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Finding home: a multimodal narrative of Syrian refugees' everyday life

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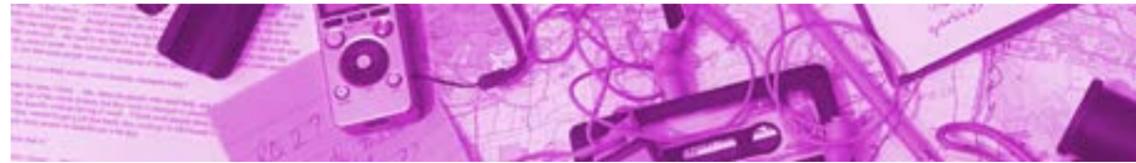# Finding home: a multimodal narrative of Syrian refugees' everyday life

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'Refugees, it seems, are exemplary subjects for documentary photography, and conversely, documentary photography has been one influential factor in the construction of the refugee'

(Szörényi, 2006: 25)

In an article published in Visual Studies in 2006 Anna Szörényi questioned the effects of photographic representations of refugees, arguing that although they seem to be promoting intimacy and empathy, 'refugee coffee-table books' display the otherness of the refugee, the separation between the subject and the reader, and that, ultimately, they reinforce a 'culture of imperialism' akin to nineteenth-century colonial exploitation. Szörényi's argument is built on three different coffee-table books published between 1991 and 2000, a form that she defines as non-immediate and hence 'designed to promote an emotional response rather than immediate political intervention' (2006:25). Yet, as the citation in the epigraph foregrounds, her contention is that while photography has contributed to raising awareness about the refugee experience, it has also played a decisive role in creating the refugee and the refugee narrative. Fast forward ten years and the development of new platforms has launched different forms of publication that, unlike the book form, allow the whole process to be more interactive, dialogical, and multimodal. Case in point, and the subject of this re-view, is the award winning, yearlong multimedia project *Finding Home*.
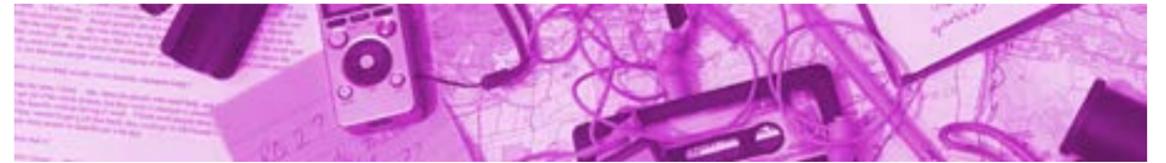
'The refugee crisis may be a political challenge, but it is one that plays out on a human scale'

(Baker, 2017)

TIME's multimedia project *Finding Home*[1], developed since September 2016 by photographer Lynsey Addario, journalist Aryn Baker, and videographer Francesca Trianni, seeks to portray a human story, a narrative about people with whom we share a common vocabulary of intimate, domestic moments. Following for an entire year three Syrian refugees 'as they prepared to give birth and raise a child in a foreign land'– from the delivery room to their tents, from 'the labyrinthine asylum process' to their next destination – *Finding Home* aims to 'understand the intense and intimate challenges' that refugees face, by reporting their stories 'in the magazine, TIME.com and on Facebook, Instagram and more'[2].

It is a 'story at the heart of Europe's refugee crisis, where for the first time since World War II the majority of refugees are women and children. More than 1,000 women gave birth in Greek refugee camps in 2016 alone. Their babies, born of no nation, have entered a world that is increasingly hostile to refugees. This daily struggle plays out against the backdrop of Europe's newest experiment to integrate hundreds of thousands of refugees, some into countries that have very little experience with outsiders'[3].

On April 13 2018, *Finding Home* won the 1st prize in the World Press Photo's Digital Storytelling contest category. This interactive story is an 'intimate and immersive page' that 'puts a name and a face on this real-life experience', whereby Taimaa 'tells of the frustrations of waiting for asylum, the quiet moments of new motherhood, and the lonely struggle to fit in in a new land, through a series of text messages with TIME video journalist Francesca Trianni'[4].

