

PHOTOGRAPHS IN DIALOGUE: MIGRATION AT THE MEXICO–US BORDER, VISUAL MEMORY, AND ILLUMINATIONS OF THE PAST

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ABSTRACT

In this article, considering photography as a medium of cultural recording capable of revealing complexities, we investigate the representation of migration at the Mexico–United States (US) border in Monica Lozano’s photographs. Drawing on the idea of photographs as media of memory, we propose to analyse these photographs through exercises in montage, bringing them into articulation with images of the Nazi concentration camps in Germany, not to establish a historical equivalence between events, but to make explicit how certain visual forms of dehumanisation, containment, and violence may reactivate, in the present, a transcultural memory of violence and abandonment. It is interesting to reflect on what the montages reveal, in thinking through the plasticity of images of the migratory crisis at the Mexico–US border, and in the convergences and divergences between the images of the camps. The first part of the essay discusses the theoretical and methodological frameworks that form the basis of the photographic analyses, namely the materiality and transculturality of memory and montage between images. In the second, through montage, we examine Lozano’s photographs in the works *Concertina* (Concertina wire; Lozano, 2024), *Come Hell or High Water* (Lozano, 2023), and *Hugs Not Walls* (Lozano, n.d.). We propose a mosaic of images that suggests that Lozano’s photographs evoke the transcultural memory of concentration camps, resonating, without establishing historical equivalence, with visual traces of authoritarianism, suspension, and violence. In the third, we analyse in detail four montages that construct bridges between past and present, identifying visual resonances between historically distinct forms of vulnerability, violence, and dehumanisation, without equating the specificity of the Holocaust with the contemporary migratory crisis. We conclude that correspondences and the survival of images foster a form of memory activism, connecting past and present and illuminating the question of migration.

KEYWORDS

Mexico–US border, memory, migrations, photography and montage, concentration camps

FOTOGRAFIAS EM DIÁLOGO: MIGRAÇÃO NA FRONTEIRA MÉXICO–EUA, MEMÓRIA VISUAL E ILUMINAÇÕES DO PASSADO

RESUMO

Neste artigo, considerando a fotografia como meio de registo cultural capaz de revelar complexidades, investigo a representação da migração da fronteira México–Estados Unidos da

América (EUA) nas fotografias de Monica Lozano. A partir da ideia das fotografias como meios de memória, proponho analisar tais fotografias através de exercícios de montagem, articulando-as com imagens dos campos de concentração da Alemanha nazi, não para estabelecer uma equivalência histórica entre acontecimentos, mas para explicitar como certas formas visuais de desumanização, contenção e violência podem reativar, no presente, uma memória transcultural da violência, do desamparo. Interessa refletir sobre o que as montagens revelam e permitem pensar através da plasticidade das imagens acerca da crise migratória na fronteira México–EUA e pelas aproximações e afastamentos das imagens dos campos. Na primeira parte do ensaio, são abordados os referenciais teóricos e metodológicos que estabelecem a base das análises fotográficas, nomeadamente a materialidade e a transculturalidade da memória e a montagem entre imagens. Na segunda, por meio das montagens, investigo as fotografias de Lozano nas obras *Concertina* (Lozano, 2024), *Come Hell or High Water* (Lozano, 2023) e *Hugs Not Walls* (Lozano, s.d.). Proponho um mosaico de imagens que permite pensar que as fotografias de Lozano evocam a memória transcultural dos campos de concentração, fazendo ressoar, sem estabelecer equivalência histórica, traços visuais de autoritarismo, suspensão e violência. Na terceira, analiso em detalhes quatro montagens que pensam pontes entre o passado e o presente, identificando ressonâncias visuais entre formas de vulnerabilização, violência e desumanização historicamente distintas, sem equiparar a especificidade do Holocausto à crise migratória contemporânea. Concluo que as correspondências e sobrevivências das imagens favorecem uma espécie de ativismo da memória, conectando passado e presente e iluminando a questão migratória.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE

fronteira México–EUA, memória, migrações, fotografia e montagem, campos de concentração

1. INTRODUCTION

The issue of migration in the United States of America (USA) has gained significant media prominence in recent decades, particularly regarding the border with Mexico. In 2024, Customs and Border Protection recorded approximately two million attempted border crossings (U.S. Customs and Border Protection, 2024). Concurrently, there has been a rise in anti-migration discourses that bring together a range of perceptions associated with the figure of the migrant, among which concerns regarding economic, security, and cultural risks stand out. Within discursive rhetoric, these risks consolidate the image of the migrant as a threat to US national sovereignty (Contrera et al., 2022), which, in contexts of widespread economic and social crisis, may turn migrants into a form of “scapegoat” (Girard, 1982/2018). On the other hand, issues of mobility related to attempted crossings at the Mexico–US border have highlighted the dangerous nature of the route and the extreme vulnerability to which migrants are exposed. Beyond being the object of political and identity-based disputes, migration at the Mexico–US border is also the subject of diverse artistic representations, as in literature with *Lost Children Archive* (Luiselli, 2019), in cinema with *De L’Autre Coté* (From the Other Side; Akerman, 2002), in the performing arts with *Border Tuner/Sintonizador Fronterizo* (Lozano-Hemmer, 2019), and in photography, with the series *Come Hell or High Water* (2023), *Hugs Not Walls* (n.d.), and *Concertina* (Concertina wire; 2024) by the Mexican-American photographer Monica Lozano. When considering

art's capacity to transform events, culture, and history into collective memory, such representations may be understood as mnemonic records of migration. From the relevance of cultural representations for the construction of collective memories derives the potential of these manifestations to bring to the surface non-obvious elements of the migratory question, beyond debates concerning the right to move, to come, and to remain.

