

# Artivism and Migration: JR and Banksy A Mediological Analysis of the Transfrontier Practices of Refugees in Europe and the Mediterranean

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## Premise

The study seeks to illustrate and investigate a paradox in contemporary photography in relation to the transfrontier practices of *artivism*<sup>1</sup> expressed in the language of street art connected with recent European migrations. We'll look at two languages that use the medium of photography in relation to the theme of migration: artistic photography in street artivism (photo collage and photo stencil) and photojournalism that narrates in sensationalist pictures the flight, the tragedy at sea, the landing.

The research seeks to examine in depth the artistic interventions by two of the most famous protagonists, indeed pioneers, of the language of contemporary artivism: the French–Tunisian JR and the British Banksy (whose identity is still unknown, since the artist operates in secrecy because some of his practices are illegal and the contents of his works are so provocative). Celebrated on a global level and highly valued on the international art market, JR and Banksy move

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<sup>1</sup> We recommend the excellent volume that deals with the multiple perspectives attached to artivism and identify its foundations and horizons of action: Stéphanie Lemoine and Samira Ouardi, *Artivisme: art, action politique et résistance culturelle* (Paris: Alternatives, 2010).

skilfully along the border of artistic experience between mainstream and underground. Indeed they are accredited as being the greatest exponents of the urban scenes they inhabit as the wellsprings of transpolitical expressions<sup>2</sup> and the poetics of the crossing and demolition of frontiers.

The language of photography – including street art photography and photojournalism – seems to have been neglected in communication studies and social sciences, moreover there is not a specific academic field oriented towards the analysis of these media seen in their dynamics which concern the social effects and the new roles they recover during post-media era. Not only considering this gap, but also due to the unconventional theoretical frame and the topic itself, the writing strategy of the paper includes dense style argumentation; a number of different sources have been used – such as essays, novels, interviews, audiovisual documents, street art images, exhibitions – to let the readers comprehend the multi and trans-disciplinarity challenge of the research, which directly reflects the transformation occurring in the relationship of science, society and media. Following the socio-semiotics methodology, based on an inherent and underlying visual culture perspective<sup>3</sup>, the article finds in the sociology of imagery the rhetorical strategy to describe the potential and the rise of sensationalism when adopted to explain the human tragedy caused by migration. The work deals with the representation of the refugees made by artists and media, with border crossing and with otherness in actual Mediterranean socio-historical contest.

In analysing through the lens of the sociology of imagery, visual culture and socio-semiotics some significant cases and examples of the two above-mentioned languages – chosen from the context and imagery of the Mediterranean and Atlantic – we shall see that photojournalism tends to define itself by following the stylistic features, aesthetics and canons typical of artistic language, while, on the contrary, activism, starting from its most illustrious exponents, is articulated through modes and practices that are coherent with the genre of documentality, investigation and denunciation.

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<sup>2</sup> See, Vincenzo Susca and Derrick De Kerckhove, *Transpolitica. Nuovi rapporti di potere e di sapere* (Milan: Apogeo, 2008).

<sup>3</sup> See, Andrea Pinotti and Antonio Somaini, *Cultura visuale. Immagini, sguardi, media e dispositivi* (Turin: Einaudi, 2016).

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## 1.0 Photography and the Family Album in the Age of Web 2.0

Here we are, looking at an old photograph, a group portrait with friends and relatives, the patina<sup>4</sup> of which sends us back several years in time. Behind the group that looks straight ahead, there is an ambient so familiar to the memory: a piece of furniture on which are displayed everyday objects, a majolica fruit bowl, a turtle-shaped ornament, an orange clock. It's the living room in which we're celebrating my cousin's birthday. Everything is organised around the syntax of the poses we strike as the cake is about to be cut – an event which isn't depicted in the photo, but which is implied by the festive tablecloth bedecked with colourful plates.

The “obvious sense”<sup>5</sup> of such a photograph is naturally concentrated wholly in the desire to fix a memory right before the candles are blown out. Nevertheless, there is another sense, which Roland Barthes calls the “obtuse sense”, and it lies elsewhere. It is a *je-ne-sais-quoi*<sup>6</sup> of (a certain) melancholy elicited by the image itself, of which the amateur photographer herself was unaware, even as she snapped the instant and fixed it forever on film. The obtuse sense is exactly that tension typical of photographic language within which the image itself resonates; indeed, the image is torn between a rigid syntactical and interpretative apparatus – given by the pose,<sup>7</sup> by the explicit meaning of the recollection, and by

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<sup>4</sup> See, Jacques Fontanille, *Figure del corpo. Per una semiotica dell'impronta* (Roma: Meltemi, 2004); Roland Barthes, *Système de la Mode* (Paris: Seuil, 1967).

