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On the aesthetic regime of Kurdish cinema: the making of Kurdishness

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INTRODUCTION

i. Questions of Kurdish Cinema

In the winter of 2014, when I was still working as an academic for the Turkish government, I was invited to give a talk on Kurdish cinema in Diyarbakır by *Komeleya Akademiya Sînemayê ya Rojhilata Navîn* (Middle East Cinema Academy). That was the first time I had the chance to meet with Kurdish cinema students in the *de facto* Kurdish capital of Turkey, Diyarbakır. Excited to be there as a Kurdish Alevi woman researcher trying to make sense of the emergence of Kurdish films in light of discussions of national cinema, I stood before a group of Kurdish students from different backgrounds and professions: a Kurdish woman who fled Syria amid the civil war, a middle-aged man who had been working for the pro-Kurdish newspaper *Özgür Gündem* in the 1990s, a few young people who were unable to gain entry into a Turkish university, likely because of the language barrier, but who were eager to learn about the theory and practice of cinema. When I started to present the literature on national cinema and to invite students to engage with its promises and problems in the Kurdish case, I was reminded by the host of the class that this was the age of '*Türkiyelileşme*',[1] and that I should have been encouraging Kurdish film enthusiasts to make movies on trauma and reconciliation as a way of helping them to embrace the political paradigm of HDP, so as to be agents of peace-making, and to understand that the idea of an independent Kurdish state had been 'thrown into the

[1] The term '*Türkiyelileşme*' (or "Turkey-ify", so to speak) is proposed by the imprisoned leader of the PKK (*Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan*, Kurdistan's Worker's Party) to define Turkish citizenship on the basis of shared land instead of shared language and ethnicity, as a part of his broader political project. The term has been embraced by the pro-Kurdish HDP (*Halkların Demokratik Partisi,* Peoples' Democratic Party) as a step towards solving the Kurdish issue of Turkey by democratic means.

trash bin' in the words of Hatip Dicle (*İlke Haber*, 2014). Not really heeding his words, I proceeded to discuss a wide range of approaches to national cinemas. I listened with great curiosity as one participant, the former *Özgür Gündem* journalist, said, 'I know it does not sound proper now, but I want to make a comedy in Kurdish instead of drama. I have been experiencing violence since the early 1990s but what I find worth telling is the absurdity of all the state violence surrounding Kurdish lives here' (Personal Communication, 2014).

Needless to say, I appreciated the understanding shown to me here, as a guest instructor in one of the classrooms of *Navenda Çand û Hunerê Ya Ciwanan a Cegerxwîn* (Cegerxwîn Center of Culture and Art for the Youth), established under the governance of pro-Kurdish BDP (*Barış ve Demokrasi Partisi*, Peace and Democracy Party) in 2010. And I appreciated the chance to witness, up close, some of the implications of the counter-official will of Kurdish parties within Turkish politics months before *Newroz* in 2015, a celebration of Kurdish peace, and two years before the destruction of Kurdish districts in the fall of 2016. Yet what especially struck me, in terms of my evolving interest in Kurdish cinema, was that I was being told here of certain rules—articulated here quite explicitly—for the field of aesthetics; I was witnessing the making of the politics of what can and cannot be said, what should and should not be represented in art—in a sense, a call for the formation of certain kinds of subjects around Kurdish political claims. In the following years, the more I became involved with Kurdish films and their relevant literature, the more aware I became of these rules, in both their explicit and implicit forms.

Thus, in addition to my interest in the concept of national cinema, I began to wonder how these rules function in the Kurdish embracing of the medium of cinema, and whether or how these rules inflected the cinematic promise of Kurdish oral presence. In line with this, I grew more interested in the perplexities of discourses of national cinema for the Kurdish case, and in how the counter-hegemonic struggle of Kurdish political parties set certain limits and demands on a Kurdish aesthetics of cinema, and also took part myself in the production of knowledge on Kurdish cinematography as a Kurdish woman. Through these experiences, I began to realize that the dynamism of Kurdish cinematography was not free from the dynamism of processes that produce Kurdish subjects. Hence, my interest in questions of Kurdish cinema evolved into questions of the making of Kurdish subjects in the age of late capitalism and of technological revolutions.

