Different Modes of Visibility:

A Comparative Visual Analysis of Syrian and Ukrainian Refugee Representation in *DER SPIEGEL*

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Peace and Conflict Studies

Bachelors Thesis

12 ECTS

Spring 2026

Word count: 13,948

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Abstract

This thesis examines how the German news magazine DER SPIEGEL visually represented the Syrian refugee crisis (September 2015–March 2016) and the Ukrainian refugee crisis (February–May 2022), and what the differences between the two representations reveal about racialised conventions in the visual framing of refugees. The study combines compositional interpretation with discourse analysis in a qualitative visual analysis of six photographs, three drawn from each crisis, and applies Chouliaraki and Stolic's typology of the five modes of refugee visibility. The analysis finds that the Syrian corpus is constructed primarily through the biological life and threat modes – anonymous crowds, distant framing and institutional or maritime settings – whereas the Ukrainian corpus is constructed through the empathy, self-reflexivity and hospitality modes, foregrounding identifiable individuals, emotional proximity and familiar European spaces. Read through Hall's account of racialised representation and Said's concept of Orientalism, the thesis argues that this uneven distribution of visibility reproduces a racialised hierarchy of recognition while presenting itself as the neutral documentation of two humanitarian emergencies. The study contributes to peace and conflict studies by showing that the unequal recognition of populations displaced by armed conflict is constructed at the level of visual composition.

Keywords: refugee representation; visual framing; racialisation; Orientalism; modes of visibility; Syrian and Ukrainian refugees

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1 Introduction

1.1 Research problem and relevance to peace and conflict studies

In February 2022, the Russian invasion of Ukraine triggered a wave of European solidarity towards the refugees it produced, and that response stood in visible contrast to the way the continent had received Syrian refugees in 2015. The contrast should not be overstated: the response to Ukrainians was neither uniform across Europe nor unqualified, and research on 2015 records considerable variation between national media systems and between outlets within them (De Cock et al. 2018: 313–318; Özdora-Akşak et al. 2021: 294–298). What can be established is that a vocabulary of proximity became available in 2022 that had not been available in 2015. European politicians and journalists stated openly that Ukrainians were 'European' and 'like us'; the Bulgarian prime minister described the arrivals as "intelligent, educated people", and British and American commentators repeatedly contrasted them with refugees from the Middle East (Bayoumi 2022). No equivalent vocabulary accompanied the arrival of Syrian refugees, whose reception was instead framed as a crisis requiring border securitisation. These divergent responses did not emerge from nowhere. They were shaped, in part, by the way news media visually represented the two groups. News images are not neutral records of events; they actively construct which displaced populations appear to deserve empathy and protection, and which appear as a threat to be managed (Bleiker et al. 2013: 400). This raises a specific empirical question: whether and how a single major Western news outlet visually framed the Syrian and Ukrainian refugee crises differently, and what any such difference reveals about the racialised logics that can operate in this kind of coverage.

This question matters for peace and conflict studies because both refugee movements were produced by organised violence, and because the way the civilians displaced by that violence are made visible is one of the mechanisms through which their claim to protection is granted or withheld. Symbolic power decides which populations displaced by armed conflict are recognised as civilians owed protection and which are constructed as a threat to be contained. In the European context this double movement has been described as humanitarian securitisation: the vocabulary of rescue and the practice of border control operate together rather than in opposition (Chouliaraki & Zaborowski 2017: 613–614; Holzberg et al. 2018: 545–547). The stakes are therefore not confined to media studies. Holmes and Castañeda (2016: 12–13) show, for the German case, that the line between the deserving and the undeserving displaced was drawn in representation before it was drawn in policy, and that it carried consequences at

the border for who was admitted and who was left to die in transit. How the civilian victims of two wars are made visible is thus a question about the political management of conflict-driven displacement and about the conditions under which an obligation to protect is recognised at all. The influence of war reporting on political decision-making is neither direct nor automatic (Carruthers 2011), but representation sets the terms on which such decisions become thinkable.

1.2 Aim and research questions

The aim of this thesis is to examine how DER SPIEGEL visually represented the Ukrainian refugee crisis (February–May 2022) and the Syrian refugee crisis (September 2015–March 2016), and to analyse what the differences and similarities in this representation reveal about racialised conventions in the visual framing of refugees from armed conflict in Western media. The end goal is not to establish that a difference existed, which previous research has already shown, but to identify the compositional mechanism by which it was produced and to specify what each representational choice offers or withholds from the population depicted. The aim is pursued through one overarching research question and three sub-questions. The main research question asks:

> *How did DER SPIEGEL visually represent the Ukrainian and Syrian refugee crises, and what do the differences and similarities reveal about racialised framing in the visual coverage of refugees by a major Western news outlet?*

Three sub-questions specify the steps through which this question is answered:

The first is compositional: what conventions of composition, aesthetics and narrative characterise DER SPIEGEL's photographic representation of refugees in each crisis?

The second applies Chouliaraki and Stolic's (2017) typology: which of their five modes of refugee visibility – biological life, empathy, threat, hospitality and self-reflexivity – are mobilised in each corpus, and how do these modes construct the refugee in terms of agency, dignity, individuality and proximity to the Western viewer?

The third moves to theoretical synthesis: what does the distribution of these modes across the two corpora reveal, when read through the postcolonial work of Stuart Hall and Edward Said, about the conditions under which different refugee populations are granted different modes of visibility?

Sub-questions one and two are addressed in Sections 5.2 to 5.4 and sub-question three in Section 5.5. All three are then answered explicitly in Chapter 6, before the main research question is returned to.

1.3 Structure of the thesis

The remainder of the thesis is structured as follows. Chapter 2 reviews previous research on DER SPIEGEL, on refugee representation beyond the two cases, and on what news images do to viewers, and states the gap the thesis addresses. Chapter 3 sets out the theoretical framework, drawing on Hall, Said and Chouliaraki and Stolic, and specifies both the account of the inclusive pole and the limits of that framework. Chapter 4 presents the method and material, including the selection of the corpus and the decision rules governing the analysis. Chapter 5 conducts the visual analysis and tests it against competing explanations. Chapter 6 discusses the findings; Chapter 7 concludes.

2 Previous research

Existing research has demonstrated that Western news media play a significant role in shaping public understandings of refugees through visual representation. This chapter reviews that scholarship in four steps. Section 2.1 discusses the two studies that analyse DER SPIEGEL's visual framing of the Syrian refugee crisis directly. Section 2.2 widens the frame to research on the representation of refugees beyond the two crises compared here, including work on refugee photography as a professional convention, on the management of refugee voice, and on variation between national media systems. Section 2.3 turns to the separate body of research on what news images do to those who see them, which is decisive for determining what a study of images alone can and cannot claim. Section 2.4 reviews the comparative research on Syrian and Ukrainian representation specifically. Section 2.5 states the gap that this thesis addresses.

2.1 Visual framing of refugees in *DER SPIEGEL*

Among the existing literature on refugee representation, the studies by Zhang and Hellmueller (2017) and Hellmueller and Zhang (2019) are particularly relevant because they focus specifically on *DER SPIEGEL*. Together, they provide strong evidence that the outlet framed the Syrian refugee crisis consistently through themes of security, border control and public order rather than through individualised humanitarian narratives.

Zhang and Hellmueller (2017) conducted a quantitative visual content analysis of 287

photographs published by *CNN International* and *DER SPIEGEL* between January and September 2015 (Zhang & Hellmueller 2017: 8). Drawing on global journalism theory, they examined how each outlet visually framed the arrival of refugees in Europe, and identified substantial differences between the two news organisations (ibid.). While CNN International relied more heavily on 'human interest' and 'loss/gain' frames that highlighted the personal experiences of refugees, DER SPIEGEL predominantly employed 'law and control' and 'xenophobia' frames (Zhang & Hellmueller 2017: 15). Refugees were frequently represented in relation to border security, migration management and public order rather than as identifiable individuals with personal histories (Zhang & Hellmueller 2017: 22). The study therefore demonstrates that securitised visual framing was not an inevitable consequence of the refugee crisis itself. Since both outlets covered the same events during the same period, the differences suggest that editorial practices and national media contexts shaped the visual representation of refugees significantly. For the present study, these findings establish that DER SPIEGEL's coverage of the Syrian refugee crisis placed a stronger emphasis on security and institutional control than that of another major Western news organisation.

Hellmueller and Zhang (2019) examined whether this framing changed after the publication of the widely circulated photograph of Alan Kurdi, the three-year-old Syrian boy photographed on a Turkish beach in September 2015. Analysing coverage published between January 2015 and October 2016, they found that CNN International shifted towards more humanising representations, increasingly portraying refugees as individuals deserving compassion, whereas DER SPIEGEL moved in the opposite direction, towards increased border-control interpretations and a more Eurocentric perspective on migration (Hellmueller & Zhang 2019: 18–20). The persistence of these frames suggests that DER SPIEGEL's representation of Syrian refugees was not a short-term response to events but a durable editorial framing: even one of the most influential humanitarian photographs of the century did not alter the dominant visual narratives through which Syrian refugees appeared in this outlet.