<sup>5</sup> Roland Barthes, trans. *L'ovvio e l'ottuso. Saggi critici III* (Turin: Einaudi, 2001), 46-48.

<sup>6</sup> See, Vladimir Jankélévitch, *La musique et l'Ineffable* (Paris: Armand Colin, 1961).

<sup>7</sup> Barthes, *L'ovvio e l'ottuso*, 12.

the changes in colour wrought by the passage of time on the surface of the picture – and an *élan* that seeks to free itself from the semiosis and aspires to an objective, imaginal realm, in which the anthropological structures of the imagery echo<sup>8</sup>. So, while all the elements in the photographic image are organised through signs in order to keep the sense of the photography and enclose it in the idea of the transmission of a recollection frozen in time, simultaneously, some elements – the most ineffable and inaccessible to our scrutiny – are unleashed to bear witness to the spatial and temporal extension of an image coming from the past.

It's a dynamic that brings into play an effect of false movement, or rather, an apparent immobility; it's a state of tension from which escape some of the variables that turn photographs into special images. Such images, in fact, impose themselves on our gaze, inviting us to *regard* them. With care and regard we conserve the images that are dear to us, and we look at them again and again over the years, or after decades: they are the old photos of a loved one, of a dear childhood friend, of a father who is no longer with us. A movement of pathos, a dynamic rooting<sup>9</sup> in the recollection that arises from the meaning of the photograph and transmigrates through it: a kind of recollection which did not exist before the nexus created by the relation between the portion of reality brought to light by the camera and the portion of dream agitated by the ghosts of an exhumed past.

What unleashes such a tangle of emotions? A melancholic smile, the welling up of unexpected tears, a knowing laugh, an uncontrollable empathic desire? What unleash them are the elements in the photograph; though enclosed in the paper rectangle of the image, they have nevertheless eluded the intention of the person who wanted simply to photograph a

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<sup>8</sup> See, Gilbert Durand, *Les structures anthropologiques de l'Imaginaire* (Paris: PUF, 1963).

<sup>9</sup> See, Michel Maffesoli, *Du Nomadisme. Vagabondages initiatiques* (Paris: Le Livre de Poche, 1997).

birthday party, a family reunion in the countryside, a trip to the seaside with friends. In that snapshot there is, for example, a cousin's glance; having joined the group at the last minute, she doesn't look straight at the camera, like the others, but rather at the chocolates on the table decked out for the party; or there's the edge of the father's jacket and his hand that peeps out from the right-hand side of the image and stretches toward the forehead of the son, which is sweating from playing games. This is one of the thousand private pictures found along with other belongings in the Easter Mediterranean deep waters after the sinking and the death of hundreds people.

The moment captured in the snapshot creates a commotion – *movere cum* from Latin, is a movement together stirred by a shared sentiment – and such a sentiment in the photographic record is the (desperate) attempt to reconstruct, and to mend, the absence which the image brings to life, while not fulfilling its *praesentia*.

When Benjamin described in 1936 the loss of the aura in photography<sup>10</sup> due to its serial nature, which removes it from the *hic et nunc* (here and now) of the work of art as a unique creation, removes its “cult value” and consigns it to a perennial condition of “exhibition value”, he nevertheless gave it the chance to be the last refuge of the aura, which he identified symbolically in a specific photographic subject: the philosopher says, adopting a military metaphor, that the “last ditch”<sup>11</sup> occupied by the aura before it retreats is the facial portrait. The photographed face expresses the aura of that person because in their gaze is captured the life *in praesentia* of someone who is no longer here, or of someone who is far away; while a landscape or a street without any people or faces, for Benjamin, would instead constitute evidence, like a visual record or report, or a journalistic find: “documents of proof in the historical process. And this is what

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<sup>10</sup> Walter Benjamin, trans. *L'opera d'arte all'epoca della sua riproducibilità tecnica* (Turin: Einaudi, 2000).

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.

constitutes its hidden political character”<sup>12</sup>.

Each time we take out old photographs to look at them again, even though we know them well, what are we seeking? We couldn’t say, since we are so caught up in the “freely roaming contemplative reverie”<sup>13</sup>. Perhaps it’s the sidelong glance of someone who isn’t looking directly at the camera but elsewhere, it’s the stain on the shirt, the wind swept hair, the crooked lapel on the jacket, the confusing background chosen without any real reason. In other words, it’s “the limit, the inversion, the unease and perhaps the sadism”<sup>14</sup> – which may even be degrading – of something that is out of place, of something that is outside the photographic syntax, and so it intrigues and attracts us because of its inappropriateness.

