



## **TRANSNATIONAL SOLIDARITY AND VISUALITY DURING THE COVID 19 PANDEMIC - VISUAL ESSAY**

OSUN Connected Learning Contest Winner

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**Course: Ways of Seeing—Visual Politics and the Middle East**

In response to the pandemic and the disruption felt across the board by moving to online teaching and social distancing, I dropped one of my original set assignments for the course and asked students instead to produce an essay in groups about the visual politics of the coronavirus pandemic and how it affects issues such as border security, right wing nationalism, neoliberalism or any other issues relevant to the students' current experience. The assignment was open and completely free, it asked only that students think critically about the momentous history that they were witnessing and their role in the writing of history, its documentation and visual archiving. Even though the course was originally focused on the Middle East in global context, the essay (and indeed the course toward the end) focused on many themes as they were playing out in various parts of the globe, from countries in Latin America, to North Africa, the US and Iran. For the essay a lot of the students seemed to be moved by their experience of witnessing the politics of migration and the ways in which it was aggravated by the coronavirus pandemic. This is reflected in the essay.

This turned out to be one of the most interesting tasks we worked on and indeed I ever assigned in my years of teaching. This is in part because students were given the chance to think carefully about issues of the witness in history, how social history gets narrated and the role of the visual in each. All these themes were related to the course anyway, but when they began to realise that they were also witnesses to momentous historical events, it made more sense to shift their focus back to Europe and thus the extra step we took to submitting it to the *EuropeNow* journal website.

The essay, titled "Thinking Solidarity in a Global Pandemic: What the Crisis Uncovers and What Remains Unseen," is now undergoing the editorial process of the *EuropeNow Journal of Research and Art* (<https://www.europenowjournal.org/>) in August 2020. It is a jointly published essay by my class which included students who were based in Berlin and various parts of the US at the time of writing.

### **Ways of Seeing: Visual Politics and the Middle East**

This course examined visual politics and the politics of seeing in and about the Middle East, with reference to other postcolonial contexts in the Global South and their relationship to the west, broadly speaking . It contextualized theoretical and visual material within wider debates and scholarship on the construction of subjectivities, the distribution of power and the formation of identity and belonging. The module placed particular emphasis on decolonization theory, gender theory and postcoloniality to study issues of image-making, circulation, translation and reception, in a global context and transnational frame. Thematic areas of focus included the aesthetics and politics of states and security, violence and memory, dispossession, displacement, and revolution.

### **Practical and pedagogical value**

It was an excellent collective and individual experience because it rose to the challenges that we were facing together. We added a positive spin not only by deciding to write together but actually submitting the journal for publication. So the students, working remotely, yet jointly, learned how hard yet gratifying it is to publish. They learned the ins and outs of publishing and all the drafts they had to work through. It was frustrating at times, but it was all done in good humour and camaraderie. I was very proud of what they produced and the quick thinking that went into it. This is because they were learning theory that they then applied to a context they were living. This is very gratifying for a professor and I made sure they knew how important the critical thinking they were doing was. I will definitely be using joint essays for publications in online journals again. It is an effective way to motivate students and to get them to work together in a context where they can see the fruits of their labour once published. More importantly, I loved how convenient and easy it was as an online learning tool, which plugged the students into real life work and the world of publishing.

## The assignment

“Thinking Solidarity in a Global Pandemic: What the Crisis Uncovers and What Remains Unseen”

This essay is the product of a semester of disruption. As a collaborative essay within the framework of a course on visual politics, we want to follow scholars Nicolas Mirzoeff and Jaques Rancière in examining visibility in terms of the structures of everyday life—of what is visible and what is not. We strive to interrogate the lived reality in European countries which face a virus that ignores their borders. How does the virus affect the visible and how do states weave their respective narratives during times of a global crisis? And how do borders change when the threat does not respect our human barriers?

Images constitute what we see. What we see, however, has political implications. The visuals in this essay are supposed to represent the imagery that we encounter daily—in our homes, in the streets; on news and social media platforms. What started out as a visual essay, has therefore turned into an analysis of the causes behind the images. As an attempt to problematize visibility, the following text seeks to shed light on causes that images alone cannot represent.