While both studies provide valuable insights into *DER SPIEGEL*'s visual coverage of the Syrian refugee crisis, they also have important limitations. Both employ quantitative content analysis, which allows them to identify dominant framing patterns across large image corpora but offers limited insight into how individual photographs produce meaning through composition, perspective, distance, or visual symbolism. Furthermore, both studies focus exclusively on the Syrian refugee crisis and therefore cannot examine whether similar visual framing practices persisted during later refugee crises. As a result, they do not address whether *DER SPIEGEL* employed different representational strategies when covering Ukrainian

refugees, leaving unanswered the question of how visual framing may vary across refugee populations within the same news outlet.

2.2 Refugee visibility beyond the Syrian and Ukrainian cases

Research on the visual representation of refugees extends well beyond the two crises compared here, and the wider literature qualifies any account that treats 'Western media' as a single actor with a single practice. Greenwood and Thomson (2020) analysed 811 photographs of migration from Turkey into Europe in 2015 submitted to the Pictures of the Year International competition, and found that photographers overwhelmingly emphasised the transitory condition, vulnerability and difference of the people depicted, while giving almost no visual space to the connections and integration that were taking place at the same time (Greenwood & Thomson 2020: 140, 156–158). Their study matters here in two respects. It establishes that the compositional emphasis on vulnerability and distance is not peculiar to DER SPIEGEL but is a convention of the professional field; and it shows that the convention operates as a selection among available scenes rather than as a neutral record of what was there to be photographed.

A second strand examines how refugees are positioned as speakers rather than as bodies. Chouliaraki and Zaborowski (2017) content-analysed 1,200 news articles across eight European countries and identified three practices of 'bordering' through which refugee voice is managed: bordering by silencing, by collectivisation and by de-contextualisation (Chouliaraki & Zaborowski 2017: 613, 620–626). The result, they argue, is a hierarchy of voice that misrecognises refugees as political, social and historical actors and holds them outside 'our' communities of belonging (ibid.: 630–631). Holzberg, Kolbe and Zaborowski (2018) reach a comparable conclusion for the German press specifically: across 2015 and 2016, coverage constructed a figure of the (un)deserving refugee around economic productivity, state security and gender relations, and thereby extended the humanitarian securitisation of borders into public discourse (Holzberg et al. 2018: 534, 542–547). Because the present thesis analyses a German outlet, this finding supplies the immediate discursive context of the corpus.

A third strand complicates the picture by showing that coverage varies systematically between national media systems. De Cock et al. (2018) compared Belgian and Swedish newspaper coverage of 2015 and found differences in tolerance and in the attribution of responsibility not only between the two countries but between the Flemish and Francophone Belgian press, although refugees were rarely permitted to speak for themselves in any of these settings (De Cock et al. 2018: 301, 313–318). Özdora-Akşak, Connolly-Ahern and Dimitrova (2021) compared Turkish, Bulgarian and British print coverage of Syrian refugees and found

significant differences in contextualisation, in the spaces depicted and in the agency granted to those represented, which they trace to the different political positions of the three countries in relation to the crisis (Özdora-Akşak et al. 2021: 282, 294–298). Taken together, these studies establish that there is no single Western visual regime. Variation between outlets and national contexts is part of what has to be explained, and it is a reason to be cautious about generalising from any one outlet.

2.3 What news images do to viewers

A separate body of research addresses the question that a study of images alone cannot answer: what visual representation does to those who see it. Slovic (2007) demonstrates the phenomenon of psychic numbing, whereby concern fails to rise in proportion to the number of people at risk and may decline as that number grows, so that a single identified victim reliably mobilises more feeling than statistics describing hundreds of thousands (Slovic 2007: 79, 88–92). Slovic, Västfjäll, Erlandsson and Gregory (2017) tested this against the photograph of Alan Kurdi and reported behavioural evidence that the image of one child produced a larger response, measured in search behaviour and in charitable giving, than years of rising casualty figures from the Syrian war had produced; they also found that the empathy so created decayed within weeks (Slovic et al. 2017: 640, 642–643). Mortensen (2017) follows the same photograph's afterlife through its appropriations, showing that iconic status is not conferred once but is repeatedly constructed, confirmed and contested as the image circulates (Mortensen 2017: 1142, 1154–1158).

Joye (2015) approaches the question from the production side, showing through critical discourse analysis of Belgian television coverage that journalists actively domesticate distant suffering, drawing on identifiable discursive modes to render it locally relevant and to invite identification with the distant Other, while leaving the underlying relations of global inequality largely unchallenged (Joye 2015: 682, 688–692). This literature has two consequences for the present study. Substantively, it establishes that compositional choices are consequential rather than merely aesthetic: proximity, individuation and identifiability are precisely the features that research on viewers finds to be effective, which is why their unequal distribution across two corpora is worth analysing. Methodologically, it marks a boundary. Because these effects were established with audience and behavioural data, a study working only at the site of the image cannot claim them. What it can examine is the viewer position an image invites, which is a claim about the photograph rather than about its audience. Section 4.6 formalises this distinction.

2.4 Comparative research on Syrian and Ukrainian refugee representation

Beyond studies of *DER SPIEGEL* specifically, a growing body of comparative research has examined how Western media represented the Syrian and Ukrainian crises differently.

Kim (2025) analyses a large body of wire-service photographs from Reuters and AFP through a gender and racial lens, drawing explicitly on postcolonial theory. Syrian refugees are shown overwhelmingly outside Syria, mostly confined to camps and shot from a distance, which produces a passive and homogeneous depiction; Ukrainian refugees appear as active individuals across diverse contexts and are often accompanied by Western cultural markers such as EU flags or meetings with the Pope (Kim 2025: 13–14). The distinction rests on a compositional technique: proximity evokes intimacy, distance conveys detachment (ibid.: 5). Kim frames the pattern as evidence that photographic choices function as discursive tools reproducing racialised and gendered hierarchies rooted in colonial legacies (ibid.: 17), but works across wire services rather than a single outlet and does not draw on Chouliaraki and Stolic's typology.

Bassoli and Greppi (2026) take a different methodological route: a GDELT-based analysis of article tone and volume across seven European countries, comparing coverage in the four months surrounding Alan Kurdi's death and the Russian invasion of February 2022. Ukrainian refugees were covered more positively than Syrian refugees in all seven countries (Bassoli & Greppi 2026: 54); Kurdi's death briefly increased the volume of coverage of Syrian refugees but did not shift its tone over time (ibid.). The authors also identify a pattern of selective attention in which Ukraine crowded out other displaced groups (ibid.: 53). Their units of analysis, however, are textual tone and article volume rather than images.

Kim, Bassoli and Greppi, and the studies reviewed in Section 2.2, converge on a single empirical claim: Syrian and Ukrainian refugees were represented unequally, and the inequality is visible in tone, in voice and in photographic convention. De Coninck (2023) adds a further comparison that bears directly on how that inequality should be explained. Reflecting on European and American reactions to Ukrainian refugees in 2022 and to Afghan refugees after the Taliban takeover of 2021, he notes that the two groups were received very differently despite arriving under broadly comparable conditions of flight from armed conflict, and attributes the difference to symbolic threat, to a sense of collective conscience and to perceived ethnic proximity rather than to the circumstances of displacement themselves (De Coninck 2023: 578, 581–584). The Afghan case is instructive because most Afghan evacuees did not arrive by sea in overcrowded boats, and were nonetheless received with apprehension; mode of arrival alone therefore does not determine reception.

2.5 The research gap

What the literature reviewed above establishes is that the inequality exists and how widely it extends. What it does not establish is how the inequality is produced. Frame-coding and tone measurement record the outcome of the process: they can report that 'law and control' frames dominated a corpus, or that coverage of one group was more positive than of another, but they cannot show the compositional operations through which the arrival of war-displaced civilians is rendered in one case as a security problem and in the other as a scene of family life. The open question is therefore not whether a difference exists, but by what representational means it is made, and what moral-political relation to the viewer each of those means installs.

Two further considerations specify that gap. First, studies that compare across outlets or across countries cannot separate the effect of an individual editorial line from that of the national media system in which it operates, because both vary at once; the cross-national findings reported by De Cock et al. (2018) and Özdora-Akşak et al. (2021) make that confound explicit. Holding the outlet, the country and the genre constant and varying only the refugee population isolates the variable that the comparative literature confounds. Second, the analytical vocabulary used so far is largely evaluative: coverage is coded as positive or negative, humanising or dehumanising. Chouliaraki and Stolic's (2017) typology replaces that binary with five distinct moral-political relations, which makes it possible to ask not whether a representation was favourable but which relation to the viewer it offered, and what was withheld from a population when a given mode was absent from its corpus. Applying that grid within a single outlet across two crises is the contribution this thesis makes.

3 Theoretical frameworks

This chapter sets out the theoretical framework through which the visual representation of refugees is analysed. It proceeds in five steps. Section 3.1 draws on Hall and Said to establish how representation constructs racialised difference. Section 3.2 introduces Chouliaraki and Stolic's typology of the five modes through which refugees are made visible, the central analytical tool of the thesis. Section 3.3 turns to Bleiker et al.'s account of visual dehumanisation. Section 3.4 specifies the operative concepts carried into the analysis, and Section 3.5 sets out how the inclusive pole of the comparison is theorised and where the framework reaches its limits..

