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Kurdish Filmmaking in Turkey: History and Narratives

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Kurdish Filmmaking in Turkey:

History and Narratives

by

Omar Sadik

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts
in
Anthropology

Thesis Committee:
Mrinalini Tankha, Chair
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2023

Abstract

This research investigates the history and politics of cultural production by examining Kurdish filmmaking in Turkey. I provide an analysis of contemporary films and filmmakers to explore how Kurdish cinema in Turkey is situated in broader, global political-economic structures. By examining this important case through the lens of history and memory, I clarify how production and aesthetics in Kurdish cinema point to important systemic processes. I use three main research strategies in this study: a historical survey of Kurds in Turkey, an analysis of ten semi-structured interviews with contemporary Kurdish directors and an analysis of films directed by Kurdish filmmakers in Turkey. Data have been collected from primary sources, such as interviews, film screenings and historical records, as well as secondary sources, such as monographs and journal articles. Using these approaches, this research reconsiders how legitimacy, hegemony and the social order in nation-states like Turkey are maintained and how filmmakers challenge these forces. This research shows that Kurdish filmmakers in Turkey, by grappling with several intersecting forms of oppression, provide important insights into systemic social inequality in their films. This thesis contributes to the fields of political and economic anthropology, sociology of culture, anthropology of violence, sociology and anthropology of the state, development studies, Kurdish studies, Middle East studies, comparative history and film studies.

For Boike

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List of Abbreviations

| | |
|-----------------|--|
| AKP | Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi) |
| CHP | Republican People's Party (Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi) |
| CUP | Committee for Unity and Progress (İttihat ve Terakki Cemiyeti) |
| DP | Democrat Party (Demokrat Parti) |
| HDP | Peoples' Democratic Party (Halkların Demokratik Partisi) |
| PKK | Kurdistan Workers' Party (Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan) |
| TİP | Turkey Labour Party (Türkiye İşçi Partisi) |
| DDKO | Revolutionary Cultural Eastern Hearths (Devrimci Doğu Kültür Ocakları) |
| Dev-Genç | Revolutionary Youth Federation of Turkey (Devrimci Gençlik) |
| GAP | Southeast Anatolian Project (Güneydoğu Anadolu Projesi) |
| KSM | Mesopotamia Cinema Collective (Kolektif Sineması Mesopotamia) |
| METO | Middle East Treaty Organization |
| MKM | Mesopotamia Cultural Center (Mezopotamya Kültür Merkezi) |
| NSC | National Security Council (Milli Güvenlik Kurulu) |

Preface

The firmer the refusal of a purely Western emphasis and of one laid solely upon development to date (to say nothing of discredited imperialism), all the stronger is the help afforded by a utopian, open and in itself experimental orientation. Only thus can hundreds of cultures flow into the unity of the human race; a unity that only then takes shape in non-linear time, and with an historical direction that is not fixed and monadic.

Ernst Bloch, *A Philosophy of the Future*

I shall purloin no valuables, appropriate no ingenious formulations. But the rags, the refuse—these I will not inventory but allow, in the only way possible, to come into their own: by making use of them.

Walter Benjamin, *Passagenwerk*

His origins are become remote as is his destiny and not again in all the world's turning will there be terrains so wild and barbarous to try whether the stuff of creation may be shaped to man's will or whether his own heart is not another kind of clay.

Cormac McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*

A long time will pass for our present to become a past like us.
But first, we will march to our doom...

so leave, you guests of the place,
some vacant seats for your hosts
they will recount to you the terms of peace
with the dead!

Mahmoud Darwish, *The "Red Indian's" Penultimate Speech to the White Man*

1. Introduction



Figure 1. Map of Kurdish Population Distribution

This research explores the politics of cultural production through an analysis of Kurdish filmmaking in Turkey. Using historical and ethnographic methods, I consider how filmmakers comply with and challenge the power structures they encounter. The Kurds were torn apart by the catastrophic geopolitical reorganization of national territories in the Middle East following World War I. Since then, they have struggled against the governing strategies of four states that divide their historic homeland – Turkey, Syria, Iran, and Iraq. State violence and other less “visible” forms of oppression, such as economic marginalization and symbolic domination, have continued unabated for decades. This research examines how Kurdish filmmakers in Turkey reveal historic and contemporary inequalities despite ongoing state efforts to silence them. The Turkish state

often censors films that they deem too dangerous for public circulation. For example, the Turkish state censors Kurdish films that explore military repression, socio-economic marginalization, and violent anti-democratic campaigns.

In this research, I define Kurdish cinema in Turkey in a restricted sense: cultural production constituted by films directed by Kurdish filmmakers in Turkey. Along with this designation, I frame Kurdish cinema with a world-systems approach to political-economic theory. World-systems analysis avoids reproducing the systemic inequalities of the status quo. Unlike empire or any other social system, the world-system does not require a single hegemon, and it accepts and feeds on political and cultural differentiation and “self-expression” that ultimately have little to no effect on the system as a whole (Palumbo-Liu 2011, 5). Therefore, I analyze how material and aesthetic dimensions of Kurdish cinema allude to and deal with world-systemic processes. World-systems analysis demonstrates the complex, non-linear way modernity unfolds around the world. This framework enables me to see how Kurdish cinema discloses and depicts this complexity. Likewise, a world-systems approach allows me to challenge the postulate that the Kurds are a colonized people. The colony postulate implies a simplified, static, binary system that fails to consider the complex core-periphery dynamics of the globalized 21st century (Yadirgi 2017). A world-systems approach is helpful in analyzing how cultural production in the periphery influences the core in a multi-centric system. Using this framework, I argue that Kurdish cinema, as cultural production from “the periphery”, reveals essential features of the world-system that are overlooked in “the core.”

One of the premises of this research is that all histories are contested. Therefore, using a world-systems framework presents a contradiction. A world-systems approach necessitates a certain level of “distance” in analysis of cultural production to place it in a broader, global context. The trade-off of this approach is the inevitability of overlooking detailed analyses of counter-histories from the margins. Instead, I critically engage with dominant historiographies and representations of Kurds in Turkey to demonstrate how filmmakers conform to or challenge them.

Many Kurdish filmmakers attempt to tell stories that touch on historical events and experiences. Thus, historical memory forms a central theme in their films. In my interview with the filmmaker Ahu Öztürk, she refers to the unconscious process of memory as follows:

Concerning all histories and peoples, what strikes me is exactly what is forgotten as opposed to what is remembered in history. I want to take a look at what we’ve left out. For example, there are many key events in Turkey... massacres, lynchings, pogroms. [I choose to remember] these painful things. But there are also those things that I unconsciously forget. Why? Can I follow that feeling?... In my feature-fiction, *Toz Bezi*, I didn’t explicitly deal with social memory in the film. But the things I had previously chosen to erase and forget in my own memory somehow entered the film, because writing is like facing yourself. The journey towards the suppressed is through writing, towards that which we have chosen to forget.

