Responsible photography in relation to the refugee crisis
By Sarah-Jane Field, 2017

Introduction

It is a great privilege to be able to photograph the people and activities that take place at the *Dunkirk Refugee Children's Centre* (DRCC) alongside *Just Shelter* (JS). However, in doing so I have made a promise to DRCC that I will not publish any images online which show identifiable faces of the children or adults who live at the centre. This is to do with safeguarding. Additionally, questions surrounding how people living in refugee camps are represented inform, to a greater or lesser extent, much of what I am exploring through my images.

It is worth looking at the role of photography here: about why it's important to document what is happening, but also remain aware of the relationship between photography, western attitudes towards displaced people, and our collective history, in particular empire building. There are certainly benefits associated with documenting the situation, not least of which is, it helps to keep people aware of events. Such work will also be important in the future. For instance, it might contribute to a conversation where the past is examined. However, photographers need to approach this task with an awareness of the pitfalls and a sense of responsibility.

My motivation

The story these photos tell, as far as any viewers are concerned, is not about me. However, my desire to take them and my own history and status both have a huge impact on the way the work is developing. Crucially, I am not a journalist. Because of that I do not need to sell newspapers with these pictures. So I don't have to create dramatic images that pander to readers' preconceptions or advertisers' needs, but rather to the needs of the subject matter. In addition, the fact I grew up in a colonised country, where the systematic separation of people was enshrined in law while I lived there, is also likely to be something of note; and probably enabled me to see some stark similarities. When I initially visited the Jungle it was apparent a part of Northern France looked like a township near Johannesburg, so Europe began to experience something of the non-western world, here, first-hand on its own land. The non-western world had manifested itself on the shores of France; 'foreign' news, normally rendered less real by distance was on our doorstep. And of course, the response, both positive and negative is worth recording. I am also a photographer who enjoys working with children.

Preparation

During the summer of 2015, every time I saw something on the news about the Jungle or any of the other camps around Europe, I was shocked and astonished by how the UK and France in particular were choosing to deal with the situation. Both

countries were coping, or not, with things in what seemed to me an incredibly odd way. It was if they were hoping it would all just sort itself out, and failing to implement support mechanisms that were obviously needed. Where, I wondered, were the NGOs like *Save the Children, Unicef* or the *UN*? (Barred by governments is the likely answer.) When I started seeing reports of children living in the Jungle I was certain the authorities would have to do something positive and productive, but even then, they didn't. What was even more shocking was the vitriol from members of the public, which you can still find online; the lack of compassion and in some cases open, barefaced hatred. However, the lack of state support meant this other amazing thing was also happening - the volunteer effort. That side is an incredibly positive aspect to the story and needs to be recorded too. In the absence of state support, humanity prevails, and that should not be forgotten in all of this.

I am a photographer in the early stages of a career. I was also a very naive photographer. I really thought that if people in the UK could just see pictures of children they might soften their views. And I take pictures of children. Some people seem to like those pictures, so I thought I will go and find some children and take pictures and come back here and show them to friends and the online community and perhaps they would show them to their friends and eventually some people might stop being hateful and angry. Really naïve and simplistic.

It took me a while to pluck up the courage to go, as it would be odd not to have some feelings of trepidation. I spoke to a doctor on Facebook who had been there, a photographer on Instagram, and wrote to someone in Calais via calaidipedia.com who directed me to guidelines surrounding photography in the camp, which has been crucial to how my work has progressed.

Visiting the Jungle for the first time

On the first visit in December 2015, I went with a friend of a friend. The camp had not been bulldozed at all at that point. Tents came up pretty much to the side of the road under a bridge next to an exit off the motorway. One of the first images I took was of some graffiti which says, "Maybe this whole situation will just sort itself out…" which is now, I think, a key image to the project. I mention it because obviously there is a high degree of irony in the words, and in fact the situation requires people to *do something*, even if that something feels very small.