### *The dichotomy of solidarity and selfishness*

The pandemic we are facing has brought out displays of solidarity which manifest in social media sites, through videos of neighbors singing from balconies and people clapping from their windows in support of workers on the frontlines of this healthcare crisis. Further, we are met with uplifting news stories to boost our spirits, which confinement has depleted. False accounts like the images of dolphins returning to the canals in Venice circulate, as do true stories of clearer skies due to the decrease in pollution as cities, regions, and countries shut down. These stories are not the only ones that crop up in our social media feeds. They are paired with stories of individuals hoarding medical equipment and other goods that are essential for precautions, or stories of people fighting over foodstuff and other household items. Other accounts show the rich riding out threats of coronavirus on yachts, and many other images of self-preserving activities can be seen. State-organized measures similarly take place according to an us-vs-them logic, although it is critical that precautions be accessible to all to slow the spread of the novel coronavirus. The solidarity we witness seems to satisfy the desire for comfort amidst the acts of self-preservation and selfishness by both individuals and states.

A guarantee of solidarity and a sense of normalcy is reassuring amidst the crisis, yet the normalcy which we seek to attain reveals greater structural inadequacies, especially in marginalized and vulnerable groups. In the following essay we will consider possible solidarities in the attempt to frame a network of causes and point at the possibility of a similarly interrelating solidarity—which, like the virus, can cross borders all the same.



Figure 1.; Sign in Berlin apartment window

*Europe now: from migrant labor to the comforts of asparagus*

Amidst this novel crisis, one ever-present fact of the European way of life has gained visibility: its wealth is built on the sweat and tears of migrant workers. Those who make the journey both from within and from outside Europe year after year, season after season to plug our beloved asparagus, pick our apples and care for our elders. Irregular and regular migrants commonly take on the labor Europeans are not willing to do anymore. This segregation between migrant and local workers has thus led to increasing invisibility of who is doing Europe's "dirty work", more often than not, under unacceptable working conditions. In her piece "Contradictions of Capital and Care" (2016), Nancy Fraser recognizes how neocolonial dynamics, deeply rooted in European colonialism, have led to a dualization of production in the neoliberal era: while some, predominantly in the core, have gained wealth to afford the commodification of certain services, others have no choice but to provide them, often those coming from the periphery.

Ironically, the very same group which had previously been rallying against anyone not considered "German" day by day, the right-wing party, Alternative for Germany (AfD), is now demanding Germany open its borders for seasonal migrant workers to minimize agriculture's losses and secure the availability of food (AfD Kompakt 2020). It is ironic to think that it is precisely this group to uncover and make visible the myth of European self-sufficiency?

Often remaining unseen as a result of this paradox of needing migrant workers for our basic sustenance even in times of Corona is a lack of basic rights for immigrant workers such as unlimited contracts or eligibility to government aid if one is unable to work. Even more so in the case of irregular workers who are deprived of health care, humane working hours and any way of organizing whatsoever. “In most countries, the work of migrant domestic workers and care workers is not recognized as industrially designated ‘work’ subject to regulation.” Being sent “home” means not being able to provide for their families, period. That’s because as a non-citizen, the only force that governs over migrant workers is the market, and the market values labor, not being human. Stuart Rosewarne emphasizes, “The dominant economic discourse [...] is founded on a definition of migrant workers as, essentially, factors of production, and developing and transition countries are considered to have an over-supply of these factor endowments” (Rosewarne 2010).



