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Images of Illegalized Immigration
Towards a Critical Iconology of Politics

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Illegalized immigration is a highly iconic topic. The public perception of the current regime for mobility is profoundly shaped by visual and verbal images. As the issue of illegalized immigration is gaining increasing political momentum, the authors feel it is a well-warranted undertaking to analyze the role of images in the creation of illegalization. Their aim is to trace the visual processes that produce these very categories.

The authors aim to map out an iconography of illegalized immigration in relation to political, ethical, and aesthetic discourses.

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Introduction

CHRISTINE BISCHOFF, FRANCESCA FALK AND SYLVIA KAFEHSY

Illegalized immigration is a highly iconic topic. The public perception of the current regime for mobility is profoundly shaped by visual and verbal images, they play a crucial part in the creation of “imagined communities” (Benedict Anderson).

People without the legalized status of a residence permit and/or a working permit are today a part of the social reality—everywhere around the world. A state ignites processes of illegalization by its specific management and control of migration. It classifies people as “insiders” or “outsiders” in its “imagined communities”. In this publication, we argue that those immigrants are *made* illegal by political and juridical strategies, they are *illegalized*. It is therefore our aim to trace the visual processes that produce these very categories.

As the issue of illegalized immigration is gaining increasing political momentum, we feel it is a well-warranted undertaking to analyze the role of images in the creation of illegalization. We therefore ask: Who has been creating these images? Under which conditions are they made? And where do they circulate? What is their relation to legal and political discourses? How are social movements appropriating these images, transforming them for their own ends? And under what circumstances can these images develop a momentum of their own? The representation of illegalization can only be properly analyzed in relation to the actual concrete form: This requires the analysis of the actual visual images, figures, symbols, narratives, metaphors—the material forms—in which symbolic meaning is circulated. Images and their production, transfer, and reception form a system of media practices that have a powerful impact on the perception and the everyday life of human beings. These visual practices don't merely reproduce points of view of different groups but actually produce them: Visuality not only signifies what might be referred to as a rising “flood of images”, but a change in consciousness, which accords visual practices a much more substantial role in thought processes and in the acquisition of “knowledge”.

The papers collected here aim to map out an iconography of illegalized immigration in relation to social, political, ethical and aesthetic discourses. They point out the “inaccessibility” of illegalized immigrants and the strategies, purposes, and dangers of giving persons without legal papers an individual face. Images can bring the violence inherent in illegalization out into the open and thereby shed a critical light on governmental policies of labour mobility. But showing what is hidden may sometimes lead to new forms of oppression.

In his contribution “*Migration, Law, and the Image: Beyond the Veil of Ignorance*” W. J. T. MITCHELL focuses on the twofold transformation of a native people into a diasporic population and a diasporic people into a nativist society. For Mitchell, the “problem” of migration is structurally and necessarily bound up with that of images: Images “precede” the immigrant in the sense that, before the immigrant arrives, his or her image arrives first. The critical situation in Israel/Palestine is defined by Mitchell within a broader survey of the overall question of immigration, taking up issues such as forced emigration and the spatial construction of displacement and confinement. Analyzing two recent documentary films, one Israeli, the other Palestinian, he discusses, among other things, how these scenes are in fact scenes of “illegalized” immigration. According to Mitchell, the Palestinians are treated as illegalized immigrants in their own land. The “veil of ignorance” allows liberal states to maintain their fictional status as liberal democracies. But it is precisely the image of the veil of ignorance that could be used to establish a normative order where the condition of illegalized immigrants is taken into account. Here, another role that the image can play becomes visible, namely to set out hypotheses, possibilities, and experimental scenarios for a world of open borders and universal human rights: The objective is not merely to change the way people see immigrants, Mitchell writes, but to change the way they see themselves.

The paper “*Milieus of Illegality, Representations of Guest Workers, Refugees, and Spaces of Migration in Der Spiegel, 1973-1980*” by JAN-HENRIK FRIEDRICH explores the beginnings of a West German system of representation that made immigration appear a threat to the country by expressing it in terms of illegality and delinquency. Two historical events provide the focus for his paper: The recruitment ban for foreign workers in 1973 and the rising numbers of refugees in 1979/80. Articles and pictures in the German weekly *Der Spiegel* over several years are the author’s sources. Remarkably, already in those days, pictures of deportation circulated in mass media. Furthermore, Friedrich highlights the imaginary component of the “ghetto”. This image allowed transforming migration from a social into a spatial issue; urban space became one of the crucial categories in trying to *contain* this illegalized Other, and thereby rendered both the class character and the ethnic heterogeneity of the “ghetto” invisible.