## **2.0 We are not all in the same boat. Images e translocations**

### **I.**

In the light of these reflections on the photographic medium and its language, we can interpret the ambitious and poignant transmedia project (a short film and a site-specific photographic installation) called *Ellis* (2015) by the famous “urban activist”<sup>15</sup> of the Parisian *banlieues*, JR, born in 1983 of Tunisian origin. The work takes its name from Ellis Island, the New York landing place for millions of migrants who arrived

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 29. Shortly after, the philosopher adds: “The freely roaming contemplative reverie does not suit their nature. It unsettles the observer; he feels that in order to gain access, he must find a particular inroad” (ibidem).

<sup>13</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>14</sup> Barthes, *L’ovvio e l’ottuso*, 53.

<sup>15</sup> Christian Caujolle, “Avis à la population!,” in *Women are Heroes. A global project by JR*, ed. Marco Berrebi et al. (New York: Harry N Abrams, 2012), 75.

there exhausted from all over the world, dreaming of America. The work is based on an aesthetic and a technique elaborated by the artist that can be adapted to the different sites chosen for a high visual impact.

Artivism, exacting and severe: JR is a poster artist who became famous for his gigantic black and white photographs flyposted across the globe. To mention just one: the itinerant project entitled *Women are Heroes*<sup>16</sup> (begun in 2008 and still ongoing), whose most famous site, which went viral thanks to Instagram and other social networks, is represented by the large eyes and faces of women pasted with the *collage* technique of poster art on the walls and stairways of the *favela* Morro da Providencia in Rio de Janeiro. Visible from a distance, the installation can be seen in the many online photographs taken by amateurs, tourists and journalists, becoming, in a certain sense, the new symbol of the Brazilian *favela*.

It is a site-specific operation, which reflects the amphibious nature of the photographic image: the medium in itself is comprised of the photographic self-portraits of ordinary people, collected by JR and turned into gigantic black and white images on paper, ready to be pasted onto large surfaces. But even the strategy of documentation and the “finish” of the work<sup>17</sup> are closely connected to the practice itself of photography, necessary for an appreciation of the whole from a distance.

Through the photographs that frame the whole urban context, the overall sense of the imaginative installation comes to life, allowing thus, and only thus, the final passage that completes the work, in other words, the spontaneous circulation and sharing online made possible thanks to the technological reproducibility of JR’s transmedia artistic intervention. The photography, in this case, is both a support-medium and an

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<sup>16</sup> JR, *Women are heroes Brasil*, accessed November 12, 2016, <http://www.jr-art.net/projects/women-are-heroes-brazil>.

<sup>17</sup> We refer the reader to the Marxian concept of “finish” as the final passage curated by the consumer, who then appropriates the merchandise for his/her own benefit through the practice of *détournement* – displacement.

intersemiotic text in virtue of its sign residue of remembrance and testimony expressed in the gazes and the faces of the persons represented.

In the work entitled *Ellis*,<sup>18</sup> and perhaps even more intensely here than in the Brazilian project, JR exhibits an overcrowded superimposition of faces from both present and past that call to mind the oceanic migrations of all those who disembarked on American shores, fleeing war-torn countries or desperate lives of poverty and indigence. Twelve million people passed through the corridors and rooms of that stifling inspection station and were then held in quarantine in the hospital on the south side of the island; now they meet with the immigrants of the latest generation coming from all over the world, whose faces in black and white, belonging to men and women of all ages, lie quietly on the hospital corridor floors, almost invoking a migrant dialogue with imaginary travelling companions who faced the same fate in different landing places. The artist recounts the preparatory stages of the project:

“In Europe we are going through a profound crisis. Five years ago I began a project in which I asked immigrants from all over the world to send me their photos; those are what you see at the end of the film pasted to the floor. A year before filming *Ellis* I went to Lampedusa [Sicily – Italy] to see how the migrants arrive there and how they are received; and it was like Ellis Island. I couldn’t believe that there are those who pay thousands of dollars to board a ship and probably never arrive. That was the analogy with Ellis Island: the stories of people who have left everything behind and don’t know what they will find”<sup>19</sup>.

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<sup>18</sup> For an appreciable online tour of the whole photographic series we recommend the New York Times website, which has an accurate photographic gallery where the original pictures are compared with their new site-specific collocations: JR, “Shadows returns to Ellis Islands,” *The New York Times*, accessed November 12, 2016, [http://www.nytimes.com/2014/09/25/arts/design/jr-brings-ellis-islands-abandoned-hospital-to-life.html?smid=pl-share&\\_r=1#](http://www.nytimes.com/2014/09/25/arts/design/jr-brings-ellis-islands-abandoned-hospital-to-life.html?smid=pl-share&_r=1#).

