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The role of images in migration governance. A proposed new theoretical framework and methodological approach

Alice Massari

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The role of images in migration governance. A proposed new theoretical framework and methodological approach

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Abstract

While there has been a growing focus on the use of images in the study of world politics, the theoretical and methodological examination of visual representations' role in transnational governance processes has not been given due attention. This paper, stemming from the VIGO research project, seeks to address this deficiency. However, it's crucial to note that the aim is not to divert from an analysis of the impact of visual representations on politics. Rather, the objective is to augment this analysis by specifically probing into the role that images play within the context of migration governance. Therefore, the goal is to propose a theoretical and methodological framework that enables us to understand how images influence migration governance more comprehensively.

Given the role of visuality and the multiple ways digital communications and social media are transforming the governance landscape, providing new avenues for new actors, and transforming power relations between the existing actors, this paper proposes a new way to look at migration governance at the transnational level. First of all, it offers a theoretical framework enabling us to consider the different relevant dimensions of governance: not only policies, practices, and regulations but also (visual) discourses and representations. Second, a theoretical framework enabling us to include in the analysis all the relevant actors, the traditional ones but also the ones whose participation has been enabled by the new digital communicative sphere. In this sense, not only institutions and organizations (actors at the macro and meso level) but also individuals acting at the micro level should be included in the analysis. Third, the proposed theoretical framework is based on the understanding that the role of images in migration governance should be thought of as an iterative approach between the image/visual communication sphere and the governance realm. Finally, to study the role that images play in migration governance, this paper proposes a multi-modal methodology to theorize the role that images play in migration governance.

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Introduction

While there has been a growing focus on the use of images in the study of world politics, the theoretical and methodological examination of visual representations' role in transnational governance processes has not been given due attention. This paper, stemming from the VIGO research project, seeks to address this deficiency. However, it's crucial to note that the aim is not to divert from an analysis of the impact of visual representations on politics. Rather, the objective is to augment this analysis by specifically probing into the role that images play within the context of migration governance. Therefore, the goal is to propose a theoretical and methodological framework that enables us to understand how images influence migration governance more comprehensively.

As the adage goes, a picture is worth a thousand words. Images have become usual if not essential, communication elements on practically every issue. Topics of global relevance have often become easily recognizable through iconic images: photos of overcrowded migrant boats, starving polar bears on melting glaciers, and infographics showing COVID-19 mortality rates have become prominent elements of today's visual landscape. Visuality, defined as both 'ways of seeing' (Berger, 1972) and as visual artifacts (e.g., photos, maps, infographics, sculptures, symbols), has assumed even more relevance in the contemporary world where social media, heavily based on images, are widely used to both produce content and as a source of information by a wide range of actors.

Different strands of scholarships from distinct perspectives have investigated the interaction of images and international politics (Strobel, 1996; Livingston, 2011; Bleiker, 2001; Robinson, 1999; Hansen, 2015; Adler-Nissen et al., 2020a, to cite a few). Although we are still missing an overarching analytical framework, it has become increasingly evident that by looking at the images produced by the different actors in the international arena, we can shed some light on specific dynamics of international politics. This is particularly true in migration, a topic that has dominated the contemporary visual landscape (and policy debate) for decades.

Migration topics have been increasingly high on the media and social media agenda over the last decade. We probably all remember the massive focus of digital and social media on the so-called 2015 European Refugee Crisis or the 2018 US administration campaign against the migrant caravan and the intention to expand the Mexico–United States barrier further. More recently, stories and images of Afghanis trying to board the last American flights leaving the country after the Taliban takeover and Ukrainian women and children crossing land borders in the EU to escape the war have certainly not gone unnoted.

Within this articulated digital sphere, images (e.g., pictures, videos, memes, infographics, maps, etc.) have taken the lion's share. Some of the images, probably more impactfully than the thousands of words written on the topic over the years, indeed became iconic representations of contemporary "migrations crises". I use the term migration crisis critically because although helpful in identifying a moment that in Europe has drawn particular attention, I agree with the many scholars that have pointed out how the intensity of arrivals to Europe has neither been a new phenomenon in the history of migration, nor it has constituted the invasion that has been presented in public accounts (see among others Fargues, 2015; De Genova et al., 2016; Krzyżanowski et al., 2018), and the large majority of refugees has been (and still is) hosted by Syria's neighbouring countries. Images such as the aerial photo of the boat crowded with migrants in the middle of the Mediterranean Sea published by TIME on July 14th, 2014 (Massimo Sestini-Polaris, 2014) or the dramatic picture portraying the lifeless body of Alan Kurdi on the shore (Adler-Nissen et al., 2020b) became visual symbols of contemporary mobility. Others sparked strong emotional responses and debate, such as, for example, the images disseminated on Twitter of the camerawoman tripping a refugee carrying a small child as he ran from the police (Richter, 2015).

What has been probably new in the communicative sphere around migration over the last ten years is that along with heads of state, EU representatives, and politicians, digital and social media have also been increasingly used by international organizations and NGOs working on migration as well as by the migrants themselves and the general public. Besides the posts of politicians or other institutional actors conveying their views on global mobility, we became increasingly used to seeing relief organizations' campaigns to support people on the move, solidarity movements disseminating information from the different migration routes hotspots, and even first-hand accounts of the journey. This new communication landscape allowed new actors to emerge, especially highlighting the relevance of individuals, influencers, or small groups of people in global debates over various international and transnational issues. In this context, looking at how different actors of migration governance "frame the ideational context in which international migration is perceived" (Betts, 2011, p. 16) becomes crucial to shed light on migration governance dynamics.

Given the role of visuality and the multiple ways digital communications and social media are transforming the governance landscape, providing new avenues for new actors, and transforming power relations between the existing actors, this paper proposes a new way to look at migration governance at the transnational level. First of all, it offers a theoretical framework enabling us to consider the different relevant dimensions of governance: not only policies, practices, and regulations but also (visual) discourses and representations. Second, a theoretical framework enabling us to include in the analysis all the relevant actors, the traditional ones but also the ones whose participation has been enabled by the new digital communicative sphere. In this sense, not only institutions and organizations (actors at the macro and meso level) but also individuals acting at the micro level should be included in the analysis. Third, the proposed theoretical framework is based on the understanding that the role of images in migration governance should be thought of as an iterative approach between the image/visual communication sphere and the governance realm. Finally, to study the role that images play in migration governance, this paper proposes a multi-modal methodology to theorize the role that images play in migration governance.

The paper is divided into two parts. The first presents the theoretical framework, and the second advances a multi-modal approach for the analysis. In so doing, *Part I – Theoretical Framework* is divided into four sections. The first one provides an overview of International Relations' interest in the connection between images and world politics. The second section turns to a discussion of the digital public sphere and the identification of its actors. The third one outlines the concept of governance and migration governance to set the scene and outline how images matter. The fourth section connects the dots and introduces the concept of visual migration governance. *Part II – A proposed multi-modal approach* is divided into four sections. It first provides an overview of Critical Discourse Analysis and the emerging literature on the importance of looking at the visual. The second, third, and fourth part outlines the various method whose combination enables to shed light on how images produce meaning and how this meaning is circulated in a given context. The concluding section reflects on the broader potential for research on visual migration governance in international relations.

