

SCENE OF CRIME: AN AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC BACKTRACK TO ANCESTRAL HOMELANDS THROUGH PHOTOGRAPHS

Cinayet Mahali: Fotoğraflarla Ata Yurduna Otoetnografik Bir Geri Dönüş

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the backtrack searching through the use of photography's visual and experiencing an autoethnographic journey's narrative possibility to reconstruct an episodic memory which does not exist for a third-generation member of a family who emigrated from Bulgaria to Turkey in 1926. During his journey to Alfatlı/Bulgaria where his ancestors came from, first author's had no information on his family's oral, visual, or written history except a vague story. Based on the relationship between history and photography in Walter Benjamin's works such as "On the Concept of History" and "Little History of Photography", this work emphasizes that return is a photographically important and visual tool that should be used. The narrative part of the study consists of using autoethnography, a postmodern method, to analyze the autobiography of the third generation with an ethnographic perspective. The photos attached to the narrative section are associated with the concept that Benjamin calls "scene of crime" and the narrative-visual relationship is structured. The study therefore discusses the possibility that the third generation immigrant will return to the scene of crime and use photography and autoethnographic backtrack methodologically to find a meaningful and possible way of establishing a link between lost memory and identity.

Keywords: Autoethnography, photography, migration, Balkans, homecoming, backtrack, postcolonialism.

ÖZET

Bu makale, 1926'da Bulgaristan'dan Türkiye'ye göç eden bir ailenin üçüncü kuşak bir üyesi için var olmayan episodik bir hafızayı yeniden inşa etmek için fotoğrafın ve otoetnografinin görsel ve yazınsal anlatım olanaklarını kullanarak bir geri dönüş incelemesini içermektedir. Atalarının geldiği Alfatlı/Bulgaristan göçü sırasında ilk yazarın ailesinin sözlü, görsel veya yazılı geçmişle ilgili belirsiz bir hikaye dışında herhangi bir bilgi bulunmamaktadır. Çalışma, Walter Benjamin'in 'Tarih Kavramı Üzerine' ve 'Fotoğrafın Küçük Tarihi' gibi yapıtlarındaki tarih ve fotoğraf ile ilişkisinden hareket ederek geri dönüşün fotografik olarak önemli ve kullanılması gereken görsel bir araç olduğu üzerinde duruyor. Çalışmanın anlatı bölümü ise postmodern bir yöntem olan otoetnografinin kullanılarak üçüncü kuşağın etnografik bir bakışla otobiyografisini çözümlemeye çalışmasından oluşuyor. Anlatı bölümüne eklenen fotoğraflar ise Benjamin'in 'suç mahali' olarak adlandırdığı kavramla ilişkilendirilerek anlatı-görsel ilişkisi yapılandırılıyor. Çalışma, buradan hareketle üçüncü kuşak göçmenin tekrar suç mahaline dönerek, kayıp hafıza ile kimlik arasında bir bağlantı kurmanın anlamlı ve olası bir yolunu bulması için fotoğraf ve otoetnografik geri dönüşü metodolojik olarak kullanmasının olasılığını tartışıyor.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Otoetnografi, fotoğraf, göç, Balkanlar, eve dönüş, geri dönüş, postkolonyalizm.

1.INTRODUCTION

My grandfather is named Veli from Alfatlı, which is a nickname in the village where he lives in Turkey. When I was a child, I did not know the meaning of Alfatlı and it was something of a mystery to me. Later, I learned that Alfatlı is the village in Turkey to which my grandfather migrated from Bulgaria/Alfatlı when he was two years old. During my conversations with my uncles, I tried to learn why and how my grandfather migrated from Alfatlı. According to the conventional history of Balkan migration to Turkey, there were many reasons for the migration to present-day Turkey during the Ottoman period from the 19th century on: the Balkan wars, World War I, ethnic and religious pressures, and the defeat and dissolution of the Ottoman Empire. But in my case, I had no information on why my ancestors migrated to Turkey, except just a vague story. As my oldest uncle told me: "They walked all the way to Turkey when your grandfather was two years old. When they arrived at the Maritsa River, your grandfather's father chartered a boat to cross the river. But the boatman said to him, 'Just leave the kid' but he said 'No! I am just putting

