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Saime UYAR

Hacettepe University, Institute of Fine Arts, PhD student
saime44uyar@gmail.com
ORCID: 0000-0001-8665-8038

READING REFUGEE PROBLEMS THROUGH PHOTOS

Abstract

This study aims to raise universal awareness by reading the refugee problem, which should be seen as a universal problem, through photographs. When we look at the origin of this problem that the world ignores, we face the fact that we all have responsibility for this. Only ownership and confrontation of this problem will lead us to the solution. In this study, the impact and importance of the art of photography in creating the awareness that the refugee problem is a common problem of society is mentioned. Art, which has been progressing in an objective way to witness history for centuries, has always existed as a mirror of society. The art, which is divided into branches, eventually reaches a common conclusion about conveying the same message. Art of photography is one of the most common and easy-to-read arts of today's digital world. It is hoped that looking at the issue of refugees through photographs, interpreting and identifying the crucial points of the problem and leaving this article to social memory will create a small drop for the solution of the issue. Art, which cannot be independent of the era it lives in, is one of the most powerful tools in creating awareness, empathy and social memory about migration and the refugee crisis as a consequence of the migration.

Keywords: Refugee, immigration, social memory, art, photography

MÜLTECİ SORUNLARINI FOTOĞRAFLAR ÜZERİNDEN OKUMAK

Öz

Bu çalışma, evrensel bir sorun olarak görülmesi gereken mülteciler sorununu fotoğraflar üzerinden okuyarak, evrensel boyutta bir farkındalık oluşturmayı amaçlamaktadır. Tüm dünyanın görmezden geldiği bu sorunun kökenine baktığımızda hepimizin sorumluluğu olduğu gerçeğiyle yüzleşiyoruz. Bu sorunu sahiplenmek, yüzleşmek ancak çözüm üretmenin kapısını aralayacaktır. Bu çalışmada mülteci sorununun toplumun ortak sorunu olduğu bilincinin yaratılmasında fotoğraf sanatının etkisi ve önemine değinilmiştir. Yüzyıllardır tarihe tanıklık etme konusunda objektif bir çizgide ilerleyen sanat, her dönem toplumun aynası olarak varlığını sürdürmüştür. Kendi içerisinde dallara ayrılan sanat, nihayetinde aynı mesajı iletme konusunda ortak sonuca varır. Fotoğraf sanatı da günümüz digital dünyasının en yaygın ve kolay okunan sanatlarından biridir. Mülteciler konusuna fotoğraflar üzerinden bakmak, yorumlamak ve sorunun can alıcı noktalarını tespit etmek toplumsal hafızaya bu makaleyi bırakmak konun çözümü için küçük bir damla oluşturması temenni edilmektedir. Yaşadığı çağdan bağımsız olamayan sanat, günümüz sorunlarından göç ve beraberinde gelen mülteci krizi konusunda farkındalık, empati ve toplum hafızası oluşturulmasında en güçlü araçlardan biridir.

Anahtar kelimeler: Mülteci, göç, toplumsal hafıza, sanat, fotoğraf

Introduction

Today, the comfort culture that causes us to think only ourselves in our world has made us deaf to the cries of others.

While rejecting the fact that it is a part of our lives in real life, we watch the news about the lives that wash ashore, accompanied by eating. If we base this situation on Tolstoy's thought, we see that our humanity is going through a process that needs to be questioned: "If you can feel pain, you're alive. If you can hear the pain of others, you are human". When we do not want to see the pain of others, we can say that we are moving away from the concept of being human. We are the slaves of our selfishness in the conformism of the popular culture and consumer society created by the capitalist system. We are in the illusion of a blind, deaf and mute life within the limits of selfish perception of human values. The refugee problem, which we ignore but one of the important problems of today, is the common problem of all humanity.

As the COVID-19 Virus shows, it is an inevitable fact that both positive and negative developments are no longer stayed only in certain geographies, and their effect is felt by everywhere, as the boundaries have lost importance with globalization.

One of the most striking examples of this is the recent war in Syria, and the immigration and subsequently refugee problem. Many countries learn directly by experience that the problem is not only within the boundaries of Syria, but it has spread all over the world, even though there is a stubborn insensitivity towards this situation worldwide.