Part I – Theoretical Framework

Images and international politics

For a long time, the field of International Relations has been intrigued by the possibility that images might play a role in shaping international politics. In 1996 Strobel advanced the idea that the visual representation of conflict and suffering happening in distant countries did "help foreign policy officials explain the need for US intervention" (Strobel, 1996, p. 35). He argued that by focusing attention on one crisis (the famine in Somalia in 1992) over another one (the conflict unfolding in

Southern Sudan), CNN played a crucial role in “dictating” US foreign agenda. At the same time, Strobel specified that the CNN effect should not have been considered a direct causal link between the diffusion of images and foreign policy decisions – as those were significantly affected by consideration of the financial and human costs of military operations. The genocide in Rwanda in 1994, widely reported by CNN, did not elicit a US military intervention. And the withdrawal of US troops from Somalia was already under discussion when the videos of the dead American soldiers being desecrated were aired. However, when a mortar shell hit the Sarajevo market, killing 68 people, the US administration quickly moved forward with the interventionist policy being discussed for the Balkans and decided to act promptly in reaction to the attack. According to Strobel, that event proved that CNN was helping government officials to explain the actions they had already decided to take. Later on, Robinson redefined the impact of the CNN effect, showing that although it was unclear whether or not the news media had triggered military intervention, the relation between images and foreign policy could be better framed in terms of "media-policy interaction" (Robinson, 1999). He suggested that media influence on government policy was possible only when the policy was still uncertain and media coverage framed a situation advocating for a specific course of action.

Although scholars are still discussing the dynamics of the interaction of images in world politics, little doubt remains on the fact that visual representations play a role in the international arena. Bleiker's seminal article on the Aesthetic Turn (Bleiker, 2001) showed how exploring representative practices could broaden our comprehension of International Political Theory. For Bleiker (2001), the difference between what images represented and the subject of representation was ‘the very location of politics’ (p. 510). Since then, International Relations studies have increasingly focused on the visual world to investigate international politics.

Exploring the role of iconic images in international politics, Lene Hansen has explained how, by condensing and constituting the meaning of events, some images become international icons: images that can prompt reaction beyond the borders of the state in which they have been produced, obtain recognition and elicit responses at the international level (Hansen, 2015). While warning about icons as inherently contested and subject to different readings and the necessity to understand images as not able "speak" foreign policy independently from the larger discourse, Hansen theorizes icons as images that operate as visual nodal points that “provide a partial fixation within an inherently unstable system of signs” (Hansen, 2015, p. 274). Reflecting on the effects of iconic images, she contends that icons might affect the debate in more indirect and long-term ways than a sudden foreign policy shift or the decision of military intervention, contributing to supporting particular moral positions or, by being reappropriated (e.g., the Abu Ghraib hooded prisoner image shown in an art gallery) being instrumentalized to promote radically different interpretations.

Some scholars have suggested a more direct link between the circulation of certain images and specific political outcomes. For example, Randy Besco (2018) has pointed out how the image of Alan Kurdi in September 2015 had a direct impact on the Canadian election results as the Liberal party leader Justin Trudeau promised to a public largely shocked by the image, that if elected, he would have accepted 25,000 Syrians by the end of the year. Using the same dramatic picture as a starting point, Lemay (2019) analyzed Germany's openness politics between 2015 and 2016. A more recent study conducted by a group of British researchers who interviewed 30 senior officials in charge of delivering humanitarian aid for the government of the sixteen among the top humanitarian donors has focused on the influence of news coverage on countries' emergency aid budgets. The study (Scott et al., 2022) found that media attention puts pressure on the aid system to allocate additional funding to face sudden or new crises, mainly because other accountability institutions (e.g., the public, civil society, elected officials) push for a prompt humanitarian reaction. However, humanitarian budget allocation remained largely unaffected by increased media coverage of a particular crisis. The study also revealed that many aid bureaucrats believed that other governments’ humanitarian allocations were consistently

driven by media pressure. Therefore, they were more inclined to finance relief responses for the so-called "forgotten crises". The authors concluded that even when humanitarian spending seemed relatively unaffected by news coverage, media pressure appeared to influence the outcomes indirectly.

I am not suggesting that we move away from an analysis of the impact of visual representations on politics. Rather, my intent is to highlight that, even with increasing interest in images within the study of world politics, there remains a gap in the literature concerning theoretical and methodological approaches that specifically address the role of visual representations in transnational governance processes. Images are powerful not only because they are able to produce effect on the public (e.g., media images sparking public emotional responses) and eventually, in some cases, on political dynamics as a consequene. Images are powerful – and important to study – also because they can be instrumentally mobilized by different actors in a governance system raising questions of unequal power relations whithin the different actors of the system in producing and disseminating images. And this is particularly evident in the complex systems of multilevel and multi-scalar migration governance populated by a variety of actors at each level of the system.

From a post-positivist epistemological perspective, the fact that a direct causal link between media representation and foreign policy decisions is still debatable or should probably be excluded altogether does not surprise nor pose a significant problem when attempting to comprehend the impact that visuality plays in governance. Inspired by constructivism, I am more interested in understanding how visual representation should be accounted for in a system of governance, given their capacity to produce meaning and signification. In order to do so, it is probably helpful to introduce the notion of 'public sphere' and the more recent 'digital public' sphere to define the space in which images create meaning and who the actors of this space are.

The digital public sphere and its actors

The communicative sphere we live in is radically changed compared to the media landscape that existed when scholars were writing about the CNN effects. Internet, the emergence of social media, and the accessibility of digital technologies have given a whole new role and potential to images (through their role in shaping discourses and representations), given how easy it is to take pictures and circulate them. The main implication of the new communicative system is that it is open to bottom-up approaches of actors and influencers at the individual level. The digital public sphere pushes us to rethink the way we approach the study of governance and advance a theoretical framework able to consider and include in the analysis the new actors situated at the micro level (individuals or small groups of people), now able to participate to the public debate and therefore contribute to influencing governance dynamics.

A digital public sphere is “a communicative sphere provided or supported by online or social media – from websites to social network sites, weblogs, and micro-blogs – where participation is open and freely available to everybody interested, where people can discuss matters of common concern, and where proceedings are visible to all” (Schäfer, 2015, p. 1).

One of the most widely acknowledged advantages of the digital public sphere, as opposed to the traditional one – made of “newspapers and magazines, radio and television” (Habermas et al., 1974, p. 49) – is its *openness* to a variety of actors. In other words, online media enable a more comprehensive array of voices to be heard. Schäfer (2015) illustrates this distinguishing feature of the digital public sphere being opened to different stakeholders by noting how content can be quickly posted online without intermediaries or gatekeepers such as journalists in a traditional media environment. Thanks to this feature, the digital public sphere can empower those marginalized or excluded by the public debate.

While this new dimension does not erase the unequal power relations within the governance of migration, it has the potential to challenge them bringing to the forefront of the digital public sphere groups or individuals traditionally left at the margin. The features inherent to the digital sphere allow therefore to study the different dynamics of knowledge and meaning production performed by the different actors while at the same time acknowledging existing and changing power dynamics.

State institutions (and state-based institutions such as EU agencies) that have been one of the most prominent actors of the traditional public sphere remain critical to today's digital communicative sphere. Against this backdrop, state departments, political parties, and representatives of national and transnational institutions have, at this point, mostly embraced the challenge of online communication.