Figure 2.; Asparagus on Easter Sunday

The AfD’s initiative to demand the opening of borders for agricultural workers sheds light to yet another one of Europe’s inconsistencies: Not only are migrants the basic structure of its economy, it is “welcoming” of them only if they fulfill this role and no other. Specifically, Germany has a long history of shipping in migrant workers when needed in the hopes of their leaving once they finished the work. (Klekowski von Koppenfels; Hoehne. 2017) Even Angela Merkel’s “opening” of the borders to Syrian asylum-seekers in 2015 can be understood as a move to ease the country’s demographic challenges under the disguise of humanitarianism. Were Europe to stand true to its self-proclaimed values, it had long since implemented a humanitarian visa scheme which goes beyond the punctual border opening

for certain groups and workers. It had long made sure Moria didn't exist by resettling asylum-seekers, children had not drowned in the Mediterranean by strengthening sea-watch, or helped Jordan house the Zaatari inhabitants in something better than make-shift tents. Instead, Europe chose to prioritize asparagus this year, allowing Bulgarian workers to cross internal borders to save the picking season in Germany (Kühnel 2020).

Perhaps, a European humanitarianism never existed. Perhaps, whenever global publics see this so-called humanitarianism appearing it may not be more than a disguise for one of its self-serving agendas.

### *Leave no one behind*

No one should be in a position in which it is impossible to take proper social distance. However, many vulnerable communities—such as asylum seekers—are in this situation. Asylum seekers are particularly vulnerable to the threat of Covid-19. Gathering people to live in camps and detention centers in overcrowded conditions at a time when laws and fines are implemented to discourage the general population from assembling leads to a double standard. This raises concerns about how governments value human rights and define humanity.

In Europe, there are more than 40,000 asylum seekers living in camps six times over capacity on the Aegean islands in Greece (Smith 2020). The potential risk and dire consequences resulting from a Covid-19 outbreak in camps led the Greek government to implement new measures to slow the spread of the virus. However, in carefully examining these measures, it is clear that they are less about protecting asylum seekers than the local residents on the islands. Risk has only increased and conditions worsened for asylum seekers living in the camps (Evacuation 2020).



Figure 3.; Vathy camp in Samos, Greece

The new measures announced by the Ministry of Immigration and Asylum in Greece have included moving ATMs and other important operations into the camps to avoid movement in and out, delaying the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) monthly allowance until these operations are in place, and ordering a lockdown limiting when migrants can be outside of the camp (Smith 2020). These measures are critical, but they also remove access to basic needs. These actions result in many asylum seekers being unable to purchase food, hygiene products, and other essential items. Moreover, the non-governmental organizations (NGOs), which provide some of these basic needs are not permitted to distribute to camp dwellers in the moment of crisis. Individuals are forced to decide between being hungry or safe. They often have to wait in a crowded line for five hours for a small portion of food, which often runs out before everyone is fed (Situation on Samos 2020). These measures—which are supposed to allow for heightened preventive precautions on the Aegean islands—deny asylum seekers a basic need, which, in turn, forces them to put themselves in dangerous situations. When The halt of NGO activities reveals the broader issue of government neglect. Asylum seekers increasingly depend on NGOs to address the needs which should be met by the government. The dire situation for asylum seekers on the Aegean islands and the lack of an effective emergency plan is not new but has been caused by years of structural failures in the European asylum process, and a lack of effective action by member states.

By failing to respond quickly to the increased risks of a Covid-19 outbreak in Greek camps, Europe has placed asylum seekers at greater risk. The situation brought about by Covid-19 has made clear a disregard for the humanitarian ideals Europe prides itself on and revealed the brokenness of the asylum process.

The balance between human rights standards and public health is being weighed globally, as governments determine which actions are appropriate. Extreme measures seem effective to slow the spread of Covid-19, but often infringe on human rights and freedoms. In the United States, there are tens of thousands of asylum seekers in Immigration and Custom Enforcement's (ICE) detention centers—held there as they await their court date on their asylum claim. In an effort to contain Covid-19, ICE initially released 700 individuals after evaluating their flight risk and potential threat to national security. By being selective about who is released, ICE is communicating that those who continue to be held in detention centers should not be afforded safety or the right to take precautions to protect themselves against the virus. Moreover, the scale of this preventative action is too small and comes too late, as coronavirus has already begun spreading through detention centers (Matt 2020).

