous, they can also ignite different kinds of mobilizations. To give a simple example of this, imagine a photo of any political leader. This can support both protest and praise. The same goes for images of distant suffering, which can lead to mobilizing against the event and the people in the image just as well it can lead to mobilizing for them. In other words, the same image can facilitate a ‘pro’ and ‘anti’ mobilization, meaning that the direction of mobilization is not determined by the image.

Butler on photography

Before going into Judith Butler’s take on images of distant suffering, I will give a brief overview of the argument so far. These are ethical limitations of images of distant suffering, according to Sontag: (i) trends in photography have been influenced by bourgeois voyeurism and colonial relations, resulting in popular images that aestheticize the marginalized, ‘exotic’ other.; (ii) the expectation that images are truthful makes that images appear as neutral mediators, like windows into reality. Yet, images are a result of framing, which directs our attention to certain events while neglecting others.; (iii) images cannot determine a specific moral position in a spectator, because their meaning is ambiguous. It depends on the context in which an image is published, how the spectated is framed, and the spectator who interprets the image; (iv) the omnipresence of images of distant suffering has paralyzed us.

Having discussed the limitations of images of distant suffering, I will turn to Judith Butler. I will use their work to study the ethical potential of images of distant suffering. In order to do so, I will

also explain the wider ethical framework that they develop in the book *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Justice* (2004), to which I will refer as an ethics of precarity. Although a complete overview of an ethics of precarity would be beyond the scope of my thesis, I will start by explaining the pillars of this framework, which we need to understand Butler's take on ethical potential of images of distant suffering. After this general overview of an ethics of precarity, I will turn to a discussion on the agency of an image itself, as a result of which images necessarily affect their spectators (Butler, 2007, p. 955). Because affect is not the same as an ethical relation, I will end the section on Butler with a discussion of the potential for an ethical type of affect.

Ethics of precarity

In this section, I will give background information on an ethics of precarity. Some of the core characteristics of this ethical framework are: (i) others' ethical demands have priority over that of our own, (ii) nonviolence is an absolute ethical demand, (iii) ethical responsiveness to 'the face', (iv) inherent vulnerability of life to destruction by others. In what follows, I will discuss what these pillars are and how they relate to one another.

To start, ethics of precarity is partly based on Emmanuel Levinas and centralizes the precarious life of 'the other'. What Butler means with precarity, is that life is inherently vulnerable to destruction by others, because of the vulnerability of bodies (both human and nonhuman) (Butler, 2004, p. xviii). Since we cannot overcome this precarity of our bodies, our preservation (i.e. the continuation of our life) is dependent on our encounters with others. Others can easily harm us, they can even murder us, thereby endangering our self-preservation (and their own self-preservation, as we are likely to harm the other too, if the other hurts us). And yet, others do not usually do so, and we do not usually inflict harm upon others. To Levinas, this is the basis of ethics; it is precisely the recognition of our own vulnerability to the other and *vice versa*, and refraining from trying to overcome that vulnerability with violence, even when we fear the other (or when the other fears us). The fact that we *can* harm and kill others, but we do not do so (most of the time), means to Levinas that we are constantly engaged in ethical negotiations with others (Butler, 2004, pp. xvii-xviii).

For Levinas, we are ethically responsive to the other if we recognize 'the face'. In other words, our ethical negotiation for mutual self-preservation follows from the recognition of 'the face' (Butler, 2007, p. 955). Butler also refers to 'the face' as a non-linguistic expression of ethical demands (Butler, 2004, p. 134). Since 'the face' is non-linguistic, it is most often conveyed visually (such as through images) (Butler, 2007, p. 955).

So, what is 'the face' exactly? First of all, 'the face' is a technical term and does not necessarily refer to an actual face. Sometimes we can recognize someone as another person, an other to which we are ethically responsive, even though we may not see their face in full detail. For example, when we see images of people's backs, we can deduce that these backs represent people

(Butler, 2004, p. 133). ‘The face’ is thus about recognizing the other as a life form, and understanding the ethical demands that follow from this recognition (Butler, 2004, p. 134). It is also worth noting that ‘the face’ is not exclusively human, as we can also be ethically responsive to animals and nature’s needs – but that is a different discussion.

Besides this, an ethics of precarity prioritizes ethical demands posed by others over ethical demands of ourselves. This means that even when the other resorts to violence, an ethics of precarity interdicts us from using violence as a response. This interdiction has two grounds. First of all, Butler builds their account on Levinas, who has argued that nonviolence is an absolute ethical demand. Our own ethics cannot depend on whether others act ethically; that is, regardless of others’ actions (and whether or not these will be violent), we must remain nonviolent in order for our own ethics to be absolute (Butler, 2004, pp. 136-137; Nobel Prize Museum, 2011b).

Butler also discusses another argument for nonviolence; they argue that if we respond to violence with violence, we are simultaneously creating or upholding the sorts of collective conditions that foster violence. By resorting to violence ourselves, we also become again more vulnerable to violence by others, specifically because we incentivize others to respond with violence to us again. To Butler, being violent is an attempt to overcome one’s inherent vulnerability to destruction by others. Yet, since this vulnerability is inherent to our physical condition, we can only seemingly overcome this vulnerability by exploiting that of others (which we do when we inflict harm upon others) (Butler, 2004, pp. 29-30, 136-137).

To summarize then, an ethics of precarity is characterized by the priority of others’ ethical demands over that of our own, nonviolence, bodily vulnerability to destruction by others, dependency on others for self-preservation, and the recognition of ‘the face’. These elements in themselves are not yet applicable to images of distant suffering, but they will show to be necessary in order to explain Butler’s stances on images of distant suffering to which I will turn in the following two sections.

Images as agents

To understand Butler’s take on images of distant suffering, I must also explain some ontological viewpoints. These viewpoints presuppose that we are in a constant state of becoming, and that our being is informed by our environment and ‘the others’ in it (Butler, 2004, p. 44). In other words, we are constituted by traces of others, because we change upon encounter and never return to any previous state (Butler, 2004, p. 46).

Butler is mostly concerned with the interaction between a human “I” and a human “other”, but we can think of any discursive/material form or being as a co-creator of ourselves (and how we understand ourselves). This view is based on what Karan Barad refers to as ‘agential realism’; this view presupposes continuous interaction between material and discursive forms and beings, which produces a type of agency that influences our own configuration as discursive and material beings in

any given moment in time (2008, pp. 141-143). To illustrate this, I am currently in my appartement, in which I live with a cat. My cat is oftentimes anxious due to trauma. When she is in my living room, I do not make sudden movements or loud noises. So, I adjust my behavior as a result of the interaction between me and my cat. Barad would then say that this interaction exercises agency upon me, and influences who I think I am and how I act in that specific moment.

A similar example could be made for a nonliving object, like an image. While an image does not react to my being in any way my cat does, it still informs my being (the interaction between me and the image exercises agency upon me). When we watch an image (even briefly), we become something new. We now take with us this trace of an image, whether or not this trace has a large impact on us or not at all. Butler has a beautiful way of phrasing this in the context of an encounter between an “I” and a “you”:

“It is not as if an “I” exists independently over here and then simply loses a “you” over there, especially if the attachment to “you” is part of what composes who “I” am. [...] On one level, I think I have lost “you” only to discover that “I” have gone missing as well. At another level, perhaps what I have lost “in” you, that for which I have no ready vocabulary, is a relationality that is composed neither exclusively of myself nor you, but is to be conceived as *the tie* by which those terms are differentiated and related (2004, p. 22).