It would be rather surprising to find any of those institutions not having a dedicated department for online communication, whether through websites, Facebook pages, or Twitter and Instagram accounts. Indeed, while in 2013, 77.7% of governments of the 193 UN member countries had a presence on Twitter (Burson-Marsteller's, 2013), this figure raised to 98% in 2020 (Burson Cohn & Wolfe, 2020). State-level agencies, heads of state, EU representatives, and political leaders have social media accounts. They actively and timely comment on global issues and events, followed by millions of followers. For example, the European Commission Facebook page has 1.3 million followers, the President of Russia's Twitter account has 4 million, the Prime Minister of Canada, Justine Trudeau's Instagram has 4 million followers, and President Biden's official Twitter account has 17.9 million followers.[1]

At the macro level, scholars have by now not only largely pointed out the importance of social media in international politics (Bjola & Holmes, 2015; Hocking & Melissen, 2015) but also the centrality that specific social media, such as Twitter, play in world politics (Duncombe, 2018). As government institutions have traditionally been the main protagonists of the public sphere (and international politics), it does not come as a surprise that they adapted their communication strategies to the digital environment, becoming one of the key actors of the digital sphere too (Krzyżanowski, 2018a, 2018b; Colombo 2018). If the traditional public sphere has been predominantly occupied by "institutional" voices – those deriving from the state through the institutions (e.g., political parties, state bodies) themselves and the individual politicians as representatives of those institutions – the digital public sphere opens up to the participation of actors usually excluded. Organizations at the *meso* level and individuals at the *micro* level can now join the ranks together with traditional actors at the *macro* level.

International Organisations (IOs) and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) started in the mid-2000s to create social media accounts to interact with the public and governments. On one side, social media allowed organizations to interact with millions of supporters (or potential supporters) across the globe. As the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF), Digital Engagement Director, Sid Das acknowledged: 'the explosion of digital communications platforms has been a game-changing opportunity (Burson Cohn & Wolfe, 2020). At the same time, the digital public sphere enabled IOs and NGOs to use social media to target key decision-makers as part of their advocacy activities directly.

The European Media Director of Human Rights Watch, Andrew Stroehlein, clearly illustrated this new sphere of opportunity outlining the crucial role played by Twitter in three key components of the organization's mandate: "investigate, expose, change" (Stroehlein, 2017). Social media have not only been widely used to document human rights violations but, most notably for this paper's focus, to *expose* and *change.* Twitter allowed the NGO to make publicly known the abuses and their perpetrators (without the intermediation of journalists) but also to capitalize on the power of the large social media following to influence decision-makers. 'Twitter is integral to this effort because we can use the platform to target key decision-makers and the

[1] Last checked: February 14th, 2022

journalists who might help us influence them. Driving public pressure, media coverage, and political-diplomatic concern around an important issue, with Twitter as part of a multifaceted advocacy effort, helps us bring about that third and most important goal: positive change' (Stroehlein, 2017).

Going one step further, one of the most exciting developments brought along by the opening up of the public sphere to digital technologies and social media has been the possibility of participation of individuals, until that moment, generally considered as *only* the public of traditional media. In a stoke taking of the CNN effect, Livingstone has pointed out how the blurred lines between consumers and producers imply that traditional representations of mass media as the one generating content with political elites interpreting them and a passive receiving public are outdated to explain the current communicative sphere (Livingston, 2011). People and movements – thanks to the non-mediated accessibility to social media – could directly participate and attempt to influence decision-makers as never before. Scholars have noticed how particular events, such as the “European refugee crisis," have been paradigmatic in showing how governments have become increasingly responsive to online public discourses (Ferra & Nguyen, 2017). By increasing the possibility of people's engagement with international politics to obtain information on what is going on in other countries (often not included in traditional media coverage) and, most importantly, allowing direct access to the public debate, digital technologies have profoundly transformed the public sphere. Social media have undeniably increased citizens' sphere of political action (Seib, 2012).

For example, although commentators have been right in pointing out how the uprising that occurred in the Middle East and North Africa at the beginning of the 2010s have been first and foremost peoples' movement (Khamis et al., 2012), it is nonetheless quite interesting noticing how the 2011 Egyptian Revolution and the Syrian uprising the same year have been associated with Facebook (Time, 2011) and YouTube respectively (CNN, 2012). While the events that occurred, for instance in Tunisia, Egypt, and Syria, have certainly been fuelled by national movements moved by context-specific political, media, and security situations in each of those countries, it is now challenging to overlook the crucial role that social media have played in the circulation of information and the possibility of interaction when we look back at those events. The power of people in using social media to engage with politics is also confirmed by its nemesis: the surveillance or interruption of internet services that States have at times put in place during particular historical moments to control or disrupt public debate tout court (Duncombe, 2018).

Given the radically new features of today's communicative sphere, this paper advances the need for a theoretical framework to think about governance that includes all relevant actors, not only the traditional ones located at the macro and meso level (e.g., institutions and organizations), but also actors at the micro level (individual and small groups of people). To understand the relevance of this digital public sphere and its empowering and inclusive feature in governance, we first briefly introduce the notions of governance and migration governance this paper draws upon.

Governance and migration governance

This paper proposes to use a theoretical framework to think about transnational governance, particularly migration governance, including all the relevant governance layers. This means looking at what has been traditionally considered – a set of rules and policies (and more recently practices) – and at the level of discourse and representation.

Roseneau defined governance as ‘systems of rule at all levels of human activity—from the family to the international organization—in which the pursuit of goals through the exercise of control has transnational repercussions’ (Rosenau, 1995, p. 13). However, to reflect on governance – and the role of different actors in it – it is also essential to consider Barnett and

Duvall's insightful contribution on the role of power in global governance (Barnett & Duvall, 2004). As the two authors pointed out, the two terms are indeed strictly interconnected as governance encompasses the norms, structures, and organizations that rule and control social life, which, in turn, are critical elements of power. Within this framework, an analysis of transnational governance dynamics cannot be separated from the analysis of power. In Barnett and Duvall's understanding, power refers to the creation of effects that, through social relations, affect the ability of actors to shape their state and prospects. While the authors of *Power in Global Governance* identify four different expressions of power – compulsory, institutional, structural, and productive – the latter is particularly relevant for this paper as it provides a theoretical framework to include the study of images into that of transnational governance.

'Productive power is the socially diffuse production of subjectivity in systems of meaning and signification' (Barnett & Duvall, 2004, p. 3). In Barnett and Duvall's taxonomy of forms of power, productive power is *diffuse* – it works through connections at a certain 'distance' or that are mediated – and works through *social relations of constitution* – social relations that determine who the actors are and what capacities they have, their 'power to'. Productive power is therefore about 'discourse, the social processes and the systems of knowledge through which meaning is produced, fixed, lived, experienced, and transformed' (Barnett & Duvall, 2004, p. 20). Discourses are here intended in Foucauldian terms as sites of social relations of power that produce social identities and capacities. Barnett and Duval conceptualization is particularly relevant as it allows to analyze the discursive production – including contested ones - of subjects and the determination of meanings in transnational governance. Notably, it allows investigating how the 'other' is defined and how the fixing of meaning is connected with determined practices and policies (Barnett & Duvall, 2004). Therefore, the added value of this approach is its capacity to enable a study that looks at how a specific actor regulates the world and, at the same time, how the actors constitute it. Moreover, it allows for investigating how actors represent (and therefore define) themselves toward a specific issue.

In most governance accounts, it is widely acknowledged that in addition to state-level institutions and state-sponsored transnational institutions, non-governmental organizations need to be considered key actors. (Rosenau, 1995; Weiss & Gordenker, 1996; Duffield, 2001, 2007). What is still open to debate is whether individuals or, better to say, some forms of individual expression could also play a role in governance.

