

## Migrant Chic : Vilification by fashion photography

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### Abstract

This article analyses Hungarian fashion photographer Norbert Baksa's controversial photography series entitled "Der Migrant". The images are claimed to present a social commentary on the refugee crisis by the photographer. However, the critical analysis of the photos reveals that Baksa's images depict an obscene Oriental Otherness through portraying a Janus-faced refugee figure which embodies an oversexualized Oriental femininity mongrelized with dangerous, strange and fearful Muslim otherness.

**Keywords :** Orientalism, neo-Orientalism, Otherness, Refugees, Photography.

### Résumé

Cet article analyse les séries photographiques controversées du photographe de mode hongrois Norbert Baksa intitulées "Der Migrant". Les images prétendent présenter un commentaire social du photographe sur la crise des réfugiés. Cependant, l'analyse critique des photos révèle que les images de Baksa représentent une altérité orientale obscène à travers la représentation d'une figure de réfugié au visage Janus qui incarne une féminité orientale exagérée, associée à une altérité musulmane dangereuse, étrange et effrayante.

**Mots-clés :** Orientalisme, néo-orientalisme, altérité, réfugiés, photographie.

*Because night has fallen and the barbarians haven't come.  
And some of our men just in from the border say  
there are no barbarians any longer.  
Now what's going to happen to us without barbarians ?  
Those people were a kind of solution.*

C. P. Cavafy, Waiting for the Barbarians

### Introduction

Europe has been witnessing the greatest refugee crisis since the Second World War. In retrospect thus far, 2015 has been the most difficult year both for refugees and for European countries. Fleeing war or persecution, refugees drowned by the hundreds in the Mediterranean Sea. The images of a three-year old Syrian boy, Aylan Kurdi, whose lifeless body washed up on the shores of Turkey, marked a turning point in the crisis<sup>1</sup>. These images galvanized the world's attention, changing European Union regulations and countries' policies towards sharing the burden of the humanitarian crisis. Furthermore, polarizing debates over who will be

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<sup>1</sup> The Guardian, 2 September 2015, <<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/sep/02/shocking-image-of-drowned-syrian-boy-shows-tragic-plight-of-refugees>> [accessed 25 May 2018].

accepted as a refugee, an asylum seeker, or an economic migrant continue with heightened intensity particularly in the Visegrad Countries. Besides some countries' deliberate anti-immigrant measures<sup>2</sup>, xenophobic sentiments have also been manifested individually. Hungarian journalist Petra Laszlo's kicking and tripping up a refugee running with his child across the Hungarian-Croatian border is a known example of such deep-rooted xenophobia in the region<sup>3</sup>.

Coinciding with Laszlo's spectacle during the Hungarian-Croatian border crisis, Hungarian Fashion photographer Norbert Baksa released his controversial fashion photography series titled '*Der Migrant*' (September-October 2015)<sup>4</sup>. Inspired by the refugee crisis, Baksa's series depicts a semi-naked, beautiful model, representing a female refugee, dressed in designer clothes and accessories and veiled at the same time, positioned in front of a wire fence representing the Hungarian-Croatian border<sup>5</sup>. Faced with a storm of criticism across social media, Baksa removed the photographs but defended his work claiming that, "artists around the world regularly attract the public's attention to current problems through 'shocking' installations and pictures. This is another example of such art."<sup>6</sup>

Quite obviously, Baksa's images do not seem to be created with an intention of raising a humanitarian awareness about the refugee crisis. Far from evoking pity, empathy or compassion, the images disorient Western spectators' attention from "the core question of what might have driven them away from home" (Chouliaraki, 2017:15) towards enforcing the distinction of the deserving refugee and the undeserving immigrant

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<sup>2</sup> Measures include tightening Asylum Laws, building wired fences, and governmental campaigns supported by anti-immigration billboards. See: Simonovits, Bori, and Bernát Anikó. 'The Social Aspects of the 2015 Migration Crisis in Hungary. Budapest: Társki Social Research Centre.' (2016).