<sup>19</sup> JR, “Interview with JR,” *La Repubblica*, October 30, 2015, accessed November 12, 2016, [http://www.repubblica.it/spettacoli/cinema/2015/10/30/news/jr\\_il\\_mio\\_de\\_niro\\_migrante\\_a\\_ellis\\_island\\_per\\_scoprire\\_il\\_sogno\\_americano\\_-126233587/](http://www.repubblica.it/spettacoli/cinema/2015/10/30/news/jr_il_mio_de_niro_migrante_a_ellis_island_per_scoprire_il_sogno_americano_-126233587/).

These intense snapshots, in which the expressions vary greatly, are pasted to the floor like a collage, overlapping, beside, behind and in front of one another, while on the walls and windows of the Ellis Island Immigrant Hospital (a post industrial building in use from 1890 and then abandoned in 1954) appear old photographs with a fantasmatic aura, documenting how the refugees in quarantine were studied and treated at the time.

On the flaking walls with dirty white tiles we can glimpse a group photo from around the beginning of last century that shows doctors posing while they examine a patient; on another cracked wall looms the image of a body lying on its side, placed in perspective next to the rusty remains of a bed; behind the broken window panes in another room peep out the faces of sick and frightened children, who seem like zombies imploring to be let in; across a doorway passes with a furtive glance a life-size family of three, the man with the suitcase looks darkly at the observer, the young boy, bent under the weight of a heavy parcel, follows the man, who is perhaps his father, while the woman in ankle boots walks quickly across the frame, as if she doesn't want to be seen. In the ruins of the caged ward we find the "psychopathic" patients, rendered in gigantic images as a homage.

In tandem with the photographic project, *Unframed – Ellis Island*, JR also made a short film, *Ellis*, presented at the Tribeca Film Festival in New York in October 2015, starring Robert De Niro, himself the descendent of a migrant family that disembarked at Ellis Island over a century ago.

The actor willingly accepted the proposal; indeed he became passionate about the whole project. Wearing a dark, slightly oversized coat and carrying a small suitcase, he wanders slowly around the crumbling walls of the old hospital complex, echoing the words of a migrant by reading a letter he holds in his hand. His face marked by deep lines, his hair silvery grey, with his unmistakable voice he recounts the

tales, hopes and fears of so many, through those desolate, sometimes horrifying, rooms, brought to life by the beseeching crowds that press upon us from everywhere.

A silent crowd in solemn black and white, the overall effect of the audio–visual work is one of great intensity. Thanks to JR’s aesthetic choice of using only full–frontal portraits, it seems impossible for us to escape a face–to–face encounter. Observers find themselves facing these persons, who seem to return, as in an eternal condemnation, to the place where they once disembarked, just as today, along different coasts, so many others continue to arrive. In the artist’s works migrating is a condition that regards us all; the horizons and the prospects may often change, but the photography of migrant subjects, dislocated from their original landing places, becomes a visionary attempt to put into practice a perception that is both transmigrating and committed to otherness.

## II.

January 2016, opposite the French Embassy in London, a plywood panel – part of the scaffolding for renovation work on the outside of a building – displays the collage of a young girl with a contrite face and dishevelled hair. It’s Cosette, one of the characters in *Les Misérables* by Victor Hugo,<sup>20</sup> from the famous illustration by Gustave Brion for the first French edition. The half–bust of the young girl stands out, her face lined with yellow tears because of the gas escaping from a canister open below her; the canister is a paper cut–out too, pasted onto the wall. Behind the black and white figure flutters in colour the French national flag, its red stripe ragged and frayed.

The work might be considered as a sequel to the trilogy created by the British artist Banksy at the end of 2015 on the streets of Calais, the

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<sup>20</sup> Victor Hugo, *Les Misérables* (Paris: Gallimard, 1999).

embarkation point for refugees seeking asylum in Great Britain. Banksy's intention here is to lay bare and denounce the illegal use of tear gas in the refugee camps in Calais that accommodate over 4,500 people along the shores of the English Channel in northern France. The Jungle is the name given to one overcrowded and unliveable part of this immense shanty town. Through this transmedial operation the artist has chosen to expose what the mainstream media have omitted to mention: the use of tear gas ordered by the French authorities in order to evacuate a particularly unhealthy zone of the camp. The choice of media convergences<sup>21</sup> in the London mural is interesting: a mixed technique collage, in turn photographed in order to send it viral on social networks, and equipped with a QR code below the central image, but separate from it, which functions as a portal for all the information prepared by the artist and traceable online, necessary to clarify in detail what happened, thus expanding and extending the contents of the work well beyond its original site-specific location. "By placing their smartphones near the code, the passers-by get access to a long video<sup>22</sup> filmed in the Calais refugee camp in France on 5 January 2016, during a police raid to remove about 1,500 refugees from the camp."<sup>23</sup>

