

MASTERARBEIT | MASTER'S THESIS

Titel | Title

This Lifeless Image of Mine

The Significance of Photographs in the Turkish Migration Experience in
Germany

verfasst von | submitted by

İlkyaz Salmanlı Likic

angestrebter akademischer Grad | in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts (MA)

Wien | Vienna, 2026

Studienkennzahl lt. Studienblatt |

UA 066 583

Degree programme code as it appears on the
student record sheet:

Studienrichtung lt. Studienblatt | Degree pro-
gramme as it appears on the student record
sheet:

Masterstudium Theater-, Film- und Medienwissen-
schaft

Betreut von | Supervisor:

Univ.-Prof. Dr. Andrea Seier

Acknowledgements

I would like to express my deepest appreciation and sincere thanks to my advisor, Univ.-Prof. Dr. Andrea Seier, for her understanding and support throughout the writing of this thesis, both in good times and challenging moments. I am especially grateful for her patience, motivation, and enthusiasm, which encouraged me to refine my ideas and bring this project to completion.

Words cannot fully express my gratitude for the encouragement and support provided by Mag. Dr. David Martin-Krems throughout my research. His guidance, patience, and thoughtful feedback have greatly influenced this work. Through working with him, my interest in photography was reignited, and my passion for it has grown immensely, inspiring me to further explore and deepen my engagement with the field.

My sincere thanks go to the entire thesis committee for their time and effort in reading and evaluating this work. I am also deeply grateful to the families who allowed me access to their private archives. Their openness and trust provided essential insights that made this thesis possible.

I would also like to thank my grandfather, who was a photojournalist. Although I never had the chance to meet him, I like to believe that he would be proud of me.

Lastly, I would like to thank my parents for their unwavering support and for instilling in me the confidence that brought me to where I am today, and my partner, Haris Likic, for his constant love and for giving me the strength to continue.

Abstract (Deutsch)

Diese Arbeit untersucht die Rolle der Fotografie innerhalb der Erfahrung türkischer Arbeitsmigration nach Deutschland und fragt danach, wie Fotografien unter Bedingungen geografischer Trennung als vermittelnde Objekte fungieren. Auf der Grundlage von Repräsentationsanalyse und materialkulturellen Ansätzen betrachtet sie migrantische Fotografien nicht als transparente Dokumente gelebter Realität, sondern als kulturell codierte und sozial eingebettete Artefakte, durch die Identität, Zugehörigkeit und Erinnerung ausgehandelt werden.

Mit einem Schwerpunkt auf der Familienfotografie analysiert die Studie, wie Bilder innerhalb transnationaler Familiennetzwerke produziert, inszeniert, ausgetauscht, aufbewahrt und erneut betrachtet werden. Dabei wird die Fähigkeit der Fotografie hervorgehoben, eine Form vermittelter Präsenz zu erzeugen, die es Migrant:innen ermöglicht, für die Zurückgebliebenen sichtbar und sozial lesbar zu bleiben. Fotografien werden dabei zugleich als visuelle Repräsentationen und als materielle Spuren verstanden, die durch ihre Zirkulation und physische Beständigkeit eine affektive Bedeutung tragen.

Die Arbeit verortet diese Praktiken im historischen Kontext des Gastarbeiterprogramms, das die türkische Migration als temporär rahmte, zugleich jedoch langfristige Realitäten von Ansiedlung und geteilter Zugehörigkeit hervorbrachte. Der türkische Begriff *gurbet* wird herangezogen, um diese strukturelle Erfahrung des Fernseins von der Heimat zu beschreiben, in der emotionale Bezugspunkte weiterhin an einen anderen Ort gebunden bleiben. In diesem Kontext wird Fotografie zu einer zentralen Praxis, durch die Abwesenheit bewältigt und Kontinuität aufrechterhalten wird. Anhand ausgewählter Fotografien aus privaten Archiven zeigt die Studie, wie migrantische Bilder Narrative von Stabilität, Wohlstand und familiärer Einheit konstruieren, während sie zugleich die Spannungen und Grenzen offenlegen, die im fotografischen Versuch liegen, Präsenz über Distanz hinweg zu bewahren.

Abstract (English)

This thesis examines the role of photography within the experience of Turkish labor migration to Germany and asks how photographs function as mediating objects under conditions of geographic separation. Drawing on representational analysis and material culture theory, it approaches migrant photographs not as transparent documents of lived reality, but as culturally coded and socially embedded artifacts through which identity, belonging, and memory are negotiated.

Focusing primarily on family photography, the study investigates how images are produced, staged, exchanged, kept, and revisited within transnational family networks. In doing so, it highlights photography's capacity to create a form of mediated presence, allowing migrants to remain visible and socially legible to those left behind. Photographs are shown to operate simultaneously as visual representations and as material traces that carry affective weight through their circulation and physical endurance.

The thesis situates these practices within the historical context of the Gastarbeiter program, which framed Turkish migration as temporary while producing long-term realities of settlement and divided belonging. The Turkish concept of *gurbet* is used to describe this structural condition of being away from home, in which emotional reference remains tied to another place. Within this context, photography becomes a key practice through which absence is managed and continuity is sustained. By analyzing selected photographs from private archives, the study demonstrates how migrant images construct narratives of stability, prosperity, and familial unity, while simultaneously revealing the tensions and limits embedded in the photographic attempt to preserve presence across distance.

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0. Introduction

0.1 Background and Context

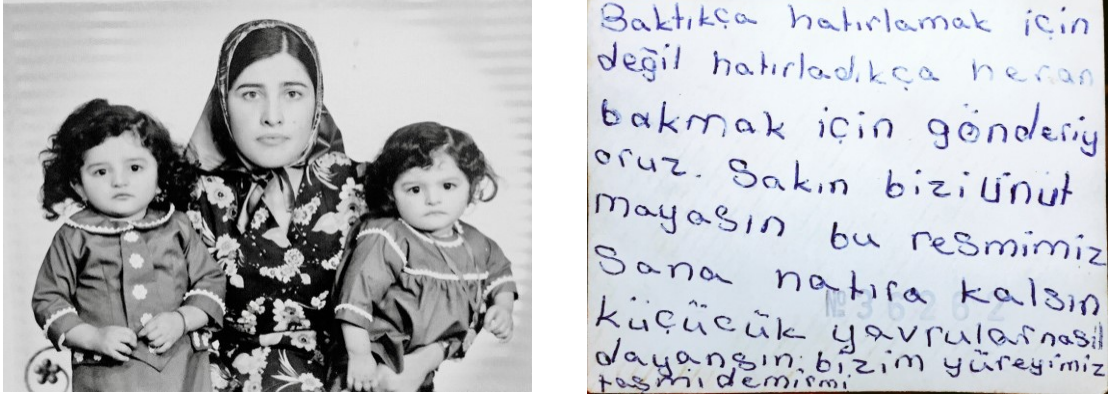


Fig. 1: Anon., Photograph (c. 1972), reproduced via DiasporaTürk (@diaspora_turk), X (formerly Twitter), 2025.

The photograph (see Fig.1) of a mother with her two children, carefully staged in a studio atmosphere, carries another layer of meaning through the words written on its back:

“Baktıkça hatırlamak için değil, hatırladıkça her an bakmak için gönderiyoruz. Sakın bizi unutmayasın, bu resmimiz sana hatıra kalsın. Küçük yavrular nasıl dayansın? Bizim yüreğimiz taş mı demir mi?” (“We are not sending this so you remember when you look, but so you can look whenever you remember. Do not forget us, let this picture remain as a keepsake. How can these little children endure? Are our hearts made of stone or iron?”) [trans. ISL]¹

The way this family presents themselves in the photograph speaks to self-representation as a careful visual practice. The portrait projects composure. The mother sits upright, the children are drawn close to her, their bodies forming a group that leaves little empty space. This physical closeness gathers the family into a single visual unit. The composition is structured around the mother’s body. Positioned at the center, she holds the children to either side, creating a visual order in which her presence anchors the image. The children are supported by her posture and framing, their placement shaping how the photograph communicates stability. The figures remain still, their expressions contained, their gestures minimal. The image shows family life through an arrangement that organizes kinship into a visible and shareable form.

¹ DiasporaTürk (@diaspora_turk), “Baktıkça hatırlamak için değil...” (Türkiye’den Almanya’ya, 1972), X (formerly Twitter), 21.06.2025, URL: https://x.com/diaspora_turk/status/1967181358964580607, 20.09.2025.

The inscription on the back names the condition that makes such formal composure by the subjects necessary. To appear stable across distance requires deliberate effort. The words and the image work together to constitute a specific kind of message, in a way that the words articulate what the photograph enacts: the production of a presence that can endure separation.

This feeling is especially strong in the case of the children, who are dressed in their finest clothes yet described by the writer as helpless, uncertain of how they will endure the distance from a home they know only through familiar ties. The longing for home becomes tangible. The subjects seek to hold onto their identity and presence, suspended within the photograph — an object of permanence that stands apart from the passing nature of life. The photograph stages familial stability. The inscription disrupts this stability by naming what the image cannot show: the uncertainty of return.

This photograph comes from the life of a migrant and is one of many such images produced within the context of migration. This and other photographs form the core of this thesis, functioning not only as personal mementos but also as cultural artifacts through which questions of self-representation, belonging, and the negotiation of identity in transnational contexts are explored. As Stavros Messinis argues:

While photography itself is often seen as a medium of realism, it can transcend mere documentation and become a form of social commentary that challenges, reimagines, and complicates narratives of belonging.²

To understand this visual language of migration, it is therefore necessary to consider the historical and social circumstances within which these images took shape. This photograph originates from the postwar migration of Turkish laborers to Europe. It reflects how migrants sought to represent themselves while negotiating new forms of identity and belonging in foreign lands. Through its formal qualities and cultural associations, photography offers a powerful means of preserving and conveying the complex meanings and experiences of migration.

The migration of Turkish laborers to Germany, which began in the 1960s, represents a pivotal socioeconomic and cultural phenomenon that has shaped the histories and trajectories of both nations. Initiated by the *Gastarbeiterprogramm* (Guest Worker

² Stavros Messinis, "Borders & Belonging: Photography Across Migration, Displacement, and Identity", M-ArtLens, URL: <https://m-artlens.com/borders-belonging-photography-at-the-intersection-of-migration-displacement-and-cultural-identity/>, 14.01.2026.

Program), this movement of foreign labor to Germany was initially conceived as a temporary solution to alleviate labor shortages in the country's post-war economy. The program was called a guest program because the workers were expected to return.

The word "guest" already carried a specific meaning: a guest is someone who is welcomed, but only for a limited time and under conditions set by the host. To call someone a guest is to say that they do not belong to the household. They are present, but their presence has an expiration. Applied to labor migration, this language did something concrete: it allowed the German state to bring in workers who were needed for the economy, while signaling that their place in the country was not meant to last. Guesthood, in this sense, worked as a category that kept economic participation and social belonging apart. The workers contributed, but the framework under which they came made clear that this contribution was not supposed to lead to permanence.

This program was a move by the German government to address its labor shortage while avoiding the need to invite and naturalize new citizens.³ Initially restricted to a two-year stay, this limitation was lifted in 1964, allowing Turkish workers to settle more permanently and to play an increasingly significant role in Germany's post-war economic and social transformation.⁴ What changed in 1964 was the duration, not the underlying logic. The two-year cap was removed, but the distinction between being useful and being recognized as part of the society remained. Workers could now stay longer, but the framework still treated them as guests. This is where permanence began to develop inside a structure that was never built for it. Yet it was precisely through labor that the conditions for staying were created.

The program facilitated the recruitment of Turkish workers and aimed to provide them with valuable practical experience that they could use. However, the number of temporary guestworkers increased above anyone's initial expectations due to the strong belief that transitory labor migration benefits both sending and receiving countries.⁵ Migration researcher Matthias M. Mayer writes: "The recruitment of Turkish workers to West Germany was intended as a temporary measure to address labor shortages,

³ Cf. Isabelle Arden Mudge, *Türkisch und Deutsch: Shifting Understandings of the German, the Citizen, and the Foreign*, Annandale-on-Hudson: Bard College 2018, 9.

⁴ Auswärtiges Amt, "'We called for workers, but people came': 60th Anniversary of the Recruitment Agreement with Turkey", German Federal Foreign Office, URL: <https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/en/aussenpolitik/recruitment-agreement-2493370>, 12.01.2026.

⁵ Cf. Philip L. Martin, "Germany's Guestworkers", in: *Challenge* 24/3, 1981, 34–42, here: 35.

but what began as short-term labor rotation soon turned into permanence, especially after the end of the rotation principle and the introduction of family reunification.”⁶ The shift from rotation to settlement changed not only the composition of Germany's labor market but also the social questions the country had to face.

Michelle Lynn Kahn contends that the predominant focus on developments within West Germany has inadvertently minimized the significance of migrants' return to their home countries, often reducing the return to little more than an "illusion" or an "unrealized dream".⁷ The unrealized dream, in this context, points to something that shaped how migrants understood their own presence — the belief that life in the new country was only temporary, and that return remained a real possibility.

Yet this viewpoint by Kahn does not fully account for the complex realities and evolving motivations of migrant families, who frequently encountered changing economic and social circumstances that shaped their decisions to remain in Germany rather than return to Türkiye — especially as many Turkish workers eventually brought their families to Germany.⁸ In the mid-1970s, the German government restricted family reunification and child allowances to curb family-linked immigration, but this policy inadvertently incentivized foreign workers to bring their families to Germany to qualify for full child benefits.⁹ This ultimately led to the establishment of a permanent settlement, essentially influenced by the government's response.

It can be therefore argued that the outcomes of guestworker programs are shaped by interactions among employers, states, migrants, and brokers, yet variations in their scale are largely determined by the surrounding social structures.¹⁰ This legacy reaches beyond the labor market itself. The way the program was structured, who was invited, under what conditions, and with what expectations, continues to shape how questions of social cohesion, integration, and cultural diversity are discussed in Germany today. It is within this tension between temporary framing and permanent settlement that the photographic practices examined in this thesis take shape.

⁶ Matthias M. Mayer, "Germany's recruitment of workers from Turkey, 1960–1973", in: *International Migration* 58/6, 2020, 43–57, here: 45.

⁷ Cf. Michelle Lynn Kahn, "Between Ausländer and Almançı: The Transnational History of Turkish-German Migration", in: *Bulletin of the German Historical Institute* 66, 2020, 53–82, here: 55.

⁸ *The official name of Turkey has been changed to Türkiye in 2022.*

⁹ Cf. Amparo González-Ferrer, "The process of family reunification among original guest-workers in Germany", in: *Journal of Family Research* 19/1, 2007, 10–33, here: 14.

¹⁰ Cf. Kristin Surak, "Guestworkers: A Taxonomy", in: *New Left Review* 84, 2013, 84–102, here: 99.

However, despite the longstanding history of cultural exchange between Germany and Türkiye, the notion of “home” continues to hold distinct meanings for both Germans and Turkish immigrants. For many migrants, this difference becomes especially pronounced in the emotional and cultural dimensions of what “home” signifies. In Turkish culture, home carries a deeper meaning than simply a place to live. It is tied to feelings of identity and belonging that go beyond the physical boundaries of a house or a geographic location. Home is not only where one resides, but also where one feels connected and rooted through relationships and memories. As a research paper about the belonging among migrants explains: “Belonging is brought in relation to a feeling of being ‘at home,’ which is not only about physical dwelling but an emotional and social situatedness that migrates with the individual”.¹¹ This understanding highlights that home is not fixed but is carried and reshaped through personal and collective experiences, tied strongly with the idea of belonging.

Belonging does not just describe attachment to a place, but also the way people create meaning through their connections with others: “The sense of belonging acts as a bridge between space and individual, and between space and society, creating meaning that goes beyond physical characteristics to encompass socio-cultural and emotional connections formed through lived experience”.¹² This bond becomes clear when it is shaped by distance, leading to the creation of specific ideas or words to describe the feeling of being away from home.

This is particularly evident in Turkish culture, where language itself becomes a way of expressing the layered emotions of being at home and of being away from it. Among these expressions, the word *gurbet* holds particular resonance, since it conveys not only the physical distance from one’s homeland but also the emotional weight of separation, nostalgia, and displacement. More than a simple term for being abroad, *gurbet* encapsulates a collective sentiment deeply rooted in Turkish social and cultural memory, a sense of belonging that lives precisely through its absence. The existence

¹¹ Jolien Klok/Theo G. van Tilburg/Bianca Suanet/Tineke Fokkema/Martijn Huisman, “National and Transnational Belonging among Turkish and Moroccan Older Migrants in the Netherlands: Protective against Loneliness?”, in: *European Journal of Ageing* 14/4, 2017, 341–351, here: 342.

¹² Cansın Mercanoğlu, *Relationship Between Sense of Belonging and Social Production of Space: Analysis of Hasanoğlu High Village Institute*, MSc thesis, Middle East Technical Univ., Ankara 2019, 45.

of a specific term indicates that the feeling occupies a recognizable place within the cultural expression of Türkiye and Turkish communities.

Yet *gurbet* does more than name an emotional state. The term names a condition in which life is lived across divided coordinates, where everyday practices take place in one setting while emotional reference remains tied to another. *Gurbet* frames distance as something that can be lived with, even as it continues to carry the emotional weight of separation from familiar social worlds, often manifesting itself as being away from home.

As Turkish academic Nevnihal Erdoğan explains:

Home is not only a physical location but also an emotional and social construct where belonging, identity, and memory intertwine. Among Turkish migrants, the feeling of *gurbet*—being away from home—expresses this tension between place and emotional rootedness, embodying both longing and adaptation.¹³

Gurbet understands the homeland as a 'fantasy', an imagined place that acts as an anchor to navigate between two identities and nationalities, allowing migrants to value their place of origin while also forming deep attachments to the country of residence.¹⁴ In this sense, *gurbet* does not describe the loss of home but its redistribution. What once belonged to a single location becomes dispersed across two settings, neither of which fully contains what home is supposed to provide. The feeling persists not because migrants fail to settle, but because settlement itself does not resolve the question of where one belongs.