up with the pain for my kid.” There were no photographs, no written documents, and no oral history on Alfatlı, Bulgaria or on the migration. Losing the homeland, one could not go back home, so these were the reasons to try to keep alive the memories of the homeland and hand them down to the next generations. The story of the migration includes some basic and natural instincts of migration and exile to keep from losing one’s cultural and political identity. But what if there is nothing about your ancestral homeland except where it is? Is it just a geographical location that exists beyond a border? Does it still have a meaning for me? So, why is Alfatlı important to me? I just knew that my grandfather came from Bulgaria and that I am a *muhacir*¹, but I didn’t know the exact place where he came from until I learned about Alfatlı. Thus, I thought that my grandfather’s village was in Turkey, which is my ancestral homeland, but now Alfatlı has for me the “possibility of home” again, my ancestral homeland. Is it still possible that there is a home for me in the Balkans?

During my personal journey to Alfatlı, I didn’t know what to expect. Most of the imagination about an ancestral homeland is that it is more than a physical place; it is rather a kind of mysterious and distant imaginary land. What is Alfatlı like? Does it still exist? I think it must be an empty and abandoned village. I started a journey to get an answer to all the questions in my head and to reconstruct my fragmented memory, my identity and the possibility of homeland.

Also, we use photography to point to Eugene Atget’s Paris photographs as a ‘crime scene’ between memory, history and the role of photography mentioned by Benjamin:

“Atget, who, around 1900, took photographs of deserted Paris streets. It has quite justly been said of him that he photographed them like scenes of crime. The scene of a crime, too, is deserted; it is photographed for the purpose of establishing evidence. With Atget, photographs become standard evidence for historical occurrences, and acquire a hidden political significance. They demand a specific kind of approach; free-floating contemplation is not appropriate to them. They stir the viewer; he feels challenged by them in a new way”. (Benjamin 1939: 258)

The history and culture under wreckage can only be saved by the ‘images, ‘fragments’ and ‘moments’ that the historical subject would collect from the scene of crime. The history and culture under wreckage can only be saved by the ‘images, ‘fragments’ and ‘moments’ that the historical subject would collect from the scene of crime. For Benjamin, the photographer that traces the scene of crime is Atget. In the *Little History of Photography*, he mentions this link as follows: “It is no accident that Atget’s photographs have been likened to those of a crime scene. But isn’t every square inch of our cities a crime scene? Every passer-by a culprit? Isn’t it the task of the photographer [...] to reveal guilt and to point out the guilty in his pictures”. (Benjamin 1931: 527)

In our case, Atget’s approach to the hidden reality of Paris through the photography shares a similarity with the expression of Alfatlı where the origin begins spatially and temporally. It hides the raw material. In this sense, photography offered us not just a documentation of physical reality, but also the ability to find the meaning of Alfatlı. In this way, we could look for the reality of the autoethnographic and cultural phenomena of Alfatlı through the photography. Besides, the autoethnographic narrative of Alfatlı requires a straight experience in the field where this spatial and temporal field belongs to where ethnography and photography meet and share the same ambitions, that is, to discover the nonvisible through the visible. The immigrant, as a historical subject, wants to capture ‘*the image of the past that suddenly flashes in the face of danger*’ (Benjamin 1940: 390-391). In this context, photography creates a third time and an image of space enabling the historical subject to dialectically link today and the past. The return journey, along with the potential of transformation and experience, traces the memory and the lost gaze that have remained unnoticed and disconnected from the past.

¹ Muhacir or muhajir is an Arabic word meaning emigrant, commonly used to describe the people who emigrated from Bulgaria to Turkey in Turkey.

2.CRIME SCENE AUTOETHNOGRAPHY

"Nothing ended. Nothing ever ends. I returned to where I let a story slip into the past. Losing its clarity under the dust of time, and then, unexpectedly, at some moment, it returns like a dream" Nothing ever ends.²

I arrive at the Turkey-Bulgaria border, called Kapikule in Turkish and Kapitan Andreevo in Bulgarian. I see that lots of people are waiting in the passport line. I am getting nervous because of the tension between the officer and you a frozen moment.



Image 1: *Officer! I used to live in Bulgaria, Alfathi, did you know?*

Being at the border is like being in the middle of a sandglass. You have only one way to pass and “if I take one step I am somewhere else...or [...]”³. One more step and I’m in Bulgaria now. I passed Svilengrad. The Maritsa River makes me think of my identity. Maritsa occurred to me on the day of Epiphany in the Balkans. The priest throws a cross in the river and young men race to retrieve it. It is believed that whoever saves the cross will be healthy this year. Once upon a time, my ancestors used this road to reach Turkey, probably another walkway.