[http://www.tarki.hu/hu/news/2016/kitekint/20160330\\_refugees.pdf](http://www.tarki.hu/hu/news/2016/kitekint/20160330_refugees.pdf). [accessed 25 May 2018].

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/sep/08/hungarian-nationalist-tv-camera-operator-filmed-kicking-refugee-children>. [accessed 25 May 2018].

<sup>4</sup> The photographs were removed by Baksa on 8 October 2015. See Baksa's twitter message for removing the images: Norbert Baksa, (@NorbertBaksa ) <https://twitter.com/NorbertBaksa/status/652133933929271297>.

<sup>5</sup> The photographs can be viewed at: <http://www.disphotic.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/FireShot-Screen-Capture-145-DER-MIGRANT-norbertbaksa prosite com 396151 7719138 fashion der-migrant1.jpg>

<sup>6</sup> ABC News, 7 October 2015 : <http://abcnews.go.com/International/hungarian-photographers-refugee-themed-fashion-photoshoot-sparks-outrage/story?id=34295284> [accessed 25 May 2018].

(Holmes and Castañeda, 2016). In other words, the images perform a visual persuasion of reinforcing otherness and cultivating xenophobia. Following this line of thought, this paper's argument is two-fold. First, the present study argues that Baksa's photos dehumanize the refugees by aestheticizing and distorting human suffering, thereby masquerading as fashion photography claiming to make a social commentary. The second argument, which constitutes the main problem of this article, concerns how Baksa's images depict an obscene Oriental Otherness through portraying a janus-faced refugee figure which embodies an oversexualized Oriental femininity mongrelized with dangerous, strange and fearful Muslim otherness. The visual appeal of the images created by lascivious oriental female image drawn from the fantasies of 19<sup>th</sup> century Orientalist art invites the audience to enjoy the erotic spectacle. However, the same images deny the voyeuristic enjoyment since they are also loaded with recognizable neo-orientalist markers capitalizing the refugee's cultural and racial identity. Consequently, the hybrid and obscure vision of Baksa's Oriental Other discloses a spectatorial perplexity for the western audience, aggravating the current European fears of refugees and expanding the boundaries of the existing images and stereotypes stigmatizing the Muslim/Arab/Oriental other.

The critical analysis of these images maintains that the images are built upon a broader view of the feminized and sexualized female stereotyping of European Orientalist art, articulated with new visual depictions of neo-orientalist imaginary. The meticulous depiction of the female figure with contradicting elements which do not belong together is what deepens Baksa's provocative intention. Therefore, one needs to deconstruct the layers of Baksa's presentation in order to understand the two intertwined fictions used in these images mirroring both the long-held Orientalist views of the West towards the Orient and the present-day speculations of strange, dangerous and fearful Muslim otherness.

Initially, I will explore the shift between the two modes of Orientalism, particularly emphasizing the continuities and emerging additions with their mode of representing the Oriental Other. Since it is an extensive topic, this effort will be limited with the diverging cultural perceptions and aesthetical representations of Oriental women – mainly focusing on Muslim women – constructing their bodies as markers of Otherness. Accordingly, I will elucidate the images of the female refugee in "Der Migrant" series critically through the lens of overarching meanings and perceptions of (un)veiling in particular as eroticism, submissiveness and/or Islamic aggression (Perry, 2014:8).

Besides the paradigmatic shifts in Orientalism affecting the construction of the Oriental and Muslim Other that underlie the basic premises of this present study, I also dispute that an analogy to various tropes of Christian aesthetics and religious iconography can be drawn to get a clearer view of Baksa's representational *modus operandi*. By prescribing archetypes of beauty, nudity, femininity as well as purity and innocence, Christian aesthetical tradition visually differentiates 'sacralized and purified bodies' from the bodies of the demonized non-christian others whose claims to purity, victimhood, suffering and ultimately justice are denied. Concisely, the cross-reading of the essentialising corporeal imagery of Orientalism and beauty-innocence-victim trilogy of Christian aesthetics will allow us to critically decode how Baksa's representational *modus operandi* functions within the framework of different paradigms and indeed reflects the prevailing anti-refugee discourses emphasizing Europe's Christian identity being under threat by refugees<sup>7</sup>.

