

Kurdish Documentary Cinema in Turkey

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*The Politics and Aesthetics
of Identity and Resistance*

Edited by

Suncem Koçer and Can Candan

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INTRODUCTION

SUNCEM KOÇER AND CAN CANDAN

Without doubt, this decade's most elaborated and developed documentary production in Turkey comes from Kurdistan, a name that provokes nationalist panic in Turkey, yet delineates distinct cultural, linguistic, and political boundaries, nonetheless. Documentary film production by Kurdish filmmakers of Turkey determines the major tendencies of this emergent genre of Kurdish documentary cinema. Kurds have an approximate total population of over thirty million in Kurdistan as a whole. About twenty million Kurds live in Turkey, and about twenty percent of this population resides in Istanbul. Today, Istanbul is known as the largest Kurdish city in the world. Kurdish cultural production in Turkey has long been entangled with the Turkish state's oppressive policies towards non-Turkish populations, several Kurdish rebellions throughout the Republic's history, the war between the PKK (Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan/Kurdistan Workers' Party) and the Turkish military forces since the mid-1980s, and the torrid international contexts of the Middle East. This volume was written in 2016, at a time when, unfortunately, the conflict between Kurds and the Turkish state had escalated after a period of hope when a peaceful future seemed not so distant.

Such documentary film production by Kurdish filmmakers provides a vantage point not only on the current cultural and political dynamics, but especially on the historical context that circumscribes the "Kurdish issue" in Turkey. Detailing seemingly unending state crimes against civilians of the region, the subject matters of Kurdish documentaries range widely, including the absurdities of the Turkish national education system, Kurdish nomads and pastoralism as an expiring subsistence method, and the memoirs of torture narrated by Kurdish political prisoners of the 1980 coup. There is great diversity not only in the subject matters, but also in the aesthetic and stylistic tendencies within this proliferating body of work, as the filmmakers come from various backgrounds, express different social and political orientations, and embody multiple approaches to documentary practice. Nevertheless, many of these documentary productions

are geared towards cultivating experiences and narratives that have historically been either ignored or precluded by the official and hegemonic constructions of identity, history, and culture in Turkey. Since its launch, the Turkish nation-state has sought to subsume its Kurdish subjects both practically and discursively in its construct of the Turkish nation through the project of ethnic homogeneity and modernization. Kurdish history has been shaped by resistance on several fronts to this nationalization project.

With the increasing access to first, video and, later, digital technologies, and due to the emergent modes of transnational culture movements in a post-colonial world, media production has emerged as a significant platform for cultural preservation and for raising political awareness and dissent. The documentary form, then, has come to constitute a productive site for Kurdish media and culture producers through which they contest official histories, hegemonic identities, and the dominant constructions of Kurdishness against a backdrop of dynamic national, local, and transnational contexts. While the documentary genre, with its seemingly transparent and direct relationship to reality has provided Kurdish media producers with tools to breach and reconstruct dominant codes of identity and history, its canonical conventions, such as the epistemological hierarchy between who is behind, and who is in front, of the camera has arguably overshadowed the practice of recreating meanings of Kurdishness as well as the continuing discussions around Kurdish documentaries.

The burgeoning of documentary media productions revolving around Kurds and the Kurdish issue in Turkey has stimulated a scholarly interest in interrogating the intersections between history and memory, identity and nation, and mainstream representations and counter-narratives through close readings of these documentary texts and/or the study of their production, circulation, and reception. Approaching Kurdish media as a transnational field of cultural production, this edited volume sets out to bring together this recent academic interest in Kurdish documentary filmmaking, especially in Turkey. Why do Kurdish cultural activists consider the documentary genre a productive vantage point from which to re-signify history, identity, and culture? In what ways do Kurdish documentary films question hegemonic representations of Kurdishness, national ideologies that create these representations, and such historical constructs of nation and borders as well as reality and truth? What are some of the problems, opportunities, and limitations inherent in this endeavor of refashioning representations of Kurdishness through documentary practice? What are some of the aesthetic and stylistic inclinations of this emergent genre, which is highly saturated by social and political discourse around Kurds and Turkey? This volume is designed to

tackle some of these critical questions and issues, and open the ground for further discussion.

The questions above need to be prefaced by somewhat larger and more definitive other questions, one of which is what a Kurdish (documentary) film is. This primary question is symbiotically related to the historical, political, and social context from which Kurdish cultural production has flourished. Kurds, as a transnational people without a nation-state of their own, have engaged in cinema productions (just like productions in other areas of arts and culture) as part of their political existence within multiple nation-states, which separate them as a people and subject them to a variety of assimilation policies, to say the least. It is no easy task to answer the question of what defines a Kurdish film, as neither academics nor practitioners themselves have reached a consensus on the canonical conventions of the genre. A more productive approach is perhaps to focus the endeavor of defining a Kurdish film, including Kurdish documentary film, and Kurdish cinema as a genre, on the debates and discussions themselves in addition to the characteristics of the films. Why does the Kurdish language become a significant defining point despite the fact that Kurds live within borders of multiple nation-states and often speak diverse languages? Or, in what ways are the concepts of authenticity, reality, and history opened up to discussion in films and through the discourse around films? How is censorship discussed in relation to Kurdish films? Paying attention to such discourses paints a more complete and more dynamic picture about Kurdish documentary cinema, which cannot be considered in isolation from its current and historical political and social contexts. From this perspective, a focus on Kurdish documentary productions in/from Turkey seems inevitable, not only due to the increasing production in Turkey within the last couple of decades, but also due to the dynamic discourse around Kurdish documentary cinema in Turkey. The chapters in this volume illustrate such discourses as they delve into analyses of particular documentaries in various contexts.

Cinema productions by and about Kurds offer a unique opportunity for a nuanced understanding of national cinema. The larger body of films, fiction and non-fiction which has been named Kurdish cinema complicates the category of national cinema, a concept discussed heatedly within cinema studies literature. Documentary film is proving to be a particularly complex tool for the Kurdish social and political existence, as Kurds lack the official tools of history-writing and cultural preservation that are categorically associated with the capacities of a state. Overlooking aesthetics and style for a focus on the political nature of these productions, however, would be shortsighted, as Kurdish documentary filmmaking

blends contemporary art forms and muddles the ever-shifting lines between art and politics and the political and the personal. Furthermore, by delving into Kurdish documentary films as products of complex societal, political, and historical processes, the articles in this volume highlight the intersections of media production, film text, and audience reception, and they expand on vibrant debates in the field of film and media studies through situated case studies. Bringing these chapters together, we hope to stimulate academic discussion around this emergent and lively genre of documentary film production and encourage further research and publication.