Leaving one home to create another is a deeply challenging decision, illustrating the concept that "home is an illusion of community",¹⁵ defined more by emotional ties and aspirations than by physical place. Migration splits 'home' across geographies. What migrants call home is not reducible to either location but emerges through the tension between them, sustained by the very distance that keeps both places present.

Migration researchers Nilay Kılınç and Russell King highlight the complex emotional relationship that the Turkish Germans have with the idea of "home", and how it

¹³ Nevnihal Erdoğan, "Cultural Traditions and Domestic Space: Ağaçbekler Home", in: *SAGE Open* 7/4, 2017, 1–12, here: 3.

¹⁴ Cf. Loïc Michels/Marilou Niedda, "The Feeling of *Gurbet*", *Humanity in Action*, 2021, URL: https://humanityinaction.org/action_project/the-feeling-of-gurbet/, 20.09.2025.

¹⁵ Georgina Tsolidis, "Memories of Home: Family in the Diaspora", in: *Journal of Comparative Family Studies* 42/3, 2011, 411–420, here: 418.

manifested itself in the following generations after. One participant in their research expressed the ambiguity by stating:

Germany is not my home...but then neither is Turkey. Until now, I was always somewhere else and there was no place where I felt I belonged. Recently I started thinking: where is my home? Home is an emotional thing...¹⁶

That this feeling surfaced in the second generation shows that *gurbet* is not confined to those who made the journey. The tension of living between two settings persisted beyond the first generation, reshaped but not resolved. For the children, it often meant inheriting their parents' attachment to a homeland they had never fully inhabited, while at the same time navigating a society that continued to frame their presence as conditional. What was passed on was not the specific experience of departure but the structure of divided belonging itself, carried forward through the family as a relational condition rather than a personal memory.

Migration researcher Marta Bivand Erdal points out that how migrants relate to “home” reveals how their identity develops across different places and over time, shaped by both emotional attachments and practical considerations as they navigate connections to more than one place.¹⁷ In this case, this development was not only individual but collective. What held attachments together across generations was not a single place but the practices and memories that moved between places, ways of speaking, eating, gathering, remembering. These practices gave divided belonging a concrete form, embedding it in everyday life rather than leaving it as an abstract condition.

For Germans, meanwhile, the integration of Turkish communities has influenced their own perceptions of home and national identity. Ruth Mandel suggests that the German context acts as a crucial lens for Turkish individuals to understand and navigate diverse interpretations of their identity, challenging reductive stereotypes and embracing a range of lived experiences.¹⁸ As Turkish communities redefine their sense of belonging within Germany, they also prompt a reevaluation among Germans of the boundaries of national identity – of the concept of inclusion and of the manner in which shared

¹⁶ Nilay Kılınç/Russell King, "The Quest for a 'Better Life': Second-Generation Turkish-Germans 'Return' to 'Paradise'", in: *Demographic Research* 36, 2017, 1491–1514, here: 1507.

¹⁷ Cf. Marta Bivand Erdal, "'This is My Home': Pakistani and Polish Migrants' Return Considerations as Articulations about 'Home'", in: *Comparative Migration Studies* 3, 2014, 361–384, here: 364.

¹⁸ Cf. Ruth Mandel, "Germany, Turkey, and the Space In-Between", in: Ruth Mandel, *Cosmopolitan Anxieties: Turkish Challenges to Citizenship and Belonging in Germany*, Durham: Duke University Press 2008, 1–22, here: 3.

histories are negotiated. In this process, home becomes not just a physical or cultural space, but a site of mutual transformation, where the interplay of migration, adaptation, and acceptance gives rise to a re-shaping of both individual and collective understandings of self and society.

However, the integration of the Turkish community in Germany has led to significant challenges as German society has nevertheless faced difficulties in accommodating this community within its established notions of national identity and cultural cohesion. The exclusion faced by Turkish Germans is rooted in an ethnically defined concept of nationhood and the initial expectation that their presence would be temporary; despite reunification and evolving legal frameworks, Turkish Germans continue to be perceived as "Other" within the broader understanding of German identity.¹⁹ This ongoing tension reflects deeper societal ambivalence regarding inclusion and belonging.

This tension was not only political or economic, but also cultural and religious, shaping everyday encounters, institutional approaches, and public discourse. Social anthropologist Jenny B. White shows that German approaches to "integration" were often articulated through culturally normative expectations that positioned Turkish family life, gender relations, and religious practices as problems to be corrected rather than differences to be negotiated.²⁰ This leads to a specific conceptualization of integration that actively works against pluralistic forms of belonging.

As White writes, "Rather than promoting a practical integration into German society which would allow Turks to retain the identity and support of Turkish family and community, Germans have constructed integration in opposition to what they perceive to be 'traditional' Turkish behavior".²¹ White's formulation reframes integration as a structuring lens through which social reality is rendered intelligible. It organizes attention by preselecting which practices, relationships, and signs become readable as indicators of belonging, while others remain unmarked or unintelligible.

What is at stake, then, is not simply how people live, but how everyday life is sorted, mediated, and made publicly legible — a process that obscures the internal ways communities organize meaning, support, and continuity, including the forms of social

¹⁹ Cf. Mudge 2018, 51.

²⁰ Cf. Jenny B. White, "Turks in the New Germany", in: *American Anthropologist* 99/4, 1997, 754–769, here: 764–765.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 759.

organization that developed within migrant communities themselves. Religion, for instance, took on an organizational and social role, as associations increasingly addressed spiritual as well as practical needs, indicating that religious practice was embedded in everyday structures of community formation rather than confined to private belief.²² That this internal embedding of religion within social life would later become one of the primary domains through which difference was rendered visible in integration discourse reflects the broader condition examined in this thesis: the terms under which Turkish life could be read were shaped less by the communities themselves than by the frameworks that surrounded them.

This framing reduces cultural difference to a polarized scale in which 'modern' functions as an unmarked norm and 'traditional' as what must be left behind. Integration is thereby cast less as a negotiated process than as a directional movement, narrowing the conditions under which Turkish life can be recognized.²³ It is partly against this narrowing that the visual practices examined in this thesis gain their significance: where public discourse constrained how Turkish life could be read, photography offered a space in which migrants could organize their own visibility. Within this logic, family practices, gender relations, and Islam become primary sites through which difference is interpreted, situating everyday life itself within broader debates about cohesion, legitimacy, and belonging.²⁴

Consequently, Turkish migrants worked to maintain ties with their families and to hold onto their cultural practices within a context that was not built to support either. The conditions described above, the framing of integration as a one-directional process, the narrow terms under which Turkish life could be recognized, did not stop communities from organizing around what mattered to them. They built networks around shared traditions, and these networks became the spaces through which displacement could be navigated without giving up what connected them to where they came from. This was not only a cultural effort but also a material one. People with a background in migration are frequently conceptualized through an economic framework, yet remittance practices are equally influenced by moral and religious

²² Cf. Rosa-Luxemburg-Stiftung, "Building the Left in the Turkish Diaspora", Rosa-Luxemburg-Stiftung, 2025, URL: <https://www.rosalux.de/en/news/id/54061/building-the-left-in-the-turkish-diaspora>, 12.01.2026.

²³ Cf. White 1997, 759.

²⁴ Cf. Ibid., 757-758.

imperatives, underscoring the significance of altruistic support beyond material considerations.²⁵ Sending money home was not separate from the emotional and social bonds that held communities together. It was part of the same effort to stay connected, to remain present in the lives of those who had been left behind.

Out of these circumstances, photographs emerged as a vital component of the migrants' communication networks: "Photography's capacities to fix a moving subject in space and time and to disseminate images and ideas have, for over a century, made it a powerful tool through which to reflect on human migration and (im)mobility".²⁶ The media practices of producing and disseminating photographs and videos within migrant communities aimed to transcend the barriers of time and space, emphasizing connectivity and reinforcing social bonds to maintain relationships and cultural continuity across geographical divides.²⁷ These practices enabled migrants to assert their identities within transnational contexts while simultaneously establishing a collective visual idiom through which they could express their experiences of being uprooted and of belonging.

While broader public and academic discourses often frame migration through structural or economic lenses, photography operates differently. It does not explain migration as a system. It shows how it was lived, by specific people, in specific moments. A family portrait taken in a studio in Germany, a photograph sent back to relatives in Türkiye, an image kept in a drawer for decades — these are not illustrations of policy. They are traces of how people maintained relationships, marked occasions, and made their presence felt across distance. In this regard, photography can serve as a tool that facilitates the preservation of connections and shared narratives among families separated by boundaries, whether geographical or cultural: "Migration is visible because migrants change the meaning of spaces and places to both themselves and others by changing what those places and spaces look like".²⁸ Through this lens,

²⁵ Cf. Claudius Stroehle, "'When you win, you are a German, when you lose, you are a foreigner': Claiming Position beyond the Meritocratic and Discriminatory Migration Discourse", in: Brigitte Bönisch-Brednich et al. (eds.), *Migrant Narratives. Storytelling as Agency, Belonging and Community*, London: Routledge 2024, 71–85, here: 82.

²⁶ Tanya Sheehan, "Photography and Migration. Keywords", in: Tanya Sheehan (ed.), *Photography and Migration*, London: Routledge 2018, 1–15, here: 4.

²⁷ Cf. Mine Gencel Bek/Patricia Prieto Blanco, "(Be)Longing through Visual Narrative: Mediation of (Dis)affect and Formation of Politics through Photographs and Narratives of Migration at DiasporaTürk", in: *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 23/5, 2020, 709–727, here: 712.

²⁸ Jerome Krase/Timothy Shortell, "Story-Making and Photography: The Visual Essay and Migration", in: Karolina Nikielska-Sekula/Amandine Desille (eds.), *Visual Methodology in Migration Studies: New*

photography captures not just individual experiences but also how migration reshapes the environments it touches, both where migrants arrive and where they leave behind.

0.2 Research Objectives and Questions

The purpose of this research is to examine the social relationships and cultural dynamics of Turkish migrant communities in Germany through the lens of photography, with a particular emphasis on how visual media has been used to construct and convey narratives of prosperity, maintain cultural continuity, and reinforce familial identities across borders.

The analysis examines photographs in relation to migrant identity, emotional connection, and practices of cultural continuity. It attends to how photographs are produced, shared, kept, and viewed within family and community contexts, and to how these practices shape what images come to stand for across time. Family photography is central to this analysis because it concentrates questions of memory, self-presentation, and belonging within a shared visual form.

In the context of the guestworker program that brought large numbers of Turkish communities to Germany, photography provides a means through which migration is lived, negotiated, and remembered over time. While state policies framed migration as temporary,²⁹ photographic practices participated in the circulation of presence, attachment, and social continuity across distance. As Jennifer Rowsell observes, “photos distribute social relations across time and space”,³⁰ allowing individual experiences to enter shared frameworks of memory that persist beyond the conditions that produced them. Within this context, photography functions as a medium through which migrant lives are rendered socially present and collectively intelligible.

Representational analysis will serve as the primary framework for this study. It allows for a close reading of what photographs show, how they are composed, and what they make visible or leave out. Through this approach, the images are treated as objects that actively shape how migration is seen and understood. Additionally, Alfred Gell's Material Culture theory will be employed to examine how the materiality of a

Possibilities, Theoretical Implications, and Ethical Questions, Cham: Springer 2021, 131–148, here: 141.

²⁹ Cf. Surak 2013, 101.

³⁰ Jennifer Rowsell, "Affecting Photos: Photographs as Shared, Affective Ethnographic Spaces", in: *Qualitative Research* 25/1, 2025, 207–226, here: 210.

photograph, its physical form, its circulation, and its presence in domestic and social spaces, contributes to the meanings it carries within the context of Turkish migration.

The analysis also asks how photographs have functioned across generations. The images examined in this study were produced under specific conditions, by people who were navigating distance, cultural adjustment, and the pressures of representation. How these photographs were understood by their makers is not necessarily how they are understood today. This research examines how subsequent generations within the broader historical context of Germany and Türkiye have interpreted these images, and what shifts in meaning have occurred as the photographs have moved further from the circumstances that produced them.

1. Methodology

This section defines the analytical framework used to examine the photographic material in this study. It specifies how images are approached, how visual meaning is identified, and how interpretive claims are developed from photographic material. The focus lies on how photographs function: how they structure perception, circulate within social contexts, and produce meaning within migratory lives.

The analysis that follows is grounded in conceptual tools that guide how photographs are approached and interpreted in this study. These tools move the analysis beyond description by addressing how images produce meaning and how that meaning gains a social context. What a photograph shows as an image and what it is as a physical object operate together, shaping how photographs function in everyday life. What a photograph shows gains force through the surface that carries it and the situations in which it appears. Meaning develops not only through representation but through physical presence and social use. This becomes especially legible in contexts where photographs are required to sustain relationships across distance.

1.1 Representation Analysis

On this basis, representation analysis serves as the central methodological approach. Through representation analysis, photographs can be examined as sites where meaning is produced, negotiated, and made socially legible within specific historical and migratory contexts.

Representation links language to culture, serving as the primary mechanism through which social significance is created and exchanged.³¹ Rather than approaching photographs as transparent reflections of social reality, this study treats them as mediated forms whose meanings emerge through social and historical conditions. From this perspective, this study sees images as participants in the processes through which social identities become recognizable and are negotiated over time.

To clarify how photographs operate as carriers of meaning, it is necessary to situate photography within a broader framework of signification and briefly outline the concepts of sign and meaning guiding this study.

Meaning is produced within language through various representational systems, or languages, and constructed through signifying, meaning-producing practices.³² More than a century ago, mathematician and philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce established a strong foundation for this field with his classification of signs into three categories through relation: icon, index and symbol.³³ An icon signifies through resemblance, meaning that its form shares visible or audible features with what it refers to; an index signifies through a direct physical or situational connection, where one thing points to another because they are linked in time or space and a symbol signifies through convention, where meaning is established through shared systems rather than similarity or physical contact.³⁴ These categories provide analytical tools for examining how migrant photographs operate as resemblances, traces, and culturally coded forms within everyday practices.

³¹ Cf. Stuart Hall, "The Work of Representation", in: Stuart Hall (ed.), *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, London: Sage/Open University 1997, 15–17.

³² Cf. Ibid., 14.

³³ Cf. Ersu Ding, "Rethinking the Peircean Trichotomy of Icon, Index, and Symbol", in: *Semiotica* 213, 2016, 165–175, here: 165.

³⁴ Cf. Ibid., 166.

Stuart Hall theorizes that visual signs are iconic because they resemble the real world by “reproducing some of the actual conditions of our visual perception”.³⁵ This differentiates them from linguistic signs, whose relationship to what they signify is entirely arbitrary — Hall illustrates this by giving an example of a tree and how the tree would not mind being called something else other than tree, because the relationship between the word and the thing is arbitrary.³⁶ Whereas in the case of photography, what is signified remains closely bound to the form of its representation, as Hall mentions above. It is this close proximity between image and referent that allows a photograph to appear less like a description of the world than like a direct fragment of it.

Yet the relation between the signifier and signified cannot be fixed,³⁷ in the way history traditionally seeks to understand it. The meaning of a photograph can evolve alongside society's understanding, as each cultural shift reshapes the conceptual framework through which the world is interpreted.³⁸ Since the meaning of a photograph cannot be fixed, the personal histories carried by these images remain open to reinterpretation, shaped by the position and experience of whoever encounters them.

This perceived realism helps explain why photographs carry such authority within everyday life and family memory. As Hall reminds us, “most images are in two dimensions whereas the ‘real’ [object] exists in three dimensions”.³⁹ By transferring a moment into a physical image that can be seen, kept, and shared, photography produces objects that appear to carry the presence of what has been. This authority can make the conventions and decisions behind an image easy to overlook. Precisely because photographs are often trusted as self-evident, representational analysis becomes necessary to examine how particular meanings, relations, and versions of reality are stabilized through images.

This makes the photograph part of a practice whose meaning extends beyond its initial moment of use. As images persist over time, they begin to address viewers who were not part of their original exchange and who encounter them under different conditions. Yet before a photograph can persist, it must first be produced, and photographing a scene is a deliberate act, shaped by the photographer's intentional choice of what to

³⁵ Hall 1997, “The Work of Representation”, 19.

³⁶ Cf. *Ibid.*, 20.

³⁷ Cf. *Ibid.*, 24.

³⁸ Cf. *Ibid.*

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 19.

capture. In the simplest sense, the subject's existence as a visible, preserved figure derives from the photographer,⁴⁰ since without the intentional decision to capture that specific moment, the subject and its associated meaning would simply pass and be forgotten.

According to Vilém Flusser, images produced by a camera can be categorized as technical images, as they are generated through the operation of apparatuses, reflecting a technological process.⁴¹ The camera fixes fleeting moments into durable objects that can be revisited and reinterpreted long after their occurrence, a presence this study traces through practices of keeping, sharing, and viewing photographs.⁴²

The non-symbolic nature of technical images causes viewers to perceive them not merely as images but as transparent windows, prompting them to trust these representations as readily as they would trust their own eyes.⁴³ The camera serves as a unique tool for capturing and preserving fleeting appearances, halting their inevitable replacement by new ones, something that only the mind's eye and the faculty of memory could achieve before its invention.⁴⁴ This capacity intensifies the cultural and social stakes of photographic practice.

Unlike memory, photographs present appearances detached from meaning, which arises only through understanding their context and function.⁴⁵ The photographer deliberately chooses what to capture, demonstrating not only an awareness of their subject but also an understanding of the photograph's potential influence on memory and perception. In this manner, the camera serves to both preserve and frame reality, thereby influencing our understanding and relationship with the moment.

