The Social Self of Child Refugee through Cinema: A Sociological – Educational Approach

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Authors' contributions

This work was carried out in collaboration between both authors. Author KE designed the study and wrote the protocol. Author TC wrote the first draft of the manuscript and managed the literature searches. Both authors read and approved the final manuscript.

Commentary

ABSTRACT

This paper is concerned with contemporary cinema films about refugees in an attempt to highlight their social self through redefined identities. The refugee issue is a crucial one to the global community. Political structures are tested by population mobility, while the democratic system is also challenged. The interpretation of discourse determinant to refugee social self is supported through studying cinema films. Focus is placed on screenplay, image and expression of feelings by the actors.
Five films portraying child refugees' life trajectories are utilized to highlight the reconstruction of their social selves, while struggling for survival and violently being introduced to early adulthood. Cultural issues are correlated with social meanings and interpretative discourse patterns based on the way they are illustrated in the films. The film itself becomes discourse expressing the reality through correlating meanings constructed within the social, political and cultural setting. The unfolding of films, as interpretative patterns, includes knowledge that is the meanings of everyday

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life conducive to shaping emotions, attitudes and behaviours. The combination between the film narrative and social web forms the basis on which the political discourse pattern is approached, while the meaning emanates from the co-articulated domineering and conflicting discourses.

Following the massive population transfer to Europe, due to wars, domestic conflicts, political reversals and climate change, this time period forms the breeding ground to study refugee-related film theoretical discourse. This analysis will contribute to self-reflection through studying the hidden aspects of refugee life. Everyday refugee-related political discourses highlight the effects on the economic system and political structures, while the dimension of the citizen – refugee is concealed. Thus, the refugee, as individual and social subject, is invisible, excluded and marginalized. Films on refugees are conducive to increasing the different ways of viewing their lives in modern societies. At the same time, the education system is challenged to integrate child refugees through meaningful educational practices.

1. INTRODUCTION

The refugee issue generates a new social setting through the transformation of the restricted socially recognized setting of theoretically homogeneous states. This ruptured socio-political situation was visible through nation-state interpretative orientations. Migration communities, already having been included more or less in the policy of rights, were also gradually included in the states textual narrative. At the same time, the restructuring of societies towards migrants' reception was apparently completed by the limiting conventional population transfer.

According to the UNHCR statistical yearbook for 2018, a total of 70.8 million people have been forced to flee their homes mainly due to war conflicts or persecution. Among them almost 25.9 million have been reported as refugees, while the number of under-aged refugees is over half of the total refugees number. It is also reported that approximately 80% of them have found shelter in countries neighbouring to their countries of origin. Data also indicate that more than half of refugees come from three countries, namely Syria (6.7 million), Afghanistan (2.7 million) and South Sudan (2.3 million), while a significant number of them come from Iraq, Eritrea and other war-hit countries. As regards the major hosting countries that receive the largest numbers of displaced people, Turkey has received 3.7 million, Pakistan 1.4 million, Uganda 1.2 million, Sudan 1.1 million and Germany 1.1 million [1].

Even though population mobility had been recorded in previous years, the refugee crisis commenced in 2014 and was distinctive of the vast numbers of people arriving in Europe either across the Mediterranean Sea or through Turkey and Southeastern Europe routes [2]. Eurostat has reported an ongoing flow of refugees from war-hit countries as from 2014, seeking asylum in many European countries [3-6].

Particularly, in terms of states, the European Union and international organizations, prior to the immense refugee flow, were assumingly prepared to handle the limited population mobility. Based on the already formed socio-political experience an attempt was made to avoid ruptures and reversals within states. National legislations, the European Union and national organizations legislative interventions along with practical institutional arrangements were conducive to transforming structures and creating operational patterns for migrants' integration. This viewing does not mean, in any case, that social inequalities are refuted or operational problems are eliminated, or even transformations did not cause conflicts.

Besides states' unreadiness to handle the increasing refugee flow, citizens are also found unprepared to live together with populations of different ethnic, religious, linguistic and cultural background, in the sense that refugees are deemed the source of widespread economic problems, or even worst, of rebellious outbursts [7] resulting in intrastate conflicts in the reception countries [8]. Rüegger [9] argues that it is the state political instability and its domestic problems, resulting in certain groups' marginalisation, that potentially lead to intrastate conflicts in which refugees might also be involved due to their being socially excluded.