Starting from the premise that artistic representations contribute to the perception of the complexities of experiences of displacement, this essay investigates the representation of migration at the border between Mexico and the USA in Monica Lozano's photographic series. It draws on Sontag's (2003/2024, 1977/2024) idea that photographs can function as testimonial objects, capable of articulating notions of truth, artificiality, and memory, always with the potential to provoke thought. Through a methodological proposal based on montage between images (Didi-Huberman, 2012/2020) and the heuristic potential of such articulations, the study investigates how Lozano's photographs, in portraying the context of migration and despair near the border wall, may activate visual memories associated with the "banality of evil", as discussed by Arendt (1963/2013). The author observed that acts of horror can be committed by ordinary people, bureaucrats, and citizens who, by relinquishing their reflective capacities and moral judgment, can follow orders unthinkingly, thereby leading to a relativisation of such acts. For Arendt, this attitude leads to the perception of certain actions as banal and acceptable. "The essence of totalitarian government, and perhaps the nature of bureaucracy, is to make functionaries and mere cogs in the administrative machinery out of men, and thus dehumanise them" (Arendt, 1963/2013, p. 312). This normalisation would be transmuted across history, assuming other forms and meanings. In this sense, the suspension of life and despair experienced at the border as a result of migration policies appears to echo other events associated with extreme vulnerability, violence, and crises of belonging, which are in turn also documented in photographic records.

It is acknowledged that many human tragedies, genocides, and forms of historical violence could be invoked for this type of comparative exercise. However, photographs of the Nazi concentration camps in Germany were selected as objects for the montages alongside Lozano's photographs. This choice is justified by the fact that these images are part of a repertoire of transcultural visual memory (Erll, 2011b; Rothberg, 2009), already consolidated in the collective imagination as memories of the banality of evil that runs through history and which, in new forms, is reactivated and transformed in the present. As Arendt (1963/2013) proposes, "it is in the very nature of things human that every act that has once made its appearance and has been recorded in the history of mankind stays with mankind as a potentiality long after its actuality has become a thing of the past" (pp. 295–296).

Nevertheless, it is important to emphasise the distinct nature of the photographs. Whereas the images of the camps are documentary records of dehumanisation, Lozano's photographs, while also documentary records of the border and illustrative of the authoritarian dimensions of migration policies, possess an artistic character that distinguishes them from the camp images. In this analysis, however, it is not only the aesthetic

qualities of the photographs that are of interest, but rather their cultural dimension, that is, the way in which the photographs critically express, through montage, the contours of cultures. Thus, articulating such different photographic materials proves heuristically pertinent and, as Mirzoeff (1999/2023) suggests, allows the question to be posed: what do they signify, what do they say, what worlds do they evoke?

A methodological and ethical precaution must be made explicit: through montage, the aim is to identify the reciprocal capacity of illumination between visual records, without establishing historical equivalence between events. This analysis does not seek to construct historical, causal, or moral correspondence between occurrences, but rather to show that the dialogue between photographs makes it possible to observe how certain visual forms of separation, vulnerability, and dehumanisation may resonate across historically distinct contexts, arising from different circumstances and separated by space and time. It is argued that, through montage — that is, by placing images side by side — one begins to perceive elements that provoke unease, not because of any presumed socio-historical similarity, but because of the evocative and revealing capacity of such juxtapositions. Of particular interest is what the dialogue between images reveals and how it facilitates reflection on the plasticity of photographs across these distinct historical and cultural contexts. From a methodological perspective, montage is understood here as a relational and critical mode of reading images. The procedure observes recurring formal and affective elements — barriers, barbed wire, walls, queues, bodies, abandoned objects, gazes, and absences — to produce visual thinking, without subordinating one image to another or reducing the historical specificity of each event.

To investigate relations that consider the testimonial character of photographs and reveal the presence of the past in the present, this essay is divided into three parts. The first presents the theoretical and methodological frameworks that underpin the photographic analyses. It addresses the materiality of memory (Assmann, 1999/2011; Erll, 2011a) and the potential of photographs to evoke recollection, recognising the transculturality of memory in images of concentration camps (Assmann, 2014; Erll, 2011b, 2011c; Rothberg, 2009). It then introduces the concept of montage between images proposed by Warburg (1929/2010; 2010/2021), Corrêa and Moreira (2023), and Didi-Huberman (2012/2020), which is used throughout the photographic analysis.

