THE NARRATIVES OF *TOPOS*:

Eva Leitolf's *Deutsche Bilder—eine Spurensuche* (1992–2008) and *Postcards from Europe* (since 2006)

German A. Duarte
Eva Leitolf
Free University
of Bozen-Bolzano
Italy

iD   iD

https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0902-7790   https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5943-6170

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Fig. 1. Eva Leitolf, *Orange Grove*, Rosarno, Italy. (2010)

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ORANGE GROVE, ROSARNO, ITALY 2010

In January 2010 the price obtained by Calabrian citrus growers for their Moro and Navel oranges was five Euro cents per kilogram. They paid their mostly illegally employed and undocumented African and Eastern European seasonal workers between €20 and €25 for a day's work. Depending on the variety and the state of the trees a worker can pick between four and seven hundred kilograms of oranges in a day. The business was no longer profitable and many farmers left the fruit to rot.

During the 2009–2010 harvest there were between four and five thousand migrants living in and around Rosarno, most of them in abandoned buildings or plastic shelters, without running water or toilets.

On 7 January 2010, local youths fired an air-gun at African orange-pickers returning from work and injured two of them. The ensuing demonstration by migrant workers ended in severe clashes with parts of the local population, during which cars were set on fire and shop windows broken. Accommodation used by seasonal workers was burned and hundreds fled, fearing the local citizens or deportation by the authorities.

On 9 January, under police protection from jeering onlookers, about eight hundred Africans were bussed out to emergency accommodation in Crotone and Bari.

A Season in Hell: MSF Report on the Conditions of Migrants Employed in the Agricultural Sector in Southern Italy, January 2008; tagesschau.de, 10 January 2010; interviews with orange farmers and seasonal labourers, Rosarno, 27–29 January 2010

Around the turn of the century, the notion of *topos* (τόπος) underwent an interesting and necessary transformation. Presumably due to the popularization of digital technology, scholars started to progressively uncover the complex nature of the word by expanding on its general meaning as it pertains to the sphere of speech. During the early years of the Digital Revolution, the word's intricate genealogy was rediscovered within the framework of human communication. In fact, in the course of the emerging technological transformation, certain academic disciplines rediscovered the word's original Greek meaning: "place" (τόπος). The process that shifted the term from the purely spatial notion to the semantic field of rhetoric—to the realm of speech and subsequently to the sphere of textual organization of information—is completely unknown. Nevertheless, it is possible to imagine that during this thousand-year semantic passage, the word became fundamental to the development of different instruments of human communication, specifically those developed in diverse technological contexts to relate events and convey experiences to future generations.

It is not by mere chance that the art of rhetoric, as a prominent technique of human communication, inextricably found its essence in the notion of *topos* (τόπος) through the figure of Simonides of Ceos. As Simonides is said to have taught, one effective technique of recall is to bring into the mind a spatial composition populated by objects from which the subject is able to reconstruct the information they wish to evoke. As described by William Atkinson:

The system of Simonides was based upon the idea of position—it was known as "the topical system." His students were taught to picture in the mind a large building divided into sections, and then into rooms, halls, etc. The thing to be remembered was "visualized" as occupying some certain space or place in that building, the grouping being made according to association and resemblance. When one wished to recall the things to consciousness, all that was necessary was to visualize the mental building and then take an imaginary trip from room to room, calling off the various things as they had been placed. The Greeks thought very highly of this plan, and many variations of it were employed. (Atkinson 2019: 18)

The legend of Simonides' represents a very performative way of memorizing information by means of constructing a topology

German A. Duarte
Eva Leitolf
Free University
of Bozen-Bolzano
Italy

of the event to recall. This art of memory, which essentially consisted of generating visualizations of spaces in the mind, subsequently represented a fundamental element of rhetoric. Known by its Latin popularization as the *Method of Loci*, this mnemonic device allows us to identify not only a technique through which one passed down information to future generations, but also the predominance of text over other forms of generating, organizing, preserving, and exchanging human experiences. As can be noted in Cicero's words, the concept of τόπος, as a purely spatial notion introduced to the art of memory, clearly acquired a textual dimension:

[...] therefore, who would improve this part of the understanding, certain places must be fixed upon, and that of the things which they desire to keep in memory, symbols must be conceived in the mind, and ranged, as it were, in those places; thus the order of places would preserve the order of things, and the symbol of the things would denote the things themselves; so that we should use the places as waxen tablets, and the symbols as letters. (Cicero 1855: 326)