3.1 Representation and the racialised ‘Other’: Hall and Said

Stuart Hall (1997) identifies four representational practices through which cultural difference is produced. Before these are set out, it is necessary to explain why difference matters in his account: it matters because difference is essential to meaning (Hall 1997: 234), and meaning depends on the opposition between terms (ibid.: 235). Contemporary racialised representational practices are therefore not new but were formed through historical encounters such as slavery, colonial expansion and post-war migration (Hall 1997: 239). For this thesis, that means contemporary news images of non-European refugees draw on pre-existing visual grammars that precede and exceed individual editorial choice (ibid.: 240).

The most important of these practices is stereotyping (Hall 1997: 257). Stereotyping reduces the individual to a few simple characteristics presented as given by nature, and it fixes difference (Hall 1997: 257–258). It draws a line between the normal and acceptable and the abnormal and unacceptable, and excludes everything assigned to the latter (ibid.). In doing so it maintains a social order that separates who belongs from who does not, producing a sense of ‘us’ and ‘them’ that allows those who belong to experience themselves as a community superior to those who do not (Hall 1997: 258). Hall calls this mechanism splitting. Stereotyping is therefore an exercise of symbolic power: it occurs where inequalities between groups are pronounced, and it holds the subordinate group in a fixed position within a rigid regime of representation (Hall 1997: 259).

Hall illustrates this argument through nineteenth-century advertising, discussing advertisements in which racialised representations embedded in colonial visual codes were transferred into scenes of everyday domestic life (Hall 1997: 240–242). He calls this ‘commodity racism’, and it is relevant here as an early form of naturalising racialised difference by folding it into ordinary consumer culture.

A further mechanism is essentialising and reduction. The racial Other is reduced to the body, most often to skin colour or to other prominent physical features treated as marks of difference (Hall 1997: 244). The body is then read as evidence of natural difference, which makes racialised representation appear natural rather than constructed (ibid.).

These practices have been reproduced across art, literature and photography, and it is through them that racialised knowledge is implicated in the operations of power (Hall 1997: 260). Representational power therefore operates hegemonically: it naturalises the world view of dominant groups until it appears to be common sense rather than a particular political

perspective (ibid.: 261). Power never operates under equal conditions; it continually produces new discourses and new knowledge, and shapes practices and institutions (ibid.).

A second discourse plays an important role in the analysis: Orientalism, as defined by Edward Said. For Said, the Orient is one of the most persistent representations of 'the Other' in European history, because it is Europe's oldest and richest colony (Said 1979: 1). It has not only served to define Europe as its contrasting image; as a discourse, Orientalism also enabled European control, reorganisation and authority over the region (Said 1979: 2–3). Orientalism produces rather than reflects its object, in precisely the sense Hall describes: Europe systematically produces the Orient politically, sociologically, militarily and ideologically (ibid.: 3), so that the relationship between the West and the Orient is one of power, domination and hegemony (Said 1979: 5). The forms of power involved are colonial and imperial but also intellectual, moral and cultural, and they derive considerable structural force from being embedded in political, governmental and educational institutions (ibid.: 6, 12). Orientalism is therefore less a means of understanding the East than a means of reinforcing Western identity and dominance (ibid.: 12). Throughout this thesis, 'the West' is accordingly used not as a geographical description but in Hall's discursive sense: a system of representation that produces its own identity through contrast with a constructed 'Other'.

Both Hall and Said argue that representation is never neutral. Hall shows how stereotyping operates through naturalisation and power. Said shows how Orientalism functions as a discourse that produces rather than reflects the non-Western Other. Together, the two accounts explain how contemporary news media construct racialised difference not as individual editorial bias but as a systematic practice of power. Hall and Said therefore provide the conceptual foundation of this study. The following section introduces the analytical typology through which these representational practices are examined in visual media.

3.2 Mediated suffering and the figure of the refugee: Chouliaraki and Stolic

In their article on media responsibility in the refugee 'crisis', Chouliaraki and Stolic address the failure of news media to represent refugees as human beings (Chouliaraki & Stolic 2017: 1). Refugees are frequently portrayed as a threat to the nation and excluded on that basis, producing an image of people who do not belong and can never become part of the community (ibid.: 2). Their principal target, however, is the existing scholarship: an academic tradition that reduces such representation to a judgement of whether it is good or bad, which obscures what is at stake in these crises (ibid.).

In response to this limitation, Chouliaraki and Stolic propose an alternative approach. Rather than judging representations as simply good or bad, they develop a typology that identifies the different modes of visibility through which refugees are represented and the moral-political dispositions that each mode produces.

They accordingly set out five categories, each corresponding to a different mode of visibility, in order to examine the conceptual connection between visualisation and responsibility (Chouliaraki & Stolic 2017: 4). The first is biological life, which reduces the refugee to corporeal existence and physical need (ibid.: 6) and depicts the refugee as wholly reliant on the West for aid or rescue (ibid.). It situates the refugee in a relation to 'us' defined by generalised pity and humanitarian emergency rather than by political failure (ibid.: 7), and is framed visually through images of refugees in camps or fleeing in boats.

The second category is empathy. This mode represents innocent vulnerability, encourages compassion and care, and can evoke guilt (Chouliaraki & Stolic 2017: 7). Its characteristic compositional feature is the intimate close-up, for example of a mother holding her child (ibid.). These positive associations are not stable, however: they can shift into fear once the refugee's otherness becomes visible (Chouliaraki & Stolic 2017: 8). Empathy, the authors argue, is not a settled moral disposition but a contingent and reversible one (ibid.).

The third category, visibility as threat, operates in contrast to empathy and is activated when refugees are shown as a mass. Empathy gives way to fear and anxiety, driven by the apprehension that the social order is being disturbed by racial and cultural others (Chouliaraki & Stolic 2017: 8). Its visual markers are typically skin colour, clothing and, as noted above, large groups composed predominantly of men (ibid.).The fourth mode is hospitality. Its moral-political disposition is an activism that welcomes the 'other' into one's own space without expecting anything in return (Chouliaraki & Stolic 2017: 9); its typical image is that of people marching with placards welcoming refugees into their country. This mode positions 'us' as complicit in the wrong being done and stands for transnational solidarity (ibid.).The fifth and final mode of visibility is self-reflexivity. Here the refugee is visually constructed as someone like 'us': belonging to the same class, sharing the same cultural codes and standing in the same proximity to Western perspectives (Chouliaraki & Stolic 2017: 10). Such images perform solidarity by giving voice to refugees and their suffering, while also educating 'us' into compassion and casting a sceptical eye on politics (ibid.). Images of celebrities supporting refugees signal that those depicted are 'worthy' of our attention (ibid.).This five-category typology provides the operative analytical framework of the thesis. In Chapter 5, each mode of visibility is examined across the Syrian and Ukrainian corpora in order to determine which

modes are mobilised, how they construct the figure of the refugee, and what the resulting distribution reveals about racialised representation.

3.3 The visual dehumanisation of refugees: Bleiker et al.

Hall's argument that representation is a practice of power finds concrete expression in what Bleiker et al. (2013) identify as the visual dehumanisation of refugees: a practice that reduces refugees to anonymous masses without individuality or agency. They argue that media imagery shapes public perceptions of refugees and influences political debate about them (Bleiker et al. 2013: 399), and identify the specific features that dehumanise — above all long-distance shots of large groups, frequently on boats (ibid.). Their content analysis of front-page coverage in two Australian newspapers found that only two per cent of images showed refugees with clearly recognisable facial features (ibid.), with boats, barbed wire and detention camps as recurring symbols (ibid.: 403).

Giving suffering a human face not only evokes the viewer's empathy but also mobilises a willingness to act (Bleiker et al. 2013: 408). The image of a single person in distress is more effective because it foregrounds individual suffering and thereby humanises the political crisis (ibid.). Bleiker et al. argue that Western politics exploits this dynamic in reverse: through anonymous visual representation, both the crisis and the refugees are presented as a potential threat to state security, which feeds a politics of fear (Bleiker et al. 2013: 399–401). Where refugees are represented as a mass, the viewer no longer sees an identifiable victim but a dehumanised political problem, and the effect is numbing (ibid.: 406, 411). The authors term this depersonalisation the 'revictimisation of victims', because such pictures supply a visual point of reference for the viewer's anxiety (ibid.: 412).

Bleiker et al.'s analysis demonstrates that visual dehumanisation is a key mechanism through which Western news media construct certain refugee populations as threats rather than as individuals worthy of compassion – a distinction that is essential to understanding the differing representations examined in this thesis.

3.4 Operative analytical concepts

This thesis works with four analytical concepts derived from the framework set out above. Hall's account of representation and the racialised Other is used in Section 5.5 to explain how media images construct refugees as culturally and racially distinct groups and thereby draw social boundaries between 'us' and 'them'. Chouliaraki and Stolic's five-category typology structures Section 5.4, where it provides the grid for classifying and comparing the two corpora.