Our intention is to point out the already formed regularity in which social subjects and institutional structures were gradually adapted to receive migrants. In terms of the micro and

macro level of socio-political space, roles were institutionalized and normative demands were formulated within the socio-political system. In this sense, conflicts could be avoided and policies could be applied in which meaning-making could be the outcome of expanded groups of people towards a new condition defined by migrants' presence. Following the war conflicts in Syria, new socio-political conditions have emerged, and a vast number of refugees have been transferred towards Europe, Mediterranean countries in particular. Greece and Italy are transformed from temporary refugee reception countries into prolonged and undefined refugee residence countries. Refugee identity and empirical incidents tied to refugee social identity become thematic units of different forms of art.

This paper focuses exclusively on Cinema, through the analysis of exemplary discourse formed through image and screenplay in an attempt to generate a new topic, the refugee issue, through merging approaches to it, either explicitly or implicitly.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The refugee issue is timely for Greece, as it has been a refugee reception country since 2015. Both the political system and social services make an attempt to process refugee affairs. However, the European Union policy is apparently unprepared to handle the on-going population mobility resulting from war conflicts or political dysfunctionalities. In sociological terms, the refugee issue mainly focuses on social integration, social racism, social marginalization, the negotiation of social identity as well as issues associated with refuted regularity in the context of the policy of rights [10,11].

From a sociological point of view, the self is conceptualized as a set of perceptions referring to an individual and their relation to others within a social system. The self is socially constructed, since each person's identity is shaped on the basis of their interaction with other human beings. In this sense, each individual develops their social identity shifting from "I" to "we". When it comes to refugees, they encounter different socio-cultural situations from what they have experienced in their countries of origin resulting in redefining their selves on new grounds. Their perception of their social self must be reconstructed, as they have to identify with groups that are negatively valued by the

dominant culture. They do not reject their group identity; yet, it is rather difficult for them to handle the reconstruction of their social self in relation to the prevalent status resulting in their being invisible by the social whole [12].

Popular sociological issues include interculturalism consistent with discourse generation on co-existence and humanism. The cinema is utilized by sociology as a methodological tool to approach discourse formation issues tied to social situations, refugees in particular [13]. The representation of social interactions is interpreted through the social paradigm of constructed models and behaviours by the cinema [14]. Thus, the role of language, the cinematographers' exploration, screenplay content and selection of images are especially emphasized. Multifaceted sociological works focus on developing deep understanding and evaluating the content of a film as well as on special sociological views conducive to forming opinion. In this respect, the audience is influenced, the civil society is directed and eventually knowledge generated by other fields is either constructed or reversed [15].

Viewed from a sociological perspective, cinema discourse includes analytical terms of knowledge, it puts forward social processes, it reconstructs the social world and it is theoretically inserted in a discourse conflict, virtually formulating its own available discourse to be discussed [16]. Among an abundance of films about refugees, five films were selected which, as it will be shown, interpret a specific social group, the child refugee. Focus was placed on film structure, different narrative tools and the explicit or implicit norms of productive association of discourse on refugees, knowledge on the social construction of refugees, personal responsibility for ignorance or silence tied to social practices of refugee exclusion. All these aspects tend to maximize refugee stigmatization, while causes are veiled and the European States and international organizations weaknesses are concealed.

Films can become the means by which the contemporary social reality in reception countries is portrayed through the narratives of the protagonists. Film directors, characterised by empathy towards child refugees, try to depict emotions, real life situations and, eventually, social exclusion as experienced by the protagonists themselves. Through their narratives, life incidents are unfolded, enriched

by personal viewpoints and life experiences. The children's narratives are distinctive of who they are, of what they have been through and of dreams and expectations about their future. Their social identities are explored and reconstructed on the grounds of everyday situations in camps, hosting vessels, remote schools and reception centres, a fact evident in all five films [17].