Through these words, it is not difficult to imagine the way τόπος started to become speech and subsequently was placed fully in the semantic sphere of text. The more humankind adopted writing technology to preserve and exchange information within an already complex society, the more the space (the image), as noted by Cicero, became "waxen tablets." The sequentiality and linearity of the text (above all, in its alphabetical form)[1] became our species' essential instrument of analysis and communication, and so, as posited by Cicero, the images (spaces) would be used as white pages to write upon. The space—the image—disappears and becomes text, and within this framework the notion of τόπος is uprooted from the realm of "topology" and placed fully in the sphere of the "topic." Further, the rupture from its original etymological sphere seemed over centuries to be a social necessity. The exchange of the notion of *topos* seen as a space and understood as a coordinate system belonging to the image was a necessity since *topos* was seen as a limit on knowledge

1. Through the lens of a long tradition of studies and influential works, one can assume that writing technology has a deep influence on human cognition. On this subject, see, Eric A. Havelock, *The Muse Learns to Write: Reflections on Orality and Literacy from Antiquity to Present* (Havelock 1986).

which had conceived the *logos* exclusively through the speech. It is not by chance that image represented for the construction of the *Polis* a problematic space in which reason is weakened. Plato's arguments against idolatry are well known, since images, by hiding the event in its mimetic process, were seen as anti-republican. Consequently, one could argue—and as diverse scholars maintain—linear writing and its irruption in Greece was a direct response to idolatry, which represented a problem for the construction of a social organization based on the *logos*. In fact, the notion of "citizenship" and the social organization of the *Polis* seemed to have directly derived from the "text" (*logos*), and, at the same time, seemed threatened by the forces of idolatry, which represented an experience of the world that was related through images. Curiously, the Platonic lesson vanished when society started its compulsive consumption of images, a mass media society that progressively imposed images in diverse forms of communication. It is certainly impossible to determine how and when the compulsive behaviour towards images began. One could argue that George Méliès, by realizing his *actualités reconstituées*, generated the social need for translating into cinematic images the whole info-sphere, which until that point had used only text (Duarte 2009). That is to say, it is possible to see in his reenactments the root of the need for translating into images, into audio-visual material, all forms of information in order for it to be experienced and consumed by the audience, an audience that has built its experience of the world on the cinematographic medium (Casetti 2015).

Nevertheless, by the end of the last millennium, human cognition, highly influenced by the linearity and sequentiality of the alphabet, started to undergo a radical change. The eruption of digital technologies resulted in the interruption of these textual-linear processes of thought. Text, as a serialized sequence embodied by the alphabetic writing system, started to acquire a hypertextual form, a non-linear form that clearly displays a spatial nature. As remarked by Bolter, from the popularization of digital technology emerged a kind of topographic writing, in contrast to the "topic" writing that had characterized literate humankind. Furthermore, according to Bolter, topographic writing—which

German A. Duarte
Eva Leitolf
Free University
of Bozen-Bolzano
Italy

is not "the writing of a place, but rather a writing with places" (Bolter 1991: 25)—is not a phenomenon exclusive to writing technology, but rather embraces all former media, since the non-linear hypertextual form, being a space, could be populated by items that had previously exclusively pertained to other media. It is precisely this hypertextual form, which shaped the text into a series of multimedia links, that needed to be comprehended by means of spatial notions. Thus, this necessity placed the concept of *τόπος* at the centre of the discussion, but this time as a concept that had reclaimed its original meaning of "place."

Eva Leitolf's oeuvre can be analyzed through the lens of this phenomenon. In a particularly deconstructivist approach, Leitolf's *Deutsche Bilder—eine Spurensuche* (*German Images—Searching for Evidence*) (1992–2008) and *Postcards from Europe* (since 2006), fragments and disassembles the intricate notion of *τόπος* in its purely spatial nature and, by extension, reveals the mechanisms through which spaces become narrative, become text. In fact, by generating a geodesy of contemporaneous European social debacle, Leitolf's photographs evoke the awful events devoid of speech. Through an attempt to avoid the mechanism of representation, these series of images present *loci* populated by traumatic events that must be recalled, yet their evocation remains foreign, in its first narrative phase, to the mechanisms of speech. In a manner analogous to the method of *re*enactment, these topographic narratives become "topic" by bringing the space of the event into the collective discussion and elaboration of the social imaginary. The space, in her oeuvre, becomes a place for social discussion in which the topic seems no more than the topography of the contemporaneous social catastrophe, one built on a complete absence of empathy.

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German A. Duarte: Both works mentioned above, *Deutsche Bilder—eine Spurensuche* (1992–2008) and *Postcards from Europe* (since 2006), are built on a similar practice: you show public places that have been the scenes of tragic events, but the images themselves contain no clues, no signs, of the tragedy. You show empty spaces disconnected from the events of which they are

the focus. Could you explain a little more your practice, and how you construct your work?

Eva Leitolf: Especially in the new part of the work *Deutsche Bilder—eine Spurensuche* (2006–2008), but also in *Postcards from Europe*, I was initially interested in structural questions: How are xenophobic and racist violence, and its victims depicted? What narratives and social discourses are sparked or fuelled by them?[2] And: for which political goals are these image narratives instrumentalized?[3] I understand both works as research projects to explore how counter-narratives can be developed using images.