Following this introduction, the volume starts with a chapter that situates Kurdish documentary filmmaking within the history and politics of documentary cinema in Turkey. In doing so, Can Candan traces the origins of Kurdish documentary filmmaking in Turkey by focusing not only on documentary filmmakers and institutions, but also on themes and modes prevalent in Kurdish documentaries. The following two chapters trace the depiction of truth and the politics of reality evident in many Kurdish documentaries. While Ali Fuat Şengül's discussion revolves around what constitutes reality and its relevance to the claims to truth in Kurdish documentaries, Louise Spence focuses her discussion on *5 No 'lu Cezaevi: 1980-84 (Prison Nr.5: 1980-84, Çayan Demirel, 2009)* as a case study and considers the opportunities and limitations of the talking witness form, as well as its manifold appeals. In her piece, Özgür Çiçek continues where Şengül and Spence leave off. She coins the concept of the fictive archive in describing the relationship between Kurdish cinema and historical reality.

The following two articles pay particular attention to the circulation and reception dynamics of Kurdish documentaries. Ayça Çiftçi argues that Kurdish films are inevitably received with reference to reality beyond the intentions of the filmmakers. "How real the story of this film is," Çiftçi notes, is a question that arises from the political conflicts around the Kurdish issue, and comes with Kurdish films, both fiction and non-fiction. In the piece following Çiftçi's, Zeynep Yaşar analyses the critical reception of the documentary, *İki Dil Bir Bavul (On the Way to School, Orhan Eskiköy and Özgür Doğan, 2008)*, by focusing particularly on the discourse around the political discussions this film has stimulated. In the following chapter, focusing on *Ez Firişam Tu Mayî Li Cih (I Flew You Stayed/Ben Uçtum Sen Kaldın, Mizgin Müjde Arslan, 2012)* as an example of domestic ethnography, Suncem Koçer explores the ways in which the actual process of production turns into a process of discovery in which the

filmmaker cultivates her identity against a backdrop of both official ideologies and counter histories.

The next two chapters delve into a symbiotic aspect of producing and circulating Kurdish films in Turkey, namely censorship. Josh Carney traces the journey of *Bakur (North/Kuzey)*, Çayan Demirel and Ertuğrul Mavioğlu, (2015), a recent documentary that deals with Kurdish guerillas' withdrawal from eastern Turkey as part of the peace process. This journey has been bound with nothing but the circuits of censorship in Turkish film culture. Carney documents the case of *Bakur (North)* and presents that case as a window on cultures of censorship which have lately become more visible and have swallowed film festivals, rating system, and the state funding agencies. Suncem Koçer, on the other hand, argues that, as much as it is binding for agents, censorship is also a discursive formulation by which Kurdish filmmakers harness transnational publics. Based on long-term ethnographic research with the production team of *Demsala Dawî: Şewaxan (Last Season: Shawaks/Son Mevsim: Şavaklar)*, Kazim Öz, (2009), Koçer documents the active process of public making by Kazim Öz, a renowned Kurdish filmmaker from Turkey, at international film festivals.

In the following two chapters, Nagehan Uskan Selvelli asks what the documentary camera accomplishes for Kurdish collectivity by simply "being there," whereas Kevin Smets and Hamdi Akkaya delve into the documentary work Halil Dağ produced while fighting for the PKK in the mountains. Ranging from activist documentary videos, to transnational productions, to films by a Kurdish guerrilla, the authors of this volume work with a diverse set of texts to discuss Kurdish documentary filmmaking in Turkey. Presented with a critical introduction by Alisa Lebow, the final chapter consists of the transcript of the plenary session on Kurdish documentary cinema that was held during the 2010 Visible Evidence Conference in Istanbul. In that session, Kazim Öz, Mizgin Müjde Arslan, and Çayan Demirel, three of the directors whose works are discussed in this volume, elaborated on their documentary practice and politics. With that final chapter the volume is concluded with the narratives of the filmmakers themselves.

Encouraged by Kazim Öz's statement at the discussion panel mentioned above that academia has not paid attention to Kurdish Documentary Cinema, this volume is an attempt at bringing together academic scholarship on this topic, making this form of cultural production visible, hoping to encourage others to join in the discussion around Kurdish documentary cinema, and hopefully not only encouraging further scholarship, but also production. It is our greatest hope that this

volume will be translated into Kurdish and Turkish in the near future to make it accessible to non-English speakers.

Note

Since we are writing in English about a cinema that is inherently bilingual (Kurdish and Turkish), we have felt the necessity to give proper reference to film titles. Hence, we have decided to use the following format when a film is introduced in text for the first time: Original title (either in Kurdish or Turkish), then English title and Turkish title if available, then director's name and year of release. For example: *Dûr* (Distant/Uzak, Kazim Öz, 2004).

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CHAPTER I

KURDISH DOCUMENTARIES IN TURKEY: AN HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

CAN CANDAN

This chapter attempts to situate Kurdish documentary filmmaking within the history and politics of documentary cinema in Turkey by giving an historical overview. The main emphasis will be on the last two decades, when Kurds in Turkey have become their own storytellers, bringing new voices, perspectives, and challenges to the documentary cinema of Turkey. Focusing on the films, the filmmakers, the institutions, as well as the audiences, both in Turkey and in the transnational Kurdish diaspora, the chapter briefly analyzes the contexts within which these films were produced. By situating Kurdish documentary filmmaking within the history of documentary cinema in Turkey, this chapter aims to identify a documentary practice and heritage which is fertile ground for self/cultural expression in resistance and in constant interaction with other filmmakers in the region and in the diaspora. As in any historiography, this work is incomplete and intended to be a brief introductory survey.

Where are the Kurds in Documentary Cinema?

