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

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CONCLUSION

My curiosity about Kurdish cinema began with the film language of an oppressed nation against hegemonic and colonial impositions. In time, this expanded into a critical exploration of the meanings attributed to that nation, and to Kurdishness. My research on Kurdish cinema has been met with doubts about the possibility of narrative in a language, Kurdish, that has not been officialy recognized until recently. Between the years of 2015 and 2020, I have been thinking, reading, talking and writing on Kurdish audio-visual presences in several platforms, addressing a variety of audiences. Turkish academics have not hesitated to express their surprise about my insistence on the necessity of knowing Kurdish languages to have any claim on the diegetic construction of Kurdish films. Kurdish male academics working on cinema, meanwhile, have questioned the political stance of my research. As a Kurdish Alevi woman from Dersim, my mother tongue was not Kurmanci and my intellectual interests were not in harmony with Kurdish national desires. In these circumstances, the questions I ask of Kurdish cinema have evolved to consider the particular modes of subjectification formed through implicit and explicit rules about what and how to claim and what and how to dismiss in and by Kurdish films. Throughout this research, I have critically engaged with questions of Kurdish cinema in order to expose clashing ideologies in this specific film universe, through not only commercial, feature-length films in Kurdish languages, but particularly through the emergence of several institutions, directors and discourses working in the non-commercial spaces of the Kurdish film universe (at least, to the extent that a rapidly evolving political climate has allowed). Having identified the limits of commercial Kurdish films for interpreting the sociology and politics of Kurdish lives and aesthetics,

I started to investigate cinematic forms in the service of an aesthetic regime of Kurdishness liberated from modern forms of imagining the nation, as well as from movie theaters, and in the service of democratic politics.

The imagination of homogeneous time has helped modern nation-states to spread a sense of territorial and linguistic sameness, with broadcasting serving as an investment in collective memory. Yet the democratization of media channels with the rise of globalization and technological development has led oppressed communities to engage with broadcasting for their identities, long denied and targeted for assimilation. Some discussions of national cinema have called attention to the limits of conceptualizing cinema through strictly territorial terms, and have exposed the nature of this situation for oppressed communities under the rule of a single nation-state. Yet in the Kurdish case, because Kurds have been subjected both to the assimilation policies of four separate nation-states, and to differentiated diasporic experiences at the hand of various host countries' immigrant policies, more than four structures of time -chronologies of trauma- and collective memory have evolved, depending on the corresponding nation-state's homogenous imagination of time for Kurdishness and Kurdish cultural workers' engagement with cinema to speak for something like a nation. Throughout my investigation, I have critically engaged with the heterogenous elements of Kurdish cinema -namely films, collectives, and festivals- to problematize the national, political and revolutionary claims of Kurdish aesthetics by directors, academics, and possible virtual publics, in the name of making Kurdishness.

In the first chapter, recognizing Turkey's settled film industry's opportunities for Kurdish filmmaking practices, and Yılmaz Güney's centrality to Kurdish cinema's claims, I posit his performative identity as a Kurdish citizen, director, writer and actor of Turkey as a prism through which to see the colonial presence of Kurdish cinematography alongside the emancipatory potential of art as living. As an original account of Kurdish cinematography demands a horizontal understanding that attempts to close the gap between theory and practice in the name of Kurdishness, Güney's varied performances throughout his career as an activist demonstrate the strategic positionings through which making Kurdishess becomes possible in audio-visual terms, despite widespread dependence on settled film industries. Although Güney's cinematography announces the medium of film as the carrier of truth for Kurdish people through its international reputation, it is also Güney's persona that challenges realist aesthetics to go beyond already-there meanings attributed to Kurdishness by the then- governing ideology, Kemalism, through the shock of the real. Accordingly, Güney's cinematography can be thought of a set of moving pieces, each of which investigates several Kurdishnesses, oscillating between voluntarily assimilation and continuous resistance in the service of an a-centric and a-chronological Kurdishification in audio-visual terms. Güney's more recent popularity, blended with the aesthetics of the shock of the real, contrasts with the popular address of feature-length movies in Kurdish languages, as his popularity emphasizes the agency of history's victimized people under the yoke of neo-liberal Islamist ideology of the AKP government in the 2010s. However, the desire of a