### **1. Orientalism and Divergent Representations of Muslim Women**

It will be insightful to start the analysis with a brief overview of the diverging cultural perceptions and aesthetical representations of Oriental and Muslim women. European Orientalist artistic representations of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries provide a fertile ground for analyzing Western visual representation of the 'Oriental other'. Orientalist art, essentially referring to the paintings and photographs of European artists portraying the Middle East and North Africa indeed belonged to the "larger rationalizing mechanism of European colonialism" which reflected a "preexisting Oriental reality" as Linda Nochlin argues (Nochlin, 1989:72). Displaying the exotic romanticism and the brutality of the Oriental Other simultaneously in their paintings, Orientalist artists, as Mackenzie argues, "have been subjected to extremes of admiration and vilification" more than any other artists. (Mackenzie, 1995 : 44)

In many well-known examples of Orientalist paintings and photographs, oriental women were mostly illustrated as nude or semi-nude suggesting "sensuality, sexual availability, and primitiveness." (Brown, 1988:40) Mainly reflecting the western male fantasies about the mystery of Oriental women and harem, at times the scenes were enriched with the exhibitionist poses of the women, sluggishly reclining on a sofa or a

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<sup>7</sup> See Victor Orban's comments on refugees threaten Europe's Christian identity : <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/refugees-threaten-europes-christian-identity-orban--87923>

cushion, in a state of amorous intoxication emphasizing their sexually accessibility. Therefore, the eroticization and sexualization of Oriental women was a central strand of “the process of Orientalization of the Orient” which as Yeğenoğlu points out “is one that intermingles with its feminization.” (1998:73)

Another important aspect of Orientalist art that should be mentioned is the artworks’ self-proclaimed authenticity of reflecting the Oriental reality, with their obsessive attention to a “plethora of authenticating details” (Nochlin, 1989:38). The artists strived to create a “reality effect” (Nochlin, 1989:38) so that pictures can be viewed like an evidence of the colonized worlds and like a witness. Also, though photography was supposed to reflect a more realistic view of the Orient compared to painting, Orientalist photography has further augmented the Orientalist fantasy more strongly since “the notion of the camera as objective has historically reinforced these presentations of the Orient as factual reality” (Wong, 2017:16). It is crucially significant, at this point, to mention the colonial postcards produced by French photographers as extensively analyzed by Malek Alloula in his book, *The Colonial Harem*. Alloula provides a critical analysis of how French photographers produced postcards of Algerian Women claiming to portray the women in their natural everyday settings. These postcards which were very popular among the French colonizers, mostly portrayed semi-naked oriental women, dressed in their ethnic clothes as well as Islamic clothing such as veil, but at the same time displaying their naked breasts, explicitly encouraging the western viewers’ “scopic desire” (Alloula, 1986:7). Although reconstructed with staged scenes dominantly in studio shots, the French Postcards undoubtedly depicted “a contained and carefully fabricated fantasy” of the Orient and Oriental people with a photographic pictorialism. (Wong, 2017: 5)

At this point, we need to briefly focus on the complexities involved in the diverse meanings of covering or veiling and its political, cultural and ideological interpretations in the West. Diversified and indeed contradicting meanings attached to ‘veiling’ invoke various specters ranging from oriental sexuality and exoticism to backwardness and ignorance, from Muslim women’s segregation and oppression to a symbol of the threat of Islamic terror (Bijdiguen, 2015). As Alain Buisine argues, Orientalist artists “seized every opportunity to represent them as nude” (qtd. in Dobie, 2004:28). Unveiling the oriental women through art is not only an affirmation of “the moral superiority of western liberalism” but is rather a symbolic act of lifting the veil of mystery of

the Oriental World for the western audience (Dobie, 2004:28), “like the unveiling of an enigma, makes visible what is hidden” (Richon, 1985: 8). However, the ‘unveiling’ and eroticization of the Oriental women by Classic Orientalist art has recently transformed into a ‘hyper-veiling’ of the female body, highlighting a reconfiguration of “the social, cultural and political distance between the ‘West’ and ‘Islam’” by conveying “a sense of threat.” (Calia, 2011:58) As Anne Norton points out, “the veil now prompts fears that weapons can be concealed beneath it, and if not weapons, dangerous sentiments and beliefs.” (Norton, 2013 : 62) Although engendering “new tropes of othering”, the neo-Orientalist representations are still “indebted to classical Orientalism.” (Behdad and Williams, 2010: 284)