The statement above shows that Kurdish filmmakers, in addition to recounting narratives repressed by the state, struggle to recount those that they have forgotten themselves. In this research, I analyze the different ways amnesia is instituted and how filmmakers challenge this.

I choose to analyze films by contemporary Kurdish filmmakers, some of whom came of age as early as the 1990s. Despite state repression during that era, cinema emerged as a medium of remembrance in relation to ongoing events that violently

targeted Kurds and stirred their political conscience. These filmmakers have explored the relationship between fact and fiction in the cinematic re-creation of historical events. In an interview, director Kazım Öz said, “Our history has many stories relevant for the world... When making documentaries, I search for narrative and story-telling; when making fiction films, the narrative is built on concrete experiences we have had.” Öz and other filmmakers wrestle with the tension between fact and fiction, memory and history, as do censors who choose what the public can see and which films receive acknowledgment from state institutions, film festivals, and cultural organizations.

In the thesis that follows, I explore how Kurdish filmmakers in Turkey navigate the tensions between memory and history. I begin with a background chapter summarizing the history of the Kurds in Turkey. The historical analysis explores the relationship between the world economic system, Kurdish cultural production, and identities related to nationalism, language, and territory. In the subsequent ethnographic chapters, I explore how these dynamics are central to filmmaking and film aesthetics.

Two questions formed the basis for my interviews with filmmakers:

- 1) How do funding, production, distribution, consumption, censorship, etc. influence the way memory and history are experienced, curated and archived?
- 2) How do film form, content, narrative, representation, themes, etc. problematize and deal with the tensions between history and memory?

With respect to the first research question, on the production of Kurdish films, I analyze the concrete and material conditions of filmmaking. With respect to the second research question, on the aesthetics of Kurdish films, I analyze how films engage with history and memory. I use the analyses of material conditions and aesthetic practices as heuristics to argue that they are located in and register broader political-economic and world-systemic

processes. For example, many of the repressive conditions under which Kurdish filmmakers work are results of specific state policies. These policies are integral elements of world-systemic transformation in the last decades and they directly influence the aesthetic techniques used in Kurdish filmmaking. I frame Kurdish cinema in Turkey as a form of cultural production in the periphery and I argue that Kurdish films are effective in providing a critical reflection of the world-system.

A Basic Outline of Kurds in Turkey, Cultural Production and Kurdish Cinema

Prior to World War I, the Ottoman Empire, which covered much of the Middle East, was a multi-ethnic imperial territory with a complex social system in which the majority of the Kurds had lived. Following World War I, the defeated Ottoman Empire and the victorious Allied forces (particularly the British and French) attempted to ratify the Treaty of Sevres, which would partition the Ottoman Empire into colonial units governed by the victorious European powers. Mustafa Kemal, former field marshal of the Ottomans, launched a successful anti-colonial revolution in the name of secular Turkish nationalism against the Europeans and the assenting Ottomans. This led to the ratification of the Treaty of Lausanne, which established modern Republican Turkey in 1923 and granted the new Turkish elite and ruling classes nearly all their postwar ambitions (Cengiz 2021). The treaty left the Kurds, the fourth largest ethno-linguistic group in the Middle East (after Arabs, Persians and Turks), divided between four territories and eventually four nation-states: Turkey, Iraq, Iran, and Syria. Today, the majority of Kurds live in Turkey and they are Turkey's largest ethnic minority (almost 20 million; roughly 20% of the population) (Institut Kurde 2017). The Turkish Republic's general policy

towards its Kurdish population has been violent and undemocratic assimilation, both ethno-linguistically and socio-economically. This still unresolved centuries-long process is known as the “Kurdish Question.”

Since 1923, the Kurdish Question has been framed by the Turkish state in three ways: (1) in the early Republic, as a civilizing mission of degenerate mountain tribes; (2) in the mid 20th century, as a (top-down) socio-economic development mission of an underdeveloped region; and (3) since the ‘80s, as an “anti-terrorist” crusade against an irrational, violent Kurdish sectarianism. These three regimes of representation have not been distinct and have often combined. The majority of Turkey’s politicians, social scientists, writers, and filmmakers – in short, knowledge producers – explain this so-called degeneracy, underdevelopment, and terrorism as a result of the Kurdish culture’s backwardness, its static reactionary tribal structures, and resistance to modern institutions (Yadirgi 2017). Kurdish society has consistently been represented as residual in the forward march of linear progress. The gap between history and these representations is central to this research and is the subject of Chapter 2.

This ideology of progress has justified two major practices: (1) an array of alarming state interventions in the Kurdish southeast – demographic engineering, mass deportations, linguicide, endless police states, and ecological and socio-economic ruin; and, as mentioned, (2) Kurds represented in Turkey’s popular consciousness as everything from “degenerate mountain Turks” and uncivilized boors to tragic humanitarian victims in need of paternal aid. These ideologies ignore that Kurdistan’s so-called “degeneracy, underdevelopment, and terrorism” are in fact the result of the Ottoman and Turkish state’s active de-development of the region since the 19th century

(Yadirgi 2017). This was part of Turkey's nation-building imperative embedded in the broader process of uneven and combined development (U&CD hereafter). Turkey's modernization was a manifestation of late development (Harootunian 2015). Like other "late developing" states (such as Iran and Japan), the Ottoman Empire and Republican Turkey avoided full-blown European colonialism through rapid modernization of the military and education systems. This "late modernization" has had resounding effects on Turkey's various minority populations, especially the Kurds.

In this study, I do not frame Kurdistan as a colony of Turkey. As Yadirgi (2017, 53) explains, "the explanatory value of the internal colony postulate in elucidating the relationship between the Turkish state and the Kurdish people is dubitable, since all of the applications of this model are founded on a unidirectional and static conceptualisation of the relation between 'powerless and peripheral' Kurdish areas and the 'all-powerful and dominant' Turkish state... This characterisation obscures many aspects...because it fails to account systematically for the influence of the periphery over the core." This dialectical relationship between the periphery and the core will be outlined in Chapter 2.

Modernization and development help us understand how the Turkish state attempts to assimilate the Kurds and how this leads to the development of identities and nationalisms. Both Turkish and Kurdish nationalism are a modern phenomenon and Kurdish resistance to assimilation has been a central part of identity formation (Yadirgi 2017). In the case of both Turkish and Kurdish nationalism, the question of "origins" has been the "site of (re)producing differences under a regime of state violence" (Hassanpour 2021, 105). Many Kurdish films, such as Öztürk's *Toz Bezi*, Rûken Tekeş's *Heverk* or Ali

Kemal Çınar's *Veşartî* challenge these foregoing versions of the national imaginary by deploying, among others, gendered, ethnic and queer narratives.