commercial mode of cinema for national totalities is valid in the Kurdish case, through a pedagogy of the real, to place traumatized Kurdishness in a passive victimhood discourse in the name of the recognition of Kurdish languages, and to claim its own popular narratives within the limits defined by hegemonic powers—i.e., the officially recognized space for narrations of Kurdishness, and Kurdish languages in movie theatres. Kurdish feature-length films, as the carriers of Kurdish cinema discussions, have employed unsynchronized time as a means for processing collective memories that both carry and project the fractured, traumatic pasts of differentiated Kurdish lives through their multilingual perspective on fluid spaces. The fluxes of time are independent of each other, but all depend on denial and violence, albeit from different sources. Particularly, in the case of industrially produced, technically perfected feature-length films, while the Kurdish directors of Turkey engage with the aftermath of the 12 September *coup d'état* and the political environment of Kurdish society characterized by forced migration, disappearance, and torture in the 1990s (*Voice of My Father*, *Song of My Mother, Come to My Voice, The Trace*), Kurdish directors of Iran engage with life on the border, mostly focusing on a narrative of smuggling and a desire to exceed the border, which is the real condition for Kurdish society within the borders of Iran (*Turtles Can Fly, A Time for Drunken Horses, Hezar-o Yek Siv* [*1001 Apples,* Taha Karimi, 2013]). The Kurdish directors of Iraq, meanwhile, focus either on the internal conflicts of Kurdish communities after independence, or the trauma of the Anfal Genocide in 1988 (*Bîranînen li ser Kevirî* [*Memories on the Stone,* Shawkat Amin Korki, 2014], *Dol* (*Dol: The Valley of Tambourines*, Hiner Saleem, 2007), *Welatê Efsane* (*Land of Legend,* Rahim Zahibi,

2008). Each Kurdish community, whether in Turkey, Iraq, or Iran, thus has been represented within its particular political and historical existence. Different directors address their own common experience of time in terms of different collective traumas and rely on commercial feature-length films to put forward different claims to legitimately represent Kurdish history. And how Kurdish directors discuss the significance of their own films, similarly, shifts according to different political and historical contexts. Thus, Kurdish directors during Turkey's Peace Process prefer to identify their productions as 'political films by a Kurdish director' or their own situation as a 'Kurdish director with Turkish citizenship' (Doğan, 2013; Mintaş, 2013). Such identification, it bears stressing, is not the same as 'trying to progress on the way of the sun and spring,' in the words of exilic Kurdish director Hineer Saleem from Iraq, as noted in Chapter I (Saleem, 2009). Based on the pragmatic engagement of Kurdish male directors with factual politics in order to access the technical equipment for perfected commercial films in Kurdish lands, exilic Saleem's framing of Kurdish cinema demands its radicalization in light of industry, identity, and resistance.

Furthermore, the limited popular audience of Kurdish feature-length films is also flagged in film scholars' interpretations of Kurdish cinema, as is the taste and room for such films in international film festivals. Within such a historical and political context, which frames Kurdish cinematography as a discursive tool within capitalist film modes, a claim for truth telling emerges as the domestication of non-linear and non-smooth conflict zones in favor of a consumable/digestible form of Kurdish culture. Affirming the hierarchies of

nationalist theories by addressing its audience either as a homogenous totality or as festival goers, the perfection of feature-length movies and documentaries in Kurdish languages, and a technically perfect Kurdish national film culture, are tied to a representative regime of art embracing Kurdishness as trauma, as determined by various modern nation-states. However, encountering and engaging not only with hegemonic nation-states, but also with the cultures and everyday experiences of the countries and cities to which Kurds have migrated, Kurdish engagement with the medium of film has taken on movement as the common topography of any Kurdish cinematographic habitus. It has done so in conditions marked by the impossibility of a unified collective memory and standardized language. This exposes the politics of Kurdish audio-visual aesthetics through an embracing of movement not only in terms of internal migration, forced migration, and exile, but also in reference to unstable subject positions operating in dynamic languages and non-standard communicative spaces.

