Waiting for a hypothetical asylum: the photographic coverage of Maximilian Park in Brussels

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Abstract:

This article investigates the photographic coverage of the migration crisis in Belgium. It focuses on an event that captured the attention of the Belgian media in September 2015. At the end of the summer, hundreds of Syrian and Iraqi refugees, waiting for a hypothetical asylum in Belgium, suddenly set up a camp in the middle of the Maximilian Park, which is located in the heart of Brussels, near the Immigration Office. Up to 1000 people slept there until the camp was dismantled in early October. These events generated a wave of citizen solidarity and constant political agitation over regularization of the refugees.

Technical, thematic and contextual analysis of the photographic coverage of Maximilian Park in four Belgian newspapers (two "popular" titles and two "quality papers") helps not just to understand how what happened there is to be distinguished from other pictures and stereotypes of refugees, but also how these images express and feed longer crisis narratives at both Belgian and European levels.
We observed that the photo coverage of the quality newspapers focused on the refugees and the living conditions in the park (while the tabloid newspapers largely ignored them). Instead of showing the refugees as a threat or as distant foreigners facing a new interlocutor (the volunteers of the park), those pictures chose to get as close as possible to the refugees' daily life and their difficult living conditions. In doing so, however, the pictures presented to the readers seem far from the tendency to universalize 'the refugee' and do not question photojournalism as a form of humanism.

During the summer of 2015, a large number of refugees arrived in Belgium, mainly from Syria and Iraq. As was the case for many European countries, the management of such a migratory flow was a real challenge for Belgium, although "it is a country of permanent immigration", already marked by other asylum crises in recent decades (Martiniello, 2013: 694). More than 5,000 asylum applications were filed during the month of September, an increase of 207 per cent compared to same time in the previous year (Commissioner for Refugees and Stateless Persons, 2016). In September, the Belgian federal authorities were temporarily overwhelmed in terms of logistics and reception infrastructure. Over the course of the whole year, the country was to handle 44,760 asylum applications.

Spontaneously, and in a very short time, a citizen movement emerged, carrying out a very crucial mission: offering a roof and a basic assistance to all refugee candidates who had no housing, and spent their days waiting in front of the main entrance of the Immigration Office, located in the heart of Brussels. It was in the Maximilian Park, situated just in front of the Immigration Office, that this improvised refugee village was built. Throughout the month of September, activity there was intense. The park, supervised by about 150 volunteers, accommodated up to 1000 refugees, usually in tents. Despite the progressive opening of new

accommodation by the federal authorities, it remained (nearly) full during its four weeks of existence. Thanks to the solidarity and the dynamism shown by the volunteers, the camp hosted a makeshift school, sports ground and other elements of basic infrastructure. Many activities were organized by volunteers in order to help the refugees to carry on. Because of its illegality and the precariousness of conditions, the authorities dismantled the village in early October 2015. Most of its occupants were taken in charge by the authorities and relocated to different reception centres. The creation of this camp remains, to this day, an unprecedented event in recent Belgian history: never had such a large and improvised refugee camp been created without any legal basis or support from the authorities.

Belgian media outlets have regularly covered the management of this refugee camp. Located in the heart of the capital of Europe, the camp provided an unexpected "case", strategically situated and well defined, embodying the migratory crisis of the summer 2015, both its challenges and its risks.

The main research question of this article deals with the photographic coverage of these events in the Belgian French-speaking newspapers. Our interest is in the iconic (photographic) display of the situation in the Park as seen through the context of its appearance, in the Belgian daily press and in the context of the events of the asylum crisis of summer 2015 in Belgium and in Europe. Our analysis relates directly to what was placed before the eyes of readers and will be confronted to the large array of studies focusing on the discursive and the visual representation of refugees in Western media outlets. Many of them refer to a universalizing frame describing the refugee as a threat, a 'distant other', in brief, "an anomaly that needs a solution" (Turner, 2015: 140). In the same time, refugees are depicted as victims who urgently need solidarity, empathy and compassion from host countries (Fassin, 2005). This contradictorily frame can finally be connected to an old cultural background making the refugee a distinct character in the Christian iconography. The purpose of this paper is to confront the particular case of the Maximilian Park with those well-established ways the journalists use in their narratives about the refugees and asylum seekers.

Literature review

The Syrian civil war and the growing arrival of migrants in Europe during the summer of 2015 took place in a long chain of humanitarian "crises" that generated significant migratory flows. In many ways, the issue of refugees is a pre-existing theme in the European media, and, more broadly, in collective memories and visual cultures. Terence Wright (2014) notes a renewed interest in migratory issues after the terrorist attacks of September 2001. In the academic field, this interest has resulted in the development of scientific journals specifically dedicated to forced migration (among others the *Journal of Refugee Studies*, the *Journal of Immigration and Refugee Studies*, *Migration Issues* or the *Journal of International Migration and Integration*).