Image 2: *I could see them while they were crossing the Maritsa River.*

² A quotation from the movie ‘Dust of Time’, directed by Theo Angelopoulos, 2008.

³ A quotation from the movie ‘Suspended Step of a Stork’, directed by Theo Angelopoulos, 1991.

Are they real or just epiphanies? Lyubimets, Harmanli, Dimitrovgrad, and Haskovo. All these settlements seem familiar to me. I realized this as I approached the ancient Thracian city of Perperikon – Hyperperakion, from the road signs. It is believed that the temple of Dionysius was located in Perperikon. The father of the Roman Empire, Augustus, visited the temple of Dionysus, guarded by Thracian tribe members called the Bessians, and there a man heard a prophecy, as Alexander the Great had before, that he would conquer the whole world.



Image 3: *Tell me your prophecy about my first gaze, Dionysius!*

Wine and fire. I can see the smoke rising up above the altar. It is rising and disappearing. I can see the Eastern Rhodope. I can see east and west, north and south. I can see Greece and Turkey. Moving on through Murgovo, Chiflik, Madrets, Dobrinovo, and Chernyovtsi, Most and I arrive in Alfatlı. I stop at the entrance of the village in front of the Alfatlı road sign, which says *Krin* – *Крин*. Suddenly I realize why the passport officer didn't understand me because this is Krin, the Bulgarian name for Alfatlı.⁴



Image 4: *Did I wake up, or am I sleeping? Where am I? And tell me this for a fact – I need to know – where on earth am I? What is this land? Who lives here?*

I pass the sign and walk through the village. The village is almost empty. Which one is my ancestor's house? Which door should I knock on? Which way is my home?

⁴ In a scene from movie of Theo Angelopoulos *Ulysses' Gaze* (1995), there is the same conversation between main character A and border police, BP: Where are you going? A: Phillippopolis (Greek language) BP: Plovdiv, Plovdiv (Bulgarian language). A gives the name of where he is going in the Greek language, but the border police insists on the Bulgarian name of the place.



Image 5: *What is my name in Bulgarian? What would it be?*

I run into an old woman. She is the oldest person in the village. She tells me that she moved to this village in 1951 after she got married. She says:

“I was working in a factory but my boss wanted me to change my name to a Bulgarian name because I was the only one whose name was Turkish. So I went back home and decided to quit my job but I had no chance. Then I went to the head of the registry office. I insisted on changing my name to something meaningless and neutral, such as Asma Yapragi, which means grape leaf. The official replied: But this is Turkish. So, how about *maika*⁵? What do you mean, he said? I said I really don’t know what I am saying. I just made it up. You are so obstinate, he said. I will give you the name, Ivanka, the official said.

Then they insisted that I change my clothes into something that was not traditional and not ethnic. I tried to struggle with them. Many of us were not allowed to do our jobs here. There was a boy named Osman Fahri, who was well-educated here and maybe working as a tobacco expert. One night, he said to his mother: They are jealous of my knowledge here. I can’t stay here anymore. I have to go. Good bye, said Osman Fahri. My lovely Osman Fahri, where would you go without me, his mother asked. Mom, it is not possible if I don’t. So he said goodbye to his mother and his brother. He was able to escape while he was still a student. We were under pressure and working at low-level jobs even if we were well- educated. Now, all of our young generation has gone to Western Europe to find better jobs and it is like a ghost village here. I really do not know who are you, son. Who are your ancestors and where is your home?”



Image 6: *Sorry son, we need to sleep!*

⁵ maika, майка, means mother in the Bulgarian language.

An abandoned cemetery. It is very hard to reach the cemetery, like an old growth. The tombstones are too far away from time and space. Nothing is written on them; they got covered with moss and mingled with the soil. Who lies here? Who are they? The Bessian tribe? The Greek gods? The Bulgarian gods? Hey! Are you sleeping? Could you please tell me who you are, so I can tell you who I am. They don't want to wake up because this is *koimeterion*⁶. They are all tired and sleeping in their mother's womb where everything is pure and innocent. They are back to where they started. I notice something in the photograph I take; I catch the glimpse of it: the tombstones are under the leaves and trees and they are buried in the soil, as if they want to darken the evidence in the scene of crime. They are expecting to come to light like the three lost bobbins of the Manaki Brothers: However, the chemist who will decipher them has not arrived yet, maybe never will.⁷



Image 7: *We just left, son!*

I keep going into the village. Is this the house where my ancestors lived? I am not allowed to enter the house because of the fences but I can still see the yard and the broken windows. So, what is the border? How many borders must we cross to reach home? Are these the fences that are borders or something different which does not allow me to enter the house? Borders are the connotations of psychological existence. I am contemplating, but my eyes, my vision, can't reach beyond what is there. What is the real thing? My body is out of perception; I am just looking. So, my gaze is nothing without penetrating or attaching my body, my identity to the house or to the village? I am limited by my body; I can't prove my identity but I am unlimited with my gaze. Is this enough? I meet with the village chief, *mukhtar*.

