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# Picturing the sea of absence

## Florian Bachmeier

In my work as a documentary photographer, particularly in my reports on refugees and their escape and migration routes from the Mediterranean and the war in Ukraine, I have consistently explored the theme of absence. Initially perhaps unconsciously, and later more deliberately, this concept became a central motif. Photography is a powerful tool, capable of evoking profound emotional reactions and shaping narrative discourses. As a medium, photography has an inherently intimate relationship with the concept of absence. Absence in photography refers to the deliberate omission or lack of elements in an image that one might ordinarily expect to find. This approach can serve various conceptual purposes and is intentionally used to achieve a specific effect. By omitting certain elements, photographers can amplify the significance of the objects that are present, guiding the viewer's perception. Absence in photography thus also fulfils a narrative function. In documentary photography, for instance, the absence of people in a place that would usually be bustling with activity can powerfully comment on social, political and emotional states. This absence can evoke feelings of isolation, loss and emptiness, prompting deeper reflection. It serves as a blank space, a hint of what is not visible in the image. It challenges viewers to think about the unseen and the unspoken. The blank space metaphorically represents absence or what is past and transient. Absence in photography creates a potent aesthetic impact. The presence of absence is, in a sense, the full stop, the 'sudden awakening' in the sense of Roland Barthes,<sup>1</sup> in many of my photographs.

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<sup>1</sup> Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida. Reflections of Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981).



Since my stays and travels to the hotspots of the so-called ‘refugee crisis’ in the Mediterranean, I have been deeply engaged with these concepts as a photographer. Through my images from places like Idomeni, the transit camp in northern Greece, the Moria camp on the Greek island of Lesbos, warehouses in the Serbian capital Belgrade, refugee shelters in Bulgaria and the Spanish enclave Ceuta on the African continent, I strive to document and analyse absences. Absence here is not only the physical lack of something but also the emotional, social and cultural void created by flight, displacement and migration.

## The meaning of absence

Absence, at its core, is a state or feeling of lack. When one considers the inhumane conditions in the camps, this lack or absence, the shattered hopes and the associated pain become particularly visible. The absence or loss of home, security, family, belonging and identity. In the worst cases, it is the absence of any hope. These absences are tangible and experiential both

Fig. 1  
**Florian Bachmeier: The horizon stretches across the sea off Lesbos Island, embodying the profound absence left behind by those who once sought refuge on its shores. Lesbos, Greece, 2017.**



physically and psychologically. Photography can capture and depict these absences profoundly.

I think of the emptiness and hopelessness in the eyes of many individuals portrayed and the bleak, chaotic landscapes of camps like Idomeni or Moria, which seem to gnaw like festering wounds at their surroundings. Pieces of torn clothing on barbed wire fences and other obstacles, faded photographs of those left behind or deceased, abandoned belongings left by those who had no choice but to leave their previous lives behind. Possessions lost on the run or hoarded in a drenched tent. Traces of escape through hostile territory. Motifs that represent and symbolically condense absence, repeating themselves in varied yet similar forms, becoming a constant that runs through the situation of refugees and their flight.

Susan Sontag argued that images, photographs, have the power to haunt us and elicit emotional reactions, something pure narrative storytelling often fails to achieve.<sup>2</sup> She describes the haunting quality of photographs that penetrate deeply into our consciousness, compelling us to reflect on what we see. I hope that my images from these camps and of the people I have been able to accompany on their journeys will ultimately serve not just as mere records but as windows into the reality of these people who otherwise remain largely invisible. They hopefully challenge

2 Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1973).

Fig. 2  
**Florian Bachmeier: Amid the barbed wire and bleak surroundings of Idomeni camp, the absence of certainty and stability hangs heavily over the refugees waiting at the closed border. Idomeni, Greece, 2016.**



Fig. 3  
**Florian Bachmeier: Empty blankets and drenched sleeping bags, painting a poignant picture of absence in the heart of the refugee camp. Idomeni, Greece, 2016.**

viewers to confront the harsh reality of refugees and their flight, grasping the intolerable absences that shape their lives. Perhaps photography can thus serve as an alternative, complementary method to highlight, investigate and reflect on such dissociations and absences.

Traditional sociological investigations rely on empirical and quantitative methods to collect and analyse data. But do these methods capture the deeper emotional and psychological dimensions of these existential human experiences? Here, photography as a medium can be a valuable complement. It can make the invisible visible, showing gaps and voids created by absences and document them.

Camps like Idomeni or Moria are places where absence is omnipresent. The people who have to live in these camps have fled their home countries to escape war, persecution and poverty. They have left everything behind – houses, apartments, possessions.



Often, they have lost loved ones. They have often experienced the unspeakable, carrying deep traumas with them. Arriving in one of these camps, they find themselves in a sort of limbo, a space between the past they have left behind and a future that remains uncertain. Many images from these contexts, including my own, depict people living in cramped spaces under often unbearable conditions, in cold, in extreme heat, without access to vital and basic services, without access to clean water, food and basic medical care.

Absences in refugee camps and other locations along migration routes refer pragmatically but primarily to the lack of resources necessary for a commodious life. There is often no medical care, injuries often remain untreated or are inadequately treated, chronic illnesses go untreated, and the lack of psychological support exacerbates the trauma many refugees have experienced and suffered. On migration routes and in camps, there is also a constant, often life-threatening lack of security. Extreme cold, constant rain and the outbreak of a fire like in Moria often have

Fig. 4  
**Florian Bachmeier: In the dim confines of a Belgrade warehouse, traumatised refugee Mohammed washes in freezing temperatures, the stark absence of safety and home evident in his solitary ritual. Belgrade, Serbia, 2017.**



catastrophic consequences. Violence, abuse and exploitation are widespread. Security forces, where present, are often unable to adequately protect the residents. Women and children are particularly at risk and often suffer from sexual harassment and abuse. The sanitary conditions in the camps and informal settlements along migration routes are often catastrophic. There is no sanitation. As previously mentioned, there is a lack of professional psychosocial support and networks to provide mutual support. Conflicts between people of different nationalities often occur. All this exacerbates the burdens refugees already face. Many suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder, depression and anxiety disorders.

These absences have serious impacts on individuals and communities. They undermine human dignity and worsen the already precarious living conditions of refugees and those in flight. In some of my photographs, I depict the architecture of makeshift, hastily erected shelters that often provide no protection. I show people who have to live in hiding, who must remain invisible. I show their sparse meals, their torn clothes, their injuries, the effects of violence and the hardships they endured during their escape. There are images of blankets, drenched sleeping bags, camps in inhospitable areas, pictures of worn-out children's shoes – a sad reminder of a childhood denied to the wearers of these shoes, likely to remain thus. Images that tell of a lives in a constant state of emergency in the sense of Giorgio Agamben,<sup>3</sup> particularly relevant in this context and these places: a situation where seemingly normal laws and rights are suspended in response to a crisis, creating a space where human rights are systematically suspended. Especially the camps exist in a state of lawlessness, operating as legal grey zones, and this state of emergency has long become the norm.

Ideally, images evoke emotional reactions – this, at least, is my hope and drive as a photographer – and make the absence of normality, of safety palpable. They hopefully speak a clear language and show the deep scars caused by this life on the run. Can photographs, as visual stimuli, evoke affective responses? Can they compel viewers to engage with the situations they depict, to connect with the people in these images? Images are a bridge between viewers and refugees, who are otherwise only perceived as abstract numbers in statistics.

## Bibliography

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3 Giorgio Agamben, *State of Exception*, trans. Kevin Attell (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).