The ‘Oriental woman’ has always been an object of desire and object of hostility of this relentless investigation (Zine, 2006). The European subject who is disappointed by “the invisibility and inaccessibility” of the mysterious veiled female figure relentlessly tried to solve this enigma by unveiling them (Yeğenoğlu, 1998:39). However, the underlying concerns for both the classical and the neo-Orientalist perceptions are similar: to solve the mystery of the Orient and the Oriental women but at the same time to transform the subject of representation into “a very distant and often threatening Otherness” (Said 1979: 21). Even the excessive sexuality highlighted by Classical Orientalism “is also seen as threatening because of its ‘otherness’” (Jiwani, 2005:180). Consequently, as Behdad and Williams emphasize, neo-Orientalism is not a new invention but indeed reveals “the continuity between contemporary and traditional forms of Orientalism” (Behdad and Williams, 2010:284).

## **2. Norbert Baksa’s Migrant Chic**

Invoking the spectre of the allegedly bogus refugees and visually emphasizing their illegality, Baksa’s photos not only dehumanize the refugees, but also offer a mongrelized Oriental Otherness drawing both from the Orientalist clichés of sexualized Oriental femininity and from the xenophobic neo-Orientalist narratives on the radical Muslim alterity circulating widely in Europe. Therefore, Baksa’s female figure is the embodiment of the “dangerous strangeness” that is still recognizable with the array of Orientalist clichés and stereotypes inserted in the images. In other words, “she is the very personification of the phantasm” (Alloula, 1986:78) knocking on Europe’s door, invoking the haunting specter that Europe will be flooded by a Muslim invasion.

As previously mentioned, Baksa mainly draws from the Orientalist paintings, portraying an oriental female figure stimulating the “scopic desire” of the western male spectator at first sight with her nudity and salacious and exhibitionist poses. (Alloula, 1986:7) Her idle, apathetic and self-absorbed gestures and distant and vague facial expressions are other visual clichés drawn from Orientalist paintings recalling the odalisques and bathers. Except on the cover photograph, the female model does not look directly at the camera. She seems to ignore a returned gaze, not bothered or disturbed by the looks of any spectators particularly when she is posing half nude for a selfie.

In the cover photograph of the series, she looks directly at the camera yearning for an eye-contact with the spectator, recalling the scenes from the French postcards depicting oriental women confined behind the window bars (Alloula, 1986: 21). She is positioned behind the wired fence, looking vulnerable and helpless, her hands clinging to the fence and her direct looks at the camera voice her plea for pity and help.

The remaining photos totally contradict with the first one in many ways. The helpless refugee figure has radically transformed into a “disaster tourist” (Kurasawa, 2014:35) who appears self-obsessed and self-absorbed, self-objectifying with consumerist glamour. She seems to reveal her real identity in these images, displaying to the viewer that she not a real needy refugee who deserves asylum but is actually seeking benefits. She cannot be perceived as a humanitarian victim, often represented by the images of “ragged people, culturally different, barefoot, in crowds and making their way across a foreign landscape.” (Pellander and Kotilainen, 2017)

These photographs do not only reveal that she is rich and not needy, they warn the western spectator about her real identity. The visuals of exposed nudity combined with the veil imbedded strategically by the photographer insinuate a suspicious alterity that she is hiding behind. She is not veiled in all photographs. Besides, not all veiled photos necessarily reveal her Muslim identity since the way she wrapped the scarf does not seem to have a direct connection with a peculiar Islamic veiling for the western spectator. However, since the photographs are declared to make direct reference to the refugee crisis, the viewer would automatically assume that she is from Middle East and she is a Muslim.