As one of the most populated stateless nations in the world, Kurdish people's experience of modernism through films provides us a case through which to both embrace and challenge Benedict Anderson's concept of imagined communities (2006). Here it is crucial to underline the fact that the historical lack of a standard printed language is a key reason why audio-visual means have been the main media employed, and why they arguably have played such a major role in processes of Kurdish subjectification. Kurdish desires for national recognition solidify in Kurdish directors' diegetic use of Kurdish languages in commercial films, yet this occurs necessarily through the differing factual conditions of fragmented Kurdish realities, all of which exist within different nation states and in the shadow of the forms and demands of different printed imaginations (Turkish

or Iranian nation making and print nationalism, e.g.). Such practical differences mean that the modern category of the nation is refracted, its limits prodded and pushed, in the hands of different directors, working through a variety of audio-visual materials. Therefore, the question of a Kurdish subject is mediated by or hailed within such a gap between the desire for the totality of a national cinema (*a cinema* able to articulate *the Kurdish subject*) and grounded truth of acentric and diverging Kurdish realities through which any subject must necessarily be articulated (*cinemas* that compel us to ask, *which Kurdish subjects*).

The process of subjectification implied by the oscilliation between these two ends precisely addresses an aesthetic demarcation marked by not only the oppressive politics directed at Kurdish identity, but also by the particular ways in which Kurdish cinema workers, including academics and researchers, engage with becoming Kurdish in the name of democratic politics. In other words, once recognizing the implicit and explicit rules imposed on the very possibility and development of Kurdish cinematography, the question of Kurdishness also becomes a matter of aesthetics. My research asks, can we speak of Kurdish cinema as productive of subjects, and if so, then what are the politics of this process of subjectification? Through my investigation, I expose the multiple layers of Kurdish cinema constructed by Kurdish films and directors, by academics working on Kurdish cinema, by Kurdish institutions, and by contemporary artists. I thus aim to depict an aestheticized Kurdish identity as a response to the politics of oppression and resistance. Through this research, embracing a Rancièrian stance to determine the conditions of a specific aesthetic regime that stands for Kurdish forms of utterance and posits a common

world for the process of subjectification, I critically delve into questions of national cinema by way of the production, distribution and interpretation of Kurdish films, in order to depict the democratic demand for equality in an aesthetic regime of Kurdishness.

ii. Rancièrian Aesthetics, Body and Language

Kurdish identity is an overly politicized category, due in large part to the continuous violence to which it has been subjected, and to traumatic experiences rooted in massacres at the hands of hegemonic nation states. Because of such experiences, trauma has become one of the most common areas of focus in intellectual work on Kurdish culture. At the same time, though, defining the criteria for a community to be called Kurdish has proved to be no small problem, due to clashes between Kurdish politics and hegemonic states, as well as between agents of Kurdish political movements. In such a context, cinema—not only because it has been in the service of nationalist projects since the earliest years of the 20th century, but also, and crucially, because it exposes the formations of the modern subject—constitutes a very specific example, in the Kurdish case, on two bases. First, not having a state-based film industry, the national claims of Kurdish cinema challenge the imagined communities of modern states, even despite its ways of imaging a linguistically determined Kurdish audience. It does so in terms of its non-homogenous audience and reception, and because of the absence of the political-economic conditions of its very presence, in terms of commercial films in Kurdish languages. These factors constitute the context for the invention of a particular artistic tradition through common experiences of

violence. And secondly, Kurdish cinema's acentric and non-linear development, precisely its anachronological presence among nationally defined cinemas, coinciding with the implementation of new technologies in film theory, posits Kurdish subjects as quasi-bodies. Here, the term quasi-bodies is used in the way Rancière uses it, which departs "from any idealist conception of the body politics as analogous to a natural organism, highlighting how any social structure is always founded on the arbitrary, conventional bases of linguistic utterances whose meanings can be re-appropriated and made to re-signify' (Lane, 2020: 13). The notion of non-cinema, too, sits at the heart of Kurdish audio-visual literarity's promises for the very democratic presence of Kurdish people.

> [N]on-cinema is about non-mainstream films and their importance. In Dussel's language, non-cinema is a politically engaged 'cinema of liberation,' freeing cinema and, perhaps more particularly, our understanding of cinema from the domination of the mainstream…Non-cinema demonstrates to us that what we define as cinema is a political as much as (if not more than) an ontological question. This is not to deny the validity or indeed the potential benefits of mainstream cinema in the digital era (this is the purpose of grounding it as a supercinema before turning to non-cinema), but it is to address the issue of the hegemony that it enjoys, and the homogeneity of cinema that ensues when that which is defined as cinema excludes that which is not overtly profitable to film financiers or easily entertaining (because familiar) to film audiences (Brown, 2016).