Today, it is estimated that Kurds have a total population of approximately thirty million in Kurdistan as a whole, a few million in the diaspora, and approximately fifteen million living in Turkey.¹ Although Kurds have been living in this part of the world for millennia, and have been the subjects of documentary filmmaking for over a century, they have been rendered invisible in documentary cinema in Turkey until very recently. This is not surprising given the fact that expressions of Kurdish identity, including language (education in Kurdish) and culture (music, literature, theater, film) have long been suppressed by the Turkish state.

The earliest moving images in the Ottoman Empire were recorded on film in 1897 by Alexandre Promio, a traveling Lumiere cameraman.² This means that the history of documentary cinema in Turkey has been being written for almost 120 years. When Promio was filming the Ottoman Army parade and the scenes at the Golden Horn in Istanbul, Kurds, as one of the ancient peoples who had been living in the Mesopotamia region for millennia, were one of the many ethnic groups that made up this Empire.

Before World War I, starting in 1905, the Manaki Brothers in the Balkans were not only filming their family and traditional life, but also the visits of the Ottoman Sultan, who was trying to keep the Empire together. The dissolution of the Ottoman Empire saw the division of Kurdistan, literally the land of the Kurds, into four regions, each controlled by another state: *Bakur*/North Kurdistan (Turkey), *Başûr*/South Kurdistan (Iraq), *Rojava*/West Kurdistan (Syria), and *Rojhilat*/East Kurdistan (Iran). When the borders of the modern Turkish Republic were defined by the Treaty of Lausanne in 1923, a mono-ethnic Turkish nation-state was established, and Kurds became the largest ethnic minority living within these political borders, although without receiving the official recognition given to the non-Muslim ethnic identities, such as the Armenians, Greeks, and Jews in Turkey. Upon its foundation, all people living within the borders of the nation-state of Turkey were declared to be Turkish, and any claims of a separate ethnic identity, let alone autonomy or self-determination, were severely suppressed. This meant the denial of the right to education and cultural expression (music, literature, theater, film, etc.) in any language other than Turkish, and bloody suppressions of revolts by the Turkish Army (Güneş and Zeydanlıoğlu 2014).

When *Grass: A Nation's Battle for Life* (1925) was filmed, the American filmmakers (Cooper, Schoedsack, and Harrison) traveled eastward from Ankara (Angora, as spelled on the map in the film) through Anatolia to find the “forgotten people in the East,” the nomadic Bakhtyari tribe in Southern Iran, who were on a “great migration following the sun from the East to the West.”³ Although not specified in the film, they probably encountered and filmed Kurds on their journey through Mesopotamia.⁴

Güneş and Zeydanlıoğlu (2014) call attention to the colonization of Kurds in Turkey and the construction of a ‘Turkish’ Anatolia:

The policy of annihilating the ethnic identity of a large section of the society has meant that the Kurdish regions have been and continue to be ruled under emergency rule, or like an ‘internal colony’, for the majority of the modern history of Turkey. In order to legitimize these policies, ideological and ‘scientific’ justifications have had to be manufactured.

Accordingly, a new glorious national history was written in the 1930s that also 'proved' that Kurds were indeed Turks. Thus, 'studying' and 'knowing' the 'East' went hand in hand with its cultural and linguistic colonization. These 'scientific' race theories justified the 'Turkishness' of Anatolia, the greatness of the Turks as a 'civilizing race', and the turkification of Kurds. (10)

When we look at Istanbul University Film Center's "Anatolian Epic" documentaries of 1956 onwards, there is no mention of Kurds living anywhere in Anatolia, as Anatolia is defined as a region populated by Turks, who carry on the traditions of ancient peoples of the land from the Hittites to the Ottomans. For example, in *Nemrut Tanrıları (The Gods of Nemrut)*, Sabahattin Eyuboğlu and Aziz Albek, (1964), on the way to the archaeological remains on Mount Nemrut in Southern Anatolia, the film takes us to Kâhta (Kurdish name: Kolîk) and later to Horik village, mostly populated by Kurds without mentioning anything that has to do with the Kurds.⁵ This omission and erasure through documentary is, of course, not only the fate of the Kurds. In a similar vein, in another "Anatolian Epic" documentary from the same center, *Doğu Anadolu'da Bir Dünya Tapınağı: Ahtamar (A World Temple in Eastern Anatolia: Ahtamar)*, Mazhar Şevket İpşiroğlu and Adnan Benk, (1959) about the Armenian Cathedral of the Holy Cross, on Aghtamar island, there is no mention of its Armenian heritage. Even the name of the island has been further turkified since then: Armenian "Aghtamar" has officially become Turkish "Akdamar."

Through state controlled education, media, and broadcasting (newspaper, radio, television) and its centralized institutions, the Turkish state continued with its policies of denial and cultural assimilation and turkification. After 1960, things begin to change, and challenges to this state policy became visible. This could be seen as the beginnings of a political struggle for collective cultural identity, independence, and autonomy by the Kurds:

The limited freedoms allowed by the democratic regime instituted with the 1960 constitution made room for oppressed voices to be heard and political opposition to harness its struggle. The Kurds were able to express some of their demands and concerns. Consequently the 1960s witnessed the proliferation of Kurdish cultural activities leading to an increase in discussion of the Kurdish question. (Güneş and Zeydanlıoğlu 2014: 2)

In this post 1960 period, *Genç Sinema* (the Young Cinema movement of 1968-1970) could be seen as the first attempt to establish an independent documentary cinema in Turkey. In 1968, in the first issue of

their publication *Devrimci Sinema (Revolutionary Cinema)*, the *Genç Sinema* filmmakers were advocating a revolutionary independent cinema for the people, where the emphasis was on organizing as a cinema movement outside of the film industry, making 8mm. and 16mm. films about real people and real issues of the day, creating audiences, and taking their films to the people. This was to be an anti-imperialist, anti-feudal national front in cinema (Ufuk 1996). Even though numerous Kurdish publications, including magazines and books were published in this period, the Kurdish question was not reflected in *Genç Sinema*'s revolutionary agenda, and a unified working class was emphasized as a homogeneous entity, deprived of its heterogeneous histories.⁶

The successive military coups in 1971 and 1980, not only stifled opposition and free cultural expression, but also saw the development of a Kurdish consciousness and liberation movement in resistance. In the decades to come, this would also have its effects on cinema in general, and on documentary cinema in particular.