As mentioned above, the London mural of *Les Misérables* was preceded by three pieces set up in absolute secrecy, as is Banksy's wont, along the streets in the centre and periphery of Calais. The first one is the life-sized portrait entitled *The Son of Syrian Migrants*, depicting a full-length stencil image of Steve Jobs, the son of Syrian immigrants who landed in New York in the 1950s from the city of Homs. Jobs appears

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<sup>21</sup> See, Henry Jenkins, *Convergence culture: where old and new media collide* (New York: New York University Press, 2006).

<sup>22</sup> *Calais Jungle Police Assault*, accessed November 12, 2016, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OQCP\\_inka-Q&feature=youtu.be](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OQCP_inka-Q&feature=youtu.be).

<sup>23</sup> Elisabetta Intini, "Banksy e i nuovi graffiti sui migranti di Calais," *Focus.it*, January 25, 2016, accessed November 12, 2016, <http://www.focus.it/cultura/arte/banksy-e-i-nuovi-graffiti-sui-migranti-di-calais?gimg=71783&gpath=#img71783>.

with his gaunt unshaved face, as in the last years of his life, wearing his usual black turtleneck sweater, in an attitude of flight, as if sneaking away, in his hand an early Macintosh computer and with a tramp's bag-on-a-stick flung over his shoulder.<sup>24</sup>

Soon after, over the course of February 2016, the work, which had gone viral due to its *gravitas* and cogency, was anonymously retouched, as well as becoming the centre of local events. Initially someone wrote in cubic letters "London Calling" using Job's thin frame as the letter "I"; then the town council installed protective Perspex panelling around it and other works by Banksy in Calais, on its official sites even indicating the location of some of these as part of its tourist itineraries (though not the stencil of Steve Jobs, since its location was considered too dangerous for tourists). Finally, some refugees camping nearby decided to take advantage of the artist's fame and began to ask for a small fee to see the work close up.

The second mural represents the stencil of the Victorian silhouette of a child, like a ship's look-out, scanning the horizon actually in front of him – the wall faces one of the beaches in Calais. The view is darkened, however, by the ominous presence of a vulture perched on the spyglass.

Yet another citation from the past can be found in the third mural, which represents a detail taken from the oil painting by the French Romantic artist, Théodore Géricault called *Le Radeau de la "Méduse"* (1818–1819), now in the Louvre. The painting depicts an event from 1816: the French vessel, the *Méduse*, ran aground off the west coast of Africa, eventually resulting in the deaths of almost all those on board; a group of around 147 persons were piled on to a makeshift raft ("radeau") in an attempt to reach shore; however, in the end, only 15 persons were saved by a passing ship, after being carried "to the frontiers of human experience. Crazy, parched and starved, they slaughtered the mutineers,

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 8.

ate their dead companions and killed the weakest”<sup>25</sup>.

The painting is the Romantic artist’s most famous work, in which he depicts the terrible event with brutal realism, choosing the final, most desperate moments of the shipwreck, and leaving scant hope in the observer, who sees the same stormy horizon as the man at the top of the pictorial pyramid of bodies.

It seems clear that Banksy knew the work well, which he reproduces with a stencil technique and calls *We are not all in the same boat*<sup>26</sup>. Indeed, the artist has included an essential detail in revisiting the original: a ferry in the distance one of those that run the gauntlet between France and England, but here, unlike the outcome of the 19<sup>th</sup> century event, the boat ignores the desperate cries of the survivors, who have become seaborne refugees in Banksy’s work, and continues along its way. In his preparatory sketches Géricault had included the outline of a vessel on the horizon, which would save the handful of survivors; in the final draft, however, he decided to eliminate the ship in order to render all the more effective the sensation of the precariousness of human life, caught between salvation and death. Yet this is not the case with the refugees in Calais, whom Banksy has sought to elevate as the protagonists of a post-romantic tragic adventure: they have not been left at the mercy of fate because of the elements<sup>27</sup>, but rather because of the political choices of those who have relegated them to a condition without the possibility of redemption, on a raft in the midst of the sea of Europe. On the 20<sup>th</sup> of

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<sup>25</sup> Jonathan Miles, “Death and the Masterpiece,” *The Times*, March 24, 2007.