Although drawn from 19<sup>th</sup> century Orientalist fantasies, Baksa’s Oriental female Other does not much comply with the clichés depicting Oriental females as “static, frozen and fixed eternally” living in distant lands.

(Said, 1979 : 208) Neither does she look like the feared Muslim Other images frequently re-marked and “brought to the fore of public consciousness” as “supra-visible” subjects through the current “media-type” visibility. (Perry, 2015:6) She does not comply with the images of Muslim women with hijabs or burkas conveying the message to the western public that ‘They’ are different than ‘Us’, and they may be dangerous and associated with Islamic radicalism and so on.

However, in some photographs, the pattern of the scarf used and the way she covers her face and head with this piece creates a dilemma. In particular photographs<sup>8</sup>, the pattern of the scarf resembles the Palestinian *keffiyeh*. Highly associated with terrorism in Western mental frames, the use of the Palestinian *keffiyeh* emphasizes a threatening message in those images. Also, in one of these particular photos, the way the scarf is wrapped does not comply with the conventional ways Muslim women use the scarf, but rather recalls the way male terrorists do. Covering the face with the scarf suggests that she has malignant motivations to conceal her identity. In a way, the image recalls a guerilla or a terrorist figure. Baksa’s photos seem in particular to corroborate various media images preferring to use the photographs of refugees with covered faces to reveal the message to the viewer that they are trying to “hide their self, to remain unidentified and faceless, and thus conceal their ‘spoiled identities’” (Banks, 2011:14). Consequently, this paper contends that the use of the headscarf corroborates the arguments of Yeğenoğlu who asserts that “The veil represents simultaneously the truth and the concealment of truth. The truth of the Orient is thus an effect of veil; it emerges in the traumatic encounter with its untruth, i.e veil.” (Yeğenoğlu, 1998 : 48)

In some photographs, the female refugee is positioned in front of the wire fence, and she is pushed and dragged by the police. The scenes resemble the real events that took place at the Hungary-Croatia border. The prevailing suspicion towards the refugees in Baksa’s images is further emphasized by the staged theatricality in which the female refugee performs a resistance against order and authority. Those images, in which she is wearing the Keffiyeh, seem to confirm the prejudices that she might be a terrorist. As Barbara Perry points out, “while the veil is often taken as a sign of submissiveness, it is also taken as a sign of Islamic aggression. So, if women are not characterized as exotic, or as oppressed,

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<sup>8</sup> The image is copied from <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/photography/migrant-chic-photoshoot-was-not-meant-to-be-offensive-says-hungarian-photographer-a6686651.html> .[accessed 25 May 2018]

especially when they are veiled, they are represented as mysterious, dangerous and threatening.” (Perry, 2014:10) Besides, Baksa’s comments undoubtedly confirm his intentions for creating such ambiguity: “It is very difficult to understand from the news coverage whether these people are indeed refugees or something else”.<sup>9</sup> He also argued elsewhere that the people shown by Hungarian media were either “refugees fleeing for life” or “aggressive migrants or terrorists”.<sup>10</sup>

What Baksa’s images intend to blur the boundaries between the familiar or the known (the conventional image of refugeeness) and the unfamiliar or unknown (the threat of the other). The photos intend to trap the spectator “somewhere between familiar territory and the disconcerting unknown.” (Piontek, 2011:44) Thus the “uncomfortable atmosphere” created by the images further generates a “fear of the other in a familiar shape.” (Ramirez, 2017) Her apparel and possession of a smart phone gives the impression to the western audience that she is ‘someone like us’. However, in Baksa’s images, the clothing is not a genuine signifier of belonging and sameness/likeness and indicator of cultural compatibility. (Ahmed, 2006: 133) Rather, the photographs with embedded visual nuances and manipulations by Baksa communicate a different message of warning that behind the visible “certain likeness” (Ahmed, 2006: 133) she may be still hiding a fearful Otherness behind. Thus, the images echo the heated discussions that took place in newspapers on refugees’ modern apparel and their possession of smart phones. As Lilie Chouliaraki reminds :