3. METHODOLOGY

Recent films are studied for the purpose of this research, showcasing the specific thematic unit of refugee childhood. These films are: a) Mani Y. Benchelah's "This is exile: Diaries of child refugees, b) Michael Graversen's "Dreaming of Denmark", c) Andreas Koefoeds' "At home in the world", d) Vladimir Tomic's "Flotel Europa", and e) Jakob Brossmann's "Lambedusa in Winter". Out of the five films, "Lambedusa in Winter" was chosen as the main thematic film which showcases refugee issues, the manner by which time, place and excluded groups are portrayed. Moreover, Vladimir Tomic's film "Flotel Europa" was utilized to highlight autobiographical discourse defining the refugee identity. The refugees' participation in the films is very interesting since the combination of discourse and image highlights emotional tensions and the protagonists' personal interpretations. In this frame, life is identified with screenplay [18]. Cinematographic discourse and meaning representations are explored within the developing screenplay which becomes image and shapes perception fields [19,20]. Focus was placed on cinema discourse, which is actually political discourse towards meaning-making about social identity, while alternative comprehension fields on social and political phenomena are also formulated. Social transformations and political re-definitions develop and shape roles in an attempt to interpret developing political situations [21].

Therefore, the analysis of cinema discourse provides elements about the structural content of a theme, its selective projection of various parts so that any critical analysis on screen highlights a discourse transcending our arbitrary definitions as propagandistic or counseling discourse or textual encouraging discourse towards specific actions [22]. Even though the above remarks are applied in films content analysis, this does not mean that the discourse is not comprehensive in social meanings, political dimensions, as inclinations are processed "automatically" within a socio-political setting in which cinema

discourse is also formulated and develops in terms of situation and content.

As regards the refugee issue, in short time, films have been apparently shown to converge to conceptual content in which socio-political discourse, emotions and proposals are encapsulated. In terms of methodology, films content analysis combines parts of discourse and image towards developing a multifaceted viewing. Based on an unusual elaboration of mixed elements stemming from the protagonists' presence on screen, enriched by clothing, lighting, scenery, and make up, they form a cohesive framework by reinforcing the supervising knowledge of a phenomenon or condition [23].

In the selected films, the emerging thematic units were classified as follows: a) content (text – screenplay), b) emotions, c) technical means (clothing, make up, lighting, scenery, etc.), and d) political discourse. Based on this classification, content analysis provided the possibility to outline the film content as well as more specific socio-political discourse analytical views. Content analysis as scientific process is restricted in the sense that it cannot become discourse for objectivity or truth since the creator or co-creators intervene in an already constructed interpretation, the refugee in this case, in which the artistic frame reinforces freedom of expression, perhaps beyond meaning or truth-related political construction.

The audience witnesses an ever-changing course of identity encompassing their life in the past, displacement affecting their identity and the current social reality impact on defining their selves. Therefore, spontaneous participation in the film is an opportunity for the young protagonists to represent their multiple identities as they have been shaped along their life trajectories. At the same time, the opportunity to develop narrative of their social self is dual. On the one hand, their social self is portrayed through their own perspective, that of the refugee, and on the other hand through the dominant culture perspective, that of the unwanted, the "other". Given that all five films are based on unplanned footage, credibility is reinforced in the sense that the audience takes the child refugee life stories seriously. This way, they are faced with the opportunity to reflect upon different life trajectories and get sensitised about the ordeals child refugees go through due to their fragmented and emotionally painful experiences.

4. DISCUSSION

Through the screenplay, images, situations and emotions are unfolded. The viewer can potentially reform the content which turns a social condition into image. Citizens' everyday messages are distinctive of their oral or written content [24]. Cinema becomes the means by which moments are expanded through the symbols of image and discourse, embracing past and present. Time acquires new dimensions. Thus, the spectators co-create their own interpretation by reforming their own scenario [25].