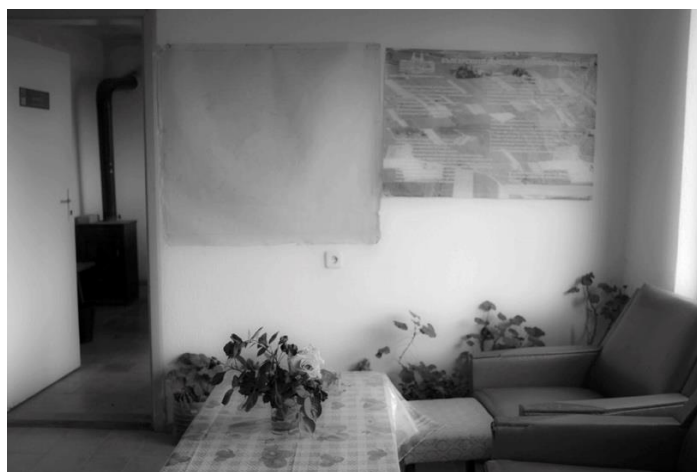


Image 8: *-Ov*

⁶ Bedroom or resting place in the Ancient Greek language.

⁷ Manaki Brothers, known as first photographers and filmmakers in Balkans in the early 20th century. In Theodor Angelopoulos' film, *Ulysses' Gaze* (1995), a Greek-American director named A, returns back from exile to his homeland after 35 years for his movie screening. He returns to his scene of crime, ancestral homelands after years and begins a journey through the Balkans to search for the lost reels of the first films of the Manaki Brothers obsessing about their first gaze, an innocent gaze, or a lost gaze. See Vrasidas Karalis, ed, *A History of Greek Cinema*, London, Continuum, 2012.

I ask him if there is any possibility he could show me the official family records from the 1920s. I am not sure that we have the records from the 1920s, but we can take a look, he said. So, we head to another village, Zvinitsa, because they keep the records in that village. Why do you keep the records in Zvinitsa, I ask? Because Alfathi is a very small village and so there is no need to open an office there. Do you know your family surname? Yes, I know - Yavuz. But, you said they emigrated in 1926, right? So in this case probably they had a different name in the records. Oh, yes, you are right. I know my grandfather's father's name was Mehmet and his father's name was Ahmet. Let's see. So, if you don't know the surname, we could check the Bulgarian name method. If Mehmet is the son of Ahmet, Mehmet's surname may be Ahmetov⁸. But there is nothing in the records. You see, some families left the village officially so the official kept a record. But they might have escaped so there would be no record of their leaving. Now, I am officially unrooted. Anyway, even if not, what does an official record mean? What is the difference between an official record and oral history? What if I were an *-ov*? Suddenly, I recognize the picture of Vasil Levski, the Bulgarian national hero and revolutionary leader who fought for the liberation of Bulgaria from the Ottoman Empire. He is looking out of the picture, but something is missing, incomplete. Levski is gazing at the scene of crime and his gaze is penetrating through me, *punctum* (Barthes 1982). Levski's gaze again reminds me of Klee's *Angelus Novus*. Levski's gaze in the photo is directed towards the past, just as Benjamin said regarding *Angelus Novus*, "It shows an angel who seems about to move away from something he stares at. His eyes are wide, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how the angel of history must look. His face is turned toward the past. Where a chain of events appears before us, he sees one single catastrophe, which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it at his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed" (Benjamin 1940: 392).

Mr. Levski, do you know why my ancestors left the village? He says: "Who were they? Why couldn't you find your ancestor's son?! I was dreaming of a multiethnic, free, and equal Bulgaria. The future of Bulgaria depends on being a republic where all ethnic and religious cultures, whether they are Bulgarians, Turks, Jews, or others, can live without pressure. I am not married and I have nothing to leave as a legacy except my ideas.