These dynamics of the state, nation-building, and representation have influenced Kurdish cultural products like literature and film. Kurdish cinema has taken shape in recent decades, with Yılmaz Güney considered to be its daring founder in Turkey in the second half of the 20th century. Özgür Çiçek has argued that modern Kurdish art could not truly develop until the 21st century due to the aggressive assimilation politics that afflicted the Kurds in the 20th century (Çiçek 2016). Kurdish cinema is of particular significance regarding the contemporary relationship between cultural production, nation/state-building, and politics (Ahmadzadeh 2003). Çiçek claims that an archive of Kurdish novels and films could only be conceived recently, and that Kurdish artists therefore maintain an ambiguity in defining themselves as Kurdish artists or their work as Kurdish art (Çiçek 2016). According to Ayça Çiftçi, the unclear status of Kurdish cinema is a reflection of the same ambiguity of their political status, which is a stateless nation who have been oppressively governed by four nation-states (Çiftçi 2015). These discussions point to an important question about Kurdish films: should we analyze these films according to how they engage with the politics of the Kurdish Question or should we also analyze them according to a distinct “Kurdishness” beyond politics? Filmmakers and intellectuals have challenged the assumption that Kurdish art and film are fundamentally conditioned by a particular political context, culture, or language (Çiçek 2016). This approach would challenge Çiftçi's claim above that Kurdish films are a mirror of their political and historical situation as an oppressed nation seeking resolution in a world-system. Though I refuse to reduce Kurdish cinema to a direct unmediated

reflection of their historical and political circumstances, I explore the complex mediation of how Kurdish films reflect their political-economic circumstances through the analysis of “cultural production in the periphery.”

As discussed earlier, Kurdish films are important in providing a critical reflection of the world-system as cultural products from the periphery. I make this argument using four theoretical frameworks. These frameworks help me analyze the research questions as well as critique prevailing assumptions and concepts that often mislead analyses of such “peripheral aesthetics” – such as progressivist historiography, Orientalist social science of the Middle East, transnational theories of culture and Eurocentric Marxist theories of culture. In the first framework, I argue that all cultural products that circulate in the world-market must be analyzed on the basis of world history. In the second framework, I argue that historical memory is critical when it challenges ideologies of historiography and gives new meaning to the past, present, and future. In the third framework, I critique outmoded, yet surprisingly persistent analytical models of Middle Eastern nation-states. These models overlook world-systemic processes and tend to explain the persistence of repressive state-military bureaucracies in Turkey as a recurrent manifestation of the despotic nature of Muslim society. Instead, I argue for the continuing importance of political-economy and social class as a way to overcome the Orientalism and racism of these models. In the fourth section, I argue that the theory of uneven and combined development helps overcome the Eurocentrism in many Western Marxist theories of culture. Eurocentric theories have failed to take account of how culture and socialization uniquely developed in regions outside the West or in the periphery.

Cultural Production

Film, like the novel, is a modern phenomenon that is now thoroughly globalized. To analyze cultural production, I apply a comparative world literature/cinema framework in this study. This framework helps analyze the globalization and historical value of film, as opposed to the fragmentation of literary and film studies by disciplines like area studies, postcolonial studies and ethnic studies (Moretti 2005; WReC 2015; Majumdar 2021). World literature and cinema is centered on the idea that the ultimate horizon of the social sciences and humanities is world history. Analysis should not abandon this framework following recent debates on multiculturalism and disciplinary critiques of Eurocentrism. These critiques bolster world literary/cinema analysis. Therefore, critiques of Eurocentrism in this study will not be used to provincialize “the West” (Chakrabarty 2000), but to deprovincialize Marxism (Tomba 2019; Harootunian 2015; Rehbein 2015). As follows, the definitive factor of analysis in this research is not cultural difference; it is social inequality.

Today’s epoch is a “post-historical” one, mired in a perpetual present that reifies the past (Jameson 1992b). I use the conditions of cultural production and representations of historical memory in Kurdish films as a way to provide a reflexive analysis of the present from an historical perspective. Without this historical framework, the “political unconscious” that generates cultural and aesthetic products is overlooked (Jameson 1991).

It is important to pluralize modernization processes by analyzing how they unfold in specific societies and cultures around the world. However, this does not mean that there are “alternative modernities” that are fundamentally divergent from a singular

worldwide capitalist process of modernization (Jameson 2002). The “alternative modernities” frameworks claim that different societies modernize according to their own logic. These frameworks ultimately “overlook the other fundamental meaning of modernity which is that of worldwide capitalism itself” (Jameson 2002, 12). In this study, I reject the assumption of any national or cultural exceptionalism or divergent modernities in the world-system. I argue that all cultural products that circulate in the world market need to be studied as part of a greater ensemble in order to understand how world-scale material processes manifest in specific cultural forms (Cramer et al. 2022, 4-5; Yamamoto 2022, 114). In the case of Kurdish films, their national censorship in Turkey and international circulation outside Turkey are conditioned by these world-systemic forces. Similarly, many narratives in Kurdish films deal directly or indirectly with these forces.

In addition to the content of films, film form “expresses” the concrete historical and material reality they are embedded in (Jameson 1971). The majority of cultural theory tends to seal off texts and the concepts used to understand them from history and change. For example, deconstructive critiques of film claim that films can never represent reality because reality is unrepresentable. On the opposite flank, Third Cinema claims that films are only political insofar as they lead to concrete social change or political goals (Wayne 2001). In this research, I do not reject these two approaches. Instead, I attempt to synthesize both of them at a higher level, because “the political value of film is part of a far more complex and mediated process in which ideology is conceived of not as a ‘bad’ thing that must be eradicated completely but as a necessity whose function cannot

be filled without representation (and correspondingly, without form)” (Cramer et al. 2022, 9).

We grasp history and understand social reality not by destroying representation, but by analyzing it. As Jameson (1981, 35) states, “history is not a text, not a narrative, master or otherwise, but that, as an *absent cause*, it is inaccessible to us except in textual form, and that our approach to it and to the real itself necessarily passes through its prior textualization, its narrativization in the political unconscious.” History must be narrativized or fictionalized in order to be thought. Form is “the final articulation of the deeper logic of the content itself” (Jameson 1971, 329). Thus, ideology and representation in cultural products can also be read in a positive sense because it reveals a political unconscious that registers the concrete reality that lies beneath it.

Representations in film say more through their omissions and failures and through the ideology of form than it does through its content (Cramer et al. 2022, 9). Koçer (2013) refers to the importance of form in Kurdish films. She claims that Kurdish films tend to exhibit a pendulum between documentary and fiction, past and present, and the traditional and modern. In this research, I build on her argument and argue that these pendulums are examples of how history, as an “absent cause”, manifests in the forms and narratives of Kurdish films.

Historiography

I use a materialist framework in this research to understand cultural production. Historical materialism is neither a theory nor a conceptual framework, it is a mode of practical intervention into history (Tomba 2013). This helps us understand how the

narration of the past can be performative rather than merely descriptive or constative (Austin 1961; Cavanaugh 2009; 2020). Walter Benjamin (1968) distinguishes between historicism and historical materialism. The former deals with empty homogeneous time by merely reciting events without distinguishing between major and minor ones. The historical materialist, on the other hand, “seizes hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger... The danger affects both the content of the tradition and its receivers... Only the historian will have the gift of fanning the spark of hope in the past who is firmly convinced that even the dead will not be safe from the enemy if he wins” (1968, 255). History is not a dead vault of past episodes waiting passively to be glossed by supposedly impartial historians. The past is a living resource for social scientists and cultural workers. I argue that the filmmakers in this study engage with the living past in order to discredit Turkish state narratives. This type of critical historiography in Kurdish films exposes the violent repetitions of modernization and development and discredits their legitimacy.