I came home having learnt some important lessons. First of all the people there were friendly, not frightening; they were mostly bored and frustrated, but really pleased to talk to me and my companion, to break up the monotony. Can you imagine what it must be like being in limbo in that way for months on end? Nearly everyone offered us whatever they could: tea, chocolates. People with absolutely nothing being unflinchingly generous. A man pointed to a £5 note, which was carelessly sticking out the top pocket of my jacket and told me to make sure it was safe so I didn't lose it. The only time I might have been in danger was when someone who didn't look very well asked me to come with him. Another person

immediately said, no, he's ill. Don't go with him. So I was protected. I also came up against my own ignorance and prejudice when a man speaking perfect English, with blue eyes and fair skin told me he was not in fact a volunteer as I'd assumed, but had just arrived from Syria the day before, where he'd abandoned his MA at Damascus university after his uncle who had been a lecturer with a doctoral degree was murdered by insurgents.

The photos I took on that first visit were influenced by the guidelines I was asked to follow on calaidipedia.com, which have been instrumental in teaching me the way the west somehow defines itself in relation to non-westerners. They also forced me to look for something different from the images we had seen in the press. The restrictions advised photographers and anyone using their phones to be careful about what we published as certain newspapers had been known to appropriate images and use them against the people living in the camp to support an anti-refugee narrative. The other thing we were advised to do was to ask permission! Of course, it seems obvious really. Up until that point a lot of photographers like me were turning up and taking photos and publishing them simply because it was accessible. Young photographers, students and 'wanna be's' couldn't get to exotic places and be real war photographers but we could pop across the channel, effectively using the situation and the people there for experience. Image-makers from all levels were simply traipsing all over the place taking pictures, which weren't always used positively. So, there was an understandable antagonism towards journalists and photographers who were posting photographs without permission, payment or any tangible help.

I was faced with the question; how do I capture pictures ethically; how important is it to do so? And will the determination to do so actually have any impact at all? (Do photographs ever change minds? It's something that gets argued about quite a lot in photography classes and seminars.)

The other thing I quickly learned was the children who I had come to photograph were protected, rightly so. I did meet some children, not many but a few. And I took a couple of photographs with permission, but the more interesting pictures at that point were the landscapes.

What I ended up capturing in the main was the resilience and creativity I saw. The compulsion of human beings, no matter how dire their circumstances, to build communities and engage in economic activity, for good or bad was palpable. And that's what I tried to photograph: community and economic activity, in amongst the obvious awfulness. After that first visit I very much wanted to return at night to see the long, miraculous high street come alive, which I did in January 2016.

How to represent people and the situation ethically? And what does that mean? And why it is in fact an important activity.

It's vitally important that this story is covered and continues to be, by journalists for on-going news coverage and by people like me so I can share images directly with people in London. Even though I can't publish some of these images online – I can show them in talks, hoping listeners will recognise fellow human beings and at the very least question our governments' reaction, perhaps becoming involved in a small or big way. Photographs can help to counter donor fatigue, which is making it harder for volunteer organisations like DRCC to do their jobs. Remember, the volunteers work without pay. But they will also be useful for future generations, who can look back and find ways to come to terms with our society's failings, as well as acknowledging more positive aspects. This crisis is a critical story and needs to be looked at in depth. But how that is done is complicated.

As photographer Allesandro Penso says in an interview in the *British Journal of Photography,* "photographs can help us to understand the bigger picture [but]…we're not doing our jobs properly if we don't look at the whole crisis… we are implicated if we only zero in on the 'waves' of people coming to our shores." He adds that he is worried by the lack of respect afforded the refugees. He says, "Some of them might have a problem if we take a picture and publish it. They're frazzled, scared, trying to get their bearings. Maybe they have a family back home that could be in danger if he is recognised." (September 2016) Penso also talks about journalists getting to know the people they are photographing. Daniel Castro Garcia is another who has worked in this way and his work and subsequent book *Foreigner* has won awards.