While Kurds did not exist as specified subjects in documentary cinema, Yılmaz Güney, the world renowned Kurdish maker of fictional films, introduced the viewer to ethnically unspecified "Eastern" villagers with Kurdish names (for example *Sirvan* and *Berivan*) in *Sürü (The Herd, 1979)*, directed by Zeki Ökten while Güney was in prison.⁷ Although the main dialogue is in Turkish, Kurdish *kılams* (ballads) are heard in the soundtrack, and side characters do speak Kurdish. This film is noteworthy for its scenes shot on location in North Kurdistan (the Turkish part of Kurdistan) that read as ethnographic documentary scenes, recording on celluloid Kurdish rural life during the 1970s.

The feature fiction film *Yol (The Road, Şerif Gören, 1982)*, based on a script and directions by Güney while in prison, is a seminal film in the history of Kurdish Cinema. It was premiered at the 1982 Cannes Film Festival, where it received the *Palme d'Or* prize and was promptly banned in Turkey. Despite the ban in Turkey, it was distributed abroad, and helped Güney become the first internationally known Turkish director and scriptwriter. It was in the late 80s, in the United States, when I was able to see this film at a local art house movie theater for the first time. The film takes place in the immediate aftermath of the 1980 coup in Turkey and tells the story of five convicts on furlough, temporarily released from a prison in the West during the short "*bayram*" holiday.⁸ They have to travel far to visit their families in the East and return back to the prison on time. When one of the protagonists arrives in Diyarbakır, the regional Kurdish capital, the word "Kurdistan" as a superimposed title appears. This was a very radical and visible self-assertion at a time when Kurdish language,

literature, music, broadcasting, etc. was banned in Turkey. *Yol (The Road)* remained banned in Turkey until 1999, even after Güney's premature death in exile in France in 1983, and when the ban was lifted, the superimposed title "Kurdistan" was omitted in the restored Turkish version.

Albeit not completely free of restraint, Güney's fictional films could be seen as first attempts at cultural and political expression of Kurdish identity in cinema in Turkey. But what about documentary cinema? When do we begin to see the emergence of a Kurdish documentary cinema? When do we see the actors of cultural production partaking in Kurdish consciousness and liberation movement, expressing themselves with documentaries?

The late 80s and the early 90s was a period when the video revolution was coming to Turkey, first with relatively low quality consumer, prosumer, semi-professional analog video (VHS, Video8, S-VHS, Hi8, U-matic etc.), quickly followed by better quality digital tape-based video (mini-DV, DVCAM, etc.) and desktop editing. This made filmmaking much more accessible and affordable than before and, as in many countries, it became possible to make low budget films independent of the established film and media industries. This saw the emergence of documentaries where identities and experiences, absent from mainstream media representations were expressed for the first time. In a way, a truly independent cinema first envisioned two decades earlier in Turkey by the *Genç Sinema* Movement, was truly becoming a possibility. Hence, the beginning of Kurdish documentary filmmaking coincides with the birth of an independent documentary cinema in Turkey.

The Mesopotamia Cultural Center's Cinema Collective

The Mesopotamia Cultural Center (*Mezopotamya Kültür Merkezi – MKM*) was founded in 1991 in Istanbul, historically the main hub of cultural production in Turkey, as a result of the Kurdish consciousness movement in the post-1980 military coup period. Among its founders were Kurdish and Turkish intellectuals such as Musa Anter and İsmail Beşikçi. The stated goal was protecting the cultural heritage and identity of Mesopotamia against the political and cultural assimilation policies of the Turkish state. The MKM became a hub for socialization and alternative education for many young Kurdish people, who had recently begun to identify themselves as politically Kurdish as well.⁹ In 1995, Med-TV broadcasting from Europe became the first Kurdish satellite television channel, which provided a televised voice for the Kurds (Ryan 1997). In

1996, film courses were offered at the MKM, with Ahmet Soner and Hüseyin Kuzu being regular instructors, and with Thomas Balkenhol and Enis Rıza occasionally joining in.

In an interview conducted in 1996, *Genç Sinema* pioneers talk about the possibilities engendered by the relatively new video technology.¹⁰ Veysi Atayman talks about how video will provide a means of expression within political movements of the day, Enis Rıza talks about the importance of video production collectives, and Ahmet Soner talks specifically about his work at the MKM, and how he is trying to pass on his knowledge and experience to others, and how video technology had made this possible:

Apart from passing on information, I want people to make films. Making films was difficult in the past. Now, we are able to provide the necessary tools. This is an organization we initiated last year. We provide lights and camera equipment, and help people make their own short films. Hüseyin Kuzu comes and helps us with scriptwriting. It is about to give its fruits. Groups are formed—because we wanted them to work in groups. Each group wrote their script, and we're going to discuss them. In this set up, there is a diversity of people from various backgrounds. For example, a worker from the local Kadıköy Municipality, as well as students from Bogazici University. I am trying to do something, and friends are helping out. So, this is what we do at the MKM...These will certainly have an effect. For example, five movies will come out of the MKM, and the workshops will continue. (Görüntü)

As a result of the film workshops at the MKM, the Mesopotamia Cinema Collective (*Kolektîfa Sinema ya Mezopotamya*) was established in 1996 with the stated goal of establishing an alternative Kurdish cinema in opposition.¹¹ Not only did this collective inspire many filmmakers to collectively express themselves in film, it also became a fertile ground from which Kurdish documentary cinema in Turkey was born.

