

Chapter 36. A Collage of Migration: Memory Fragments with a Spatial Pattern

Gamze Okumuş¹

Introduction

“One must betray one’s fatherland and go to another place to be at two places at the same time.” (Emine Sevgi Özdamar, 2003)

Emine Sevgi Özdamar – the writer, director and actress, who was born in Malatya and worked in Berlin for years – is quoting the French director Godard in one of her interviews to explain her feelings about migration. It is a powerful quoting, because it is made by a migrant. The migrant, who is mostly mentioned in relationship with detachment and the loss of the sense of belonging. The migrant, who is identified as stranger in two places: But this identification is made by other individuals about the migrant.

The desire to define the stranger arises from the effort of creating borders in the sense of time and space. While time and space are utilized together before the modernization, the expression of space free from time is a product of the modern times (Giddens, 2010). As a result of assigning meanings to the space through some dualities (there/here, inside/outside, native/foreign), social groups and the sense of belonging to these groups are being created. To embrace this belonging and its features (mutual cultural history, religion, language, race, etc.), causes the determination of being inside or outside of the community with powerful lines. The one outside is left outside and defined as a stranger by the ones inside. But how does the one outside define itself?

Migration is about remembering and the memory traces of the migrants show us that there is a power of making connections to multiple places in migration. This study is trying to reveal the spatial memory traces of migration through the migrant Muharrem – my father. My family has its own history of migration, starting with my grandfather, who was a shepherd in a small village (İcikli / Denizli) in Turkey and decided to migrate to Switzerland to work there. After some years in Ticino, he moved to Zürich and that is when my father moved there too - at the age of 16. After some years working as a waiter and headwaiter in the Mövenpick Restaurants in Zürich, he married my mother and they moved to Urdorf, a small town in Canton Zürich. That is where I and my sisters were born, and the last place we stayed before we moved to Denizli/Turkey.

The history of my family and my personal experiences were my main motivation to start thinking about this topic, but I think that this study is beyond the story of

¹ Gamze Okumuş is a graduate student in the Architectural Design Master Program of the Architecture Department, İstanbul Technical University, Taşkışla Campus, 34437 Beyoğlu, İstanbul, Turkey. E-mail: okumusga@itu.edu.tr.

Acknowledgement: The author would like to thank Assoc. Prof. Funda Uz for her support and help.

my family. Despite the fact that this story is subjective, it is actually more about “understanding the social constructions through ourselves” (Finley, 2001). Through its subjectivity, I had the chance to take a different position in terms of the notion of the stranger, identity, duality, belonging and memory. I had the chance to open up these aspects to discussion as a migrant myself. Elizabeth Wilson (1997) supports this approach in her paper “Nostalgia and the City” in her first sentence: “*Although the practice of academic research is meant to be an objective activity, one part of ‘postmodernisation’ of such work has been a greater recognition of our subjective investment in it.*” Following she refers to the anthropologist and psychoanalyst George Devereux, who once wrote that all research is autobiographical. Therefore, the subjective part of this research is making it even stronger and more unique.

Collage

“I would have spent my lifetime trying to understand the function of remembering, which is not the opposite of forgetting but rather its lining... We do not remember, we re-write memory much as history is re-written.” (Chris Marker, 1983)

Throughout the history, there were a lot of different metaphors used for memory with the function of storing: Archive, library, wine cellar, safe box, leather wallet... As literary scientific constructions, metaphors are reflections of an age, culture and environment. That is why they changed with time and there are also metaphors like forests, labyrinths, underground rooms, castles, honeycombs, wax tablets or scratch pads (Draaisma, 2007). But still, the most common ones degrade the memory to a process of perception, storing and recall. But remembering a space is far beyond that.

Memories of a space are nothing like dusty documents stored in archives. The memory is a dynamic process: Recollections are products of the past, but that does not restrain their reconstructions with today’s experiences. According to Paul Ricoeur (2006), memory is alive for this very reason: Its connections to the past experiences and open structure to future makes it alive. Henri Bergson (2007) draws attention to the role of the memory in connecting the past to the present, too: He defines matter and memory as a part of the universe, where images are flowing continuously and the whole of the images creates the matter. In this way, two possibilities to represent the immaterial through images arises. The image in the center of this activity is the body and the mind is a simple gap. This gap is being filled by the recollections of the memory, the memory connects the moments and integrates the past to the present.