Susan Sontag describes a photograph as:

A photograph is not just the result of an encounter between an event and a photographer; picture-taking is an event in itself, and one with ever more peremptory rights — to interfere with, to invade, or to ignore whatever is going on.⁴⁶

⁴⁰ Cf. Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida. Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard, New York: Hill and Wang 1981, 11 (Orig.: *La Chambre claire: Note sur la photographie*, Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1980).

⁴¹ Cf. Vilém Flusser, *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*, London: Reaktion Books 2000, 13.

⁴² Cf. John Berger, *Understanding a Photograph*, ed. Geoff Dyer, London: Penguin Classics 2013.

⁴³ Cf. Flusser 2000, 15.

⁴⁴ Cf. Berger 2013, 52.

⁴⁵ Cf. Ibid.

⁴⁶ Susan Sontag, "In Plato's Cave", in: Susan Sontag, *On Photography*, New York: RosettaBooks 2005, 8.

In this sense, Sontag's formulation draws attention to photography as a practice that actively shapes how events become images. A photograph turns what happens into something that can be seen, revisited, and worked with as a visual object. Since events only become socially intelligible once they take visual form and enter systems of meaning, this transformation situates photography within the field of representation and necessitates asking how photographs produce meaning for viewers.

Consequently, even realistic images must be interpreted with codes, which can be defined as social conventions that "fix the relationships between concepts and signs".⁴⁷ These codes influence how photographs are read and what is recognized as meaningful in a given context. At the same time, a focus on codes alone cannot fully account for the photograph's status as an object that testifies that someone was there. Photographs are made, handled, shared, and kept, and they become part of everyday situations and family relations. This makes it necessary to analyze not only what photographs signify, but how they are used, circulated, kept, and emotionally engaged with in everyday life. French essayist and philosopher Roland Barthes provides a critical perspective here through anchoring photographic meaning in the exchange between the image, the subject and the spectator.

Barthes examines the experiential aspects of photography, exploring it through three practices: to do, to undergo, and to look, which he conceptualizes as the positions of the Operator, the Spectrum, and the Spectator.⁴⁸ Through this definition, Barthes displaces the photograph from the status of an image to that of an event. For Barthes, this event is grounded in the photograph's testimonial force: the image does not only represent but asserts that what it shows has been, connecting the viewer to a past presence that can no longer be encountered directly.⁴⁹

Here, photographs play a vital role: "Photography has become one of the principal devices for experiencing something, for giving an appearance of participation".⁵⁰ Participation takes shape here through representation, as photography occupies a communicative space typically associated with direct, in-person interaction, a condition that informs how images are read in this study. This becomes especially visible when

⁴⁷ Cf. Hall 1997, "The Work of Representation", 19.

⁴⁸ Cf. Barthes 1981, 9.

⁴⁹ Cf. Ibid., 76-77; see also 88-89.

⁵⁰ Sontag 2005, "In Plato's Cave", 7.

photography is considered as a technical practice shaped by the camera. While the photographer's choices shape what comes into view, the role of the camera as a technical apparatus introduces another layer through which perception and interpretation are organized. Flusser helps frame this layer by treating the camera as an apparatus that shapes what can appear as plausible, memorable, and shareable.⁵¹ What the apparatus makes available is not neutral but already structured by the conditions of its use, which in migratory contexts means that the photograph is shaped not only by the camera but by the social situation it is produced within and addressed to.

From this perspective, the analysis that follows approaches photographic practices as sites through which cultural identity and belonging are articulated and negotiated in migratory contexts. This perspective directs attention to how visual styles, conventions, and contexts shape photographic meaning: "Representational styles select which aspects of the world they depict according to cultural tradition, and the chosen aspects are organized in conventional ways".⁵² Photography participates in shaping how reality is understood within visual media, opening a way for the analysis to examine the cultural, historical, and social contexts through which images acquire meaning. In the third chapter, this approach is developed through detailed readings of individual photographs that examine how meaning takes shape through concrete visual and social arrangements. Representation is how meaning is made public and recognizable. For migrant photographs, this means that what a family shows in an image are as significant as what they are — the image must work for viewers who cannot witness everyday life directly.

The material examined in that chapter is drawn from private family archives accessed through personal contacts within Turkish communities in Germany. Approximately forty photographs were reviewed across these sources. The five images selected for close reading were chosen because they span the range of photographic practices central to this study. The movement from inscribed portraits to ordinary scenes reflects

⁵¹ Cf. Flusser 2000, 34.

⁵² Robert Layton, "Art and Agency: A Reassessment", in: *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 9/3, 2003, 447–464, here: 453.

a structural progression in how photographs perform relational work, from explicit address to implicit continuity.

The selection does not claim statistical representativeness but follows the logic of the analysis itself: each photograph was chosen because it makes visible a distinct mode through which presence is produced and sustained under migratory conditions. The remaining photographs reviewed across these archives included wedding portraits, group images taken during summer visits to Türkiye, and workplace scenes. While these images share many of the practices discussed here, the selected photographs were prioritized because they most clearly isolate the specific operations around which the analysis is structured.

The limited size of this corpus is a consequence of the private and often fragmentary nature of migrant family archives, where photographs survive unevenly and access depends on personal trust. This is acknowledged as a boundary of the study rather than treated as a limitation to be overcome, since the analysis is concerned with how specific photographs operate rather than with establishing generalizable patterns across a large dataset.

1.2 Material Culture Theory

British social anthropologist Alfred Gell's *Material Culture Theory* defines art through its capacity to generate and sustain social relationships.⁵³ Gell further characterizes the 'art object' by three distinct qualities: it is made to be seen, it serves as an index of social agency, and it is both complex and captivating.⁵⁴ Gell's theory is used as a second methodological lens to examine how photographs operate as socially active objects within migrant family life. The focus lies on how photographs function within social contexts as material forms that participate in memory, relational bonds, and affective exchanges.

A focus on circulation and durability requires a methodological perspective that treats photographs as objects whose temporal and material qualities enable them to persist, move, and accumulate significance within social life. Barthes writes: "It is as if the Photograph always carries its referent with itself, both affected by the same amorous

⁵³ Cf. Ibid., 447.

⁵⁴ Cf. Ibid., 448.

or funereal immobility, at the very heart of the moving world”.⁵⁵ In this way, Barthes emphasizes how a photograph suspends its subject in time, a quality that informs how this study approaches photographs as material carriers of memory.

Seen as physical objects, photographs take on an active role within the migration story. Their material longevity allows them to persist through changes in place, routine or circumstance, resisting disappearance: “Photography can reveal (in the chemical sense of the term), but what it reveals is a certain persistence of species”.⁵⁶ What Barthes points out is that a photograph does not simply capture a single moment but reveals a form of continuity. The “persistence” he describes refers to the endurance of a presence across time. A photograph fixes an instant through a chemical process, yet what it shows is that something or someone has remained long enough to be recorded and remembered. This means that the photograph acknowledges that a life has left a trace that can still be returned to.

By suspending a moment from the flow of lived time, the photograph becomes a portable and durable object, capable of being removed from its original situation and re-entered into new contexts of keeping, exchange, and attachment. In migratory contexts, this suspended stillness becomes emotionally charged, and the analysis approaches photographs as material objects through which memory and identification take shape.

This aligns with Gell’s theory of art and agency, which asserts that the power of art derives from its ability to influence the mind and provoke responses in the viewer.⁵⁷ In the context of migration, photography broadens the scope of the art object by operating within social and political fields of experience: “As forms of personal history, they offer a way of testifying to the voices previously marginalized in history and have become important archives of cultural knowledge”.⁵⁸ A photograph’s significance extends beyond historical reference, since its emotional impact contributes to the social and cultural relations through which it circulates.⁵⁹ Gell’s framework makes it possible

⁵⁵ Barthes 1981, 5–6.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 105.

⁵⁷ Cf. Layton 2003, 455.

⁵⁸ Karen Cross/Julia Peck, “Editorial: Special Issue on Photography, Archive and Memory”, in: *Photographies* 3/2, 2010, 127–138, here: 129.

⁵⁹ Cf. David Bate, “The Figure of Migration”, in: Justin Carville/Sigrid Lien (eds.), *Contact Zones. Photography, Migration and Cultural Encounters in the United States*, Leuven: Leuven University Press 2021, 29–54, here: 46.

to examine how photographs operate within social relations, not only within systems of representation.

Gell's theory is used in dialogue with Hall's representational approach, allowing the analysis to move between questions of meaning and questions of agency. The objective here is to analyze the photograph through multiple theoretical lenses, as each perspective offers compelling arguments that underscore the inherent complexity of photography as a communicative medium: "The fundamental question, then, is how indexes or icons have agency, how they mediate the interaction of states of mind".⁶⁰ Each photograph may call for a different analytical emphasis, depending on whether significance emerges primarily through visual conventions, through material circulation, or through the relations it mediates between those who made, sent, and kept it.

Gell suggests that, iconic representation is based on the actual resemblance in form between depictions and the entities that depict,⁶¹ yet indexes are not made out of a set of tautologies, nor are they a part of a language in which the terms are understood through their convention.⁶² Taken together, this distinction makes it possible to approach photographs not only through resemblance, but through the material connections that bind images to particular moments and relations.

A photograph can operate iconically by resembling its subject, and it also functions as an index by bearing a direct physical imprint of the moment it captures, establishing a material connection between the image, a specific event, and the persons involved.⁶³ This indexical relation is not only semiotic but social: indexes are materially bound to the situations from which they emerge and are therefore able to enter social relations as extensions of human presence and action.⁶⁴ Gell describes artworks as "indexes of agency," meaning that they are taken up within social life as entities through which agency is attributed, distributed, and negotiated.⁶⁵

Methodologically, the study treats photographs as material objects that participate in social worlds by anchoring memory, obligation, and attachment within concrete relations. Their indexical attachment to particular moments, bodies, and exchanges allows

⁶⁰ Layton 2003, 452.

⁶¹ Cf. Alfred Gell, *Art and Agency. An Anthropological Theory*, Oxford: Clarendon Press 1998, 25.

⁶² Cf. Ibid., 13.

⁶³ Cf. Ibid., 13–17.

⁶⁴ Cf. Ibid., 16–18, 20–23.

⁶⁵ Cf. Ibid., 13–16.

them to function as evidence, reminders, and mediating objects through which memory, obligation, and attachment are organized. By analyzing these practices through the lens of media studies, we see that these photos and the family album produce a sense of continuity between disparate places.

From this perspective, photographs are approached through their circulation, keeping, and affective use: “If everything that existed were continually being photographed, every photograph would become meaningless”.⁶⁶ Photographs shape how people perceive one another, define identities, and relate to shared histories, and the analysis approaches these effects through attention to how images circulate, are kept, and are engaged with. By integrating Gell’s theory as a secondary analytical lens, the discussion approaches the photograph through its material presence and its role within social practice, where the photograph operates through its trace quality and its capacity to act within social relations.

Rather than recording moments, the photograph takes on an influential role, positioning itself as an active participant in social and cultural exchange: “Unlike any other visual image, a photograph is not a rendering, an imitation or an interpretation of its subject, but actually a trace of it”.⁶⁷ As a trace of a past moment, the photograph serves as evidence of memory and can be approached as a form of material agency in Gell’s sense. This material agency points to how the object can evoke, preserve, and activate memories within social relationships.

Representation analysis accounts for how photographs produce meaning through visual conventions and cultural codes. But photographs also circulate, accumulate wear, and participate in social exchange as material objects. Material culture theory allows the analysis to attend to what photographs do in everyday life without reducing this agency to what they show. Together, these approaches make it possible to examine photographs as images that signify and as objects that act.

2. Migration and Photography

Migration reconfigures routines, relationships, and frames of reference that depend on physical proximity and shared environments, since memory provides continuity where

⁶⁶ Berger 2013, 18.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 51.

these conditions are disrupted.⁶⁸ Through memory, it becomes possible to remain connected to social and emotional formations even when the people and places that once grounded them are no longer physically present. This makes memory a necessary point of entry for research concerned with migration, where experience is stretched across multiple contexts. It directs attention to the processes through which social worlds are maintained and translated.

When people leave one social and cultural context and enter another, everyday life is reorganized across distance: relationships are extended, memories are carried into new settings, and familiar points of orientation are reworked within different conditions and the past takes a prominent role in mobility.⁶⁹ This reorganization takes place as an ongoing condition in which the everyday life must be adjusted to dispersed forms of presence. In this process, experience itself becomes less anchored to a single setting and more closely tied to the ongoing movement between contexts, as situations, relationships, and meanings are continuously reassembled across places.⁷⁰ Experience emerges here as something that must be actively sustained, since it is continuously being shaped by practices that are tied to movement and negotiate distance.

Therefore, as everyday life extends across distance, it relies on mediated forms to register, recall, and share experience, making photography a persistent presence. Photography helps reveal how 'immigrant' and 'foreign' are socially constructed and visually defined.⁷¹ It operates as one of the sites where memory, relation and identity are materially and visually organized under conditions of migration.

2.1 Photography, Camera and Memory

Photography carries a wide range of meanings shaped by the conditions of its production, the intentions of the photographer, and the personal and cultural contexts of those who encounter it. These factors orient how photographs circulate, how they are read,

⁶⁸ Cf. Julia Creet, "Introduction: The Migration of Memory and Memories of Migration", in: Andreas Kitzmann/Julia Creet (eds.), *Memory and Migration*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press 2020, 1–26, here: 3.

⁶⁹ Cf. Monika Palmberger/Jelena Tošić, "Introduction: Memories on the Move — Experiencing Mobility, Rethinking the Past", in: Monika Palmberger/Jelena Tošić (eds.), *Memories on the Move: Experiencing Mobility, Rethinking the Past*, London: Palgrave Macmillan 2016, 1–16, here: 1.

⁷⁰ Cf. Palmberger/Tošić 2016, 6.

⁷¹ Cf. Karolina Nikielska-Sekula, "Visualising Transnationalism: Photography in Analyses of Migrants' Belonging", in: *Urbanities* 10/2, 2020, 36–55, here: 36–37.

and how they come to function as social and cultural points of connection. Within migration, this situates photographs within everyday practices through which experience becomes communicable across distance, and through which relations are sustained under altered conditions of presence.

Photography not only preserves a moment in time but also reveals evolving notions of social space, illustrating how locality is continually reshaped amid anxiety, disruption, and social change.⁷² In the context of diaspora, photography often loses its direct connection to the past and traditional communal ties, yet it finds renewed meaning within broader social and national memorial frameworks, allowing viewers to connect with a mediated historical experience.⁷³

The photographs taken by Turkish migrants in Germany varied widely in context, yet many were produced to address those who remained in Türkiye. They were made to enter concrete relational situations: to be sent, received, kept, and taken up within family life across distance. Read through material culture theory, these photographs are approached as objects through which relationships are handled, obligations articulated, and emotional investments given form. Yet their significance does not reside primarily in what they depict, but in the positions they come to occupy within networks of social relations, where objects extend persons and participate in the organization of social ties.⁷⁴ The photograph thus becomes a site where social ties are materially organized. This is the territory that Gell's theory of art and agency opens: a framework in which objects are understood not through what they represent but through the social relations they mediate, distribute, and sustain. The close readings in Chapter 3 will draw on this framework to examine how specific photographs operate as indexes of their senders' agency within the conditions of *gurbet*.

If photographs operate within relationships rather than simply referring to them, then memory too begins to shape through this material exchanges. Within this field of everyday practice, the memory attached to an experience gains social form through its transformation into an object. Photographs are constituted through practices of making, keeping, storing, and moving, and through these material trajectories become

⁷² Cf. Barbara Wolbert, "The Visual Production of Locality: Turkish Family Pictures, Migration and the Creation of Virtual Neighborhood", in: *Visual Anthropology Review* 17/1, 2001, 21–35, here: 22.

⁷³ Cf. Marianne Hirsch, "The Generation of Postmemory", in: *Poetics Today* 29/1, 2008, 103–128, here: 111.

⁷⁴ Cf. Layton 2003, 458.

enmeshed in social relations rather than existing as passive carriers of meaning.⁷⁵ Through this transfer, experience becomes available to others.

To preserve memory and experience in object form, photography selects moments out of the continuity of lived experience. The decision to photograph concentrates attention on a situation and gives it a distinct difference: What enters the image is a moment gathered through intention and preserved to be frozen as an object. By this act, the flow of the moment is disrupted, altering its natural course as an experience to be lived and released, for "[t]o photograph is to confer importance".⁷⁶ A photograph must serve a function to be understood; without meaning, it risks invisibility.⁷⁷ As John Berger notes, the photograph isolates and preserves a moment and most commonly functions as a memento of what is absent; its meaning emerges precisely through this relation between what is present in the image and what must be socially supplied beyond it.⁷⁸ Through this intervention, the photographed moment becomes available to new relations beyond the situation that produced it.

These formulations establish photography as a technology that reorganizes how the past becomes perceptible and durable. Through its capacity to extract, fix, and circulate moments, photography alters the conditions under which experience can persist beyond its occurrence. The photograph produces a form in which the past continues to operate as something materially present, returnable, and available for renewed relations.

Photography redistributes memory across objects, encounters, and social situations, where it remains active through use, circulation, and attachment, participating in what Flusser characterizes as a field of technical images through which history is absorbed into a circulating form of collective memory.⁷⁹ In this process, what was once held within individual experience becomes available to others through the material form of the image. The photograph repositions it within a shared field of visibility, where it can be encountered, recognized, and taken up by viewers beyond the original situation.

⁷⁵ Cf. Elizabeth Edwards, "Material Beings: Objecthood and Ethnographic Photographs", in: *Visual Studies* 17/1, 2002, 67–75, here: 68–69.