The use of stereotypes is one of the recurring questions raised in research on media and forced migrations. Very often, refugees are associated with the polysemous notion of crisis, which nevertheless seems to indicate specific (and mostly negative) connotations. From a semantic point of view, the use of the water metaphor (*flood, stream, tide of refugees*) and the terminology chosen by journalists (asylum seekers, migrant or refugee) express the degree of openness or anxiety conveyed in the journalistic coverage (Chavez, 2001; Wright, 2014; Finnish Institute, 2016).

Trying to shape the media coverage of this kind of issue requires considering it in terms of its national characteristics: "In the context of media reporting of immigration, national identity serves as a reference point for the debate. (…) Immigrants are often the negation of the national self" (Bauder, 2012: 34-35). Despite awareness-raising campaigns targeting journalists (IPPR, 2005, Oxfam, 2007, EJN, 2016), it seems that the closer the refugees are to the borders of a host country, the more difficult it becomes, for the media as well, to consider their presence in a positive way. Then, they become "asylum seekers" who inspire mistrust or rejection. In contrast, distant "refugees" escaping from a devastated country tend to be perceived with more kindness and humanity. The fact that these two different terms designate the same people, with the same problems, seems closely related to the geographical factor. This distinction is emphasized by the organization of headings in newspapers, which often separate foreign and domestic news. As a result, "few refugee news stories make the connection between 'there' and 'here' (Wright, 2014: 461)". The UNHCR report on the press coverage of the refugee crisis in Europe "showed that in many of the studied countries, asylum seekers and refugees had been presented in a negative light, primarily as a problem, and not as a resource that could benefit the receiving country" (Finnish Institute, 2016: 5; Berry, Garcia-Blanco, and Moore, 2015). Globally, Greenhill (2016: 317) points out "the lack of EU solidarity and absence of a collective response to the humanitarian and political challenges". Belgium is no exception: "The emotional rejection of immigrants and immigration is gaining a certain respectability", notes Caestecker. "Since the last quarter of the twentieth century, immigrants from outside the European union were increasingly considered undesirable, as it was found that they integrate only with great difficulty" (2011:50). Other earlier studies reveal that the migrants have long been seen as a threat (Lucassen, 2005), which partly explains that the media "articulate a culture of disbelief that has become a sedimented element of dominant media and policy discourses surrounding asylum seekers in the West. Indeed a 'common sense' hostility towards certain kinds of migrants as a threat to the economic stability, well-being and security of wealthy 'receiving societies' has become an enduring characteristic of migration as a hot news topic in recent years, and often linked with social, cultural or political 'crises'" (Moore, Gross, and Threadgold, 2012: 5).

Researchers also note close correlations between public discourse, immigration policies and the construction of the media image of the refugees. Media discourse needs to be studied along with what political actors, NGOs and other stakeholders say about the major issues of forced migrations. The case of recent migration policy in Germany (in 2015, the country, along with Sweden, had been the most welcoming European state to refugees) seems to confirm that a positive political discourse tends to strengthen a more accommodating media coverage: "'Solidarity', 'responsibility' and 'Willkommenskultur' (culture of welcome) are central themes in the German response to the crisis, especially in the German-language press" (Holmes & Castaneda, 2016: 8; See also Berry, Garcia-Blanco, and Moore, 2015: 259). In general, however, "the policy and public mood towards migration is often more negative than it was ten years ago" (Hague Process on Refugees and Migration, 2012: 15). Many studies agree that news media play a crucial role in the perception of refugees and in creating a climate of hospitality. Ulrich Beck conceptualizes "cosmopolitan empathy" (Beck, 2006: 7), understood as an "extended capacity to imagine and empathise with the suffering of others beyond the borders of our own kin" (Pantti, Wahl-Jorgensen and Cottle, 2012: 120). In the case of disasters and/or forced migration, cultivating this cosmopolitan sensibility through a national prism seems to have reached a kind of limitation: "Critics have suggested that

audiences are emotionally overloaded or indifferent because of the ways in which the news media represent human suffering" (Pantti, Wahl-Jorgensen and Cottle, 2012: 119-120). Moeller (1999) or Boltanski (1993) have already stressed this much-debated issue of compassion fatigue. The fact that national landscapes are in a state of constant flux and unrest does not explain why certain crises gain attention from the media and why others remain largely ignored. Deeper consideration probably needs to be given to the refugee "as a fundamentally ambivalent figure", who is "simultaneously, a sufferer of geo-political conflict and a threat to the Westphalian, nation-based nation global order" (Chouliaraki, 2012: 14).

