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# ELLIS ISLAND AS A MEMORY PLACE ACCORDING TO LEWİS HINE, GEORGES PEREC AND JR

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#### Abstract:

Ellis Island in New York, USA, served as a center accepting the entry of people who immigrated to the United States between 1892 and 1954. Afterwards, it lost its function due to the changing laws, and today a part of the island has turned into a place of visit telling the history of immigration to America. In this article, the functioning of the island when it was active as an immigration reception office, the admission conditions, the approach to immigrants and the importance of the island as a memory place today are discussed in three parts. The first is the Ellis Island immigrant photographs taken by Lewis Hine in the early 1900s; the other is the text of author Georges Perec's memory research on being a migrant during his 1978 visit to the Ellis Island Immigration Museum; Finally, photographer and street artist JR placed photographs of immigrants who entered the island and their families living today in the interiors of Ellis Island in 2014 and interpreted the place and the phenomenon of migration in the context of contemporary art. The importance of Ellis Island, which has turned into a symbol of immigration to America and a place of memory today, has been discussed in related studies.

Keywords: Ellis Island, Lewis Hine, Georges Perec, JR

# 1. Introduction

For centuries, people had to migrate for various reasons. Political pressure, economic crisis, failure to provide basic living conditions or those fleeing the war left the geographies they lived in. In the near future, it is predicted that large demographic migrations will occur due to the climate crisis. Populations in geographies where life cannot be sustained in a healthy way will have to migrate to livable areas.

In the 19th and 20th centuries, there was an intense flow of immigration to America, mostly from the European continent. Epidemics, financial difficulties, the First and Second World Wars and anti-Semitism are among the reasons for migration. Few of those who have decided to immigrate are enthusiastic about leaving. Mostly, they are worried about what to do and how to be greeted as a foreigner in a city where they do not know the language and culture. People admitted to America have been subjected to prejudice and xenophobia. From an

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extremely hypocritical point of view, people other than the wealthy or powerful men who could work in heavy industry, factories and mines were treated with distance.

Another thing that immigrants have difficulty with is climatic and geographical conditions. Geography also shapes the lifestyles of societies. To give an example from today, most of the refugees from the African continent reside in Canada due to its flexible policies towards immigrants and refugees. However, these people experience physical and psychological difficulties due to completely different geographical conditions. On the other hand, cultural differences are one of the most important reasons affecting the adaptation of immigrants. They cannot maintain their traditions and cultural affiliation in the countries they migrated to. Therefore, the continuity of cultural memory cannot be in question. The disappearance of these elements, which are determinative in their lives both individually and socially, creates a feeling of not belonging. In the stories of immigrants, we often learn that the male member of the family leaves the house first. This separation contains difficult processes for both parties. Children are growing up without seeing their fathers, mothers and wives who are devastated financially and morally. Another important issue concerns what immigrants leave behind. They leave their homes and belongings. Spaces and objects are the determining and triggering elements of collective and individual memory. Our past, our memories are animated by their presence. Their absence makes memories fade and make them forget. That's why immigrants look for the nostalgia of what they left behind in images rather than objects. In this context, photographs have been important in ensuring the continuity of memory. In addition, possibilities such as letters, audio or video recordings created the communication network of immigrants.

The social society organization archive.org has transferred 237,686 pieces of 78-cycle old stone plaques to share in the digital environment. Among these records is the song "Neden Geldym Amerikaya", recorded in 1926 and performed by Achilleas Poulas. Poulas, who probably had to emigrate from Turkey to America, adapted the lyrics of the song "Why I Came to Istanbul" as America, and reinterpreted the part of "*I wouldn't come if I didn't come" and changed it as "I wouldn't run away*" (Archive.org). These details provide us with data on the geographical mobility caused by political history. We understand that Poulas had to leave his hometown (probably Izmir), where he lived and spoke the language for years. As can be seen from my reproach in the song, Poulas is not happy in America, where he had to emigrate. Most of the immigrants who were accepted to America from Ellis Island between 1892 and 1954 left a sad story of separation behind them.