⁷⁶ Susan Sontag, "America, Seen Through Photographs, Darkly", in: Susan Sontag, *On Photography*, New York: RosettaBooks 2005, 22.

⁷⁷ Cf. Pierre Bourdieu, *Photography. A Middle-Brow Art*, trans. Shaun Whiteside, Cambridge: Polity Press 1990, 91 (Orig.: *Un art moyen*, Paris: Minuit 1965).

⁷⁸ Cf. Berger 2013, 73.

⁷⁹ Cf. Flusser 2000, 19–20.

As Barthes comments:

Each photograph is read as the private appearance of its referent: the age of Photography corresponds precisely to the explosion of the private into the public, or rather into the creation of a new social value, which is the publicity of the private: the private is consumed as such.⁸⁰

Barthes' quote points to how every photograph is already oriented toward circulation. Once a moment is photographed, it is no longer held only within a private experience, but becomes something that can be shown, kept, sent, and encountered by others. This visibility does not simply display an image; it situates the photographed moment within social space, where it can be returned to, re-seen, and taken up in different contexts. The photograph makes experience available, allowing it to enter shared frameworks of perception without yet becoming a story. In this way, photography creates the conditions under which moments can persist beyond their occurrence and later be connected, reinterpreted, and historically situated.

The photograph does not narrate; its appearance is instantaneous, captured and preserved as a fragment rather than a sequence.⁸¹ What emerges is a presence held in view, a moment made available through the situations in which it is encountered, handled, and related to other moments and memories.⁸² The photograph holds a fragment of time in visibility while remaining open to reinterpretation as it enters new contexts.

For that reason, the meaning of a photograph cannot be singular: "Whenever the past is represented, the choice of media and forms has an effect on the kind of memory that is created".⁸³ Photography serves as a medium for producing artifacts that actively shape how the past is remembered and interpreted within particular situations. Through the intentional decisions of the photographer and the visual organization of memory in the resulting image, photographs participate in shaping how moments are preserved, encountered, and related to others. In this way, photography mediates personal relationships by constructing conditions under which experiences become visible, shareable, and open to reinterpretation.

⁸⁰ Barthes 1981, 98.

⁸¹ Cf. Berger 2013, 52.

⁸² Cf. Ibid., 90–91.

⁸³ Astrid Erll, "Literature, Film, and the Mediality of Cultural Memory", in: Astrid Erll/Ansgar Nünning/Sara B. Young (eds.), *Cultural Memory Studies: An International and Interdisciplinary Handbook*, Berlin/New York: Walter de Gruyter 2008, 389–398, here: 390.

In migratory contexts, this entanglement of memory, mediation, and self-perception becomes structurally central. Under conditions of displacement and resettlement, identity takes shape as a site of ongoing negotiation, shaped by memory, movement, and the pursuit of recognition within newly encountered sociocultural landscapes.⁸⁴ Since the migrant is defined by their movement, they are often understood as a secondary figure in relation to place-bound social membership, and their identity is read through the fact of having moved rather than through where they are or where they come from.⁸⁵ Within this field of negotiation, photography can be approached as both a response to the conditions of displacement and a platform through which migrant communities articulate visibility, agency, and narrative positioning. Migrant photography becomes then operative, insofar as it participates in the ongoing negotiation of presence and social legibility.

Sontag argues that photography creates an illusion of control over experience, an illusion that plays a significant role in how migrant lives are visually fixed, mediated, and made accessible for collective interpretation.⁸⁶ Once lived moments are translated into photographs, experience becomes something that can be selected, framed, kept, and circulated. Rather than resolving the instability of migrant experience, photography reorganizes it. It provides a way of holding experience in place at moments when social position and belonging remain uncertain. The control it offers is partial: a photograph can frame how a life appears without determining what that life becomes. This partiality is itself significant, since it means that photographs participate in the negotiation of visibility without settling it.

This circulatory quality shows how photography operates in practice: images enter processes of circulation through which experience is repeatedly reactivated and repositioned. Photography gathers moments into a circulating visual field in which meaning is continuously reactivated: “[T]echnical images absorb the whole of history and form a collective memory going endlessly round in circles”,⁸⁷ offering a visual system of memory through which meanings are continually reorganized as images move across times, contexts, and social situations. This formulation returns us to the

⁸⁴ Cf. Hirsch 2008, 115.

⁸⁵ Cf. Thomas Nail, *The Figure of the Migrant*, Stanford: Stanford University Press 2020, 3.

⁸⁶ Cf. Susan Sontag, "Melancholy Objects", in: Susan Sontag, *On Photography*, New York: RosettaBooks 2005, 64.

⁸⁷ Flusser 2000, 19.

technical image as a structuring condition whose operative logic lies in repetition, circulation, and recombination. What is at stake here is how technical images structure the field within which experiences become visible, comparable, and retrievable in the first place.

In Flusser's sense, the technical image is not oriented toward altering the world 'out there,' but toward reorganizing how the world is apprehended. It shapes how people see and remember rather than changing what is materially there.⁸⁸ This returns to the distinction developed earlier between representation and intervention: technical images do not act on the world itself, but on how the world is seen, remembered, and made available to experience.⁸⁹ The technical image, by shaping perception rather than intervening in the material world, plays a central role in how representations become culturally meaningful and emotionally resonant, especially in contexts where memory, identity, and belonging are continuously being negotiated. Flusser suggests that traditional tools reshape natural objects through intentional human intervention, turning them into cultural artifacts, an act he defines as "work" whose outcome is a work.⁹⁰ In contrast, technical images intervene not in the material world but in the realm of perception, shaping how individuals see themselves and others over time.

The technical image unfolds through the same movements that shape photographs in everyday life. Images are made, sent, kept, and returned to, and through these trajectories they become traces that can be encountered again, sustaining relations across distance and time. Within such practices, photographs come to matter as points where memory, perception, and social ties are held together. In migratory contexts, particularly where photographs circulate between family members separated across national space, these movements situate images within ongoing negotiations of presence, attachment, and recognition, as photographs pass between people, places, and moments and take on particular weight within specific social and historical situations. This shows that the technical image names the condition under which these photographic relations remain active and available.

Nevertheless, the question remains whether photography, as a medium, is symbolically constrained by its place within photographic history and discourse or if it

⁸⁸ Cf. *Ibid.*, 16–17.

⁸⁹ *For a more detailed discussion of the technical image and its representational logic, see Chapter 1.1.*

⁹⁰ Cf. Flusser 2000, 23.

has the capacity to transcend these limitations.⁹¹ Photography traverses geographical and temporal boundaries, enabling cultural encounters while contributing to the production and reproduction of histories, memories, and shared experiences central to the formation of diasporic identities.⁹² It has the power to shape narratives and influence societal attitudes toward inclusion and belonging, positioning the camera as a tool that produces a photograph designed to engage the viewer in thought and contemplation: “The camera relieves us of the burden of memory, [...] for the camera records in order to forget”.⁹³ In this sense, the camera extends what the eye can do by making it possible to hold onto appearances that would otherwise be lost. It redefines the relationship between memory and forgetting by turning the act of seeing into something that can be materially preserved.

The camera's capacity to fix what memory cannot hold on its own gives photographs a particular durability within historical processes: “Cultural memory describes how a multitude of narratives about the past circulate culturally, each offering alternative ways to understand different past events”.⁹⁴ By materializing memory, photographs offer alternative perspectives on past events, even as they ultimately contribute to the same historical record. Cultural memory refers to the circulation of diverse narratives about the past, each providing alternative interpretations of historical events.⁹⁵ In the case of Turkish migration, the photographs kept within families offer a visual record that exists alongside the public narratives that have shaped how this migration is remembered in Germany. The camera, as a tool, participates in this process by producing the material forms through which such alternative accounts become durable.

However, photographs remain fragmentary by nature, and over time the contexts that once anchored their meaning begin to dissolve.⁹⁶ This suggests that photography is part of a larger framework — a collective memory that was built by the efforts of people.

⁹¹ Cf. Bate 2021, 43.

⁹² Cf. Justin Carville/Sigrid Lien, "Contact Zones: Photography, Migration, and the United States", in: Justin Carville/Sigrid Lien (eds.), *Contact Zones. Photography, Migration and Cultural Encounters in the United States*, Leuven: Leuven University Press 2021, 11–26, here: 19.

⁹³ Berger 2013, 55.

⁹⁴ Paul Leworthy, "Reframing 'Gastarbeiter' Migration: Family, Photography and Cultural Memory in *Almanya — Willkommen in Deutschland*", in: *Oxford German Studies* 52/2, 2023, 276–294, here: 290.

⁹⁵ Cf. Ibid.

⁹⁶ Cf. Sontag, "Melancholy Objects", 56.

This process plays a critical role in shaping and preserving the collective memory of the society it depicts, as photographic images, through their tangible, material form, gradually acquire the status of truth. Over time, these visual representations solidify subjective experiences into a shared cultural memory, reinforcing photography's function as a medium of materialized remembrance and historical authentication.

If photographs materialize memory into durable objects, this raises the question of how such objects circulate within conditions of physical separation. The next section examines how photographic exchange produces presence across migratory distance.

2.2 Photography, Migration, and the Production of Presence

The preceding section established how photography organizes memory into material and circulating forms. But under conditions of migration, memory alone does not account for what photographs are asked to do. They are objects through which the migrant remains present to people who cannot see them. This shifts the question from how photographs preserve experience to how they produce a form of presence that can persist across physical separation. It is this productive capacity, the photograph's ability to make someone appear as present who is not, that gives migrant photography its particular social weight.

The history of Turkish migration to Germany unfolds through photographic practices in which experience, memory, and social presence are made durable and transferable.⁹⁷ As Rothberg and Yildiz emphasize, migrants are active bearers of memory who engage with collective national histories to assert their presence and identity within society, making their diasporic memories integral to the ongoing cultural memory landscape.⁹⁸ Within the context of Turkish migration, this memory work takes material form through everyday visual practices like photography that accompany departure, separation, settlement, and the reorganization of family life across borders.

Photography provides a means of observing and reflecting on the long-term social and cultural consequences of these movements. Under conditions in which return remains uncertain and distance becomes a structuring condition of everyday life, photography emerges as one of the practices through which experience can continue to register as

⁹⁷ Cf. Wolbert 2001, 21–23.

⁹⁸ Cf. Michael Rothberg/Yasemin Yildiz, "Memory Citizenship: Migrant Archives of Holocaust Remembrance in Contemporary Germany", in: *Parallax* 17/4, 2011, 32–48, here: 33.

socially present. Within this field, photographs begin to function as stabilizing traces: material forms that gather fragmented experiences into images that can be revisited, handled, and reactivated in new situations and relations.

Once experience takes form in a photograph, the question extends beyond memory to the kind of presence the photographic image establishes. A photograph carries its referent within its own visibility, so that what it shows persists as something that has been and remains present as a trace through which experience can be encountered again and re-entered from different situations.⁹⁹ In this way, the photograph establishes a form of presence that gathers time into visibility, without providing a sequence through which that time would unfold.

It is in this sense that the photographic image gradually comes to stand in for what is no longer directly present, allowing experience to persist through material form and circulation.¹⁰⁰ In this way, photographs take part in it, carrying the weight of absence while helping to build a sense of presence and continuity. As Annette Kuhn says: "Memory work takes all forms of remembering, memory accounts and memory texts as material for interpretation".¹⁰¹ What Kuhn emphasizes is that memory is formed through ongoing engagement with the materials that support it. Photographs become part of this process because they offer something concrete that can be returned to, re-read and understood differently over time.

Across external representations and migrant self-representations, photography operates as a crucial archival practice, shaping how perceptions, narratives, and relations of belonging are constructed and circulated.¹⁰² This dynamic memory work positions photographs as sites of belonging and political agency in the diasporic experience. They become means through which migrant lives are rendered present, recognizable, and narratable within both familial memory and broader historical imaginaries.

⁹⁹ Cf. Barthes 1981, 5.

¹⁰⁰ Cf. Annette Kuhn, "Photography and Cultural Memory: A Methodological Exploration", in: *Visual Studies* 22/3, 2007, 283–292, here: 285–288.

¹⁰¹ Kuhn 2007, 284.

¹⁰² Cf. Wolbert 2001, 23–24.

David Bate offers the following statement about the perception of migration:

We should admit here that alongside their relation to the perception of migration, the figure of the migrant also carries an emotive aspect, a dimension that is interlinked implicitly with what would conventionally be called its representational power.¹⁰³

Representation does not simply reflect migration; it organizes how migration is understood across time by carrying memory and identity into visible form. A photograph often captures what compels attention,¹⁰⁴ and when a photograph is produced with the intention of preservation or deliberate representation, this attention is shaped by the specific context in which the image is made. Photographs are to be shown and shared; as Bourdieu notes, their meaning often lies in the relationships they activate, “defined by the personal relationship that links [viewers] to the photographer or the viewer of the photograph”.¹⁰⁵ In this sense, photographic meaning emerges also through the relational situations in which photographs circulate. Whether the relationship is personal, familial, or national, what gives photography its power in the making of history is both the images it generates and the active participation it entails between the photographer and the subject.

The photographic landscape of Turkish migration is formed through interrelated image practices across various contexts, in which photographs move between production, circulation, and use. They are kept, exchanged, displayed, and revisited, and through these movements they accumulate significance. In this movement, photographs become available for renewed engagement within familial settings and broader representational fields, since photographs can provide meanings, when they are provoked into being recalled,¹⁰⁶ since they are active sites of memory, identity, and self-definition.

Through their circulation and repeated activation, images become part of ongoing processes in which family histories, social positioning, and senses of home are worked upon and reorganized. These images open a space for understanding how individuals represent themselves, what they choose to preserve, and how they negotiate the meaning of home in a new context. Photography, in this context, operates at the

¹⁰³ Bate 2021, 36.

¹⁰⁴ Cf. Bourdieu 1990, 37.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 88.

¹⁰⁶ Cf. Şahika Erkonan, “Photography and the Construction of Family and Memory”, in: Leif Kramp et al. (eds.), *Politics, Civil Society and Participation: Media and Communications in a Transforming Environment*, Bremen: edition lumière 2016, 257–272, here: 259.

intersection of personal attachment and social circulation. Images produced within migration circulate as objects of communication, attachment, and social continuity, entering everyday practices of sending, keeping, and viewing through which migrant experience is visually organized.¹⁰⁷ Photography thus operates as a means through which migration becomes archived not only institutionally, but within families and social relations themselves. A photograph then eventually replaces the memory, imposing itself as a vivid, inescapable force that blocks the memory itself,¹⁰⁸ transforming recollection into a shared visual mythology.

What remains to be examined is where this visual mythology takes shape — within which relationships, and under what expectations. Seen through the public image of the 'guest worker,' the migrant archive takes shape as a set of practices that organize visibility across distance. Yet these practices are embedded in specific relational contexts that determine how photographs are made, what they are expected to carry, and who they are addressed to.

Photographs taken by and of migrants derive their meaning from lived experience. They register moments, emotions, and identities that appear significant enough to be held onto, framed, and made visible. In this regard, photography exceeds the function of private preservation. It becomes a practice through which migrants participate in the social space around them, positioning their experiences in relation to broader cultural narratives and expectations. The meanings produced through such images are rarely formed in isolation. They emerge within everyday relational contexts, and it is precisely here that the family becomes a central site through which identity, belonging, and continuity are negotiated, stabilized, and represented.

2.3 Family, Migration and Representation

If migrant photographs produce presence across distance, the question becomes: presence for whom? The photographs discussed in this thesis were not made for institutional archives or public audiences. They were produced within families and addressed to specific people, parents, spouses, children, who expected to see particular things in the image. The family is therefore not only what these photographs show; it is the social structure that determines how they are made, what they are

¹⁰⁷ Cf. Wolbert 2001, 23–27.

¹⁰⁸ Cf. Barthes 1981, 91.

expected to communicate. This section examines how family operates as the organizing framework of migrant photographic practice.

However, the concept and definition of 'family' can also be reconsidered, particularly in terms of how a family is characterized and understood, especially in the context of photography: "Family photography is not only part of the family story but a product of the culturally defined family".¹⁰⁹ Family is also an affective infrastructure: it organizes how emotions are expressed, received, and sustained between people. In migratory contexts, this infrastructure is what photographs are produced within and addressed to.

Aleida Assmann emphasizes that memory operates on multiple levels, as individuals rely on it to preserve experiences and remain oriented in time, while collective forms of remembrance connect families and communities, making memory "an important agent of social cohesion".¹¹⁰ This is crucial for migrant photography because photographs become one of the practical media through which collective memory is sustained through facilitating preexisting emotional, cultural and interpersonal bonds. What emerges here is that "family" is not simply the subject of migrant photography, but one of its organizing frameworks: the site where photographs are produced, circulated, and made socially meaningful.

These bonds make photography consequential as a medium of expression and self-expression. In this way, memory becomes a relational and communicative force, through which family members construct belonging and reinforce their sense of identity within a social group. Yet it is precisely when these bonds are stretched across geographical distance that the communicative function of photography becomes more than symbolic, since migration reorganizes the conditions under which family relations can be sustained at all.

Under migratory conditions, the family becomes a relational field in which belonging is continuously recalibrated. As Tsolidis writes, "Identification is negotiated by individuals in response to other individuals, communities and social institutions".¹¹¹ In diasporic

¹⁰⁹ Zanita Halimi, "Family Photography as a Construction of Family Memory", Diss., Univ. Wien 2020, 131.

¹¹⁰ Ingrid Ladner, "Memory as an Agent of Social Cohesion — Interview with Aleida Assmann", *scilog* — *The FWF Science Magazine*, URL: <https://scilog.fwf.ac.at/en/magazine/memory-as-an-agent-of-social-cohesion>, 06.02.2026.