The second part begins with an assemblage of three photographs by Lozano from the series *Concertina* (2024), *Come Hell or High Water* (2023), and *Hugs Not Walls* (n.d.), identifying how they construct an image of the Mexico–US border as a site marked by ambivalence, echoing Anzaldúa (1987) in her study of borderlands. It then proposes a mosaic combining Lozano's photographs with images of Nazi concentration camps, enabling a visual reflection on an apparently convergent landscape of different events (concentration camps and migration) that may render visible certain symptoms (Didi-Huberman, 2002/2013, 2012/2020) associated with the visual memory of historical violence and, paradoxically, highlight what is reactivated between images. This is not a literal reprise of the tragedy of the Holocaust, but rather the reactivation of certain characteristics that marked

that period and exposed the vulnerability of the human condition in the face of authoritarianism. The aim is to think through the images, focusing on elements that, in the contemporary migratory context, emerge as threats to national identity, in this case, US identity (Anderson, 1983/2005; Contrera et al., 2022; Sarmiento, 2021). In this way, the analysis seeks to demonstrate the harshness, vulnerabilities, and despair exposed at the border, as well as the forms of resistance that emerge from the images.

The third part shifts closer attention to the mosaic introduced in the previous section and, through four montage exercises, analyses how Lozano's photographs, when brought into proximity with images of concentration camps, allow for the observation of visual resonances of vulnerability, violence, and dehumanisation, while preserving the historical specificity of the Holocaust. The camp photographs used in these montages are sourced from the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. Finally, the concluding section seeks to demonstrate how, through the analysis of Lozano's photographs, certain survivals of images may be discerned (Benjamin, 1940/2020; Didi-Huberman, 2002/2013, 2012/2020; Löwy, 2001/2005). It is argued that photographs have the potential to retrieve the past, evoke affect (Ahmed, 2004), and foster dispositions towards action and the denunciation of human rights violations, which, in turn, may contribute to a form of memory activism (Merrill & Rigney, 2024; Rigney, 2018).

2. MATERIALITIES AND MONTAGES

Materiality has been identified as an important element in the conservation, transmission, and circulation of collective memories. Assmann (1999/2011), in addressing the metaphors of recollection and their materialities, indicates how writing, images, places, and the body itself can be understood as spaces of remembrance and inscription of memory, which, as proposed by Erll (2011a), constitute media of memory that do not contain memory itself, but are capable of evoking recollections, eliciting emotions, and awakening feelings and responses. Landscapes, objects, symbols, books, films, and photographs, as well as technologies, are configured as material artefacts of memory, allowing these to circulate across time and space, particularly in the era of globalisation.

Among memory artefacts, photographs may be considered privileged media for their transmission, given their capacity to bring together records of events and function as testimonial objects (Sontag, 2003/2024, 1977/2024) and as potentially critical engagements with reality (Barroso et al., 2020). Assmann (1999/2011) proposes "photography as the most important medium of remembrance, since it is considered the most reliable trace of a past that no longer exists, like an imprint [*Abdruck*] remaining from a past moment" (p. 238). Over time, certain photographs have become paradigmatic of socio-historical moments, such as "The Falling Soldier" (1936) by Robert Capa and "The Falling Man" (2001) by Richard Drew, as well as photographs of the Nazi concentration camps. Didi-Huberman (2012/2020), referring to images of the Holocaust, points to their capacity to transmit and reproduce memory, which enables a bridge between past and present, between the individual and the collective.

Images of the concentration camps were not confined to Germany, nor to a brief period following the end of the war. On the contrary, images and cultural representations of the Holocaust contributed to its transformation into a travelling memory (Erll, 2011c). The images of the camps have travelled and proliferated, becoming what has been termed “transcultural memory” (Assmann, 2014; Assmann & Conrad, 2010), shared across different parts of the world and capable of generating feelings of empathy, identification, and recognition. The banality of evil (Arendt, 1963/2013) is identifiable in these images of the camps, pointing to a transcultural dimension of this memory in visual representations of violence, vulnerability, containment, and dehumanisation. This image-memory of the camps — and of the banality of evil — circulates across cultures in such a way that it is often possible to recognise it, whether through difference or similarity, in other images. Didi-Huberman (2012/2020) suggests that images of the Holocaust possess an almost infinite capacity to generate reflections, feelings, and connections, particularly when placed in relation to other images.

The study of relations, correspondences, and the recognition of surviving elements in images across time formed part of Warburg’s work (1929/2010; 2010/2021; Corrêa & Moreira, 2023). According to Assmann (1999/2011), for Warburg, images bring together elements that evoke and awaken recollections in the observer and which, through repetition, become referential objects of certain historical moments. For Warburg (2010/2021), repetition across history ultimately activates specific traits within images, reactivating an affective potential embedded in the depicted figures; a motif of images would thus be constructed, a kind of impregnated force capable of reactivating the image. Warburg (2010/2021) further identified that certain patterns, symbols, and representations recur across time and space in art. Accordingly, there is no strictly temporal or evolutionary relation in the history of art or culture, but rather certain characteristics that reappear across time and space. His methodological approach proposed a reconfiguration of the history of images by foregrounding their anachronic character rather than linearity and chronology. In particular, in his unfinished *Mnemosyne Atlas* (L’Atlas Mnémosyne), Warburg (1929/2010) proposed a history of culture and art through the relation between images, thereby enabling the anachronistic identification of patterns and repetitions.