Similarly, some western EU member-states have accepted 1600 unaccompanied minors from Greece, but even before the pandemic this process has been too slow. For example, Germany has only accepted fifty minors (Rankin, Smith 2020). While all transfers are beneficial, such a number does not lead to improvements in camp conditions or in safety levels. Rather, they demonstrate a selective process that values certain lives over others. Delayed and minute reactions show a common hypocrisy among governments, which claim to value liberties and humanity, but do not act on these ideals.





Figure 4.; Sign on a Berlin balcony

Visuals of solidarity for asylum seekers are everywhere in Berlin, on a walk one might spot multiple signs, like the one pictured in figure 3. Yet there is a clear disconnect between the visibility of solidarity one might experience in Berlin and the action of solidarity which would be demonstrated with humane policy. Here, local efforts did not surpass the borders of the city and have failed to bring about state-organized action of a humane asylum policy.

#### *Labor in crisis from the United States to Europe*

As the Coronavirus pandemic cripples the global economy, there is a growing disparity between social classes domestically and nations globally. The isolation measures and stay at home orders that have been put into place, specifically in the United States, have affected millions of workers. Manual laborers and other low-income “essential” employees, such as grocery store workers have been in significant risk. Despite efforts to equip them with gloves and masks, many remain unprotected, continue to interact with groups of people, and cannot afford to stay home. The educated working class is more likely to be able to work remotely and in isolation, reducing their risk of infection significantly. Thus, the population is split between those who are inconvenienced by the pandemic, and those who are put into immediate physical or financial danger.

The current economic dynamic forces certain people to decide between their health and the ability to pay their bills and feed their families. Despite stay-at-home orders, some

companies have remained open and encouraged people to come into work, exposing workers to this risk and ignoring their personal health or concern for relatives. Alternatively, many companies have shut down, leaving millions of Americans at the mercy of government unemployment policy and aid. The US and many European nations face similar economic conundrums, yet have had drastically differing responses.

In the US, as of April 9th 16.8 million people had filed for unemployment (Zarroli 2020). Faced with these staggering numbers, government websites and resources have been overwhelmed and have even failed. People have struggled to access the sites to file a claim. In addition, unemployment checks are expected to be delayed at least six to eight weeks. The amount that individuals are expected to receive from unemployment benefits is less than what many would earn. Despite new loans to small businesses and individuals, citizens have not received help yet and many companies are facing bankruptcy.

Faced with parallel problems and cultural changes, the European system has handled the issue of unemployment very differently. Many European countries already have a reliable unemployment structure. When facing crises, they have adapted a system pioneered in Germany called *Kurzarbeit* or short-work. The *Kurzarbeit* system reduces hours to meet demand without cutting jobs entirely. It relies on government funds to subsidize wages. This system is “especially suited to Germany and other European countries with highly regulated labor markets and generous unemployment benefits” (Tilford 2020). In contrast, the United States has a limited safety net for these workers, leaving millions at risk, and many unable to pay their mortgages or face the expenses of the coming months.

It remains unclear which system will be the most beneficial in the long-term. However, at the moment, many at-risk fields are overlooked among public solidarity efforts relating to the pandemic. While health care workers are given much-deserved attention, many unskilled laborers keep markets running with little recognition for the risk they take. In her book *Precarious Life*, Judith Butler looks at grief and loss: “Loss has made a tenuous ‘we’ of us all” (Butler 2009 20). In this crisis, not everyone fits into “we.” Large swaths of the population remain unseen; they are not publicly “grievable,” as Butler would say. We do not notice their suffering as it is not placed in front of us. As we work from home and lament our isolation, we fail to see the masses that are forced into risk for our groceries, trash pick-up, and take-out orders, while we maintain a selfish sense of solidarity with those who share our own position.

*Trust in governments: an effective tool to battle the virus?*

Countries where there is a conservative government that deny scientific findings and does not favor funding healthcare have suffered higher fatality rates than others not led by conservatives (Reuters 2020).