The focus of the second chapter is the Mesopotamia Cinema Collective, which was founded to empower Kurdish culture and support the use of Kurdish languages in urban spaces. The reason for this focus has to do with the Collective's investment in creation of a new we for Kurdish people via artistic mediation, in addition to being one of the earliest carriers of a technical revolution brought about by video to make claims for Kurdish modes of movement. As Armes emphasizes 'film and video use different recording substances and therefore inevitably have different qualities and potentials' (Armes, 1988: 117). Focusing on collective film making practices in Istanbul and Diyarbakır since 1996,

I explore how the Mesopotamia Cinema Collective employs the genres of documentary and short films in order to invent and equip its political community through cinematic productivity, in addition to other cultural activities. Mesopotamia Culture Center stands for the foundation of a non-commercial mode of Kurdish film making since the 1990s. Having its own workshops and production company, the Collective constitutes the central social body representing a democratic politics in coordination with the culture centers of Kurdish municipalities in Kurdish districts like Diyarbakır and Batman, to claim for an ethical community of individual participation through the common sensory experience of being a Kurd in urbanized times. Unlike the feature-length Kurdish narratives of founding traumatic past experiences in the 2010s, the films of the Mesopotamia Cinema Collective point to the gap that Kurdish communities are trying to fill as they are subjected to violence and impoverishment, as part of ongoing struggles in capital cities. And therefore, such filmmaking posits a factual reality as the condition of Kurdish cinematic presence in the name of Kurdish politics' evaluation of truth regimes. The realist tendency in these particular Kurdish filmmaking practices, I claim, is the result of the politics of an agreement between cinematic presentation and a regime of meaning, and is therefore the carrier of a militant art by quasi-bodies for Kurdishnesses.

It is crucial to recognize the will to challenge the factual foundation of the real in feature-length Kurdish films and the Collective's documentaries and short films, by means of digital technologies and lowbudgets. Kurdish cinema's canonical interpretation focuses on statelessness, border, and death. And through Kurdish films' relations to settled

national film histories, such interpretations acknowledge the industrial filmic mode of production and the elitism of perfect cinemas, which amounts to recognizing Kurdish aesthetics within limits determined by hegemonic aesthetic cultures. However, an aesthetic regime of Kurdishness pushes the limits of a representative regime of Kurdish art from below, through non-commercial film production and screening practices from the new space of a we. The emergence of super heroes and un-realistic conditions of urban life in middle class lives in Diyarbakır, amount to a declaration of the limits of a representative regime of Kurdishness. Cinema in this way becomes the primary site for an emancipation of Kurdish audiences from the over-determination of hegemonic political categories to claim politics in itself with its low-resolution images and differing narrations of Kurdishness on the basis of internal conflicts in the name of class, gender and Other, rather than conflicting Kurdish parties. Giving a historical account of the claim for a national cinema and identifying the limits of the promise of a representative regime for the reassertion of community and art in the first two chapters, in the third, I define the means of the Kurdish cultural field's ethical transformation in the name of a Kurdish subjectification process. This, I claim, is emancipated from a negotiation with hegemonic modern nation states and with politics shaped in the name of counter hegemonic struggle, and holds on to the diegetic use of Kurdish languages to color its audience. Accordingly, the geopolitical re-discovery of Kurdish women through an internationally recognized military victory and an ethnicized gender politics, and the de-specification of film through public film festivals and internet platforms, have become two main characteristics of the contemporary aesthetic regime of Kurdishness in the service of making Kurdishness.

Tracing the genealogy of his non-cinema concept, William Brown names Eisenstein and Vertov's revolutionary cinema, Italian neo-realism, Peter Wollen's 'counter-cinema', Julia Garcia Espinosa's 'imperfect cinema', Glauber Rocha's 'aesthetics of hunger', Fernando Solanas and Octavio Gettino's Third Cinema, Jean-François Lyotard's 'acinema' and Deleuze's 'minor cinema' as expressions of a will to oppose the mainstream forms and contents of cinema (Brown, 2016: 116). I claim that the Kurdish film universe's references to this particular tendency make it possible to posit the future of Kurdish non-cinema as the carrier of a linguistically determined we in the service of a re-definition of aesthetics through video. From Yılmaz Güney's references to the Soviet cinema of revolution, and from the re-interpretation of Italian neo-realism in his groundbreaking 1970 film *Hope*, Kurdish cinematic presence has positioned itself against the mainstream by employing techniques of collective production and reinterpretations of realism (the Mesopotamia Cinema Collective), Third Cinema (Halil Dağ) or imperfect cinema through poor images (Hito Steyerl). Brown's analysis specifically develops through an emphasis on the politics of cinema as much as the ontology of cinema.

> The cinematic equivalent of the peripheral, the barbarian, and the wretched of the earth are the films that are: similarly, peripheral -in terms both of what I shall call the periphery without and the periphery within; films that are similarly 'barbaric' -in form if not in content; and films that are similarly impoverished, or 'wretched'. As the peripheral, the barbarian and the wretched are consigned to 'non-being', so might such films be considered 'non-cinema' (Brown, 2016: 108-109).