Concerning the visual representation of refugees, Liisa Malkki's work suggests that there exists a "tendency to universalize 'the refugee' as a special 'kind' of person not only in the textual representation, but also in their photographic representation" (1995: 9). Terence Wright, in a number of works, uncovers a relatively stereotyped typology of the figure of the refugee. "Although it may be the intention of journalists (using the term in the broadest sense to include editors, camera operators, etc.) to provide "realistic " images that offer a transparent view – a window on the world, they are constrained in their having to conform to cultural and institutional practices" (Wright, 2002 : 64). Increasingly accessible and abundant, pictures of refugees situate themselves in a historical and visual continuum, which provides a narrative framework immediately comprehensible in Western cultures. In a sense, it helps to shape accessible and understandable storytelling. Wright stresses that "many 'standard" images of refugees conform to patterns already established in Christian iconography" (Wright, 2002:54; 2008: 65-86). The Madonna and Child, the Expulsion from the Garden of Eden, images related to the Exodus story or to Mary and Joseph's flight into Egypt are some of the most recycled representations in the contemporary reporting of forced migration, despite the diversity of the recent crises (for instance, the Balkan wars in the early 1990s or the famines in African populations each present very specific patterns). Many of today's images of migrants and refugees conform to biblical precedents, assumes Wright. As a consequence, "our understanding of humanitarian crises in part may be influenced by these broader cultural traditions" (Wright, 2008: 89) and much of the visual imagery "promulgated by the mainstream media remains the largely the same" (Wright, 2014: 462).

Finally, since this study focuses on a refugee camp, we need to take in account some peculiarities of the very singular place. Far from being just a "emergency measure" (Turner, 2015), the refugee camp can be considered throughout three dimensions: its extraterritoriality, its ambiguity in legal terms and the social exclusion it implies, since his inhabitants are treated as not belonging to the host culture and society (Augier, 2014: 20).

Corpus and methodology

The four newspapers selected for this analysis all have their headquarters in Brussels. It was therefore very easy for them to cover the events linked to the Maximilian Park camp. Two newspapers, *La Libre Belgique* and *Le Soir*, belong to the so called "newspapers of record" of the French-speaking part of Belgium: both of them tend to give a significant place to political and international news. The other two, *La Dernière Heure* and *La Capitale*, share an editorial line closer to the tabloid press, geared towards sport and local news. The four titles face a continuing decline in their paid circulation. The year 2015 was no exception to this trend, a trend that is more pronounced for French-language dailies than for Flemish ones. *Le Soir* and *La Capitale* belong to the same publishing group, Rossel, and sold respectively 66,000 and 92,000 copies (average of 2015, print + digital). *La Libre Belgique* and *La Dernière Heure*

belong to the IPM group and sold respectively 36,000 and 46,000 copies in 2015. This precision about the owners of these titles is necessary because synergies exist between editorial staffs inside the same group. The growing business of digital news does not compensate for losses due to declining newspapers sales. As a consequence, in order to ensure economies of scale, it is not uncommon to publish the same article (with minor changes) in the two "brother" titles, despite clear differences in their editorial lines.

These four newspapers are relevant sources to deal with the photographic coverage of the Maximilian Park events: they follow this topic day by day and they all have a strong readership in Brussels. Nonetheless, it should be noted that the situation of photojournalists in French-speaking Belgium is far from being comfortable. Their number among newsrooms staffs is slowly decreasing. Their labour conditions tend to be progressively more uncertain and precarious (FEJ, 2009). In the newspapers composing the corpus, there are not more than three photojournalists employed for the entire editorial staff. Freelance collaborators and agency pictures (namely those from the national press agency, Belga) complete the daily needs in images. This clarification about the weak presence of photojournalists means that only a few events can benefit from a specific and/or detailed photographic coverage. In-house photographers have a wide spectrum of events to cover. In other words, there was no guarantee that they would be able to devote themselves to extensive work at Maximilian Park. Examining the authors of the pictures, we see that in-house photographers took only three pictures, while all the others are agency pictures. It is clear that press agency photographers usually work according to different agendas, goals and constraints. This means that they probably don't try to stick to the editorial lines and agendas of the four newspapers included in the analysis.