In order to investigate these two conceptual bases—quasi-bodies and non-cinema—of my claim on Kurdish subjectification, I bring Rancière's framework on aesthetics and ethics into conversation with the literature on national cinema, the category of the un-representable in art, and the digital revolution in the age of globalization at the intersection of body, voice, and language.

Jacques Rancière, a student of Louis Althusser in *Ecole Normale Superieure* in the 1960s, is known by his theoretical trajectory tying politics to aesthetics, alongside his focus on political emancipation and radical equality theory. 'My personal interests have often drawn me to literature and cinema' says Rancière, who continues:

> What I wanted to show when I wrote *Nights of Labor* (1981) was that a so-called political and social movement was also an intellectual and aesthetic one, a way of configuring the frameworks of the visible and the thinkable. In the same way, in *Disagreement,* I tried to show how politics is an aesthetic matter, a reconfiguration of the way we share out or divide places and times, speech and silence, the visible and the invisible (Hallwars, 2003: 203).

Since the early twentieth century, Kurdish people have been geographically across four modern nation states (Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Syria), and have been under at least four nation-making projects, silencing any possibility of a common world for them (Vali, 2003; Hassanpour, 2003). Under such circumstances, Engin Sustam sees artistic production on Kurdishness in the 1990s as a form of militancy, by its claim to speak for itself (Sustam, 2014). In my research, I embrace the theoretical frame Rancière argues for in *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible* (*Le Partage du sensible: Esthétique et politique* [2000], 2011), *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics* (*Malaise dans l'esthétique* [2004], 2010), and *Aesthetics and Its Discontents* (2010) in order to explore the anachoronic and non-relational emergence of Kurdish cinematography in the name of the democratic presence of Kurdish people. Rancière's notion of literarity, which is central to his theory of subjectification, leads me to posit Kurdish audio-visual works

of art as the core of Kurdish subjectification, due, as we noted, to the lack of a standardized print language for Kurdish people. According to Rancière:

> Man is a political animal because he is a literary animal who lets himself be diverted from his 'natural' purpose by the power of words. This literarity is at once the condition and the effect of the circulation of 'actual' literary locutions. However, these locutions take hold of bodies and divert them from their end or purpose insofar as they are not bodies in the sense of organisms, but quasi-bodies, blocks of speech circulating without a legitmate father to accompany them toward their authorized addressee. Therefore they do not produce collective bodies. Instead, they introduce lines of fracture and disincorporation into imaginary collective bodies (Rancière, 2011: 39).

In a Kurdish aesthetic regime, the distribution of the sensible—which forms an ethical Kurdish community precisely through cinematic experience—asks to be realized and analyzed in terms of the variations of non-commercial Kurdish films, and with an eye to not just feature-length commercial Kurdish films, but non-cinema, too. By employing a content analysis of films in Kurdish languages, identifying Kurdish directors as agents of history making, and investigating attempts to institutionalize Kurdish cinema, I address the Kurdish presupposition of equality to act in an aesthetic regime of art. For, 'in democratic political action, people take the hiearachies of a given political and social order to be, as Rancière says, contingent rather than natural or inevitable' (May, 2010: 72). Though before we turn to cinema, at this point, it is helpful to consider more closely the use of certain concepts by Rancière.

In Rancièrian thought, aesthetics is approached as a distinct regime for identifying and reflecting on the arts, premising the idea of thought's affectivity, which leads us to the

distribution of the sensible (Rancière, 2011: 10-11). Identifying a particular cinema, Kurdish cinema, becomes, through interpretation and through such a theoretical lens, a matter of the aesthetic regime of Kurdishess in the service of the distribution of the sensible for Kurdish quasi-bodies in the name of *we*. Here, a distribution of the sensible refers to a concept describing the common world's establishment in terms of the distribution of spaces, times and forms of activity (Rancière, 2011: 12). Through a variety of tools, the film enviroment's spatial and temporal components aid in the establishment of a Kurdified common world, demonstrating and interpreting a Kurdish aesthetic presence. In order to re-conceptualize art as a form of life alongside its historical transformation, Rancière rejects the postmodern idea of rupture (Rancière, 2010b: 36). Moreover, political heterogeneity emerges as a matter of composition instead of constitution, where politics:

> (…) invents new forms of collective enunciation; it re-frames the given by inventing new ways of making sense of the sensible, new configurations between the visible and the invisible, and between the audible and the inaudible, new distributions of space and time -in short new bodily capacities. (…) Politics creates a new form, as it were, of dissensual 'commonsense' (Rancière, 2010a: 139).