Although Butler’s passage seems to focus on an “I” and “you” who know one another, it is equally applicable to photography; they namely demonstrate that the relation between “I” and “you” is not lost in separation. Rather, an “I” is formed and composed by a “you”, thereby carrying a part of “you” inside “myself”.

With photography, however, the “you” that is mutually constitutive of a spectating “I” is an image rather than another person. This means that the spectating “I” does not meet the person or people portrayed in the image, but rather projects meaning onto those portrayed. This changes an “I”, but not so much a portrayed “you”. Nonetheless, the spectator now takes with him/her/them this relationality to the image. Even when a spectator forgets about an image soon after seeing it, there is this brief moment in which an “I” becomes precisely that “I” through its encounter with a spectated “you”. For my research purposes, this means that images can build relations between spectators and the people in an image; namely, this relation of affect, of taking a trace of an image with us in our own being.

Creating an ethical relation?

In this final section, I will reflect more specifically on an ethical type of affect, as affect in itself implies a relation but does not determine the nature of that relation. So while images affect their spectators, the question remains whether images of distant suffering can build ethical relations (i.e. a sense of care, empathy, etc.). To Butler, this is certainly possible. Here, the idea of ‘the face’ is

important again. To reiterate, ‘the face’ is a non-linguistic expression of ethical demands; it can be a literal depiction of the face, but it can also be the contours of a body; we need just enough to recognize the other as a life form in order to be responsive to their ethical demands (Butler, 2004, pp. 133-134).

This ethical responsiveness is about recognizing the other’s ethical demands, but not necessarily about accepting these ethical demands. To illustrate this, we can watch an image of distant suffering, understand the ethical demands that follow from seeing ‘the face’, but conclude that we reject those demands because the other is suffering by their own fault. Or, perhaps we pity the suffering other, but we think of their suffering as a necessary sacrifice for our own self-preservation. In both instances, however, we are already engaged in an ethical reflection and/or judgement. When we sympathize with the suffering other, we understand (some of) their ethical demands. When we do not sympathize with the other, we understand (some of) the demands, but we have reasons for not gratifying those demands (like that the suffering other suffers by their own choosing).

To Butler, being ethically responsive regardless of our active choosing for it, means that ethical relations come prior to any sense of self or any form of interpretation. We are first and foremost open to negotiate an ethical relation between ourselves and the (depicted) other, and only after this negotiation we proceed to action (or inaction) (Nobel Prize Museum, 2011c). If anything then, images of distant suffering show that our receptivity to ethical claims by others precedes any idea of who these others are, where they are from and whether or not we identify with them (Butler, 2004, pp. 138-139). In other words, we need just ‘the face’ (and not even in full detail) to recognize the other as a life form that is precarious, and whose precariousness makes that they have ethical demands for self-preservation. And because we recognize precarity in the other (as well as the ethical demands that follows from this), we recognize our own precarity (and that all life is precarious) (Butler, 2004, p. 134; Nobel Prize Museum, 2011a).

Moreover, since ‘the face’ is a non-linguistic expression, images are suitable mediators of the face. And since ‘the face’ is a necessary condition for ethical responsiveness, I would also argue that images are important ethical mediators. As Butler writes: “If, as the philosopher Emmanuel Levinas claims, it is *the face* of the other that demands from us an ethical response, then it would seem that the norms that allocate who is human and who is not arrive in visual form” (2007, p. 955).

Also, Butler tentatively suggests that images are like ethical demands; we do not choose the images we get to see, images come upon us and demand our attention. Ethical demands can also come upon us, they may call on us even though we did not choose for it, nor consent to it (Nobel Prize Museum, 2011a; Nobel Prize Museum, 2011b). Butler contends that if we only think of ethical obligations in terms of the obligations that we choose, we may be overlooking an important way in which ethical demands work; namely, as impositions that follow from a call, as demands that we are responsive to regardless of whether we want to be (Butler, 2004, p. 130). This means that when

images convey ‘the face’, this also appeals to our ethical responsibilities, thereby making our ethical responsibilities greater. In fact, our ethical responsibilities have become global because of the dissemination of ‘the face’, and our receptivity to that face regardless of our nationalities and those of the people in the picture. That receptivity comes prior to any sense of territorial and social boundaries between the other and ourselves (Nobel Prize Museum, 2011a; Nobel Prize Museum, 2011c).

Returning to my research objectives then, I am generally interested in the ethical potential and limitations of images of distant suffering. My research question focuses more specifically on the extent to which images of distant suffering can build an ethical relation between the spectator and the people depicted. I have used Butler’s ethics of precarity to study the ethical potential of images of distant suffering. As regards my research question, this last section I discussed the idea of ‘the face’ to which we are inherently ethically responsive. When we recognize ‘the face’, we understand that the other can impose an ethical demand on us – even though we can reject that demand, we are still responsive to it. This implies that images are important ethical mediators, because they can convey ‘the face’. This would lead me to conclude that images of distant suffering can create an ethical relation between the spectator and the people in an image, if this image shows ‘the face’ (need not be literally a face).

Summary

In this final section I will provide a general summary of my theoretical framework, which accounts for both the ethical limitations and potential of images of distant suffering. As a reminder, Sontag identifies the following ethical limitations of photography and images of distant suffering: (i) images of distant suffering reflect bourgeois and colonial influences in the history of photography, which has resulted in a longstanding photographic preoccupation with the marginalized, ‘exotic’ other.; (ii) images appear neutral, as if they simply show us reality, even though they are a product of framing; (iii) images cannot determine a specific moral position in a spectator, because their meaning is ambiguous. It depends on the context in which an image is published, how the spectated is framed, and the spectator who interprets the image; (iv) the omnipresence of images of distant suffering has paralyzed us.

To analyze the ethical potential of images of distant suffering, I have based myself on Judith Butler’s ethics of precarity. What is most important to take away from Butler’s work with respect to images of distant suffering, is that images are important ethical mediators because they can convey ‘the face’, a non-linguistic expression of ethical demands. We are susceptible to ethical demands posed by others if we recognize ‘the face’ in the other. Images then confirm that we do not need to know anything about the other in order to understand their ethical demands. This shows that our ethical responsiveness to the other comes prior to any sense of boundaries between ourselves and the other. While it is true that we may both accept and reject these ethical demands, Butler would argue

that both positions can only follow from ethical responsiveness to the other's demands. Even when we reject ethical demands, we are engaged in an ethical negotiation with the other.

To end, Butler and Sontag are in conflict with one another on the extent to which images can serve as ethical mediators. To Sontag, this seems no longer a possibility, because there are already too many images (and images of distant suffering) in circulation. This has resulted in collective indifference (1977, p. 20); we can watch the news, and see or read about all kinds of atrocities, but once we close our newspaper or turn off a news broadcast, we continue with our daily life activities as if we had never been confronted with suffering. To Butler, we are already beyond this paralysis when we engage in a reflection on what we saw, even if we do not actively relieve the suffering we witness in an image. We nonetheless care for the depicted other(s) in the sense that we are aware of the ethical demands they might pose on us (if, of course, we recognize 'the face' in the other) (Nobel Prize Museum, 2011a).

Research Method

Introduction

My research method is best summarized as a combination of methods. Although I focus on a single image as my case study, I will also complement this with earlier academic work on the visual representation of migration in media discourse and my own empirical findings regarding the use of images of migration on NOS.

Case study

My case study is the image on the cover of this thesis; it presents a group of migrants on a boat in the Mediterranean Sea (NOS, 2020). As I mentioned in the introduction, the photographer is Aris Messinis, who is chief photographer for AFP (French international news agency) in Greece. He has experience with photographing migrants and migration, but mostly he seems to cover big events in Greece (like sports events, the Pope visiting Athens) (AFP, n.d.; Messinis, n.d.).