The methodology of analysis is in line with a process "acknowledging the essential role of pictures in the shaping of news, and considering each published image as a *representation* (our emphasis), created by photographers and chosen by picture editors" following the editorial guidelines of their media outlet (*our translation*: Gervais, 2015: 15-16). This kind of approach "stands at a good distance from Visual Studies and its taste for abstraction" (*our translation*: Gunthert, 2015: 245). It is therefore built on a descriptive basis that includes not only the picture itself but, as far as possible, its technical and factual context. This means considering the technical features of each picture integrated inside the newspaper as well as the events surrounding it. "The study of images alone, as objects whose meaning is intrinsic to them, is a mistaken method if you are interested in the ways in which people assign meaning to pictures" (Ruby, 1995: 5). For the analysis of the images, we have carried out a descriptive summary in line with the method suggested by Laurent Gervereau (1997: 39 et seq.). The thematic and typological analysis are based on the method of Catherine Saouter (2003: 111 et seq.), for technical, stylistic and thematic description. For every picture, we made an inventory of noticeable elements and the relations between them. As a result of the close spatial boundaries of the camp and its temporariness, only a limited number of different items, individuals and infrastructures had to be coded.

Dealing with newspaper pictures, taking the factual context into account means, at least, considering the pictures in the dual spatial and chronological dimension that shape news reports. The spatial dimension refers to the thematic organization of each newspaper and it addresses the following question: where are the pictures published, in which section do they appear most often? Once the picture has been located, the chronological dimension proposes considering it inside its thematic continuum, which is the flow of events that the newspaper

grasps day after day. This chronological perspective makes it possible to distinguish the events reported during a certain period from those that break into the pages of the newspaper and disappear immediately. Those two dimensions help take into account the "social context that produced the image, and the social relations within which the image is embedded at any moment of viewing" (Banks, 2007: 11). The description of the various items and individuals shown by the pictures is thus integrated in a broader framework: the political context in Belgium and Europe during the summer of 2015.

The corpus includes a period from 29 August to 1 October 2015, which corresponds to the building and the dismantling of the refugee camp. The analysis systematically lists the pictures of Maximilian Park and the related articles, for a total of 26 pictures in the four newspapers. The analysis also incorporates the photographic contents of the "refugee crisis" both at national and European levels, since reports about this topic were very frequent throughout the period and belong to the same thematic set. September 2015 was indeed a very singular month in the media coverage of this crisis. On 3 September (which is just two days after the creation of the Maximilian Park camp), the release of the picture of Aylan Kurdi, the three-year-old Syrian refugee lying dead on a Turkish beach, launched an intense focus on the question of the fate and the reception of the refugees. Numerous papers covering the political management of the migratory crisis by the European and Belgian authorities fed this highly debated issue (see further, *results*). Events taking place along the "Balkan Road", at the Turkish, Greek and Hungarian borders, as well as in Germany, also received a lot of attention. The "refugee crisis" went through the entire period of analysis, itself marked by the creation and the dismantling of the Brussels refugee camp. In conclusion, this topic was to be included in regular media coverage at both Belgian and European levels.

Results

a) Overall coverage of the "refugee crisis"

Fig. 1: The migration issue and the Maximilian Park camp in the Belgian newspapers (n=116) (29 Aug. – 1 Oct. 2015)

Newspapers	*Migration issues: Presences in the front page*	*Max. Park: Presences in the front page*	*Number of editions covering migration issues*	*Number of editions covering Max. Park.*	*Number of pictures of the Max. Park*
Le Soir (Quality- Rossel)	20	3	23	11	11 (+5 insets)
La Libre Belgique (Quality- IPM)	9	1	26	4	7
La Dernière Heure (Tabloid- IPM)	6	0	15	1	3
La Capitale (Tabloid- Rossel)	8	1	18	2	5

Of the 116 copies analyzed (29 editions per newspaper), 37 per cent of the front pages referred, in one way or another, to migration issues. Selected themes and angles varied from one title to another: the discovery of Aylan Kurdi's body, events in Hungary or along the "Balkan Road", and political debates between European leaders were the most widely covered international issues. In Belgium, the so called "asylum crisis" reflected political tensions between parties and several front pages referred to the logistical difficulties of the Immigration Office. Criticism of M. Theo Francken, Belgian Secretary of State for Asylum and Migration and member of the Flemish right-wing nationalist party (Nieuw-Vlaamse Alliantie), appeared frequently. Given their political orientation and linguistic heritage, it is not surprising that French-speaking media closely monitored the action of the Secretary of State throughout this period. Of the 43 front pages referring to the migration issues, only five referred to Maximilian Park.

The large number of newspapers dealing with the migratory crisis in their inside pages further testifies to the importance of this theme during the period of analysis: 82 editions, or 70.6 per cent of the corpus, reported one or several pieces of news about this theme. It is not uncommon to list several articles in one single edition, usually covering international and domestic issues. With reference to these numbers, the coverage of he Maximilian Park can be considered as a "micro-narrative", a particular story within a larger set, including international, national and local coverage levels. Eighteen editions reported events from the Park between the camp's creation and its dismantling.