Bleiker et al.'s concept of visual dehumanisation is applied across Sections 5.2 to 5.4 to identify the techniques — anonymisation, massification, depersonalisation — that reduce individuality and agency. Said's account of Orientalism underpins the postcolonial reading in Section 5.5. Section 3.5 adds the account of the inclusive pole against which the excluded pole is defined.

3.5 Explaining the inclusive pole, and the limits of this framework

The framework assembled so far explains exclusion well and inclusion poorly. Hall and Said account for why a population may be constructed as Europe's Other; neither, taken alone, explains why another population displaced by war is represented with empathy rather than with indifference. Because this thesis compares two cases, the inclusive pole has to be theorised in advance of the analysis rather than after it. Hall's account of the West and the Rest supplies the necessary step. The discursive structure that produces 'the Rest' simultaneously produces 'the West' as its positive term, defined by modernity, civilisation, progress and social order (Hall 1992: 276–278). A population classified as proximate to those norms is not outside the system of representation but on its included side. On this reading, empathetic framing is not a separate phenomenon requiring a separate theory: it is the same boundary-drawing mechanism operating in its inclusive rather than its exclusive mode, and both poles are produced in the same act.

Two bodies of work specify what that inclusion consists of. Holzberg, Kolbe and Zaborowski (2018: 542–547) show that German press discourse sorts the displaced into deserving and undeserving figures along axes of economic productivity, state security and gender relations, so that inclusion is conditional and has to be continually re-earned rather than granted once. De Coninck (2023: 581–584) identifies perceived ethnic proximity, symbolic threat and a sense of collective conscience as the factors that distinguished European responses to Ukrainian refugees from responses to Afghan refugees displaced by a comparable armed conflict. Read together with Hall, these accounts generate a testable expectation: the included population will be shown as individuated, domestic and socially legible, and the excluded population as collective, transitional and institutionally managed. The expectation can fail. Empathy or self-reflexivity modes in the Syrian corpus, or threat modes in the Ukrainian one, would count against it, and Section 5.4 reports on both.

The framework also has limits that should be stated before it is applied rather than conceded afterwards. Both Hall's and Said's accounts rest on a binary opposition between a unified 'West' and its 'Other', a structure that risks flattening the internal diversity and contestation within each term; the variation between national media systems reported in Section 2.2 is evidence that no such unified West exists in practice. The framework is also, by construction,

better at detecting racialised structure than at detecting its absence, which creates a risk of confirmation. Two safeguards follow. Competing explanations grounded in the circumstances of displacement — routes and modes of flight, geographical proximity, demographic composition, border regimes and points of arrival — are treated in Section 5.4 as rival accounts to be argued against rather than as background detail. And Section 4.6 states in advance what would count as evidence against the expectation set out here.

4 Method & Material

Having established the theoretical foundations in Chapter 3, this chapter operationalises those concepts through a specific method of visual analysis. It explains which visual features are examined, how they are interpreted through the analytical typology, how the corpus was assembled, and which ethical principles guide the research.

4.1 Visual methodology and the site of the image

In visual methodology, images function as research data (Rose 2016: 15). Rose identifies three sites at which the meaning of an image is made: production, audience and the image itself (Rose 2016: 6, 15). This thesis focuses on the site of the image, because the visual is central to the cultural construction of social life in Western societies (ibid.: 2). Rose argues that social categories are not natural but constructed, and that images must therefore be examined carefully, since they frequently present very particular versions of categories such as class, gender, race and sexuality (Rose 2016: 18). Here the site of the image means the compositional features of the DER SPIEGEL photographs; the institutional conditions of their production and their reception by different viewers are acknowledged (ibid.: 19–20) but not analysed.

4.2 Compositional interpretation

Compositional interpretation examines images for what they are rather than for the uses to which they are put (Rose 2001: 34), and it is useful for describing the visual impact of an image (ibid.: 52). Looking at images in this way carries the risk of neglecting the ways in which an image has been produced and interpreted through social practices (Rose 2001: 37). That limitation is accepted here, since the thesis is concerned in the first instance with the compositional level of the photographs themselves; the discursive conditions under which those compositions acquire meaning are addressed through the discourse-analytical step set out in the following section.

Compositional interpretation does not merely describe what an image shows; it does so through specific features such as spatial organisation, shot distance, the positioning of subjects and colour saturation (Rose 2001: 38–40). Colour saturation and colour value play no part in the present analysis, which is concerned with the people depicted rather than with the palette of the image. The analysis begins with the way people are positioned in relation to one another: whether they appear close together as a mass or as separate individuals (Rose 2001: 40). It then considers the spatial relationships the image creates, and finally how the spatial arrangement positions the viewer — looking down on the subjects from a dominant position, or meeting them at eye level (ibid.). Spatial organisation is central here because, in news photographs, it conveys information about agency, individuality and hierarchy: a crowded, anonymous mass establishes a different relationship from that of isolated individuals with visible faces (ibid.).

Compositional interpretation has limitations that must be taken into account. It attends only to the image itself, and not to who made it, why, or how different viewers might interpret it (Rose 2001: 52). It assumes that images speak for themselves and can rely on vague notions such as connoisseurship, which amount to impressionistic judgement rather than systematic analysis (ibid.). Rose acknowledges that compositional interpretation alone is insufficient: it describes what is seen but does not address the discursive formations in which an image participates, and must therefore be combined with a second methodology — here, discourse analysis — to produce a critical visual methodology (ibid.).

4.3 Discourse analysis I

In Visual Methodologies, Gillian Rose presents discourse analysis I and discourse analysis II as two distinct methodological approaches to visual material. Rose draws theoretically on Foucault's concept of discourse, but develops her own framework for analysing images discursively (Rose 2016: 137–138).

According to Rose, discourse analysis examines how meaning is produced and communicated through language, images and practices within specific social and cultural contexts (Rose 2001: 136). Rather than treating images as neutral reflections of reality, it explores how they construct particular ways of understanding the world, and how these representations connect to broader relations of power, knowledge and social norms (ibid.: 137). For this thesis, that means DER SPIEGEL's visual discourse on refugees does not simply represent them in a particular light; it produces them as a particular kind of subject. Power, on this account, is not distributed from the top down alone: it operates through discourse wherever discourse circulates, in newspaper photographs as much as in academic texts (Rose 2001: 137). This is why the analysis cannot be

reduced to an accusation of editorial bias — power flows through framing choices and visual conventions that all participants reproduce. Although competing discourses exist and resistance is always possible, some discourses are more powerful than others, because they are located in powerful institutions and claim to state objective truth; the capacity to make something count as true is itself a form of power (ibid.: 137–138). When DER SPIEGEL framed Syrian refugees through 'law and control' in 2015, that framing was not experienced as a political choice but as neutral reporting, and this appearance of neutrality is what made the discourse powerful.

This thesis applies Rose's framework by combining compositional interpretation with discourse analysis I. Compositional interpretation examines how meaning is created through the visual organisation of each image; discourse analysis I then interprets how those choices relate to broader discourses of Orientalism and postcolonial representation, with Chouliaraki and Stolic's five modes serving as the analytical grid. Identifying which modes are mobilised establishes how refugees are constructed as subjects and which dispositions the images invite from viewers.

4.4 The corpus

This thesis examines photographs published by the German news outlet DER SPIEGEL. Founded in 1947 and based in Hamburg, DER SPIEGEL is one of Germany's most influential and most widely read news magazines; it has built its reputation on investigative journalism and has long played an important role in shaping public and political debate in Germany.

As the sole source of the corpus, DER SPIEGEL's own position warrants critical reflection. Its editorial orientation is broadly centre-left and liberal and its readership national, which distinguishes it from tabloid outlets such as Bild and from conservative newspapers such as the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung. That editorial line shapes which images are selected and how refugees are framed. This thesis therefore does not treat DER SPIEGEL as representative of Western media as a whole: it takes one influential outlet as a case through which representational logics can be examined in the compositional depth that large-scale studies cannot reach, and the findings should be understood as specific to this outlet's practices rather than as characteristic of German or Western media in general. As Section 2.2 shows, variation between outlets and national media systems is substantial, which makes any generalisation from a single outlet unsafe.

The two time frames were chosen because they cover periods in which refugee movements became highly visible political and media events in Germany and Europe. September 2015 to March 2016 captures the peak of the Syrian refugee crisis and the intensified debate that

followed Germany's decision to admit large numbers of asylum seekers, when refugee issues were central to public discourse and received extensive visual coverage. February to May 2022 covers the initial phase of displacement following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, when arrivals and media attention increased rapidly across Europe; focusing on the first months makes it possible to analyse representations at the moment when narratives and political agendas were still being established. Comparing the two periods allows the thesis to examine whether different refugee groups were framed differently at moments of comparable political significance.