¹¹¹ Tsolidis 2011, 414.

settings, the family becomes one of the primary sites where these negotiations unfold, since attachments must be sustained across distance and generational difference. Family photographs participate in this negotiation as objects through which relations are coordinated and made recognizable. They stabilize a shared sense of continuity precisely because they can circulate, be revisited, and be held as material evidence of familial presence.

Within family contexts, photographs become points of reference through which relationships are affirmed, histories are recalled, and connections are sustained, making them a productive site for examining how images operate within migratory lives. As Leworthy argues, "photographs play a role in mediating family myths and managing the family's self-image",¹¹² thereby shaping familial identities and preserving cultural continuity across distances. Then, family photography becomes anticipatory: it is produced with an imagined distant viewer in mind.

This anticipatory quality shapes the photograph before it is taken. The image is composed not only for the present situation but for the moment of its reception elsewhere. Framing, posture, clothing, setting: each element is oriented toward a viewer who will encounter the image under different conditions and at a different time. This means that migrant family photography is relational from the outset. It does not first record and then circulate; it is produced within the expectation of circulation.

Photography is described as a means for migrants to preserve "familial and cultural bonds across time and space,"¹¹³ reinforcing its role as both a personal and collective archive of lived experience. In doing so, migrant engagement with images "bind[s] home with their present setting through the construction of 'living memories,'"¹¹⁴ where identity, belonging, and culture form a collage anchored to a socially stabilized sense of the past.

The tension between sustaining familial expectations and adapting to new social environments shapes how migrants' stage themselves for those who remain. Photography becomes a means of staging stability, producing images that can regulate expectations across distance. Such images momentarily suspend the visible signs of

¹¹² Leworthy 2023, 280.

¹¹³ Carville/Lien 2021, 15.

¹¹⁴ Irmak Evren, "Re-Membering Germany at Home: Transnationalization of Return Migrants through Photographs and Life Stories", Diss., Middle East Technical Univ., Ankara 2023, 27.

disruption by producing a coherent scene of familial order. This staged coherence becomes visually frozen, producing an image of familial stability that can outlast the conditions that produced it. Despite the ongoing realities of displacement, such representations construct an image of stability, offering reassurance to both those depicted and those viewing them from a distance.

Hirsch emphasizes that this dynamic is enabled by “the pervasiveness of the familial gaze, and by the forms of mutual recognition that define family images and narratives”.¹¹⁵ Precisely because these images are produced to circulate and to be revisited, their meaning depends on the practices through which they are preserved, sequenced, and made available over time.

The camera enters private spaces because it can fix what would otherwise pass. But this fixation only becomes meaningful when the resulting images are made accessible, as in the family album, where private moments are transformed into shared narratives. As Erkonan writes, “Memory is also a practice where family members work with the photographs, collecting them, ordering them and changing them”.¹¹⁶ Nora similarly argues that “Memory takes root in the concrete, in spaces, gestures, images, and objects”.¹¹⁷ When these concrete forms are produced under conditions of migration, the objects and spaces through which memory takes root become especially consequential, since they must carry relational weight that would otherwise be sustained through physical proximity.

In migratory contexts, this photographic freezing becomes particularly charged, because the image often functions as the primary site where family relations remain visible and accountable. Cameras disrupt the interpersonal dynamics within families by capturing relationships in a way that freezes them in time, solidifying expectations, perceptions, and interpretations of each family member: “As a private technique, photography manufactures private images of private life”.¹¹⁸ These images often fix identities in place, giving them a sense of permanence that extends far beyond the moment they depict and contribute to a lasting emotional and narrative framework within the family, where specific moments become symbolic touchpoints for identity,

¹¹⁵ Hirsch 2008, 113.

¹¹⁶ Erkonan 2016, 263.

¹¹⁷ Pierre Nora, “Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire”, in: *Representations* 26, 1989, 7–24, here: 9.

¹¹⁸ Bourdieu 1990, 30.

memory, and relational meaning. It transforms photography into a space where emotional truths are not only preserved but also negotiated between the expectations of those left behind and the realities of those who have moved on.

However, this negotiation is still embedded within familial structures — the family does not only consume these representations but also co-produces them, shaping and reshaping identity through shared memories, affective responses, and intergenerational dialogue. Photographs may not inherently create a moral position, but they have the power to reinforce existing values and contribute to the formation of emerging ones.¹¹⁹ The actions and decisions of family members inevitably influence each other, with family members often serving as the primary witnesses to one another's experiences.¹²⁰ This process allows families to hold together continuity and change, adapting to new conditions while maintaining a shared sense of who they are.

In migratory contexts, this absorption of history takes place through the ongoing accumulation, circulation, and reuse of images, as experiences are carried forward, repositioned, and related across different moments and situations. Within these practices, family photography becomes a crucial medium for sustaining visual continuities through which diasporic attachments are negotiated through repetition, emotional resonance, and everyday acts of keeping, viewing, and sharing. In doing so, photography and its visual representations reposition migrants as active agents in the construction of cultural and historical narratives within their new environments, particularly through the processes of creation and archival, which confer a sense of permanence and enduring presence.

Given that individual family photographs gain meaning through their placement and context, there arises a need to collect and organize them in a structured form. Since all photographs create a sense of connection, the family album functions as a curated collection that materializes these ties. If the individual photograph already functions as a relational token, the album becomes the apparatus through which these tokens are stabilized into a legible familial sequence. A private photograph carries traces of the context it was taken from, preserving its meaning and serving as a memento of a life in progress, shaped by the camera's role in capturing memory.¹²¹ The family album,

¹¹⁹ Cf. Sontag, "In Plato's Cave", 13.

¹²⁰ Cf. Leworthy 2023, 289.

¹²¹ Cf. Berger 2013, 53.

in particular, becomes a site where memory, identity, and belonging are collectively constructed and negotiated. Photography bridges the relational gaps created by physical distance, serving to reinforce and sustain connections across time and space.

Hirsch writes that individuals are “part of social groups with shared belief systems that frame memories and shape them into narratives,” and that the family, as one such group, acts as “a privileged site of memorial transmission,” where memory is passed on through “the familial transfer of embodied experience to the next generation: it is intergenerational”.¹²² As such, photography serves as a medium through which embodied memories are not only preserved but also visually articulated, enabling familial identities and their associated meanings to be carried forward, reinterpreted, and reshaped across generations and borders.

Bourdieu defines the family album as:

The family album expresses the essence of social memory. There is nothing more unlike the introspective ‘search for lost time’ than those displays of family photographs [...] because it draws confirmation of its present unity from its past: this is why there is nothing more decent, reassuring and edifying than a family album[.]¹²³

Through this quote, Bourdieu shows how the family album brings reassurance by creating a sense of unity through shared memories in the context of a family. Its strength lies in the way it presents the family as continuous and connected, even across time and distance. Consequently, photographic representations become more than personal artifacts, they serve as both emotional anchors and partial reconstructions of a past that cannot be entirely replicated or reinhabited.

2.4 Belonging, Affect, and Absence

If the family album draws its reassuring force from presenting the family as continuous and unified, the question remains how the photographs within it are actually experienced — what they evoke in the moment of viewing, and what weight they carry for those who encounter them across distance.

A photograph that arrives from abroad enters a situation shaped by longing, expectation, and the awareness of what cannot be recovered. This section turns to the affective dimension of migrant photography: how photographs become sites where

¹²² Cf. Hirsch 2008, 110.

¹²³ Bourdieu 1990, 30–31.

belonging is felt, and how absence becomes perceptible through the very images that are meant to counter it.

Belonging under conditions of migration takes shape through the mediation of experience, as proximity, continuity, and shared memory must be sustained across distance and interruption.¹²⁴ Individual memory is fluid and multifaceted, shaped by shifting contexts of time and place, while balancing the need for connection with the negotiation of subtle power dynamics.¹²⁵ Photography participates in this process by reshaping how memories are held and how collective memory is formed. The acts of remembering and perceiving are not passive; they are shaped by the images through which experience is made available.

Representation is central to this process. Pierre Bourdieu argues that the value of a photograph is defined by the subject it captures, with the object itself justifying the image.¹²⁶ In contrast to this, Barthes asserts that a photograph mechanically replicates a moment that can never be authentically reproduced in real life.¹²⁷ By fulfilling these purposes, these images cannot be viewed as coincidental; rather, they are chosen and composed in ways that organize how the migrant subject appears, producing a version of immigrant life shaped for recognition.¹²⁸ Rather than opposing these positions, they point to different dimensions of photography's authority: its social value as a recognized object and its indexical force as a technical trace.

Taken together, these dimensions allow photography to function as a medium through which belonging becomes socially legible. Photographs circulate as objects that condense relationships into a visible form, while carrying the temporal pressure of what has already passed. Under migratory conditions, this authority intensifies because the photograph often has to hold together what is otherwise dispersed across distance. The image becomes a site where identity is negotiated through representation while remaining anchored in the trace of a specific moment. Experience, once displaced into

¹²⁴ *Belonging is here treated as something that is repeatedly produced through practices of recognition, representation, and mediated contact.*

¹²⁵ Cf. Tamara West, "Remembering Displacement: Photography and the Interactive Spaces of Memory", in: *Memory Studies* 7/2, 2014, 176–190, here: 177.

¹²⁶ Cf. Bourdieu 1990, 78.

¹²⁷ Barthes 1981, 4.

¹²⁸ Cf. Olena Fedyuk, "Images of Transnational Motherhood: The Role of Photographs in Measuring Time and Maintaining Connections between Ukraine and Italy", in: *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 38/2, 2012, 279–300, here: 284.

an image, acquires a different temporal status, one that can be returned to and encountered again.

Therefore, what is remembered is no longer connected solely to the vulnerability of lived moments, where they risk slipping away, “saved from nothingness” only through fragile human recollection.¹²⁹ By extracting experience from consciousness and fixing it to an object, photography shifts memory from something that is lived to something that is encountered. Memory becomes a material presence, external to the subject, whose significance no longer depends on recollection alone but on visibility.

This capacity of photographs to carry and reactivate experience and memory finds support in Jan Assmann’s understanding of memory as materially mediated:

External objects as carriers of memory play a role already on the level of personal memory. [...] the term ‘memory’ is not a metaphor but a metonym based on material contact between a remembering mind and a reminding object. Things do not “have” a memory of their own, but they may remind us, may trigger our memory, because they carry memories which we have invested into them, things such as dishes, feasts, rites, images, stories and other texts, landscapes, and other “lieux de memoire”.¹³⁰

At this point, the implications of photography’s memory logic extend into the ways experience is organized in everyday social life. As memory increasingly takes form through externalized images, questions of who one is and how one remains visible become tied to practices of representation and their circulation.

The photograph materializes the presence of its subjects in a dignified form, yet it also testifies to the distance of home and the fragility beneath the surface,¹³¹ revealing how images can both affirm identity and expose its instability within migratory contexts. In this way, the photograph begins to matter for how people come to situate themselves and be seen within ongoing social relations, since it binds together presences that are no longer present together and establishes a mediated form of encounter across time and space. This mediated encounter carries weight because it can be circulated and kept, allowing presence to persist even when bodies are elsewhere.

In migratory contexts, where separation reorganizes everyday relations, the photograph becomes one of the few traces through which continuity can be maintained and

¹²⁹ Berger 2013, 54.

¹³⁰ Jan Assmann, “Communicative and Cultural Memory”, in: Astrid Erll/Ansgar Nünning/Sara B. Young (eds.), *Cultural Memory Studies: An International and Interdisciplinary Handbook*, Berlin/New York: Walter de Gruyter 2008, 109–118, here: 111.

¹³¹ Cf. Esma Yildirim, “Where is Home? A Story of Three Generations of a Turkish Family in Belgium”, in: *Ethnographica* 7, 2007, 13–26, here: 14.

acknowledged. As Frers observes, the visual qualities of distance and material absence in migration photography can themselves produce an affective experience of absence for the viewer.¹³² This makes documentation a means of stabilizing presence, since what cannot be visually sustained risks being absorbed into the general narrative of departure, where individual lives become indistinguishable from one another.

In the absence of photographic documentation, the lives of the migrant communities can be framed as temporary, shaped primarily by narratives of movement rather than by a lasting sense of presence. What is at stake is the ability to appear as having a life that continues, accumulates, and leaves evidence. But this evidence is never neutral, since the camera can only create a sense of continuity by selecting certain moments and leaving others out.

Photography dissolves the solidity of everyday perception into a series of fragments, capturing only moments and subjects extracted from the temporal flow, selected for their perceived significance within societal structures and thereby reinforcing a constructed representation of reality.¹³³ This fragmentation is not accidental: it results from the camera's selective framing, which extracts certain moments as meaningful while leaving the surrounding continuities unrecorded. This tension between fragmentation and continuity is what gives photography its particular force in migratory contexts. It registers the breaks in experience while also producing, through the image, a sense of coherence that the lived situation may not have.

Under migratory conditions, the externalization of memory through photographic objects acquires particular significance, as photographs allow experiences of displacement, attachment, and loss to remain accessible beyond the immediacy of lived presence. As Elizabeth Edwards emphasizes, photographs are "both images and physical objects which exist in time and space and thus in social and cultural experience".¹³⁴ It is through this material persistence that photographs sustain relations over time, offering points of reference that can be revisited, shared, and reactivated across changing contexts. This also means that photographic images contribute to modes of belonging that persist across distance and temporal separation, allowing migrants to

¹³² Cf. Lars Frers, "Conclusions: Touching and Being Touched – Experience and Ethical Relations", in: Karolina Nikielska-Sekula/Amandine Desille (eds.), *Visual Methodology in Migration Studies. New Possibilities, Theoretical Implications, and Ethical Questions*, Cham: Springer 2021, 85–95, here: 87.

¹³³ Cf. Bourdieu 1990, 76–77.

¹³⁴ Edwards 2002, 68.

remain oriented toward people, places, and histories that are no longer part of their everyday physical environment. The affective force of these images resides in their capacity to mediate continuity, shaping how connections are maintained under conditions of separation and mobility.

Once memory is externalized into images, the question shifts from what is preserved to how these preserved traces are encountered, felt, and recognized by others. This highlights that the personal, affective impact of a photograph depends on the spectator's engagement, potentially evoking an emotional response.¹³⁵ Barthes articulates in *Camera Lucida*, "I see, I feel, hence I notice, I observe, and I think", ¹³⁶ underlining how images engage viewers emotionally and cognitively. In migratory contexts, this affective encounter is often structured by distance, since the photograph may become one of the few available sites where the absent other remains visible.

This power of photography lies in the ability to hold visibility and loss together within the same surface. A photograph is most powerful when the moment it captures holds a fragment of truth, alongside the nuances of what remains unseen or absent.¹³⁷ This power unfolds through the photograph's capacity to gather what is visible and what remains withheld into a single field of encounter. Photography connects personal memory with collective history, emphasizing the interplay between continuity and change as migrants navigate their identities and sense of belonging. Photographs sustain this negotiation, as their significance emerges through repeated acts of viewing, recognition, and emotional investment across different social situations. Their force lies not only in what they show but in how they move between people and situations.

As memories are inherently subjective, the impact of a photograph merges with other similar associations in the viewer's mind,¹³⁸ so that individual images come to participate in shared historical imaginaries without dissolving their attachment to singular experiences. In this way, photographs operate as sites where belonging is continually reworked through affective engagement and relational positioning.

¹³⁵ Cf. Bate 2021, 36.

¹³⁶ Barthes 1981, 21.

¹³⁷ Cf. Berger 2013, 20.

¹³⁸ Cf. Evren 2023, 20.

Through producing images, migrants exercise a degree of narrative control, turning displacement into a form that can be held. This control organizes experience into forms that can be revisited and shared. These photographs function as condensed reference points through which experiences of migration can be made communicable, even when they cannot be fully narrated. As Bate notes: “The critical discourse that surrounds a photographic image needs to interrogate the links between representation and affective power”.¹³⁹ This link becomes especially visible in migratory contexts, where photographs can move between viewers, spaces, and situations, carrying affective expectations along with the representations they stage.

Through their circulation and reuse, such images can shift how migration becomes perceptible, both for migrants themselves and for those who encounter these representations from the outside. The stillness of the photographic image brings interruption and continuity into relation, allowing uncertainty to remain visible rather than disappearing into the forward movement of migration narratives. Yet the significance of these images is not confined to intimate contexts, since they also circulate within wider visual fields where migration is continuously framed and interpreted. By presenting migrants as authors of their own visibility, such photographs can interrupt the familiar visual scripts through which migrant lives are reduced to anonymity, crisis, or transience.

Under migratory conditions, the photograph can operate as a proof of presence, especially where social recognition remains unstable. For Turkish migrants in Germany, whose presence was structurally framed as temporary, producing and sending photographs was not only a personal gesture but a way of asserting that one's life continued, accumulated, and left evidence. Migration often involves a period of uncertainty, in which attachments are unsettled and social positions remain fragile.¹⁴⁰ In such moments, photography offers a tangible way of maintaining relation to the past, while making this relation visible and shareable in the present.

The photograph becomes a way of positioning oneself within this instability, producing a trace that can be returned to as circumstances shift and attachments are reconfigured. This assertion takes shape within uncertainty, as visibility is negotiated rather

¹³⁹ Bate 2021, 36.

¹⁴⁰ Cf. Nail 2020, 2.

than secured once and for all. More than a record of memory, it functions as a deliberate act of self-representation, what Tamara West describes as involving “human, multi-sensory agency”,¹⁴¹ a form of engagement that involves not only seeing but handling, keeping, and physically relating to the image. Through this agency, photographs participate in the ongoing calibration of belonging, allowing attachments to places left behind to remain active without fixing them to a singular location or identity.

Because belonging is calibrated across shifting circumstances, photographs do not remain stable in what they signify. The same image can take on a different weight over time, as the situation in which it is viewed changes and earlier moments are re-read from a later position. What the photograph makes visible is therefore never fully separable from what has been altered. In this way, absence emerges through the photograph’s persistence, as it continues to be handled and looked at while the conditions of life move on.