Literatures of this article, A.P. From Gordon's doctoral thesis published in 2002, "In Sight of America: Photography and U.S. Immigration Policy, 1880-1930." U.S. immigration laws have been used. Author V.J. Cannato's book "American Passage: The History of Ellis Island," which also includes stories about immigrants. (2009); W.K. Sampsell's detailed book on photographer Lewis Hine, "Lewis Hine as Social Critic" (2009) are important sources evaluated in the context of our subject. French writer Georges Perec's books "Espaces d'espaces" and "Ellis Island" are works that convey the information he gave about the island in a subjective and sentimental way. The method of this article is using three artistic materials to describe Ellis Island: photography, literature and cinema. A selection of works by related artists are: Lewis Hine's "Young Russian Jewish at Ellis Island, 1905", Georges Perec's notes from the Ellis Island Immigration Museum that he visited in 1978, and lastly, artist JR's film "Ellis" (2015). Thus, the subject gained a multiple perspectives with three different narrative styles. At the same time, the dates of these selected examples, 1905, 1978 and 2015, reflect the atmosphere of three different social and cultural periods of the time.

# 2. Immigration to America and Ellis Island

While the admission of foreigners to America was almost completely free until 1875, the State Immigration Office took over the powers with the tightened restrictions, and towards the 1890s, the Immigration Office decided to build a reception center on the island in place of the buildings in Castle Garden, which could no longer meet the need. Ellis Island in New York City, which is the gateway to immigration to America, was opened in 1892 as a reception center. It was used as a prison where enemies and radicals were held during and after the Second World War, and after 1954 it was completely emptied and left to rot. With the effect of the changing policies against immigrants in the 1970s, it was accepted as a historical national monument and reopened to the public in 1976. It was seen as the memory place of immigration to America and regained its function as the Immigrant History Museum. Ellis Island provided passage to approximately 12 million immigrants between 1892 and 1954 (Wikipedia).

Admission procedures first start with the health examination. If a suspicious situation is seen, the doctor will draw a letter on the person's shoulder with chalk and wait for a more detailed examination. For example, the letters C for tuberculosis, E for eye, H for heart, SC for scalp, X for mental retardation indicate which disease should be examined in detail. Diagnosis and treatment can take days or months. During this period, patients stay in the hospital part of the island. Those who recover set foot on land, those who do not recover are either sent back or kept there until they die (Perec, 2020:45). Unfortunately, some of the people who lost their lives on the island before they could start a new life at the end of this long voyage are immigrants traveling in the third class, who had to travel in unhealthy conditions in the windowless and unventilated environment of the ship.

Let's open a parenthesis from Ellis Island to Quarantine Island in the Urla district of Izmir due to its similarities in this context. Archaeologist and guide Filiz Temiz said, "This is a strategic point that controls the entrance to İzmir Bay and therefore İzmir Port. But more importantly, the island has always had a relationship with health due to its connection with the healing spring waters since ancient times and its clean air," she explains the importance of the island. All ships entering the Izmir port were first kept a few miles offshore, passengers, crew and belongings were brought to the station in boats, people were examined, those who were suspected of illness were immediately quarantined, while other people washed in showers that can still be visited today, and continued on their way after the quarantine period expired (Temiz). Seeing Quarantine Island as one of the Dark Tourism destinations, Filiz Temiz mentions that those with terminal illnesses are immediately quarantined and kept here until they die. Those who lost their lives during the burial procedures are first burned with their belongings, and then calcified and buried in the cemetery located at the northern end of the island (Temiz). It is forbidden to enter Quarantine Island, which is also a protected area. However, there is a plan to turn the Quarantine, whose equipment is still intact and usable, into a museum. The transformation of the Quarantine Island into a museum, whose existence and function have not been known until today, and which is remembered with the outbreaks and quarantine due to the Coronavirus, will make its historical importance known and its location visible.