I found his photograph on NOS (Dutch public news channel), where it was published in a news report about migrant smuggling (NOS, 2020). Besides on NOS, the image has also been published on a Hungarian news website called 'Origo', where it accompanies a news report about European Union migration policies (Origo, 2020). I found this publication history by uploading my case study image on Google Image Reverse, which is a search engine that scans internet content to see on which website(s) the uploaded image appears. Although I am relying on Google translate to interpret the Hungarian news report, it seems to be titled 'Brussels would give more aid to migrants', and seems to criticize European Union migration policies that would incentivize more irregular migration (Origo, 2020). On NOS, my case study image is accompanied by a news report titled 'Human trafficking captain gets eight years prison sentence for fatal boat trip' (NOS, 2020). The news report criticizes human trafficking and problematizes migrants' vulnerability for it. While my focus lies with the image, I wanted to highlight these two news reports, because it shows that the image has been used in different kinds of contexts; in news reports that have different kinds of concerns. I will return to this observation in the following chapter.

Moreover, I chose the image on the cover of this thesis as my case study, because I see it as an example of an image of distant suffering. I am however more interested in the ethical inquiry into an image of distant suffering than I am in the question of what constitutes an image of distant suffering. As I mentioned in the introduction, perhaps we cannot agree that an image of migrants on a rubber boat is an image of distant suffering, but I am trying to build an argument that is equally applicable to other examples of images of distant suffering (and I think there are many other examples possible besides images of migration – e.g. conflict, disasters, famines).

Empirical findings and triangulation

In the following chapter, I will not only analyze my case study image, but I will also relate this to my own empirical findings of the wider visual representation of migration on NOS. I conducted two simple empirical analyses for this: one on skin color in images of migration on NOS, and another one on security indicators. In what follows, I will explain both analyses only briefly, and I will triangulate my empirical findings for NOS with earlier academic work on images of migration. For more details about my empirical data (includes the images themselves and my categorization of them), please see the appendix.

My research data consists of all images of migration on NOS. In NOS' online news archive, I searched for all news reports on 'migrants' or 'migration'. There are 315 news reports with a cover image, dating from 2014 to 2021 (and more news reports without images from before 2014). I downloaded all images without their news reports (except for my case study image).

To start with my analysis of skin color, I divided all images (N=315) into five categories: black, white, mix, uncertain and not applicable. If the majority of the people in an image had either a black/brown/dark or a white/pale/light skin color, I respectively grouped it under 'black' and 'white'. If there were about as many people with black skin color as with white skin color in an image, I categorized it under 'mix'. There were also many instances where I was not certain, because I could not see people's skin because of clothing or low image quality. Sometimes, I could see someone's skin, but I was in doubt whether to label it 'black' or 'white' – for example, if someone has a light brown skin color, it is hard to determine whether this fits the category 'black' or 'white' without knowing anything else of this person and their background. A 'white person' can just as easily have a light brown skin color as a 'black person'. To avoid a complicated empirical study, I made the category 'uncertain' then. The final category, 'not applicable', is for images without people in it.

My findings suggest that black skin color is slightly overrepresented in the images of migration on NOS. The category 'black' makes up about 4/10 of all images on NOS, whereas 'white' accounts for 2/10 of all images. 'Mix' is the smallest category, representing 1/10 of all images of migration. Now, I realize that this is not a thorough empirical analysis, and that categories like 'black' and 'white' are oversimplifying and reductive. – It also feels awkward to attribute people in an image a skin color. I further address this in the appendix. – Nonetheless, I do believe it provides tentative evidence for a racial bias in images of migration on NOS.

This finding is also not surprising. Johnson (2011) marks racialization as one of the core characteristics in the depiction of asylum seekers. She notes a shift in the portrayal of asylum seekers by the UNHCR. During the Cold War, images of asylum seekers depict mostly white people. After the Cold War, this changes to black people (2011, p. 1020). Also Bosworth and Guild speak of "racialized discourses of migration" (2008, p. 713). This means that my empirical finding, a slight

overrepresentation of black skin color in images of migration on NOS, is in line with earlier research on how migration is represented in discourse.

More generally, several studies suggest a negative racial bias in media discourse, with which I mean that people with a black skin color are more often portrayed in a context that bears a negative association. For example, Dixon & Linz show that people with a black skin color are “significantly more likely than Whites to be portrayed as lawbreakers on television news” (2000, p. 131). Dixon draws a similar conclusion in a later article on crime news and racialized beliefs (2012). This means that there is not only racial bias in images of migration, but also more generally in media discourse on crime. As Stamps writes: “[...] mass media has historically demeaned, criminalized, and marginalized many racial groups, [...]” (2020, p. 121).

Moving on, I also conducted a simple empirical study on the amounts and kinds of security indicators in images of migration on NOS. Security indicators are: fences, police/army/coastal guard uniforms (sometimes with artillery) and police vehicles. Out of 315 images, 60 contain a security indication like this. This represents about 2/10 of all images. In light of this, I do not think that security indicators are overrepresented in images of migration on NOS. I only wanted to isolate these images, because they are good examples of the ‘crimmigration thesis’: the conflation of crime and migration in policies and discourse (Guild & Bosworth, 2008; Stumpf, 2006). For example, an image that shows migrants next to soldiers associates migrants with security matters. And since there are several images that show migrants in a context of security indicators, this association is further nurtured. For other examples, please see the appendix.

Also Wilmott notes the presence of security indicators in images of asylum seekers in British news media. She looked at about 300 images, and concludes that when migrants are pictured alongside ‘non-migrants’, they are most often portrayed alongside security workers (army/police/border guard/coast guard). Overall, security indicators (security workers, fences, vehicles) are sufficiently present for it to be a significant finding to Wilmott (2017, pp. 72, 76).

To summarize then, from my simple empirical analyses, alongside earlier academic work, I conclude that images of migration generally overrepresent people with a black skin color. In addition to that, an image that shows both a security indication (fence, police, etc.) and migrants is an example of crimmigration in discourse, because such images present migrants in a context with visual elements associated with crime. These kinds of images foster an association of migrants and crime (or more generally security) and *vice versa*. I will use both these conclusions in the analysis of my case study image in the following chapter.

Summary

To end with a brief overarching summary, in this chapter, I have discussed my research method. I primarily focus on a single image of migrants on a rubber boat as my case study (to which I will apply my theoretical framework in the next chapter). I complement this case study with two empirical findings concerning all images of migration on NOS (N=315); findings which are confirmed by earlier academic work on the visual representation of migration. These two findings are: a slight overrepresentation of black skin color in images of migration and the presence of security indicators in some images of migration. The first one can also be observed in my case study, which presents people with a black skin color only. What is not present in my case study image, but what I nevertheless wanted to highlight as an example of crimmigration discourse, is the frequent depiction of migrants alongside security indicators.

Analysis

Introduction

In this chapter, I will analyze my case study. More specifically, I will examine an image of migrants on a rubber boat, as an example of an image of distant suffering. I will do so using a theoretical framework based on Susan Sontag and Judith Butler, whose work I will respectively use to study the ethical limitations and potential of my case study. I will not yet fully answer my research question, as I will return to this in the next and final chapter.

Ethical limitations

Migrants as marginalized and colonized others

With this critique in mind, let us consider my case study image. More specifically, I will discuss (i) how the frequent depiction of migrants as black people relates to colonial traditions in photography, (ii) if the extent of detail in my case study image fits these wider colonial traditions and norms for photography of suffering others, (iii) how the overlap of bourgeois and colonial traditions is visible in my case study, and what the implications are.