Benjamin’s guiding principle for social liberation is not the emancipation of our grandchildren – which has been the dogma of countless modernization atrocities in the name of a liberated future. Twentieth century anti-colonial struggles have rightly pointed to the inadequacy of the Eurocentric model of uni-linear history and progress. Submitting history to the stages of linear progress creates an axiology that categorically distinguishes between what is “developed” and what is “residual”, what is progress and what is not, and what is and is not historically necessary for the emancipation of the future (Tompa 2013). For Benjamin, the revolutionary situation is the reverse: the guiding principle of social liberation is not progress for posterity, but the redemption of the vanquished

through remembrance in order to reveal the destructiveness of so-called progress and development (Benjamin 1968).

The Turkish state has represented itself as a modernizing force of progressive change, whereas Kurdish society has been as a static repetitive residue. A critical political-economic and historical analysis of the situation would reveal these depictions as misrepresentations (Hassanpour 2021; Yadirgi 2017). The way the past is narrated in cultural products, such as in literature and film, is inseparable from the economic base, but it is also conditioned by other forces, such as state institutions and symbolic power, as Michel-Rolph Trouillot's (1995) work has shown. In the following chapters, I attempt to analyze the relationships between these forces and Kurdish films through the lens of the above-stated critical historiography.

Under capitalism, cultural commodities are endlessly produced in tandem with a modern crisis of historical experience (Brenner 2004; Berman 1982). According to Massimiliano Tomba (2013, 2), this is "a crisis of the capacity to give one's present a coherent meaning by reference to past experiences and exemplary stories, in order then to conceptualize future action on this basis, [which]... concerned the very possibility of writing history." This leads to the amnesiac unthinkability of political change due to an inhibited historical memory. The (mis)representations of the Kurds by the Turkish state, for example, attempt to intervene in "the very possibility of writing history." This possibility is important because, as Achille Mbembe (2002, 239-75) has argued in his reference to Africa, those that have "borne witness against life" in historical experiences of violence and atrocities have been unable to "write itself" into a collective subject. This is because the discourse of victimhood has not been able to address historical suffering in

a way that could produce a subject. In this research, I attempt to analyze how such histories are represented and how institutions like the state, market, and ideological apparatuses govern them.

The Nation-State

The Kurds in Turkey have been consistently dealt with undemocratically and kept out of or restrained in government. Moreover, Turkey has experienced several political-economic crises that have led to the rise of executive power over the legislative. This has had resounding effects on the Kurdish population and their political and cultural freedoms.

Analysis of the relationship between state and social class helps us understand the logic of phenomena such as nationalism, linguicide/ethnocide, and violence. The majority of analyses of the Ottoman Empire and Republican Turkey have discussed its history under the assumption of the “state versus society” model or “strong state tradition” that ignores the importance of social class and its effect on culture (Başkaya 1997; Keyder 1987; Cengiz 2021). The strong state tradition considers Turkey’s repressive military bureaucracy as a manifestation of a “strong state vis-à-vis a weak bourgeoisie.” A timid liberal class (agents that may support Kurdish political and cultural rights) is subordinated to the real social agent: a strong military state that inherits much of its institutional structure from the similarly “despotic” Ottoman Muslim state that preceded it. These Orientalist frameworks “ignore a relational analysis between the state’s militarist-nationalist institutionalization and capitalist institutionalization” (Cengiz 2021,

3). A relational analysis between state and social class is effective in understanding how Kurds have been governed.

Like the modern nature of nationalism, the authoritarian national state is a symptom of uneven capitalist development in the world-system (Spencer 2019, 248). Capitalist development has been the determining factor of the Turkish state's policies towards its Kurdish population (Yadirgi 2017; Cengiz 2021). The fundamental influence of social class on the reproduction of Turkey's state-bureaucratic-military structure is of central importance to how Kurds have been governed. The Turkish state often enacted undemocratic policies in contradiction with the interests of its national bourgeoisie. However, these policies have been carried out to guarantee the reproduction of capitalist social relations beneficial to the bourgeoisie in the long term (Poulantzas 1978). Like other nation-states, the Turkish state "aims at stemming the conflictual dynamics of the different classes... Its violent nature is the same as the non-neutral neutralisation of conflict...it can momentarily conflict with the interests of the bourgeoisie" (Tomba 2013, 53). In other words, the strong state tradition is misleading because it ignores the relationship between the state and capitalist institutionalization that produces a strong military state beneficial to the capitalist class. In this research, I reframe the Turkish nation-state as an institution that guarantees the reproduction of capitalist social relations. I use this to analyze key social and cultural phenomena concerning the Kurdish Question and Kurdish cinema – such as nationalisms, scientific racism, linguicide, state violence, and neoliberal governance.

The critique of the strong state tradition is inseparable from historiography. Kurdish socio-linguist Amir Hassanpour (2021) reverses the Orientalism of the "strong

state theory” mentioned above by intervening with a “history from below.” He challenges several historical narratives that claim that 20th century Kurdish society is an example of “Oriental exceptionalism.” This supposed exceptionalism claims that progressive or modern political consciousness does not emerge even when the so-called despotic Oriental state dissolves into a weak state. Most historiography depicted the Middle East, such as Kurdistan, as “an exception to world history, where peasants, women and intellectuals are timid, the working class does not exist, and the politics of feminism, communism, democracy or liberalism are unfit to flourish on its soil; only religion (Islam) is the engine of history here” (Hassanpour 2021, 68). This “exception” suggests that the oppressed, unlike in other parts of the world, are socially or culturally inert due to the static, placating and exceptional nature of Islamic society. Hassanpour empirically disproves this thesis, but his broader aim is to prove the materialist claim that both history and historiography are sites of class struggle (Hassanpour 2021, 68). What is at stake is not “history itself”, but how the past is narrated. This historiography parallels other recent “performative” attempts (Tomba 2019; Traverso 2016a, 2021; Löwy 1996, 2000) to “wrest tradition away from a conformism that is about to overpower it” (Benjamin 1968, 255).

Critical representations of the past that challenge dominant historiographies of the nation-state are politically important and effective. They open the possibility for social and historical subjectivities that challenge those that condition them (Trouillot 1995; Mbembe 2002). Mainstream historiographical narratives of the nation-state are used to justify the policies and deeds of military and civilian governments. Breaking with these narratives is not simply an alternative re-telling of the past, it is breaking with its very

form of representation (Tomba 2013, 40). Materialist historiography must be self-consciously partisan and subjective by writing from the perspective of the oppressed past in order to release the possibilities of the present (Benjamin 1968). This historiography is performative, not descriptive (Tomba 2013).