The images were identified through DER SPIEGEL's online archive search function. Because the archive indexes articles rather than individual photographs, the search required reviewing articles published within each time frame that addressed either crisis. The articles varied considerably in the number of images they contained, from a single photograph to approximately fifteen, and around fifteen to twenty articles per crisis were reviewed in order to build a pool of possible images. Articles behind the subscription paywall were excluded, since their images were not accessible. Many images, both within and across articles, showed almost identical compositions or comparable scenarios; these were treated as a single instance rather than counted separately.

One exclusion was made deliberately rather than for reasons of access. The photograph of Alan Kurdi, the three-year-old Syrian boy photographed on a Turkish beach in September 2015, was excluded from the corpus despite falling within the selected time frame. It is one of the most widely circulated photographs of the Syrian refugee crisis, and its exceptional status makes it unsuitable for a corpus intended to capture recurring compositional conventions, since it is not representative of DER SPIEGEL's typical visual coverage. This decision is further supported by Hellmueller and Zhang's (2019) finding, discussed in Chapter 2, that the publication of the photograph did not durably shift DER SPIEGEL's visual framing of Syrian refugees towards more humanising representations. Excluding the image therefore allows the corpus to focus on the dominant patterns of representation rather than on the exceptional case that briefly interrupted them.

From the resulting pool, images were selected according to four compositional criteria: shot distance, the number of people depicted, the visibility of identifiable facial features, and the gender composition of those shown. These criteria were chosen because they anticipate the compositional dimensions used in the analysis in Chapter 5 – spatial organisation, individuation versus massification, and viewer proximity. The three images selected per crisis were chosen

to span a range of values on these criteria, so that the corpus would not consist of repetitions of a single visual type.

A further limitation concerns the absence of a systematic count of the total number of accessible DER SPIEGEL articles on the two crises from which the six analysed images were drawn. Without such a baseline figure, it is not possible to establish what proportion of the available coverage the selected images represent, or to assess whether the corpus is compositionally typical or atypical of the outlet's broader visual output during these periods. This limits the claims that can be made about the representativeness of the sample and should be read alongside the limitations acknowledged in Chapter 7.

4.5 Positionality and ethics

In Orientalism, Said describes a dynamic relationship between authors and their political contexts, arguing that academic, literary and visual sources are always shaped by the producer's circumstances and socialisation (Said 1979: 11, 14–15). The production of knowledge from a situated European perspective is often described as Eurocentrism (Conrad & Randeria 2002: 17–19), and scientific knowledge should accordingly be understood not as objective truth but as produced within structures of power and value (Reuter & Villa 2010: 23–24).

Postcolonial approaches require critical reflection on one's own position and perspective, and on the historical development of the discipline and its methods (Lücking, Meiser & Roher 2023: VII). As a white student from Germany, I recognise that I too have been socialised within a society shaped by racial structures, and that my reading of images is influenced by particular aesthetics, symbols and expectations. Within this discourse, white and Eurocentric positions often remain invisible, which contributes to the reproduction of dominance and of normative historical narratives; this statement therefore aims at transparency and intersubjective accountability (Arndt & Ofuatey-Alazard 2021: 522). The analysis claims neither completeness nor objective 'truth'.

Because the photographs analysed include degrading and violent imagery, I reflected carefully on whether reproducing them in this thesis was ethically appropriate. Somerstein argues that withholding such images can itself reproduce hierarchies, by positioning racialised subjects as passive objects in need of protection (Somerstein 2011: 16). At the same time, in order to protect the privacy of the individuals depicted, I have obscured all faces before reproducing the photographs here; this preserves the visual and compositional features necessary for the analysis while safeguarding individual privacy. When describing the people represented in the images, I use a binary gender classification based primarily on visible bodily characteristics, while

recognising that these classifications may not reflect the gender identity of the individuals concerned.

4.6 Operationalisation, decision rules and levels of inference

Because the typology is applied interpretatively, the steps that lead from an observable feature to an analytical category have to be stated in advance. Four compositional features are recorded for each image: shot distance (long, medium, close); the number of people depicted and whether they are individuated or massed; the visibility of identifiable faces and expressions; and the camera position relative to the subjects (elevated, eye level, low). These are the features that Rose (2001: 38–40) identifies as compositional and that research on refugee photography has found to carry meaning — Greenwood and Thomson (2020: 147–152) record distance, setting and social connection in comparable terms, and Bleiker et al. (2013: 399) treat facial recognisability as the decisive variable. A mode of visibility is assigned to an image only where at least two of these features point in the same direction; a single feature is treated as insufficient.

Chouliaraki and Stolic's categories can overlap, and the analysis therefore needs a rule for co-presence. Where the features of an image support more than one mode, both are recorded, and the more prominent is identified by asking which feature governs the composition as a whole rather than a detail within it: an eye-level close-up of two people is read as empathy even where institutional signage is visible behind them. Images 5 and 6 are recorded as mobilising two modes each on this basis. Absence is treated as a finding in its own right rather than as missing data: where a mode is not mobilised anywhere in a corpus, that absence is reported, because the typology concerns what a representation offers the viewer and therefore also what it withholds.

Finally, three levels of claim are distinguished throughout, and they are not interchangeable. The first is what can be observed in a photograph: distance, framing, the number of people, the visibility of faces. The second is the viewer position that the composition invites, which is an interpretation made by the researcher and defended by reference to the features recorded at the first level. The third is what audiences actually feel or do, which the research reviewed in Section 2.3 establishes with behavioural and reception data (Slovic et al. 2017; Joye 2015) and which the present study does not collect. Claims of the third kind are therefore not made here. Where this thesis states that an image invites a disposition, the claim is of the second kind, and the compositional evidence for it is given in each case.

5 Analysis

5.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the visual analysis of the corpus of six news photographs, three from coverage of each crisis. Its aim is to examine how refugee subjects are represented through visual composition, and what those representations make available to the viewer.

The analysis proceeds in three stages. First, a compositional reading is conducted for each image, recording the four features set out in Section 4.6 — shot distance, individuation or massing, facial visibility and camera position — and assigning a mode of visibility only where at least two features converge. Second, the individual readings are compared through Chouliaraki and Stolic's typology, mode by mode, across the two corpora. Third, Section 5.5 reads the resulting distribution through Hall and Said in order to examine how these representations participate in broader processes of meaning-making and cultural distinction. Section 5.4 also tests the distribution against the competing explanations identified in Section 3.5 before any postcolonial interpretation is offered.

5.2 Compositional reading of the Syrian corpus

Image 1

Refugees crowded on a fishing boat in the Mediterranean, alongside a rescue dinghy.
Source: DER SPIEGEL Online, "Flüchtlinge: Frauen und Kinder auf der Flucht", October 2015. Photograph: Santi Palacios / AP.

This image shows a large group of refugees travelling on an overcrowded fishing boat at sea. Many wear orange life jackets and carry personal belongings; alongside the vessel is a smaller inflatable rescue boat carrying a few rescue personnel, and a rocky coastline is visible in the background. The spatial organisation emphasises vulnerability and collective experience at once. The refugees are tightly packed on the left of the frame, which creates a sense of overcrowding, while the rescue boat occupies the right and holds only a few individuals; the separation distinguishes those in need of assistance from those providing it, and the water between the two vessels functions symbolically as a boundary between danger and safety. The photograph is taken as a long shot, so attention falls on the group rather than on individual refugees, whose faces and emotions remain invisible.

The bright orange life jackets contrast with the blue of the sea and make the refugees the dominant focal point, while the rescue boat forms a secondary point of interest. The camera is at eye level, which establishes a relatively neutral relation between viewer and subject, but the distance of the shot forecloses intimacy. Three of the four recorded features therefore converge — long shot, massed and unindividuated bodies, no identifiable faces — and the image is read as mobilising the threat mode, in which refugees appear as a mass whose arrival is framed as requiring intervention and control. Elements of biological life are also present, in the life jackets and the dependence on rescue, but they are subordinate to the compositional emphasis on the mass.

The spatial organisation of the image emphasises both vulnerability and collective experience. The refugees are tightly packed together on the left side of the frame, which creates a sense of overcrowding and highlights the precarious conditions of the crossing. The rescue boat, by contrast, occupies the right side of the image and holds only a few individuals. This visual separation establishes a distinction between those in need of assistance and those providing it, and the water between the two boats functions symbolically as a boundary between danger and safety. The photograph is taken as a long shot, which allows the viewer to see both boats and the surrounding landscape. As a result, attention falls on the group rather than on individual refugees: their identities and emotions remain largely invisible.

Image 2

Overhead view of refugees seated in a reception processing centre, showing a crowded institutional space.
Source: DER SPIEGEL Online, "Flüchtlinge in Deutschland: Warum so viel Chaos und Leid", 11 August 2015. Photograph: Joerg Koch / Getty Images.

This image depicts a large group of refugees gathered inside a temporary reception or accommodation centre. Men, women and children are visible throughout the space; some sit on chairs, others lie down and rest, and families remain grouped together among scattered belongings, blankets and makeshift sleeping areas. The spatial organisation is characterised by density and congestion: people occupy almost every part of the frame, rows of chairs create a structured but cramped environment, and the background extends deep into the hall, reinforcing the scale of the situation. In the foreground several people are lying down, which draws attention to exhaustion and to the physical demands of displacement. The photograph is a high-angle wide shot, a perspective that takes in the entire shelter at once and foregrounds the conditions of overcrowding rather than individual stories.