Since its inception and on a daily basis for a whole year, the curator of the Instagram feed of *Finding Home*, Francesca Trianni, uploaded photographs and videos, accompanied by written captions. These 'documents' portray everyday life, stressing a common set of gestures and actions. *Finding Home*'s daily visual account records the children's progress; celebrations of birthdays and festivities, with their guests and copious meals; it documents the families' daily existence in the refugee camps scattered around Europe, while they wait for asylum; it shows the joys of life's simple pleasures that were deleted by the war, at the same time as not hiding their struggles and anxieties, and the discordant sentiments about a lost country, integration, and wanting the best future for their children. The conflicting emotions come across very strongly in the award winning 'storyline' about Taimaa, thanks to text messages, voicemails, and a particularly moving video that shows her smiling and then crying at her daughter's first birthday party.
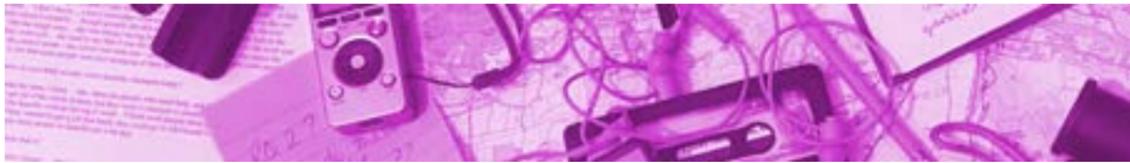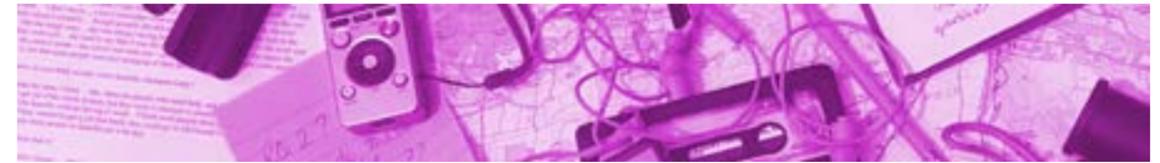
The Instagram feed of Finding Home presents pictures that could be part of any family album. Similarity is a key-term to understand how empathy works: according to Assmann and Detmers 'Before the trigger of empathy can be released, something has first to be recognized or discovered that the viewer and the viewed have in common which can be shared. A strong sense of difference and distance, on the other hand, precludes the possibility of spontaneous emotional ties, and blocks empathy' (Assman and Detmers, 2016:8). Finding Home's pictures seek to contrast the creation of a narrative based on difference and distance, for the sake of one that acknowledges a shared humanity above all. And indeed, as Martha Nussbaum contends, the ultimate ethical act is 'the recognition of humanity across the board' (Nussbaum, 2001:334), which happens when one perceives, through similarity, that the other is a fellow human being (Assmann and Detmers, 2016:8).

Yet, they are also beautiful pictures, whereby the tribulations of people (of the refugees) are turned into aesthetics objects – Walter Benjamin dubbed them 'objects of enjoyment' (Benjamin, 2003: 95) – which brings into question considerations about aesthetics and ethics. Famously, Susan Sontag said that 'to find beauty in war photographs seems heartless. […] Photographs that depict suffering shouldn't be beautiful' (Sontag, 2003:75–76), which is a criticism widely shared among scholars and critics. Lynsey Addario confirms the photographer's hesitation inherent in the paradox of creating 'beautiful images out of conflict'. At the same time, she cannot help but notice how certain images 'provoked an unusual response from readers', and how showing beauty in war 'is a technique to try to prevent the reader from looking away or turning the pages in response to something horrible' (Addario, 2015). Is photography doomed to be a voyeuristic form that reiterates the 'First World cultural imaginary' of 'Third World-looking people' (Hage, 1998:58)? Narrative practices, in whichever form they may come, are embedded in social contexts shaped by power structures, therefore they cannot be said to either perpetuate oppression or act as tools for empowerment in and of themselves (Meretoja, 2017:81).