Whereas the imagined ghetto of the former “guest workers” had clear boundaries, this is no longer the case with the “speed maniacs”, as they seem to be everywhere and not confined to a particular place. In her paper

"The Making of 'Illegality': Strategies of Illegalizing Social Outsiders", CHRISTINE BISCHOFF asks how practices of social inclusion and exclusion are created or promoted by visual representations in the media. Analyzing a Swiss example, she is able to shed light on the processes by which migrants are turned into visual representatives of the blurred borders of nations. The discussion concentrates on the fact that stereotypes—such as the “speed maniacs with Balkan background”—are being given a “face” as part of a strategy to charge the topic with political impact in the vote about a bill that would have made naturalization easier for the second or third generation of immigrants living in Switzerland. Probably it is no coincidence that here the car became the leitmotif: Often the fathers and grandfathers of those depicted had stood at the assembly lines of the car factories of central and northern Europe, making their crucial contribution to automobile production. For the collective memory, the car is the symbol of the wealth of the rich north. And now, this symbol of wealth was reduced to metal scrap by the classical migrant workers’ grandchildren.

In *"Copying Camouflage. In/visibility of Illegalized Immigration in Julio Cesar Morales' Series Undocumented Interventions"*, MICHAEL ANDREAS explores mimetic and disruptive camouflage creating visual confusion. He states that at the border only detected, that is to say failed acts of illegal immigration become visible. He focuses on migrant acts of illegal border crossings on the US/Mexican border as forms of camouflage, and discusses the visualization of the invisible by both border agencies and in the work of the artist Julio Cesar Morales. Here again, the car becomes iconic.

SYLVIA KAFEHSY writes about *"Images of Victims in Trafficking in Women: The Euro 08 Campaign Against Trafficking in Women in Switzerland"*. By taking as an example a video spot that was shown in Swiss stadiums during the 2008 European soccer championship with the aim of raising awareness about the trafficking of women in Switzerland, she points out the “paradox of victimization” as well as the power and the ambiguities inherent in such strategies of visualization. The essay concludes with an example of visual strategies in works of art that could be an inspiration for visual strategies that don't avoid complex contexts, but create nexuses where it is possible to interlace political and social contexts, or that show that victim narratives are indeed fictions and consequently can be experienced as such.

In her paper on *"Invasion, Infection, Invisibility: An Iconology of Illegalized Immigration"*, FRANCESCA FALK contrasts in a paradigmatic way two photos of boat people: Either immigration is depicted as an invasion, or an individual refugee is portrayed as a victim, following the tradition of the Christian Iconography. Yet both discussed pictures share a common feature: the fear of infection. On the other hand, illegalized immigration inside Europe is often hidden from the public eye. The deportation camps are generally located at the geographical and social margins, and pictures of them hardly ever circulate in the Swiss media. Media consumers thus seldom come across the nationally approved compulsory measures for

which they are clearly politically accountable. To counteract such invisibilities, in some cities monuments are raised in order to make illegalized immigrants and the violence produced by their deportation visible. Furthermore, the European illegalization of immigration very often hurts people coming from former colonial regions. But also these historical connections linking the past with the present are very often invisible in today's discussion about immigration. Instead, in many anti-migration campaigns immigration is frequently depicted as a colonial invasion.

PAMELA SCORZIN in "*Voice-Over Image*" refers to a paradoxical use of images of illegalized immigration in the sense that people crossing borders illegally are shown in two ways: They are given high visibility as stereotyped clichés but simultaneously obscured into invisibility as humans and individuals. Showing images of boat people in various contexts, she argues that combining these representations in a multidimensional portrait might contribute to new perspectives that essentially are propelled by sound. Thus, the discussion of this paper revolves around the question if it is possible to "break" the power of images by considering their sonic context.

In their paper "*Masking, Blurring, Replacing: Can the Undocumented Migrant Have a Face in Film?*" OLAF BERG and HELEN SCHWENKEN explore methods by which undocumented migrants—who for obvious reasons do not want to be recognized—can be made to not only speak, but also to be visually present in films that are trying to create audio-visual representations of their protagonists. How can you *not* show their faces without criminalizing them? By exploring strategies of visual representation of undocumented migrants in documentary films—the use of masks or of special make-up, the substitution of images for their (illegalized) working activities, the visualization of these people's invisibility—Berg and Schwenken are able to illustrate the difficulties of creating images that are able to ensure the viewers' sympathies for undocumented migrants and at the same time respect the latter's need to stay anonymous. Visual techniques allowing for this kind of presence of undocumented migrants and their conditions thus contribute to the legitimate presence of migrant subjectivities that are usually portrayed as deviant and criminal. On the other hand, protecting the migrant's identity can easily produce a de-humanizing discriminatory effect on the migrant that strengthens the hostile perception of and policies against undocumented migrants. From this point of view, the aesthetic question *how* a film does or does not show the faces of undocumented migrants is a highly political issue.