In the process I abandoned completely the depiction of people and concentrated exclusively on crime scenes, alleged crime scenes, and other places connected with the subject of migration. In a way, I see these deserted, everyday places as empty spaces, as a stage. An empty space in images, the permanent and complete absence of people—of protagonists—often points all the more to the possibility of the presence of those people. Both works that we are discussing here refer to media images that most viewers already have in their heads. In this collective social imaginary, which is now predominantly drawn from images distributed worldwide and online, there are refugee women with small children shown in need of help, groups of men depicted threateningly at (European or American) border crossings, as well as overcrowded refugee boats, and skinheads giving the Hitler salute.

Deutsche Bilder—eine Spurensuche and *Postcards from Europe* provide the viewers with images and texts as tools that make it possible to question the construction, meaning, and context of an image. The aim is to address the viewers' own knowledge of images as well as their imagination.

GD: Can we say that the text belongs to the sphere of *logos*, while image belongs exclusively to the sphere of *pathos*? And is there any hierarchy (between image and text) in your approach?

2. For example, Der Spiegel, from 1989 to 1992, constructed with their headlines the narrative of "asylum seekers flooding" us, the "full boat," a "powerless state," and "Nazi kids."

3. In Germany, for example, after many years of so-called "asylum debate," and after violent and xenophobic riots, the constitution (*Grundgesetz*) was amended in 1993 to severely restrict the individual's right to asylum.

German A. Duarte
Eva Leitolf
Free University
of Bozen-Bolzano
Italy

EL: The text postcards that accompany each photograph are drawn from many different sources. Media reports, police files, and press releases generally form the starting point of my research and inform the direction of my fieldwork. When travelling, I keep a diary and speak in person with people connected to the events: migrants, refugees, seasonal workers, activists, trade unionists, local politicians, border guards. These collected voices and sources later form the basis of my texts. In *Deutsche Bilder–eine Spurensuche*, these texts are made available to the viewers as a leaflet; in *Postcards from Europe*, there are text postcards next to the photographs that people can take.

For me, images and text are completely equal, what interests me is the tension between these media. I don't think of myself as a "photographer." The idea of photography as a universal language, for example as propagated in the 1950s by Edward Steichen in the MoMA exhibition *The Family of Man*, had already been impugned by Bertolt Brecht decades earlier: a photograph of a factory says nothing about the working conditions of the workers employed there. Since my studies at CalArts, I have engaged deeply with critical discourses on documentary photography and the politics of representation. Theorists and artists such as Abigail Solomon-Godeau, Martha Rosler, and also Allan Sekula have really inspired me. The exciting thing about photography for me is finding out how photography works, what spaces it can open up, where its limits are, and how dependent it is on context.

My work with images has different levels that function differently depending on the contextualization and the participation of the viewer/reader. The questioning of image and text, how they change or depend upon each other, is central to all of my works. Images change their meaning depending on the context. Text is an additional tool for reconstructing events, perhaps as an imaginary film on the "stage" of my photographs.

The idea that text generally belongs in the sphere of *logos*, while images belong exclusively in the sphere of *pathos*, describes quite well the conventional understanding of image and text in photojournalistic practice. In my work, on the other hand, clear boundaries and assignations dissolve: the image does not serve any need for "emotainment," does not allow any simple

and thereby often relieving emotional reaction such as outrage, anger, or pity. My photographs refuse precisely an emotionalized form of articulation. Together with the texts, a tension arises that creates space for the most diverse reactions.

GD: I know we share a common admiration for Susan Sontag's *Regarding the Pain of Others* (2004). The essay reminds us that the photochemical process of pictorial representation exerts, by its very nature, a force of reification: it transforms everything into an object. Sontag highlights this force by showing us that the process of photographic representation is in its very essence violent. A subject represented through photographic technology is transformed into an object, and this is an extreme exercise in violence. Do you agree that this could be extended to any form of pictorial representation? And, more importantly, do textual processes of representation exert the same violence?

EL: Yes, I agree. The reification of the subject is in itself and on multiple levels violent. People represented photographically are, through pictorial contextualisation, assigned very concrete characteristics and roles, such as perpetrator and victim. In many cases, these assignations allow the viewer to remain uninvolved: everything they see is done by others, happens to others. These images trigger emotional reactions such as fear or pity. However, one's own stance, one's own involvement, remains unquestioned.

The second question is more difficult to answer. Ultimately, of course, text can also exert violence, though in different ways to images. Always interesting in this context is Martha Rosler's photo-text installation *The Bowery in two inadequate descriptive systems* (1974–75). It seems to me that violence is already inscribed into the inadequacy of both media. The determination by images and language, the reduction inherent in both media, is in itself violent. However, both media can also be used in a more sophisticated and nuanced way: through making one's own preconditions transparent, through undertaking reasonable research, and through empowering the viewer.