Even though affirming the digital literacy of migrants may be useful, in that it challenges stereotypical views of ‘backwards’ non-Europeans..., the news status of such an affirmation is simultaneously an act of ‘othering’, insofar as such it invites us to contemplate migrants’ selfie-taking as extraordinary. (2017:15)

The disposition of the female refugee created by such visual controversies reveals a sense of incomprehensibility, “something being out of place and out of time.” (Puar, 2007:181) The enigmatic spectacle constructed around ambiguity aims to re-construct the viewers’ knowledge and emotional attachment to the situation. Particularly, the juxtaposition of nudity and the veil in the images is the primary example of such an intention of creating a spectatorial perplexity. In consequence,

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<sup>9</sup> <http://www.ibtimes.co.uk/hungarian-photographer-norbert-baksa-blasted-refugee-chic-fashion-shoot-featuring-monika-1522723> [accessed 25 May 2018]

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/10/08/world/europe/hungarian-fashion-photographer-defends-migrant-chic-spread.html> [accessed 25 May 2018]

I argue that Baksa's photographs are produced and disseminated in order to provoke the "Orientalist desire for knowledge and power" (Behdad, 1994:18-35) on the enigma of refugee crisis, with the claim of making "visible what is hidden" (Yeğenoğlu, 1998:39). As a result, the female refugee figure "is appropriated to reflect a supposed reality", yet transforming her to a "figure of the desire for transparency." (Yeğenoğlu, 1998 : 64)

Baksa's Oriental Muslim Other can be simply described as the eroticized oriental female figure retrieved from the image reservoirs of classical Orientalist art that is re-fashioned with neo-Orientalist tropes of threatening Muslim Otherness. Baksa's efforts correspond to the "Orientalist desire [that] involves a conscious act of producing 'meaning' for the public without any interest in, or recognition of, the Other's subjectivity or culture." (Behdad, 1994:21) Thus, Baksa's imaginary other discloses the myriad ways of how Orientalism generates tropes of othering, all "monolithic, totalizing, reliant on a binary logic, and based on an assumption of moral and cultural superiority over the Oriental other." (Behdad and Williams, 2010 : 284)

At this point, I propose to turn the attention to European Christian aesthetics and religious iconography briefly. Besides the Orientalist perceptions underlying the construction of the female refugee figure, another perspective to decode these images can be used by focusing on how the beautiful object of the artwork – here the refugee woman – damages "our capacity of attending to problems of injustice", in particular a humanitarian crisis. (Scarry, 2013 : 57) This article maintains that Christian iconography is a significant reference underlying the images and narratives of contemporary humanitarian discourse (Wright, 2010; Paschalidis 2003). Particularly, the visual depictions of the "victim" figures – mostly women and children – are mostly drawn from the "universally recognizable" archetypes (Kennedy, 2009) such as the religious icon of "Madonna and Child". (Wright, 2010 : 57) Furthermore, following Thomas Laqueur's emphasis that "the humanitarian narrative relies on the personal body, not only as locus of pain, but as common bond between those who suffer and those who would help" (1989 : 177), we need to understand how the visual tropes of 'beauty' and 'nudity' operate to depict the refugee figure not as an idealized victim but rather as a grotesque bearer of Oriental alterity.

As one of the most controversial concepts in Western philosophy and aesthetics, beauty has always been associated with other values of

goodness, truth and justice<sup>11</sup>. This study will focus more on the aesthetic construction of an ‘idealized beauty’ and its political, cultural and social connotations. ‘Idealized beauty’ constructs generate a hierarchical order of racialized and gendered visible identities connoting moral ordering with prevalent understandings of “purity, spirituality, transcendence, cleanliness, virtue, simplicity, chastity.” (Dyer, 1997 : 71) However, as far as the ‘female body’, as an aesthetic and artistic object of beauty, is concerned, such an analysis cannot provide a thorough understanding without referring to the issues of nakedness and nudity.