Returning to Ellis Island, those who have passed the medical examination are called in to answer the inspector's questions, accompanied by an interpreter. Interestingly, most of these questions are still asked by the police officer upon entry, even if a visa has been obtained: Why did you come? Show how much money you have. Do you know anyone here? Is there anyone who can vouch for you? In addition to these questions, one of the questions on Ellis Island is "*Are you an anarchist?*" We mentioned above that immigration admission laws are getting harder and harder. One of them was that candidates were tested for literacy and intelligence in their mother tongue, passed by Congress in 1917. In addition, quotas were implemented according to the countries (Perec, 2020:16-17).

Those who meet all the conditions are accepted as immigrants to the United States by stamping "Suitable" on their visa. No passport-size photographs were required on their paperwork or visa. But other than that, they were photographed extensively. Among these, advertising photographers, art photographers, reporters, government officials and tourists have photographed immigrants. These images have been used in a variety of media, including newspapers, conservative magazines, reform magazines, and government reports. However, the photographing of European immigrants is different from the records of Chinese immigrants who came before them. Photo ID cards applied to Chinese immigrants were not applied to European immigrants. (Gordon, 2002:179). The reason for this difference is the less reliable and, if necessary, deportable view of Chinese immigrants compared to Europeans. Chinese are required to submit their photos to the Immigration Service and carry photo identification documents to prove their right to reside in the United States. In European cases, photo ID has been used almost exclusively to document already identified immigrants and deportees. They were photographed just before they left to compile a record of the deported Europeans and to prevent them from returning to the United States (Gordon, 2002:179).

# 3. Lewis Hine's Ellis Island Immigrant Photos

American sociologist and photographer Lewis Wickes Hine (1874-1940) adopted an unbiased and realistic approach in his social portraits compared to other photographers of his time. He began his career as the permanent photographer of the National Child Labor Committee in 1908, photographing children working under harsh conditions in factories, mines and fields. He experienced various difficulties in order to photograph children in their working environment without the intervention of the employer. However, these photographs and the committee's reports yielded results, and the "Fair Labor Standards Act" was passed in 1918, which imposed restrictions on child labor in the United States. Hine has gained a unique place in the history of photography with this work, because photography has been the main tool for understanding, transferring and changing the subject. Lewis Hine's collaboration with the National Child Labor Committee is the first example of non-governmental organizations working with photographers today. In his only photographic book, "Men at Work" (1932), he photographed skyscrapers, railroad construction, factory and mine workers with an exemplary competence that has become iconic today. *"Having an active role in the progressive movement in New York, Hine sought to change*  *public opinion about the working class and the unemployed, rather than asking the rich to pity the poor."* (Hacking, 2015:296). Ellis Island, which he started photographing in 1904, is Hine's first photographic project.

Lewis Hine begins his career at the Chicago Parker School, one of the most progressive schools in the country. Due to the need to visualize school events, Frank Manny hires Hine as the school photographer (although he has no knowledge of taking pictures). Hine both recorded the show and used it in a reformed progressive curriculum. Hine subsequently, while teaching at the Ethical Culture School, sought to transcend book-only instruction with multidimensional visual learning and visual thinking possibilities. She leaves education and focuses entirely on photography, going forward to become a staff photographer for the National Child Labor Committee (Bledstein).