As already discussed in methodology, under-aged refugees are the focal point of the selected films. The child refugee becomes, at the same time, the protagonist and narrator of war consequences and overturned normality in their country. The child refugee becomes the symbol of the refuted child-related policy of rights. At this point, the right to life, to enjoy family warmth, the right to dream within a protective and secure political system is underscored. As regards the content, three of the selected films underline the concept of loss. In the first two films "Dreaming in Denmark" and "This is exile: Diaries of child refugees" the protagonists are unaccompanied children illustrating their new life in new and unknown places, off their country of origin, in a new reception country where they are not attributed the capacities of child, protection and inclusion. In "Dreaming of Denmark", the director Michael Graversen follows young Wasi from Afghanistan in his pursuit to obtain an asylum permit and redefine his identity and his life in a safe and secure place. Through simple and sophisticated discourse, the audience becomes aware of the lurking dangers for unaccompanied adolescents in case their application for asylum is rejected. Wasi's emotions are strikingly portrayed through his words and facial expressions, while all technical means illustrate real life situations. His overall discourse reflects his struggle to maintain life as a normal young man; yet, it is difficult to wait for a future that never gets started. Dreaming becomes his driving force for his survival, while he wonders whether he is anyone at all without a home, a family and an identity.

In "This is Exile: Diaries of child refugees" the lives of five Syrian children are portrayed, as they were forced to flee from their war-hit country to a refugee camp in Lebanon. The children's unsophisticated discourse reflects their emotions

as well as the way they deal with overturned reality, off their homes. Mixed emotions of vengeance, disappointment and hopelessness highlight their struggle to redefine themselves and struggle for their everyday survival in an almost abandoned place which serves as a refugee camp.

Thus, within a new social space, they gradually become the "others". They become adults within a socially marginalized and dark space. The gang becomes their group, while watching the life of the privileged ones. Everyday life is connected with survival, the child becomes the beast and memories fade away when the necessity to live on one's own becomes imperative. The political system and its democratic values are at the forefront, while unprepared or unwilling to handle the emerging condition. Political silence is the rule which prevents system disturbance and questioning by citizens. Everything works towards refugee children invisibility.

Children become visible through these two films, which also highlight political system and international organizations failure. Violent adulthood and social marginalization become the signifiers of socio-political responsibility that generates street children. The third film "At home in the world" focuses on children included in a Red Cross school. Their teacher, Dorte, is the only figure to whom they turn when they feel sad or frustrated. The diffused emotional burden of these children is also portrayed through a father-son dialogue, conducive to generating further uncertainty and anxiety about the future. Eloquent discourse serves to unfold experiences and reactions, while persons are distorted and child features are altered through the restoration of memory stock. Child trauma is defined upon the association between past and present. It is noteworthy that these children are included in education. Yet, a question is posed about life normality and social marginalization even through their symbolic inclusion in an isolated Red Cross school. Children's symbolic biographies cannot virtually be articulated through discourse. The spectator interprets it as an incident and the director portrays it as image and screenplay.

In the fourth film "Flotel Europa" the adult cinematographer Vladimir Tomic illustrates his autobiography through discourse, while defining the refugee identity, actually his own identity. The footage actually portrays the refugees' everyday

life aboard and the way they try to redefine their identities on the floating refugee centre, while attached to their cultural background through music and folk dances. He is discharged and left on a ship in the Copenhagen port. Managing the self, new balances, ruptured normality, managing memory, social exclusion and marginalization are at the forefront, portraying the shift from the secure environment and normality to a strange environment in which he is the "stranger". Two decades later, Tomic takes the audience on a journey on that ship filled with echoes of the war.

In the fifth film "Lampedusa in winter", human geography is virtually illustrated. Refugees' violent survival, violent reactions amidst the hostile winter in Lampedusa are portrayed. Feelings of unease and turmoil are widespread among the local people, apparently split in what has to do with hosting African refugees. The locals' discourse reflects either their willingness to support the newcomers or their angry reactions and resistance to accept them on their island with the excuse of lacking capacities. Refugees stay on an island, off normal city life, in camps where violence is present in many different aspects. External violence that of the political system, along with inner violence, that of emotions, violence in a camp full of different people forced to encounter a violent winter.

The above five films help complete the definition of the refugee, the consequences of loss, the difficulties in managing the social self, the identity of the "other", all developed throughout the democratic values crisis period. State and international organizations apparently handle this situation distinctive of human beings moving and trying to survive in the outskirts of cities, stranded as if beasts, without guilt.