EVA KUHN presents and discusses "*Border: The Videographic Traces by Laura Waddington as a Cinematographic Memorial*". The setting is in northern France, in the area between the mouth of the Euro Tunnel and one of the infamous refugee camps whose inmates are constantly trying to cross the fencing construction at night. Waddington's video is an artistic approach to the "realities" of illegalized immigrants. Without showing faces she creates abstract images that present fragments of single actions

in a blurred videographic trace. The artist treats Sangatte both as the site of muffled fear and delectable hope as well as the site of bitter memory. But she thereby remains permanently the Other, an outsider, and she reflects herself as such in her images: *Border* deals with this experience of distance in a specific way.

LAMBERT DOUSSON writes about the work of *Bruno Serralongue at the Cité Nationale de l'Histoire de l'Immigration*, where—under the title of “*Manifestations du Collectif de sans-papiers de la Maison des Ensembles 2001-2003*”—a series of 45 photos was presented. These photos show sans-papiers who demonstrate for papers and for the closing of the *Administrative Retention Centres*. Their photos could constitute, within a public state institution, a criticism of the present French illegal immigration policies. However, their specific *mise en scène* in the former Museum of Colonies has the effect of neutralizing their critical content. Indeed, the photos are transformed into illustrations, or even into decoration. Dousson thus contrasts the artistic work of the photographer against the mechanism of the exhibition that has tended to cancel out both the photos' political meaning and their emotional force by its exhibitiv setting. He discusses why this exhibition de-politicizes the photos and whether, in a wider sense, historical documents are in danger of losing their critical message through circulation as works of art.

By developing critical investigations into the spatial practices within current societies, MARC SCHOONDERBEEK sees in “*The Image versus the Map: the Ceuta Border*” the architect as a visionary, engaged in the activity of producing an image of a possible future. Mapping unfolds, as he argues, its potential on the basis of its openness, its invitation to interpretation. With colleagues, he created a map of the border conditions in Ceuta that suggests an understanding of borders not as fixed lines or zones in the traditional sense but rather as zones of a sequence of divisions that are fluid both in space and time.

Finally, ALMUT REMBGES relates in “*Who is a Refugee—Strategies of Visibilization in the Neighbourhood of a Refugee Reception Camp and a Detention Centre*” her experiences in two projects she initiated. In an area outside the city of Basel, in-between the Swiss-German border and a camp of asylum seekers, the artists' collective “*Practical Theory & Company*” has established a picture service for the inmates. The asylum seekers are kept waiting for months, in arduous circumstances and under permanent examination, either for acceptance as a refugee or expulsion. “*Picture Service*” lends these refugees a camera for one day and the possibility to mail the photos home or to keep them as a memory. The pictures resulting from this project do not show “victims”, but active individuals with hopes and plans, and therefore provide a vivid contrast to the photos of asylum seekers usually presented in the mainstream media. The second project “*AuQuarellclub sans frontières*” is a kind of enduring flashmob which gathers every second week on the pavement in front of the detention centre. The participants sit down and paint pictures of the building. Sometimes

the security calls the police. Then, the police ask questions about art and escape plans, checking bags and names. “No, it’s not prohibited to sit here and paint”, they say, “but we have to make sure that everything is okay.”

In our publication, scholars of literature and visual studies, art historians, artists, architects, historians, sociologists, cultural anthropologists, political scientists and philosophers outline their particular field of research on “*Images of Illegalized Immigration*”. But the boundary between who is illegal and legal can shift: people whose residence status is not “illegal” can become illegalized on account of certain (none-)behaviour and (none-)action. Furthermore, the illegalization of immigration and the illegalization of emigration are in a complex and historically changing way related to each other. In this publication we focus on the former.

A considerable amount of literature has been published on the topic of illegalized immigration. However, the question how images “generate” such conceptions of illegalization as a social production and a practice, has, to our knowledge, not been systematically approached until now. One central question is, then, how a notion like “illegal immigration” can come to be taken for granted: Illegalization is produced by law, but naturalized through the everyday use of images. The production of law, on the other hand, is also driven by both mental and materialized images. A critical iconology may help us to see such mechanisms.

With this publication, we hope to open up space for new perceptions and perspectives on illegalized immigration. The reader, however, has to keep in mind the circumstance that the participants of this Call-for-Paper-Conference and therefore also the contributors to the publication all have an American or European background. Belonging to the “global North”, they can move freely and legally around most of the world, whereas others can be detained at every stage of their travel. If there is something like the “freedom of movement”, it seems to be a human right for some, but not for others.¹

1 | This publication is based on the proceedings of a two-day conference in summer 2009. We would like to thank Matthias Müller for his proofreading and the Basel University, the Swiss Science Foundation and the Freiwillige Akademische Gesellschaft for making the conference and publication possible.