Few studies have highlighted the possibility of non-elites engaging in horizontal or bottom-up securitization processes (Adamides, 2020) and the increasingly crucial role that eyewitness videos play in engaging in politicization and securitization of issues following the widespread use of smartphones and social media (Shetty, 2022). At the same time, in recent years, visual evidence and users' generated content have increasingly become an essential aspect of advocacy (Gregory, 2006; McLagan, 2003), has been used in investigations of human rights abuses and war crimes (Aronson, 2018) and has influenced the conversation about police brutality in the US (Cave & Oliver, 2016; Uberti, 2015). Scholars have started to study the role of individuals/influencers in affecting policy change in the realm of politics (Shirky, 2011), media coverage (Freelon et al., 2018), health (Raine et al., 2014), climate change (Greer & Glackin, 2021), marketing (Kay et al., 2020), and agriculture (Oreszczyn et al., 2010).

While the existing literature confirms the importance of including the role of individuals in the analysis of governance, no research has yet focused on the migration domain. Most importantly, so far, nobody has explicitly looked at the power of images, the power of which, in the era of digital communication, is more than before and different than before.

Until this point, this paper has approached governance from a general perspective. Indeed, the notion of governance applies to several sectors: environment, security, economy, and health, among others. This paper focuses on migration governance, intended as the constellation of policies, practices, and discourses that contribute to international mobility management. When reflecting on migration governance, it is important to keep into account – as Bett suggests (Betts,

2011, p. 2)– that there are an array of institutions and policy frameworks that, although not labeled as "migration", have critical implications for states' management of migration issues instead. Policies, practices, and discourse about human rights, health, and labor law, for example, indirectly contribute to how states respond to migration. Therefore, Bett's approach calls for including actors not explicitly labelled as "migration" actors.

Reflecting on the politics of global migration governance, Bett argues that to understand the politics of international migration, it is also important to look at 'what configuration of interests, power, and ideas has led to the existing regulatory framework and determines the international politics of each area of migration' (Betts, 2011, p. 14). Interest refers to the objective that states or transnational institutions such as the EU intend to achieve by formulating policies. Since the interests relevant for migration governance are various and involve a wide range of actors with their own interests, it is crucial to investigate the role of power to understand how interests become "relevant" and "influential", it is crucial to investigate the role of power. Looking at power helps explore how different actors negotiate their respective interests and priorities and which ones prevail. Finally, Bett argues that it is equally important to consider how ideas shape the international politics of migration. The theoretical framework advanced in this paper builds on this literature to propose an approach that looks not only at the set of regulations, policies, and practices governing migration but also at the discourses and representations. The reasons why regulation, policies, and practices constitute governance acts are likely self-evident. For example, a law that prevents a specific group of people from legally crossing a border, border pushbacks, or a policy setting the requirements for legal entry into a country are all explicit expressions of migration governance. At the same time, it is crucial to acknowledge that also discourses, such as those securitizing (Bigo & Guild, 2005; Massari, 2021) or criminalizing the migrants (Anderson et al., 2000; Bosworth et al., 2018), including vulnerable categories such as children (Achilli, 2022) are one of the key ways in which governance is performed.

The following section outlines how this new theoretical approach suggests connecting the dots between the relevance of images in meaning creation, the specific features of today's digital public sphere and the variety of actors who participate in it, and the definition of governance and migration governance just outlined.

Connecting the dots: Visual migration governance

We have seen a relative consensus that images could be important data to consider in studying international politics. This paper intends to advance a theory of how images should be taken into account in the study of migration governance. Once one acknowledges the role that ideas and meaning construction have in shaping governance, it becomes clear how the investigation of the various discourses that contribute to shaping those meanings and ideas is equally important. It becomes clear how crucial it is an approach that allows thinking about migration governance considering not only policies, rules, and practices but also discourses and representations. Given the constant interaction between governance systems and societal changes, it is essential for academia to pay attention to the potential of images in shaping our perspectives on issues. This potential appears even richer given the features of today's digital public sphere and the inclusion of traditionally marginalized actors.

A wide range of studies has looked at (textual) discourses of migration and how they affect international mobility management. In this paper, however, I argue the importance of also looking at how visual discourses contribute to migration governance. In order to do so, to understand how migration governance is also performed through images, it is essential to include the study of the images produced by the different actors that, with different capacities, participate in it. As we have seen above, in addition to the role of state actors and state-based transnational actors (e.g., EU) situated at the macro level and the role played by international government and non-government

organizations at the meso level, the literature on the digital public sphere points out how also actors situated at the micro level do play a role in the way specific issues are talked about and managed.

I suggest applying the same reasoning to the realm of migration governance and looking at how images produced by the actors at the macro, meso, and micro levels, thanks to their instant and wide circulation, contribute to the iteration between the discourse of migration and migration governance. The characteristics of migration governance, specifically its multilevel and multiscalar nature, made it a particularly appropriate field to study the role that images produced by different actors located at different levels of the system play and how this role is influenced by the actors' different roles and power within today's digital public sphere. Before going any further, however, it is crucial to disentangle the complex relationship between images and governance. It is essential to consider that this is an iterative approach between the images/communication on one side and the governance and policy on the other.

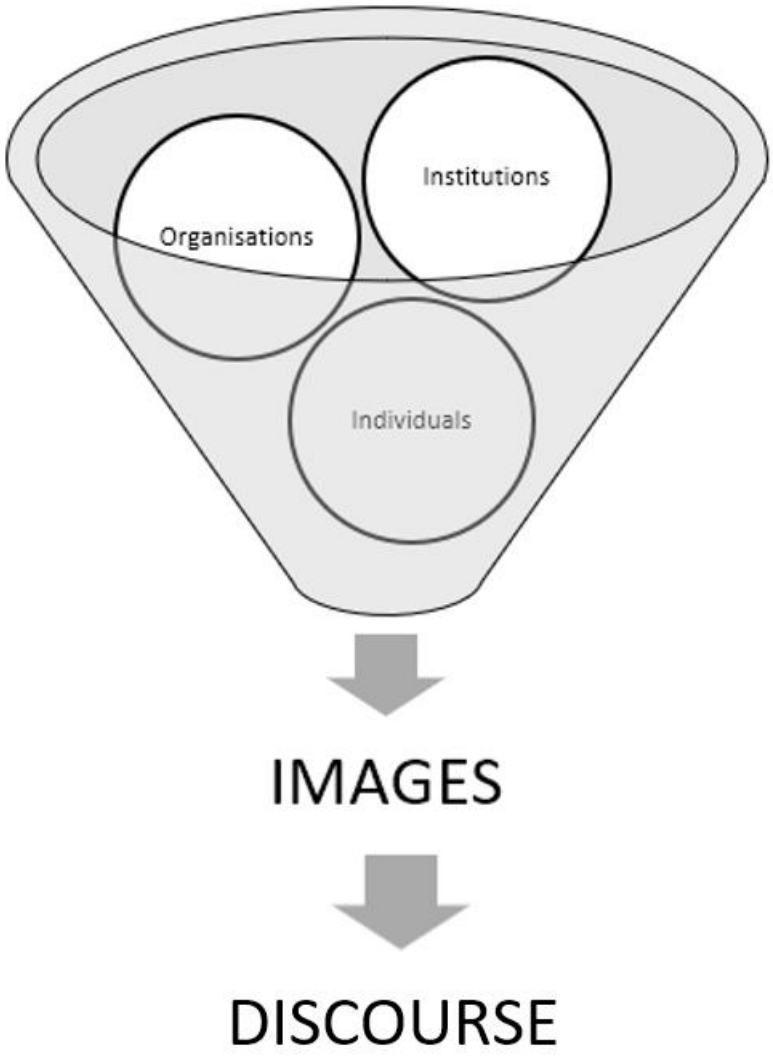

Figure 1. Different actors' role within the discourse shaping migration governance.

