

Submission to the 2026 Helsinki Photomedia Conference

By: Maria Nilsson, Stockholm University (maria.nilsson@ims.su.se)

Subtheme: 6. Performative approaches

Abstract title:

Images as placeholders in contested visualizations of deportation raids in Chicago

Abstract:

This proposed *Helsinki Photomedia 2026* conference presentation focuses on contested mediated visualizations at a time when migration policy is becoming more restrictive in several countries in the Global North. Using the empirical example of a city in the United States targeted by deportation operations during Donald Trump's second term as president, the study addresses regimes of visibility (Chouliaraki & Stolic, 2017) and visibility (Mirzoeff, 2011). The study applies the conference theme "Placeholders" by considering the visuals as stated in the Call for papers: "*participants in social struggles over housing, migration, and refuge, and taken up in collective acts of witnessing, protest, and artistic intervention*". Specifically, the sub theme "*Performative approaches*" is used as a tool for exploring how visuals made and shared serve as placeholders in discourses of government power, community resistance and the media.

The specific empirical focus is Chicago where, throughout the fall of 2025, community members have witnessed and collected eyewitness visuals, recording and collecting evidence of federal deportation raids, the testimonies serving as evidence in ongoing court cases about methods of arrest and legal rights, and as records shared with the news media and on social media. On their part, the U. S. federal government has also been relying heavily on visuals, including staged photo ops of the Homeland Security Secretary brandishing a weapon or posing in front of incarcerated inmates branded as criminal immigrants, a performative aspect of deportations. Border patrols have brought their own video crews on immigration raids, the resulting content uploaded on social media and government web sites as propaganda that conflates immigrants with crime and warfare.

The study focuses on three sites: visuals made and uploaded (site one, the community) — such as community members resisting or protesting, shown video-taping encounters, as well as visuals showing community members being arrested; and visuals published by the news media (site two). The multiplicity of this imagery, as gestures or traces, paint a composite picture of state action, community resistance and media coverage. Conversely, visuals appear in government propaganda (site three), where an immigrant detained and led away in handcuffs into a deportation center appears interchangeable with those apprehended elsewhere, the visuals placed in a larger narrative of securitization. These cycles of images as placeholders serve different functions and can be understood as contested versions of events.

A qualitative analysis is conducted on visually driven messages from selected events related to deportation raids and protests. The findings are analyzed through the theoretical lenses of *emotional excess* (drawing on Henning, 2022), *sousveillance* (Bock, 2020; Mirzoeff, 2011) and ethical *witnessing* (Peters, 2001). Findings thus far in the study, which is currently underway, suggest that excess may be cathartic as community members' express their emotion and support (also as depicted) while an arrest is taking place. Excess may also manifest as inducing fear or anger—such as fear of the immigrant portrayed as a violent criminal. *Sousveillance* is found to be a consistent strategy used by community members witnessing and filming events. Witnessing, in turn, is identified in imagery showing injured bodies, with a tension identified between the imagery as a kind of visibility exposing police

tactics and producing evidence, while negotiating ethical boundaries through their circulation, such as in the news media and on social media. The study contributes empirically, by addressing visual politics and contestation at a juncture of social and political polarization and scapegoating of vulnerable communities. Theoretically, it contributes to the literature on immigration and migration studies, and methodologically by exploring visualizations through varied lenses of analysis.

Keywords: video activism, visibility, visuality, witnessing, immigration

References

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