In contemporary scholarship, Didi-Huberman (2002/2013, 2012/2020) extends this Warburgian methodology. The author proposes that montage between images enables new understandings of images and history, suggesting that the relation between images brings forth, or renders visible, similarities and differences that produce potentially unsettling meanings regarding tragic moments in history. Warburg’s visual motifs and Didi-Huberman’s montage can be understood as procedures that intensify the affective and mnemonic energy of images, with the capacity to recharge the energy of human history, to awaken memory, and to make thought possible. It is worth recalling in this regard that, in a similar sense, for Benjamin (1935/2017), certain images would contain an aura, a unique potential for affect and memory.

Beyond the recording of facts, the capacity to evoke the dead (Barthes, 1980/2022), and the production of reflections on veracity and ethical duty (Sontag, 2003/2024),

photographs are not neutral and possess critical potential (Barroso et al., 2020), being deployable in different ways. For Didi-Huberman (2012/2020), photographs have the capacity to incite what the author terms “visual thinking”. That is, thought (analysis, reflection, idea) is constructed through interaction with the image, through the active work of the researcher: in studying a photograph, observing it, analysing it, articulating it with other images, and especially writing about it, thought is visually constructed in a transformation of image into words and words into images. “Images collide so that words emerge, words collide so that images emerge, images and words enter into collision so that thought may arise visually” (Didi-Huberman, 2012/2020, p. 198).

This investigative engagement with images enables the emergence of new ideas and meanings, even in relation to already familiar and widely analysed images, such as photographs of Nazi Germany’s concentration camps or other emblematic historical moments. In a kind of interplay between the subject who looks and the image that looks back (Didi-Huberman, 1992/2021), the *mise en abyme* (self-reflexive structure) traversed by the subject may expand and shift the photograph from the status of documentary record to that of an active relation with the subject, displacing (and being displaced) from a position of passivity. The subject is not merely an observer of the image but someone who stands actively before it. This act of observing/writing/thinking produces meanings that are continually constructed and reconstructed through the subject-photograph interaction. Through the relation established when images are placed in proximity, visual thinking emerges, rendering similarities and differences intelligible. Didi-Huberman (2012/2020) argues that the memory of the concentration camps contained in photographs is not fully exhausted in these records but that, through articulation with other images, alternative understandings may emerge, whether about the past, the present, or the future.

Images become valuable for historical knowledge when they are situated within montages of intelligibility. The memory of the Shoah should not cease to be reconfigured — and, preferably, refined — as new relations are established, new similarities are discovered, and new differences are highlighted. (Didi-Huberman, 2012/2020, p. 226)

Following this proposal for analysis through montage, and through montage exercises involving Lozano’s photographs of migration at the Mexico–US border and photographs of Nazi concentration camps — already consolidated in collective memory — it becomes possible to generate new meanings and new memories through relations between images. Such montages make it possible to think about the relation between distinct times and places, or even the survival of elements from the past in the present.

When two phenomena, chronologically distant and apparently heterogeneous, are placed in comparison with one another, mutually illuminate each other, revealing a certain internal affinity between their factual contents, there flashes before the critic a configuration — or, to put it in more properly

Benjaminian terms, a true “constellation” — of history, an image of history that is internal to them. (Botelho, 2012, p. 108)

In this sense, throughout this essay, photographs are approached as Souto (2020) approaches films, that is, as substances that, when juxtaposed and placed in relation, produce reactions: at times of proximity, but also of distancing, displacement, and opposition. These relations generate disturbances and meanings without removing the autonomy each photograph holds within its socio-historical context. This is therefore a methodological proposal that enables alternative ways of thinking, intending to produce new pathways for the social, historical, and cultural understanding of certain phenomena and events. Thus, even when photographs are separated by time, space, and circumstance, montages produce reactions, revealing relations of proximity or distance, similarity or difference. It is emphasised that the montages were constructed on the basis of visual affinities and recurring cultural questions: dispositifs of containment, regimes of waiting, the exposure of vulnerability, the presence and/or absence of bodies, and the material presence of objects in the images.

3. SURVIVALS AND NEW MEANINGS OF IMAGES

The analysis and presentation of Lozano’s works begins with a mosaic composed of selected photographs from the series *Concertina*, *Come Hell or High Water*, and *Hugs Not Walls*. The series documents, from different perspectives and moments, the border between the cities of Ciudad Juárez, Mexico, and El Paso, USA (Figure 1, Figure 2, and Figure 3). In *Concertina*, the 12 photographs in the series show concertina wire placed in front of the border wall with the USA. The images also include objects belonging to migrants caught in the wire, and no people are depicted. In *Come Hell or High Water*, 18 photographs document 8 May 2023, when the gates of one of the border wall crossings were opened, and border agents and the National Guard allowed the migrants present there to enter the USA and board a waiting bus. Finally, in *Hugs Not Walls*, 79 black-and-white photographs depict the “Hugs Not Walls” event, organised by the non-governmental organisation The Border Network for Human Rights, in which, for one day each year, the gates of the wall are opened, and migrants can embrace their family members and friends at the border for three minutes.