Technological developments and social media reaching all over the world play an active role in making this process widespread globally.

Once upon a time, the task of art and artist was to make good art. It is possible to see that the boundaries separating art from life until the realism art movement are blurred. Socialism, which emerged especially in the 19.th century, changed the view of art to social problems, and since then, it has become impossible for the art, which has been intertwined with life, to focus only on beauty. Now, we see that art, which is in a position to reflect the truth with various concerns, undertakes much more vital tasks. On the one hand, art keeps up with the necessities of the age, on the other hand, it makes its presence felt most effective today.

The media, which enriches its domain with visual and audio presentations, is very effective in terms of the viewpoint of the current problem. Photography is an important art discipline in this respect. It tells us a lot over the image. The effect of an auditory item alone is never enough. Besides, the effect and permanence created by the visible object in memory have always been greater. At this point, photography is immensely important. The photograph states the one that cannot be expressed verbally in the context of a universal language with a very rich presentation in one frame.

The effect of the photo in the viewer is not a situation that only lasts a few seconds. As Susan Sontag stated, photography is one of the uninterrupted images such as television, video and movies that surround our lives. However, when it comes to “remembering”, she stated that photography has the power to hurt more deeply and to leave a deeper trace in the human mind (Sontag, 2003).

It has been known for centuries that the art of photography is always intertwined with reality. Sometimes it reflects happiness and hope, and sometimes pain and sorrow as if it is real. It has a pure and unmixed relationship with the audience as much as possible. However, while this natural process is taking place, not every reality can be reflected. When evaluated from a psychological, sociological or political point of view, sometimes some problems can be experienced in reflecting pure reality as it is. Also, as in all art branches, we can say that the art of photography has aesthetic concerns.

For example, the image of the Syrian child Aylan Kurdi shot on September 2, 2015, has been shared over social media 20 billion times. The next day he was on the front pages worldwide. The refugee crisis, which has been expressed in numbers until then, suddenly emerged as a matter that people could face when a small child hit the shore. Politicians mentioned this picture in national parliaments. Defenders and opponents of a bolder asylum policy have adopted it as a symbol (Pekel and van de Reijt).

However, newspapers did not publish photographs of seven young children who drowned on the Libyan coast just a few days before the death of this child (Pekel and van de Reijt).

Why is it not published?

Facebook even censored a photo album created by Syrian artist Khaled Barakeh. Why was the response to the photo of Aylan baby three days later so different (Pekel and van de Reijt)?

Could the answer be related to the aesthetic anxiety of the photo? Because the photos of Libyan children were terrible. The bodies of the drowned young children were bombed and became unrecognizable (Pekel and van de Reijt).

Although photography, which is an art that directly reflects reality, pursues pure reality, it has its limits. Moral or aesthetic, it is not only a thought-based phenomenon, exempt from any

anxiety. As Avner Ziss put it: “Art always judges life events under an aesthetic form and this judgment represents an indispensable aspect of the content in the work; in the final analysis, the content emerges as the organic unity of the idea, theme, and evaluation, as they are firmly influencing each other (Ziss, 2009).”

However, some circles evaluate the photography of the Aylan baby to have such an impact with a different dimension. Hugh Pinney, news distributor of International TIME and vice president of the Getty Images, explained that: “The reason we're talking about this photograph is not because it's been taken or not because it's been circulated, but it's because it's been published by mainstream media. The reason we're talking about it after it's been published is because it breaks a social taboo that has been in place in the press for decades. A picture of a dead child is one of the golden rules of what you never published.” Besides, to make the situation a little more usual; he stated that the public had the opportunity to be informed about the developments through social media and it would be inevitable to publish it on social media if they did not publish it. Therefore, he stated that this situation gave them the courage and conviction to publish this photograph. Here, it is possible to say that there is an imperative in the transparency of the media (Laurent, 2015).

The photo shows what is happening. If we evaluate from the general framework, this is not only a political indicator of the age we are in, but also a visual reflection of the age. Here, we can also say that the media has removed the social class line that is not in line with its purpose. We can also say this explanation made by David Hopkins for the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center in New York, which was destroyed in flames on September 11, 2001, when the two planes used by terrorists representing the radical Islamist group al-Qaeda hit: “Millions of people watched the event on television screens. The presentation of an event or an image in different geographies at the same time is an indicator that the art of photography creates a class-equality.” for the effect of the Syrian child, too (Hopkins, 2000).