Aesthetic experience, says Rancière, bears both a new art of living of individuals and community, and the promise of a new humanity (Rancière, 2010a: 176). Accordingly, the radical use of cinematographic instruments as we see in the circulated videos from Tahrir Square or Taksim Square pushes the question of 'the rehabilitation of images against the so-called critical tradition' in the name of a new common bet on the anonymous people's union and in the power of images (Vila, 2013: 16). Kurdish commercial feature-length films—in the sense both of the 'cinema of the Kurds' and 'cinema in Kurdish'—articulate a cinematographic subject via an oscillation between a gendered past and an ongoing present due to rupture and becoming, rather than any imagined homogenous time or unified collective memory as a stabilizing icon of the nation. Moreover, the temporal construction of commercial narratives cuts through the multilingual and floating in-between spaces by way of the nostalgia-laden narratives of women's bodies. While 'restorative nostalgia' focuses on rebuilding the symbols and rituals of a lost home, 'reflexive nostalgia' inhabits algia longing itself (Boym, 2001: 41). Yet, Kurdish presence as the peripheric (underdeveloped), barbaric (armed), or wretched (stateless) of modern nation states is still a matter of living through continuous politicization and agency in terms of political and social transformation rather than a matter of a traumatic past to encounter. The factual realism of Kurdish films exposes itself in the tension between algia and the embodied pleasure of subject positions articulated with linguistic preferences, that most concrete of ties to an impossible home, Kurdistan. Accordingly, the aesthetic regime of Kurdishness has been formed by the oral roots of Kurdish culture to re-present contemporary everyday life in the modes of reception as the 'guardian of popular

memory' to build shared experiences in the present (Gabriel, 2020 [1989]). Here it is crucial to note that trauma narratives on Kurdish films are attempts to encounter with the violence of the Kemalist state, whereas Kurdish cinema has been developing in the neo-liberal Islamist era in 2010s. This also means that the violence toward Kurdish identity and politics by the governing rule since 2015 has yet to find expression in Kurdish narratives. As yet, we only see certain forms of counter-Kemalist stance in commercial Kurdish narratives.

The common reference of the *dengbêj* figure in commercial and non-commercial Kurdish films has been another issue in this research. Addressing the roots of Kurdish culture through diegetic or non-diegetic recordings or in protagonists' developing characters to encourage a collective memory and identity, Kurdish commercial films embrace the work of Kurdish oral traditions in narrating trauma. Oral tradition, as embodied in the everyday through forms of knowledge, is the main carrier of the struggle against official languages and histories. Recalling that, at every level (recording, listening or even sharing), recordings let us experience the body, time and sociability of imagined cultural narratives, recordings in Kurdish languages cover linguistic and spatial heterogeneity on behalf of the once-there community freed from the determinacy of territory. Therefore, Kurdish directors' reinterpretation of the figure of *dengbêj* either as representatives of endangered memory (*Song of My Mother*, *Zer*), or as the forerunners of social problems (*Nîwemang* [*Half Moon*, Bahman Ghobadi, 2006] *Vodka Lemon*, *Come to My Voice*), serve as attempts to reevaluate Kurds' collective memory while paving the way for the recognition

of the unstable and fluid here-and-now reality of Kurdish culture. Yet, unlike the *griot* filmmakers of African cinema, whom Papaionannou describes as 'subtle educators and agents who negotiate the story with their audiences at the crossroads of cultural reality and fiction, historical past and fastasmatic future, rathen than strictly between African tradition and westernized modernism' (2009: 143), Kurdish directors of commercial films instrumentalize the *dengbêj* to invite authentic Kurdish subjects to negotiate modern subject positions. Therefore, having its roots in oral tradition, Kurdish culture's engagement with cinema is haunted by the director's colonial positions in between traumatized nationhood and Westernized modernity, while liberating itself from an essentialist reconstitution of Kurdish identity through 'a pre-colonial ideological and cultural revival of the past', as in African cinemas (Papaioannou, 2009: 154). Yet, an investigation into the contextual references and the appereances of *dengbêj* culture in the Kurdish cinema is beyond the scope of this research. In her research on the impacts of *dengbêj* culture on Kurdish theather, Duygu Çelik problematizes the emergence of actors as *dengbêj* or actual *dengbêj* playing dramatic roles in addition to her investigation of the textual impact of Kurdish oral tradition (Çelik, 2017). The question of Kurdish cinema in relation to Kurdish oral history calls for further work. My research rather attempts to expose the roots of Kurdish films in journalistic activities, as a carrier of truth for a horizontally defined Kurdish public, rather than a public determined by the hegemonic politics of an era.