Some of the young Kurdish filmmakers, who studied filmmaking there later became well-known and established filmmakers, most notably Kazim Öz, Özkan Küçük, and Hüseyin Karabey. In 1996, a 48 minute documentary, in Kurdish and Turkish, *Rengen Bi Keda Destan (Groping for Colors/El Yordamıyla Renkler)* was made by Kazim Öz, Kadir Sözen, and Özkan Küçük about the founding and activities of the MKM. Another early documentary film of the Mesopotamia Cinema Collective was the 27 minute *Destên Me Wê Bibin Bask, Emê Bifirin Herin (Our Hands Will Become Wings, We'll Fly Away/Ellerimiz Kanat Olacak Uçup Gideceğiz, Kazim Öz with Dorothe Kiest, et al., 1996)*. This is a documentary about a migrant Kurdish family who has to leave their home after their village

was burned by the Turkish Army and settle in Istanbul. The off-screen interviewer asks for the original Kurdish name of their village after the elderly man states the Turkish name. In Kurdish, he talks about how they felt betrayed by the state: “There was no electricity, no roads, no clean water. We were miserable. When it snowed and covered the roads, we weren’t able to take our sick and women giving birth to a doctor.”¹² He also talks about how they were forced to become pro-state village militia.¹³ Those who refused had to endure mistreatment and torture. His wife talks about how they resisted and continue to do so. In addition to archival footage of villages burning, there is also an interview with a lawyer from the Human Rights Foundation (IHD), who talks about the burning down of villages and the forced evacuations of approximately three thousand villages by the Turkish Army in order to undermine logistic support for the PKK; about three million people having to migrate to metropolitan areas, becoming refugees in their own country, living under dire economic conditions. He also calls for a democratic solution to the “Kurdish problem.”

Later, the 23 minute *Karkerên Avahiyên (Builders/Yapıcılar*, Özkan Küçük, et al., 1999) followed. This film is about Kurdish construction workers who had had to migrate to Istanbul to find work in the construction of high-rise buildings. At the beginning of the film, one of the laborers talks about the migration process, starting with forced migration from their village, to the major urban center, to the metropolis: “They burnt down whatever we had. We had to migrate to Diyarbakır. There was no work there, we ended up here in exile.” As the daily lives of these men unfold in front of our eyes, we see them waiting on curbs to be picked up as day laborers to work at construction sites; at their temporary makeshift rooms in buildings under construction; cooking, socializing with each other, listening to music, singing in both Kurdish and Turkish, and dancing. They talk to the camera about their work, life in the big city, their hopes and aspirations. This collectively produced short documentary puts a human face on the invisible migrant labor of Kurdish men, trying to make a living for themselves and their families back home by doing precarious and temporary construction work.

Em Her Tîm Koçberin (We’re Always Migrants/Biz Her Zaman Göçmeniz, Zülfiye Dolu with Nure Demirbaş, Güllü Özalp, 2000) is an 18 minute documentary made collectively with a group of women at the MKM, once again about recent migrants to Istanbul as a result of forced migration, but this time focusing on Kurdish women’s experiences. When asked about the experience of migration, a woman says, “In the past, for us settling on highlands was emigration. Now migrating has become

obligatory and people go far away from their land and do not return.”¹⁴ This film is significant as perhaps one of the first examples of Kurdish women expressing themselves through documentary filmmaking.

The establishment of the Mesopotamia Cinema Collective by no means meant that the oppression of Kurdish identity and cultural expression had come to an end. In 1999, the televised attack on Ahmet Kaya, a very popular and well-respected Kurdish musician of the period, was etched onto public memory.¹⁵ Kaya was receiving the “Musician of the Year” award at a televised annual music awards ceremony organized by a private television channel. During his acceptance speech, he expressed his intention to include a Kurdish song in his next album, and that he hoped there would be brave producers and broadcasters who would dare to release and broadcast his Kurdish song. Upon hearing Kaya’s statement, the prominent musicians and celebrities at the ceremony began throwing objects, including forks and knives at Kaya, and he had to be ushered out in haste (Aksoy 2010). After this incident, Kaya had to leave his homeland due to death threats and was later given, *in absentia*, a three year nine month prison sentence because the Turkish courts deemed that a speech by him at a concert in Berlin included “separatist propaganda.”

The London Kurdish Film Festival

The oppression in Turkey made the diaspora a significant site for resistance and cultural affirmation, providing not only a significant site for the exhibition of Kurdish films, but also a hub for interaction and the building of a collective cinema movement. In 2001, the very first Kurdish Film Festival was organized in London and, in the first two years of the festival, there were only Kurdish documentaries from Turkey in the festival’s program.¹⁶ The festival’s website had a section entitled “What is Kurdistan?” In 2007, the festival’s founder and coordinator, Mustafa Gündoğdu, talked about that period in an interview conducted in Turkish: “We realized our first festival in 2001. In that festival, there were only a few short films and documentaries. The program had a narrow scope, made up of cinematic works of only Northern Kurds. So was the second festival.”¹⁷

The program of the first festival consisted of four documentary films. *Adana–Paris* (1994) is a 74 minute documentary by Ahmet Soner, the *Genç Sinema* pioneer, and one of the instructors at the MKM. In this documentary, Soner tells us the life story of his former colleague, Yılmaz Güney, starting from his birthplace, Adana, and ending in Paris, where he is laid to rest while in exile. *Good Kurds Bad Kurds: No Friends but the*

Mountains (Kevin McKiernan, 2000) is a 70 minute American documentary that could be seen as a journalistic effort to introduce Kurds and their plight to the American public.¹⁸ It is centered on a Kurdish family who had to migrate to the USA, and it tells the story for survival for Kurds in the post-Gulf War period. *Ret 1111 (Refusal 1111*, Cüneyt Şekerci and Hasan Çimen, 2001) is a 22 minute documentary about conscientious objectors to conscription into the Turkish army. It takes its name from law number 1111, which states that every male Turkish citizen is required to serve in the army. The film tells the short history of the conscientious objection movement in Turkey and in the World, and it includes interviews with activists. *Sessiz Ölüm (Silent Death*, Hüseyin Karabey, 2001) is an 85 minute documentary about the F-type prisons in Turkey, recently constructed by the Turkish Ministry of Justice, with their isolation cell systems for political prisoners. By looking at the experiences of prisons and prisoners outside of Turkey, it aims to counter the official portrayal of such prisons as a “modern solution” in Turkey. Although placed in the shorts program rather than the documentary section, there was also a short essay film from the UK that should not be overlooked. *Displaced Voices* (Sevim Metin, 2001) is based on the “legend of Erika Sevê as told in Kurdish villages in Turkey.” Reminiscent of Trinh T. Minh Ha’s *Reassemblage* (1982), this 17 minute film is a combination of silent film footage shot in the villages of Dersim, edited with a simple and powerful soundtrack, and with a poetic voiceover in English, Kurdish *kılam*s sung by the elderly, and occasional sound effects. As Metin returns to her roots, she makes a first of its kind film that speaks powerfully about displacement, bringing voices from Dersim to the diaspora.