A Syrian migrant child has died due to poverty and helplessness of a family who has been a refugee because of forced migration. Refugees, which the whole world knows and does not help them and left to their destiny, are included in lower-class life. Social media can reach every house, every individual without class separation and shows that the Aylan baby lives. The network formed by the communication age on the axis of the world also shapes a network of free subcultures of the contemporary art world that a loose network of overlapping subcultures held together by a belief in art (Thornton, 2008).

The contemporary media culture that spreads all over the world tries to find a way to improve its only claim political, astronomical, artistic, parliamentary, agricultural and literary illness through manifestos that address the world at the same time. It can be soft and pure, but it's right, it is always strong, vigorous and logical (Artun, 2015).

Image 1. Alan Kurdi. Source: <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/09/04/world/europe/syria-boy-drowning.html>

“Not to look at these photographs and feel pain, not to be startled by these photographs, not to strive to eliminate what caused this destruction, this destruction; these are the reactions of a beast, who, according to Woolf, did not have a fair share of morality and conscience” (Sontag, 2004).

In her book *Regarding the Pain of Others*, Susan Sontag said that; "It's very often that images offering evidence that contradicts cherished pieties are invariably dismissed as having been staged for the camera. To photographic corroboration of the atrocities committed by one's side, the standard response is that the pictures are a fabrication, that no such atrocity ever took place, those were bodies the other side had brought in trucks from the city. morgue and placed about the street, or that, yes, it happened and it was the other side who did it, to themselves." Who is the other side in the death of Aylan baby? Who is the enemy? What is the denied reality? It is necessary to face these questions (Sontag, 2004).

This tragic event attracted attention on social media for a few days and then was forgotten. It is possible to talk about a world public that is indifferent to the refugees' exiled lives, those who are lost behind and desperately forced to walk into the future. Refugee lives are hard to express. Behind the lives expressed in numbers are hopes, dreams, families. Words are not enough to explain the dimensions of the tragedy experienced. Sometimes a photo frame reveals how awful the drama behind the untold. It describes what is not told, makes you feel what it cannot be felt.

The realism of photography in reflecting history is perhaps the most objective of all art branches. Photography is very successful in helping history in witnessing time and presenting events in time with a complete chronology.

Image 2. Source: <https://news.un.org/en/focus/refugees-and-migrants>

Despite the pressures of political authorities or the issues ignored by the world, artists and theorists have to say their ideologies and judgments within the scope of their theme. These artists and theoreticians want to be politically and culturally engaged in social reality; they want to reflect on their own cultural identity, express their separate desires, and so on (Groys, 2013).

Image 3. Source: <https://ipa.news/tr/2018/06/20/dunya-multeciler-gunu/>

Regardless of the period, the destruction caused by the wars continued for years. The memories filled with tragedy, ruined dreams and futures without hope are the most painful facts left from wars.

In the photo above (Image: 3), we see the heaviest form of resistance. The screams of life that resist death affect as if it breaks the bonds of the photograph. This photo frame, which enables the audience to awake many emotions at the same time, is a tragic case that needs to be questioned in many aspects.

We now know what happens every day throughout the whole world... the descriptions given by daily journalists put, as it were, those in agony on fields of battle under the eyes of [newspaper] readers and their cries resonate in their ears " (Sontag, 2004). We do not read the news about refugees only as text, we see their photos, we watch their videos.

The civil war that took place in Syria on March 15, 2011, has not ended yet. It has been begun to qualify as the trigger for the biggest humanitarian crisis after World War II (Bulut et al. 2016).

The war, which has been going on for about 11 years, has cost the lives of millions of people. Those who are left behind struggle in a thin line between life and death. Without knowing where they are going and what kind of end they end up, many refugee lives that have been exhausted in the ice-cold waters in the name of the journey, have ended.

Refugee lives, where life does not offer many options to them often end with a few sentences in the news lines. Or we hear the news that these lives, fluttering between despair and hope, are marginalized wherever they go, maintaining a life free from human values. They carry the continuation of the chaos created by the war in their identities.