The composition draws attention first to the foreground, where people rest on chairs and makeshift beds, and then across the crowded hall towards the background, which creates an impression of scale. The elevated camera position places the viewer in the role of observer rather than participant. Elevated angle, massing and the absence of identifiable faces converge, and the image is read as mobilising the biological life mode: refugees are presented as bodies with basic physical needs — exhaustion, rest, shelter — rather than as individuals with agency

or dignity, and the institutional setting frames them as a collective humanitarian problem requiring management.

Image 3

A large group of refugees gathered in a tent camp, with aid and security personnel present. **Source:** DER SPIEGEL Online, "Flüchtlinge in Deutschland: Chaos, Durst und Platznot," 11 August 2015. Photograph: Oliver Killig / dpa.

This image depicts a large group of people gathered outdoors in what appears to be a temporary reception or humanitarian camp. Most visible individuals are adult men in casual clothing, some seated on the ground and others standing closely together. On the right of the frame two figures represent institutional authority: one wears a high-visibility aid vest, the other is labelled “SECURITY”. Rows of white tents and container buildings in the background suggest a controlled environment for short-term accommodation. The spatial organisation is dense, with seated individuals dominating the foreground and standing figures layered behind them, while the aid and security workers remain physically separated from the crowd — a visual distinction between those exercising authority and those subject to it. The photograph is a medium-long shot at eye level.

The viewer’s eye is drawn first to the bright high-visibility vest, which contrasts strongly with the surrounding colours, and then across the crowd towards the interactions taking place. Massing, the absence of individuated faces and the compositional prominence of uniformed personnel converge, and the image is read as mobilising the threat mode: the spatial separation between authorities and refugees frames displacement as a problem of security management,

and the refugees appear as a controlled population requiring institutional oversight rather than as individuals.

5.3 Compositional reading of the Ukrainian corpus

Image 4

An older woman and a crying child after arriving in Medyka, a Polish border village.
Source: DER SPIEGEL Online, „Heimatlos“, 7 March 2022. Photograph: Visar Kryeziu / AP.

This image depicts an older woman holding a young child outdoors in what appears to be a crowded public setting. Both are dressed for cold weather; the woman wears an orange coat and carries a pink backpack, the child is wrapped in a thick coat and appears distressed, and the woman’s expression suggests concern or emotional strain. Other people are visible behind them but are blurred and indistinct, which makes the two central figures stand out. The spatial organisation centres almost entirely on the physical closeness between the two subjects: they occupy the foreground and are tightly framed together, which creates a strong sense of intimacy and protection and directs attention to their expressions and physical contact rather than to the surrounding environment. The photograph uses a close to medium close-up shot, which renders facial expressions and clothing in detail.

Attention is directed first to the faces of the woman and the child, reinforced by their central placement and sharper focus, and the bright colours of their clothing distinguish them further from the muted background. The image is taken at eye level, which positions the viewer alongside the subjects rather than above them. Close framing, individuation, fully visible faces

and eye-level camera position all converge, and the image is read as mobilising the empathy mode: the emphasis on human connection and vulnerability invites the viewer to engage with the subjects as identifiable individuals rather than as an anonymous group.

Image 5

A woman and a man saying goodbye at the railway station in Kyiv.
Source: DER SPIEGEL Online, „Flucht in die Sicherheit“, 4 March 2022. Photograph: Vadim Ghirda / dpa.

The fifth image depicts two people interacting at the doorway of a train on what appears to be a railway platform. One is positioned inside the carriage and leans out through the open doorway; the other stands on the platform and reaches upward towards them, their faces close together in what suggests a moment of farewell. The train dominates the frame, its blue and yellow exterior stretching into the background, while the platform is mostly empty. The spatial organisation centres on separation and connection at once: the two figures occupy the middle of the frame and are divided by the boundary of the doorway, yet their leaning and reaching reduce that distance. The train extends diagonally across the image, creating depth and drawing attention towards the subjects at the centre. The photograph uses a medium shot.

The central positioning and contrast of the figures encourage the viewer to notice them first: they occupy the sharpest point of focus and interrupt the strong horizontal lines of the train. The camera is at approximately eye level, positioning the viewer alongside the subjects. Medium framing, individuation, visible faces and eye-level position converge on the empathy mode, which is recorded as dominant. Following the co-presence rule set out in Section 4.6, a second

mode is also recorded: the scene portrays a recognisable human moment of farewell that invites Western viewers to identify with the subjects' experience, which is the defining feature of self-reflexivity. Empathy governs the composition as a whole; self-reflexivity follows from the legibility of the situation depicted.

Image 6

Ukrainian refugee women and children arriving at Berlin Central Station.
Source: DER SPIEGEL Online, „Warum ist Deutschland so schlecht auf schutzbedürftige Frauen und Kinder vorbereitet?", 26 March 2022. Photograph: Gordon Welters / laif.

This image depicts a group of people gathered indoors in what appears to be a transport terminal or reception space. The central figure is a young woman wearing a face mask, a pink coat and a large scarf, carrying a sleeping child in winter clothing. Around them are several women and children with bags and backpacks; some look at their phones, others interact with people outside the frame, and artificial lighting and blurred signage reinforce the impression of a busy transit environment. The spatial organisation creates both density and hierarchy: people are positioned close together across the frame, but the central woman and child are visually separated from the others through placement and focus, while the child's body extends across the foreground. The photograph uses a medium shot that shows facial expressions and bodily interaction while retaining the surrounding environment.

The image prioritises the woman and the child through their central position, their direct visibility and the contrast of their pink and silver clothing; the sleeping child reinforces themes of care, exhaustion and dependence. The camera is at eye level, positioning the viewer alongside

rather than above the subjects. Individuation, visible faces and eye-level framing converge, and two modes are recorded. The setting is a recognisable European public space entered rather than a border or a camp, which is the compositional signature of hospitality; and the focus on caregiving, everyday clothing and ordinary actions invites identification, which is the signature of self-reflexivity. Notably, the group is dense but is not rendered as a mass: the threat mode is not mobilised despite the number of people in frame.

5.4 Comparative analysis of refugee visibility modes

This section compares the two corpora through the five modes of visibility set out by Chouliaraki and Stolic (2017), taking each mode in turn. What emerges is that the Syrian corpus is dominated by the threat and biological life modes, whereas the Ukrainian corpus is dominated by empathy, self-reflexivity and, more weakly, hospitality. The section then tests that distribution against the competing explanations identified in Section 3.5, before Section 5.5 offers any postcolonial interpretation of it.

Biological life mode

The biological life mode appears prominently in the Syrian corpus, in Images 1 and 2, and is absent from the Ukrainian corpus. In the Syrian images refugees are represented collectively, through overcrowded vessels, temporary shelters and scenes of management; the emphasis falls on bodily presence, exhaustion and dependence rather than on personal histories or social relations. Such representations correspond to what Chouliaraki and Stolic describe as biological life, in which refugees appear as recipients of humanitarian care rather than as political or social subjects (Chouliaraki & Stolic 2017: 6–7). The Ukrainian corpus constructs visibility differently. Vulnerability is still present, but the images focus on interpersonal relationships, mobility and everyday experience: individuals are shown interacting with family members, travelling or entering recognisable public spaces. Displacement is thereby represented as a condition experienced by identifiable people rather than as a humanitarian problem centred on bodily survival.

Threat mode

The threat mode marks the clearest distinction between the two corpora. It appears in Images 1 and 3 and in none of the Ukrainian images. Chouliaraki and Stolic (2017: 8) describe this mode as representing refugees as a potential danger to the social and political order by emphasising large groups, cultural difference and the need for surveillance. The Syrian images reproduce these features through long-distance shots of overcrowded boats and, in Image 3, through the

visual prominence of security personnel and the spatial separation between authorities and refugees, which frames displacement as a matter of regulation and public order. None of the Ukrainian images mobilises the threat mode. Even where a group is shown, as in Image 6, it is composed of women and children and is represented through caregiving, family relationships and arrival in a familiar European space rather than through security or control. This is the clearest asymmetry in the corpus: density of people is present in both corpora, but only in the Syrian images does density become massification.

Empathy mode

The empathy mode is strongly represented in the Ukrainian corpus, in Images 4 and 5, and absent from the Syrian corpus. Chouliaraki and Stolic (2017: 7) argue that this mode invites viewers to identify emotionally with refugees by foregrounding individual vulnerability, intimate relationships and recognisable human experiences. These features are present in the Ukrainian images, where close framing and eye-level perspectives direct attention to identifiable individuals: Image 4 centres on a woman comforting a distressed child, Image 5 on a farewell at a railway station. In both, facial expression and bodily proximity present displacement as a personal experience rather than as a matter of scale.

The Syrian corpus contains no comparable intimate portraits: individuality is obscured by the distanced framing of boats, camps and institutional spaces. The absence of the empathy mode therefore creates emotional distance, limits the opportunities for identification, and positions Syrian refugees as a collective humanitarian or political issue rather than as individuals with personal histories.