A political subject is defined 'by the way in which forms of subjectivication re-configure the topography of the common', where the site for dwelling, a common world, is called as 'a polemical distribution of modes of being and 'occupations' in space of possibilities' (Rancière, 2010a: 121, 213; Rancière, 2011: 42). Cinema occupies a space of possibilities in the name of subjectification of Kurdish agents 'not from but within a democratic

movement' where 'subjectification is the process of becoming a collective subject through acting out of the presupposition of equality' (May, 2010: 78). Cinema does so thanks to certain non-cinematic elements, which resist homogenization by industry, nation and patriarchy. This echoes a sentiment, sometimes voiced by directors, that movement is something common to both cinema (as an art form of the moving image) and to Kurdish identity (as people often subjected to various forms of forced mobility, displacement, diaspora, and the like). And this sentiment is further echoed in the imperfect techniques in many of the non-commercial films I consider here—techniques markedly different from the commercial perfectness of Kurdish feature-length films.

The context of cinema, the glorified medium of modernism, has problematized the subject since its early beginnings. Sarah Kofman analyses the metaphoric embracement of the earliest cinematic tool, *camera obscura,* in the texts of Marx, Freud and Nietzsche, from the late 19th to the 20th century, while Jonathan Crary elaborates the problem of the observer in the modern age via, again, *camera obscura,* in order to examine the [modern] human subject as an observer (Kofman, 1999; Crary, 1992). Crary points to the de-familiarization of urban spaces, as well as the perceptual and temporal dislocations of railroad travel, telegraphy, industrial production, and flows of typographic and visual information, as the cause for the renovation of the subject (Crary, 1992: 10-11). However, the 20th century witnessed the inversion of the sight-dominance and hearing-dominance duality to the benefit of hearing-dominance (Ong, 2002). As a result, the re-discovery of voice has emerged in five main sites in the second half of 20th century, as laid out by

Lagaay: theories and methods of linguistic and conversation analysis; literary theory; cognitive science; psychoanalysis; and contemporary arts (theatre, performance and film) (Lagaay, 2009). Continental philosophy's other key re-discovery is the move toward the body, crucial for the argument in this research. Yet, it should be noted that those interpretations of the modern subject in visual and audial terms are strictly tied to the body of a natural organism rather than a collective body of action, which will later find its expression in the national subjects of cinema.

We begin to see the poststructuralist tendency toward the body with Michel Foucault's notion of the body, described in *Nietzsche, Genealogy, History* as 'the inscribed surface of events (traced by language and dissolved by ideas)' (Foucault, 1977: 83). Although Foucault's understanding of the body is not quite concrete, its re-interpretation has a comprehensive range (Megill, 1987: 252). The most persuasive and inspiring critique of Foucault has come from Judith Butler and her crucial work on gender (Butler, 1999). By rejecting a representational approach in favor of a performative approach, Butler posits language as a medium for something beyond just perceiving and understanding reality, beyond just language as a mirror:

> If the body signified as prior to signification is an effect of signification, then the mimetic or representational status of language, which claims that signs follow bodies as their necessary mirrors, is not mimetic at all. On the contrary, it is productive, constitutive, one might even argue performative… (Butler, 1993: 30).

Here, speaking subjects come into being through the reiteration and extension of the primary acts of differentiation and separation from the maternal body (Butler, 1993: 71). In particular, the subject is above all a speaking subject. Thus, in Butler's writing, the subject is not the producer of linguistic construction, but the product (Vasterling, 2003: 208). However, Vasterling points to the fact that 'as embodied beings we happen to be this 'thing' called a 'body,' so that 'the ontological status of human beings is not only that of speaking beings but that of embodied speaking beings' (Vasterling, 2003: 210). Film theory's embracing of the body as a natural organism becomes most evident in Dolar's account of the speaking, embodied subjects of cinema and voice.