To start then, the people in my case study image have a black skin color. And this particular image is no exception to all 315 images of migration on NOS. As I noted, there seems to be a slight racial bias in images of migration on NOS. Also earlier work on the visual representation of asylum seekers shows that they are most often portrayed as people with a black skin color (Johnson, 2011; Wilmott, 2017). Now, we could conclude from this that migrants oftentimes have a black skin color. And this could be right. In their article about crimmigration practices, Weber & McCulloch contend that the ‘who’ of border control (that is, the people whom are targeted by crimmigration practices) intersects with “race and neocolonial relations of power” (2019, p. 3). In other words, people with a black skin color are disproportionately affected by the current governance of migration (especially ‘irregular migration’).

Yet, following Sontag’s critique, we also know that photographic trends throughout the twentieth century have been influenced by a history of colonialism. One way in which this manifests, is that (formerly) colonized people² have always been popular subjects in North-American and European photography. Especially images of distant suffering show a traditional preoccupation with ‘exotic subjects’, because the suffering of ‘others’ can be displayed more intimately than the sufferings of those who are perceived to belong to the same community as the photographer, or the publisher of the image, and their respective audiences (Sontag, 2003 pp. 61-63).

² I do not mean to suggest that black people are necessarily (formerly) colonized nor that (formerly) colonized people are only black. Yet, I do think it is safe to say that one can be associated with the other. When we imagine an abstract category like colonizer or colonized, I expect that many people would take race into consideration, and that we are more likely to think of the former as white and the latter as black. See also: (Azzarito, *et al.*, 2017).

My case study is not a strong example of this entangled history of colonialism and photography, since there is an intersection with ‘irregular migration’ and black skin color. The people in my case study image are (probably) ‘irregular migrants’, which is an explanation for why my case study image depicts people with a black skin color. Yet, I also addressed several other studies on racial bias in media discourse in the previous chapter. One author, Stamps, explicitly states that “[...] mass media has historically demeaned, criminalized, and marginalized many racial groups, [...]” (2020, p. 121). In light of this, Sontag seems right in problematizing the frequent depiction of people with a black skin color in images of distant suffering.

Moreover, I want to discuss the extent to which the people in my case study image are depicted in detail. According to Sontag, images of suffering others are typically more detailed, more identifiable, when those others are considered ‘exotic’ or foreign to our own community (2003, pp. 53, 63). If we look at my case study image, the people in it are illustrative of ‘foreignness’, because it shows a group of migrants. Migrants who by definition are not yet part of our own perceived political community (coming from the perspective of a spectator like me, located in the Netherlands). Following Sontag, this would mean that their suffering is depicted in detail. I am not sure if that is the case when looking at my case study image. The image shows about thirteen people. Most of them are photographed from the back. We can only see the faces of a few migrants on this boat. Some people are definitely identifiable (those who know them will recognize them), but the majority of them is not. At the same time, my case study is one image of many. There are so many images of migrants, many of which show clearly identifiable faces. Nameless strangers, who never consented to the depiction and dissemination of their suffering. In this light, there is something appropriative about photography, because it implies that we as spectators have a right to see this event of suffering.

Finally, I will discuss the overlap of bourgeois and colonial traditions in my case study image. I will assume that this image shows an event of suffering. Capturing the marginalization of others is a longstanding photographic trend, influenced by photography being initially only available to the well-off (Sontag, 1977, pp. 8-9). From this, it follows that my case study image fits into this wider history of photography, and is a typical product of its bourgeois influences.

The photographer of my case study image, Aris Messinis, has not only covered migration in his work as photographer. In the context of the banking crisis in Greece, he took pictures of people trying to withdraw their savings after the banks had been closed for three days. He writes about this: “People shoving, yelling in anger at hapless bank employees. In six long years of crisis, we have seen images like this any number of times. It’s sad. But it’s the reality and your job is to record it” (AFP, n.d.). This quote is interesting, because it shows the photographer’s motivation for capturing suffering others; namely, to record it. And by recording it, I suspect that Mesinnis also means that images are disseminated to make people aware of the sufferings that took place during the banking crisis in

Greece. His quote shows undoubtedly good intentions, and compassion towards suffering others, but it also indicates a bourgeois influence; namely, it is his job to cover this 'sad reality'. In other words, he is faced with a demand for images of distant suffering from the banking crisis in Greece. I think this is true for his image of migrants on a boat as well. While I do not know if he wanted to cover migration himself, or whether he was asked to cover it by AFP, both options suggest an interest in capturing the suffering other. And Sontag would explain this interest as a product of bourgeois influences in the history of photography.

As discussed earlier, the image is also illustrative of colonial influences in photographic trends. This means that bourgeois and colonial elements overlap in my case study image. An implication of this overlap between the suffering other and the colonized other, is that one becomes associated with the other. For my case study image, this means that migrants and migration become associated with black skin color. As noted earlier, this association may be 'correct' in the context of 'irregular migration'. However, images of migration on NOS still present a narrow idea of what migration looks like. While anyone can be a migrant in my definition of migration (i.e. moving from one place to another), the images on NOS suggest that migration refers only to 'irregular migrants'. Someone like me, a Dutch citizen with a white skin color and privilege, would not be considered 'a migrant'. If I were to move to another country, I am more likely to be seen as 'an expat'. In other words, while everyone may migrate at some point in their life, not everyone is viewed as a migrant, which is reflected in the images of migration on NOS.

Not so innocent images

Besides Sontag's critique of photography pertaining to its bourgeois and colonial influences, Sontag also notes that photography is a mode of surveillance. Photography is suitable for surveillance, because we expect images to be windows into reality. Images are supposed to represent truth. And, this expectation of truth also makes that images and the camera can respectively serve as proof and a surveillance technology, because it implies that seeing an image is equal to knowing what happened in reality (Sontag, 1977, pp. 177-178).

This is not to say that images stand in direct relation to truth, nor that they are neutral. Images are always subject to choices and collective conditions, which together form the framing which precedes any photograph. And because images are a result of framing, images in themselves are a way of demanding attention for certain events while neglecting others (Sontag, 2003, pp. 10, 39). So, when we view images of distant suffering, it may appear that those images seek to inform us (to show us an event of suffering in reality), when they are in fact already directing our awareness to certain events of suffering over others.

When we look at my case study more specifically, we now know that this image is not a neutral, transparent mediator; it does not just inform us about events of suffering taking place

elsewhere in the world, but it also shapes which events we are aware of (and which not). In light of the previous section, we also know that my case study image is illustrative of bourgeois and colonial influences in photographic trends. The combination of these two points, leads me to conclude the following: images of distant suffering, and in particular my case study image, are not harmless. My case study image appears an informative image, but this appearance disguises the extent to which the content of the image has been influenced by bourgeois and colonial traditions in photography.

In other words, if we think of my case study image as just informing us about this event of migrants on a boat, we overlook how common this image is. And how common images of (formerly) colonized, suffering others are. Also the photographer of my case study notes that images appear to ‘tell the whole story’, while they in fact show but a piece of it (AFP, n.d.). The whole story to my case study image would account for the historical embeddedness of images of distant suffering, even though the image of suffering appears to only record it. Images are the kinds of mediators that oftentimes operate invisibly; we are not aware of their mediating function. This also complicates a reflection on the historical embeddedness of images as mediators (and how this influences what images we produce, watch, share, etc.). In that sense, images are deceptive mediators.