Uneven and Combined Development and the World-System

Uneven and combined development (U&CD) is a framework that has gone under-discussed in the social sciences and humanities (San Juan Jr. 2002). Originally developed by Trotsky (1932), U&CD has recently seen a resurgence as a powerful tool for the analysis of how neoliberal globalization manifests in local contexts and in cultural products like literature and film (Löwy 1981; Christie and Değirmencioglu 2021; WReC 2015; San Juan Jr. 2002). Similar to many studies in economic anthropology (Wolf 1981; Mariátegui 1928; Meillassoux 1975), social phenomena like “Kurdish underdevelopment” are not precursors to the capitalist mode of production, but are the product of the encounter with and integration into it. Social phenomena represented as residual in linear time (i.e. “static, backward” Kurdish society) are, in practice, violently subsumed and assimilated into the capitalist mode and kept in a state of dependency and underdevelopment. The capitalist mode transforms and feeds on so-called “residual” social structures, such as Kurdish underdevelopment, through the process of development. Western intellectuals have ignored how many regions underwent paths to industrialization and modernization that differed from the West, such as Turkey (Harootunian 2015, 48).

Uneven development plays a major role in cultural production. Postwar Marxists in the West developed critical theories of cultural production based on the commodity-form, such as in Lukacs (1971) and Adorno (2001) or Debord (2002). Western Marxism's insistence on the commodity-form as the only genuine methodological point of departure leads to a Eurocentric fixation on the totalizing and reifying relationship between culture and socialization in capitalist modernity. This overlooks the unevenness of development. Thus, these theories are not straight-forwardly applicable to the majority of the planet. Processes of state-modernization, industrialization and "embourgeoisement" took on decisively divergent forms from the West in many parts of the world due to the unevenness of development. Turkey's modernization process and its effects on its Kurdish population is an example of this divergence. The key to understanding these differences is to see how the state and development have been implicated in the "minute texture of everyday life" in the periphery (Gupta 1995). This must be a central framework in understanding cultural production. I will use this framework to point out the Kurdish Question's historical specificities in Chapter 2. I will then use these specificities to analyze filmmaking conditions and film aesthetics in Chapters 3 and 4.

Development, especially its representation and legitimation, is influenced by how globalization transforms the nation-state. Globalization challenges two key concepts at the heart of the national state: territoriality and sovereignty (Sharma and Gupta 2006). In order to understand these changes, it is helpful to analyze the effects of state processes, rather than focusing only on governmental or national institutions (Mitchell 1999; Trouillot 2001). Under neoliberal globalization, the state maintains and even increases its

power as an “exercise of legitimation”; it is a bid to elicit support or tolerance of the insupportable and intolerable by presenting itself as something other than itself – namely, legitimate, disinterested domination (Trouillot 2001, 125). Analyzing U&CD from this perspective helps historicize globalization, while working out the ongoing though changing importance of the nation-state as an “exercise of legitimation” (Edelman and Haugerud 2005).

U&CD is crucial for analyzing modernization beyond a Eurocentric model that posits a linear transition from premodernity to modernity. This flawed linear model parallels Eurocentric literary and film theory that sees a corresponding linear progression in aesthetic forms (realism → modernism → postmodernism) (Jameson 2020). Films and novels produced in different parts of the world-system must be understood in their specificity. The U&CD framework reconceptualizes such linear models on a more complex global scale.

Kurdish filmmakers consistently deploy the aesthetics of realism and modernism, but sometimes in surprisingly unique ways. I argue that Kurdish films are not marginal or outdated because they use these aesthetics. I analyze films using U&CD to argue that these aesthetic practices from the Kurdish periphery are often apocalyptic insights into a social order that produces manifest forms of inequality, violence, and social degeneration. These aesthetics dramatize the struggle to replace the system with something else by discrediting hegemonic narratives of progress and shared universal purpose. They reveal the fact that late capitalism is not an epoch of progress, but one of explosive contradictions between development and underdevelopment. Put simply, many of these films radically negate the most fundamental aspects of how the system and the state

legitimize themselves. James Ferguson (1999, 249-50) has questioned “how we can reconfigure the intellectual field in a way as to restore global inequality to its status as a ‘problem’ without reintroducing the teleologies and ethnocentrism of the development metanarrative.” It is in this context that Benjamin’s task is very pertinent: producing an image of reality that is able to illuminate the possibility of change. In order to do this, what needs to be opposed, paradoxically, is the entire concept of modern linear progress.

Positionality, Research Design and Methods

I first became interested in the “Kurdish Question” in Turkey over ten years ago when I was living in Istanbul from 2011 until 2014. The more I learned about its history and politics, the more I understood its complexity. Many of its defining elements – such as assimilation, nationalism, state-building, modernization, urbanization, economic development, geopolitical conflict, and democratization – are relevant to understanding our times. Since then, I have traveled to Kurdistan numerous times and carried out several months of ethnographic fieldwork in 2015 – a politically important year for the region.

I hold a C1 (lower advanced) level Turkish language certificate from Boğaziçi University in Istanbul. However, I am self-taught in Turkish from the A1 to B2 levels. Therefore, my reading and writing skills are disproportionately more basic than my speaking. I was more autonomous in the interviewing process than in the transcription and secondary textual data process. I was able to conduct the interviews done in Turkish on my own. In the transcription process, I had a Turkish colleague correct and proofread the transcribed interviews conducted in Turkish. I do not speak Kurdish, Farsi or Arabic

which does present its limitations. For example, I was not able to conduct analysis on secondary data written in these languages. Fortunately, all interviewed participants were fluent in Turkish and some in English.

I was born and raised in Northern California, USA. Both of my parents come from the rural lower-class peasantry in the Pashtun region of South Asia near Peshawar with strong clan traditions, whereas I was socialized in a semi-urban multi-ethnic part of the US. My parents raised me with generally secular-liberal values. We are ethnically Pashtun people (Iranian ethnic group). My minority status was the object of racism and xenophobia in the US. As a child, I was raised in a migrant working-class environment, and in my adolescence my family achieved middle class status through social mobility. Without this mobility, I doubt I would be doing academic research today. These biographical factors play a major role in my relationship to my research and to the Kurdish issue in Turkey. I come from the same ethnic group as the Kurds (Iranian), and have had some of the same experiences that many Kurds face in their daily lives (assimilation, xenophobia, inequality, partition and militarization of homeland, migration, etc.), albeit embedded in quite different contexts and forms of power. Therefore, I have some familiarity of the intricacies of the society and culture, yet I am also very much an “outsider” as a U.S. American and as a non-Kurdish speaker.

In this research, I employ a mixed-methods approach to answer the primary research question. I began by conducting participant observation in a unique iteration of the London Kurdish Film Festival in April 2021, which was platformed online/digitally for an extended period and “globally” distributed via the Internet due to the Covid-19 pandemic. There, I “digitally” attended about 100 film screenings and conducted content

analysis on these films. Based on the data collected, I formulated a series of questions that I subsequently asked filmmakers who joined my research as interviewees. I based these question on (1) the social conditions and (2) the aesthetics of their filmmaking in relation to history and memory.