Figure 1. Photograph from *Concertina* (2024)

Credits. Monica Lozano (<https://www.monicalozano.com/series/concertina>)



Figure 2. Photograph from *Come Hell or High Water* (2023)

Credits. Monica Lozano (<https://www.monicalozano.com/series/come-hell-or-high-water>)



Figure 3. Photograph from *Hugs Not Walls* (n.d.)

Credits. Monica Lozano (<https://www.monicalozano.com/series/hugs-not-walls>)

The dialogue between these photographs constructs an image of the Mexico–US border and of migration marked by risk, barriers, and uncertainty. While in *Concertina*, it is the barbed wire fence and objects caught in the wire that point to the difficulties and risks of crossing, in the photographs of *Come Hell or High Water* and *Hugs Not Walls*, it is the wall that is consolidated as an obstacle and an impossibility of passage, indicating further difficulties in the migratory trajectory. At the same time, the presence of people attempting to cross the border (*Come Hell or High Water*) or gathered at the border to embrace their families (*Hugs Not Walls*) indicates the persistence of survival and the perseverance inherent in migration. In these images, the border becomes a site of ambivalence, of both demise and survival. These contradictions resonate with Anzaldúa's reflections (1987). The author describes the characteristics of the Mexico–US border region, tracing its historical formation from the Aztecs through Spanish domination and, later, English occupation. In exposing the characteristics of the border, Anzaldúa highlights *mestizaje*, the mixing of beliefs, and power struggles as defining elements of the borderlands. For Anzaldúa (1987), "a borderland is a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary. It is in a constant state of transition (...). Ambivalence and unrest reside there, and death is no stranger" (pp. 3–4). The dialogue between Lozano's photographs precisely renders visible this uncertainty, loss, and displacement, as well as the insistence on life. The images reveal a site of contradiction and, through them, the border acquires materiality beyond its physical and geographical space, becoming a complex visual record of migration.

At the level of differences between these photographs (aesthetic and contextual), the mosaic's disturbance is further reinforced. It points to the horror of the camps that appears to survive within images of the past, as well as to new forms of segregation emerging in the present. The mosaic suggests a convergent framework across dimensions, producing an unsettling, disturbing landscape that critically articulates the contours of these cultures. It is important, however, to emphasise that this shared visual landscape does not erase the historical, political, and moral differences between contexts. Its analytical value lies in its capacity to render visible formal and affective resonances — and not in establishing continuity or equivalence between events.

The notion of survival in Warburg (2010/2021), and particularly in Didi-Huberman (2002/2013), demonstrates how certain visual elements and gestures reappear over time, emerging in different social, historical, and cultural contexts. Images contain a kind of unconscious memory that persists, sometimes through similarity, sometimes through dissonance of meaning. These visual elements correspond to the manifestation of Freudian symptoms, as something that returns from repression and emerges in the image (Didi-Huberman, 2002/2013, 2012/2020). For the author, one way of understanding the history of images is through the recognition of symptoms: “the strange conjunction of difference and repetition” (Didi-Huberman, 2000/2015, p. 46). The montages proposed here may therefore render visible what, in Freudian terms, remains unresolved or insufficiently worked through in history and culture in relation to the historical trauma of the camps. The presence of a persistent past manifests itself in the recognition of the condition to which migrants are subjected in Lozano's photographs. Löwy (2001/2005), in his reading of Benjamin's theses, returns to the idea of a past that insists in the present because it has not yet been worked through:

to articulate the past historically does not mean to know it “as it really was”.
It means to seize a memory as it flashes up in a moment of danger. (...)
The gift of kindling in the past, the spark of hope, belongs only to that historian who is pervaded by the conviction that even the dead will not be safe from the enemy if he is victorious. And this enemy has never ceased to be victorious. (p. 65)

The mosaic suggests that the visual memory of the Holocaust, barbarism, and segregation in the concentration camps appears to be reactivated in Lozano's photographs, which, in Benjaminian terms, illuminate or flash up past events. The border photographs may thus mobilise memories and affects, evoking recollections of a hostile past towards minorities and bringing forward the persistence of forms of violence in present-day images. Symptoms such as authoritarianism, violence, and segregation emerge, albeit in updated forms. Through the mosaic, the justifications used to segregate people during the Second World War are not transposed onto the North American context, which is itself historically marked by racial segregation. Nevertheless, the relation between the images prompts reflection on the elements underlying the migratory crisis represented in the photographs.

In the context of migration, contemporary political discourse questions migrants' presence and entry into the USA, arguing that their presence threatens US national identity. According to Anderson (1983/2005), a nation can be understood through an image, but this is ultimately that of "imagined communities", given the impossibility of encompassing all members of a nation within a single image. However, according to prevailing discourses, it is precisely this supposed image that is perceived as threatened. Political and social actors argue that the presence of migrants introduces new values, practices, and cultures that weaken the nation, with migrants being held responsible for national decline (Contrera et al., 2022; Sarmiento, 2021) and for the weakening of national sovereignty, thus requiring walls as forms of protection (Brown, 2010).