As a diasporic venue for showcasing Kurdish films, the London Kurdish Film Festival expanded its selection in its third edition in 2003 to include films from South Kurdistan (Northern Iraq). This was possible due to the fact that there were more films being produced, and because the organizers had direct access to the local producers in different parts of Kurdistan.¹⁹ They were able not only to bring more diverse Kurdish voices to the audiences, but also build bridges within a Kurdistan separated by state borders and also with the diaspora.

In Turkey, while the MKM was a hub for training and production outside of academia, within academia, Kurdish students studying filmmaking also began to tell their stories with documentary films, contributing to Kurdish documentary cinema with their output. In 2003, at Ankara University’s School of Communications, a short documentary, *Ayrılığa Düğün (Wedding to Severance*, M. Namık Uğur and Mustafa Sağlam) was produced.²⁰ This 38 minute documentary is about the

filmmakers' brother going through the tradition of bride exchange called *berdel*.²¹ As we learn from the voice-over at the beginning of this film, it is a tribute to an older brother who sacrifices himself so that his brother can get an education and so that his sister can get married to her loved one. In this intimate portrait, we see the reclusive elder brother go through the motions as he gets wed to a woman, other than his beloved, and occasionally hear his sentiments in his native tongue, Kurdish.

Diyarbakır Cinema Workshop

In 2003, the first filmmaking workshop in Diyarbakır was organized during the 3rd Diyarbakır Culture and Arts Festival. The coordinator for the month-long workshop was Özkan Küçük from the Mesopotamia Cultural Center.²² This workshop could be seen as the beginning of the process of Diyarbakır becoming a center for documentary instruction and production as well.²³ A 20 minute documentary, *Çek Çek (Pull Pull)*, 2003), was collectively produced by the participants of this workshop under the supervision of Ahmet Soner of *Genç Sinema*. In *Çek Çek*, which is named after the type of handcart used in Diyarbakır, we witness a day in the life of an elderly *çek çek* puller. It is a portrait of a poor, traditional migrant who is trying to raise his family in Diyarbakır. *Çek Çek* was shown at the 3rd London Kurdish Film Festival in 2003, and then became the first Kurdish language documentary film to be broadcast with Turkish subtitles in Turkey on the local television channel, Gün TV in 2004. Zeynel Doğan, who later directed *Dengê Bavê Min (My Father's Voice/Babamın Sesi)*, 2012), an award-winning fiction feature, remembers this workshop as a turning point in his career as a director.²⁴

In the same year, a 70 minute documentary, *Yıllar Sonra, İşte Diyar-ı Bekir (Years Later, Here is Diyarbekir)*, Özkan Küçük, 2003) about the Diyarbakır Culture and Art Festival was produced. It begins with a scene from Yılmaz Güney's *Yol (The Road)*, where two of the protagonists arrive in Diyarbakır as prisoners on furlough. Twenty years after the release of *Yol*, Diyarbakır had become the capital of Kurdish culture and arts. In 2004, a 28 minute documentary *Beşikten Mezara (From Cradle to Grave)*, about a local carpenter and his trade, was collectively produced at the Diyarbakır Cinema Workshop.

Although as a Kurdish language documentary film, *Çek Çek* was broadcast on local television in 2004, the ban on the Kurdish language in the public sphere continued. A well-known example is from the music industry: Aynur Doğan, a contemporary Kurdish singer, released her album, *Keçê Kurdan (Kurdish Girl/Kürt Kızı)*, 2004), in which she sang

nine out of the eleven songs in Kurdish. The album was banned by a provincial court in Diyarbakır on the grounds that the lyrics contained propaganda for an illegal organization (meaning, by that, the PKK).²⁵ The court ruling said the album “incites women to take to the hills and promotes division.”²⁶ A month later, in an attempt to boost its bid to join the European Union, Turkey’s public television broadcaster, TRT, began broadcasting a half-hour Kurdish program entitled *Our Cultural Riches*.²⁷

Kurdish Documentary on the Rise

After his beginnings at the MKM, Kazim Öz became one of the most prolific and well-known Kurdish filmmakers in Turkey. His fiction short, *Ax (The Land/Toprak)*, Kazim Öz, 1999) and the later fiction feature *Fotograf (The Photograph/Fotoğraf)*, Kazim Öz, 2001) won numerous awards. His first feature-length documentary was *Dûr (Distant/Uzak)*, 2004), about the return of the filmmaker to his small Kurdish village and the stories of those who remained and those who left. One of the most memorable scenes is when an elderly woman in the village addresses the filmmaker and demands, “Don’t lose our tongue Kazim!”, clearly prescribing a certain mission. The elderly villagers staring into the camera,²⁸ the camera going through the rundown and closed village school, looking at the village from the cemetery where guerrillas killed in the armed conflict with the Turkish army are buried—all are powerful images that possibly remain etched in the viewers’ minds for a long time. In this personal story, the filmmaker takes us along a journey chronicled in his diary entries that he occasionally shares with us. At the same time, he manages to close the gap between family members by sharing video footage he has filmed, similar to the tradition of audio/video letters carried back and forth between home and exile. *Dûr (Distant)* is also significant in its alternative distribution strategy. Outside of the commercial distribution channels, the filmmakers organized independent screenings with video projectors in many cities, reaching between 20,000–25,000 viewers.²⁹