GD: Would it be possible to posit that the absence of subjects, of people, in your images is an attempt at liberating the photographic process from that force of reification of the subject?

German A. Duarte
Eva Leitolf
Free University
of Bozen-Bolzano
Italy

EL: Yes. As I described earlier, with the way I work, the reification of the subject disappears and the viewer finds themselves—lacking a surface to project their emotions onto—at the centre of their own focus. How does my reaction to what has happened change because of what I have read? What active role do I play in the construction of meaning?

GD: Your practice establishes an unconventional relationship between the object, its representation, and the subject. The process of representation that you have developed transforms the beholder, in my view, into an active entity. In front of an empty space, the beholder is encouraged (I would even say forced) to evoke the tragic event through and in the space represented in the image. Thus, the subject mentally reconstructs the whole tragic event and, in performing this sort of reenactment, they must draw upon to a vast series of semiotic tools and narrative forms. The process of representation, in your practice, does not aim to only produce an intelligible object for the beholder, but to trigger a whole narrative mechanism; that is to say, to trigger in the viewer's mind a kind of *mise en scene*. In doing so, your practice refers to the collective imaginary and the way it shapes the general perception of determined events.

A large part of your work deals with the social issues of immigration, discrimination, and violence. Certainly, the perception of those social issues is different in America and Europe: each continent has its own collective imaginary. Nevertheless, there is, in my opinion, a vast number of analogies. I wanted to construct our conversation around some of these analogies and divergences. This will hopefully allow us to better understand the limits of representing an event through a photograph.

My plan was to start by discussing a series of pictures that were very present in the public discourse on the two continents, but that were viewed in different ways. Firstly, I would like to discuss the image of the "*caravana de migrantes*" on its path to the US's southern border. As soon as I showed you this image, you showed me (like an answer) the cover from *Der Spiegel*. It was amazing. Can we talk about these images? Can we analyze them?

Fig. 2. A migrant caravan, which has grown into the thousands, walks into the interior of Mexico after crossing the Guatemalan border on Oct. 21, 2018, near Ciudad Hidalgo, Mexico. (John Moore/Getty Images)

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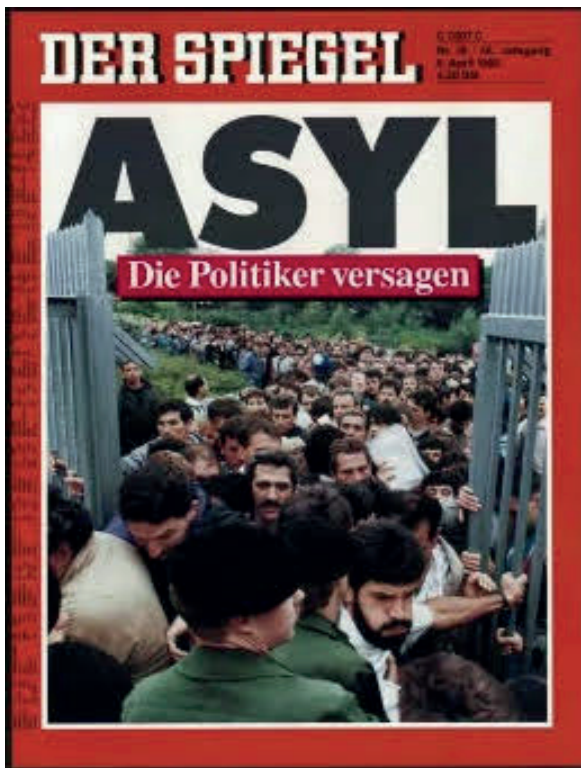*Eva Leitolf*
Free University
of Bozen-Bolzano
Italy

Fig. 3. *Der Spiegel* cover (1992)

EL: The image *caravana de migrantes* which circulated worldwide in the press in October 2018 can be found online in several—very similar—versions. *Roll Call* headlined on October 29th 2018 with "Trump Warns of 'Invasion' Approaching US-Mexico Border" and captioned the photo with: "A migrant caravan, which has grown into the thousands, walks into the interior of Mexico after crossing the Guatemalan border on Oct. 21, 2018, near Ciudad Hidalgo, Mexico. John Moore/Getty Images."[4] DW.com had already published the image on 21 October (the date the photograph was taken) beneath the title "*La caravana de migrantes centroamericanos avanza pese a las advertencias de Trump*," and the subtitle "*la caravana de la miseria*." The photograph, taken by P. Pardo for Getty Images/AFP, is accompanied by the caption "*Vista del avance de la caravana en su camino entre Ciudad Hidalgo y Tapachula, en Chiapas.*"[5]

The second image that we are speaking about was published by *Der Spiegel*—over 25 years earlier on 5 April 1992—together with the headline which is integrated into the picture and dominates the image: "ASYL—Die Politiker versagen" (Asylum—The Politicians Fail).[6]

We can discuss these images on many different levels. I would like to start by just describing the images: all three images show a long formation of people that is coming towards the viewer.