For Contrera et al. (2022), US cohesion has historically been constructed through the rhetoric of the threat of the Other. After the Cold War, this external threat became more diffuse, and today the figure of the migrant has consolidated as the nation's primary threat. But not all migrants: European or Canadian migrants are considered part of the "civilised" world and are not subject to the same exclusionary treatment. It is the Latin American or Muslim migrant, poor and racialised, who embodies this figure. These migrants threaten (a) economic stability by "stealing" jobs from US citizens, (b) national security as they originate from countries associated with drug trafficking or potential terrorism, in the case of Muslim-majority countries, and (c) cultural values and norms, as they are perceived not to share North American culture (Contrera et al., 2022; Sarmiento, 2021). In this way, threats are projected onto the figure of the migrant, transforming it into a "scapegoat" (Girard, 1982/2018). This rhetoric and the resulting anti-immigration policies gain force in the context of the neoliberal economic crisis. Perceived as bearing cultural frameworks different from those of the USA and as an economic threat, migrants are seen as challenging local culture, threatening social cohesion, and therefore requiring containment, selection, and restriction.

Within this analysis, the montage reveals a border that, beyond materially separating territories and constituting a site of ambivalence, operates both materially and symbolically through barbed wire and walls. Materially, it separates Mexico and the USA, restricting — though not entirely preventing — certain migratory flows. By limiting access to territory and attempting to prevent people from other cultural backgrounds from entering the USA, the border appears to operate as a barrier (Haesbaert, 2004/2011) and a form of selection. The border, fences, and gates used to contain and separate prisoners during the Holocaust appear to be symbolically transformed into expressions of the hegemony of one country over another, separating those who belong — and are deemed worthy of belonging — to the country that constructs the wall.

If the photographs of the camps invite transcultural memory of the Holocaust, in Lozano's images, one finds visual resonances that engage with the past, becoming a potential memory of the present. Under the rhetoric of national protection, the montages recover ideas of racism, prejudice, and xenophobia as foundations for the perception of migrants as threats. These visual elements in dialogue function as a kind of State power

(Brown, 2010), establishing boundaries between one people and another, between identities and values. While pointing to symptoms of struggle, violence, oppression, and political conflict, the montages also indicate the persistence of the oppressed, rendering the border a site of resistance and ambivalence.

The dialectic between images enables a non-literal return to the past, not to the past itself, but to certain aspects that persist, such as abandonment and deferral, and to others that are updated, such as segregation. The mosaic also highlights the evident migratory vulnerability experienced by those attempting to cross the Mexico–US border and, beyond that, the undeniable persistence of the struggle for survival. In this sense, the relation between images suggests that images of the past may give strength to the present in order, perhaps, to transform it, as proposed by Löwy (2001/2005): “the relation between today and yesterday is not unilateral: in an eminently dialectical process, the present illuminates the past, and the illuminated past becomes a force in the present” (p. 61).

4. THE PAST IN IMAGES OF THE BORDER

Drawing on the montage developed by Warburg (1929/2010; 2010/2021) and continued by authors such as Didi-Huberman (2002/2013, 2012/2020), this section proposes an analysis of the photographs in the mosaic in Figure 4 through juxtaposition. By placing Lozano’s photographs alongside images of Nazi concentration camps, the reader is invited to observe proximities and distances produced through montage, extending the historical scope of the banality of evil and its forms of expression and transformation. In this analysis, a form of correspondence between images can be identified, enabling the recognition and differentiation of certain aesthetic, but above all cultural, elements. This correspondence reflects the “anachronism of images” (Didi-Huberman, 2002/2013, 2000/2015), that is, the capacity of images not to represent chronological time, but to establish relations of another order — based on visual association, poetic resonance, and the interplay of similarity and dissonance between images. The transcultural dimension present in images of concentration camps enables viewers, when confronted with them, to recognise and recall violence, horror, and brutality. Thus, engaging in montages between photographs makes it possible to establish connections across time, reactivating the tragic past and opening possibilities for thinking about the present and the future.

In Figure 5, the photographs selected for the mosaic share barbed wire as a common visual element. While in the first row of the mosaic, the wire encloses the entrance to the Auschwitz concentration camp, in the second row it surrounds the border wall between Mexico and the USA. Initially used to hinder troop mobility during the First World War, particularly in trench warfare, the wire, in the interplay between the images, shifts from preventing exit to preventing entry. It is as if, through this shared element — the wire — first horizontally and then in all directions, the wire traverses the photographs, always intending to separate, restrict, and contain. The wire, within and across images, draws the subject into a trap, giving material form to *mise en abyme* itself: the subject is caught in the anachronism of a symptom in constant repetition and updating.



Figure 5. Top, from left to right: photographs of Auschwitz (1945); bottom, from left to right: photographs from *Concertina* (2024)

Credits. United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (<https://collections.ushmm.org/search/catalog/pa30676>; <https://collections.ushmm.org/search/catalog/pa15018>) and Monica Lozano (<https://www.monicalozano.com/series/concertina>)

Continuing the observation of barbed wire as a visual element that helps articulate the violence of separation between people, in Figure 6, the wire of the concentration camps gives way to a wall, bars, and steel structures guarding the US border. These barriers more concretely prevent passage. In the relation between the photographs, through the plasticity of the images and the imagination, the reader is invited to consider a before-and-after-the-camera, establishing a dialectic between seeing and being seen, and the possibility of deriving meaning from this relation.