In that case, how does the migrant remember the spaces on his way and how are they integrated to the present? In real life, there is a continuity in time and space. But when these spaces become a part of the past and we remember them, the continuity disappears: Our childhood home and a place we experience years later in another part of the world can recall each other. The time fragmentizes. Our brain forms a montage of places, which are unconnected to each other in the terms of time and space. When I asked Muharrem to narrate his life and the spaces he lived in, he

connected İcikli, Zürich, Urdorf and Denizli not in a chronological way. Rather he jumped from one to another in relation to the context of his narration (Image 1).



Image 1. Montage of the Spaces in Muharrem’s Life

Space is more than a physical reality: It is a formation, where the individual and common experiences are being transmitted. Our minds recreate the cultural and physical traces of the environment by recalling them and create a model by reinterpreting them in their own imagery (Yazıcıoğlu – Öge, 2004). This model appears like a collage: Our memory pulls out fragments of spaces from their original context, displaces them with new codes and creates a collage with a new meaning. Max Ernst (1948) describes the power of displacement as following: *“I’m tempted to see in collage the chance meeting of two distant realities on an unfamiliar plane, or to use a shorter term, the culture of systematic displacement and its effect.”*

This displacement, this “meeting of two distant realities on an unfamiliar plane” takes not just place as montages of spatial fragments in the mind of the migrant. In 1993 and 1994, Muharrem and his friend published a magazine called “29+1 Ayna”, which has the meaning “29 + 1 Mirror”. *“It was not a work done for money, we started with the aim to help the people there. It was kind of a social work.”* states Muharrem in our interview (Personal Communication, December 17, 2015).



Image 2: The Cover of the First Issue of 29+1 Ayna: Just the Objects of Origin on the left, the Original Cover on the Right

The cover of the first issue represents the mission of the magazine: To reflect the lives of the Turkish migrants in Switzerland. It is a collage with a mirror in the center, which has the abbreviations of the two countries, Turkey and Switzerland. Similarly, the flags of the two countries are reflecting each other on the top left. The background of the collage is the newspaper *Hürriyet*, and some objects and images representing Turkey surround the mirror in the middle. The newspaper is not just an object from the origin, it had a much more important meaning for the migrants, especially in the eighties and the beginning of the nineties: *“My father could not read, but he bought every day the newspaper Tercüman, anyway. Then he brought it home, so that we could read it.”* (M. Okumuş, Personal Communication, December 17, 2015). The newspaper was an important medium to keep the connections with the homeland alive for the migrants.

Dalibor Vesely (2004) states that fragmentation makes contribution to the formation of meaning and to the sense of wholeness by using the art of collage as an example. The fragments in this collage on the cover of the magazine are tied closely to the memory of the origin, but they are also contributing the meaning of migration. If there were just the objects like the Turkish food, the images, or the flag of Turkey on it, the collage could have just represented the memory of the origin. But using the newspaper refers to the memory of the father, who tried to preserve the connection to the origin. The use of the mirror and the reflected flags show the attachment and sense of belonging to both places. The collage creates the meaning of migration by displacing the fragments with the codes of memory: Attachment and belonging.



Image 3: The Wife and Daughter of Muharrem in their Home in Urdorf

If you look at the homes of the migrants, you will see a lot of objects as memory fragments. No matter if it is a Russian man living in Europe, a Brazilian woman in America or a Turkish family in Switzerland. I remember in our home in Urdorf a statue of a rooster standing on Pamukkale, the natural wonder in Denizli (Image 3). There were also some coffee cups, a flag of the Turkish sports club Denizlispor, an image of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk and other objects related to Turkey. But all these objects vanished mysteriously as we moved to Denizli and were displaced with new

ones. Now, the rooster is gone and there is a key holder from Luzern (Switzerland) on the wall in the entrance of the new house instead.

The souvenirs are collected from the migrants through time and presented in their memory museums. Every migrant is an artist, who creates his own art of collage in his personal space. The objects are nostalgic, but the narrative of the whole collage is not that of nostalgia. The objects “are not symbols but transitional objects that reflect multiple belonging” (Boyer, 2001).