The photographs that were taken in 2018 at the Guatemalan border were shot from an elevated vantage point which suggests to the viewer a position of oversight. This perspective is also found in paintings of battle scenes such as Albrecht Altdorfer's *The Battle of Alexander at Issus* (1529) and the paintings of Louis-François Lejeune *Battle of Moscow, 7. September 1812*, (1822), among others. From this perspective, no individual can be made out; they become part of a seemingly homogenous mass that is moving towards the viewer. At the same time, the high

4.   *Roll Call*, https://rollcall.com/2018/10/29/trump-warns-of-invasion-approaching-us-mexico-border/, last accessed 11 September 2022
5.   DW.com, https://www.dw.com/es/la-caravana-de-migrantes-centroamericanos-avanza-pese-a-las-advertencias-de-trump/a-45978245, last accessed 11 September 2022
6.   *Der Spiegel*, https://www.spiegel.de/spiegel/print/index-1992-15.html, last accessed 11 September 2022

angle allows a more distant outlook that suggests the possibility of cool control and surveillance. The two versions of the picture differ in their foregrounds, which, seen through the telephoto lens, is still far away. In both, the head of the *caravana* can be seen; in the photograph published by *Roll Call* a police vehicle is stopped at right angles to the approaching people.

The cover from *Der Spiegel* (actually, a photomontage) also shows the *caravana* motif from a raised vantage point. But the elevation is minimal and counteracted by the short distance to the subject. Two police officers/border guards are cropped off and can be prominently seen in the foreground with their backs to the viewer. They appear to be trying in vain to block the approaching mass of people pushing through a half-open gate, and offer the viewer the chance to identify with them. In the image, the officers are confronted with individually identifiable intruders. All are male, and stern-looking.

Both pictures have in common that no end of the *caravana* can be discerned. They reach to the horizon and appear to be lost to infinity. Both motifs couple onto the stereotypical image of the "wave" of single men flooding "us" (Europeans/ North Americans) (which stands in contrast to another motif widespread in the media: the fleeing woman/ family with a child shown in need of help). The perpetual anonymization, homogenization, and problematization of migrants in images serve an exclusive "us vs them" narrative that seems to ultimately necessitate compartmentalization as ultima ratio (Salerno 2019: 109). The then US President Donald Trump instrumentalized—in the lead-up to the midterm election—the people who had made their way from Latin America, and wrote in one of his tweets of an "invasion." Without presenting any evidence, Trump claimed that terrorists may have infiltrated the crowd, which posed a threat that needed to be countered militarily.[7] After declaring the *caravana* to be a national emergency, he deployed thousands of troops to the border with Mexico.

German A. Duarte
Eva Leitolf
Free University
of Bozen-Bolzano
Italy

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7.   (@realDonaldTrump) "Many Gang Members and some very bad people are mixed into the Caravan heading to our Southern Border. Please go back, you will not be admitted into the United States unless you go through the legal process. This is an invasion of our Country and our Military is waiting for you!" *Twitter*, 19 October 2018.

The cover from *Der Spiegel* does not exist in isolation, but can be interpreted as one of many images in the period from 1989 to 1992 in which the weekly magazine with their headlines constructed the narrative of "asylum seekers flooding" us, the "full boat," a "powerless state," and "Nazi kids." A large wave of racist and xenophobic violence in Germany after the fall of the Berlin Wall culminated in 1992 in massive riots in Rostock-Lichtenhagen. On the third day, 24 August, the reception facility that was being attacked was evacuated in the early hours of the morning—but not the accommodation facilities next door which at the time still housed more than one hundred Vietnamese people and who now became the target of the attacks. The Vietnamese families, along with a television crew that had been trapped with them, managed to break open a skylight and escape over the roof of the neighbouring building to safety. It was only the following night that the situation could be brought under control after reinforcements were called in from other police jurisdictions and the massive deployment of water cannons. Journalists later discussed whether political entities had planned a "controlled escalation of the mob" in order to persuade the Social Democratic Party to compromise on the asylum issue.

The dissemination of simplistic and stereotypical visual narratives through the news media has complex causes, conditions, and characteristics. Images are often only a small but nevertheless powerful component of contemporary forms of propaganda (Staal 2018).