Germany is an outlier in Europe in the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite being hit hard with cases, the fatality rate in Germany has been surprisingly low. Researchers are attributing this to several factors: mass testing, the preparedness of the health care system, and Chancellor Angela Merkel's leadership (Stafford 2020). The head of virology at University Hospital in Heidelberg, Prof. Hans-Georg Kräusslich, said that Germany's greatest strength in combating COVID-19 "is the rational decision-making at the highest level of government combined with the trust the government enjoys in the population" (Bennhold 2020). Chancellor Merkel is herself a scientist and has been able to communicate clearly, calmly, and regularly throughout this sudden crisis, with little political opposition.

The approach taken by the United States is different than that taken by Germany. The Trump administration has failed to roll out mass testing, prepare the healthcare system that is already stretched thin, or offer leadership. The Trump administration has been inconsistent with messaging and guidance. Some states have chosen not to implement any stay-at-home orders, while others have implemented full lockdowns. The US healthcare system was not prepared for this pandemic and is now unable to catch up and meet the demands of those infected (Diamond 2020).

President Trump's disdain for anything that has the potential to hinder his conservative agenda has proven to be fatal in the wake of Covid-19 (Levitz 2020). He failed to act on any of the alarming warnings given by intelligence agencies, and his reluctance to stray too far from his conservative platform will cost many American's their lives as a result of the PPE shortage alone (Hopkins 2020). Additionally, the uncoordinated response from the Trump administration may have a catastrophic outcome (Khazan 2020).

The delayed response to Covid-19 in some countries has had visible repercussions on the quality of life of healthcare workers. In the UK, Spain, Italy, and the US, they have to reuse personal protective equipment (PPE), which is dangerous for them and their patients (Shortage 2020). Healthcare workers in the UK have been told to improvise with materials they have on hand at home—like swimming goggles—and some nurses have even been told not to wear any PPE at all while treating patients (Fadel 2020). In the US, PPE scarcity is a direct result of the Trump administration's inaction. This shortage will cost thousands of lives. It could have been avoided if the Republican agenda were not valued higher than American lives. In countries where healthcare is viewed as essential and worth funding, like Germany and South Korea, the fatality rates will be far lower than in countries that have other priorities (Karmanau 2020).

Covid-19 has revealed that a well-run and properly funded state is the difference between life and death. Ultimately, the job of the government is to protect its people: a social contract (Hobbes 1599-1679).

### *A global solidarity?*

This is not to say that nurses, doctors and cashiers should be shown any less appreciation. To show solidarity is not a question of either or. What can we do to authentically engage with issues that go beyond our own backyard—and how can we stand in solidarity with groups outside of our immediate communities, outside of the country, or even across continents? More than ever, the global pandemic makes visible how we relate to each other globally. While many in Europe experience the pandemic in the comfort of privilege, others face tangible limitations. For all, the embodied experience of the everyday is still one of isolation and confinement (Figure 5).

We are all deprived of seeing our family. This may help us understand that some people never can. They are separated by borders, walls, or by the lack of financial means. Grasping what it feels like to be limited in one's fundamental human rights offers a chance for solidarity. This moment of crisis might present us with the chance of becoming a global people united around a shared cause. In order to oppose the inequalities that are constantly being reproduced—and to stand in solidarity with others—we need to engage in our own ethics and go beyond the state narrative of our respective countries. In times of a global pandemic we cannot be separated. A global solidarity—and a universal ethics, therefore, depends on the engagement of individuals. It is on us to shed light on inequalities that even this pandemic does not undo, and to use the current—"crisis"—as a means to reshuffle state-ordered frames of visibility.



Figure 5.; Apartment building in the former GDR

**Pauline Jäckels** studies Economics, Politics and Social Thought at Bard College Berlin. Next to that, she is active as a team member of Baynatna, the Arabic Library of Berlin, a cultural space created by Syrians to build bridges between the diaspora community and German society. Her focus lies on contemporary migration, policy and the intersection of the Levant and Europe beyond migration.

**Tinca Joyner** studies Humanities, Arts and Social Thought at Bard College Berlin with a concentration in Ethics and Politics. She has experience working in the Vathy Camp in Samos, Greece.

**Kelly Lynch** is a transfer student from the US with a major in politics. She is particularly interested in contemporary middle eastern politics.

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