The miserable situations they experience during and after the war create deeper both physical and mental wrecks in refugee lives.

In developed countries hosting refugees, some clinical studies have been conducted for refugees and individuals affected by war and human rights abuses. It has been reported that risk and resistance factors have a stronger relationship with psychological morbidity and traumatic events in the post-migration environment. (Gorst-Unsworth and Goldenberg, 1998; Leban et al., 2004; Lie, 2002). The data obtained in the study showed that the traumatic events that refugees and asylum-seekers experience after migration, leave serious damage to mental health (Carswell et al., 2011).

Again, according to the analyzes of the Academic Mental Health Center, the University of South Wales School of Psychiatry and the Research and Teaching Unit of Psychiatry, which deals with the contemporary refugee crisis clinically; In addition to past traumas experienced by refugees, it has been stated that feelings of insecurity, fear, anxiety are constantly intense. It has been observed that the deaths, losses and separations experienced constantly create grief and cause the addition of new ones to existing traumas. Especially for communities with strong collectivist values, the disintegration of relations, ties, and losses have caused extremely strong traumatic mental states. Racism and xenophobia are other factors in strengthening such cases in the countries they shelter (Silove et al., 2017).

Image 4. Source: <https://gazetekarinca.com/2019/01/yine-akdeniz-yine-olum-bot-batti-117-multeci-yasamini-yitirdi/>

For the sake of a more livable future, thousands of refugees who tried to cross Europe in illegal ways have drowned in the waters of the Mediterranean and this tragedy continues. The photo above (Image: 4) is just one of the countless frames that set out from Libya to go to Italy, showing that 117 out of 120 people on the boat sunk in the Mediterranean have died. In this image stuck on the surface of the blue representing freedom, we see that freedom was plundered. We see that the flutters that try to hold on to life suffer in the blue waters. According to what the survivors told the officials of the International Organization for Migration (IOM), there were also 10 women and 2 babies on the boat. According to IOM data, 2,297 refugees died in the Mediterranean or disappeared in 2018 alone (January 20, 2019) (<https://gazetekarinca.com/2019/01/yine-akdeniz-yine-olum-bot-batti-117-multeci-yasamini-yitirdi/>).

Especially, most of the refugees that the West calls "boat people" reach the end of their lives before reaching the end of this challenging journey they make with vivid promises. As the socialist writer Peter Gale has stated, the policy of these border-protectionist countries against these stateless people, who they call "the other", causes much worse consequences (Gale, 2004).

Refugee lives have been subjected to various traumas throughout history. It is possible to come across the concept of "unfortunate people" in many volumes of the 1921 League of Nations Official Journal for their tragedy-filled lives that fill the concepts of statelessness and lack of belonging in every period: It was impossible for the French Government to ignore the distress of these unfortunate people..." (League of Nations, 1921e: 1010) "Great as is its sympathy for the suffering of these unfortunate people..." (League of Nations 1921a: 226, Saunders, 2018).

It is not acceptable for the world to remain insensitive to all these traumatic situations. Moreover, the fact that countries have not fulfilled their requirements despite a contract document still in force is an indication that they have actually violated these provisions. Because: "According to Article 2 of the Declaration of Human Rights, everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration, without distinction of any kind, such as race, color, sex, religion, social origin or another status" (Ozgoker and Dogan, 2019).

Especially, preventing refugees from crossing the border on the Greek islands trying to cross Europe and punishing them is a clear indication that the 1951 Geneva Convention is opposed. In the convention: "According to the convention about the legal status of refugees, the refugee who enters the country without permission is not punished, asked to correct the situation or waited until another country accepts him, he is not sent back to his country of origin." Besides, according to Article 31 of the 1951 Geneva Convention, it is envisaged that no penalty will be imposed on the refugees who enter the countries without permission or who are in their country because of their illegal entry or presence (Ozgoker and Dogan, 2019).

It was tried to be strengthened the 1933 Convention Relating to the International Status of Refugees against the concerns about refugees with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Saunders, 2018).

We can easily see how people are prone to behaving immorally, inhumanly and terribly, personally or collectively, when their interests are compromised.