[Mobilization for and against migration](#)

Finally, I will discuss a rather different critique than the previous two. This one pertains to the potential for images to build ethical positions, and to mobilize groups of people. Sontag is not convinced that images of distant suffering can create a moral position in a spectator. At most, they can strengthen a prior consciousness. Consequently, images do not mobilize their spectators, but they can encourage mobilization (if the relevant consciousness is already in place for a group of people) (Sontag, 1977, p. 17). Yet, because our interpretation of an image depends on this prior consciousness, we will see different things in the same image. This equally implies that the same image can facilitate a ‘pro’ and ‘anti’ mobilization; meaning that the direction of mobilization is not determined by the image, but rather a product of the interaction between the image (and how the spectated is framed), the context in which it is published and the particular spectator that interprets it.

For my case study image, I noted in the previous chapter that it has been published on two news websites. NOS is one of those platforms, but it has also been published on a Hungarian news website. The Hungarian news report seems to be titled ‘Brussels would give more aid to migrants’, and appears to criticize European migration policies that would incentivize more irregular migration (Origo, 2020). On NOS, the Dutch news platform, my case study image accompanies a news report that is titled ‘Human trafficking captain gets eight years prison sentence for fatal boat trip’ (NOS, 2020). This finding is a very good example of what Sontag means with the ambiguity of images.

To explain this, the publication history of my case study image shows that the same image can support different kinds of news content. In other words, the meaning of an image can shift depending

on the context in which a spectator sees it. Because images oftentimes function like windows into reality, we tend to think of them as having inherent meaning. As if everyone would interpret a single image in the same way. In the context of my case study, this proves to be wrong because the same image supports a news report that suggests we need to sympathize with migrants (NOS) and a news report that appears to foster distrust towards migrants (Origo).

In that regard, Sontag seems very right in noting that images can reinforce ethical relations, but that the nature of those relations is undetermined by the image itself – this is thus dependent on the spectator’s prior convictions, the context and the framing of the spectated. In other words, if images are ethical mediators, they are ambiguous ethical mediators. For my research question, this means that images can build (although Sontag would say reinforce) an ethical relation between a spectator and the depicted people. Yet, the nature of this ethical relation is not equal to a definition I used earlier; a sense of empathy, sympathy, care or tolerance towards migrants. This ethical relation may just as well entail a sense of hate, distrust or danger. I will return to this observation in the following chapter, when I specifically answer my research question. For now, I will end by noting that this question of ethical mediation by images is irrelevant to Sontag. To her, images of distant suffering can *no longer* function as ethical mediators, because we have seen so many of those already that we are desensitized to distant suffering (1997, p. 20).

Ethical potential

‘The face’ as ethical mediator

Moving on then, I will now turn to the ethical potential of images of distant suffering making use of Judith Butler’s ethics of precarity. More specifically, I will seek to rebut two arguments that I have made in the sections for ethical limitations. I first of all concluded that images are not innocent; if we think of them as neutral, transparent mediators, we overlook the importance of colonial and bourgeois influences in the history of photography. And we overlook the role of these influences in shaping photographic trends throughout the twentieth century. I also noted that the lack of inherent meaning results in diffuse kinds of mobilization. While images of distant suffering, and my case study image in particular, can reinforce sympathy for migrants, they may just as well do the opposite (depending on the spectator and the context of a particular news report or news website).

In what follows, I will rebut these two arguments – although I do not mean to say that they are invalid. Rather, I want to highlight how Butler would respond to these arguments, and how they would come to the ethical potential of photography of distant suffering. To start with the argument concerning images as not so innocent mediators, Butler would respond to this as follows: images of distant suffering show that we are ethically responsive to ‘the face’ (if ‘the face’ is visible in these images of distant suffering). Even though an image like my case study is not an innocent mediator, for it is embedded in colonial and bourgeois influences, it can convey ‘the face’. Even if ‘the face’ is that

of a colonized, marginalized other, we can still see ‘the face’ and to that we are inherently ethically responsive.

This does not mean that it is not important to take into account this bourgeois and colonial dimension in images of distant suffering, but if we would only focus on this critique, we would miss out on the opportunity to see the ethical potential of my case study image. If we look at it more closely, it shows to be a great example of ‘the face’. As I noted earlier, some faces are fully visible, while the majority of the people is photographed from the back. As I also noted earlier, what Butler means with ‘the face’ (in turn basing themselves on Levinas), is not literally a depiction of the face. It can be that, but it can also be the contours or outlines of a face and/or a body. Butler even specifically notes that ‘the face’ can also be someone’s back (2004, p. 133). As long as there is sufficient visual material to identify another life form to which we are ethically responsive. In my case study image, I am ethically responsive to all 13 depicted people. Perhaps I feel more connected to the people whose faces I can see, but this does not imply that I do not feel connected at all to the people of whom I can only see their backs. This is exactly what Butler means with ‘the face’; it manifests in more and less visible ways, and in so doing shows that we are responsive to ‘the face’ whether clearly depicted or not.

From recognizing ‘the face’, there follows an inherent ethical responsiveness to the other. To Butler, an image of distant suffering is like an ethical solicitation, that invites a spectator to recognize the other and their ethical demands. If we recognize an other (again this can be human and nonhuman, but in my case study it concerns people), we engage in an ethical relation because we realize that this other needs our assistance for self-preservation. And upon realizing this, we realize that our own life is vulnerable to destruction by any other too, and that we are dependent on others for our own survival, because all life is precarious (Butler, 2004, pp. 41-43).

As for my case study, I am not sure if all of these thought processes are (explicitly and consciously) set in motion when we watch an image of migrants on a boat. Yet, Butler seems very right in saying that the recognition of ‘the face’ is a sufficient condition for an ethical relation. Indeed, I can sympathize with these migrants only from watching their faces and without knowing their names and personal histories. To Butler then, images are necessarily ethical mediators when they convey ‘the face’ (2007, pp. 955, 965). They even note that the volume of images of distant suffering may benefit the depicted suffering other. Even when a suffering other is depicted in an identifiable way, they remain somewhat anonymous in the masses of images of distant suffering. This certainly seems to be the case for the people in my case study image, as there are so many (similar) images of migrants. (2007, p. 965)

In addition to this, Butler notes that a nameless suffering other can remind spectators of the limits of their knowledge, and the limits of what they are allowed to know. Sontag describes

witnessing the suffering of others in an image as an appropriative process, in which we assert a right to know about this suffering without engaging with the suffering others, without asking their consent for depicting their suffering (1977, pp. 8-9). And while this is a valid point, Butler challenges this critique of appropriation by centralizing the spectators, and the limits of their knowledge when they watch an anonymous, nameless suffering other. Spectators cannot appropriate the other to the extent that they know who the suffering other is; they can only see the other in an image, and this determines the boundaries of their knowledge. As Butler would phrase it, the image reminds us that there is much information (of the suffering other) that is “not ours to know” (2007, p. 965).

Ethical responsiveness

Nonetheless, we can still debate if the visibility of ‘the face’ necessarily shows our ethical responsiveness to ‘the face’. As illustrated earlier, my case study image can support different messages. In the context of NOS, it is more likely to make us feel sympathetic towards the migrants in the image, because the news report itself is about the condemnation of human trafficking and migrants’ victimization (NOS, 2020). On the Hungarian news website Origo, the image is published in a report that seems to condemn the arrival of migrants to the European Union (Origo, 2020). It would seem as if this difference in context also shapes the extent to which we are ethically responsive to the people in the image.