Figure 6. Left: photograph of Auschwitz (1945); right: photograph from *Hugs Not Walls* (n.d.)

Credits. United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (<https://collections.ushmm.org/search/catalog/pa14532>) and Monica Lozano (<https://www.monicalozano.com/series/hugs-not-walls>)

This is not a matter of comparing the events recorded by the images, but rather of attending to the dialogue between photographs, to what emerges in their relation. In the montage, in *Auschwitz*, some children behind the wire look towards the camera, and the photograph may be read as a record of violence (Sontag, 2003/2024), becoming a witness to horror, while paradoxically also capturing gazes that appear to challenge the brutality of the event and of the image itself. In Lozano's photograph, the border image generates unease; it depicts children (or a family?) being photographed by someone positioned on the outside (or the inside?) of the bars. The image is read from the perspective of someone behind the family, so that their faces are obscured. Placed side by side,

the two images evoke a shot/reverse-shot structure, one the reverse of the other, establishing a connection between two distinct temporal and spatial orders while also emphasising their divergence in what they record, particularly in the context of the barbarity of Auschwitz. Paradoxically, this inter-image relation brings time and space closer together. The sense of despair and abandonment experienced by victims of the camps appears to be reactivated, becoming even more forceful in its relation to Lozano's photograph of migratory contexts, which depicts individuals subjected to extreme conditions in their attempt to cross the border. This is particularly evident in representations of children, who have not necessarily been afforded the choice.

In Figure 7, in the first photograph, prisoners are seen at the entrance of Auschwitz being selected either to enter the camp or to be sent directly to extermination. In the second, a queue of migrants at the border wall is being processed by the Border Patrol and directed towards a bus that will take them into the USA. The montage requires active viewing. The photographs, placed at the same height and in this sequence, appear to create a sense of continuity. In a form of collage, the images connect through several elements. First, through the barrier formed by the train cars in the first image, which, in the second, are imaginatively transformed into the separating wall of the border. Secondly, at approximately the same visual level, the figures appear to move from one image to the other, producing, through the plasticity of the photographs, an effect that simultaneously preserves and updates narratives: history is transformed, and while the barbarity of the first image disappears, ideas of segregation and selection remain in the second — albeit in different forms.

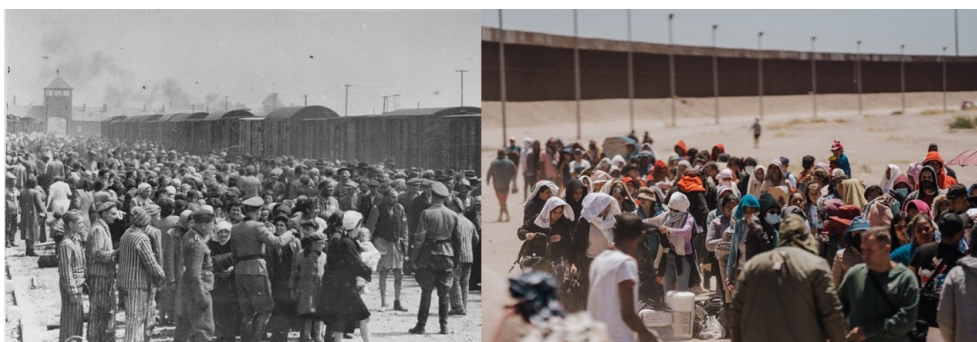


Figure 7. Left: photograph of the arrival of prisoners at Auschwitz (1944); right: photograph from *Come Hell or High Water* (2023)

Credits. Yad Vashem Photo Archive FA268/035/United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (<https://collections.ushmm.org/search/catalog/pa8273>) and Monica Lozano (<https://www.monicalozano.com/series/come-hell-or-high-water>)

Lozano's photograph does not reproduce the scene or tragedy depicted in the first image, but, through this montage, it appears to activate the visual memory of that scene, its tragic dimension and absurdity. The joint reading of the photographs reinforces the history of violence and horror of the Holocaust, which is re-evoked in Lozano's image, while simultaneously pointing to the emergence of other forms of control, segregation, and violence in the contemporary migratory context at the Mexico–US border. The past thus becomes a form of illumination of the present and the future.

Finally, in Figure 8, a photograph from Lozano's *Concertina* series is placed alongside an image from Flossenbürg, an image in which, in the foreground, a pair of shoes appears, and in the background, a blurred barrier, likely the concertina wire and wall visible in other images. Above the wire, a fragment of blue sky can be glimpsed. In the adjacent image from Flossenbürg, the foreground contains a pile of objects between an embankment and a section of brick wall. Beside the objects and in front of the wall, two men appear, proportionally small in relation to both the wall and the pile of objects. On closer inspection, the pile consists of shoes. The shoes of Holocaust victims form part of the few surviving personal belongings. The photograph reinforces barbarity: the pile of shoes, larger than the men in the image, evokes the number of victims of the camps.