As Marianne Hirsch notes in relation to family photographs, images that outlive their subjects can appear as “ghostly revenants from an irretrievably lost past world,” enabling viewers “not only to see and to touch that past but also to try to reanimate it by undoing the finality of the photographic ‘take’”.¹⁴² It is precisely the awareness that this reanimation can never be completed that gives such images their continued force, shaping how they are returned to, handled, and reinterpreted over time rather than exhausted as stable records.

Hirsch emphasizes that this effort unfolds together with “the consciousness of its impossibility,” a tension that becomes especially relevant in migratory contexts.¹⁴³ Photographs invite renewed attention and engagement while making clear that what they show cannot be fully retrieved. Their continued use sustains a relationship to it over time. This tension is not limited to images that are carefully exchanged and preserved within the family. It also emerges in more ordinary situations, where photographs are encountered in passing and become part of everyday spaces rather than deliberate acts of remembrance. In these moments, images appear within the routines of daily life, carrying traces of absence into unexpected settings.

¹⁴¹ West 2014, 181.

¹⁴² Hirsch 2008, 115.

¹⁴³ Ibid.

In this way, the persistence of photographs keeps absence active as a background condition of everyday belonging. It becomes then evident that Turkish Germans, regardless of where they are at any given moment, remain keenly aware of the places they have left behind.

It is from this position that the photograph begins to function as a bridge between Germany and the “real” home of Türkiye. As an object shaped by use and circulation, it connects lives lived in different places without dissolving the distance between them. The photograph carries recognisable traces of the person who has moved, allowing relationships to persist, while at the same time making visible the separation that gives the image its purpose. It is made with the expectation that it will travel, be looked at repeatedly, and stand in for the person who cannot be there. This expectation shapes how the image is composed. Bodies are positioned carefully, expressions held steady, surroundings chosen for their recognizability rather than their specificity. What matters is producing an image that can hold its meaning as it moves across distance and time.

Taken together, this chapter has developed an understanding of photography as a practice through which experience, memory, and visibility are organized across material and social contexts. By tracing how photographs circulate, persist, and become available within everyday relations, and how technical images structure broader conditions of retrievability and perception, photography has been situated within the processes through which the past remains operative in the present.

These processes, however, become fully legible only when traced through specific images. The following chapter examines how they converge within individual photographs from private family archives, where the demands of *gurbet* take material and visual form.

3. The Photograph as Object, Trace and Narrative

Identity, culture, and family are often treated as intimate themes, yet they exceed the individual precisely through the social forms that make them legible: kinship, language, obligation, and recognition. Migration introduces a new dimension to the understanding of identity, challenging and reshaping how it is perceived within both individual and

collective contexts.¹⁴⁴ What the preceding chapters have established at the level of theory, this chapter examines through specific photographs. The question is no longer what photography can do in principle under conditions of migration, but what particular images do in practice when they are produced, sent, and kept within the social fields that migration generates.

These fields are not contained within a single location. Mandel describes the spatial logic of Turkish German life as one of continuous repositioning:

In looking at the ways migrants have appropriated multiple spaces; it becomes evident that Turkish Germans continually reposition themselves as part of increasingly complex transnational networks.¹⁴⁵

This repositioning is not only social but also temporal. Life under migration unfolds across different places and different times simultaneously, a condition that diaspora theory has described in the following terms:

The space of diaspora exists in multiple times and places, encompassing those who leave as well as those who stay and those who return. It is multiple, fluid, and at times paradoxical. It is about the future as well as the past.¹⁴⁶

For the photographs examined in this chapter, this multiplicity is the practical situation in which each image must function. A photograph taken in Germany must remain legible to viewers in Türkiye who live in a different moment of family life. It must hold together as a recognizable image of the sender even as the circumstances around it change. What remains constant within diasporic consciousness is the existence of a relationship with a homeland and thereby a continuity of belonging or reference.¹⁴⁷

Because photographs are made to circulate between Germany and Türkiye, they materialize migration's fractured temporality. The temporal split they must navigate is structural, not only affective: photographs must bridge the gap between when they are made and when they are encountered. This split is shaped by the historical framing of Turkish migrants as "guests" whose presence was never imagined as permanent. The image materializes the expectation that belonging remains divided, that life must be lived in one place while continuing to be addressed to obligations and futures located elsewhere.

¹⁴⁴ *Migration is seen here as a reorganization of social legibility and more than a move from one country to another.*

¹⁴⁵ Mandel 2008, 9.

¹⁴⁶ Gali Weiss, "Diasporic Looking: Portraiture, Diaspora and Subjectivity", in: Melinda Hinkson (ed.), *Imaging Identity*, Canberra: ANU Press 2016, 55–70, here: 63.

¹⁴⁷ Cf. Ibid., 62.

This contradiction enters everyday life as a lived experience of distance and suspended recognition, and it is articulated through the vocabulary that emerges around migration. Certain terms structure how Turkish migrants describe both their social positioning and their sense of distance, giving everyday language a way to name what is otherwise difficult to stabilize. In this context, *gurbet* becomes particularly significant, because it functions as a lived frame through which separation and belonging are understood.

The structural conditions outlined above, the temporal split, the unresolved status of guesthood, the expectation that belonging remains divided, do not produce a single emotional response, but a way of living. What is needed, then, is not a term that describes how migration feels but one that names the condition under which everyday life is organized across distance.

Gurbet provides this.

Unlike "nostalgia" or "homesickness," which describe states of feeling, *gurbet* describes a situation: the ongoing condition of being away, in which separation is a structure within which life continues. It is this distinction that makes the term analytically productive for the photographs examined here. The images are objects produced within *gurbet*, shaped by its demands, and addressed to the relationships it sustains.

Gurbet describes a condition of suspended belonging, in which recognition is continuously deferred in both directions. The migrant is not fully at home in either direction, a position captured in Michelle Lynn Kahn's description as "identified simultaneously with two homelands and with no homeland at all", through which the photograph records family life as it persists under forms of belonging that remain provisional and unresolved.¹⁴⁸ This condition is also embedded in language itself, as *gurbet* carries semantic traces of estrangement that frame migration as an enduring state rather than a temporary detour.

As Besim Can Zirh notes:

In this 60-yearlong adventure, *gurbet* [...] has been the most significant concept in our memory. It is a concept that cracks open the door to thinking that those who stay away from home, who long for the homeland will become estranged (alienated) over time especially when one considers the word's semantic opposition to the word homeland,

¹⁴⁸ Cf. Kahn 2020, 53–55, 69–70.

but its kinship with words strange (garip) and the West (garp). On the one hand, keeping this unity of meaning in mind, when we look at the different stops in the history of migration studies and what remains of different migration experiences in the last two centuries, it can be said that migration is first and foremost an experience of in-betweenness.¹⁴⁹

This semantic kinship between *gurbet*, garip, and garp frames migration as a condition in which estrangement becomes structured, lived, and continually negotiated. It is precisely because this estrangement is lived through everyday relationships and obligations that photographs become necessary as objects that can sustain recognition across distance.

In this context, the photograph becomes one of the tools through which deferred recognition is managed, allowing migrants to remain socially legible to those who are not physically present. Within *gurbet*, photography functions as a relational act: it is produced with a viewer in mind and shaped by the expectation of being received. As art historian Geoffrey Batchen observes, “an image is also an object and that simulation is inseparable from substance”,¹⁵⁰ a reminder that the photograph’s meaning is not located in depiction alone but emerges through its handling, storage, and circulation. Elizabeth Edwards sharpens this point by insisting that photographic materiality actively structures how the image signifies:

The material forms of photographs also refer to other object forms, with a dual function; first, to reinforce what is present in the photographs as images and second to refer beyond the object and the image in a mutually reinforcing sign system.¹⁵¹

Taken together, Batchen and Edwards emphasize that photographs signify not only through what they depict but through what they are: physical objects shaped by use. The photograph therefore operates simultaneously as image and material trace. In migrant contexts, this materiality becomes especially meaningful, since inscriptions, creases, and marks of handling are not secondary additions but part of the photograph’s communicative function. They register who the image is meant for and what kind of relational work it is expected to perform across distance.

¹⁴⁹ Besim Can Zırh, *A Review on the Sixtieth Year of Labor Migration between Germany and Turkey: "So glad we are here!"*, Istanbul: Association for Migration Research 2021, 8.

¹⁵⁰ Geoffrey Batchen, *Each Wild Idea: Writing, Photography, History*, Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press 2001, 61.

¹⁵¹ Edwards 2002, 72.

This is where Gell's account of art objects as indexes of social agency becomes analytically relevant. For Gell, the "anthropological theory of art" is "a theory of the social relations that obtain in the neighbourhood of works of art, or indexes".¹⁵² Objects participate in social life not by representing relations but by mediating them. As Gell argues, "social agency can be exercised relative to 'things' and social agency can be exercised by 'things'".¹⁵³ What matters is not what the object depicts but the social transactions it enters and the agency it distributes within them. The migrant photograph, handled, inscribed, and sent, operates in precisely this way.

Read in this way, the migrant portrait becomes a place where multiple demands converge: the need to remain visible to family, the expectation of continuity, and the pressure to present a stable self despite geographic dislocation. It is through this combined visual-material form that absence becomes manageable and connection becomes narratable.

Against this background, this chapter turns to photographs as objects through which presence is circulated. The first portrait makes this logic explicit through its inscription, where the sender calls the image a "lifeless image," naming the photograph as a trace designed to travel, to be kept, and to sustain recognition without dissolving distance. The chapter begins with such inscribed portraits, before shifting toward more ordinary domestic photographs in which the same work of presence is performed less explicitly, through repetition, routine, and everyday scenes.

¹⁵² Cf. Gell 1998, 28.

¹⁵³ Ibid., 17–18.

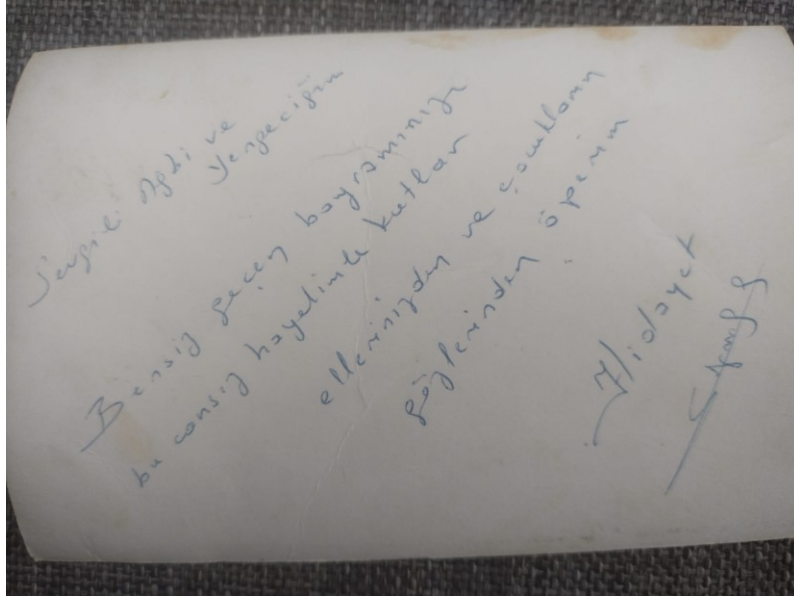


Fig. 2: Anon., Photograph (front and reverse), private archive [Hidayet Salmanlı], Cologne, n.d.

In this photograph (see Fig.2), a young man stands in an open field, dressed formally: suit, polished shoes, hair combed. His body is turned slightly away from the lens, his expression composed. The field offers no context — no identifiable landmarks, no other figures. What matters is his presence, isolated and made legible against an unmarked background. This formal simplicity is deliberate: the photograph must work as a portable trace, recognizable to viewers who need to see him, not his surroundings.

This awareness shapes how he stands, how he looks, and how he performs his own presence in front of the camera. The field surrounding him is largely devoid of detail, a compositional choice that further accentuates his figure as the focal point. The location matters mainly as a backdrop for address: the subject positions himself there to

produce an image for someone elsewhere, and the landscape works as a stripped-down stage that keeps the body readable and familiar. The image functions as a visual articulation of distance, an affective space of separation that becomes embedded within the photograph itself.

The back of the image reveals another dimension that deepens this reading. It reads:

Sevgili Ağbi ve Yengeciğim, Bensiz geçen bayramınızı bu cansız hayalimle kutlar, ellerinizden ve çocukların gözlerinden öperim. Hidayet. (My dear brother and sister-in-law, I celebrate the holiday you spent without me with this lifeless image of mine, and I kiss your hands and the children's eyes. Hidayet.) [trans. ISL] ¹⁵⁴

This short message turns the photograph into a form of communication. The phrase *this lifeless image of mine* speaks directly to the relationship between representation and absence, suggesting how the photograph stands in for the self that cannot return home.

By suggesting that this *lifeless image* can stand in their place, the subject acknowledges the role the photograph is expected to perform within the conditions of migration. The image must represent them across distance, yet its inability to convey their full presence remains part of how it is understood. This awareness reveals a practical understanding of photographic representation: the photograph can maintain a connection, but it also marks the separation that makes such a connection necessary. The statement therefore reflects how migrants rely on the photograph to support relationships and continuity, while recognizing that the image only offers a partial version of themselves.

The photograph becomes a substitute body, a visual stand-in that travels where the person cannot. It is sent in place of a visit, kept in place of proximity, and looked at in place of the face it carries. This substitution is not metaphorical. The photograph remains indexically tied to the body that stood before the lens. Light reflected from that body at that moment produced this specific image, and no other situation could have produced it in the same way. The viewer who receives the photograph knows this, even without articulating it. What they hold is a trace of a particular person at a particular time, and it is this material connection that gives the image its force as a relational object. The photograph can act as a stand-in because it is produced by their physical presence before the camera.

¹⁵⁴ Anon., Photograph (front and reverse), private archive [Hidayet Salmanli], Cologne, n.d.

In Gell's terms, the photograph operates here as an index of the sender's agency. For Gell, an index is "the material thing which motivates abductions of agency": an object through which the viewer is led to recognize that an agent is acting upon them from elsewhere.¹⁵⁵ The image is not merely evidence that Hidayet exists. It is an object through which he acts upon his family, sustaining obligation, affection, and recognition without being physically present. Gell describes this capacity through the concept of the distributed person, arguing that persons are not confined to the boundaries of their bodies but dispersed across the objects that carry their agency into social circulation. As he writes, such fragments "are physically detached fragments of the victim's 'distributed personhood,' that is, personhood distributed in the milieu, beyond the body-boundary".¹⁵⁶

The inscription on the back makes this distribution explicit. By calling the photograph *this lifeless image of mine*, Hidayet names it as a part of himself that travels where he cannot. The possessive ("of mine") marks the image as an extension of his person rather than a depiction of it. What Barthes will describe ontologically, as proof that something has been, Gell allows us to understand socially: as an act performed through an object upon specific others.

Gell's framework accounts for what the photograph does within social relations: it extends agency, distributes personhood, and sustains recognition across distance. But it does not account for the particular force of the photographic image as distinct from other objects that circulate between people. A letter, a gift, a piece of clothing sent from abroad could also function as an index of the sender's agency. What makes the photograph specific is that it carries a visible trace of the body itself.

It is this visible trace that gives the photograph its particular hold on the viewer, producing a form of certainty that other objects cannot offer. Barthes defines the photograph as a 'shared hallucination':

Here is where the madness is, for until this day no representation could assure me of the past of a thing except by intermediaries; but with the Photograph, my certainty is immediate: no one in the world can undeceive me. The Photograph then becomes a bizarre medium, a new form of hallucination: false on the level of perception, true on the level of time: a temporal hallucination, so to speak, a modest, shared hallucination

¹⁵⁵ Gell 1998, 27.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid., 104.

(on the one hand "it is not there," on the other "but it has indeed been") : a mad image, chafed by reality.¹⁵⁷

Barthes examines the intertwined notions of presence and absence in *Camera Lucida* through an ontological lens, asserting that "every photograph is a certificate of presence".¹⁵⁸ For Barthes, photography affirms that something has been. It stands as proof of existence, yet at the same time, it gestures toward loss. The photograph holds this tension within itself; it both preserves what once was and quietly mourns it.

Yet the photograph mechanically replicates a representation of what could never be repeated in its existential reality.¹⁵⁹ Within the context of migration, this act of replication becomes especially significant: it captures a version of family life anchored in a specific time, place, and emotional configuration — one that may no longer exist in the same form. These images offer comfort by preserving traces of belonging, stability, and identity, but they can also impose a sense of constraint by freezing familial roles and relationships into a fixed visual narrative. This is precisely why the phrase *lifeless image* is so telling: it does not reject the photograph, but names its paradoxical function. The image reassures those at home by offering proof of continuity, yet it also confirms that this continuity is only accessible through a static trace.

In the field portrait, the conditions of the photograph are visible. The open landscape, the solitary figure, the inscription on the back: each element makes the work of address legible. The viewer can see that this image was produced for someone elsewhere, because the photograph shows its own situation of sending.

The next portrait operates differently. It does not declare its function through setting or written message. Instead, it draws on the conventions of studio photography, where the image is organized through proximity, framing, and formal appearance. The body is no longer isolated against open space but presented in close-up, composed within the controlled conditions of a photographic studio.

What changes between these two images is not what the photograph is for. Both are produced to circulate, to be kept, to sustain recognition across distance. What changes is how this work is carried out. In the field portrait, presence is performed through the

¹⁵⁷ Barthes 1981, 115.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid., 87.

¹⁵⁹ Cf. Ibid., 4.

body's visibility against an empty backdrop. In the studio portrait, it is produced through the conventions of the photographic form itself: the tightness of the frame, the formality of clothing, the steadiness of the gaze. The phrase *lifeless image* will appear again on the back of this photograph, written by a different sender. Its recurrence across different images and different people suggests that the phrase names something shared, a common understanding of what the photograph is asked to do and what it cannot fully provide.