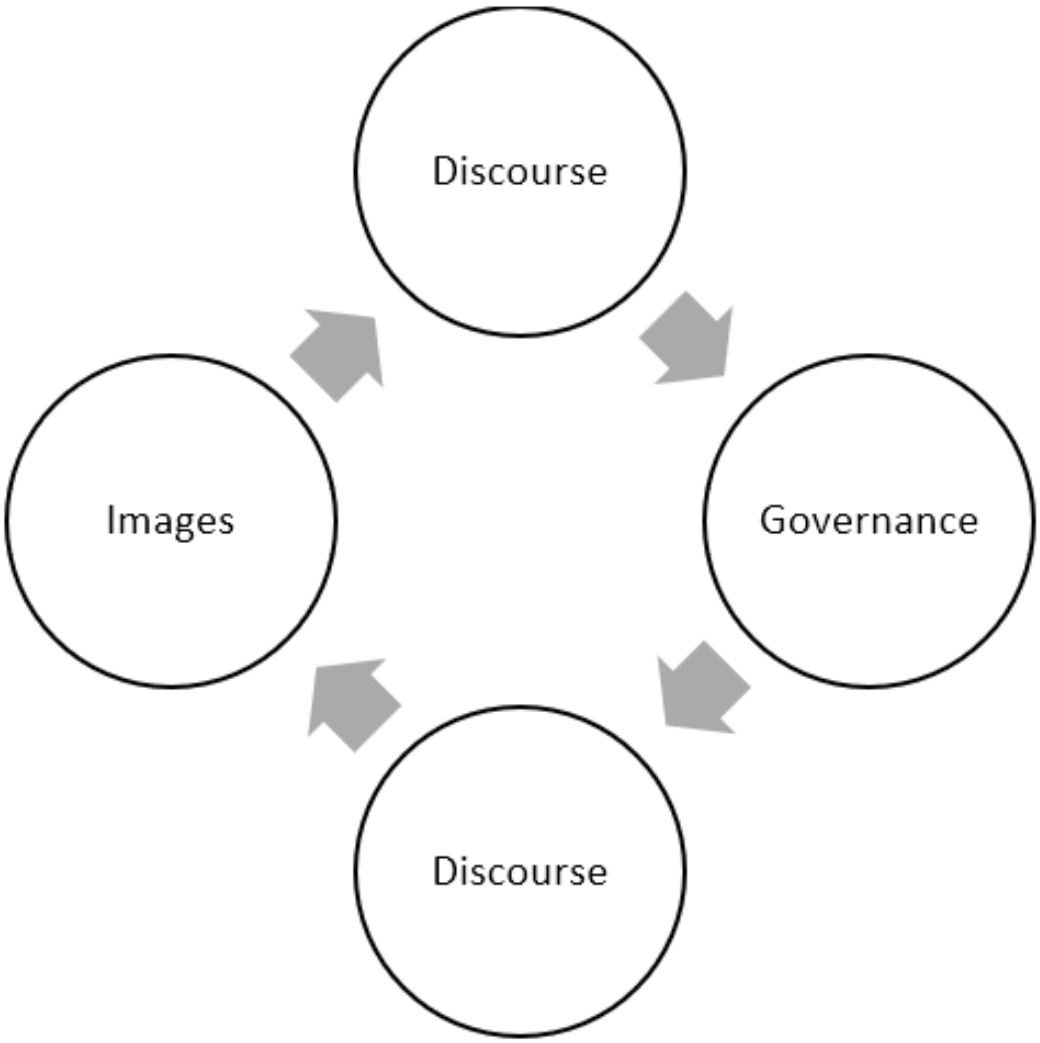

Figure 2. Iterative relation of discourse and governance in visual migration governance

On the one hand, images contribute to governance through their crucial role in shaping public debate and discourses. Building upon the abovementioned theories about the interrelations between interest, power, discourse, and governance, I suggest focusing on images as they contribute to meaning creation, shaping the governance system in a certain way. All the digital public sphere actors – state-based institutions, international organizations, NGOs, civil society, individuals, and artists – contribute, although with different degrees of power, to the creation of discourse. On the other hand, images could be approached as one of the ways in which governance is performed if we conceptualize governance as operationalized by policies, practices, regulations, and discourses. Therefore, looking at the role that images produced by different actors at different levels play in migration governance sheds light on two opposite but interrelated dynamics. The analysis of visual migration governance allows us first to explore how images contribute to meaning formation within the discourse(s) that shape the governance of international mobility and, secondly, to investigate how migration governance can also be performed through images. These two interconnected processes of meaning creation could mislead us toward cognitive immobility, stuck into the chicken or the egg dilemma. Should images

be approached as governance tools intended as part of the instruments that policymakers can utilize to steer actors toward specific policy outcomes? Or, on the contrary, should images be considered for their ability to contribute to discourses on migration issues that shape governance policies? The difficulty of answering these questions lays in its false premises. The question of what comes first between images and governance is misleading as the two are interconnected in a strictly hermeneutical process in which the latter shapes the former while it is also shaped by it.

Part II – A proposed multi-modal approach

Framing the field

In the analysis of representations, the notion of "discourse" is certainly central. I use this term according to the Foucauldian conceptualization, as a system of representation of knowledge and meanings situated in a particular time and space (Foucault, 1971, 1972, 1980). According to Foucault, the concept of discourse is strictly interrelated with the production of truth and relations of power: 'What I mean is this: in a society such as ours, but basically in any society, there are manifold relations of power which permeate, characterise and constitute the social body, and these relations of power cannot themselves be established, consolidated nor implemented without the production, accumulation, circulation and functioning of a discourse. There can be no possible exercise of power without a certain economy of discourses of truth which operates through and on the basis of this association. We are subjected to the production of truth through power and we cannot exercise power except through the production of truth' (Foucault, 1980, p. 93).

For this reason, Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is the perfect starting point for framing the theoretical field of my methodological approach. Building upon the Critical Linguistic scholarship that since the 1970s has been concerned with the relationship between language and power (Blommaert & Bulcaen, 2000), CDA is "fundamentally concerned with analysing opaque as well as transparent structural relationships of dominance, discrimination, power and control as manifested in language. In other words, CDA aims to investigate critically social inequality as it is expressed, signalled, constituted, legitimized and so on by language use (or in discourse)" (Wodak & Meyer, 2009, p. 2). However, since its origin, CDA has primarily looked at discourse through the lenses of text, overlooking other modality of expression, particularly the visual dimension (Wang, 2014).

Starting from the mid-90s, a growing group of scholars (Slembrouck et al., 1995; Kress & Van Leeuwen, 1996; Rose, 2001) began to claim the importance of including visual material into the analysis and started focusing on visual methodologies. The importance conferred to the visual dimension in academic research became crucial not only because of the massive presence of images of all kinds (photography, television, art, advertisement, etc.) in our contemporary visual landscape, but also for the acknowledgement of the pivotal role of visuality in the process of meanings production and exchange, particularly in the Western society (Rose, 2001). Since the world can be seen in different ways and the different ways of seeing have different social impacts, the analysis of images becomes crucial to grasp the effects of hegemonic visualities in reinforcing dynamics of power and social difference (Haraway, 1991).