In his most prominent work on voice, Mladen Dolar posits voice as the agent of the embodiment of the impossible division of the body into interior and exterior (Dolar, 2006: 71). Moreover, voice stands at a paradoxical and obscure site: it is the crossing point of the body and language, but it is neither part of language nor of the body (Dolar, 2006: 73). Additionally, it is precisely the voice as the bearer of all linguistic expressions that exposes persons as social beings. Only voice makes utterance and enunciation possible, as a subjectivity expressing itself and inhabiting the means of expression (Dolar, 2006: 14-15). Dolar's position on voice as the unique site of true expression and the locus that reveals the unutterable, ultimately aims to make the voice visible, as:

> […] it epitomizes something that cannot be found anywhere in the statement, in the spoken speech and its string of signifiers, nor can it be identified with their material support. In this sense the voice as the agent of enunciation sustains the signifiers and constitutes the string, as it were, that holds them together, although

> it is invisible because of the beads concealing it. If signifiers form a chain, then the voice may well be what fastens them into a signifying chain. And if the process of enunciation points at the locus of subjectivity in language, then voice also sustains an intimate link with the very notion of the subject (Dolar, 2006: 23).

Dolar's analysis of the notion of subject based upon voice and language recalls Bhabha's notion of the rhetorical strategy of social reference (Bhabha, 1993). It provides a fruitful frame for an investigation of cultural identity focusing on the audio-visual surface of cinema. Dolar also points to the promise of cinema in terms of thinking about voice:

> Among the new media it is, perhaps surprisingly, the cinema which has opened a whole new realm of experiencing the uncanny nature of the acousmatic voice. Surprisingly, because the cinema is based on fitting sight to sound, bringing together both halves, re-creating the seamless flow of the visible and the audible, but in the very endeavor to make them tally it appears that, at immutable margins, they do not fit. Michel Chion's insightful book *La voix au cinéma* (1982) has made us acutely aware of this (Dolar, 2006: 65).

Although cinema has not been silent since its earliest emergence, theories of cinema have immanently involved a tendency to ignore or demote sound, at least until recently (Abel and Altman, 2001; Chion, 1994). Chion's conceptualization of the acousmatic voice, whose cause is not seen on the screen, is promising as the suture of the constitutive division of the subject (Schlichter, 2011: 46). Additionally, by rejecting the visual emphasis of theories of cinema, Chion provides the new concept of 'the audiovisual scene':

> If we can speak of an audiovisual scene, it is because the scenic space has boundaries, it is structured by the edges of the visual frame. Film sound is that which is contained or not contained *in an image;* there is no place of sounds, no

> auditory scene already preexisting in the soundtrack – and therefore, properly speaking, *there is no soundtrack* (Chion, 1994: 68).[2]

The surface of this audiovisual scene refers to sensory cinema, whose components cannot be limited to sight and sound but are also 'rhythmic, dynamic, temporal, tactile, and kinetic sensations that make use of both the auditory and visual channels' (Chion, 1994: 152). This approach understands the body as a site of difference and experience, which cannot be limited to the experience of the audience but also involves the articulation of the subject(s) through the cinematic surface. Here, rather than positing sound in cinema as a threat to the metaphoric referents of body, Chion redefines the body as part of enunciation and experience while liberating it from biological determinism. The closest emphasis on collective experience on body politics comes from Mary Ann Doane, who defines three types of spaces appropriate for Chion's redefinition: the space of diegesis, the visible space of the screen as the receptor of the image, and the acoustical space of the theater or auditorium (Doane, 1980: 39).

As a site of becoming, '*the voice that holds bodies and languages together*'[3] is the main theme for a critical reading of speaking, embodied subjects in the context of Kurdish cinema, and the frame for an investigation into national cinema's discourse of standardized languages (Dolar, 2006: 60). Language, as the crossing point of voice and body, has special importance in collective terms for any attempt to deal with Spivak's

[2] Emphasis in the original
[3] Emphasis in the original

well-known question: ‘Can the subaltern speak?’ (Spivak, 1988). In the search for the possible answers to that question, as a utopia, a philosophical concept, an ideological apparatus, a form of entertainment, an industry among many other things, cinema asks to be re-conceptualized as ‘an art form only insofar as it is a world’ (Rancière, 2012; Vila, 2013). Looking for the aesthetic experience at the heart of the democratic politics of an ethical community for Kurdish subjects, a *we*, I investigate not only Kurdish artistic emergences but also Kurdish emergence of life in the form of art to present a comprehensive understanding of a Kurdish presupposition of equality as an element of democratic movement rather than as a result of it. I claim that the bodies of viewers, actors and directors are ethnicized as agents, in contribution to imagining spatially and temporally non-fixed and non-unified Kurdishness in the name of the construction of quasi-bodies forming a *we*.