GD: I think your analysis of the image composition is very interesting and gives us a better understanding of the mechanisms of propaganda, especially your highlighting of the fact that the point of view of these images deletes the uniqueness of the individual. This can be related to the way cinematographic propaganda in different countries structured narratives during World War II. That is to say, this was a kind of shared narrative element for all propaganda in Europe. Certainly, each propaganda machine had its specific aims, but the main goal was to "delete the subject" from the plot. And this goal was achieved by transforming the soldiers into a monolith. They (i.e. the soldiers, also: the young people) were no longer a series of pluralities but became a singular entity that embodied "the revolution," the "defence against the aggressors," "the nation," the "protection of cultural

traditions," and so on. Propaganda films do not show the individual soldier but the multitude of men in arms. Because once you show the individual in a warlike film, you uncover the reality of war: that it is made of millions of fragments of inhuman and useless pain.

The early films of Peter Watkins clearly demonstrate this phenomenon. For example, in *The Diary of an Unknown So*ldier (1959) Watkins deconstructs the mass on the battlefield—he deconstructs the monolithic entity—and shows the subject. And the individual is nothing more than a person who is aware that he is facing death or, at best, with a little "good luck," is destined to kill another human being. It is terrifying that this pattern, as you just mentioned, is still a part of contemporary forms of propaganda, and I am wondering if the image composition you just analyzed, which clearly shares some characteristics with this propaganda strategy, is the product of a deeper phenomenon, deeper than mere propaganda. In fact, as you noted, there is a vast series of images on the events we are discussing, like the *caravana* or the migration brought about by the reunification of Germany (I could go on), and these events are documented using the same image composition you just explained. Even though these images are produced within a democratic system that guarantees plurality, and in a media context that is extremely pluralistic, the image composition used to relate these events still predominantly employ the view from above, the removal of the individual, the creation of a monolith and, I would add, of a "menacing" monolith.

Can we say that a sort of "grammar" or a series of automatisms come into play when one composes images that perpetuate this "traditional" image composition? Would it be possible to identify the problem in these automatisms? And would it be possible to argue that we are facing not just a stereotypical image but the product of canons of image composition rooted in the Renaissance and which have colonized the contemporary mediascape? I was thinking about how one would analyze this image of a US Border Patrol agent on horseback trying to stop a Haitian migrant from crossing the US border into Texas, and how one could analyze it with respect to the stereotypes.

German A. Duarte
Eva Leitolf
Free University
of Bozen-Bolzano
Italy

Fig. 4. A United States Border Patrol agent on horseback tries to stop a Haitian migrant from entering an encampment on the banks of the Rio Grande near the Acuna Del Rio International Bridge in Del Rio, Texas on September 19, 2021. Photo by PAUL RATJE / AFP VIA Gettyimages.

EL: What you just explained makes me think of Jonas Staal's essay "Propaganda (Art) Struggle" (2018) and parts of the lecture he gave at the Free University of Bozen-Bolzano. Images like *caravana* advance an "us vs them" narrative that allows simple dichotomies to be constructed, with the help of seemingly monolithic entities, and, ultimately, politically instrumentalized. Staal inverts the Chomsky-Herman propaganda model and argues for "Collectivity" versus "Anti-Communism," Communism having been instrumentalized as a dominant trigger for fear and a unifying element within the "us vs them" narrative when *Manufacturing Consent* was first published during the Cold War in 1988 (Herman and Chomsky). It seems now to have been replaced by Islamophobia and Anti-Migration.

If we understand propaganda as an exercise of power by particular groups to shape society in their interests and as an attempt to create a new, normative reality, then the point Staal is trying to make becomes clear: he does not believe in a society without propaganda, rather for him it is more about replacing *elitist* propaganda structures with *emancipatory* forms of propaganda.

But to come back to your question: you are correct in that it is not a phenomenon of the repetition of individual, stereotypical images, but rather the recurrent staging of motifs deeply inscribed in our collective imaginary. What I find interesting here is that traditional images from European art history have, through the monopolization of news and image agencies, developed into globally dominant image rhetoric. How *emancipatory* forms of propaganda and counter-narratives can be effectively and subversively integrated into such a powerful communication structure is a question that preoccupies many artists.

The image that you suggest next is found multiple times in online media: in the digital edition of the *Bangkok Post*[8] and on the website of the Arabic news outlet Al Mayadeen,[9] as well as on the websites of Amnesty Germany[10] and NBC News Digital.[11] It is contextualized differently in each case. The most detailed caption for it reads: "a border patrol agent on horseback tries to stop a Haitian migrant from entering an encampment on the banks of the Rio Grande near the Acuna Del Rio International Bridge in Del Rio, Texas on Sept. 19, 2021. Paul Ratje / AFP via Getty Images file."[12] On the homepage of photographer Paul Ratje, the image is presented without any caption or description.[13]

Ratje's photograph looks like a film still, like a frozen moment in a dynamic sequence of movements. Three men are seen moving fast. The power constellation quickly becomes clear. Two black men are running and a white man is pursuing them on horse-

German A. Duarte
Eva Leitolf
Free University
of Bozen-Bolzano
Italy

8.   *Bangkok Post*, https://www.bangkokpost.com/world/2187483/last-migrants-removed-from-camp-under-texas-bridge-us-official, last accessed 19 October 2022.