Fig. 3: Anon., Photograph (front and reverse), private archive [Cahide Kasıkoğlu], Munich, n.d.

In this photograph (see Fig.3), a man appears photographed in black and white. He wears a dark hat, a heavy jacket over a white collared shirt, and what appears to be a patterned scarf or tie at the neck. The framing is close, leaving little space around the figure. His gaze meets the camera with a steady, contained expression. The photograph itself is small, its corners rounded and its surface marked by creases and wear, registering a history of handling that has become part of the object. Unlike the field portrait, where the full body is visible against open space, this image concentrates attention on the face and upper body alone. The studio setting removes context: there is no landscape, no identifiable location, only the subject presented within the conventions of formal portraiture.

This self-presentation gains particular relevance in the context of migration. For someone living away from home, standing before a camera is not only an individual

gesture but a way of marking one's presence across distance. It becomes a means of stabilising identity in circumstances shaped by movement and separation. The photograph therefore functions not simply as evidence of how he looked at a given moment, but as an attempt to communicate who he understands himself to be and how he wishes to be recognised.

Stuart Hall's account of representation is relevant here. As Hall emphasizes:

The ways in which the media represent the world are not mere reflections of reality but are involved in constructing and shaping it. Meaning is not fixed or stable but constantly produced and reproduced in the language of representation.¹⁶⁰

The studio portrait participates in this process. The man's posture, clothing, and controlled expression are part of the representational work it performs. They organize how he appears to those who will receive the photograph, producing a version of himself that can circulate within his family and community. What the image offers is a constructed appearance, one shaped by the conditions under which it will be seen.

The inscription on the back offers additional insight into how this portrait was produced and how it was meant to function:

Bu cansız hayalim sizlere hatıra olsun. Burada iyi fotoğraf çekemiyorlar. Sevgilerimle, Hüsamettin Kaşıkçı (Let this lifeless image of me be a keepsake for you. They cannot take good photographs here. With love, Hüsamettin Kaşıkçı) [trans. ISL]¹⁶¹

The note reveals an awareness of the photograph's limitations and, at the same time, a clear intention for what the image should achieve. Calling it a *lifeless image* again acknowledges that the photograph cannot fully capture the vitality of the person it depicts. Yet the act of sending it positions the image as a substitute for presence, something that stands in when physical proximity is not possible. The inscription exposes both the constraints of photographic representation and the expectations placed upon it in moments of distance.

The complaint that "they cannot take good photographs here" is not only about image quality. Read through Gell's framework, it registers a frustration with the index itself: the material object that is supposed to carry his presence into social circulation falls short of the agency it is expected to perform. For Gell, "whoever allows his or her attention to be attracted to an index, and submits to its power, appeal, or fascination,

¹⁶⁰ Stuart Hall, "Representation & The Media", Transcript, University of Massachusetts at Amherst 1997, 8–10.

¹⁶¹ Anon., Photograph (front and reverse), private archive [Cahide Kasikci], Munich, n.d.

is a patient, responding to the agency inherent in the index".¹⁶² The photograph must do this work: it must attract attention, sustain the social bond, and stand in for the body. But the conditions of its production limit what kind of object it can be. Hüsametlin sends it anyway, naming it *lifeless* and entrusting it with a task it cannot fully accomplish. This tension between what the object is asked to do and what it can materially provide is central to how migrant photographs operate: they circulate as imperfect indexes whose social force depends not on fidelity but on the relationships they enter.

What makes this tension visible is the inscription itself. Hüsametlin does not simply send the photograph; he writes on it, naming it and addressing it to specific people. The inscription converts the image from a general object into a directed one. It tells the viewer what the photograph is for and who it comes from. This is not incidental to the photograph's function as an index. It is part of how the object enters the social relation it is meant to sustain. The written message compensates for what the image alone cannot carry. When both Hidayet and Hüsametlin use the same phrase across different photographs, something beyond individual expression becomes visible.

The repetition of this phrasing across different senders suggests what Barthes claimed in a practical way. In these inscriptions, Barthes's 'presence' is mobilized as proof for others, while the writers simultaneously name what the proof cannot repair. Calling both of these photos a *lifeless image* points to an awareness of what the photograph cannot provide: It lacks movement, voice, and the immediacy of being in the same room. The image circulates in place of the person, carrying emotional weight across distance, while remaining a reduced form of what it stands for.

These practices of memory-making take shape through concrete actions and objects that can be shared and revisited upon in everyday life. Among these, photography occupies a particularly stable position. Unlike memories carried internally, photographs offer something that can be handled, stored, and shown to others, allowing continuity to be maintained through material means. In this way, memory becomes anchored in objects that can move between places, linking experiences in the host land with relationships and expectations elsewhere.

¹⁶² Gell 1998, 31.

The following example turns to such a situation in order to examine how this awareness of impossibility is negotiated when photography enters a different social and spatial context, opening the analysis toward another mode of photographic presence. Here, absence is no longer declared through inscription, but becomes embedded in the ordinary scenes through which migrant life is recorded and shared.



Fig. 4: Anon., Photograph, private archive [Zafer Parilti], Izmir, n.d.

Here, the *lifeless image* persists, but its function is no longer articulated through inscription or formal staging; it is embedded instead in the ordinary scenes through which migrant life is recorded.

In this photograph (see Fig.4), a woman and a young boy are shown riding bicycles along a paved path in what appears to be a quiet residential area. The woman rides behind the child, positioned centrally in the frame, while the boy occupies the left foreground. Both figures face the camera directly with a neutral expression, suggesting an awareness of being photographed. The direct gaze of the subjects and centered arrangement suggest that even everyday movement can be briefly paused in order to become legible as an image. This photograph fixes an everyday scene of mobility and routine life, making it available as a trace of ordinary presence in Germany.

In contrast to the earlier portraits, the image does not show its own function through inscription or compositional form. Its significance lies in the way it captures an ordinary

moment of life in Germany and fixes it in a stable visual form. What the image holds together is a scene of routine mobility in which cultural markers remain visible without being foregrounded. The mother's traditional clothing appears alongside the everyday activity of cycling, as part of a life that is both familiar and settled. The photograph presents it as a condition that can be shown.

What is particularly legible in this image is the co-presence of cultural continuity and spatial adaptation within a single frame. The mother's headscarf and traditional clothing appear as part of the scene's ordinariness — worn while cycling, not while posing. The photograph does not frame the headscarf as a statement. It shows it as something worn while doing something else. In this way, the image quietly resists the kind of interpretive framework that White describes, in which cultural markers are read as signs of failed integration, presenting them instead as features of a settled and unremarkable daily life.

At the same time, the photograph's compositional choices reveal the tension between spontaneity and address that structures migrant everyday photography. The subjects have stopped cycling to face the camera. This pause converts movement into a pose and transforms an activity into a scene.

The image could not function as a sendable photograph if the figures were blurred or turned away. What appears as an ordinary moment has been organized, however minimally, for legibility at a distance. The photograph must show that life continues and that it continues in a way that can be recognized by someone who is not there to see it directly. The pause before the camera is itself a trace of the relational demand that structures image-making under *gurbet*: even the everyday must be held still long enough to become an image that travels.

Even in its ordinariness, the bicycle photograph presents everyday life as something that can be shown: a livable environment, a recognizable routine. This is where the shift from inscribed portraits to everyday scenes matters. In the earlier images, absence is named and addressed; here, it is managed through the apparent normality of what is shown. The photograph offers a scene of continuity, and the work of “presence” moves into the background and setting.

Seen this way, everyday photography renders routine into a communicable form. The camera isolates a fragment of lived time and stabilizes it as an image that can be kept.

What matters here is the shift that photographs introduce: everyday life becomes something that is accessed retrospectively, through a surface that outlasts the moment it records.

Within the context of *gurbet*, this ordinariness carries particular weight. Distance is not articulated through explicit expressions of longing, but through the accumulation of moments that cannot be experienced together. Absence is embedded in the image as a taken-for-granted condition rather than a declared theme. The photograph registers separation as something that unfolds over time and settles into routine, shaping daily life without requiring constant articulation. Because of this, being away appears as a sustained condition rather than an exceptional event.

But if absence settles into routine, then the question shifts from what the photograph expresses to how the ordinary becomes available as an image in the first place. The bicycle photograph produces a moment. Something in the scene must be recognized as showing well enough to be sent, kept, and understood elsewhere. This means that the conversion of everyday life into a photograph is never merely technical; it is shaped by the conditions under which the image will be received. What looks like a spontaneous snapshot is already oriented toward a viewer who is not present and it is this orientation that determines what counts as an ordinary scene worth fixing into visibility.

This is the point at which the material logic of the photograph intersects with the apparatus that produces it. The camera does not passively register what appears before it; it structures what can appear at all. Here, Flusser's account of the technical image becomes analytically productive as a way of understanding how the everyday is processed into a form that can travel.

Flusser reminds us that photographs do not preserve experience directly but translate it into a form that can circulate as information.¹⁶³ Under migration, this translation becomes necessary: what cannot be lived together can still be held together as an image.¹⁶⁴ The photograph is therefore less a direct preservation of experience than the result of working within a field of programmed possibilities, where making an image

¹⁶³ Cf. Flusser 2000, 20; see also 52.

¹⁶⁴ Cf. *Ibid.*, 25.

means selecting and generating symbols that can be processed and circulated.¹⁶⁵ Even when a photograph appears spontaneous, it is shaped by the expectation that the moment has to “work” as an image, one that remains understandable once it travels beyond the situation in which it was taken.

What Flusser's framework clarifies is that this expectation is structural. The camera, as an apparatus, already carries within it a set of possibilities for how the world can be rendered visible and the photographer works within this field, selecting from what the apparatus makes available.¹⁶⁶ For the migrant photographer, this selection is further shaped by the relational demand of *gurbet*: the image must hold together as a recognizable scene for someone who lives elsewhere, in a different rhythm of daily life. The everyday, then, enters through the apparatus's capacity to stabilize it into a form that remains legible across distance.

Everyday photography produces a legible version of ordinary life by isolating it from the flow of time and giving it a stable visual structure. What appears banal in lived experience becomes photographable precisely when it can be rendered into a recognizable scene: a street, a bicycle ride, a domestic interior, a family gathered around a table. In this process, the camera actively helps define what counts as a shareable moment. The photograph becomes a tool for stabilizing the everyday as something that can be transmitted, even when the conditions that produced it remain unstable.

Seen in relation to the bicycle photograph, this stabilization is not abstract. The camera selects these elements from the flow of lived time and holds them as evidence that life continues, that it has settled into recognizable form. What arrives at the other end is its converted trace — shaped by the apparatus, addressed through *gurbet*, and designed to remain legible after the moment has dissolved.

Under these conditions, “lifelessness” names the transformation of lived time into a trace. From this perspective, the idea of the *lifeless image* refers to a condition under which everyday life becomes visible in photographic form after the moment has passed. The image points to a life that continues in another place and remains inaccessible to those for whom it carries emotional significance. What is preserved is

¹⁶⁵ Cf. Ibid.

¹⁶⁶ Cf. Ibid., 34.

a confirmation of ongoing existence that can be returned to, handled, and kept. As photographs move across time and space, they are gradually assigned the role of maintaining connections that cannot be sustained through co-presence. In this process, ordinary moments become part of a migrant archive in which *gurbet* is not resolved but managed through visual continuity, allowing everyday life to persist within changing social and spatial conditions.



Fig. 5: Anon., Photograph, private archive [Zafer Parilti], Izmir, n.d.

As with the studio portraits discussed earlier, this family photograph (see Fig.5) shows the same individuals engaging in deliberate self-presentation under migratory conditions, now embedded within the everyday photographic logic established by the bicycle image. The mother and boy from the earlier photograph appear again, this time joined by a man who stands between them. The three figures are arranged side by side before a residential house, facing the camera directly. The man occupies the center of the frame in a light short-sleeved shirt buttoned to the collar and grey trousers; the mother stands to his right in a fitted dark blazer, her hair uncovered and pulled back; the boy sits on a bicycle to the left, hands on the handlebars. All three look at the camera, still and composed. The addition of a third figure changes how the image is organized — the two figures caught mid-ride in the bicycle photograph are now part of a wider family grouping, held together by the man's central position.

Several things have changed since the bicycle photograph, though the image does not draw attention to them. The mother's headscarf and white cardigan are gone; what she wears here is visibly different. The boy is on a bicycle again, but he is no longer riding. He poses alongside the adults, part of the arrangement rather than in motion. The family stands on a paved area in front of the building, a space that belongs to the house but is open to view. The photograph holds the figures and the setting together in one frame, so that the surroundings become part of what is shown alongside the family.

What the image produces is a scene that can be looked at and understood without explanation. The frontal arrangement, the stillness, the house behind them — these are part of how the photograph works. It gathers the family into a single, presentable surface: recognizable, composed, and addressed to someone who is not there. Like the bicycle photograph, it is made to travel. But where that image showed everyday movement, this one holds the family in place and presents them as a unit — visible, together, and settled enough to be shown.

When this image is viewed in relation to the earlier photograph, the continuity of photographic practice becomes apparent through the repeated appearance of the same people. Therefore the image actively participates in its maintenance across distance, since family photographs are “not only records of the past and images of people involved within that past, but also let us take a closer look at the construction of those specific families and their histories”,¹⁶⁷ while the anticipation that the photograph will travel and be viewed elsewhere resonates with the understanding that documentary practices foreground “the performance of the relationship between maker and subjects” rather than a self-contained moment.¹⁶⁸ This relational work of the image becomes especially legible in the ways bodies are positioned, dressed, and held together within the frame.

Unlike the individual portraits, this photograph must hold multiple bodies together within a single frame. The family is positioned carefully: standing close enough to register as a unit, but separated enough that each figure remains individually

¹⁶⁷ Erkonan 2016, 261.

¹⁶⁸ Cf. Mieke Bal, “Documenting What? Auto-Theory and Migratory Aesthetics”, in: Alexandra Juhasz/Alisa Lebow (eds.), *A Companion to Contemporary Documentary Film*, Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell 2015, 124–144, here: 130.

recognizable. Clothing reinforces this: everyone dressed with similar formality, creating visual coherence without uniformity. What the photograph stages is familial belonging — the claim that these people constitute a family, that their relationships persist despite geographic separation, and that this persistence can be shown to others.

Placed alongside the photograph with the bicycle, this image can be understood as part of the same visual practice. Both photographs translate moments of everyday life into images that remain available after the moment has passed. Changes in clothing and setting do not indicate a break, but reflect adaptation over time. What remains consistent is the use of photography to hold everyday life in a form that can travel and endure.

The earlier phrase *lifeless image* returns here as a quiet structure of everyday documentation. Seen together, the two photographs show how photography accompanies migration as an ongoing practice. The same people appear in different situations, linked through repeated acts of image-making. Through circulation and continued use, these images support continuity and help manage distance. Everyday activity and deliberate presentation are held within the same photographic framework, allowing life under conditions of migration to remain visible and accessible over time.



Fig. 6: Anon., Photograph, private archive [Zafer Parilti], Izmir, n.d.

The family exterior and the bicycle photograph both produce images in which life in Germany appears settled and recognizable. They show adaptation as something that

can be presented. But not every photograph performs this work in the same way, and not every image sustains the same reassurance. Some photographs register what the staging of stability leaves out. Yet the continuity these photographs establish does not resolve the condition of separation itself. This becomes particularly apparent in this image (see Fig.6) in which the same family appears gathered once again, now within the confined interior of a domestic space.

Seated around a small table, the family is physically together, but the image no longer emphasizes deliberate presentation or symbolic reassurance in the same way. Attention is dispersed, bodies are arranged according to the demands of space rather than the camera, and everyday objects take on a prominence equal to that of the figures themselves. The photograph confirms coexistence without restoring shared time. What it offers is not the fullness of being together, but the persistence of presence under conditions shaped by migration.

This means that the image does not contradict earlier photographs that communicate stability and continuity; instead, it reveals why such images remain necessary. Togetherness here is real but partial, lived within routines and constraints that photography can register but not resolve. The image thus holds continuity and limitation in the same frame, showing how family life under *gurbet* continues not by overcoming absence, but by accommodating it.

What makes this photograph analytically distinct from the earlier images is the way it distributes attention. In the inscribed portraits, the subject commands the frame; in the family exterior, the figures are arranged as a presentable unit. Here, the composition is shaped by the room rather than by the camera. Bodies are positioned according to where they can fit around the table. The frame includes objects that occupy as much visual space as the people themselves. This is not a failure of photographic staging but a different register of documentation, one in which the material conditions of everyday life assert themselves alongside the human subjects. The photograph shows togetherness as something that takes place within constraints: a small room, a crowded table, a domestic interior whose modesty the image neither conceals nor aestheticizes.

Read through Gell's framework, the objects on the table are not incidental props but part of the social field the photograph indexes. The dishes, the arrangement of the

table, the food: these are traces of domestic labor and hospitality that participate in how the family makes itself visible as a functioning unit. A set table is not merely functional; it registers the household's capacity to gather and sustain its members. In migratory contexts, where the conditions of domestic life are shaped by economic constraint and spatial limitation, the visible effort of a prepared table operates as evidence of continuity, that the practices of family gathering persist despite displacement. The photograph indexes not only the people present but the social routines that hold them together.

The absence of any inscription or deliberate compositional staging also shifts how the photograph functions as a relational object. Where the field portrait and studio portrait directed their viewers through written address, this image depends entirely on its material afterlife. Its meaning is not declared at the moment of production but built through the accumulation of returns — the repeated act of looking back at it, recognizing the room, the faces, the table, and situating them within a longer narrative of family life.

