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To cite this article: Simon Faulkner (16 Dec 2024): Invasion Images and Seeing Gaza, *Visual Culture in Britain*, DOI: [10.1080/14714787.2024.2428089](https://doi.org/10.1080/14714787.2024.2428089)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14714787.2024.2428089>



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Published online: 16 Dec 2024.



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Invasion Images and Seeing Gaza

In 2003, *Visual Culture in Britain* published an article of mine entitled ‘Asylum Seekers’, ‘Imagined Geography and Visual Culture’ that focused on the visual representation of migrants¹ in the UK tabloid press.² This article reproduced a photograph used on a frontpage of the *Daily Express* in 2002 that showed a group of migrant men running across a goods yard near the French entrance to the Channel Tunnel. The headline over this image declared ‘We Can’t Stop Them’. The obvious aim of this frontpage was to create a sense of threat amongst the newspaper’s readers. The photograph, especially with the dozens of migrants it showed apparently running towards the spectator, suggested the existence of an invading force at the edge of the national territory. As such, this image constituted a good example of what has more recently been termed ‘border spectacle’, referring to the visual mediation of border regimes and the ‘illegal’ forms of migration they generate.³ The image also entailed a strong visual embodiment of a nativist understanding of the nation as a circumscribed space where some people naturally belong, while others do not and as such are a threat to the integrity of the national body.

This earlier article is discussed here, not only because I am writing for the relaunch of *Visual Culture in Britain* and wanted to note an instance of my past involvement with the journal but also because my analysis from 2003, without making any great claims for it, seems to be as relevant today as it was in the early 2000s. Peddlers of anti-migrant sentiment have continued to produce presentations of the supposed migrant threat to the UK that are visually comparable to the *Daily Express* frontpage from 2002. The most obvious example being the ‘Breaking Point’ billboard produced by Nigel Farage’s United Kingdom Independent Party (UKIP) as part of their 2016 Brexit campaign.⁴ This billboard used a cropped version of a photograph taken by the photojournalist Jeff Mitchell in October 2015 of a large group of predominantly adult male Syrian migrants walking through the Slovenian countryside from the border with Croatia to the Brezice refugee camp. The photograph filled the entire billboard and showed the migrants moving in an arc from the top to lower left of the image and thus apparently into the space of the viewer, in a similar way to the movement of the migrants within the photograph used by the *Daily Express*. Superimposed over the image were the slogans ‘Breaking Point’, ‘The EU has failed us all’, and ‘We must break free of the EU and take back control of our borders’. Although UKIP acknowledged at the time that the migrants in the photograph were in Slovenia and that

the billboard was largely about what was happening in Europe, through the declaration that the UK needed to 'take back control' of its borders, they also made this image about the UK. In this sense, it was not so much the denotative or indexical content of Mitchell's photograph that was important for UKIP as much as the visual impression and connotation that the migrants were on their way to the UK. And for this, it did not matter who these migrants were or their actual destination (which was probably Germany). What mattered more was their sheer number, their gender, and the darkness of their skins. With the latter being the element of the billboard that enabled it to have strong racial connotations without openly stating this.

More recently, Farage's Reform UK party has used similar visual rhetoric in election campaign posters distributed via social media. For example, one poster used the slogans 'BROKEN BRITAIN' and 'Britain Needs Net Zero Immigration' along with a montaged image of a serpentine column of migrants moving under a sign that points the way towards 'Hospitals', 'Schools', and 'Housing', each of which are, respectively, linked to the statements '7 Million Waiting', 'Lack of Places', and 'Unaffordable'.⁵ Although this time the migrants in the image appear to be moving away from the spectator, they are nonetheless represented as invading the space of the nation. Thus, the political message of the poster was clear: Britain has been 'broken' by excessive immigration resulting in the denial of national resources to the people they are meant for. Although not explicitly articulated, this message is aimed at a political constituency understood to be 'native' and white, meaning that this poster is both xenophobic and racialized. The photograph used for the montaged image of the migrants also derives from the Syrian refugee exodus into Europe in 2015 and was probably purchased from the photo website Shutterstock.⁶ As with the UKIP billboard, for Reform it is not the photojournalistic specificities of this image that matter, but its symbolic potential to signify a threatening mass invasion of national space.

The use of invasion metaphors in relation to immigration has a relatively long lineage in the UK.⁷ This may well mean that there are other examples, beyond those already discussed, of migrant invasion-type imagery relating to the UK to be found and analysed. There are also probably examples of public contests over how migrants and migration have been made visible within the UK. In relation to the latter, the example of the defacement of Banu Cennetoglu's display of *The List* at the Liverpool Biennial in 2018 with the slogan 'INVADERS NOT REFUGEES!' comes to mind.⁸ This suggests that the visual representation of migration in the UK and the generation of a UK-specific border spectacle has been and continues to be an important subject that strongly implicates visual forms with a deeply political situation. It is the examination of this kind of interrelationship between visual culture and politics that I hope the relaunched *Visual Culture in Britain* can take on as a key aspect of its critical remit.

It is a simple point to make that the basic subjects of visual cultural studies – images, ways of seeing, and conditions of visibility – are often

wrapped up with political interests and effects. Visual cultural forms have their own conventions, technologies, and infrastructures as well as having specifically visual meanings and impacts, and as such define a relatively discrete subject area deserving of serious and sustained study, but at the same time part of this subject is how these forms have functions within a wider socio-political field. Thought about in these terms, the title *Visual Culture in Britain* not only involves a territorial demarcation of the study of visual forms but also a subject area that is in many ways inextricable from the political issues that animate social life within this territory and from the political relations between this territory and other parts of the world.