'[Refugees] are easily conceived as thinking, decision-making beings, rather than just victims'

(Szörényi 2006: 33)

Finding Home seems to propose a new way for documentary photography to 'talk' about refugees, which develops a positive dialogue between ethics and aesthetics. With its committed and dynamic presence on social media, the project is able to reach an incredible amount of people throughout the world. During the year the project ran, Francesca Trianni posted daily pictures, videos and observations on the protagonists and on other news related to refugee life and regulations. The shared photographs are accompanied by captions that report the refugees' wishes, their fears, their struggles, the moments of sadness and joy. Together, they tell their everyday stories while at the same time they try to inform followers of the most recent developments in legislation, and to give insights into the actual mechanism of the policies.

Followers are also active participants of the dialogue by contributing their own comments and questions; they write words of encouragement, celebration or disappointment in response to each event; they leave a large share of emoticons; but they also request clarifications, they share their own confusions and perplexities over the different bureaucratic procedures. They participate emotionally in these three families' lives on European soil, and through this unofficial exchange they become critical interlocutors of their governments' decisions towards refugees.

A mixing and remixing of media takes place: from pictures to videos, from descriptive captions to those that report direct discourse, from the website to the magazine to social media. With the help of the photographers and journalists, Taimaa, Nour, Ilham, their respective husbands and children are able to vocalize their experiences, to do what Arendt believes is giving human dignity, i.e. to have one's story told, and through this telling, to interact with the world. Finding Home does not simply 'tell' the story, but lets refugees talk about it in the first person, thus building a discussion, a dialogue, a conversation between the three agents involved: the journalist/photographer, 'the refugee', and the viewer.

'Everyday life is a context of human creativity, innovation and change, and a site where processes towards a sustainable future might be initiated and nurtured'

(Pink, 2012: 5

In *Finding Home* the ordinary, unremarkable progress of daily living gains the foothold of the narrative, its preoccupation lying within everyday activities. It presents the 'counterintuitive' that erases 'stereotypes and misconceptions' (Addario, 2015) which, by presenting refugees as ordinary women (and men) engaged in activities that similarly affect everybody, challenges assumed ideologies and certain political propaganda. By shifting the attention to the conventional, the ordinary, and by making information and individual agency easily available, *Finding Home* is building a space for intimate[5] and everyday forms of activism. In fact, literature on social movements has long considered that everyday life is politically significant, and recent scholarship argues that activism is not an extraordinary practice disconnected from everyday life, linked to 'the public, explicit, explosive and sometimes even glamorous elements of political life' (Pink, 2012:4), but rather 'an everyday life activity' that is performed in private or local spaces (e.g. homes, neighbourhoods) (2012:5), and, I would add, virtual spaces such as Instagram, Facebook, or Twitter.
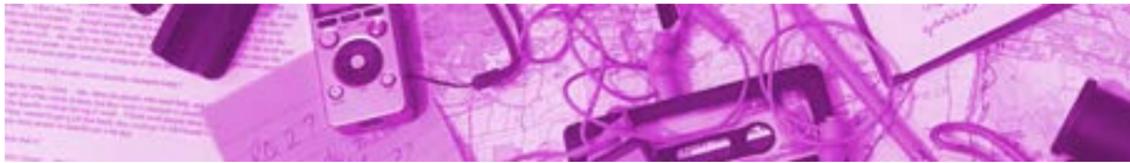
In recent years, social media platforms have become important spaces for civic participation. Scholarship on the topic has either proposed techno-optimistic analyses that underline the democratic potentials of these new horizontal forms to mobilize collective action aimed at social change; or it has criticized 'these platform-centric and techno-deterministic approaches' (Barassi, 2016: 494) by focusing on digital practices rather than social media platforms, thus showing that 'social media activism is part of broader and more complex information ecologies of resistance' (2016:498) (see e.g.: Barassi, 2015; Castells, 2009 and 2012; Fenton and Barassi, 2011; Gerbaudo, 2012; Kavada, 2015 and 2016; Mattoni and Treré, 2014; Treré, 2012; Treré and Barassi, 2015). Thus, *Finding Home*'s use of Instagram as its primary tool to share photographs and communicate with its audience integrates a growing practice of online activism[6]. As a social media platform used by countless individuals in their everyday lives – mostly accessed through a phone while in the midst of ordinary activities – Instagram can be conceived as an ordinary space where people engage in practices of social change within their everyday life. If looked at from this perspective, Finding Home becomes more than a multi-media project: a site of social movement where every follower counts as an everyday, intimate activist.