Image 9: Vasil Levski

Why can't you find your ancestors? Why did they leave Bulgaria? Did you check the official family records? Family cemetery?" I don't understand, Mr. Levski. I came here to find some answers but you want some answers. I think we both have nothing to find. "I don't know your ancestor's son, but I really want to know if the people of Thrace have an equal, peaceful, and free existence and live without pressure, do they?" If so, where are they, Mr. Levski? We have lots of questions but no answers for each other.

The traces in the scene of crime are hardly visible, or even totally unclear. What I see is the the aftermath of a crime, being in itself. The photographs I take show me the Alfathi that appear with momentary flashes and the place that I pull out of the stage of history, or as Barthes says: "I discovered her as into herself" (Barthes 71).

⁸ Appendix *-ov*, means Mehmet, who is the son of Ahmet.



Image 10: *To where?*

I'm walking through to a meadow place where the view is open and it is easy to see the horizon. I just feel the wind. I wanted to return to Alfathı to find some answers, but now Alfathı insists on a new journey. I remember the poem:

“... Keep Ithaka always in your mind.

Arriving there is what you are destined for.

But do not hurry the journey at all.

Better if it lasts for years,

so you are old by the time you reach the island,

wealthy with all you have gained on the way,

not expecting Ithaka to make you rich.

Ithaka gave you the marvelous journey.

Without her you would not have set out.

She has nothing left to give you now.

And if you find her poor, Ithaka won't have fooled you.

Wise as you will have become, so full of experience,

you will have understood by then what these Ithakas mean”. (Cavafy 1992: 36-37)

3.CONCLUSION

Ironically, this narrative work on emigration took place at the beginning of the 20th century and it seems like perhaps the least tragic narrative of a migration wave that is still going on today, because there is no experience of an individual or physical interaction with the migration case. Whether it is a diaspora or a simple mobility, every migration has its traumatic effects that pass next generations. A journey to utopia, Alfathı, or Ithaka, is a mandatory revisiting journey that revives a migrant's trauma or anxiety. Even though the journey has no exact answers, the historical subject tries to reconstruct the lost memory through returns and visuals. The point here is making the journey, and the journey and experiments become the answers, not the conclusions. Even more important thing is to be able to make the concept of home and return meaningful: What is a homeland and how could it be represented. In our case, the autoethnographic narrative meets with the surreal straight photography to express/tell/visualise the experience, lost memory and home. Thus, this article points to answers about the Alfathı myth through the expressive notion of surreal straight photography and experiencing the journey. Atget's surreal photographs are given as

examples to show how the photographic medium behaves as a *flâneur* to catch an unexpected coincidence where surrealists and migrant overlap in the same kind of behavior through a return to origin, to the unconscious. Also, the absence and reality of the space and time here are revealed by the spatial surrealist photographs of Atget. Through surreal straight photographs, the autoethnographic migrant positions himself in another blurred time and space. This is a third place and time where the migrant cannot position himself either in the past or in the present, but rather in the surreal. The expression about the situation, the trauma and anxiety of the migrant is not in 'I was there' or 'This is how it is' but rather in a kind of looking for a lost gaze in a surreal time and place, as Russell argues: "The auto-ethnographic migrant blurs the distinction between ethnographer and Other by traveling, becoming a stranger in a strange land, even if that land is a fictional space existing only in representation" (Russell 1999: 280). Straight photography gives visual knowledge that the migrant need. The historical subject can never reach the past knowledge of the home and memory, but what he achieves is a third time and space that he suddenly encounters and reconstructs himself here. Surreal straight photographs allow historical subject to make sense of himself in there or here, just like Atget does. He cannot find his own past in traditional time and space, but in surreal. The home and the memory is neither past or now, both are in surreal. So, this field of practice through surreal straight photography more closes to engagement of the senses and experiments instantly. Also, the narrative of the journey to the mythical homeland helps the photographs to explain surreal encounters. Thus, the autoethnographic migrant reaches to different answers, or rather narrative of the journey and homeland which is dynamic, polysemic and multi-layered, as Hall states:

"The homeland is not waiting back there for new ethnics to rediscover it. There is a past to be learned about, but the past is now seen, and it has to be grasped as a history, as something that has to be told. It is narrated. It is grasped through memory. It is grasped through desire. It is grasped through reconstruction. It is not just a fact that has been waiting to ground our identities". (1997: 38)

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