Yet, this ethical responsiveness is about recognizing the other’s ethical demands, but not necessarily about accepting these ethical demands. To illustrate this, we can look at an image of migrants, trapped on a rubber boat at sea, and understand the ethical demands that follow from seeing this. We can recognize that the depicted other may need us for their self-preservation. However, we can still conclude that we reject those demands because the other is suffering by their own fault. Or, perhaps we pity the suffering other, but we think of their suffering as a necessary sacrifice for our own self-preservation. In both instances, however, we are already engaged in an ethical reflection and/or judgement. When we sympathize with the suffering other, we understand (some of) their ethical demands. When we do not sympathize with the other, we understand (some of) the demands, but we have reasons for not gratifying those demand (like that the suffering other suffers by their own choosing).

So both sentiments of distrust and sympathy are part of an ethical relation, that follows from our inherent responsiveness to ‘the face’ (Butler, 2004, pp. xvii-xviii). If anything then, different kinds of sentiments or responses to an image of distant suffering, show us that we are ethically responsive beings despite our different backgrounds, political beliefs and ethical positions. An image of distant suffering like my case study is a kind of ethical solicitation, that arouses our ethical responsiveness; it invites us to engage in an ethical negotiation with the depicted other, regardless of whether we argue against or alongside the other.

Summary

In this chapter, I have discussed the ethical limitations and potential of my case study, an image of migrants on a rubber boat which I take to be an example of an image of distant suffering. This leads me to conclude the following:

- (i) An image like my case study shows bourgeois and colonial influences in its depiction of black people as migrants, and its focus on suffering and marginalization. My case study image is thereby not unique, but fits photographic trends throughout the twentieth century. An implication of this overlap is that one becomes associated with the other; that is, black people become associated with irregular types of migration, such as by rubber boat. – On top of that, images are deceptive mediators, because we oftentimes forget their role as mediators. We think of them as neutral and transparent, but they are biased; they reflect photographic trends, time, location, and many more factors. –
- (ii) While I do want to stress the importance of realizing this historical embeddedness of images as mediators, I also believe there is ethical potential in an image like my case study because of ‘the face’. Following Butler, images are obvious ethical mediators because they can convey non-linguistic ethical demands that follow from being ethically responsive to any other life. An image like my case study shows that fairly little detail is needed to recognize people in it. And with that, to identify that there is an other life (whether in an image or in real life), that poses ethical demands on us. This means that even faceless suffering, like in the many images of migration, is an ethical solicitation for a spectator; it is an invitation to engage in an ethical negotiation with the depicted other.
- (iii) What is more, images are ambiguous mediators, because their meaning can shift depending on the context in which they are published. Images of distant suffering may thereby spark sentiments like care, but they can also do the opposite. For example, my case study image has been published in the context of a news report that condemns human trafficking of migrants (NOS). The image has also been published in the context of a critique on European Union migration policies for they incentivize migration too much (Origi). This shows that images may be able to strengthen (Sontag) or even create (Butler) a moral position, but they do so in diffuse ways.
- (iv) Nonetheless, whether these sentiments are sympathetic or unsympathetic towards migrants, these sentiments only follow from an ethical responsiveness to the demands posed by others. Whether we argue against migrants or in favor of them, we engage in ethical negotiation in which we weigh the other’s demand against that of our own. I then propose that we shift our analytic focus from what ethically divides us to our collective ethical responsiveness.

- (v) As a final consideration, there is one conflict in Sontag and Butler's views, which also presents a conflict for my research question. Sontag does not think images of distant suffering can serve as ethical mediators anymore, because we have already been exposed to too many of them. This leads to paralysis in the face of images of distant suffering. I think this is a valid point, that Butler does not completely solve. We have become familiarized with images of distant suffering to the extent that we can watch them repeatedly in our morning news without being moved by them in any way. We can simply ignore them. I do agree with Butler that doing nothing to relieve the sufferings we witness does not necessarily mean we do nothing with images of distant suffering. In watching these images, we are still engaged in a process in which we reflect on the suffering other. And it is quite remarkable that we can reflect on the suffering others' ethical demands, without knowing anything else of them. I am however not convinced that this reflection is strongly separated from paralysis. In fact, my own experience as a spectator of images of distant suffering is that I am oftentimes both reflective of, and desensitized to, the suffering I witness.

Conclusion and implications

Introduction

In this final chapter, I will return to my research question. I will use the five conclusions that I summed up on the previous pages in order to determine the extent to which images of distant suffering can create an ethical relation between a spectator and the depicted suffering other. I will answer this question by weighing the ethical limitations and potential of images of distant suffering, and combining Sontag and Butler's more specific standpoints on images as ethical mediators (thereby creating this ethical relation between the spectator and the people in the image).

Returning to the research question

So, to what extent can images of distant suffering create an ethical relation between the spectator and the spectated? The nuanced answer to this questions seems to be that such an ethical relation is possible, but the nature of this ethical relation is different from my initial definition of an ethical relation. I started this thesis by describing an ethical relation (in the context of my case study) as a relation of care between a spectator and the people depicted in an image of distant suffering; and I defined care as being attentive to the ethical responsibilities we have towards a suffering other, as feeling somehow responsible for the suffering other's survival. This definition indicates a sense of compassion towards the suffering other, but we know by know that this kind of relationship cannot be determined by an image. It seems that an ethical relation is better understood as an ambivalent, open kind of relation. An ethical relation is a way of being ethically responsive to the other, but this does not necessarily result in sympathy. It may just as well foster distrust. So while images of distant suffering can function as ethical mediators, and remind us of our ethical responsiveness to the other, they cannot determine the nature of the ethical relation between the spectator and the spectated. In other words, images are ambivalent ethical mediators.

If images are ambivalent ethical mediators, then we can wonder about their suitability for building a relation of care. If, as Sontag argues, our interpretation of images of distant suffering depends on our prior convictions as spectators, as well as the context in which we view an image and the way in which the spectated is framed, then an image of migrants on a boat may just as well spark sympathy in me as it may ignite hatred in others. In light of this, an image does not seem to be an ethical mediator per se, but rather a reflection of the interaction between a particular image, its context and framing, and the spectator. This means that I bring myself to the table when I interpret an image (even though I do not have absolute power in interpreting the image). And I need a relevant prior consciousness to interpret an image of distant suffering in terms of a relation of care; this care cannot be created by the image alone.

Yet, to Butler, images of distant suffering build many ethical relations, because they make spectators ethically responsive to suffering others that spectators otherwise would not have known.

Now, we could object to this stating that Butler ‘only’ proposes a shift in analytic focus, away from how images can foster different kinds of relations and mobilization (like in favor of and against migrants), and towards a shared ethical responsiveness that follows from seeing ‘the face’. With regard to my research question, we could then question whether the image itself creates an ethical relation, or whether it is the spectator who needs to shift their analytic focus in order to see the ethical potential of images of distant suffering.

Yet, for Butler, this objection would also rely on an incorrect interpretation of ‘the face’. For Butler, ethical responsiveness necessarily follows from recognizing ‘the face’. It is thus comes prior to any judgement or interpretation of the (depicted) other, prior to our active choosing (Butler, 2004, pp. xvii-xviii, 130). For my research question, this means that an ethical relation between a spectator and the spectated is possible, but the visibility of ‘the face’ in the image is a necessary condition for that.

Nonetheless, I do also think that Butler suggests that we are better off focusing on shared ethical responsiveness to ‘the face’ when we watch images of distant suffering, than we are focusing on the nature of those ethical relations (even though this focus is thus not, strictly speaking, an active choice). If we shift our focus, then images of distant suffering are above all confirmations that we are ethically responsive to any kind of (depicted) other.