With the same interest in visual representations, and a specific focus on International Political Theory, Roland Bleiker (2001) has contributed to the debate with a seminal article on the *Aesthetic Turn*. Starting from the observation of the increasingly wider diffusion of images representing international political events and "their highly arbitrary nature" (Bleiker, 2001, p. 509), the author emphasized the importance of locating politics in the differences between what is represented and its representation. Following Derrida (1967), this approach sees representation as an interpretation of the truth. Therefore, a political event should never be investigated *per se*, but its representation should instead be at the center of the analysis to unveil the "sets of true

statements" beyond it (Bleiker, 2001, p. 512). In fact, argues the author, although the human tendency is to trust the resemblance of what is represented with reality – part of the human "desire to order the world" (Bleiker, 2001, p. 515) – we should acknowledge that representation is power.

Over the last decades, many authors have focused on visuality in International Politics (see among others Robinson, 1999; Boltanski, 1999; Shapiro, 1999; Bleiker & Kay, 2007; Campbell, 2007). More recently, a growing scholarship has devoted its attention to the visuality of migration. Studies have explored images of displacement and emotions in international politics (Adler-Nissen et al., 2020b), the humanitarian representations of refugees (Johnson, 2011; Rajaram, 2002a; Szörényi, 2006), the visual politics of a military humanitarian operation in the Mediterranean Sea (Musarò, 2017), gendered framing of mobility (Friese, 2017), representations of illegalized immigration (Bischoff et al., 2014) and self-representation of migrants and refugees (Chouliaraki, 2017). Scholars have shown how mainstream representations tend to fuel a stereotypical and overly simplified narrative of the migrant as an object of compassion (Ticktin, 2011), as helpless and passive (Calain, 2012; Fassin, 2007; Kleinman & Kleinman, 1996; Rajaram, 2002), as dehumanization subjects (Bleiker et al., 2013) at the mercy of reckless smugglers (Achilli & Massari, 2023).

Despite this growing attention to visuality, most studies omitted to indicate and outline the methodological approaches utilized for the analysis. With few notable exceptions (Hansen, 2011; Heck & Schlag, 2013; Hansen, 2015), academic scholarship on visuality has generally been less interested in the methodological dimensions. This is not a minor flaw, especially in the relatively new field of visuality in IR, as it ultimately undermines the power of the insight and the perspicacity of the argument. Remarkably, and again with few notable exceptions (Massari, 2021; Hansen et al., 2021), until now, most of the existing studies in IR and migration studies have focused on content analysis of a set of images that did not explore how the method could be combined with other more qualitative visual methodologies or on (few by definition) iconic images. The approach proposed in this paper seeks to address the challenge of dealing with a large dataset of images while at the same time maintaining a more qualitative, in-depth approach able to account for insights (such as polysemy and the role of absence) that would have escaped a more quantitative approach.

In this working paper, answering to Bleiker's call for an interdisciplinary framework that relies on multiple methods (Bleiker, 2015), I propose a multi-scalar and multi-modal approach to investigate images' role in migration governance. The multi-scalar approach will enable the investigation of actors situated at different levels of governance (the macro, meso, and micro levels discussed in Part I). The multi-modal demarche is based on the combination of various methods: content analysis – coding based on iconography, visual social semiotics, policy framework analysis, and interviews. The following sections present each method in detail and how they can be combined and complement each other to study the role of images in migration governance.

Content Analysis and Iconography

As Bell explained, content analysis 'is an empirical (observational) and objective procedure for quantifying recorded 'audio-visual' (including verbal) representation using reliable, explicitly defined categories ('values' on independent 'variables') (Bell, 2001a, p. 13). In this sense, it is a methodology particularly apt to answer questions around the predominance of certain visual patterns and historical changes in the representation of subjects or issues. Therefore, after having identified which "corpus" of images the study wants to focus on, content analysis requires the identification of visual categories, called "variables" whose content must be defined explicitly and unambiguously (e.g., subject, age, type of image, e.g., person vs. object, child vs. adult, photographic image vs. drawing, etc.) and respective "values" assigned (e.g., person vs. object,

child/adult/adolescent/elderly, photographic image/hand drawing/stylized electronic image). Quite important to notice is that variables in content analysis always refer to the way something is represented and not to the reality of it (e.g., it does not matter if a person portrayed as a police officer is a police officer or just a model posing for the picture). While pure content analysis would be used in order to make comparisons and cross-tabulation from the quantitative results given by the occurrence of each value and sub-value in each image, I propose to use it for the first preliminary descriptive phase of the analysis, namely the presentation of the general characteristics of the "corpus" of images. Later on, assigning different values to each image will also allow for testing some hypotheses (e.g., photographic images represent primarily children or persons are more often represented in the form of hand drawings).

A crucial element of content analysis, however, is the elaboration of precise hypotheses (called expectations), in other words, questions about the variables under examination. The definition of the variables is a crucial part of the analysis as it has also to do with the epistemological definition of our subject of study. In this sense, iconology (or iconography[2]) and the studies that have explored the iconology of representations should be the starting point in identifying variables that need to be included/looked for in the analysis (See also Mueller in Van Leeuwen & Jewitt, 2001). However, it is important to also draw upon the iconographical method in order to be able to identify and capture recurrent visual patterns that may still need to be identified by the literature.

Originally elaborated in the sixteenth century for the study of art, iconography was later developed and systematized in a three-level methodology for visual analysis by Erwin Panofsky (Müller, 2011). The identification of visual motifs and interpretation of the meaning of visual products take place through a three-step process: pre-iconographical description - or representational meaning according to the terminology used by van Leeuwen (2001) - iconographical analysis (or iconographical symbolism) and iconological interpretation (or iconological symbolism). After a 'neutral' description of the represented elements, the second step is meant to identify typologies of images that share the same features. This categorization of images allows the researcher to recognize variances and resemblances that will – in the final step – be interpreted according to the broader social context. The first level, similarly to the denotation of visual semiotics and the representational meaning of visual social semiotics, refers to the description of the element of the image. At the second level of analysis, the represented participants – to continue with the terminology used by Kress and van Leeuwen (1996) - do not only denote the depicted individual/object, “but also the ideas or concepts attached to it” (Van Leeuwen, 2001, p. 100). The iconicity attribute refers to the image's resemblance with the object that the image represents. In order to fully grasp the iconographical meaning of images, it can be helpful to keep in mind the distinction made by C.S. Pierce between icon, index, and symbol. The first term refers to the similarity between the iconic sign and the object represented. Index is a sign identifying his signified object. Symbols are images that conventionally (and therefore culturally specific) establish a relationship between the representation and the object.

Although Panofsky initially elaborates on the iconographical method in relation to art history, he recognizes that the same pictorial conventions that connect concepts to artistic themes work in contemporary art. In the iconographical symbolism, 'there arose, identifiable by standardised appearance behaviour and attributes, the well-remembered types of the Vamp and the Straight Girl (perhaps the most convincing modern equivalents of the Medieval personifications of the Vices and Virtues), the Family Man and the Villain, the latter marked by a black moustache and a walking stick' (Panofsky quoted in Van Leeuwen, 2001, p. 101). Hence, a specific corpus of images will include a specific set of visual typifications. According to Kurasawa (2015), the range of representations predominant in a particular cultural, historical, and socio-

[2] I used iconography and iconology as synonyms following Panovsky's relabelling of the first former with the latter (for more on this, please see: Pauwels and Margolis 2011).

political context are limited, and its reiteration produces an "iconographic repertoire" of humanitarian images. The importance of visual conventions and repertoires lies in their being representative of a culturally and socio-historically situated system of thought, a way of representing the world that is shared by the practitioners that produce the visual material and works “as tacit referential or indexical social knowledge” (Kurasawa, 2015, p. 20). Moreover, the repertories play a pivotal role in constructing the public discourse, setting the boundaries of how the represented people, situations, and relations can be thought of and interpreted.