Focusing on activist aesthetics and critical spectatorship, Teshoma Gabriel concludes his elaboration of the Third Aesthetics as follows:

> The 'wretched of the earth', who still inhabit the ghettos and the barrios, the shanty towns and the medinas, the factories and working districts are both the subjects and the critics of Third Cinema. They have always '[smelled] history in the wind'. Third Cinema, as guardian of popular memory, is an account and record of their visual poetics, their contemporary folklore and mythology, and above all their testimony of existence and struggle. Third Cinema, therefore, serves not only to rescue memories, but rather, and more significantly, to give history a push and popular memory a future (Gabriel, 2020).

The state of siege as the norm of late modern colonial occupation (Mbembe, 2003) has recently been one of the key concepts of contemporary politics in Turkey. The devastating image of the 57-year-old mother of 11, Taybet İnan, shot dead by security forces and left lying on a street in Silopi for a week, has been iconic of the violence in besieged Kurdish districts. Kurdish women have, across the same period, gained international recognition after their armed struggle in Syria in 2016. The gap between these two images referring to Kurdish identity in the same era crystallizes the tensions embedded in any art claiming to represent a univocal Kurdish sense of community without recognizing its politics of inequality. The tension between the traumatic there-and-past and the fractured here-and-now in commercial narratives addresses Kurdish subjects in terms of either a restorative or reflexive nostalgia for identification by positing the body of women as the mediator of the will to nation. The gender issue of the Kurdish subjectification process sits, then, at the heart of present experience through the politicization of Kurdish women, and through the womanization of Kurdish politics. Despite the paucity of Kurdish woman directors

and the limited spaces recognized for a womanhood which hasn't been demarcated by either sacred motherhood or armed militancy, Kurdish women's lives manifest the patriarchal foundation of Kurdish cinematography and Kurdish languages through mediated channels. Based on my analysis of commercial film modes' patriarchal codes, the radicalization of cinematography in terms of gender needs a post-human aesthetics shaped through 'featuring techno-mythologies, cyborg embodiments and rhizomatic bodily performativity' by digital means and social media (Ferrando, 2016: 2). Thus, this becomes either a contemporary art, or video project, or internet footage one not haunted by the elitisms of art galleries and consumption culture, which will meet the aesthetic regime of Kurdishness with its very public, we.

Therefore, I conclude that the presence of non-commercial Kurdish film festivals in Kurdish settlements or in exile as an account of an aesthetic regime beyond testimonial art, and not haunted by the elitism of international film festivals or the representative, claims of feature-length trauma narratives. Relying neither on technologically developed perfect cinemas nor on popular narratives, nor still on competitions, Kurdish film festivals are a call for Kurdish audiences to participate in the foundation of a new common world for an ethical community conditioned to a democratic politics of equality in the name of peace and freedom. The future of Kurdish cinematography, I conclude, depends on an ethical community that does not transcend, but reclaims Kurdishness in its new place. Such a cinema depends on the embracing of digitalization to realize itself by individual participation in a common world, due to the necessity of an anti-capitalist stance against

the commercialization of art through conflicting interests, parties and states. This imposes itself as the condition of a liberated artistic regime for the anachronic presence of Kurdish cinema.

Kurdish lives, which have been under the rule of sovereign violence since the early 20th century, are the carriers of an aesthetic regime of Kurdishness by their ways of surviving in the face of structural and physical violence. Achille Mbembe detects the expression of sovereignty in 'the power and the capacity to dictate who may live and who must die', such that 'becoming subject therefore supposes upholding the work of death' (Mbembe, 2003: 11, 14). He addresses the power of speech and thought in terms of the communicative act, while developing a body politics of death against siege and occupation (Mbembe, 2003). I posit cinema as a home for the communicative act that will empower speech and thought for the Kurdish social body by its capacity to fold the future into the present through an aesthetic regime of imperfect, nomadic audio-visual assemblages, and through the most accessible of platforms, the internet, to make its people. Efforts to promote publications in Kurdish languages notwithstanding, a re-distribution of the sensible for Kurdish community essentially becomes possible through audio-visual literarity. For, people engage in democratic politics on the basis of equality in terms of a literarity they can access when the lack of a standardized language encourages other forms for democratic presence.