These general observations should not hide clear differences between the editorial lines, nor differences in the size of the articles. Newspapers of record or quality papers (*Le Soir* and *La Libre Belgique*) together accounted for 60 per cent of the editions devoted to the migratory crisis. By far, *Le Soir* showed the highest level of interest in this issue in its cover pages. Here, the striking difference with *La Libre Belgique* can be explained by technical features: the smaller format and the emphasis on graphics of *La Libre Belgique* do not allow the display of more than five or six topics in the headlines, unlike *Le Soir*, which benefits from more space and also publishes its own editorial on the front page.

In general, both quality papers focus more on international and (Belgian as well as European) political subjects. Throughout September, they published longer articles and devoted more editorials to the subject of refugees than the other two titles. From time to time, they gave a voice to the refugees through field reports or interviews. This practice seems far from being evident in the media coverage of refugees (Finnish Institute, 2016). For instance, *Le Soir*, a member of the "Leading European Newspaper Alliance", published, in collaboration with other European newspapers, a series of seven in-depth reports on refugees from various European countries. In this kind of paper, refugees were given the opportunity to express their own views.

As can be seen by the presence on front pages and by the number of editions dealing with this theme, the interest of tabloid newspapers (*La Dernière Heure* and *La Capitale*) in migration issues was in no way systematic. The majority of front pages focused on the abundant sports events punctuating the period: for the first time in a century, Belgium played the final of the "Davis Cup" and the national football team played important qualifying matches for the upcoming European championship in France. The storytelling of the migratory crisis was neither as regular nor as well documented as in the quality newspapers. Following their

overall editorial line, the news stories were systematically shorter and more highly illustrated than in the record newspapers. From a qualitative point of view, political questions and international news were addressed less frequently, or even ignored. As a rule, tabloid newspapers chose a Belgian, sometimes a local, reference point in most of the stories dealing with refugees. One can thus speak of a "transposed" coverage. There was also greater attention to disputes, anecdotes and incidents involving refugees (diseases, thefts, administrative problems in the camp), which were generally ignored by *Le Soir* and *La Libre Belgique*.

Regarding the journalistic coverage, the only true common point between the quality papers and the popular ones relates to the discovery of the young Syrian refugee's body at the beginning of September. The Belgian media situate themselves in a wider context (which is not unanimous, as the case of French newspapers shows). On this occasion (on 3 and 4 September), the four newspapers offered a similar treatment in terms of volume and editorial choices. All of them, for example, published a retrospective of the pictures that most shocked public opinion over the last few decades. In this particular case, the logic of synergies mentioned above seems obvious: newspapers belonging to the same media group share an important part of their content.

This similarity is not reflected in the coverage of Maximilian Park. *Le Soir* is, by far, the newspaper that showed the highest level of interest in the refugee village, and in migration issues in general. The other three titles were clearly behind in quantitative terms. But, whatever the newspaper considered, the events at Maximilian Park were not a matter of primary importance. The fact that no newspaper reported its deconstruction is probably a kind of evidence of this, as well as the fact that some newspapers decided to mention the activities of the citizen movement only after a few days. In any case, Maximilian Park disappeared suddenly from the news at the end of September. Only *Le Soir* and *La Libre Belgique* announced the impending closure of the camp on 30 September. Eighteen articles and five front pages referred to Maximilian Park, amounting to one fifth of the editions dealing with migration issues and one tenth of the front pages. Tabloid newspapers were particularly reluctant to devote anything other than a few short stories to it.

Despite this, in September 2016, several Belgian media outlets celebrated the first anniversary of the creation of the refugee camp as one of the most visible symbols of the migration crisis, and a concrete proof of the logistical difficulties encountered by the Belgian authorities. It seems that the park remained, at least in the short term, a kind of symbol of a troubled period. The migration issues, furthermore, have not disappeared. If asylum applications have gradually decreased compared to the summer of 2015, the issue of refugee reception remains a potential (and also a sensitive) topic on the media agenda. This may explain, one year after, this mention of Maximilian Park.

b) Photo coverage of Maximilian Park

First of all, it is necessary to note that the two tabloid newspapers published only eight pictures relating to Maximilian Park throughout the whole period of analysis. A brief report about thefts committed in the park excepted, the other seven pictures were merely illustrative and referred to other topics: for instance, an interview with M. Francken or another article summarizing parliamentary debates on asylum policy were illustrated with pictures of the park. These papers did not refer directly to the Maximilian Park events. Neither did the picture captions refer to the camp, its actors or its events. Regarding the tabloid press,