Like beauty, nudity has diverging connotations from “innocence to shame, from vulnerability to culpability, and from present worthlessness to future bliss in the resurrection of the body.” (Miles, 2006). Transforming women’s nakedness into art and culture, the female nude became an “icon of idealised feminine sexuality.” (Ussher, 2006 : 3) Besides colonial imagery, Christian religious iconography is also a significant domain in which artistic and aesthetic racial and gendered symbolism is constructed. Prescribing an ideal femininity around icons such as the Virgin Mary, Christian imagery equates “whiteness with beauty, purity and virtue, and the artistic representations have helped to define how women are publicly represented.” (Edwards, 2017) Additionally, close association of nakedness/nudity with the suffering body, represented dominantly by the body of Christ and Virgin Martyrs in European art generated an archetype of sacralized and purified bodies.

Baksa’s female refugee does not look like an innocent, vulnerable and beautiful female victim canonized in Christian iconography. Contrary to European artistic as well as humanitarian traditions, the female refugee is not the ideal victim. On the contrary, the images turn the female refugee into a vilified and eroticized object, devoid of innocence and victimhood. She resembles an evil-feminine figure that is beautiful from outside but vicious and dishonest inside. Therefore, the monstrous, even grotesque beauty generates a vision of ‘otherness’ which is promiscuous yet repulsive and threatening at the same time.

Her beauty emphasized by her nudity, camouflages the alien and the unknown strangeness inside her and the figure becomes the “site of questions about what can and cannot be known.” (Doane, 1991:1) Resurrecting the well-known ‘femme fatale’ trope, the female refugee

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<sup>11</sup> See: <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/beauty/> [accessed 25 May 2018]

strikes the viewer as if she is not really what she seems to be. She seems to conceal “a threat which is not entirely legible, predictable, or manageable.” (Doane, 1991:1) Ultimately, the images transform the female figure into a secret, a mysterious ‘otherness’, “something which must be aggressively revealed, unmasked, discovered.” (Doane, 1991:1)

### 3. Concluding remarks

I want to point out that this study will not criticize Baksa’s photographs with respect to objectivism or truthfulness since they are obviously not representatives of photojournalism, nor does he claim so. However, since Baksa announced that the images were created deliberately to draw attention to the European refugee crisis of 2015 and to re-animate the events that took place in the Hungarian border through artificially staging the scenes, the photographs still purport to reflect some kind of truthfulness. By preserving a mimetic illusion of realistic representation, the photographs still intend to re-animate the historical events that occurred in September 2015. Baksa even defended himself by claiming that “the pictures are reproductions of reports in Hungarian Media”.<sup>12</sup> Resembling the Orientalist postcards which Alloula’s study illustrates, Baksa’s photographs also allege to picture the refugee crisis as close to reality as possible by setting the scenes as a mimetic representation of the incidents that took place at the Hungarian border. However, the photographs do not resemble any particular news images. They are not one of the artistic responses such as Fernando Botero’s paintings reflecting Abu Gharib torture or reproductions of Aylan Kurdi’s lifeless body, which are also highly problematic posing controversial ethical issues.

Rather, Baksa’s images are fabricated with added and exaggerated spectral illusions deceiving the viewer into seeing what is totally different from the actual events that took place. The only photographic details used to create a reality effect are the wired fence and the rural area resembling the Hungarian border and the uniformed man who we understand from the writing on the back of his uniform in Hungarian ‘Rendörseg’ that he is a Hungarian policeman. This is not to say that the perceptual impact created by Baksa’s photographs intends to create a misperception of the truthfulness of the events such as the well-known staged or faked photojournalism examples. Although Baksa’s images do

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<sup>12</sup> Norbert Baksa, 6 October 2015, <https://twitter.com/NorbertBaksa/status/651414890062708736>

not offer recognition of a fabricated truth, they still demand from the viewer to be a participant who is “informed about the reality as well as the illusion” but still enjoys the deception willingly (Kleutghen, 2013 : 97). In other words, although the viewers are fully aware that these images are fashion photographs not news coverage, the initial shock and surprise created by the visual appeal and distractions persuade the audience to look, interpret and comment on the photographs as well as on the refugee crisis since it is obviously referring to the event. Baksa’s offensive words trying to justify his intention of surprising and shocking the audience to draw their attention to the refugee crisis is no more than “rhetoric of camouflage.” (Alloula, 1986 : 28)