> *'Who somebody is or was we can know only by knowing the story of which he is himself the hero'*
>
> (Arendt 1958/1998: 186)

When it debuted, *Finding Home* was a multi-media project seeking to understand, share, and combat the 'globalization of indifference' (Gibbs, 2016). Throughout 2017, it has become a pole of attraction for individuals invested in a generous conversation on the reality of the refugee condition. Thanks to its exclusive reporting, it has created a visual archive that documents the intimate family life of Syrian refugees, and it has created a community of reference that inquires and informs about this specific migratory phenomenon. As the community increases (22.9k on August 15, 2018), its reach through social media platforms becomes more extensive and permeates everyday practices, thus reconfiguring the politics of the everyday as affecting local and global contexts of engagement.
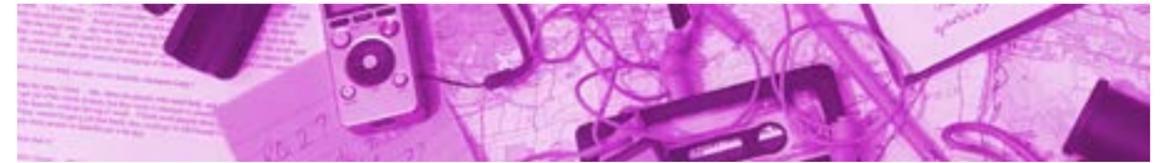
Notes

[1] The project is supported by the Pulitzer Center on Crisis Reporting and Merck for Mothers (known as MSD for Mothers outside the US and Canada).
[2] http://time.com/finding-home-stories/
[3] https://www.worldpressphoto.org/collection/digital-storytelling/2018/innovative/finding-home
[4] *Ibid.*
[5] I borrow the term 'intimate activism' from Sarah Corbett, who used it in her TEDx-Youth talk 'Activism needs introverts', recorded in Bath in November 2016: https://www.ted.com/talks/sarah_corbett_activism_needs_introverts
[6] Furthermore, a study on the Instagram posts of three U.S.-based social movements by the School of Informatics and Computing at Purdue University concluded that social media, especially image-based, has allowed online activism to flourish. Cf. V. P. Cornet, N. K. Hall, F. Cafaro, E. Brady, 'How Image-Based Social Media Websites Support Social Movements' (2017). Poster accessible at http://www.academia.edu/34101059/How_Image-Based_Social_Media_Websites_Support_Social_Movements

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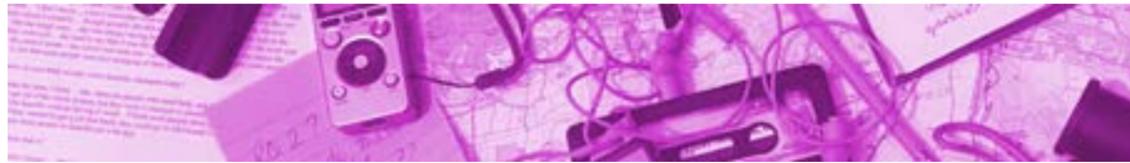
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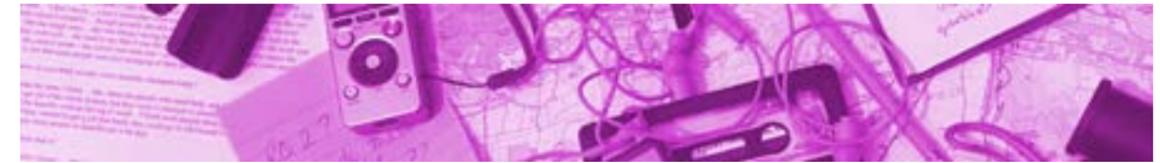
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