A semiotic analysis of images

As Bell (2001b) pointed out, content analysis alone is often insufficient to support affirmation about the interpreted meaning or the significance or effect of a representation. Once the recurrent and predominant visual motives have been identified, visual social semiotics can be extremely useful in shedding light on the different and multiple meanings an image can contain.

Semiotics is an area of research interested in the study of signs. With its origin in the ancient Greek world, semiotics is today applied in various disciplines such as linguistics, religious studies, media, cartography, etc. (Nöth, 2011). In semiotics, the sign (either an imagined or material sign) has to be understood in relation to both its referent object and the mental image or idea evoked (Peirce, 1931, vol. 2). Its visual declination, visual semiotics, emerged in the 1960s with specific attention to the visual language. According to one of its founding fathers, Roland Barthes, two levels of meaning need to be addressed in the semiotic analysis of images: denotation and connotation (Barthes, 1972).

The first step of analysis focuses on identifying what van Leeuwen calls “literal message” (Van Leeuwen, 2001, p. 94) – the Barthian denotation - and answers the question of what is depicted in the image. The second stage of the analysis is connotation. It refers to ideas, values, and concepts represented in the image, aiming to identify the cultural interpretations linked to specific aspects of images. 'Such connotative meanings - in Mythologies (1972) Barthes called them 'myths' - are first of all very broad and diffuse concepts which condense everything associated with the represented people, places or things into a single entity (…). Secondly, they are ideological meanings, serving to legitimate the status quo and the interests of those whose power is invested in it’ (Van Leeuwen, 2001, p. 97).

Van Leeuwen has highlighted that despite visual semiotics' crucial importance in answering questions related to what is represented in the image and the meanings of the representation, two aspects in Barthes' perspective limit the potentiality of the analysis (Van Leeuwen, 2001). The first concerns the non-problematization of the concepts of denotation and connotation. Barthes considers the first level of meaning as if what is represented corresponds to reality without the interference of any encoding mechanism, ambiguity, or the possibility of different interpretations. Something similar happens with the concept of connotation. The problem with this term is that, although its exploration can shed light on the process of condensation of values associated with the subject in a single image while at the same time legitimizing its representation, it considers the underlying meaning as universally understood by different people in different times and places.

These shortcomings translate into a narrow focus of visual semiotics for the visual text, the lexis of the image, and an overlooking of the context, the visual syntax. In a visual analysis interested in considering intertextuality and the importance of the broader discourse around the images, the attention to the context is, on the contrary, crucial. In this sense, social semiotics, for its emphasis on the social dimension, seems more apt to grasp the social implications of visual material. In fact, this discipline is concerned with 'the social dimensions of meaning in any media of communication, its production, interpretation and circulation, and its implications in social processes, as cause or effect' (Semiotics Encyclopedia Online, 2018). With particular attention to

the study of images in their social context, visual social semiotics adds to the representational level of analysis that I have outlined above, two other layers: the interactional and the compositional. The first refers to the way in which what is represented interacts with the viewer. The second looks at how images are included in the broader visual syntax.

In an article devoted to social semiotics in visual communication, Jewitt and Oyama (2001) situate the main difference between the structuralist school of semiotics and social semiotics in the notion of 'semiotic resources'. The authors define resources as “at once the products of cultural histories and the cognitive resources we use to create meaning in the production and interpretation of visual and other messages” (Jewitt & Oyama, 2001, p. 36). Unlike the concept of code used in semiotics to connect the sign to the meaning, resources enable us to explore and make sense of the different ways signs can be interpreted and assigned different meanings. Semiotic resources (such as the point of view of an image or the depth of focus in photography) are at the same time determined by the specific context in which they were created and cognitive resources used to interpret images and their meanings. For this reason, the attention to semiotic resources implies attention to the ways the various "rules" of interpretation came into being in a given cultural context and the possibility of change of those rules.

Before moving to present visual social semiotics methodology, a couple of considerations regarding semiotics resources are very important to use them appropriately as a methodological tool of visual analysis. First, semiotics resources do not create meaning *per se*, but 'meaning potential': they make it “possible to describe the kinds of symbolic relations between image producers/viewers and the people, place and things in the images” (Jewitt & Oyama, 2001, p. 135). These meaning potentials are activated by the images' producers and viewers and do not constitute a fixed meaning. However, they refer to a limited spectrum of meanings. Second, it is essential to remember that symbolic relations are very different from "real" relations because their representation can purposely subvert "real" relations.

Visual social semiotics is based on Michael Halliday's conceptualization of the three metafunctions of semiotic work: ideational, interpersonal, and textual (Jewitt & Oyama, 2001). The first has to do with the creation of representation, the second with the relation between the producer and the receiver of the text, and the last one with how these functions work within their specific communication genre. Kress and van Leuween (1996) have adapted Halliday's framework to the study of images and classified the three tasks of visual semiotics as representational, interactive, and compositional.

The representational meta-function looks at the participants of the image, i.e., the people, objects, and places represented, and, most importantly, at visual syntactic patterns that put the participant of the images in relation to each other: the visual structures. The structure dimension is important because it creates “meaningful propositions by means of visual syntax” (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 1996, p. 47). The authors identify two kinds of representation: the narrative and the compositional. The choice to depict something in a narrative or conceptual way offers a "key to understanding the discourses which mediate their representation" (Van Leeuwen & Jewitt, 2001, p. 141). Visual structures do not simply mirror the structures of 'reality'. On the contrary, they create images of reality linked with the interests of the social institutions in which the images are created, disseminated, and used. "They are ideological. Visual structures are never merely formal: they have a deeply important semantic dimension" (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 1996, p. 47).

The narrative structure refers to how the different elements of the image relate to one another. The elements depicted are the *represented participants* – regardless of their humanity or non-humanity – and are distinguished from the *interactive participants*, namely the producer and the viewer of the images.

The conceptual structure represents the participants according to their general characteristics: "in terms of their more generalized and more or less stable and timeless essence, in terms of class, or structure or meaning" (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 1996, p. 57). The absence of vector, classification, or symbolic process defines the analytical process. It has a wide range of

structures such as temporal, topological or topographical, unstructured, exhaustive, and inclusive. Finally, there are symbolic processes: the structures that represent the meaning of the participants.

The interactive meaning is interested in grasping the relationship between the producer of the image and the viewer. Although their interaction can be direct and immediate (such as when people take pictures of each other as souvenirs), Kress and van Leeuwen note how the contexts of production and reception are often disjoint. Disjunction aside, however, the producer and the viewer still share the image and "a knowledge of the communicative resources that allow its articulation and understanding, a knowledge of the way social interactions and social relations can be encoded in images" (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 1996, p. 115). In visual communication, not only social relations but also the relations between the producer and the viewer, are represented instead of enacted. This representation is created through different *resources* such as contact, distance, perspective, and angle.

Some images establish clear contact with the viewer. This is done through a vector (eyeline or gesture) connecting the represented participants to the viewer. These kinds of images perform two critical tasks: they directly address the viewer and constitute an "image act" (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 1996, p. 117). Kress and van Leeuwen base the notion of "image act" on Halliday's concept of "speech functions," which identifies four core speech acts and two reactions (expected and discretionary) for each: offer of information (social response: agreement or contradiction); offer of goods and services (social response: acceptance or rejection); demand of information (social response: answer or not answer), and demand of goods and services (social response: respond to the quest or not respond). On the contrary, when there is no eye contact, the images put the viewer in a *voyeuristic* position as an unseen spectator. Following Halliday's classification, these images that do not directly address the viewer are called *"offer images"* in contraposition to the abovementioned images that belong to the "*demand*" category.