iii. Methodology

In his investigation of Rancière’s theory, Todd May warns his reader about the difference between Foucaltian subjectivation and Rancièrian subjectification as follows: ‘It is not the type of subjectification discussed, for example, by Michel Foucault, where the power relations around us turn us into subjects. In some sense, it is the opposite. Subjectification is the process of becoming a collective subject through acting out of the presupposition of equality’ (May, 2010: 78). In this research, my aim is to investigate the Kurdish audio-visual presence in terms of its claim on democratic politics, and I pursue this aim through

qualitative research into the forming of a collective subject. Referring to a Rancièrian understading of literarity and literary animals' emergence as the transhistorical force in the process of subjectification, it is necessary to recognize the historical conditions of Kurdish cinema which determined the organization of my thesis (Lane, 2019: 11). Though some critique Rancière for his use of politics as an ahistorical or dehistoricizing notion or for his anti-scientism, in fact, Rancière's employment of the concepts of non-relation and the untimely event can be read as a critique of prior forms of historiography (Whitener, 2013). Precisely through the emergence of an untimely, anachronic event, it becomes possible for the possible to be set up a polemical space on which equality and absence meet in the name of a poetic structure of knowledge (Whitener, 2013). Kurdish cinema's improper emergence without a state-based industry and homogenized audience calls for examination as an anachronical event, rather than through a chronological account of a particular cinema to elaborate its transhistorical presence. In other words, focusing on periods and fragments instead of following a chronological and holistic order, I aim to isolate elements of Kurdish cinema as moments of subjectification and politics, without falling prey to an evolutionary understanding of Kurdish film history.

I focus on the production, distribution and reception of Kurdish films to depict a Kurdish aesthetic regime of art as a condition of an ethical Kurdish community. I employ Hoberman's definition of cinema 'to mean a form of recorded and hence repeatable moving image, and for the most part, synchronized recorded sound. Television kinescopes and TV since video-tape are cinematic; so is YouTube' (Hoberman, 2013: 3).

A further part of cinema is the audience, though here, the reader will notice the absence of festival viewers and movie theather audiences in this analysis. This is due to limitations on intellectual space afforded in Turkey since 2015. Specifially, I mean that, having been dismissed from my position and thus already on the radar of the state, and writing during a period of intensified scrutiny of academics, my ability to comfortably carry out fieldwork was, to say the least, limited. Therefore, cinema collectives and film festivals stand as mediators to depict, via the internet, the quasi-bodies for a Kurdish we, and to explore the followers and attendees of Kurdish films and Kurdish film festivals. 'As a democratic political movement begins to take hold, a *we* emerges that was not there before. A group begins to emerge where there was none before. In that sense, the social field of experience is reconfigured' (May, 2010: 78-79). In order to investigate the construction of subjectivity through a non-standardized language, my focus in particular is the space of diegesis of Kurdish films, the audio-visual forms of Kurdish languages. Through an analysis of narratives in Kurdish languages by Kurdish directors, I embrace the Rancièrian tension between un-representable trauma and the will to re-present, in order to explore the ways in which an aesthetic regime of Kurdishness becomes possible. The internet thus emerges as the host for a new experience of film audience, different than movie theaters in important ways.

Kurdish directors are central to my discussion, as bodies marked by the subjectification process through both their filmmaking and their broader engagement, as teachers and public speakers about participation in democratic politics. In order to provide a historical

account of their individual subjectification processes, I have examined interviews, panels, and academic works with and by Kurdish directors. My personal communications with Özkan Küçük, Şener Özmen, Binevşa Berivan, Kazım Öz, Zeynel Doğan and Ali Kemal Çınar also shaped the development of this research. Their search for both resources and an audience to, respectively, make and show their films speaks to the necessity of non-governmental organisations for the promise of cinema for the process of Kurdish subjectification. The settled film industry in Turkey has made Kurdish directors of Turkey central to any discussion of Kurdish cinema, starting from Yılmaz Güney. Recognizing Güney's emergence as the founding myth of Kurdish cinema, my research problematizes the search for Kurdish cinema's father by intellectuals and academics working across different narratives, directors and institutions, in their attempts to re-claim Kurdishness. In other words, despite Kurdish women's public recognition and political gains, the gender issue of Kurdish cinema primarily crystallizes in this search for a father. Moreover, Güney's colonial experience of Kurdishness at the heart of the assimiliationist Turkish film industry, and his later anti-colonial declarations in Europe function as a prism to claim for the playful use of concepts by Kurdish collective subject in the name of a pragmatically defined common world. Yet, my contribution to the literature on Kurdish cinema becomes evident through the inclusion of Kurdish contemporary art and imperfect film making techniques to address the forms and tools of an aesthetic regime of Kurdishness in the service of a social body. Due to the limited spaces recognized for commercial Kurdish films, spaces like YouTube offer a possible home for the film language of quasi-bodies in the distribution of the sensible for a Kurdish common world.