Summing up, images of distant suffering create an ethical relation between a spectator and the depicted other if they convey the face. After all, ‘the face’ is a non-linguistic communication of ethical demands. So, even when a spectator and the depicted subjects never meet, an ethical relation in the spectator has been aroused. And this ethical relation would not have existed if it were not for the existence of the image of distant suffering. The nature of this ethical relation, however, is not equal to how I initially defined it; namely, it is not necessarily a sense of compassion. An ethical relation is any type of negotiation of ethical demands posed by others; whether we outweigh our own ethical demands over that of others or not, we are engaged in an ethical relation that follows from the mutual recognition of the other’s face and that of ourselves.

Implications

In this final section, I want to reflect briefly on the implications of the ethical limitations of images of distant suffering. After all, while they can build ethical relations (with undetermined nature), they can also harm those when images systematically conflate (formerly) colonized people with marginalization. This manifests in my case study, because I noted that the migrants in it are depicted as black people, and that migrants are very often portrayed as black people on NOS. This builds an association between black people and the kind of suffering that follows from (irregular) migration. This then also feeds into the idea that black people are more often migrants, more often marginalized – Even though we know by now that the frequent depiction of black people in images of migration shows colonial and bourgeois influences in the history of photography, and, that there is simply more

(graphic) visual material of the suffering of those we consider to be outsiders to our own (political) community.

The most important implication seems to me the risk of discrimination. There is a risk that we come to associate black people with an image like my case study, and that we come to think of migrants and migration as a black phenomenon. This association building does not only affect the specific people in the image, but also the wider population of people of color. Butler makes a similar point, although in their case it concerns Muslims after 9/11. In response to 9/11, Osama Bin Laden's face in particular was widely disseminated as the face of the (Islamic) enemy of the United States. Consequently, anyone who shares visual and facial characteristics with this portrayal of the enemy's face, may also be seen by others as an enemy (even when they is/are not). As Butler writes:

“A population of Islamic peoples, or those taken to be Islamic, has become targeted by this government mandate to be on heightened alert, with the effect that the Arab population in the US becomes visually rounded up, stared down, watched, hounded and monitored by a group of citizens who understand themselves as the foot soldiers in the war against terrorism” (2004, p. 77).

Important here is the part ‘or those taken to be Islamic’. It illustrates that anyone who fits our collective imaginations of what a Muslim looks like, can be subject to this heightened social surveillance and control in a post-9/11 context. This can be paralleled with the risk for discrimination of black people. In the end, they are more likely to be associated with ideas of what a migrant looks like if they are overrepresented in photography of migration.

This is especially problematic in light of the crimmigration thesis. As I noted, there are many images of migrants and migration alongside security indicators (like police or fences). These kinds of images conflate crime and migration (or more specifically, the visual characteristics respectively associated with crime and migration). This means that people of color also become associated with security matters, in turn heightening our social surveillance of this group. After all, if we think of certain visual characteristics as being indicative of crime or criminal behavior, we are more likely to pay a little extra attention to the people that match these visual characteristics.

In light of this, it is important to realize that images are not the invisible mediators they appear to be. They actively build associations, which are embedded in a bourgeois and colonial history. Perhaps we could even say that images of distant suffering thereby perpetuate these histories.

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Appendix

1 Racialization

In this appendix, I provide an overview of my data that I used to support the argument that images of migration on NOS are racialized. After that, the reader can find an overview of all images of migration on NOS per category: black people (A), white people (B), mix (C), uncertain (D), not applicable (E) – see also figure 1b. A few important points to take into account in reading this part of the appendix:

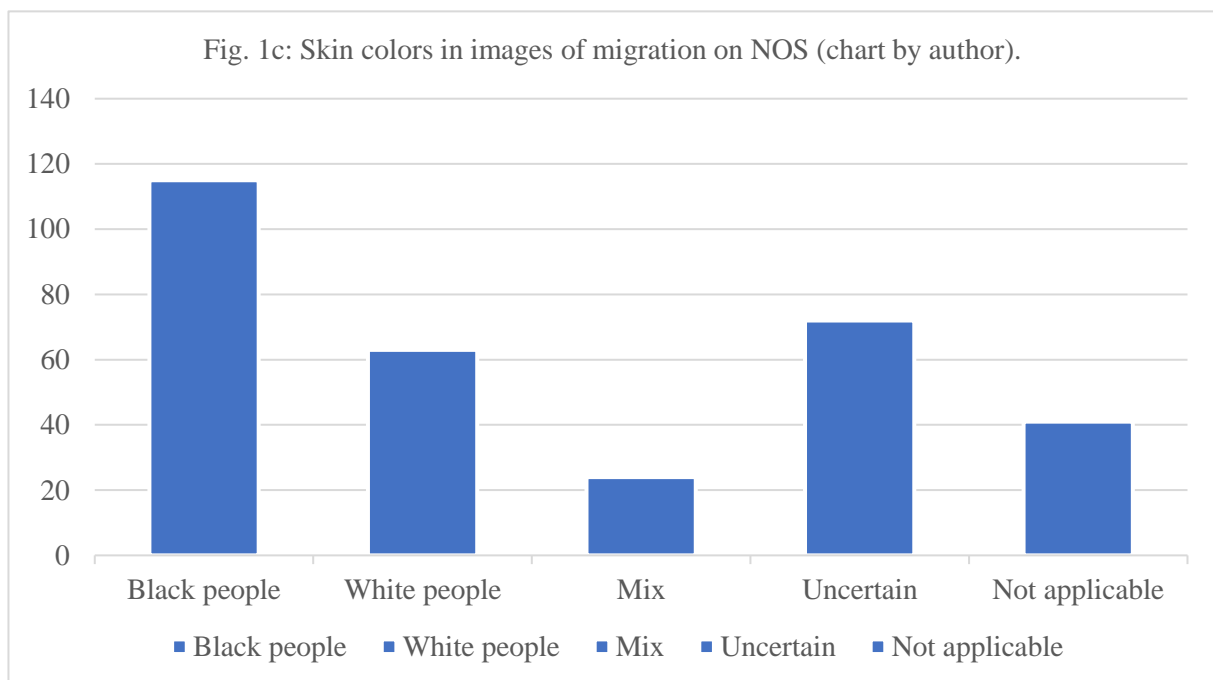
1. It feels awkward and sometimes outright wrong to categorize images of people on the basis of skin color. Not only is it very complicated to divide 315 images in 5 categories, it also feels wrong to assign someone I see depicted in the image a skin color. Some images are simply ambiguous, and others show the inherent flaw of categorization; namely, if I attribute a person in an image a skin color label, I am speaking on their behalf. I represent them and I do not know them, so I may just as well be wrong. I do not know of their complicated personal histories, and how they understand their own skin color.
2. I looked at the skin tone in every image (if there were people depicted in it), and I grouped all 315 images into five categories (black, white, mix, uncertain, not applicable). In many cases it was difficult to determine a categories, sometimes because the skin was covered with clothing, but more often because the skin appeared light brown and I was uncertain whether to categorize them under ‘black people’ or ‘white people’.

Figure 1a: Explanation skin color categories (table by author).

Category	Explanation
Black people	Majority or all people have a dark/brown/black skin color.
White people	Majority or all people have a white/pale/light skin color.
Mix	About as many people with a white skin color as with a black skin color.
Uncertain	I was uncertain about the skin color, either because it was not clearly visible (e.g. people with hats, long sleeves, images taken from a long distance, etc.) or because I was not sure how to categorize the skin color (e.g. is a light brown skin color black or white?).
Not applicable	No people in the image.