<sup>26</sup> See the artist’s official website: Banksy, *We’re not all in the same boat*, accessed November 12, 2016, <http://banksy.co.uk/index3-2.asp>.

<sup>27</sup> A work of striking effect is *Mediterranean Boat Ride*: these are boats adrift in an artificial pond in Dismaland, the tragic amusement park set up by Banksy in 2015, in which, among the highly satirical installations, there is an interactive one with remote-control toy boats overcrowded with statuettes of refugees that guests can steer any which way around the pond. See, Banksy, *Mediterranean Boat Ride*, accessed November 12, 2016, <http://www.gorgonia.it/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/Mediterranean-Boat-Dismaland-Banksy-Boats-via-click2houston-com.jpg>.

September 2016 UK started to build the *Great Wall of Calais*, but the project provoked “outrage from human rights organisations when it was announced (...) and a vow from local authorities to fight the British Government’s scheme”<sup>28</sup>, including the mayor of Calais, Natacha Bouchart. “Francois Hollande, the French President, has vowed to dismantle the camp and relocate its estimated 7,000 to 10,000 residents before the onset of winter”<sup>29</sup>.

### 3.0 The *selfie* and the catastrophe of the Ego

Moving from photography as a private souvenir to photography as a device for bearing witness in the canons of contemporary urban art, we come to those hybrid snapshots, the product of our age, which have the flavour of old family albums, yet are comprised of the *selfies* of an all-inclusive and digitally extended family<sup>30</sup>, which are both public and private, and aspire to be called artistic, since their origins are in journalism.

In other words, private photography is composed of all those elements that recontextualise it at the heart of the subject’s existential gesture, which beckons and evokes his/her worldly presence thanks to the practice of *posting* on social networks. As such, it indicates the having-been-there in that precise place and time, not just physical, but also existential and emotional, exploiting both the device of the photo-souvenir and that of the *post*, as well as the sharing thanks to the number

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<sup>28</sup> Lizzie Dearden, “Great Wall of Calais,” *The Independent*, November 8, 2016, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/refugee-crisis-great-wall-of-calais-jungle-motorway-migrants-asylum-seekers-wall-building-injunction-a7344411.html>.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>30</sup> See, Claudia Attimonelli, “Album de famille. L’imaginaire photographique et le souvenir,” paper presented at the annual conference *Les journées du CeaQ – socialité postmoderne XVI*, Université Sorbonne, Paris, France, June, 23-24, 2015.

of likes.

Photojournalism, on the other hand – the origins of which Benjamin collocates with the rise of *post mortem* portrait photography<sup>31</sup>, but differentiating it mainly due to its documental vocation – seems designated for an aesthetic project, which must be able to produce shared, indeed *viral*, sensations and emotions, opening up disquieting lacerations in the context of media sensationalism.

From the amateur photograph to the photo–portrait of friends and relatives – but unrelated to the subject that observes the image – we can perceive a pathemic<sup>32</sup> tension that activates the modality “remembrance” and the sentiments connected to it along a vast gamma that goes from tenderness to discomfort<sup>33</sup>, the latter felt each time the protagonists of the images strike a pose, whether by chance or by choice, and, without meaning to, reveal their sloppiness, embarrassment, or frailty in front of the lens.

The double halo emanated by the condition in which the photographed subject is placed, as both subject of the image and object of the technical (or technological) medium, is the origin of the rampant proliferation of the most widespread and diversified practice of photo portraiture at the present time: the *selfie*. More than the facial portrait, which was, for Benjamin, the ‘last ditch’ of the traditional aura<sup>34</sup>, the digital *selfie* – anticipated by the Polaroid self portrait in the 1980s – expresses the most potent level of societal emotion freed from any concern for privacy,

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<sup>31</sup> Benjamin, *L'opera d'arte*, 28-29.

<sup>32</sup> Along with Greimassian semiotics, there is a semiotics of passions, called “pathemic semiotics,” interlaced with phenomenology, an interpretative method which studies the subject’s relation to the object, with the body as medium. See, Paolo Fabbri, and Paul Perron, *Foreword to The Semiotics of Passions*, in *The Semiotics of Passions. From States of Affairs to States of Feelings*, Algirdas Julien Greimas and Jacques Fontanille (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), VII-XVI.

<sup>33</sup> Barthes, *L'ovvio e l'ottuso*, 53.

<sup>34</sup> Benjamin, *L'opera d'arte*, 28.

pushed to the limit of a blissful dementia, describing and illustrating the catastrophe of the undivided individual.

