

Evan Madsen

Mr. Greco

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Atrocities through Art

Yalitza Aparicio, a Mixtec actress from Mexico, believes that “art sheds light on the urgent, necessary, and at times painful issues that. . . society [has] not been able to figure out.” Her primary claim is that art is a tool of expression, a pathway for people to represent their stories, struggles, and their needs. To support her claim, she cites her own experience as an actress, working on and starring in the film *Roma*. Through her role as Cleo, she herself could represent on the big screen a lifestyle that would otherwise be mostly hidden from the public. She could use the art of film in order to tell an important story that she believed others needed to hear, which was of major value and importance. The mid-1900s photojournalist Dorothea Lange exemplifies Aparicio’s claim through her depictions of struggling farmers during the Great Depression and Japanese-Americans during WW2. Lange’s work functions just as Aparicio believes art should: as a window into the lives of those with little other representation in society.

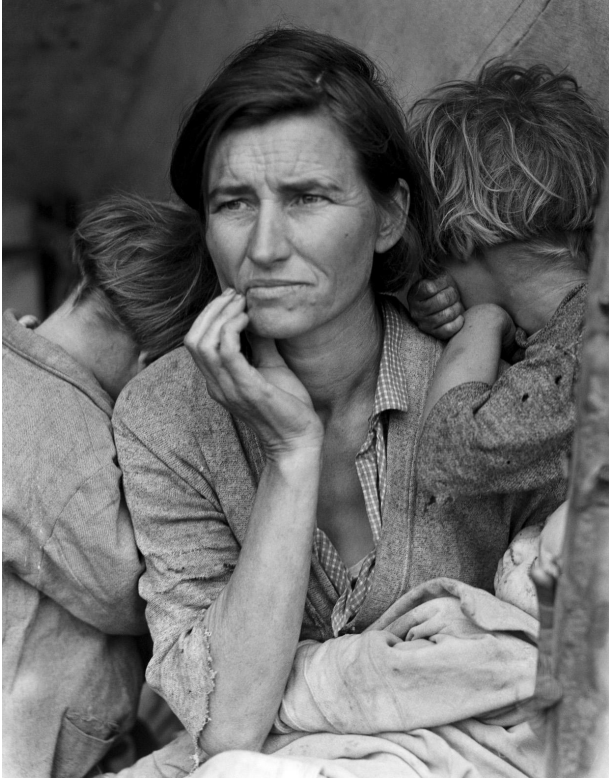


Fig. 1. Lange, Dorothea. *Migrant Mother*. 1936. Wikipedia, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Migrant_Mother

Migrant Mother(see fig. 1.), Lange's most famous photo, depicts a distressed and contemplative immigrant mother with her two children laying around her. The texture of everything in this photo, from her skin, to the ragged clothes she and her children are wearing, is rough. The photo alone gives the viewer an idea of the harrowing situation she is in. The emphasis of the photo is brought to her face, which holds a very worried look. From the moment we see the photo, there is a sense of struggle and sadness on her face. She seems preoccupied, trying to escape the harsh reality that surrounds her. The values of the photograph are very inconsistent, and a very wide variety of light, dark, and medium grays make the photo feel chaotic, like there is a lot going on. Through these elements, Lange tells the painful story of a migrant, only using the emotion conveyed through the

black and white photo. Ultimately, the combination of artistic methods as well as the purpose of this photo supports Aparicio's claim, as the piece itself is an artistic representation of the lives of migrant workers and families, a hugely marginalized group in America.



Fig. 2. Lange, Dorothea. Woodland, Yolo County, California. 1942. Calisphere, <https://calisphere.org/item/ark:/13030/ft7x0nb4ri/>

In this photo taken by Lange, she uses photography to not only tell a story, but evoke a feeling in the consumer of the art. In the photo, an elderly Japanese-American woman cries as she looks out of the window of the train taking her to internment during WW2. The black and white color palette creates a sense of sadness and despair, which matches the subject of the image: atrocities committed by the US government against the Japanese

during the second world war. Her use of lines is also notable, with the lines of the train being diagonal, and moving slowly down as you go from left to right on the image. This is symbolic of the low place which the train is heading to, and helps the photo tell a story. There is also emphasis on the number 3 written on the train. It, alongside the other numbers, shows how dehumanizing this sort of process was, with the only form of identity given to the people in the photo being numbers. By taking this photo which highlights the tragic truth of internment of the Japanese, Lange is achieving the same goal as Aparicio was when she acted in *Roma*, bringing attention to a group of people who were experiencing loss or inequality.



Fig.3. Lange, Dorothea. Migrants' Camp. 1935. Shorpy, <https://www.shorpy.com/node/14868>

While the last photo was filled with the emotion and sorrow of the internee, *Migrants' Camp* (see fig.3.) seems almost lacking in any major emotion. The subject, who leans in the shadow of an old rusty truck, seems numb. His figure is diagonal, resting on the circular wheel, seeming unable to stand upright and support himself. The tones and light in the photo is almost all in the background, and the subject in the foreground is only slightly highlighted, and mostly eclipsed by the rusty car. This is symbolic of the way the constant grind of work is draining and deprives the light from the lives of migrants who lead that sort of life, where every waking moment is spent working or worrying about a next meal. Importantly, his face seems expressionless, as if poking the tire is intriguing to him. While still remaining a sorrowful image, it lacks the emotions and thought of the last two, exemplifying how draining and void the lives of migrants can become.

The works of Yalitza Aparicio and Dorothea Lange powerfully demonstrate the impact of art in shedding light on the often overlooked struggles and stories of marginalized individuals and communities. Aparicio's role in the film "Roma" and Lange's iconic photographs serve as poignant examples of how art serves as a medium for expression, advocacy, and storytelling. Through their respective artistic mediums, they illuminate the urgent and painful issues faced by those on the fringes of society, emphasizing the enduring relevance and power of art as a tool for social awareness and change.

Works Cited

Aparicio, Yalitza. "In Mexico, 'Roma' Lit a Fire for Workers' Rights" The New York Times, 23

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<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/23/opinion/roma-mexico-workers-rights.html>

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Note about artworks: Since I provided full source information about each artwork with each figure caption, I do not need to provide this information on the Works Cited Page.

Note on the generative use of AI: I used ChatGPT to summarize my paragraph, and incorporated that directly into my conclusion.