Maximilian Park seems to have become a convenient incarnation of the impact of the migratory crisis in Belgium: it provides the most recent images, relayed in all the media, and they were likely to express, without any textual input, the main challenge faced by the Belgian authorities: hosting, housing and deciding on the fate of refugee claimants. To the extent that Maximilian Park was mentioned only sparsely, without continuity, in both tabloids, it is not surprising that its photographic representation was limited to eight pictures. Recounting the story of the refugee crisis, with a few exceptions (Aylan Kurdi's death, shocking political declarations of European leaders), was strictly performed from a Belgian perspective and a local perspective: Who are the Belgian footballers from a migrant background? Which local politicians make racist comments on their Facebook wall? What are the local initiatives to support refugees? For these questions, the shaping of a journalistic narrative does not require pictures of Maximilian Park. More broadly, the pictures of the Maximilian Park were not linked to any specific narrative, nor could they be found in a precise section of the tabloid newspapers. On the contrary, they were integrated into various articles, whose building blocks (title, keywords, summary, angle) may have opposite meanings: such a paper underlines the solidarity of the Belgian citizens, while another, illustrated by a picture of the same place and the same people, insists on the polemics, the anxiety and the supposed dangers of the asylum seekers.

Things are clearly different for the other two titles, *Le Soir* and *La Libre Belgique*. The first one published a total of eleven photos of Maximilian Park. We may add five inset pictures of the park, used for the graphic identification of the articles included in what the newspaper called the "asylum crisis" section, which constituted its major series during the period. *La Libre Belgique* published a total of seven pictures (without using any insets). The analysis of the photo coverage focuses on these two newspapers since only they published a substantial number of images.

As explained in the methodology, the approach proposed in this section analyses these images inside the product in which they were offered to the reader. The first question, therefore, is that of the factual items appearing in the eighteen pictures. Based on the referenced items, events and figures, the inductive coding of the eighteen pictures reveals a distinction between the two quality newspapers. Most of the photos in *La Libre Belgique* showed tents in the park. These tents were the major iconographical theme of the newspaper. For *Le Soir*, the major theme was people living or working in the camp, but refugees were shown much more than were volunteers over the course of the month analysed.

Maximilian Park as an internal division

Considering the spatial reference point, seventeen pictures of Maximilian Park were published in editorial space devoted to the Belgian news. Analysis of the chronological dimension of these pages shows that the main story developed by the two newspapers concerned the political tensions caused by the reception of refugees. These tensions are a profound expression of features of Belgian political life, revealing differences of opinion about asylum policy. For instance, both newspapers reported the disputes about responsibilities between the burgomaster of Brussels, a Francophone socialist, and the Secretary of State for Asylum, a member of the Flemish right-wing nationalist party. The action of the federal authorities and the political management of the reception of refugees were monitored throughout the month. The question of the legality of Maximilian Park and the desire to dismantle it also divided the political actors. Integrated in this conflicting storytelling, the pictures of Maximilian Park sometimes attest to the political chaos that prevailed in Belgium (Fig. 2). In this respect, the

first fault line caused by the refugee crisis was therefore a political one: Maximilian Park was at one and the same time both a trigger factor and an illustration of this divide. Political conflict become so important that both *Le Soir* (15 September) and *La Libre Belgique* (22 September) expressed the position of the citizen movement's spokesman, who claimed that he was not acting on behalf of a party and did not want to play any political role.

Fig. 2: Cover picture of Le Soir*, 1 September 2015*

<Insert Fig. 2 here>

But the journalistic narrative emphasised another form of chaos, which was logistic and human. Some photographs seemed to underline the inability of decision-makers to act as quickly as the situation in the field required. With various levels of criticism, the articles highlighted the difficult living conditions in Maximilian Park, often described as precarious and shameful. Limited to 250 places per day, the Immigration Office's initial reception capacity had, to some extent, "created" Maximilian Park, claimed the newspapers. Photography's power to offer contrast therefore compared the cosy and comfortable lounges of politicians with the mud, the fragile tents and the discomfort of the refugee camp. When articles and photographs depicted the people in the park, they emphasize the refugees and their tents – Fig. 3) as well as the absentees (the representatives of the authorities as a whole). A picture showing an empty reception room in *La Libre Belgique* (8 September) supported and confirmed what had been claimed in both newspapers (often by refugees themselves): the reception conditions as set up by the authorities rarely found favour with the asylum seekers. In doing this, the photographic coverage emphasized a second fault line, that which separates citizen action, highlighted by a certain solidarity and constant action on the ground, and the authorities' action, depicted as bureaucratic, distant and unable to understand the daily needs of asylum seekers.