Moreover, the desire to be accessible to its audience liberates Kurdish films from the common concerns of digitalization, which Erika Balsom defines in terms of finances and the right seeing conditions, when noting that 'in contemporary moving image art, more often than not reproduction is viewed as a threat, not as a promise' (Balsom, 2016: 390).

iv. The Structure of the Research

I structure my research under three chapters, following the three artistic regimes identified by Rancière: 'A Foundation of Kurdish National Cinema', 'A Re-interpretation of Kurdish Trauma', and 'An Aesthetic Regime of Kurdishness'. Within the Western tradition, Rancière identifies three artistic regimes. The first is an ethical regime of images that finds its roots in a Platonic polemic against the simulacra (Rancière, 2011: 20-23). Here, a twofold question haunts images, in terms of their origin and their end or purpose. This first title will pave the way for a problematization of the theology of time in the catastrophic spaces of Kurdish films—a theology that claims a cinema in the service of nationalized trauma. Precisely, I mean here the ways in which the image's mode of being affects the ethos; the mode of being of individuals and communities become the object of knowledge (Rancière, 2011). In other words, what is the stance of the researcher toward his or her object of knowledge when it comes to knowing and defining Kurdish cinema? Rancière's conceptualization of the representative regime of arts, the second regime, is based on an Aristotelian articulation of the couple *poieis* and *mimesis*. *Mimemis* is the principle that organizes the distribution of ways of doing, making, seeing and judging,

such that it is not the principle of resemblance (Rancière, 2011). Accordingly, the Kurdish film universe, which speaks in the name of a witness and for the sake of a nationalized trauma, becomes a problematic to address the necessity of the ethical turn on behalf of the re-conceptualization of the form of art, including documentary. And the final regime Rancière names is the aesthetic regime of art that declares the absolute singularity of art while destroying any pragmaticism isolating such a singularity (Rancière, 2011). Accordingly, the digital revolution becomes part of a Kurdish audio-visual habitat by means of its low quality or imperfectness. While the representative regime of arts embraces the separation between the idea of fiction and of lies, and stabilizes the artistic exception, in the aesthetic regime:

> (…) The logic of descriptive and narrative arrangement in fictions becomes fundamentally indistinct from the arrangements used in the description and interpretation of the phenomena of the social and historical world. (…) The aesthetic revolution drastically disrupts things: testimony and fiction come under the same regime of meaning (Rancière, 2011: 37).

Accordingly, the defining paradox of the aesthetic regime of arts becomes 'the suspension of every determinate relation correlating the production of art forms and a specific social function' (Rancière, 2010a: 137), and art is re-positioned as a form of life that is also a form of self-education (2010a: 118-119). Therefore, the concept of art becomes a form of life to respond to questions on a shared common world by Kurdish filmmakers, Kurdish audiences, and film scholars on Kurdish cinema, through different meanings attributed to becoming Kurdish.

In the first chapter, I explore the foundations of Kurdish national cinema to reach the establishment of a theology of time in Kurdish feature-length narrative films, and to explore the discourse of Kurdish national cinema. Critically engaging with the literature on the concept of national cinema, I explore a perspective from which to posit Kurdish national claims on cinema, while exposing the Platonic structure of any taxonomic use of national cinema discussions. In line with this, I also explore a growing academic and intellectual interest in Kurdish films to problematize the very foundations of Kurdish national cinema, not only in terms of films, but also in reception and interpretation. Here the modernization of Kurdish culture in terms of the audibility of Kurdish languages presents the very political ground or the possibility of any national audio-visual regime of Kurdishness. Yılmaz Güney, the father of Kurdish cinema for many, occupies a strong position, through which one can identify Kurdish cinema in the absence of Kurdish languages, and better understand how Kurdish presence is a matter of positioning in audio-visual terms, even with the lack of a nationalized Kurdish audience in Kurdish languages (Bozarslan, 2006; Şengül, 2013b; Koçer, 2014; Çiçek, 2016b). In this manner, I argue that the celebration of Kurdish cinema in national terms is in the service of a hegemonic imposition of modern nation states, while the Kurdish community's socio-political realities diverge from the normativity of state-based definitions of national subjects.