In addition to coordinating the workshops in Diyarbakır, Özkan Küçük continued making documentary films, and 2005 was a productive year for him. *Mamoste Arsen (Master Arsen)*, Özkan Küçük, 2005) is a 29 minute film about the Diyarbakır days of Kurdish pantomime artist, Arsen Poladov, a.k.a Mamoste Arsen (Master, or teacher, Arsen), who was visiting Diyarbakır for the first time for the 3rd Culture and Arts Festival. The film begins with Arsen’s funeral in Yerevan, Armenia, where he lived, and it includes archival footage of Arsen giving a workshop at the MKM in 1993 and a TV interview recorded in Cologne, Germany.³⁰ In

one scene at the festival in Diyarbakır, Mamoste Arsen says, “for the first time in my life, I’m speaking in Kurdish in front of such a large crowd.” *Li Serxaniyên Diyarbekirê (On the Rooftops of Diyarbakır/Diyarbakır Damlarında*, Özkan Küçük, 2005) is a 27 minute documentary, shot in Diyarbakır, with no dialogue. Küçük observes life on the rooftops of Diyarbakır, including the shadows cast on rooftops as he is filming. *Pılava Binok (Rice with Chickpeas*, Özkan Küçük, 2005) is a 45 minute documentary about Fahriye, the widow of a guerrilla, Tahsin, who decided to leave his pregnant wife and small child to join the armed struggle of the PKK, and who died while fighting. Fahriye tells us her life story, starting from meeting Tahsin at the age of fourteen, eloping with him, and ending with her becoming an independent woman on the theater stage fourteen years after her husband’s departure. The two boys, who did not have a chance to get to know their father, talk about their mixed feelings about him. They are both angry with and proud of him, despite the fact that they have to hide the details of how he passed away. This film puts a human face to one aspect of the armed struggle of PKK guerillas: the families left behind.

In *İsmi Güzide (Vendetta Song*, Eylem Kaftan, 2005), the filmmaker travels from Canada to Turkey, where she was born and raised, to trace the life story of her aunt, Güzide, who was murdered. The film begins with her statement, “I have an urge to return to the East,” and the National Film Board of Canada describes the film as follows:

In an attempt to unravel the 30-year-old mystery of her aunt Güzide’s murder. As she searches for clues and closure, she encounters antiquated customs in a Kurdish culture she’s never known. She knows that her aunt was the victim of a senseless vendetta killing and as she ventures from village to village she pieces together the woman’s final days and closes in on the identity of her killer.³¹

Premiered at the 9th 1001 Documentary Film Festival in Istanbul, 38 (Çayan Demirel, 2006) is about the state organized 1938 Dersim massacre in Turkey. Demirel, through the eyes of witnesses and culprits, as well as archival material, not only sheds light onto what happened to the Kurds in Dersim during the years 1937–1938, but also makes visible the mechanisms, such as the print media, that shaped and continue to shape public opinion; “... the events come as a ‘silent scream’ before our eyes in this documentary.”³² Not only was this a massacre on a grand scale but, at the same time, it was a family tragedy for the filmmaker, as 54 members of his extended family were killed at the time. Not surprisingly, there have been numerous attempts to censor this film. After its Istanbul premiere,

during the Munzur Festival in Dersim, the film's screening was canceled by the governor for not having the necessary permission. Later, the Ministry of Culture effectively censored the film by not granting it a commercial license for distribution and exhibition (Candan 2011). Although legally challenged, this ban continues to date.

In 2007, following the London Kurdish Film Festival, the second Kurdish film festival in the diaspora was organized in Paris by The Collective of Kurdish Filmmakers and Artists (*Le Collectif des Cinéastes et des Artistes Kurdes/CCAK*): “The festival intends to promote Kurdish culture and cinema to the Parisians by providing varied Kurdish feature and short films, documentaries as well as some animations” (Kılıç 2007). Meanwhile in its third year, the Diyarbakır Municipality's Cinema Workshop continued instruction in the art and craft of filmmaking. Three full-time positions were created and workshops expanded throughout the whole year.³³ In addition to short fiction films, participants continued making short documentaries collectively. A press release dated 6 Dec 2007 stated:

The Cinema Workshop, which has been active for three years within Diyarbakır Metropolitan Municipality's Culture and Tourism Department, has become a film school for both professional and amateur students. The Cinema Workshop has given the opportunity for students to make two documentaries and two short films under the supervision and with the support of their tutors after three-months of training. Although 70 people applied to the Cinema Workshop this term, only 30 people will be accepted for the three-month program. A practical and theoretical “documentary workshop” with advisor Özkan Küçük, will begin on December 8th.

The two collectively made documentary projects that were mentioned in this press release are *Kalo* (2007) and *Semerci Fesih* (*Fesih, The Saddle-maker*, 2007).³⁴ *Kalo* is a 29 minute portrait of a local newspaper delivery man, part of the tradition of the free Kurdish press. We see him distributing *Özgür Gündem* (*Free Agenda*) and *Azadiya Welat* (*Free Country*), talking about not only his work, but also the importance of bringing these independent Kurdish newspapers, despite all forms of repression by the state, to its readers in the region. The 8 minute documentary *Semerci Fesih* is also a local portrait. Fesih Sürmeli is one of the last practitioners of saddle-making, an ancient Armenian trade passed onto Kurds.

Close Up Kurdistan (Yüksel Yavuz, 2007, Germany), from the diaspora, could perhaps be seen as an answer to *Good Kurds, Bad Kurds: No Friend but the Mountains* (2001) from a Kurdish perspective:

The Kurdish director Yüksel Yavuz creates a connection between his personal story of immigration and the current situation of the Turkish-Kurdish conflict. In the film he makes a personal journey which takes him from Hamburg through Stockholm to Turkey, ending in the north of Iraq, in the refugee camp Maxmur in Iraqi Kurdistan. Throughout this journey he meets among others his parents and old friends, some of whom went to the mountains to become guerrilla fighters, others who fled the country and went into exile.³⁵

Close Up Kurdistan is a documentary attempting to write on film the alternative history of the conflict between the Turkish state and the Kurdish Liberation Movement. It was shown for the first time in Turkey two years after its release at the 2009 If Istanbul International Independent Film Festival. The festival director, Serra Ciliv, candidly talked about how scared they were to show such a film and debated what the Turkish title of the film should be. They considered titling it just “Close-up” without any reference to Kurds or Kurdistan, but later decided to call it “Close-up Kurds”.³⁶ Even though the screening took place without any attempts at censoring the film, even in 2009, the word “Kurdistan” with its political connotations, was still a taboo.