Fig. 3: La Libre Belgique*, 22 September 2015, and* Le Soir*, 17 September 2015*

< Insert Fig. 3 here>

The park as an isolated counterpoint

The images analyzed fit into a much broader and international level of reading. There are indeed a large number of articles dealing with the refugee issue in the international pages of the two newspapers. After Aylan Kurdi's death, most of the media outlets, in Belgium and elsewhere, referred to a "European" asylum crisis. Although the pictures of Maximilian Park were not published in the international section, the Belgian and the European dimensions of this crisis echoed each other and interacted on several occasions. For example, the Prime Minister of Belgium intervened in both the Belgian and European problems, and the remarks he gave (especially during interviews with wide coverage) mixed these two levels. The

sensitive question of the refugee quotas that each country was asked to host, managed by the European authorities, obviously interacted directly with national and even local news when a city was requested to accommodate refugees. Despite a well-defined spatial setting, the pictures studied were thus part of a wider macro-narrative, which contrasted images and information from different European countries with those that did not exceed the limits of Maximilian Park.

In the "international" pages, the archetypical representations brought to light by Terence Wright are much more visible. While pictures of Maximilian Park frequently emphasized the relative inertia of refugees passing time and waiting for hypothetical good news, those in the European news reports reconnected with the pictorial backgrounds of the Exodus and displaced people often portrayed in Christian iconography (Wright, 2002: 57). On various occasions, readers found pictures of crowds massing at borders suddenly blocked by barbed wire, as well as shots of refugees left on their own along the Balkan Road. Driven by the high broadcast speed of the social networks, references to one of the darkest ages of European history resurfaced in the newspapers: on 3 September, *La Libre Belgique* released a picture showing a young refugee whose arm was numbered by a Czech policewoman (Fig. 4). In line with the mechanisms described by Wright, we note that such an image refers to a deeper and more or less shared cultural background, echoing what was done in Nazi camps during the Second World War. Throughout the month, and despite some reports differing from this trend (mainly due to the German "welcome" policy), the European refugee crisis was illustrated by pictures of closed borders, ubiquitous policemen and lines of walking refugees.

Fig. 4. La Libre Belgique*, 3 September 2015- Children in Auschwitz, 1945 (© Reuters)*



In attempting to understand the possible meanings of images of Maximilian Park, we need to take into account this macro-narrative. Images of the European crisis are much more numerous and thus partly "recover" the storytelling of Maximilian Park. They evoked the same group of people, with the significant difference that, in the "international" pages, they were far from Belgium and belonged to this "elsewhere" and these "distant others" described by Pantti, Wahl-Jorgensen and Cottle (2012: 119). Here, there appears an important difference in media coverage of *close* and *distant* refugees. Usually, as stressed by previous studies, the more numerous and closer the refugees are, the more they risk being portrayed as a threat, namely to the cultural identity and the labour market of the host nation (Holmes and Castaneda, 2016: 7). In the present case, this classical dialectic was on the whole invisible in the four newspapers considered, even in the tabloid press. Regarding *Le Soir* and *La Libre*

Belgique, pictures of Maximilian Park even initiated a shift of this narrative, since the refugees were never been pictured as a "massive" threat (Lucassen, 2005) or a problem for public order. In a very focused way, Maximilian Park played the role of counterpoint to the flow of images depicting the difficult reception of refugees, which was sometimes violent or even denied (in September 2015, Hungary received fierce criticism from Belgian newspapers in this respect). Far from the stereotyped and timeless images of long lines facing the road or exhausted mothers carrying their children, another picture of the refugee crisis, even a cautious one limited to a park of a few hectares, seemed to be possible. The fact that this did not happen on the road (in the broadest sense of the term), the usual place where refugees are pictured, is not the most important thing. Essentially, the pictures show a place where there exists a kind of proximity between those from "here" and those from "over there".

But this proximity, which was temporary and clearly defined in spatial terms, cannot be likened in any way to traditional photographic representations of compassion. What is shown is quite simply "the (provisional) daily life of these men who are not from here and who are no longer from over there" (*our translation:* Lafont-Couturier, 2006: 526), and who seem to be halfway between 'distant' and close refugees. Our corpus is far from showing the compassionate view of refugees stressed among others by Fassin (2005, cited by Turner, 2015: 143), where refugees are portrayed as "innocents victims (…), appealing to humanitarian compassion and a philanthropic will to help fellow human beings in need". We find ourselves for the most part faced with photographs that "seem to be discreet, silent, almost reserved, the very opposite in any case of the thundering rhetoric of certain press photos (...) without any real quality of news" (*our translation:* Lavoie, 2010: 207). These photos of tents and refugees sheltering patiently from the rain, of piles of clothes and various donations, do not reflect what one might call the humanitarian style or stereotype, which might relate, to use the words of Edgar Roskis, to an "iconography [that] assumes a charitable quality, which calls for compassion or for donation rather than promoting the understanding of political facts (...)" (Ruffin, Ryfman, 2006: 497). In fact, the photographs in *La Libre Belgique* and *Le Soir* do not fall into step with a "visual standardisation of wretchedness" (Bihl, 2006: 784). They allow us to see waiting, uncertainty, precariousness, softened to be sure by citizen initiatives, but nevertheless visible in nearly all the photographs published.