Lewis Hine has a progressive and humanistic worldview in line with the theories of William James and John Dewey, the pioneers of the American pragmatic tradition. Angered by the notion that America is an immigrant nation, he countered the growing fear of xenophobia. He refused to contemptuously describe immigrants with condescending adjectives such as poor, stumbling, humiliated. Hine saw the United States as a nation of immigrants and newcomers as citizens of a strong future who would be non-threatening, 100% American with energy and vitality (Sampsell-Willmann, 2009: 25)

Lewis Hine's approach as a conscientious and tolerant commentator on the lives of individual immigrants and workers should be distinguished from the photographs of his contemporaries Jacob Riis and Alfred Stieglitz. Maren Stange portrays Lewis Hine's photograph, "Young Russian Jewess at Ellis Island, 1905" "allowing the expression of individual qualities, elevating her posing subject beyond the mere depiction of familiar immigrant types." she says that his approach is not similar to the approach of Jacob Riis and Alfred Stieglitz to photograph immigrants at the same time (Sampsell-Willmann, 2009: 24-25). The title "Russian Jew" here does not imply that she is a foreigner, but is a sensitive observation of a nice and beautiful woman. It is a portrait that shows the elements of individual identity. She is one of the numerous Russian women who emigrated at the beginning of the twentieth century. According to Hine, this is one of the examples of social development. But his method is based on conveying a message to the audience about others, using one individual's experience (Sampsell-Willmann, 2009: 27). The strength, health, and beauty of the woman in Hine's photograph is a record that challenges most Americans to view immigrants as weak, unhealthy, and ugly. He makes eye contact with the person with his Graflex brand machine. It is a deliberate, designed, knowing and direct shot. Photo theorist Susan Sontag says we don't know the name of the "Russian Jewish" woman, isn't it too generalizing to describe them as just "immigrants"? she expresses her criticism (Sampsell-Willmann, 2009: 27). Even if we do not know her name, the identity of the woman is brought to the fore. Hine's awareness of the lives of immigrants and workers and his tolerant, graceful interpretation is strongly felt in Hine's photographs. Moreover, it is not a general preference to use "Anonymous" for the people whose portraits he took. For example, "Hine's naming the child in the photograph 'Sadie Pfeifer, Spinning Mill Worker, Lancaster, South Carolina, 1908' adds precision and credibility to her research, as well as showing the worker as an individual" (Hacking, 2015:296).

There are three main and competing ideas about the nature of immigrants in 1905 New York: the immigrant as the threat, the immigrant as the refugee, and the immigrant as the subject

of social science. All three of these competing approaches objectified immigrants and distanced observers from them. Hine, on the other hand, presented his own pluralistic vision. He rejected the alienating objectivity of social science, allowing the woman to pull herself together for the camera, as in the case of Russian Jew photography. She is tired as a teenager but neither weak nor threatening (Sampsell-Willmann, 2009: 27)

Historians Miles Orvell and Gabriel Ibieta compare the photographs of Riis and Hine as follows: But while Riis highlighted the problems of housing, Hine portrayed immigrants in a more complex and multifaceted way: whereas Riis tended to see his subjects as victims and often brutalized. Hine saw the emigrant with expressions on their faces as a person with positive emotions and ambitions at the same time (Sampsell-Willmann, 2008: 231).

Looking from today, what do Lewis Hine's immigrant photographs remind you of? First of all, the records of immigrants entering from Ellis Island, which he photographed for nearly 10 years, are extremely valuable as visual documents of American immigration history. Due to its continuity and approach to the subject, it has a separate place from the work of other photographers or anonymous photographs. The perspective that interprets the arrival of immigrants with a positive perception is a phenomenon that should be remembered today.

# 4. Ellis Island by The Writings of George Perec

The last work of the French writer Georges Perec before his death is the text of the movie "Récits d'Ellis Island" with Robert Bober. (This text was translated into Turkish by Sel Publications under the name "Ellis Adası" in 2020). For the first time, on May 31, 1978, together with Bober, they visited the island, which was turned into a museum. There are a few others with them. Children and grandchildren of immigrants who came in hopes of finding their families. He states, "*This space, which for some consists only of suffering and uncertainty, has now turned into a space of memory for others, one of the spaces where the relationship that binds them to their own history is formed*" (Perec. 2020:35). He asks how everyday objects used on the island or items belonging to immigrants turn into ornate museum objects, how to define this place by going beyond official statistics and photographs. "How to read traces? ...how should we not be content with what we are given to see, how should we not see only what we know we will see? How to capture the unshown, the unphotographed, the unarchived, the unrepaired, the unstaged?" (Perec, 2020:36-37).