Baksa’s images can be interpreted as caricaturized portrayals of a popular image of the Oriental-Muslim-Arab refugee Other, discursively defined by politicians, particularly by Hungarian President Victor Orban during the refugee crisis of 2015. However, it is also crucially important to point out that Baksa’s images are not solely reflecting the Hungarian anti-refugee sentiments of a particular refugee crisis. Rather, I argue that these photographs, although they were removed by the photographer, were put into circulation, taking their place within the global repository of (mis)representations informed by anti-Muslim, Anti-Arab sentiments drawing from a historical tradition of Orientalism, peaking after 9/11 through displaying distinctive features. (Perry, 2014 : 2)

Malek Alloula argues about the Orientalist French postcards that the “deeply fascinating and equally disturbing” portrayals of oriental women were the main reasons for “the photographic success of the postcards.” (Alloula, 1986:35) A similar argument can also be raised for Baksa’s photographs, not in terms of admiration as an artwork or getting credit for the message they convey, for but for drawing the audience’s attention, even “to surprise” as well as “to provoke desire” in Barthes’ words. (Barthes, 1982 : 29) Besides, still depending on the same discursive themes and tropes of classic Orientalism, neo-Orientalism generates more arbitrary and extensive circulation of “a kind of doxa about the Middle East and Muslims” with new technologies of communication and a popular mode of representation. (Behdad and Williams, 2010 : 284) Therefore, Norbert Baksa’s fashion photographs are discernible examples of such neo-Orientalist representations that overemphasize ‘the Muslim other’, replacing the more generalized understandings of the ‘Oriental other’ with “a social and existential threat” to the Western world and culture. (Kerboua, 2016 : 8) Although the photographs were widely criticized and removed by the photographer, it is a precise example of

how neo-orientalist presentations camouflaged as fashion photography can circulate arbitrarily and extensively through the means of new communication technologies.

The academic and artistic productions about the Orient and the Oriental Other have always underpinned the differences between Islamic East and Christian West as reminded by Edward Said. Said points out that the West has been studying, classifying and verifying the Orient and its people “but above all, it subordinated them to the culture and indeed the very idea of white Christian Europe.” (Said, 1994 : 222) He also reminds in *Orientalism* (1978) “the Orient and Islam are always represented as outsiders having a special role to play inside Europe.” (Said, 1978 : 71) Furthermore, the increasing discourses raised on the dichotomy between Muslim East and Christian West recently justify John L. Esposito’s argument that one “must speak not only about Islam *and* the West but also Islam *in* the West.” (Esposito, 2003 : 2) Likewise, we can claim that, not complying with the conventional images of refugeeness or the iconic tropes of an oriental otherness per se, Baksa imaginary other is the ‘Other within Europe’– if accepted as a refugee – who has mutated into a deceptive western appearance.

The images which are claimed to present a social commentary are obviously poignant representations of Orientalizing desires and fears masquerading as fashion photography. Hyper-sexualized but at the same time threatening images of the female refugee are interwoven with the dialectics of Orientalist fascination and repulsion. Accordingly, Baksa used the established ‘Oriental woman’ archetype as object of desire and hostility (Yeğenoğlu 1998). Visually appealing with allusions to promiscuity, the images are subtly loaded with the neo-Orientalist rhetoric reifying the refugee figure as a “‘suspicious being’ who has ‘attractive’ yet ‘dangerous’ and ‘treacherous’ moves” (Bijdiguen 2015 : 113). In conclusion, communicating a paradoxical picture, the photographs produce a “desired effect of terrorism” (qtd. in Racco, 2014 : 82); and most significantly, by making “visible what is hidden” (Yeğenoğlu 1998:39), it seems that Norbert Baksa attempted to solve the refugee enigma which has been frustrating Europe through his visual unveiling of the female refugee.

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