Through existing contacts and contacts I made after giving an open-ended interview to the coordinator of the London Kurdish Film Festival, I used snowball-sampling to find ten currently-active Kurdish filmmakers willing to participate in open-ended semi-structured interviews (Bernard 2011, 147-9, 157-8).

I began this sampling and interviewing process in October 2021 and concluded it in February 2022. More than ten filmmakers responded to my requests, but I apportioned the final selection to equally fulfill three “types” of filmmakers – established, emerging and neophyte. I define established as a filmmaker with several years of experience, multiple productions, reception of various funds/grants and international recognition; emerging as a filmmaker with less experience and productions but with some international recognition and/or funding and support from cultural institutions; neophyte as a filmmaker who has either recently began filmmaking and/or has been self-funded and tends to avoid cultural institutions. Though these categories are not clear-cut, three to four filmmakers represented each category in the final interviews. This provided me with a better sample of filmmaking at different stages or with different approaches.

I also created a gender quota of at least 3 (30%) and preferably 5 (50%) women interviewees (Bernard 2011, 144). This is an important consideration in a field (filmmaking) dominated by men. I created this quota so the analysis and results in this research would not be distorted by the variable of gender. Moreover, interviewing women

would help me analyze if questions of filmmaking and historical memory are influenced by gender. Following the sampling procedure, four women filmmakers agreed to participate in my research. They all participated in the study.

I conducted the interviews in both English and Turkish without the need for an interpreter and recorded the interviews with the permission of the participants. The interviews were semi-structured with a list of twenty questions – half of which inquired about material conditions and the other half about aesthetics. The open-ended, semi-structured form gave the interlocutors space to reflect on further issues connected to the original questions. These were issues that I either did not consider at first or were specific to the given interviewee. For example, some filmmakers discussed ambiguities in language, social mobility, and specific gender issues, which were not directly part of my interview structure. I also invited the interlocutors to ask me questions, which helped deepen our discussions. Many of the questions they asked me led to further topics not originally planned in the interview, such as the reception of Kurdish films abroad, the experience of doing social science in Turkey as a foreigner, or conversing about my own biography. Almost all the interviews lasted between two to three hours, with some as long as five. The extended length of the interviews allowed me to establish a deeper, more emotional connection with the filmmakers that is often not possible in shorter, structured interviews. Thus, I was able to collect rich ethnographic data, with over 250 pages (double-spaced) of transcriptions.

I translated and transcribed the interviews and had a Turkish colleague make sure my work was accurate. I then analyzed the data using Atlas.TI QDA software. I primarily used content and thematic analyses. I partitioned the transcribed data based on the

questions asked and then analyzed the data on a question-by-question basis to develop codes and themes. A total of eighteen primary codes were developed, such as financing, censorship, nationalism, and migration. Within each code, further sub-codes were developed to help organize the material. For example, under the code “aesthetics” and “fact-fiction”, I created sub-codes such as form, content, and style or realism, imagination, experience, and story-telling. Using these codes, I then did closer readings of and took notes on the interviews. Alongside this analysis, I continued to conduct analyses of films that were relevant to the research and where they were available for viewing, including films produced by filmmakers not interviewed. All the participating filmmakers shared their films with me free of charge digitally for me to view before and after our interviews. I used digital platforms like Mubi, Vimeo and MezolinX to view films by filmmakers not interviewed in this research, such as Ali Kemal Çınar, Kazım Öz, Ferit Karahan, Rezan Yeşilbaş, etc. I used the themes and codes from the interviews and screenings to develop a focus of the historical study in Chapter 2, such as the emergence of nationalisms, modernization, state policy, linguicide, etc. Following analysis of interviews and films, I used the coding and thematic analysis to develop the final arrangement of Chapter 3 and 4 – which are economic exclusion, symbolic power, and state violence in Chapter 3 and childhood, heritage, exile, education and militarization in Chapter 4.

I loosely employ Franco Moretti’s (2013) methodology of “distant reading” in this research to analyze films. While I do not use this methodology as rigorously as Moretti, I use his general framework of sacrificing the benefits of close reading in order to attain the benefits of distance. With distance, aesthetic sensibility is exchanged for the

conceptual rigor of Wallerstein (Christie 2019). I used distant reading to analyze how overarching and recurring themes in films map onto broader geographical and historical phenomena.

Chapter Layout

Chapter 2 is an historical analysis of Kurds in Turkey with a focus on the relationship between political-economy and cultural production. This chapter helps the reader grasp the context of the ethnography and film analyses in Chapter 3 and 4. The goal is to show the historical context of major themes in Kurdish cinema (nationalism, language, economy, the state) using the theoretical framework discussed earlier in this chapter. Chapter 3 focuses on the social conditions of filmmaking with the various forms of power traversing the field of cultural production in Turkey and the international arena. Cultural production always occurs in a social environment full of power and inequality. The goal is to gain a more detailed perspective on structure and agency in a complex world-system and how Kurdish filmmakers deal with this environment. Chapter 4 is a continuation of this ethnographic analysis with a focus on history and memory in Kurdish cinema. The two ethnographic chapters attempt to probe more deeply into the issues raised in chapters 1 and 2. Finally, Chapter 5 provides a summary and a conclusion based on the significance of the frameworks used to understand culture and history.

2. A Historical Analysis of Kurds in Turkey

This chapter is a historical study of Kurds in Turkey. I use a political-economic framework to analyze how modernization and development affected the Kurds. I first discuss how Late Ottoman modernization reforms initiated the development of nationalisms. I then analyze the effects of Republican Turkey's aggressively-imposed "Kemalist" ideology throughout the country. In the early Republic, the Kurds were the object of a severe civilizing mission by the Turkish state as part of a nation-building imperative. I then examine the mid-century Cold War period. These decades were politically volatile and included three military governments. Turkey joined NATO in the 1950s, and the military became more deeply entrenched in the Kurdish Question. The guiding ideology vis-à-vis the Kurdish Question in these decades was the question of so-called "development", which was a "containment of communism" in Third World countries. These decades also saw the birth of Kurdish cinema through the celebrated actor-director Yılmaz Güney – a staunch activist during this politically volatile period. I then discuss the neoliberal transformation of Turkey and the emergence of the AKP regime in 2002. Since the 1980s, "terrorism" has been the defining element of the Kurdish Question. In the '80s and '90s, violence in Kurdistan peaked as the state waged an anti-terrorist war against Kurdish insurgents. This "dirty war" is the subject of many Kurdish films. Initially, there was hope for a peaceful solution to the Kurdish Question with AKP. They retracted their promises of peace and have implemented policies of neoliberal authoritarianism. These policies have directly affected Kurdish filmmakers.