The fact that it was accepted as a national monument in 1976 and opened to the public with the status of the Immigration Museum is of course important in terms of conveying the history of immigration and immigration to America through the venue. So, let's try to understand the reasons for the doubt in Perec's questions. As in the Museum of Immigration, we can learn and experience the history of immigration to America through documents, photographs, objects, texts and narratives of guides, as well as the place itself, as in this example. However, it is necessary to look at the perspective from which these presentations are prepared and how detailed they are. For example, is the introduction of new laws that make it increasingly difficult for immigrants to be accepted in American law and their reasons? On this subject, the comments of Vincent J. Cannato, the author of the book "American Passage", which tells the history of Ellis Island through national consciousness and America's immigration laws, were examined. *"The immigrant asks Uncle Sam: "Can I come in?". "I guess you can come in, there's no law* 

to keep you out," Uncle Sam replies." Cannato quoted this dialogue from a cartoon published in America (Cannato. 2009: 6). As it can be understood from this dialogue, the American people and administration have approached with a prejudice against immigrants for many years. The prevailing opinion is that immigrants are not strong enough for themselves, so if they are entering the country, they should be healthy and have the capacity to be self-sufficient. It is said that people who can work in fields such as factories, industry and mining where workers are needed should be accepted, and immigrants should not be allowed to fill the country's poor aid associations or hospitals. Another concern, depending on Darwin's theory of evolution, is the thought that immigrants accepted to America will adversely affect the genetics of the nation. So much so that poverty, disease and ignorance will be passed on to future generations and may weaken the nation's genes. "Should we accept people from all over the world?" question and the related immigration law changes came into effect. The administration, which previously opened its doors to Chinese immigrants and stopped accepting Chinese immigrants for similar reasons, this time creates difficulties for Europeans (Cannato, 2009: 1-15) Therefore, the struggle of immigrants, which was difficult to reach and accept America, continued in a not very tolerant environment. In one of the narratives exemplified by the writer Cannato, 33-year-old Finnish carpenter Johann Tyni expresses his disappointment: "I would like to go back to Finland. I am not well understood in this country. I've been working too hard and I'm totally blown away. I am grieving and the thoughts make me cry all the time." (Cannato, 2009: 1).

The text of the movie "Ellis Island" has a structure that destroys the boundaries of fictional narrative and documentary narrative. For example, when visiting a room in a museum, he starts describing everything in the room one by one. As we are familiar with in his writings, he lists everything about Ellis Island that helps to train the memory: "The breakdown of numbers, ships, people, ports, goods... how many suicides have occurred, how many people have returned, how many suitcases have been lost, how many people's money has been stolen" (Perec, 2017: 210-211). On the other hand, by referring to the testimonies of the last immigrants who entered America through Ellis Island, he tells the stories of their departure, arrival and settling in America. Georges Perec's father died at the front during World War II, and his mother died in the Auswitch concentration camp. Realizing the extent of the danger, many of the Jews fled to America before the war. We can attribute the reason behind Geoges Perec's desire to visit Ellis Island, the gateway to America, to his tragic past. Had his family migrated, they would have had a different life. So, for Perec, this island is the representation of its uninhabited past. The stories of other immigrants remind us of their roots: "What I went to look for on Ellis Island is the impression left by this point of no return, the consciousness of this radical rupture. I want to probe, question, test, my rooting in this non-place, in this absence, in this crack in which all kinds of searches for traces, words, the Other are grounded" (Perec, 2017:210).