The second chapter is structured to problematize the popular theme of victimhood in feature-length narrative films in Kurdish languages by claiming a re-interpretation of

Kurdish trauma in terms of political economy. In feature-length narrative films, where the color of Kurdishness is determined by the trauma its subjects have faced under the yoke of whichever modern nation state they exist within, trauma becomes the founder of Kurdish subjectivity, in commercial Kurdish films, as a founding past experience. In this respect, the category of the unrepresentable in art emerges as key to uncovering the necessity of a re-conceptualization of ethics for a Kurdish audio-visual regime, to re-interpret the Kurdish form of cinema. I engage with the term of 'the pedagogy of real' to pass the threshold for Kurdish cinematic presence, and propose the emergence of *Kolektîfa Sînema ya Mezopotamya* (KSM, The Mesopotamia Cinema Collective) in Istanbul, as well as the re-conceptualization of documentary films blended with fiction, as tools to establish the quasi-bodies for Kurdish ethical community (Jaguaribe, 2005). Following the refusal of an aesthetics of testimony from the homeland, Diyarbakır, I take *Gênco* (*Genco,* Ali Kemal Çınar, 2017) under my lens and question the possibility of an aesthetics embracing the digitalization and re-definition of Kurdish trauma to dismantle the prescription offered to Kurdish audiences by governing politics in the service of a legitimate imagination of Kurdishness, for an imagined hegemonic viewer.

In the last chapter of my research, I investigate the aesthetic regime of Kurdishness in terms of the topography of common life in Kurdish, taking root beyond Kurdistan. To define that Kurdish common life, I discuss a topography of the common, by the most current determinants of Kurdish identity, in terms of spatial and linguistic mobility through an analysis of *My Sweet Pepperland* (Hiner Saleem, 2013). Moreover, positing

the womanization of Kurdish politics as a mirror to reflect the gendered constitution of Kurdish cinematography, I throw into question the gender of the imagined Kurdish ethical community. Hereafter, 'poor images' of Kurdistan, captured by the German-based Japanese contemporary artist Hito Steyerl, shape the discussion. Engaging with the early embracing of the digital revolution by Kurdish artists of Turkey in the 1990s, and the lack of exhibition sites for Kurdish contemporary art, I suggest to focus on Kurdish film festivals' potential in Kurdistan, rather than outside of Kurdistan. Deprived of central institutional support and international recognition, Kurdish film festivals function on behalf of educating Kurdish audiences, in particular by re-interpreting political concepts on behalf of creating an ethically determined community through film exhibitions, panels, and workshops. Thus, the conventional imposition of Kurdish victimhood meets with the agency determined by resistance in Kurdish film festivals of short films and documentaries rather than the perfected trauma narratives in feature-length films in Kurdish. I suggest viral Kurdishness as the contemporary category for a legitimate Kurdish presence by an audio-visualization of politics through a variety of media channels, including newspapers, periodicals, and YouTube videos. Viral Kurdishness stands for the popularization of Kurdish subjects within recognized ranges by hegemonic states, as in two cases: Hacı Lokman Birlik and the Angel of Kobane.

Based on the detailed discussion, across these three chapters, of national cinema, the art of the un-representable, and digital revolution, I aim to reveal the necessity of exploring the aesthetics regime of Kurdishness in audio-visual terms, in order to articulate the

subjectification processes leading to an ethical community in the name of Rancièrian democratic politics. Kurdish languages, and oral tradition stand in as the carriers of a subjectification process that marks a Kurdified collective body. As such, this investigation also attends to the formation and content of Kurdish utterances, as part of the analysis. This in turn raises the question of Kurdish ethical community as a matter of the political presence of Kurdishness re-claiming its national foundation beyond the nation for an emergent *we*. Yet, the gap between the political recognition Kurdish women have gained and Kurdish cinema's patriarchal apperances marks this particular ethical community in a particularly gendered manner. Drawing from the concepts of body, voice and language, then, I will continue with the foundation of Kurdish national cinema as a starting point for my research on an aesthetic regime of Kurdishness.