The historical analysis in this chapter is neither authoritative nor exhaustive. As will be discussed towards the end of this chapter, Kurds have struggled to write histories

due to the lack of official institutions that results from statelessness. As mentioned earlier, my method of analysis in this chapter necessarily overlooks the various ways Kurds produce counter-histories. Instead, my analysis relies on the Turkish state's dominant historical narratives in order to critically analyze them using a materialist framework. This helps me examine the three dominant narratives of the Kurdish Question discussed above that are evident in Turkey's modern history: civilizing, developing and anti-terrorism. These are not clear-cut narratives and have often combined. Many of the interviewed filmmakers discussed all three representations as important influences on their aesthetic practice and subjectivities. Within these hegemonic narratives, however, there are cracks that can lead to openings for memory to slip in – which will be analyzed in chapter 3 and especially in chapter 4. My analysis in this chapter allows the reader to gain a historical context of the subsequent ethnographic and film analyses and it allows me to understand how filmmakers and their films challenge these dominant historical narratives.

Kurdish Identity and Literature Before the Establishment of Republican Turkey

From the sixteenth to nineteenth centuries, the Kurdish region was a mosaic of tribal, nomadic, agrarian, and urban zones caught between the Safawid and Ottoman states (Bozarslan 2019). These two states considered the Kurds unqualified to rule themselves and, accordingly, governed their “stateless” Kurdish subjects. Kurdish identity began to develop in these circumstances. In a time when the Ottoman and Safawid states attempted to undermine their political autonomy and territory, literary

texts, such as Bidlisi's 16th century *Şeref-nāme*, Khani's 17th century *Mem û Zîn* and the 19th century poetry of Koyî, were the first conscious efforts to assert a unified Kurdish history and statehood (Hassanpour 1992).

In response to the dramatic rise of the North Atlantic in the 18th and 19th centuries, Ottoman policy was to assimilate and coopt the Kurdish elite away from Kurdistan into urban centers so as to keep tight centralized control over its changing economy (Yadirgi 2017). In 1838, Britain's support of Istanbul in regional wars led to the most significant watershed in the Ottoman Empire's modernization process. There were two corresponding effects. First, the opening up of the Empire to the political and economic hegemony of the British and their industrial free-trade machinery – incorporating Ottoman lands into the capitalist world system, tumbling the Ottoman state into debt peonage, politically subordinating the Empire to the British and French and, most importantly, confronting the Empire with the new European ideologies of nationalism, liberalism, secularism, and positivism. Second, the Tanzimat bureaucratic centralization-modernization reforms (1839–76) in the Ottoman domains espoused by the British led to radical social transformation (Yadirgi 2017, 3; Owen 1992). As a manifestation of U&CD, the reforms were a “defensive modernization” against European encroachment and laid the groundwork for primitive accumulation (Matin 2019). They included military modernization, the universal extension of citizen rights to all Ottoman subjects, the development of a new secular school system, the creation of representative assemblies, and a more regular state bureaucracy that managed land revenue to pay for military development (Pamuk 2018, 94-102).

These changes led to the birth of nationalisms, among them Kurdish. The British – now working with a much larger colonial map – began to adopt a policy to preserve a strong, “hard” centralized Ottoman Empire as a buffer against the Russian push towards Istanbul (McDowall 2004, 69). Maintaining political hegemony over the Ottoman state as its major creditor, the British supported the Ottomans against territorial fragmentation, and thus against any threat to losing the Kurdish emirates. The Tanzimat reforms were a drive against this fragmentation that tried to quell any emerging nationalist movements. It was the most significant event in the obliteration of local autonomy in the Kurdish region and set off a chain reaction of rebellious ethno-nationalisms (Greek, Kurdish, Armenian, etc.). This came to define the Ottoman and subsequent Turkish state’s Kurdish Question. The Ottoman and later Kemalist hardline interventions into this now de-stabilized Kurdish and Armenian geography was the region’s transformation “from imperial borderlands to imperial shatter zones” (Yardirgi 2017, 5). This decades-long process prevented two potential events from happening that created the conditions for Kurdish statelessness. The first was that the destruction of the Kurdish emirates prevented the establishment of any power-centers and thus a Kurdish urban bourgeoisie (Hassanpour 2021). Correspondingly, the Kurdish language and cultural production never coalesced beyond its fragmented and tangentially connected character (Hassanpour 2021).

In this context, the 19th century poetry of Haji Qadir Koyi is a rupture in the historical development of Kurdish national, literary, and cultural identity. Koyi was the architect of modern Kurdish nationalism (Ghaderi 2014). His secular modernism helped pave the way for Kurdish identity and linguistic autonomy (Hassanpour 2021). Koyi’s modernism corresponds to a world-historical conjuncture that occurred in the mid-19th

century. Many parts of the globe experienced the cultural contradictions of U&CD; particularly between universalisms (freedom, justice, equality, fraternity, cosmopolitanism) and particularisms (nationalisms and pan-ethnicisms that attempted to abate European intrusion). Facing the uneven socio-economic effects of European finance capitalism, these late developing societies combined “premodern and modern” practices to modernize and counteract European imperial power. Like Bolivarianism or rising nationalisms in Asia, the Ottoman Tanzimat reforms engendered Greek, Armenian and Kurdish nationalism. From the perspective of cultural production, these decades saw the rise of powerful literary figures in the new global periphery wrestling with modernization and nationalism – from Ram Mohan Roy to Vivekananda in Bengal, Sarmiento and Blest Gana in Argentina and Chile, Shimei and Sōseki in Meiji Japan and Namik Kemal in the Ottoman Empire.

Koyi was part of this conjuncture. Ottoman Kurdistan was engaged in a response to European hegemonic pressure, and the outcomes led to unique contradictions such as between modernization and religious conservatism (Pamuk 2018, 19). These explosive cultural contradictions were the object of Koyi’s critique – he promoted the grassroots democratization of Kurdish life through the expansion of new sciences, communication technologies, literacy (especially in Kurdish), women’s education, translations and publications in Kurdish, and the elimination of religious superstition (Hassanpour 2021, 24).

Centralization led to most of the Kurdish elite and political aristocracy being transferred to urban metropolitan centers (Istanbul, Cairo, Baghdad, etc.). Print-media in this period, promoted by Koyi and made possible by the centralizing-unifying goals of a

modernizing Ottoman state, helped produce a Kurdish national “awakening” (Hassanpour 1992). Thus, Kurdish national identity is fundamentally modern and “socially constructed” (Bozarslan 2003; Yadirgi 2017, 18). Uneven socioeconomic development and social stratification in the late Ottoman Kurdish periphery provoked a conscious, middle-class Kurdish feudal elite to mobilize identity and nationalism to “right the balance” (Yadirgi 2017, 20). The subsequent “middle-class” nationalisms that emerged through print/media capitalism and bourgeois social relations in Republican Turkey are far from being isolated and successive categories from “feudal nationalisms”; they continue to coexist today. This helps us understand the contradictions and dialectics of modern nation-states that tend to impose ethno-linguistic homogeneity in its territory at a certain historical stage, while at the same time leaving room for forms of resistance against it. Turkey’s transition from a feudal to a capitalist nation-state in 1923 marked the beginning of unprecedented forms of centralization and governance.