Today, there is an image of Zürich hanging in Muharrem’s office. “The reason why I hung this picture is that I have lived there for a long time. I spent the half of my lifetime there, it is a part of my life. I wanted to remember that every time I come to my office and I wanted it to represent me. Actually, the first place I worked in Zürich can be seen on it.” (M. Okumuş, Personal Communication, December 17, 2015) (Image 4).

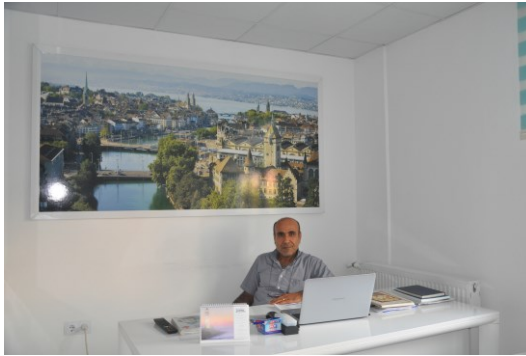


Image 4: Muharrem in his Office in Denizli

It is known that Braque once looked at his small painting he made and said with a lump in his throat, that this painting would be much stronger next to a wheat field (Aragon, 2015). Obviously, it is not really possible to glue a wheat field to the painting to achieve the right emotion, but it is possible to create a collage in spaces with objects and images from our past. When Muharrem placed an image from a place of his past in his office, it is no longer a picture that can be described as Kitsch: The collage as a whole, with this image chosen and placed in this space represents now Muharrem’s identity and the sense of multiple belonging.

Conclusion

This study is beyond the story of my family. It discovers the ways of remembering spaces through the migrant and how memories are constructed in our lives as collages. The collages carry personal traces of the places my family lived in, but they are coded with common contexts of migration like belonging, attachment and identity. This study is a part of a work, which is still ongoing and pursues the question how the migrant, mostly defined as a stranger, remembers and connects spaces.

It does not make a complete description of the spatial memory of migration, but it contains the patterns which space creates in memory. We can see how a

newspaper turns into a fragment of attachment, how a statue of a rooster or an image of a city becomes a sense of multiple belonging. The displacements of fragments, their coming together as distant realities create an evocative power. Like an object glued to a painting or a novel placed into a movie: We place spatial fragments from our memory in different spaces in our lives, we create collages – and these fragments are becoming representations of new patterns and meanings.

The collages of migrants do not represent their origins or past, they are rather narrations of the process of migration. They show us, that being a migrant does mean to be at two places at the same time.

References

- Aragon, L. (2015). *Kolajlar*. Janus Yayıncılık.
- Bergson, H. (2007). *Madde ve Bellek*. Dost Kitabevi.
- Boyer, C. (2009). *Nostaljinin Geleceği*. Metis Yayınları.
- Dauman, A. (Producer), Marker, C. (Director). (1983). *Sans Soleil* [Motion Picture]. France: Criterion Collection.
- Draaisma, D. (2007). *Bellek Metaforları*. Metis Yayınları.
- Ernst, M. (1948). *Beyond Painting*. Wittenborn, Schultz.
- Finley, S. (2001). Painting Life Histories. *Journal of Curriculum Theorizing*, 17(2), 13-25.
- Giddens, A. (2010). *Modernite ve Bireysel Kimlik: Geç Modern Çağda Benlik ve Toplum*. Say Yayınları.
- Özdamar, E.S. (2003). I turned my tongue to German and was suddenly happy (Stiller-Kern, G.). Retrieved from: <http://www.culturebase.net/artist.php?629>
- Ricoeur, P. (2006). *Memory, History, Forgetting*. U of Chicago Press.
- Vesely, D. (2004). Architecture in the Age of Divided Representation : The Question of Creativity in the Shadow of Production, Massachusetts Institute of Technology.
- Wilson, E. (1997). Nostalgia and the City. *Westwood, S. and Williams, J. (eds.) Imagining Cities: Scripts, Signs, Memories*. London: Routledge. pp: 127-139.
- Yazıcıoğlu-Öge, S. (2004). Anımsamanın Koşulu Olarak Mekân. *Şentürer, A., Uz, F. and Ural, Ş. (eds.) Etik-Estetik*. İstanbul: Yapı Yayın. pp: 134-139.