9.   English.almayadeen.net, https://english.almayadeen.net/, last accessed 19 October 2022.

10.   Amnesty.de, https://www.amnesty.de/informieren/amnesty-report/usa-2021, last accessed 19 October 2022.

11.   Nbcnews.com, https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/immigration/dhs-report-says-border-patrol-agents-used-unnecessary-force-haitians-t-rcna36992, last accessed 19 October 2022.

12.   Nbcnews.com, https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/immigration/dhs-report-says-border-patrol-agents-used-unnecessary-force-haitians-t-rcna36992, last accessed 19 October 2022.

13.   Paulratje.com, https://www.paulratje.com/portfolio/G0000bF-P6ZsmGxYM/I0000NUyIEp.FWJo, last accessed 19 October 2022.

back. The latter displays the contemporary trappings of power: over a military-style outer garment, he is wearing a tactical belt kitted with communications equipment that clearly connects him with other border control agents. The rider appears to be brandishing a whip from which the two men are trying to duck to safety. In their hands are semi-transparent bags of take-away food; the slippers they are wearing are not suited to running. This photograph of photojournalist Ratje evokes in 2021 the image of a merciless slave driver driving his defenceless victims before him.

A day after publication of this picture, United States Secretary of Homeland Security Alejandro Mayorkas declared that based on the scenes captured in this and similar photographs a sweeping investigation would be launched by the Office of Professional Responsibility (OPR) within the Department of Homeland Security's US Customs and Border Authorities. He alerted the Inspector General and ordered the OPR "on site, in Del Rio, 24/7, to insure that the conduct of our personnel adheres […] to our policies, to our training and to our values […]."[14] He further claimed to have been "horrified to see these images."[15]

Almost nine months later, a 511-page report from the OPR was published stating that while mounted Border Patrol agents did not whip any Haitian migrants, they used unnecessary force to push the migrants across the Rio Grande back into Mexico.[16]

GD: What I find almost horrifying is that this image can reformulate some of the figures that built the collective imaginary about the new continent. Part of the beauty of the imaginary relating to the continent turns into horror. I'm thinking in particular of the mustang which embodies the freedom and immensity of the new continent. In the image, sadly, this wonderful animal is turned into an instrument used by a ranger (another important and, in my view, less beautiful part of the American imaginary)

14. C-Span.org, https://www.c-span.org/video/?c4977933/dhs-secretary-mayorkas-horrified-haitian-migrant-images, last accessed 20 October 2022
15. C-Span.org, https://www.c-span.org/video/?c4977933/dhs-secretary-mayorkas-horrified-haitian-migrant-images, last accessed 20 October 2022
16. *Washington Post,* https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/2022/07/08/report-border-agents-horseback-del-roi/, last accessed 20 October 2022

to terrorise people on the US's southern border. It is even more perturbing when one realizes that the element of propaganda is in fact rooted in the very flexible nature of the image. Being part of the same imaginary but unable to establish a clear signifier, the image, upon entering into the massive, contemporaneous communicational process, becomes just an engine of emotions, of passions. The remembrance of the wonderful, wild horses that populated the endless territory, and the freedom they brought, appeals at the same time to the beholder to "protect" that territory "against" an imaginary invasion. In the latter scenario, the mustang comes to evoke the territorial roots, the identity, and, by extension, the exclusivity of a group of people. Further, what I find problematic, and at the same time fascinating, is the way these series of signifiers appear. During the process of communication, these images are, in some way, guided or conducted onto the path of becoming text. After a certain moment, they are no longer spaces in which one can meet to discuss a shared experience or an event of social relevance; they have become text. In other words, at a certain point, these images cease to belong to the sphere of dialogue, and enter the sphere of discourse, even if, as you quite clearly explained, the image composition already is a formulation of textual statements through its spatial organization. Following the theoretical framework mentioned at the beginning of this text, at a certain point, the image, once space (*topos*), becomes topic.

I personally believe your method in *Postcards from Europe* highlights an important element of this mechanism. Above all, it disturbs what I think is the essence of all forms of propaganda: the passivity of the viewer. By facilitating a more active relationship with the viewer, your method, in my opinion, shows that once the image acquires the status of a space in which the subject can semiotically navigate, the role of the viewer is immediately translated into a more active one.