Hospitality mode

Chouliaraki and Stolic (2017: 9) define hospitality as a mode that foregrounds acts of political solidarity and activism, such as public demonstrations or the welcoming of refugees into national communities. None of the images analysed here depicts such explicit activism. Image 6 nevertheless carries elements of the mode through its emphasis on arrival, reception and inclusion within a recognisable European public space: rather than showing refugees at borders or in confinement, it shows women and children arriving at Berlin Central Station, which constructs displacement as a process of entering a society rather than of remaining outside it. The Syrian corpus contains no comparable representation of reception. The mode is therefore present only in attenuated form, and this is recorded as a partial rather than a clear instance.

Self-reflexivity mode

The self-reflexivity mode appears in the Ukrainian corpus, in Images 5 and 6, and is absent from the Syrian corpus. Following Chouliaraki and Stolic (2017: 10), this mode constructs refugees as people with whom Western audiences can identify, by emphasising shared social experience, cultural familiarity and everyday life. Image 5 captures a farewell at a railway station, a moment widely recognisable beyond the context of forced displacement; Image 6 situates refugee women and children in Berlin Central Station, a space many German readers know from their own daily lives. In both cases the setting reduces the symbolic distance between viewer and subject and invites identification rather than observation.

The Syrian corpus offers no comparable spaces of familiarity; its settings emphasise distance rather than commonality. The absence of the self-reflexivity mode therefore denies Syrian refugees the visual proximity afforded to the Ukrainian corpus and reinforces their construction as socially and culturally separate from the imagined European community.

Summary of findings

Taken together, the comparison of the five modes reveals a systematic difference between the two corpora. The Syrian corpus is dominated by biological life and threat and portrays refugees as anonymous collectives defined by vulnerability, dependency and institutional management. The Ukrainian corpus is characterised by empathy and self-reflexivity and, more weakly, hospitality, and presents refugees as identifiable individuals embedded in family relationships and familiar European spaces. The expectation stated in Section 3.5 is therefore borne out: no empathy or self-reflexivity mode appears anywhere in the Syrian corpus, and no threat mode appears anywhere in the Ukrainian one. The two populations are not simply represented differently; they are granted access to different modes of visibility.

Competing explanations

Before this distribution is interpreted as racialised, the rival explanations set out in Section 3.5 have to be addressed, because the two refugee movements differed in ways that shaped what could be photographed at all. Syria's geographical distance meant that maritime crossings dominated the routes available to photographers, whereas Ukrainians arrived overland by train into European cities. Reception infrastructures differed accordingly: camps, border facilities and rescue operations in one case, railway stations and public buildings in the other. The demographic composition of the two flows also differed, since Ukrainian men of conscription

age were barred from leaving the country. Each of these is a real difference in the available material rather than an artefact of framing, and any explanation that ignores them is incomplete.

Three considerations nevertheless limit how much of the distribution they explain. First, the compositional operations that produce the modes are independent of the scene. Shot distance, camera height and the decision to frame an individual rather than a crowd are editorial choices that could have been made differently in either setting: refugees in a reception centre can be photographed at eye level in close-up, and a railway platform can be photographed from above as a mass. Zhang and Hellmueller's (2017: 22) finding that CNN International and DER SPIEGEL produced markedly different visual frames while covering the same events in the same period is direct evidence that the scene does not determine the composition. Second, the absences are harder to explain by circumstance than the presences. That boats and camps generate images of crowds is unsurprising; that not one of the three Syrian images offers a single identifiable face, across seven months of coverage from which the corpus was drawn, is a pattern of selection rather than a constraint of the setting.

Third, the comparison with a third case weakens the circumstantial account further. De Coninck (2023: 578, 581–584) observes that Afghan refugees displaced by the Taliban takeover in 2021 were received with markedly more apprehension than Ukrainians, although most did not arrive by sea and many arrived through organised evacuation; he attributes the difference to symbolic threat and perceived ethnic proximity rather than to the mode of arrival. If the route of flight were doing the explanatory work, the Afghan case should pattern with the Ukrainian one, and it does not. The conclusion drawn here is accordingly narrower than a simple claim that racialisation explains everything: the circumstances of the two crises explain a substantial part of what was available to photograph, while the compositional treatment of that material — the distance, the height, the choice to individuate or to mass — is where the racialised convention operates. The following section examines the discursive conditions that make that convention available.

5.5 Postcolonial reading

Section 5.4 established that the two populations are granted access to different modes of visibility, and that the circumstances of the two crises account for part but not all of that difference. This section examines the discursive conditions under which the remaining, compositional part becomes available to an editor as an obvious way of photographing a refugee. Drawing on Hall's theory of representation and Said's concept of Orientalism, it argues

that the residual asymmetry follows a racialised representational logic rather than the neutral documentation of two events.

Representation and the racialised Other

Hall argues that representation is not a neutral reflection of reality but a cultural practice that produces meaning through systems of difference (Hall 1997: 235). Images therefore do not simply document refugee crises; they construct particular understandings of who refugees are. This is visible in the contrast between the corpora: Syrian refugees are represented through biological life and threat, Ukrainian refugees through empathy and self-reflexivity, which means the two populations are made visible through different representational logics rather than merely shown in different settings (Hall 1997: 258).

The process operates through stereotyping, which "reduces people to a few, simple, essential characteristics, which are represented as fixed by Nature" (Hall 1997: 257). In the Syrian corpus refugees are reduced to collective bodies associated with mass movement, humanitarian dependency and security management; individual identities are absent, and long-distance shots and dense compositions foreclose personal recognition. The Ukrainian images present refugees with recognisable faces, emotions and social relationships. This contrast reflects what Hall describes as the racialisation of the body, whereby the racialised Other is reduced to physical presence rather than recognised as a social subject (Hall 1997: 244). The resulting opposition — a familiar European subject against a distant, anonymous Other — produces a symbolic distinction between who belongs within the imagined European community and who remains outside it.

Hall's concept of the West and the Rest offers a broader explanation for why these binary oppositions emerge so consistently across the two corpora. Hall (1992) argues that 'the West' is not simply a geographical location but a discursive construct associated with modernity, civilisation, progress and social order (Hall 1992: 276–277). Its identity is produced through contrast with 'the Rest', which is represented as culturally different, less developed and external to those values (ibid.: 278). The distinction is maintained through systems of representation that classify people and societies according to their perceived proximity to Western norms (ibid.: 277).

The visual findings reflect that logic. Ukrainian refugees are repeatedly situated within familiar European environments such as railway stations and reception spaces, and depicted through everyday practices including family care and arrival, which makes empathy and self-reflexivity available as modes. Syrian refugees are represented almost exclusively in spaces of transit — boats, camps, reception facilities — and remain visually associated with borders and institutional management. The unequal distribution of modes therefore reproduces the symbolic distinction between 'the West' and 'the Rest', granting individuality and emotional proximity to those positioned closer to Europe and anonymity and threat to those positioned outside it.

These patterns become powerful because they operate discursively. Photographs acquire meaning through wider systems of representation that shape how viewers interpret what they see (Hall 1992: 291), so that the visual differences between the corpora can be read as natural reflections of two different crises even though they are produced through distinct representational choices. This is what Hall, drawing on Gramsci, calls hegemony (Hall 1997: 261): representational power naturalises the world view of dominant groups until it appears to be common sense. Within the DER SPIEGEL corpus, the differential treatment of the two populations reproduces a hierarchy of familiarity while appearing to document humanitarian events neutrally, and the power of these images lies precisely in the invisibility of their assumptions.

These findings are consistent with previous research on the outlet. Hellmueller and Zhang (2019: 3) found that DER SPIEGEL's visual framing shifted towards border-control interpretations after the Alan Kurdi photograph, whereas CNN moved towards more humanised depictions — a pattern corresponding to the threat and biological life modes identified here. The present study adds the compositional mechanism through which that framing is realised within individual photographs.

Orientalism

Said's concept of Orientalism provides a historical explanation for why the Syrian corpus is associated with threat and biological life. Said (1979: 3) argues that Orientalism is not a neutral body of knowledge about the Middle East but a discourse through which Europe has produced the 'Orient' as an object of knowledge, management and power — the systematic discipline through which European culture managed and even produced the Orient politically, sociologically, militarily and ideologically. The system functions as what Said calls an "accepted grid for filtering through the Orient into Western consciousness" (Said 1979: 6).

Applied here, the repeated emphasis on overcrowded boats, camps and security personnel in the Syrian corpus cannot be understood as a set of neutral documentary choices alone. These images draw on a longer visual repertoire that has represented Middle Eastern populations as anonymous, culturally different and in need of Western management. Said's argument does not depend on the intentions of individual journalists: the representational framework precedes and exceeds individual editorial decisions and shapes which images appear objective and newsworthy (Said 1979: 11). The differential framing is therefore better understood as the operation of a discursive system than as individual bias.