As foretold, a significant number of refugees are persons under 18 years old who struggle to cope with the violent disengagement from their homes and caregivers, while they are challenged to fight for their lives and adapt to new conditions in the reception countries. The entire educational community should reconsider the refugees' presence in western societies, reception countries in particular [26]. Child refugees' participation in education is imperative in the sense that isolation or exclusion from the social whole can be avoided. Given an educational approach that puts forward the person's social self in relation to all other individuals and serves people's collective rights to education as well as personal and professional life can lead to

expanding humanistic and social capital and, consequently to successful inclusion on the basis of democracy [27].

In this respect, education plays a crucial role in embracing child refugees and providing the opportunity to reconstruct their social identity and redefine their life in new terms. Given that many refugee children attend schools in the reception countries, the policymakers and educational community should re-approach the issue of schooling through developing curricula and corresponding educational practices for all students [28]. Such practices could include group activities enhancing participation, mutual acceptance and respect and sharing of different cultural elements among all students. Thus, a sense of belonging can be reinforced, in which both native and refugee children can thrive through developing their cognitive and social skills towards building the future citizens of the civil society [29].

5. CONCLUSION

Amidst a period distinctive of access possibilities to information, discourse on the refugee issue consequences is rather restricted. Native populations perceive it as non-normality. In most European countries, refugees are isolated in the outskirts of cities, excluded from socio-political structures. NGOs apparently perform their duties pertaining to everyday survival [30,31]. The definition of refugee is associated with a non-personified population of individuals, a rather undifferentiated mass. Fundamental democratic principles on the citizens' rights are annulled by the refugees' social marginalization, considering that refugees are citizens, too.

Children are not highlighted in refugee groups, as they are invisible within the system resulting in an eliminating child culture. Refugee children are eventually led to early adulthood; however, within marginalized conditions. It is widely understood that social marginalization directs to peoples' inclusion in delinquent groups; yet the states' welfare system is rather indifferent. Contemporary political systems are not stimulated by beggars, refugee children, gang members or abused victims. In other words, when refugees are rejected their asylum application, they consequently feel lost, excluded and marginalized by the existing socio-political system resulting in their turning to other groups of people having experienced similar conditions.

This sense of belonging to a group of people is gradually conducive to their developing behaviours similar to those of the other group members in an attempt to define their social identity, however, in an erroneous way. Nevertheless, when these children become "dangerous", they are legally prosecuted and as prison inmates they are further violently abused. Not a single political system is convicted for refugees' non-effective inclusion, refugee children in particular.

A different discourse is developed through cinema, the refugee child, as personality and social self, within its constructed social world. The socio-political content of the refugee issue is portrayed through the narrative and highlighted normality. Features of child culture, such as spontaneous discourse, game and emotional manifestations are re-approached in order to put forward loss and early adulthood through the violent setting of exclusion. Combining different elements of image and discourse contributes to meaning-making tied to rejected elements, such as the consequences of political choices for refugees. The cinematic language creates representations reflecting refugee reality for which all citizens are responsible. The form and content of cinematic discourse are conducive to shaping a non-arbitrary narrative, tied to specific meanings about refugee social identity, their civil capacity, the right to life and political responsibility stemming from democratic political organization. Thus, knowledge is generated and a content of truth is formed, even if this is not the objective of cinematic discourse. At the same time, knowledge is associated with emotions. In this sense, the spectator approaches the issue through scrutinizing situations adhering to refugees' life moments.

The refugee issue is transformed into one of people's expanded community; yet without discriminations between refugees and non-refugees. Natives' subjective standpoints towards developing racism can be transformed. The cinematic discourse generates knowledge, negotiates meanings and showcases social incidents distorted by formal political discourse. Within a political setting of reinforced far right trends and deregulated democratic operations, redefinitions of knowledge on social equality and humanism along with participation and monitoring of the political system should contribute to deconstructing refugee social racism and social exclusion. As shown by the five films, refugees' social moments create

redundant meaning that underlines the necessity for political resolution through citizens' education about intercultural co-existence.

COMPETING INTERESTS

Authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

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