Figure 1b: Skin colors in images of migration on NOS (table by author).

Category	Amount of images	Part of total (N=315)	Image collection	Page
Black people	115	36%	A	p. 48
White people	63	20%	B	p. 49
Mix	24	8%	C	p. 50
Uncertain	72	23%	D	p. 51
Not applicable	41	13%	E	p. 52
Total	315	100 %	N/A	N/A





1A

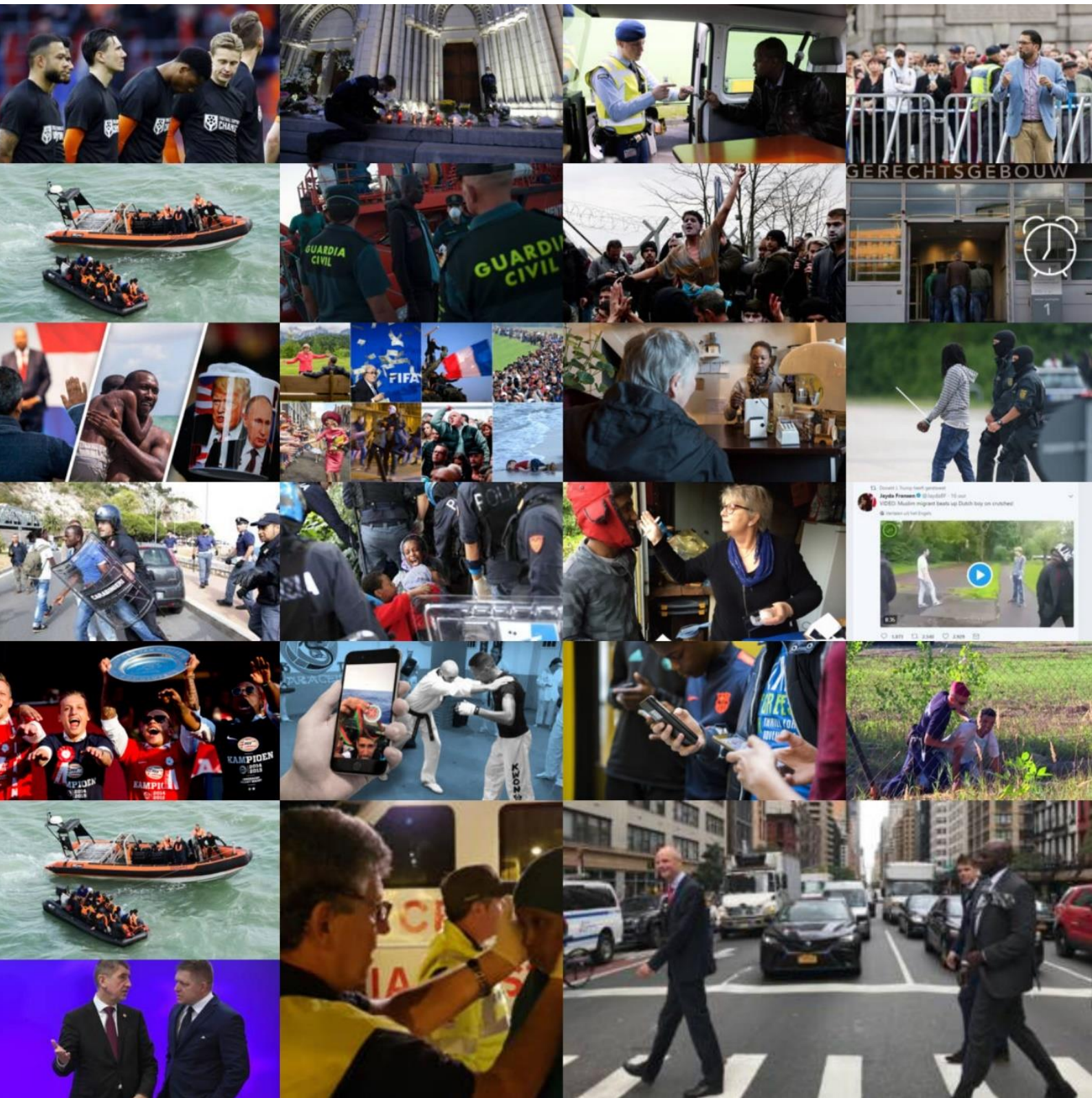
MARITIMO

UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

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Zelenskyy e il suo governo

Women and Children Unit





2 Securitization

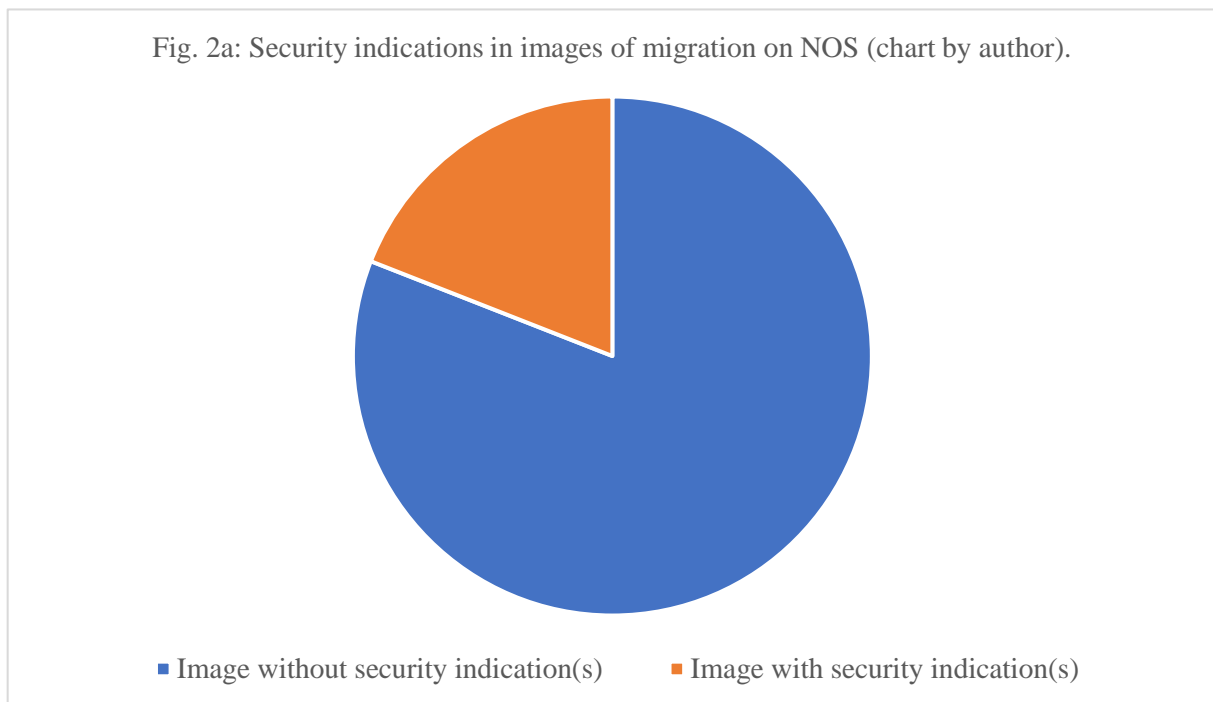


Figure 2b: Explanation security indication(s) (table by author).

Security indication	Amount of images	Part of total (N=315)	Image collection	Page number
Fence	30	10%	2A	p. 54
Police, military or coast guard uniform (sometimes with guns), police vehicles	30	10%	2B	p. 55