# 5. Ellis Island as Seen by JR

French photographer and street artist JR (1983), first of all, attracted worldwide attention with his project "Face 2 Face" (2007). By printing and pasting the portraits of people living in Israel and Palestine in large sizes on the walls on the border, he transformed the wall into a kind of transparent and made the people of both sides visible through visuals. These portraits, which he

took with a fisheye lens, were slightly deformed, and instead of a political tension, an integrative project was formed in which everyone was placed in the same ironic situation, as the people he photographed were smiling. JR's work, which removes religion, politics and discrimination and focuses on the self, is also the focus of his projects in other countries. It makes the inhabitants of the city, the neighborhood visible, by drawing attention to them with huge scale photographic applications. In his project "Women are Heroes" (2008-2011) he tried to make visible the hardships of women and their important place in society with the photographs he took in Brazil, Kenya and other countries. The eyes of women covered the walls or roofs of the slums they lived in, and even these photographs, which they printed on canvas, also turned into a function that protects them from rain. Some were placed on top of trains, with the eyes of women traveling in the city. In this method, which JR describes as "infiltrating art", they take part in the act of artistic creation without a stage separating the ensembles from the audience (JR-art).

JR uses photography as a method and showcases his work on the streets, on the surfaces of buildings or in the wasteland. His preference for public spaces rather than museums or art galleries is a choice that fits well with the content of his works. Instead of inviting his audience to a place, he creates pleasant surprises for people who continue their lives in the routine dynamism of the city. In his project titled "Unframed, Ellis Island" he realized in New York in 2014, he invited the people of the city to Ellis Island to meet with their past. The pioneering thing in realizing this work is seeing the photographs of Stephen Wilkes. Wilkes photographed the hospital building on the southern part of Ellis Island for 5 years in 1998. Through the photographs and videos, he took here, he pioneered the collection of approximately 6 million dollars for the restoration of the building. He published this work in a book titled "Ellis Island: Ghosts of Freedom" in 2006 (Wilkes). JR's project on Ellis Island, like his other works, is about making the past and present residents of the city visible. However, this time, he made use of the photographs of people who entered the island as immigrants years ago. The artist pastes the mostly anonymous photographs on the relevant areas of the space, on the walls in one-to-one size. These surrogates are like representations of the ghosts of immigrants who have passed or failed to pass through Ellis Island. As we mentioned above, millions of people entered Ellis Island, but some were sent back as unsuitable or committed suicide. On the other hand, portraits of today's generations of immigrants are smiling at us on the floor in a part of the space. Images of the past and present offer the viewer a memory journey. JR also integrates this exhibit with a 15-minute film. The film stars actor Robert de Niro, who himself comes from an immigrant family. De Niro, who plays a fictional character, tells an event about people who came to America to immigrate but were rejected through the story of the past. While watching the movie, the narrator's story, set in the time-worn corridors of the place, connects us with the story of the real people who were there years ago. In JR's film, as he pursues the photographic installations he has applied to the space, his ghostly portraits that permeate the worn and crumbling wall texture are traces of Ellis Island's chronotope.

#### 6. Conclusion

Some places gain importance again as a reflection of the changing spirit of the time. Ellis Island in New York is one of them. Between 1892 and 1954, it had a busy period with the task of being

the gateway for millions of immigrants to America, after which it was abandoned for a long time, and the climatic conditions used its wearing power in the buildings on the island. Meanwhile, historical buildings, monuments, squares or places that were the location of a historical event were re-evaluated as places of memory. In the opening sentence of Les Lieux de Mémoire - Spaces of Memory, considered one of the main works of memory studies, Pierre Nora says, "*The reason we talk so much about memory is that there is so little left of it*" (İlhan: 2018:27). While Ellis Island is on the verge of being forgotten and disappearing, it has inspired memory and history studies, a changing and diversified understanding of museology and artists. Years have passed since the first immigrants arrived, and their children and grandchildren trace their families' roots in the National Museum of Immigration. The National Immigration Museum and its neighbor, the Statue of Liberty, are symbols of immigration to America and important tourism routes. At the same time, the immigration route has changed since the last century, and most likely, the memory of migration in the future will be the border walls of south of America and Mexico.

#### **Conflict of Interest Statement**

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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