In 2009, at the 28th International Istanbul Film Festival, premieres of several Kurdish documentaries were programmed. *Pırdesur (Red Bridge/Kırmızıköprü)*, 2008) was the first documentary by Caner Canerik to be shown at the Istanbul International Film Festival. Canerik is known for living in Dersim and producing all his documentaries there. The 90 minute *Pırdesur (Red Bridge)* tells the story of the difficult winter season in a village in Dersim, from where many have migrated and a few remained. In an interview, he talked about how he was surprised that his film was accepted at the Istanbul Film Festival and how this has meant that such films were being appreciated as works of art.³⁷

Inspired by the story of her 48 year old paralyzed aunt’s experience, in *Kirasê Mirinê: Hewîtî (A Fatal Dress: Polygamy/Ölüm Elbisesi: Kumalık)*, 2009), Mizgin Müjde Arslan talks to women and men about the tradition and experience of polygamy in the Kurdish community. This 45 minute documentary later became the first Kurdish documentary to be broadcast on Turkish prime-time television, on *Kanal 24*, a conservative mainstream television channel.³⁸ The channel even paid an acquisition fee, a rare event in Turkey for a documentary.

İki Dil Bir Bavul (On the Way to School), Orhan Eskiköy and Özgür Doğan, 2008) is a purely observational documentary about the first year of a young Turkish teacher at a small primary school in a Kurdish village. The absurdity of the official educational system is made apparent, as

neither the teacher nor the students speak each other's language. With its hands-off approach to the subject matter, the film had a wide appeal. This was due to the fact that 2009 was the year of the "Kurdish Opening" in domestic politics. Nevertheless, it is significant to mention the debate engendered among film critics, who did not know what to do with such a form of documentary storytelling (Sönmez 2009).

Also premiered at the 2009 festival were two feature length documentaries: *5 No'lu Cezaevi: 1980-84 (Prison Nr. 5: 1980-84, Çayan Demirel, 2009)* is about the horrific human rights abuses that took place at the infamous Diyarbakır prison after the 1980 military coup. This was the prison where activists of the Kurdish political movement were tortured for years. Told by the survivors themselves, it is a very powerful depiction of state violence and the will to survive and resist:

The documentary exposes how the use of systematic torture and turkification policies were imposed by the state upon all prisoners, most of whom were Kurdish prisoners. While the Turkish military authorities describe the prison as a "military school," the prisoners describe it as "years of indescribable brutality." The only way to break the chain of atrocities was to resist and sacrifice yourself. The prisoners took up the challenge to break it and, three decades later, director Çayan Demirel takes up the challenge again to show us what happened. (Surela Film)

In *Demsala Dawi: Şewaxan (The Last Season: Shawaks/Son Mevsim Şavaklar, 2010)*, Kazim Öz witnesses a year in the endangered traditional life of the nomadic *Shawak* community in Eastern Turkey. If *Grass: A Nation's Battle for Life* was the first documentary in the "nomadic people genre," this documentary could possibly be seen as the first Kurdish contribution to this genre, the main difference being that Öz was not directing his camera at some exotic tribe, but to his own community, where he had grown up.³⁹ In this film made from within, he also talks about sexism within the community, when he confronts a man in front of the camera.⁴⁰

In pursuit of European Union membership, in 2009 the Turkish government, with the Justice and Development Party (AKP) in power, announced its new democratic initiative to improve its human rights track record. Popularly known as the "Kurdish Opening," this hotly debated shift in government policy possibly loosened some of the restraints on Kurdish cinema. As part of this new "opening," the state-run Turkish Radio and Television (TRT) established its own national, 24 hour Kurdish language channel, TRT-6, in 2009.⁴¹ At that time, Kurdish language television channels had already been broadcasting outside Turkey via

satellite to many parts of Kurdistan, including to Kurds in Turkey, since 1994 (Hassanpour 1998). This was followed later in 2009 by a new regulation that would allow privately owned television and radio stations to broadcast in languages other than Turkish. In response to the prevalence of Kurdish media production, the Turkish state attempted to produce state sanctioned documentaries. Thirteen years after *Destên Me Wê Bibin Bask, Emê Bifirin Herin (Our Hands Will Become Wings, We'll Fly Away)*, a 57 minute documentary about the same topic of forced migration and its human cost was produced and aired by TRT. *Zorunlu Hayat (Forced Life, Zafer Akturan and Sema Ceylan Cabbaroğlu, 2009)* is the story of families forcibly severed from their home, ending up as migrants in Istanbul. This TRT documentary surprisingly ends with this title: “Forced migration is a human rights violation!” and could be regarded as the most significant contribution by TRT to the “Kurdish Opening” via documentary film.

In 2009, too, the third Kurdish film festival in the diaspora was organized in New York, by the founder of the London Kurdish Film Festival (LKFF), Mustafa Gündoğdu, with the theme “a cinema across borders,” signifying the trans-national aspect of Kurdish cinema. In December of the same year, as a collaborative project of the Diyarbakır Arts Center (DSM) and the Diyarbakır Municipality, an international Kurdish cinema conference (*Konferansa Sinemaya Kurdî Navnetewî*) was organized in Diyarbakır. Although Kurdish cinema had been discussed outside of Turkey for some time, this was the first time a conference was being held in Turkey, where the majority of Kurds live. Conceptual and theoretical debates and discussions took place in Kurdish and Turkish within the framework of the two sessions, one titled “Kurdish Cinema as a Question,” and the other “Situating Kurdish Cinema.”⁴²

A year after *Close-up Kurdistan* was shown at the 1st Istanbul International Independent Film Festival as “*Close-up Kurds*,” the festival announced a section titled “Opening Continued” in their program.⁴³ “Opening Continued” referred both to the “Kurdish Opening” in the country, and their own “opening” as a festival.⁴⁴ At the 2010 festival, for the first time in Turkey, two documentaries that could be considered part of a genre of “mountain films” were screened.⁴⁵ Albeit years after their release in international festivals, with these two films, audiences were, for the first time, witnessing the experiences of Kurdish women active in the armed struggle. *Sozdar: She Who Lives Her Promise* (Annegriet Wietsma, The Netherlands, 2007) is a 70 minute portrait of Nuriye Kesbir, one of the leaders of the Kurdish resistance movement, *Koma Civakên Kurdistan (KCK)*.⁴⁶ *Les Femmes du Mont Ararat (The Women of Mount Ararat, Erwann Briand, France, 2004)* is an 85 minute documentary about a small,