Do you think the process of encouraging viewers to take a more active role is implicit in the technological context that we live in? In other words, do you think digital technology, by radically transforming all processes of the production and consumption

German A. Duarte
Eva Leitolf
Free University
of Bozen-Bolzano
Italy

of images, is naturally pushing the viewer into a more active role at the expense, fortunately, of traditional forms of propaganda?

EL: That is a very optimistic view of technological developments. I think it depends how you want to define "a more active role." Certainly many processes of production, distribution, and consumption have become more accessible—in this sense the roles of producers and consumers, especially on social media, have not been so easy to differentiate for a long time now. However, automatic imaging processes in surveillance, military, and AI technologies continue to take place for the most part without our knowledge, understanding, and most importantly, our participation. These technologies determine, often unnoticed, how we live and communicate, and therefore do not allow us to take action as engaged citizens. This is what artists and researchers like Trevor Paglen, Hagit Keysar/Ariel Caine, and Forensic Architecture are working on: only after locating and making visible "NSA/GCHQ-Tapped Undersea Cables" in the Atlantic,[17] or the so-called "Geofence," a cylindrical, digital barrier around the Haram al-Sharif in Jerusalem,[18] are criticism, counter-narratives, and political actions possible.

Viewers have not necessarily become more (image) literate. Access to imaging technology—without a critical understanding of images and how meaning is created—does not make you immune to more subtle forms of propaganda.

GD: Yes, that's right. I fully agree with that. There is a series of technological devices that determine different stages of the creative process. Sometimes I have the feeling that there is a programmed interface for everything, including an interface able to determine even the deepest and most private human expressions. On the other hand, I think that the rupture—or, to use Eco's concept, the *apertura*—that is inherent in contemporary narrative

17.   Paglen.studio, https://paglen.studio/2020/05/22/undersea-cables/, last accessed 1 November 2022
18.   Universiteitleiden.nl, https://www.universiteitleiden.nl/agenda/2022/10/recntr-talk-spatial-testimonies-spatial-photography-aerial-imagery-and-photogrammetry-in-spaces-of-conflict-and-colonisation, last accessed 1 November 2022

forms has deeply transformed the role of the viewer/reader by displacing the linearity of the text. I think your work is a clear example of that. By creating a space between the text and the image, a *seuil* emerges—the notion Genette used to identify the place in which the passage between media occurs (De Lungo 2009)—where the viewer is called upon to trigger some semiotic processes in order to give meaning to certain elements in the image. This active role of the viewer is also evident in the hypertextual form in which the text loses its linearity and acquires an additional dimension—a *seuil*—in which the reader moves.

Can we say then that these spaces in which the viewer acquires an active dimension are the spaces in which propaganda loses its efficacy? Do you think these spaces are being threatened by technological determinism? Within that scenario, how would one define propaganda? Will the technological *dispositif* produce the social imaginary? In other words, will the collective imaginary be produced, and exclusively produced, by the technological *dispositif*?

EL: Eco's concept of *apertura* fits well. Interestingly, in relation to the term "open artwork," he does not initially assume a literary work, but a musical work. In addition to the listeners, independent interpreters also come into play here whose works are realized in the moment that they are experienced. In non-open artworks, the intention of the artist dominates how it is perceived. I am interested in breaking open this one-dimensional process. Ultimately I see my photography and texts as tools that the viewer can use, in addition to concrete images and texts, to reflect on the process of the creation of meaning. The work manifests itself only, and in each case differently, through the individual assimilation by and imagination of the viewer. There is no closed narrative structure and what emerges is an open space.

Coming back to your question: yes, I believe that in spaces that viewers or listeners themselves occupy, propaganda loses some of its efficacy. Navigating this type of unstable, fluid interstitial space requires a high level of intellectual and emotional engagement. In such spaces, content cannot be comfortably digested and prejudices simply satisfied. Critical thinking requires discussion. I fully believe that these free spaces are being threatened by certain technological but also especially social, political, and economic

German A. Duarte
Eva Leitolf
Free University
of Bozen-Bolzano
Italy

developments, as they have always been. Social media platforms like Twitter and Instagram promote the shortening of image and text content and offer quickly consumable narratives that make it easy to have reflexive reactions. Texts, due to the character limit, easily become slogans; images, due to the limited size, have to be easily decipherable. As already discussed, there is at the same time an increasing number of artists, designers, and scientists probing these technologies to see how their very use can make it possible to observe more precisely and reflect in a more sophisticated way.

Technologies of production, distribution, and consumption give structure to and shape content and processes, but do not necessarily determine them. The social imaginary is subject to other, diverse influences. Be it the persistent concept of nation states or the normalization of social privileges: what meaning we ascribe to technologies is grounded in history and subject to economic politics. The collective imaginary is and will be produced—but not exclusively—by a technological *dispositif*.

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German A. Duarte
Eva Leitolf
Free University
of Bozen-Bolzano
Italy