To expand on this point, I want to conclude by discussing a further example of contemporary visual culture in the UK. Since the beginning of the Israeli assault on the Gaza Strip in response to the Hamas attack into Israel on October 7 2023, a group of demonstrators have been gathering on Wednesday afternoons at a busy road intersection near where I live in South Manchester. These demonstrators gather in support of a ceasefire in Gaza and are generally pro-Palestinian. They hold banners and Palestinian flags and attempt to make themselves visible and audible to passing car drivers, many of whom (often members of the local Muslim community) beep their car horns in support. These demonstrators have also left stickers on the street furniture at the intersection. One of these stickers is pink and features a pattern derived from a Palestinian keffiyeh scarf and an olive branch motif. At the top of the sticker is the slogan 'We Will NEVER Look Away', while at the bottom is written 'GAZA WILL LIVE'. Written on three of the olive branch leaves are also the statements 'STOP GENOCIDE', 'END THE OCCUPATION', and 'CEASEFIRE' (Figure 1)

I am discussing this sticker not only because it is an example of political visual culture in a UK context but also because it refers to a practice of looking through the slogan 'We Will NEVER Look Away'. The anti-migrant images discussed above are conceptually premised on oppositions between what is understood to be a 'native' community internal to the space of the nation and migrant *others* viewed as alien to this space. These images (especially the UKIP billboard and the Reform poster) are also, at least implicitly, premised on a form of ethno-nationalism that is only concerned with people belonging to one's own national group at the expense of all others. In contrast to this, the form of looking referred to by the authors of the sticker is invested with a sense of responsibility towards people beyond the territorial border of the UK and thus beyond any delimiting conception of the boundaries of the national community.

The sticker also raises for me the question of what might specifically be seen via the practice of looking to which its main slogan refers? What does this committed gaze, that 'will never look away', see? One might suggest, in abstract terms, that it sees Gazans as fully people who have value and are grievable. But what if we go beyond this abstract sense of vision to think about how looking at Gaza from the UK might involve

Figure 1. Pro-Palestinian sticker, South Manchester, 2024. Photograph: Simon Faulkner.



looking at actual images. What images might these be? Will they be mainstream media images, images on social media, family photographs?⁹ Again, understanding how and in what ways Gaza has become visible to people in the UK and what this visibility has meant is a subject clearly relevant to a title like *Visual Culture in Britain*. The journal has an especially strong record of examining visual culture in the UK as a historical phenomenon, with a strong leaning towards the art historical. This is important and should not at all be disparaged. However, the relaunch presents the opportunity to reorient the journal just as strongly towards the visual culture of the present and towards its implication with contemporary political concerns. As can be seen in the case of the anti-migrant invasion images discussed here, this often also involves continuities with the past, meaning that the function of a journal like *Visual Culture in Britain* can also be to understand how visual representations and conditions of visibility from the past inform how we see, understand, and act in the present.

Notes

- 1 I use 'migrant' as a coverall term for people who have moved from their countries of origin rather than making the conventional distinction between migrants and refugees, which generally evaluates refugees as having legitimate reasons for movement, whereas migrants are defined as having

- illegitimate economic reasons for their migration. For a discussion along these lines, see Ambalavaner Sivanandan, 'Casualties of Globalisation,' *The Guardian*, 8 August 2000: <https://www.theguardian.com/business/2000/aug/08/imf.comment>. (consulted 24/6/2024)
- 2 Simon Faulkner, 'Asylum Seekers', Imagined Geography and Visual Culture', *Visual Culture in Britain*, 2003, 4:1: 93–114.
 - 3 See for example, Ruben Andersson, *Illegality, Inc. Clandestine Migration and the Business of Bordering Europe*, Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2014; Bernd Kasperek, Nicholas De Genova, and Sabine Hess, 'Border Spectacle,' in Nicholas De Genova, Sandro Mezzadra, and John Pickles, ed., 'New Keywords: Migration and Borders,' *Cultural Studies*, 2015, 29:1: 66–70.
 - 4 For discussions of this billboard, see Simon Faulkner, Hannah Guy, and Farida Vis, 'Right-wing populism, visual disinformation, and Brexit: from the UKIP 'Breaking Point' poster to the aftermath of the London Westminster bridge attack,' in Howard Tumber and Silvio Waisbord, eds., *The Routledge Companion to Media Disinformation and Populism*, London and New York: Routledge, 2021, pp. 198–208; Alan Bradshaw and Paul Haynes, 'The assemblage of British politics' breaking point', *Journal of Consumer Culture*, 23: 4, 2023: 971–989.
 - 5 See for example: <https://www.reformmansfield.com/broken-britain>. (consulted 26/6/2024)
 - 6 See <https://www.shutterstock.com/image-photo/several-thousand-refugees-wandering-into-direction-331912505>. (consulted 26/6/2024)
 - 7 See for example, Paul Gilroy, *There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack': The cultural politics of race and nation*, London: Routledge, 1992, p. 45.
 - 8 The version of *The List* in Liverpool involved the documentation of 34,361 deaths of migrants who had lost their lives within or on the borders of Europe since 1993, as compiled by the 550 organizations in 48 countries of the anti-discrimination network United for Intercultural Action. See: <https://archi-veofdestruction.com/artwork/the-list/>. (consulted 26/6/2024)
 - 9 I mention family photographs in reference to a recent Manchester Metropolitan University UCU branch online AGM at which one of the speakers was a UK-based Palestinian, who was originally from Gaza. She showed us family photographs of a holiday in Gaza during the summer of 2023 by way of contrast with the images currently being distributed of the assault on Gaza.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Simon Faulkner is a Reader in Art History at Manchester Metropolitan University. His recent research has focused on art and photography in relation to Palestine/Israel, and the interpretation of social media images.