A panoply of posts–memories ready to testify and vow to one’s being–here in the world and one’s being–here–with – *Dasein*<sup>35</sup> – thanks to which we participate with naturalness in a neotribal,<sup>36</sup> aesthetic and affective regeneration of the family.

#### 4.0 The obtuse sense of horrific photojournalism

3 September 2015, Bodrum (Turkey), his name was Aylan Kurdi, three years old; he had a brother called Galip, five years old. Both were drowned when the boat went down that was supposed to take the family, originally from Koban in Syria, to Kos, the Greek island where thousands of Syrian refugees try to land in the hope of travelling on to Germany or somewhere else in northern Europe. Aylan’s family, however, ended up on the shores of Bodrum, a famous Turkish seaside resort, after their boat capsized. The image of Aylan’s death had an extraordinary impact worldwide all across the media, and raises some interesting mediological questions that we’ll seek to analyse using socio–semiotic tools.

An initial reflection concerns the state of perennial visual sollicitation in which those of us who follow information on a daily basis find ourselves. We are getting more and more used to deleting images already seen or archiving them in folders that won’t ever be reopened, with the sensation that they might be useful one day. The photographic condition with which we experience the present and the past and archive our memories for the future is both ambiguous and complex.

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<sup>35</sup> See, Martin Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit* (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer, 1927).

<sup>36</sup> See, Michel Maffesoli, *Le temps des tribus. Le déclin de l’individualisme dans les sociétés de masse* (Paris: Méridiens Klincksieck, 1988).

What stays impressed on the retina<sup>37</sup> of public emotion of all the photographic production, for how long, and with what result? What is the relation between the photographs of current events and the memory, given that shots like the one capturing the little boy's demise originate in a journalistic vocation, yet, due to media sensationalism, increasingly find themselves aspiring to an artistic status? In what way do we today construct our own personal relation with history, both present and past, and with memory?

Given that memory and recollection have always been on different planes, the former stimulated by official contrivances, like Remembrance Day, the latter stirred by banal events that bring to the surface recollections of a Proustian nature<sup>38</sup>, how can we change our ability to recollect, when ever more often today we participate in the activation of the memory through the modality of *posts* of personal recollections that tell of our being *there* in places of high news density? What constitutes memory seem to be the crowded snapshots of normal people, sticking together in swarms of dramatic recollections, or pictures taken by the *homo photographicus*, who confers meaning on photography by interpreting what s/he selects for the snapshot.

Let's start with what Roland Barthes calls the *obvious sense* of the photographic. On a denotative plane<sup>39</sup>, the first level, the obvious one that describes without interpreting, the image represents, we would all agree, an anonymous shoreline, the sky is overcast and at the centre is a young child in blue shorts and red t-shirt, his face turned down in the sand. The connotative plane, at a more symbolic level, makes us instantly say that at the centre of the image there is the *body* of a young child, the

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<sup>37</sup> "The TV screen is the retina of the mind's eye. So the TV screen is part of the human brain's physical structure." Extract from the monologue by Prof. O'Blivion, the incarnation of Marshall H. McLuhan in David Cronenberg's cult classic, *Videodrome* (Canada, 1982).

<sup>38</sup> See, Marcel Proust, *À la recherche du temps perdu* (Paris: Gallimard, 1946).

<sup>39</sup> Barthes, *L'ovvio e l'ottuso*, 31-35.

specification of the phrase “the body of a young child”, rather than the more direct “a young child”, implies that the subject presents qualities that interrupt the “photographic syntax”<sup>40</sup> of a living being.

The face turned down in the sand does not refer to a normal condition; on the symbolic plane, we must advance the hypothesis that perhaps the subject is sleeping or has fainted. The rest of the information stays the same. Then, inexorably, a third sense advances, what Barthes calls the *obtuse sense*<sup>41</sup>. It proceeds in its semiosis beyond pure description, it proceeds beyond the connotation we have in any case attributed to the photograph. The third sense, the obtuse sense, leads us, in spite of ourselves, to doubt that the child is sleeping or could have fainted; most likely he is dead. At this point, all analytical tools are abandoned and we are in the grip of emotions that, for some, will be heartrending, for others, aggressive, while for others still, they will elicit feelings of morbidity or cynicism, pity or violence... In other words, the obtuse sense, like the obtuse angle, is open to multiple interpretations<sup>42</sup>, all of which, beyond right or wrong, are plausible and don't require any consensus among those who feel them. The obtuse sense no longer sees a news image, but instead is caught in the web of emotions elicited by a photo that is aesthetically perfect in representing the tragic.