Conclusion

The short and well-defined story of this refugee camp seemed to fit perfectly into the general framework of Belgian and European events of the summer of 2015. The specific technical features of the newspapers, as well as their overall agenda and editorial lines, placed the Maximilian Park refugee camp in two distinct narratives, one focused on the Belgian political context and the other one on the international level. In this respect, other media outlets might have supplied another framework to photo coverage of the park. Flemish newspapers, for instance, did not place as much importance on the political tensions between the burgomaster of Brussels and M. Theo Francken. Only a small minority of inhabitants of Brussels are Dutch-speaking and most of the Flemish newspapers do not have their headquarters in Brussels. What happened in Maximilian Park was thus probably less relevant for their readership. Digital versions of the quality papers considered also gave another representation of the refugee camp: for example, 360° photo shoots, augmented reality or in-depth reports for online media outlets allowed journalists to offer a much more detailed view of the camp, its inhabitants and its living conditions. This deeper perspective was not possible in print newspapers, where the available space is by definition strictly restricted.

Rarely reported without a wider political or logistical context, Maximilian Park played a dual role: it was directly included in the Belgian narrative of the crisis, and indirectly, or even far away, into the European one. These pictures offered unexpected proximity to a problem often dealt with at a distance and uncertain compassion. These images helped to create an iconographic proximity, based on an initiative never seen before in the recent past, making it possible for the journalists to provide a new depth to the numerous pictures taken far from Belgium, along the Balkan Road or on the Mediterranean coast. Far from the painful images of the beginning of September, which once again raised many questions about the mobilizing power of shocking pictures and compassion fatigue among Western audiences, the pictures of Maximilian Park emphasized above all a specific place where migrants were no longer on the road, but forced to wait and to rely on others' help. Yet it is not solidarity that is shown, nor a form of compassion or of emotional proximity. Also invisible is the cosmopolitan empathy described by Ulrich Beck. In the end, the corpus studied seems to be far from "questioning photojournalism as a form of humanism" (*our translation:* Poivert, 2015: 168). By emphasising neither a logic of 'spectacularisation' nor a didactic logic, the photographs of both *La Libre Belgique* and of *Le Soir* do not create the visual shock usually conveyed by refugee's distress and insecurity. The photographic programme chosen by the two Belgian quality newspapers does not follow the 'common sense' hostility stressed by Moore, Gross and Threadgold, but belongs to a flattening out of the transitory, in which "the migrant loses his mobility, the pillar of this transitory identity that makes the clandestine road tolerable. What is shown is this unforeseeable situation of unforeseen transition that expands time, during which migrants oscillate between immediacy and boredom" (*our translation:* Billet, Jobard, 7). In a certain way, they fit in with the judgment of Susan Sontag: "Photography is not supposed to remedy our ignorance of history and of the causes of the suffering it chooses to frame. These images can scarcely do more than invited us to give our attention, to reflect, to learn, to examine the rationalisations through which the established powers justify enormous suffering" (Sontag, 2003: 125).

Nonetheless, the photographs published contribute to the tendency to universalize the refugee, described by Liisa Malkki. They evoke many others images that have occupied and continue to occupy the media and that form a shared visual store of migrant camps (Turner, 2015): the tents, the provisions, life in the rain and the mud, the boredom and the waiting, the arrangement of a sketchy life, the presence of volunteers. Among recent visual references, Maximilian Park would come close to the 'jungle' of Calais or to Sangatte, in France. In this respect, the photographs of the Park, like many others, are part of "an economy of representations that are linked with refugees" (*our translation:* Laquette, Le Vergos, 2016: 11). But compared with the Calais' pictures, their originality is that they do not appear to belong to what is denounced by, for example, the authors of the collective book "*Décamper*" when they write that "in the media, the camps exist under the programme of hypervisibility, generally through pitiful or 'monstrous' representations" (Laquette, Le Vergos, 2016: 11). Here, the photographic programme chose a different angle, probably partly because Maximilian camp is not a 'common' camp according to the conceptualization developed by Agier. Its extraterritoriality, its (il)legality and the social exclusion could be photographically shown. But the pictures firstly show the particular temporariness of this camp, suddenly raised by volunteers and dismantled four weeks later. Those tents and refugees in the rainy sky of Brussels are a way to emphasize that this life is lived only in preparation for another—hopefully fuller—life in the future, *beyond* the camp (Turner, 2015: 145).

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