The Ukrainian corpus provides an instructive contrast, because it falls largely outside the framework Said describes. Orientalism is specifically concerned with the construction of non-European, predominantly Middle Eastern and Muslim populations as Europe's cultural Other (Said 1979: 3), and the conventions that characterise the Syrian corpus — anonymity, massification, institutional control, distance — are correspondingly absent from the Ukrainian images, which foreground identifiable individuals, family relationships and familiar public spaces. This contrast reflects Said's argument that Europe has defined itself by setting itself apart from the Orient as a "surrogate and even underground self" (Said 1979: 3), so that Orientalism ultimately tells us more about the West than about the Orient (ibid.: 12). The images analysed here are therefore not simply representations of two refugee populations: they simultaneously construct a vision of Europe as a space of familiarity and belonging. The reading aligns with Kim (2025: 13, 17), who finds that Syrian refugees continue to be represented through tropes of distance and dependency while Ukrainians are portrayed as culturally proximate individuals with agency, and argues that such imagery reproduces racialised hierarchies rooted in colonial legacies.

Synthesis

The mechanisms through which these discursive patterns are realised are further illuminated by Bleiker et al.'s concept of visual dehumanisation. Their analysis shows that refugees are most often represented as anonymous groups photographed from a distance, with only two per cent of images in their corpus showing clearly recognisable facial features (Bleiker et al. 2013: 399). Long shots, dense groups, boats, camps and the absence of identifiable faces encourage viewers to perceive refugees as collective problems rather than as individuals (ibid.: 406, 411–412) — precisely the compositional profile of the Syrian corpus analysed here. Taken together, Hall, Said and Bleiker et al. explain the residual asymmetry identified in Section 5.4. Hall accounts for the mechanism by which difference is constructed and naturalised; Said for why Middle Eastern populations in particular occupy the excluded position; and Bleiker et al. for the visual techniques through which the hierarchy is realised in news photography. The contrasting representations are therefore neither incidental nor reducible to editorial preference, and neither are they reducible to the circumstances of the two crises. They reflect systems of representation that shape who is recognised as an individual and who is imagined as belonging within Europe, while appearing to document two humanitarian emergencies neutrally.

6 Discussion

Sub-question one asked which conventions of composition, aesthetics and narrative characterise DER SPIEGEL's photographic representation of refugees in each crisis. The two corpora were constructed through opposing conventions. The Syrian corpus relied on long shots, massed and undifferentiated groups, institutional and maritime settings, obscured faces, and an elevated, observational camera position that held refugees at a distance. The Ukrainian corpus relied on close and medium shots, individualised subjects, eye-level framing, recognisable European public spaces, and visible faces carrying legible emotional expressions. This is not a neutral stylistic difference: it distributes visibility and anonymity unequally between the two populations and determines who is rendered as a noticeable person and who is rendered as an undifferentiated mass.

Sub-question two asked which of Chouliaraki and Stolic's modes are mobilised in each corpus, and how those modes construct the refugee. The compositional split maps directly onto an uneven distribution of the modes. The Syrian corpus mobilised biological life and threat; the Ukrainian corpus mobilised empathy, self-reflexivity and, more weakly, hospitality. Read against the four dimensions named in the sub-question, the consequences are pronounced: Syrian refugees are constructed as a dependent or potentially threatening collective, stripped of individual agency and dignity, whereas Ukrainian refugees are constructed as identifiable individuals whose dignity, agency and emotional proximity to the Western viewer remain intact throughout.

Sub-question three asked what the distribution of these modes reveals when read through Hall and Said. That distribution is not incidental. Read through Hall, the boundary between 'us' and 'them' is drawn through splitting and then naturalised, as though it simply reflected the way the two crises differ rather than a representational choice. Seen through Said's account, the specific vocabulary attached to the Syrian corpus – anonymity, massification, securitisation – is recognisable as an Orientalist grammar that marks the Middle Eastern refugee as a categorical outsider in a way that is never applied to the Ukrainian one.

Taken together, these three answers address the main research question. DER SPIEGEL visually represented the two crises through systematically different modes of visibility, and these racialised conventions reproduce a hierarchy of who counts as an individual deserving empathy, while appearing merely to document two humanitarian emergencies. The demographic composition of the two flows differed, but the analysis has shown that the

compositional conventions producing these modes are editorial choices independent of who is depicted, and that the difference therefore cannot be reduced to that factor alone.

These findings sit closely alongside the research reviewed in Chapter 2. Zhang and Hellmueller's finding that DER SPIEGEL securitised its Syrian coverage through 'law and control' and 'xenophobia' frames, Kim's postcolonial reading of wire-service photography, and Bassoli and Greppi's cross-national analysis of article tone all establish, at scale, that Syrian and Ukrainian refugees were treated unevenly by Western media. This thesis confirms the same pattern at close range, within a single outlet and across both crises. What it adds is mechanism: rather than measuring tone or coding frames, it shows how the differential treatment is built compositionally within individual photographs, and it names the specific modes of visibility through which that treatment operates. Where the existing literature offers pattern and scale, this thesis offers depth and mechanism.

For peace and conflict studies specifically, the findings locate one mechanism by which the protection owed to civilians displaced by armed conflict is differentiated in practice. Holzberg et al. (2018: 545–547) and Chouliaraki and Zaborowski (2017: 613–614) describe the European response to displacement as humanitarian securitisation, in which rescue and containment operate together; this thesis shows what that combination looks like at the level of the photograph. The Syrian corpus performs both halves at once — refugees are shown as bodies to be saved and as a mass to be controlled — while the Ukrainian corpus performs neither, because the population depicted is not constructed as a problem of order in the first place. Since Holmes and Castañeda (2016: 12–13) trace the line between deserving and undeserving displaced people to consequences at the border, the compositional conventions identified here are not merely expressive. They are part of how the differential recognition of war-affected civilians is produced and sustained.

7 Conclusion

This thesis has shown that DER SPIEGEL's visual coverage of the Syrian and Ukrainian refugee crises relied on systematically different modes of visibility, and that this difference reproduces a racialised hierarchy of recognition while presenting itself as neutral documentation. What follows states the contribution of the thesis, situates that finding within its limits, and identifies where the theoretical framework itself reaches its edge.

For peace and conflict studies, the thesis demonstrates that the unequal recognition of populations displaced by armed conflict is not only a matter of policy or political rhetoric but

is constructed at the level of visual composition – through shot distance, framing, and the individualisation or massification of subjects. By showing how these editorial choices operate within a single outlet across two crises, the thesis adds mechanism and interpretive depth to a body of research that has so far established the pattern mainly through large-scale aggregate methods.

Three limitations qualify the scope of this claim. The first concerns the circumstances of the two crises, examined in Section 5.4, which differed in ways that shaped what was available to photograph. The claim advanced here is correspondingly narrow: it concerns the compositional treatment of the material available to each corpus — the decision to shoot at a distance or at eye level, to show a crowd or an individual — and not a claim that the two refugee populations faced identical circumstances.

The second limitation is the size of the corpus: six images, three per crisis. This reflects a deliberate trade-off between range and depth rather than an oversight. A qualitative, compositionally attentive reading of this kind cannot achieve the statistical generalisability of large-N coding, and it does not claim to. Its purpose is to demonstrate how differential framing operates within individual images at a level of detail that aggregate methods cannot reach.

The third and most serious limitation follows from the second. Six images cannot be claimed to represent the entirety of DER SPIEGEL's coverage of either crisis, and the possibility of unrepresentative selection must be acknowledged directly. The defence offered here is not that the sample is exhaustive but that it was selected against explicit criteria set out in Chapter 4, and that the patterns identified through close reading converge with those established independently by large-N studies of the same outlet and period, notably Zhang and Hellmueller's coding of DER SPIEGEL's Syrian coverage and Kim's wire-service analysis (Zhang & Hellmueller 2017; Kim 2025). That convergence between an interpretative reading of six images and aggregate findings across hundreds is evidence that the corpus is typical rather than atypical – though it remains evidence rather than proof, and the claim is limited accordingly.

A final limitation concerns the framework itself, discussed in Section 3.5: the binary structure of Hall's and Said's accounts is better suited to identifying racialised difference than to registering its absence or its internal variation. A fuller account of the inclusive pole — how solidarity is visually constructed, and not only how exclusion is — would require a theoretical vocabulary that this framework does not supply, and marks the most productive direction for further research building on these findings.

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9 Image sources

Image 1:
https://www.spiegel.de/politik/ausland/fluechtlinge-2016-koennte-rekordjahr-2015-uebertreffen-a-1075076.html

Images 2 and 3:
https://www.spiegel.de/politik/deutschland/fluechtlinge-in-deutschland-warum-so-viel-chaos-und-leid-a-1046851.html

Images 4 and 5:
https://www.spiegel.de/ausland/ukraine-krieg-bilder-zwischen-truemmern-und-traenen-a-e74eb0e5-9a9c-4ef6-8310-884a9258c0fc

Image 6:
https://www.spiegel.de/panorama/gefluechtete-aus-der-ukraine-sind-die-frauen-in-massenunterkuenften-gut-genug-geschuetzt-a-af648873-1885-429f-b78d-857f64557a46