Even so, one cannot ignore that photography, and especially the photography of people from non-western countries is steeped in a tradition borne out of empire building, when inspecting people like objects or 'specimens' was a social norm. It is a tradition that often emphasises difference and taps into fantasy. The father of anthropology, Bronislaw Malinowski, was one of the first to visit exotic foreign lands and make the inhabitants pose while he took photographs to bring back and show Europeans. Although he was the original to practise extensive fieldwork, he has been accused of approaching his subjects as if he were collecting and categorising butterflies, another Victorian fetish. What's more, his public, relatively ethical stance and the more unpalatable private views he held, discovered posthumously, were startlingly at odds with each other (Malinowski, 1967). It is incredibly hard to step away from this tradition if you are a westerner visiting a camp from a place of safety where stateless people are struggling, and then return to your place of safety with your privileged passport, which makes it possible to travel almost wherever you wish to go. If you're doing that, it behoves you to do so with a high level of awareness and sensitivity.

Photographers must consider what they're doing with these images, think about why they are taking them at all, and whether the cost of doing so outweighs the benefits

or not. Meyda Yegenoglu, an academic, in her book *Colonial Fantasies,* which looks at empire building from a feminist perspective, describes her work as being about "…the cultural representation of the west to itself by way of a detour through the other" (1998). In other words, the west defines itself by how it relates to non-westerners; and the feelings such images can trigger support and perpetuate, mostly unconsciously, fantasies which westerners have existed with for decades and even centuries. It seems fantastically important for anyone making images in relation to this crisis to be sentient about the conundrums faced. Especially when considering the current situation is arguably a result of the way the west has historically trampled all over the planet for centuries, upsetting networks and systems, be they social, biological or ecological. (Bateson, 1968)

In *The Guardian* eyewitness section, dated 20th February 2017, there is a powerful image of people being rescued off the Libyan Coast. A trainer of photography-journalists commented on Twitter, 'Strong photo in *the Guardian* today. But yeah. More refugees presented as 'the other' (*Duckrabbit*, 2017). The image is indeed strong but comes straight out of a tradition dating back to Malinowski's first images where 'otherness' is emphasised. The photograph re-enforces the notion of a frightening, alien figure from deepest darkest 'foreign lands'.

The challenge is to make arresting images, which represent people realistically. Perhaps an early example of photography, which aimed to do this, can be seen in Ansel Adam's pictures of Japanese interment camps. (Blakemore, 2017) Other solutions have been to offer people in camps cameras to document the situation themselves. When we see images of children laughing and playing, or of scabies on their faces, ideally and in an humane world, we should be able to say to ourselves, "it could very well be my child and I'd want someone to help".

Conclusion

I'm extremely privileged to be able to accompany *JS* and grateful to *DRCC* for trusting me. And I owe it to the people there to make pictures that counter that sense of exotic, frightening other. It is important to document the work charities such as *DRCC* are doing and necessary to record the support *JS* provide, so people in Wandsworth have a link to what is taking place in France and the rest of Europe.

Finally, perhaps we should consider how societies have long dehumanised people from outside their immediate experience. The following was published in 1968, part of a speech given in 1967 at a conference, a time of social and cultural revolution, when people were asking questions of those in power as they made decisions which seemed abhorrent and unacceptable to many. The full text explores how capitalist society keeps its subjects in a constant state of preparedness for war.

"In the contemporary world, as contrasted with the tribal, the inimical [hostile, harmful, unfriendly] lacks traditional definition, and the group in power reserves the right, and the power, to define who the inimical shall be. The definition, then

becomes part of the social system: lessons about the inimical are taught to elementary school children; the mass media scream its name with appropriate invective; the inimical becomes part of the legal system and it becomes incorporated into the economic framework." (Henry, 1968)

In 1967, communism was seen as the big bad wolf rather than Islam. As a society we are incredibly disconnected to our own history. But it doesn't take long to see, if you look, how what is happening today isn't new or surprising, and is simply a continuation of events that have taken place in history. There was no big bang moment for all of this. The extremism on all sides, which we have witnessed in recent years, isn't new. It's a result of on-going policies, actions and decisions that have been taking place for many years. Supposed western hegemonic superiority over other people, over cultures and societies that have been consistently de-humanised in the minds of some for too long has a lot to answer for in relation to today's issues. The vocalised reluctance of people to be photographed by westerners is a positive development, and the ensuing negotiated lessons learned by photographers here in the west important too. Responsible photography needs to be practised with an awareness of underlying historical implications at the very least, and with some effort, aim to counter assumptions and prejudices so prevalent in our society.

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Views my own

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