Figure 8. Left: photograph from *Concertina* (2024); right: photograph from Flossenbürg (1945)

Credits. Monica Lozano (<https://www.monicalozano.com/series/concertina>) and United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (<https://collections.ushmm.org/search/catalog/pa1173581>)

Through the dialectic between images, present-day shoes evoke past shoes, while past shoes unsettle the present. Once again, this is not the same state of exception or totalitarian regime. However, in both images, the presence of shoes points to what is absent from the photographs: the people who wore them. In their absence, objects bear witness to existence, rendering it visible through materiality and transforming absence into presence. At the border, within the montage, shoes from the present and the past recall victims of the Holocaust while also indicating a contemporary form of precarious life, as suggested by Butler (2009/2024), distinct from that of concentration camp victims, yet exposing the risks faced by migrants attempting to cross the border in search of better living conditions. The interplay of images retrieves a different past, updating it and prompting unsettling reflections on both contexts.

Through the evocative capacity of photographs — to summon memory, emotion, and imagination — these montages open possibilities for thinking time and space across Lozano's photographs and images of concentration camps. It becomes evident that certain memories of the past are reactivated through the dialogue between border images and camp photographs. This analysis shows that it is not a matter of establishing a parallel between events, but rather of perceiving something that resonates in one and

is reactivated in the other, recalling the fragility of the human condition in the face of different degrees of authoritarianism and violence. Throughout this investigation, the montages reveal proximities and distances between images, times, and places, contributing to an understanding of the migratory question at the border and of the vulnerabilities that shape migration and support the construction of an image of crisis. Likewise, the dialectical relation between images enhances the memory of the devastating and absurd past of the concentration camps.

5. FINAL CONSIDERATIONS: ILLUMINATIONS FOR ACTION

This article has sought to suggest, through montage, that the survival of the transcultural memory of concentration camps may be reactivated in Monica Lozano's photographs, thereby identifying recurring elements in reflections on the banality of evil and its forms of (re)production. It has been shown that montage enables the bringing into the present of reflections that evoke elements of an authoritarian past that persist, albeit in other forms, at the Mexico–US border. Representations of the migratory crisis at the border help to critically interrogate the rhetoric that frames migrants as a threat to the USA, holding them responsible for the loss of national identity and for economic crises. The montages point to migratory vulnerability, to a political, social, and humanitarian context marked by violence and contradiction, and to the persistence of life nonetheless.

Lozano's photographs, through their critical capacity to provoke thought, evoke, within the montages, the memory of collective barbarism and, through the recognition of the past within the present, enable a critical reading. In line with Ahmed's (2010) suggestion that affect sticks to objects, it is proposed that images, through their evocative and mnemonic potential, can mobilise affect, inciting empathy and readiness for action within an affective economy. At this point, the affects and actions triggered by the montages resonate with Rigney's (2018) reflections on the relationship between memory and activism. The work of memory activism is widely discussed as an act of active memory production; Rigney (2018) proposes that the cultural memory of specific events contributes to the development of collective actions in support of a cause, thereby making certain memories integral to political and social activism. This notion of memory activism may be enacted through the mobilisation and interpretation of existing narratives (Gutman & Wüstenberg, 2023; Merrill & Rigney, 2024), as well as through the formation of narratives about the present to create a "future-proof" memory that extends the lifespan of a movement and its associated ideals (Merrill & Rigney, 2024). Within this activist turn (Gutman & Wüstenberg, 2023), there is an ethical commitment to preventing the erasure of certain memories, and photographs may play a significant role in activism (Barrilaro, as cited in Ferreira, 2017). Such a commitment may help prevent some memories from becoming "small islands in a sea of oblivion" (Erll, 2011a, p. 9). This is the critical potential of montage, art, and visual thinking that this essay has sought to demonstrate. The illuminating force of montage enables border images to move towards becoming an archive of

memory, making it possible to preserve the present not only to remember it but also to mobilise and transform it into critical discourse and the fostering of action. Considering the transculturality of the memory of violence, the montages appear to offer a way of visualising forms of the normalisation of precarity in the migratory context, in which deferral, despair, and abandonment are recognisable in photographs of the Mexico–US border, as they point to the conditions of precarity experienced by migrants. The past is transformed, but it persists in the present through new expressions. It must be recognised and, as a potential site of activist intervention, acted upon.

Machine Translation Post-Editing: Anabela Delgado

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author expresses her gratitude for the attentive, inventive and constellatory reading and rereading by Lígia Ferraz (University of Beira Interior), as well as for the constant encouragement of her supervisors, Professor Luísa Afonso Soares and Professor Santiago Pérez Isasi, from the Centre for Comparative Studies of the School of Arts and Humanities of the University of Lisbon, and for the attentive listening of Pablo, Lucia and Pedro Bertho. This publication was made possible through a doctoral scholarship from the Centre for Comparative Studies of the School of Arts and Humanities of the University of Lisbon.

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Submitted: 29/11/2025 | Accepted: 05/05/2026



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