What European governments, whose concerns about racial and ethnic homogeneity are increasing day by day, are under the title of "immigration problem" offer to solve is actually the need to control their borders more tightly.

Especially against the double standard diplomacy of the developed Western states, the policy that Turkey follows is one of the facts that will go down in history.

Turkey is a country located in the center of international mobility of the migration. Turkey, which was previously the source country of immigration, now stands out with its position of destination and transit country. Turkey, which was a sending country to Europe especially with the migration of workers until the 1970s, has become the country with the largest refugee population in the world as of 2018 (Aygul and Eke, 2019).

Gil Loescher, an international Renaissance professor at Notre Dame University, stated that it would be a mistake to be in only humanitarian and philanthropic expectations in the face of these racist attacks on refugees. He emphasized that existing institutions such as UNHCR should introduce new regulations and these institutions should be strengthened (Loescher, 1993).

Wolfgang Bauer, a writer and journalist born in Hamburg, criticizes Europe's approach with a very harsh and realistic style in addressing the refugee crisis problem: "It is impossible to fit the barbarity and disaster in Syria into statistics, the United Nations stopped counting deaths in early 2014. Trying to escape from danger also became increasingly dangerous. 3419 people were drowned while they fled to reach Italy or Greece in 2014. This number is probably much higher. There are also those whose bodies cannot be found. As the European borders make it impassable, the fugitives have to choose more dangerous roads without stopping" (Bauer, 2016).

There are public anxieties and fears for refugees. Zygmunt Bauman addresses the refugee problem, which is this important problem of our age, with a critical perspective: "No country can isolate itself from this universal problem. As Robert Winder points out, "Let's put our chairs on the beach as much as we want and shout at the upcoming waves, neither the tide will listen, nor the sea will retreat" (Bauman, 2016).

Also, press members and photographers who photograph and make news these tragic events have a great responsibility. The emotional impact they experience in the face of the severe tragedy they face while trying to fulfill their duties is also inevitable. The Reuters Institute has

carried out a series of studies explaining the effects of the psychological traumas experienced by journalists reporting on the refugee crisis with a study (Nguyen, 2017).

30 years of Reuters photographer Yannis Behrakis expressed his experiences as follows: “A lot of times you are not sure what to do: leave the camera and actively help people come out of the sea or do practical things for them, drive them up the road, or give them clothes, or take their pictures” (Nguyen, 2017).

Another point that the interviewees unite is the difficulties they encounter in returning to normal life. Freelance journalist Will Wassilopoulos, who works for AFP, states and express his feelings that he had a hard time with this issue: “If I were to say what is more difficult in this crisis, getting over the images of the dead people, or going on a mission that is long – 10 days long – and then going home, opening the door and automatically being a father and husband, I think that is the most challenging thing” (Nguyen, 2017).

Refugee lives are exposed to diseases such as natural disasters and epidemics that develop worldwide as well as their current difficulties. Many refugees living in Elazığ and Malatya provinces were left homeless in the earthquake of 6.8 in Elazığ, Turkey on 24 January 2020.

Also, in the last days of 2019 refugees living in various parts of the world are affected by the COVID-19 virus epidemic, which emerged in the city of Wuhan, Hubei Province in China, and then spread to the whole world.

The emergence of this epidemic, when thousands of refugees, which is in a very harsh waiting period at the borders of Greece, trying to cross over Europe through Turkey in early 2020, made more and more difficult the lives of the refugees.

The fact that refugees lack basic needs such as shelter, nutrition, and cleaning against this epidemic disease, which requires hygiene rules, has increased the extent of the danger.

Image 5. Source: <http://siyasihaber4.org/multeciler-icin-acil-koronavirus-tedbirleri-alinsin>

According to UNHCR data, it was stated that approximately one person was forcibly displaced every two seconds as a result of conflict or persecution. 70,8 million people in the world had to leave their places. Half of these refugees, which makes approximately 25,9 million, are under the age of 18 (<https://www.unhcr.org/figures-at-a-glance.html>).

Although there are 65 million displaced people in the world, and 22,5 million of these are refugees. 55% of these refugees include 5.5 million from Syria, 2.5 million from Afghanistan and 1.5 million from South Sudan, 24 people are forced to leave their homes every minute in the world, which corresponds to 34,000 people every day (Aygul and Eke, 2019).