The kitchen-table photograph situates family life within a materially dense and spatially constrained interior, shifting emphasis away from symbolic reassurance toward the routines through which migrant life is sustained. Rather than presenting migration as an exceptional or dramatic condition, the image aligns with what Barbara Wolbert describes as the everyday visual labor through which migrants produce a sense of place, since family photographs function as “knowledge of how to produce and reproduce locality under the conditions of anxiety and entropy, social wear and flux”.¹⁶⁹ In this image, locality emerges through furniture, proximity, and shared domestic space, all of which anchor family life within the temporariness of migration.

Unlike the inscribed portraits, this photograph carries no written instruction for how it should be received. There is no address, no signature, no phrase naming it as a keepsake. Its social function depends entirely on what happens to it as an object: whether it is kept, where it is stored, how often it is returned to, and who handles it. In Gell's terms, the agency of this image is not declared but accumulated through use.

¹⁶⁹ Cf. Wolbert 2001, 21–24.

As Gell writes, "all that is stipulated is that to any given transaction between 'agents' one agent is exercising 'agency' while the other is (momentarily) a 'patient'".¹⁷⁰

This matters for the kitchen-table photograph because there is nothing else to carry the relational work. The inscribed portraits had words that told the viewer what the image was for. Here, the object must speak for itself. Whatever social force the photograph has acquired, it has acquired through being handled, stored alongside other photographs, and returned to in moments when the family needed to see itself as it once was. The material condition of the image is the only record of this history.

The photograph becomes an agent through the transactions it enters over time: the keeping, the handling, the returning to. The creases, the fading, the fact that the photograph has survived across decades of displacement and resettlement, are not incidental to its meaning. They are the material record of its continued participation in the social life of the family. Where the field portrait and the studio portrait announced their relational purpose through inscription, the kitchen-table photograph acquires its force through duration. It has been kept, and the keeping is itself a form of social action.

This is where the kitchen-table photograph diverges most clearly from the portraits examined earlier. The field portrait and the studio portrait declared their purpose at the moment of sending. Their inscriptions fixed the terms of the relationship between image and viewer. The kitchen-table photograph has no such declaration. Its meaning has been built after the fact, through the slow work of keeping. What it shows, a family seated together in a small room, is ordinary. What it has become, through decades of survival within a family archive, is evidence that this ordinary moment was worth preserving. The act of preservation is itself the claim.

Seen in this light, the kitchen-table image sustains *gurbet* as a lived relationship, one that is revisited, reinterpreted, and emotionally reworked over time. The photograph holds together continuity and limitation: it confirms family presence while simultaneously registering the distance, routine, and partiality through which migrant life is lived.

¹⁷⁰ Gell 1998, 22.

Yet the significance of such images may not be confined to the families that produced them. When domestic photographs from different migrant archives are brought together, as in exhibition contexts, the question shifts from what a single image holds to what becomes visible across many.

Researcher Besim Can Zırh explores this dimension in depth in his study on the meaning of photography in migration, written for the sixtieth anniversary of labor migration between Türkiye and Germany:

Photographs depicting small migrant homes, modest celebrations and dinner tables where acquaintances come together, objects placed on these tables, portraits hanging on the wall, the way people dressed, a newly bought car or cassette player posing in the centre just like a family member... And perhaps most notably, the encounter of exhibition visitors – with a migration background – with dozens of poses they thought were only present in their own family albums. All these elements have prompted them to contemplate themselves as a part of a wider emotional landscape of immigration.¹⁷¹

Zırh's description shows how such domestic photographs produce recognition through repetition: the same poses, interiors, and objects recur across different family archives. What appears private therefore also becomes collective, since viewers recognize their own histories in images that seem to belong to others. In this way, the migrant photograph does not simply document everyday life but helps stabilize it as a shared visual memory through repetition and recognition.

This recognition is produced by the accumulation of images over time. As domestic photographs gather into albums and informal archives, they begin to form a visual field in which everyday life is arranged.

When photographs are viewed together, rather than individually, certain similarities become visible. Across different images and situations, comparable ways of appearing recur, pointing to shared ideas about how one should be seen from afar. These patterns do not suggest sameness of experience, but they indicate a common understanding of what photography is meant to do under conditions of separation. Meaning develops gradually, through repetition and comparison, as images are kept, arranged, and returned to.

¹⁷¹ Besim Can Zırh, "Bridging In-between-ness as a Situation Space through Photography in the Sixtieth Anniversary of Migration", *Red Thread*, 09.09.2023, URL: <https://red-thread.org/en/bridging-in-between-ness-as-a-situation-space-through-photography-in-the-sixtieth-anniversary-of-migration/>, 03.11.2025.

This gradual production of meaning depends on how the individual photographs accumulate. When images are stored together, they begin to form relations that exceed the single moment of exposure. Photographs then function as fragments that gain weight through adjacency, through what they echo. What becomes visible is the emergence of a visual continuity that is built through selection and return.

This is where narrativity enters the archive of everyday. These photographs produce a story through the ordering of images, through what is kept and disappeared. Everyday photographs become part of a structure of recognition that organizes migration experience into a legible sequence, allowing dispersed moments to appear as if they belong to the same unfolding life.

Private photographs therefore participate in a shared emotional vocabulary shaped by separation, adaptation and the effort to create stability which can be understood as a story by itself:

Images tell stories, even if the maker is mindful of the pitfalls and doing their best to represent the subjects' reality. The framing of an image creates fiction. The moment when the image is taken creates fiction. The final selection of images as well as their sequencing create fiction.¹⁷²

The photograph contributes to the construction of a coherent account of life abroad, shaped as much by what is chosen and repeated as by what is excluded. If we apply Coffineau's concept of "fiction" to migration experience, the act of taking a photograph becomes a form of narrative agency: a way of producing coherence under conditions that are structurally fragmented. Yet, the "lifeless image" does not merely preserve a moment, but participates in the making of a story that can circulate, endure, and be recognized.

Taken together, the photographs discussed in this chapter show migrant photography as a practice through which presence is worked out under conditions of distance. Across studio portraits, domestic scenes, and everyday images, photography helps hold relationships in place without recreating co-presence. What endures is not shared time, but a sense of relational visibility—the reassurance that life continues elsewhere and remains connected to familiar social bonds.

¹⁷² Léa Coffineau, "Images of Migration: The Ethics and Perils of Visual Representation", in: Jennifer Leetsch/Frederike Middelhoff/Miriam Wallraven (eds.), *Configurations of Migration*, Berlin: De Gruyter 2023, 55–66, here: 60.

Photography offers a way of living with *gurbet*. As images move between places, they affirm continued existence and commitment, accommodating separation as something ongoing rather than exceptional. In this way, photography becomes part of the quiet, everyday labor through which connection is maintained across distance.

The idea of the *lifeless image* helps clarify this dynamic. It does not point to emotional emptiness or technical limitation, but to the moment when life becomes visible in photographic form after it has already moved on. Vitality is deferred rather than lost. The image gestures toward a life that continues elsewhere — out of reach, yet present through its trace. Seen in this light, migrant photographs orient everyday life toward continuity rather than immediacy.

This chapter has traced photography not as documentation of migration but as a practice through which migration is lived. The photographs analyzed here perform multiple, overlapping functions: they substitute for absent bodies (field portrait), they stage respectability across distance (studio portrait), they register ordinariness as something that can be shown (bicycle photograph), they gather family into visual coherence (exterior), and they register the constraints of togetherness (kitchen table). Across these functions, photography emerges as a technology of presence-making under conditions where presence cannot be assumed.

Understanding photography this way requires attending to both what images show and what they do as objects. The *lifeless image* is a condition of photographic practice itself: the photograph materializes presence precisely by extracting life from temporal flow. This is true of all photography, but it becomes explicit under migration, where the gap between here and there, now and then, requires photographs to work harder as mediating objects.

For migration studies, this analysis suggests that *gurbet* is a set of practices through which separation is organized and managed. Photography is one such practice, arguably the most widespread and durable. By examining how migrants use photographs, we see how they negotiate belonging without resolution, maintain relationships without co-presence, and produce continuity under fragmentation.

More broadly, migrant photography challenges representational theory to account for the material and circulatory dimensions of images. It is not enough to analyze what photographs show. We must also ask: how do they move? who handles them? how

do they accumulate meaning over time? what relationships do they sustain or interrupt? These questions reorient visual analysis toward practice, positioning photographs as active participants in social worlds rather than passive records of them.

4. Conclusion

This thesis began with a photograph: a mother and her two children, carefully composed in a studio setting, their bodies drawn together into a single visual unit. On the back, an inscription addressed the absent viewer directly: "We are not sending this so you remember when you look, but so you can look whenever you remember." The words named what the image enacted: the production of a presence designed to endure separation.

That photograph condensed the questions that have organized this study. How do photographs function within the experience of Turkish labor migration to Germany? What do they produce, sustain, and make legible across distance? And what kind of presence does the image establish when the person it depicts cannot be there?

These questions cannot be separated from the conditions that generated them. The guest-worker program of the 1960s organized Turkish migration around a distinction between economic contribution and social membership. Workers were needed but not expected to stay. When the temporal restriction was lifted and families followed, permanence took shape within a structure that had not been designed to accommodate it. The concept of *gurbet*, a condition of suspended belonging, in which life is lived in one place while emotional and social reference remains tied to another, names the lived texture of this structural ambiguity. Within *gurbet*, relationships must be maintained across distance, and the question of how one remains recognizable to those who are absent becomes a practical concern. It is within this gap between presence and recognition that photography takes on its specific weight.

This thesis examined how photographs operate within this gap — not as transparent documents of migrant life, but as mediated objects through which identity, memory, and belonging are organized under conditions of separation. The analysis attended to how photographs are produced, shared, kept, and viewed within family and community contexts, and to how these practices shape what images come to stand for across time. Family photography was central because it concentrates questions of self-

presentation, continuity, and obligation within a shared visual form that must work for viewers who cannot witness everyday life directly.

The history of postwar labor migration to Germany is traced through photographic practices that make the experience of displacement durable. While the recruitment of Turkish workers in the 1960s was officially framed as a temporary economic measure, the act of producing and sending photographs allowed migrants to assert a persistent presence that contradicted their designation as “guests”. These images do more than depict domestic life: they function as active tools for maintaining social legibility when physical proximity is severed by distance. By converting lived moments into portable objects, the photograph establishes a form of mediated co-presence that accommodates the structural condition of *gurbet*.

Within diasporic consciousness, what persists is not a stable homeland but a relationship to one — a continuity of reference that sustains belonging across distance. Within migration, sending one’s photograph becomes a way of maintaining connection, of asserting presence despite distance: “The practice of image-making is by necessity caught up in its own ethics and politics”.¹⁷³ Here, the ‘ethics’ are located in the obligation to appear reassuring to those at home, while the ‘politics’ lie in how migrants make themselves visible on their own terms within a history that preferred them unseen. The photograph becomes a visual confirmation of navigable life, marking ongoing participation in familial and social networks even as those relationships unfold across borders.

This thesis has shown that such photographic acts are not incidental, but structurally tied to the migration experience itself. They emerge from the condition of separation and from the need to remain socially legible across distance. The photograph becomes a medium through which the migrant subject can be present without being physically available.

Within the specific history of Turkish labor migration to Germany, the photograph also functions as a form of testimony. Through exhibition and dissemination, these images foster contemporary acknowledgment of guest workers within Türkiye’s national identity and collective imagination — not as transparent records but as idealized

¹⁷³ Ibid., 58.

representations of past daily life.¹⁷⁴ The photograph makes visible that its subjects exist beyond the territorial boundaries of one homeland and are situated within the social and economic structures of another. In doing so, it situates the migrant within a broader transnational narrative shaped by labor mobility, displacement, and shifting forms of belonging. The photograph records not only a personal path but also the wider historical and structural conditions that organize the migrant life.

At this point, the photograph becomes part of how migration is remembered publicly, and part of how the guestworker experience becomes visible as history rather than as a temporary episode. This dual function, intimate and historical, explains why migrant photographs carry such density even when they depict ordinary scenes.

Reaching this understanding required approaching photographs through more than one analytical register. Representation analysis, following Hall, made it possible to examine how photographs produce meaning through visual conventions and cultural codes: how a studio portrait stages respectability, how clothing and posture become readable as signs of continuity. Gell's material culture theory shifted attention from what photographs show to what they do: how they circulate, accumulate wear, and enter social relations as objects through which agency is distributed. Flusser's account of the technical image situated the camera as an apparatus that shapes what can appear as plausible and shareable, while Barthes grounded the analysis in the photograph's testimonial force and its capacity to assert that something has been while remaining bound to the conditions of its circulation. None of these frameworks alone could account for the full range of what migrant photographs do. Together, they made it possible to hold representation, materiality, and practice within a single analysis.

Throughout this thesis, photographs have emerged as objects whose meaning builds through endurance, repetition, and use. Kept, handled, and returned to over time, they support continuity without relying on physical proximity. What they sustain is not the fullness of lived experience, but a recognizable form of life that can be trusted and revisited. Memory, here, is not sealed within the image itself but takes shape through repeated engagement with photographs as they remain in use.

¹⁷⁴ Cf. Gencel Bek/Prieto Blanco 2020, 713.

The close readings in Chapter 3 traced this logic across specific images. The field portrait and the studio portrait made the work of presence explicit through inscription — the phrase "lifeless image" naming the photograph's function as a portable substitute for the absent body. The bicycle photograph and the family exterior showed how the same work continues within ordinary documentation, where absence is no longer declared but embedded in the routine accumulation of shareable scenes. The kitchen-table image registered the constraints of togetherness itself, confirming that what photography sustains under *gurbet* is not the resolution of separation but its ongoing accommodation. Across these images, a pattern became legible: migrant photography does not document a life so much as it produces the conditions under which that life can remain visible to others.

Migrant photography does not only preserve the past. It participates in the organization of presence. The photograph holds a trace of what has been, but it also structures how the migrant is made to appear, how family continuity is imagined, and how belonging is maintained when shared time is interrupted. This is possible because history and memory, in this context, are not simply preserved but mutually constitutive: "the past intrudes into the present, [and] the photograph, at once a spectacle and a juxtaposition of different movements, can be oriented toward questions of the experience of migration".¹⁷⁵

The photograph cannot be treated as a neutral document. It always enters pre-existing frameworks of meaning. It is shaped by what needs to be communicated, by what needs to remain recognizable, and by what kinds of visibility are possible or desirable under the social pressures of migration. The meaning of a photograph is never isolated from the cultural frameworks in which it circulates. How people interpret absence, value presence, and sustain relationships across distance is shaped by the norms and expectations of the communities they come from. The photograph enters these frameworks and becomes part of how individuals negotiate separation and belonging. Photographs hold such weight in migratory contexts because they do not only represent a person but participate in the ongoing work of maintaining closeness when physical proximity is no longer possible.

¹⁷⁵ Bate 2021, 49.

The transition from an individual photograph to a collective archive relies on the material persistence of these images. By staging scenes and converting lived moments into tangible objects, the photographer builds a visual world that responds to the instability of life abroad. The family album becomes a deliberate effort to produce a sense of belonging within the precarity of migration, using the camera to organize kinship into a shareable form. When a photograph enters the sequence of an album, its meaning undergoes a structural change — it is no longer a solitary trace but part of a visual logic that determines how a life is perceived across distance. The album makes memory readable by placing fragments into relation, allowing separate moments to appear as parts of a single life.

This process also defines the boundaries of what counts as evidence, since it privileges what can be shown while leaving the unphotographable realities of migration outside its frame. Through this labor, the migrant is not merely a subject of history but an active author of their own visibility.

The archival logic extends beyond the initial act of sending, as these images are kept, handled, and returned to over time. This repetition builds a visual continuity where the migrant remains present through photographic traces, allowing family bonds to survive the physical rupture caused by migration. The concept of the "lifeless image" names this specific labor of turning a presence into a portable trace. While the photograph remains indexically tied to the person, it moves independently as an object that stays available for repeated use.

What this thesis proposes, then, is that the *lifeless image* designates a specific mode of photographic operation under migration. It does not replace Barthes's ontological account of the photograph's testimonial force, nor does it supersede Flusser's analysis of the technical image as a structuring condition of visibility. Rather, it reorients both toward the concrete relational practices through which migrant photographs circulate and accumulate meaning. Where Barthes grounds the photograph in its capacity to assert that something has been, the "lifeless image" foregrounds what happens to that assertion once it enters the social field of *gurbet* — how it is addressed, sent, kept, and returned to. Where Flusser describes the apparatus as shaping what can appear as plausible and shareable, the "lifeless image" situates that shaping within the specific demands of maintaining recognition across migratory distance. The concept is drawn from the language of the migrants themselves and remains tethered to the

material it describes, offered here as a productive reorientation rather than a freestanding theoretical category.

In this way, the *lifeless image* becomes a precise concept rather than a poetic one. It names the transformation of lived presence into a trace that can travel. The photograph remains bound to the person it depicts, yet it circulates independently of them. It preserves family life as an image-object that can be revisited, interpreted, and emotionally reactivated. What persists through this archive is not the return of the past, but the continuation of relational visibility. The migrant remains present through images and the family remains legible through the traces it chooses to keep.

Yet the *lifeless image* also marks a limit. What the photograph can sustain is relational visibility: the ongoing recognizability of a person, a family, a life. What it cannot repair is the structural condition that made such visibility necessary in the first place. The guest-worker program's logic of temporary presence, the withholding of full social membership, the lived suspension of *gurbet* — these are not resolved through photographic practice, even as they are navigated by it.

Photography offers migrants a way of remaining present within systems that were not designed to register their permanence, but it does so by converting life into a trace, and a trace is always less than the life it carries. To attend to migrant photographs, then, is to attend to both what they make possible and what they cannot undo, to recognize that the labor of visibility is itself a sign of the distance that remains.

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