A child, the most pitiful creature of all, not an old person, not a man or a woman, but the quintessence of innocence, wearing a red T-shirt drenched in sea water; his little socks are crumpled by the waves lapping on the shore, the soles of his shoes show minute feet falling sideways; and then there are the little hands with the palms facing upward and the fingers slightly bent, telling us he didn't put his hands out in front of him to break his fall, as all children instinctively do, but was there, returned to the shore by the sea itself, abandoned, rendered, surrendered and

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 48-59.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 45.

surrendering.

And so we, spectators from all over the globe, found ourselves faced with that image; helpless, our arms limp by our sides, we stared at our computer or TV screens, or wherever we first received the vision.

What is missing from the image that removes it from the genre of news reportage? What makes it an aesthetically flawless picture? It lacks a narration, perhaps, that is, the whole frame, which some newspapers cropped in order to create a more shocking effect. What is missing is the man who delicately lifts the child, in another compelling image, convinced that he is only unconscious and can still be saved, as he later recounted, together with the barman who first discovered the bodies and contacted the authorities<sup>43</sup>.

But that's not how it was. A sickening sense of shameful and, at the same time, touching embarrassment<sup>44</sup> – together with an irreparable sense of pity and guilt from heads of state and opinion leaders, who intervened with declarations<sup>45</sup> no sooner had the obscene image spread uncontrollably, kindling an unprecedented collective compassion – gained ground, acting on an emotional level run amok by the aesthetic potency of a vision that perhaps subtracted itself too soon from the contextualisation of who, how, when, and where, terms that invoke a background, impose names and produce actions.

And herein lies the power of the photographic, that *je-ne-sais-quoi* of the image that represents migration, that holds it and contends it between

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<sup>43</sup> Hannah Roberts and Vanessa Altin, “Their eyes were open. I closed them softly,” *The Dailymail Online*, September 3, 2015, accessed November 12, 2016, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3220992/Their-eyes-open-closed-softly-Turkish-barman-body-toddler-Aylan-Kurdi-beach-relives-horror.html>.

<sup>44</sup> Barthes, *L'ovvio e l'ottuso*, 50, 53. A further reference to malaise, baseness, and the inchoate unleashed by the obtuse sense could be investigated – as, moreover, Barthes himself suggests, *ibid.*, 53 – in George Bataille's writings from 1929, especially “Le gros orteil,” *Documents N. 6, Œuvres complètes Tome I* (Paris: Gallimard, 1970); “Informe,” *Documents N. 7, Œuvres complètes Tome I* (Paris: Gallimard, 1970).

<sup>45</sup> *Death of Alan Kurdi*, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Death\\_of\\_Alan\\_Kurdi](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Death_of_Alan_Kurdi).

the artistic and the realistic, the authentic and the sophisticated. Herein appears the metaphor of light and shade, of which photographic language is the celebration. In these interpretative interstices reside the traces of the multiplicity of photographic signs that leave those who look at them dazed and confused, as they ask themselves whether the stakes in journalistic sensationalism aren't going a little too far, beyond the level of both real and fictional risk in which the subjects caught by the image unwittingly find themselves.

## Conclusion

Our hypothesis is that the imaginary is becoming ever more objective<sup>46</sup>, and the real makes itself known through the dynamics of empathy and sensationalism. “Today, it is the real that has become the alibi of the model, in a world upheld by the principle of simulation. And, paradoxically, it is the real that has become our true utopia – but a utopia that no longer belongs to the order of the possible, since we can only dream of it as we would dream of a lost object”<sup>47</sup>.

According to the philosophical perspective suggested by Jean Baudrillard, and following the paradigmatic examples of the activists Banksy and JR, we citizens and netizens, we spectators, reach and eventually obtain a point of view on the reality of migration and the tragedy of crossing borders through the lens of activism, because thanks to the aesthetic strategies it provides an authentic glimpse towards the otherness; on the contrary and at the same time, the traditional source of documentality, such as photojournalism in the contemporary social contest, returns and reflects a fake and sophisticated representation of the

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<sup>46</sup> Vincenzo Susca and Derrick De Kerckhove, *Transpolitica...*

<sup>47</sup> Jean Baudrillard, “Simulacri e fantascienza,” in *Tecnofilosofia. Per una nuova antropologia filosofica, Millepiani 17.18* (Milan: Mimesis, 2000).

refugees, while adopting an increasingly dose of sensationalism. Both languages and media have been analysed in their historical phase of deep contamination one with the other, and it is within the task and the challenge of communication and social sciences the urgency to understand the mediological transformation and outline frames and contents where information circulate.

(English translation by Lisa Adams)

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