Turkey is the country that hosts the most refugees in the world. In the top 10, only Germany takes place from Europe. After the civil war in Syria, the number of asylum seekers in Turkey has steadily increased. As of February 20, 2020, there are 3 million 587 thousand Syrians in Turkey under temporary protection, according to official data released by the Migration Management (<https://tr.euronews.com/2020/02/28/dunyada-en-fazla-multeciye-ev-sahipligi-yapan-ulke-turkiye-ilk-10-da-avrupa-sadece-almanya>).

Therefore, the quality of life of these people we live in together directly affects our lives. As long as we touch their war-scarred, fearful, hopeless and unhappy life, it will actually be a positive investment in our own life and future, too.

I realized an artistic project in the camp where Syrian refugees live in the city of Malatya, Turkey. This artistic project called "We Color Gray Lives" aims to create an opportunity to express this differently, primarily because individuals of refugees have difficulty in expressing their experiences.

Image 6. Saime Uyar, "We Color Gray Lives Project", 2019, Malatya Syrian Refugee Camp, Turkey

It is an activity that I have carried out (especially for children) to raise awareness of refugee problems at the social level and to improve the refugee lives in the camp area.

By taking part in such public projects in which refugee individuals participate and bringing refugee individuals from different cultures closer together, they also shared their experiences, pains, joys, dreams and hopes with each other and provided a strong view of life together. Such artistic efforts are important for refugees to protect the spirit, regain human dignity and ensure their self-esteem is preserved. Thanks to the possibility of a holistic and collective creation, new and original works have emerged. Although tragic feelings are at the center of these works that liberate the imagination, it is possible to see the reflections of all feelings about hope.

Addressing the emotional aspects of individuals and groups, art adopts the idea that we are all part of a common humanity, with a radical cosmopolitan understanding. Living together also contributes to integration (Living Together: Developing Cultural Multiplication by Art, July 2018).

Image 7. Saime Uyar, “We Color Gray Lives Project”, 2019, Malatya Syrian Refugee Camp, Turkey

Children always pay the heaviest price of a war that they cannot even understand why. Most do not complain about this chaos. Because they started to learn the world like this. They cannot imagine those happy children who live a normal life, which go to school or play in the park, in different parts of the world. Those naive and innocent looks on their faces do not withhold themselves from even a tiny beauty.

Image 8. Saime Uyar, “We Color Gray Lives Project”, 2019, Malatya Syrian Refugee Camp, Turkey

Image 9. Saime Uyar, “We Color Gray Lives Project”, 2019, Malatya Syrian Refugee Camp, Turkey

The concept of equality and freedom brought by the digital age to the art brought along the disposing of the limitations of the four walls in museums and galleries. Especially in the art of photography, it is a very important event in the context of contemporary art to reach the audience directly without requiring any curatorial control and to spread it to a wide range of environments without being dependent on any exhibitions.

Conforming to the principle of universality of art, contemporary art sets a universal route with developing technology. Although it has been suggested that digitalization's entry into the art world may cause a postmodern skepticism, it is possible to say that the pluses it brings to art are a must for the globalizing world.

“In fact, there are many uses of the innumerable opportunities a modern life supplies for regarding (at a distance, through the medium of photography) other people's pain. Photographs of an atrocity may give rise to opposing responses. A call for peace. A cry for revenge” (Sontag, 2003).

Result

The art of photography, which often plays a role in recording and sharing beautiful moments of life, sometimes makes history with real images that cannot be erased from memories. Although the years passed, the image of Aylan Kurdi's body hitting the shore will never be erased from memories. It will always be remembered in the conscience of society as a symbol of the painful lives of all refugees. No word or no explanation could be as effective as this photo frame. When we think in this context, art is a concept far beyond the emotions that make people human.

It is difficult to cease mass migration unless political interests are eliminated. These migrations will always be one of the factors that cause an imbalance between both developed and

developing countries of the globalizing planet. Unless the world states show the necessary sensitivity to the refugee problem, these problems will inevitably increase more and more.

Although we have different mountains, seas and borders, we share the same sky and the same sun, everyone has the right to life.

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