Distance is another way through which visual material depicts the relationship between the viewer and the represented participants. Similarly to contact, distance is a term that refers to a continuum of the frame size that can go from what is technically called a close-up to a very long shot. A close shot corresponds to a close (or even intimate) social relationship, whereas a very long shot corresponds to social distance.

As in the case of contact, distance is a powerful dimension of the interactive meaning. Through a certain kind of representation, it creates an imaginary relationship between the viewer and the represented participant, contributing to defining the people with whom we have a close or a far social distance and who are thus strangers to us. Although, as underlined above, representation is always about imagined relationships, not enacted or real ones, it is, however, essential to acknowledge its potential in creating a more or less strong, social connection with the represented participants.

Perspective is another crucial dimension of the interactive meaning highlighted by Kress and van Leeuwen. This technique was first introduced in pictorial art during the Renaissance and used to represent depth and space on a two-dimensional surface. It provided the illusion of a stronger connection between reality and its representation and, simultaneously naturalized a point of view that was, on the contrary, socially determined. The notion of point of view is connected with the perspective and the concept of vanishing points (the points where the parallel lines seem to converge in a perspective image), an important semiotic resource. The point of view indicates the position of the image producer toward the represented participants and the relationship among them thereby represented. It may have different angles, representing power, involvement, or detachment.

As with many of the other semiotic resources analyzed, the angle of the image should be understood as a continuum of the whole range of possible points of view. Schematically, at the horizontal level, the image can have a frontal or an oblique angle. At the vertical level, a high angle represents a relationship of power of the viewer toward the represented participant. In

contrast, a low angle signifies the opposite, and an eye-level angle a relationship of equality. In between, a whole spectrum of nuanced meanings can be produced through all intermediate points of view within these visual perspectives' extremes.

The compositional meaning refers to the way the representational and interactive meanings relate to each other and "the way they are integrated into a meaningful whole" (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 1996, p. 176). Compositional meaning acquires even more value in multi-modal texts (texts that combine different semiotic modes such as written text and images) that comprise most of the images object of this study. Composition is the analysis of the position of various elements and the different *information values* attributed to them according to their specific position, *salience* (the relative importance of the elements of the image), *framing* (which has to do with the degree to which the represented participants are connected, disjoined or separated to each other) and the *modality* (defined and measured as the credibility or "true" value of the image).

Before concluding the discussion of the visual approach, it is essential to address a crucial feature of visual images: their polysemic value. As Barthes (1977) has pointed out, "all images are polysemous; they imply, underlying their signifiers, a 'floating chain' of signifieds, the reader able to choose some and ignore others" (pp. 38–39). There is little doubt that by looking at the same image, two people could be stuck by different aspects of the representation. Therefore, acknowledging polysemy should be considered seriously in any visual analysis. However, the various readings are somehow circumscribed as "in every society various techniques are developed intended to *fix* the floating chain of signified in such a way as to counter the terror of uncertain signs" (Barthes, 1977, p. 39). In the interpretation of images, therefore, the meanings circulating among a situated cultural milieu assume particular importance in limiting the various reading possibilities. In this sense, as Mitchell has maintained, "whatever the pictorial turn is, then, it should be clear that it is not a return to naïve mimesis, copy or correspondence theories of representation, or a renewed metaphysics of pictorial 'presence'; it is rather a post-linguistic, post-semiotic rediscovery of the picture as a complex interplay between visuality, apparatus, institutions, discourse, bodies, and figurality" (Mitchell, 1995, pp. 4–5).

In choosing to interpret images through the specific methodology of visual social semiotics, I am also aware that this is one of the ways through which an image can be read and its meaning unpacked, far from implying that this is the *only* or the *right* way to analyze a visual artifact. However, beyond its attention to the broader cultural and social context, visual social semiotics' interpretation of an image is based on the complex agglomeration of the multiple semiotic resources at play and the interplay of the different layers of meaning (i.e., representational, interactive, compositional). In each picture, this infinite possibility of combination works to reinforce or, on the contrary, weaken a particular reading. Consequently, an image is analyzed in its entirety, and, in each case, the various layers of meaning and semiotic resources considered together can help point toward one specific reading.

Migration Policy Framework Analysis and Interviews

One of the distinguishing features of visual social semiotics lies in the attention to the "social" context. Images are created, selected, and circulate in a historically determined setting. For this reason, attention to the broader context is critical: legal frameworks, migration policies, practices in place, and public debate around migration are all essential elements of the migration regime that it is crucial to consider to complement and enrich the visual investigation. The analysis of the different visual narratives acquires even more meaning when put in the context of the policy narratives around migration and key themes of public debate, especially in the context of the so-called refugees and asylum crises.

Visual analysis is crucial to unpack the meanings conveyed by visual narratives. However, in order to be able to grasp the implications of their representation fully, it is also important to understand the dynamics around image production. For this reason, this study intends to complement the investigation of images with semi-structured interviews with key informants' representatives of the three groups of actors identified above as playing a role in migration governance: government institutions, non-governmental organizations, and asylum seekers/refugees/migrants. Interviews can be fundamental in understanding the dynamics of visual communication production in terms of key messages, preferred visual motifs, ethical considerations around the use of images, intended meaning, images selections, etc. To this purpose, interviews will be conducted with communication and advocacy staff of institutions and NGOs' working on migration and with individual refugees, asylum seekers, and migrant producing images disseminated on social media.

Ideally, interviews are carried out in person and go hand in hand, when possible, with multi-sited fieldwork in the sites where images are produced and the communication decision are taken (e.g., offices of institutions, organisations, particular events, symbolic places).

Concluding remarks

This paper has attempted to connect the dots between images, discourse, power, and migration governance, advancing the new concept of "visual migration governance". It has advanced a theoretical and methodological framework to approach the study of images' role in migration governance.

We have seen how the presence, immediacy, and wide diffusion of images make them crucial to consider when approaching the study of international affairs. This is particularly evident for a topic such as migration that has seen pictures becoming symbolic representations of complex human events and, in some cases, considered to have directly affected political outcomes. The importance of their role probably lies in their relevance in the process of meaning formation. While the importance of paying attention to (also) images to study world politics has been widely acknowledged, traditional methodological approaches for studying international politics are yet quite limited when it comes to analyzing how meaning is produced (Åhäll, 2009). This is especially true regarding mobility, migration policies, identity, and agency issues. In this sense, given the role that images have in world affairs, if not in directly driving foreign policy decisions, at least in significantly contributing to the process of meaning production, an analysis of governance that acknowledges the importance of the notion of productive power (Barnett & Duvall, 2004), needs to be extended to visual representation. In this paper, therefore, I advanced the idea that migration governance dynamics should also be investigated through the lens of visuality because images play a crucial role in shaping the discourse around migration.

The features of today's digital public sphere suggest that while we look at the role of images in meaning creation and, therefore, in migration governance, we need to include in the investigation the images produced by all different stakeholders. Indeed, as the communication realm has become more open and inclusive, so should our explorative gaze. By looking at the different ways in which different actors contribute to shaping the discourse(s) around migration which in turn influences and is influenced by migration governance decisions, we will be able to shed light on the complex interrelation between visuality and migration governance. In order to do so, this paper has also presented a multi-modal approach to the study of images that enables the researcher to include in the analysis the images created and disseminated by actors of migration governance situated at different levels. The proposed methodological demarche combines a set of methodologies to allow for the study of large datasets of images, with in-depth visual social semiotic insight as well as consideration for the broader discourse in which the images are circulated.

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