Republican Turkey, Kemalism and the Civilizing of the Kurds

Following the end of WWI, the planned British and French carve-up of the Ottoman territory (the Sykes-Picot agreement) left the Kurds in a liminal state of uncertainty. Persuaded by Kemal’s call for Muslim unity against European colonialism, the Kurds joined Kemal’s anti-colonial revolutionary movement. After Kemal’s successful military campaign, the elites and ruling classes of the new Turkish Republic accomplished nearly all of their political aspirations in 1923. The majority of Kurds were now “Turkish subjects.” Kemal was well aware of separatist tendencies in Kurdistan and

he implemented “Turkification” measures. Due to Britain’s lenient tendencies towards Kurdish ethnic identity in their newly acquired Iraq, Kemal extinguished Kurdish identity in Turkish borders. Linguicide was the main strategy to drive a wedge between Kurds in Turkey and Kurds in British Mandatory Iraq (Hassanpour 2021). Kemal also instituted de-development policies in the Kurdish region in order to prevent the emergence of Kurdish autonomy (Yadirgi 2017, 166). Kemal crushed subsequent Kurdish uprisings and implemented state of emergency laws explicitly premised on “modernization.” At this point, Turkey was a new state based on military rule steered by national-developmentalism and Kemalist ideology – populism, republicanism, Turkish nationalism, ‘secularism’, statism, national revolutionism, and military tutelage. The state’s sole domestic geopolitical preoccupation was taming Kurdistan.

Earlier, I critiqued the strong state hypothesis and argued that the authoritarian national state is a symptom of uneven capitalist development in the world-system. Motivated by the nation-building imperative of capitalist institutionalization, Kemalist authoritarianism is an example of this phenomenon. The state’s drive to modernize and “civilize” the Kurds had resounding effects on the Kurdish population. Many Kurdish films, such as Çayan Demirel’s *38* (2006)¹ or Kazim Öz’s *Zeynel Dede* (2015), recount this history. Kemalism facilitated the establishment of modern bourgeois society through a “revolution from above” with the military. This established a “Bonapartist” capitalist state. This is a state in which a modernized bureaucratic military mutates into a special social power that rises above society in precarious conditions in order to guarantee the

¹ Though Demirel is not ethnically Kurdish, his film recounts a key event in Kurdish history: 1938 in Dersim.

reproduction of capitalist social relations (Cengiz 2021, 8). Parliamentary power is subordinated to executive power because the former, presided over by the bourgeoisie, is unable to maintain the social order necessary for the establishment of capitalist social relations. In this “exceptional state”, a particular hegemonic ideology is necessary to legitimate the state’s coordinated repression against the masses for the establishment of capitalist social relations (Poulantzas 1975). It is in these conditions that the police-state replaces the legal-state, the juridical distinction between public and private is blurred and the law is no longer the limit of society nor the principal mechanism maintaining social order. Everything falls within the scope of state intervention and its unlimited use of executive power (Cengiz 2021, 12). Thus, the historically repressive state and bureaucratic power in Turkey were products of necessity for an embryonic Turkish bourgeoisie in an underdeveloped and late developing country where capitalism belatedly took root (Savran 2002, 6).

Many Kurdish films critically represent key institutions that were established in this period. These include ethno-nationalisms, militarization, and the education apparatus. These institutions were part of Turkey’s development strategy. Belated modernity and late development are phenomenon that occurred in modernizing absolutist states under military pressure from Europe (such as Turkey, Japan and Iran) (Davidson 2019; Nairn 1997). The new nation-state attempts to rein in the explosive economic, social and cultural contradictions driven by rapid modernization in two principal ways: undemocratic military dictatorships and invented ethno-nationalisms as “a nation-state in the absence of a nation” (Matin 2019, 128). Invented ethno-nationalisms are an example of combined “neo-traditional” forms (modern institutions such as military and education

and “traditional” institutions such as mythical histories) in periods of intensive primitive accumulation. They are deployed as a pre-emptive counter-revolution in the name of a mythical past to mitigate the socially-explosive ferment created by the contradictions of uneven development in late developing states (Davidson 2019). Thus, Kemalist Turkey’s policies and ideologies are not a derivative of a cultural phenomenon (i.e. as inherently “Turkish” or as a manifestation of Oriental despotism); they are of a political-economic one: late development.

Lacking factories and an industrial proletariat in a tense context of the new global periphery’s necessity for rapid development, Kemalist economic policies focused on the aggressive accumulation of surplus value, which led to volatile economic unevenness (Harootunian 2015, 130). Accordingly, Kemalist modernization policies needed to deter the sedition and socially-explosive contradictions created by this economic unevenness. It did so by directing its modernization efforts on two key institutions: compulsory military and education. This form of modernization “reorganizes the state into a de facto factory through its schools and armies”, transforming late developing nation-states like Turkey into “an educational apparatus that produces the ‘human being’” (Karatani 1980, 132). One of the resulting cultural forms of this process of “producing the human” was an aggressively-enforced invented Turkish nationalism that attempted to erase any anti-nation-state constituents within Turkish borders. These constituents were often religiously-inflected opposition and non-Turkish ethno-linguistic groups – most notably Alevism and Kurds after the destruction of the Ottoman Christians.

The Kemalist state, like many other states at the time, began to take on fascistic forms in the ‘20s and ‘30s. The late-developing nation-state (such as Japan, Italy and

Germany) develops as a response to a specific social crisis in the finance-imperialist stage of capitalism. Political class-representation breaks down and the transition to monopoly capitalism is fulfilled under the ideological state apparatuses (nationalism, military, education) controlled by the fascist party (Poulantzas 1975). Thus, “these totalitarian tendencies of Kemalism were accompanied by promoting a palingenetic myth of national history” – including the “Turkish History Thesis” that depicted the ‘Turkish race’ as the creator of all ancient civilizations (Cağaptay 2006, 87-88). The Turkish state represented the Kurds as supposedly degenerated “mountain Turks” who broke off into retrogressive tribes that resist the modern civilizing mission of the state (Hassanpour 2021, 159). Like the “civilizing” of the Amerindians, this form of scientific racism is one formed in the crucible of uneven development: the territorializing expediencies of nation-states undergoing modern economic development leads sovereignty in the colonial encounter to represent spatial and temporal difference as absence – emptiness of territory (*Terra nullius*) and between “backward” and “advanced” peoples (Anievas 2019, 98-102). This encounter, driven by the compulsion of primitive accumulation, produces the modern state (Wallerstein 1974; Arrighi 1994). The mythography of absence – the non-existence of Kurdistan and of Kurds as “backward” – is of central importance in military, education, and economic institutions of the Turkish state and is a central theme in Kurdish films.

This divisive theme persists in Turkish society and Kurdish cultural products because Kemalist Bonapartism was institutionalized and outlived Kemal’s death in 1938 (Cengiz 2021). “[T]he transition from a one-party autocracy to a multi-party political system... did not lead to a qualitative alteration in the Turkish state’s perception of and

preoccupation with the Kurdish question, largely because none of the regimes post-1950 sufficiently de-Kemalised...By the end of the 1970s, Turkey remained locked in contradictions created by the Kemalist shibboleths on the Kurdish issue...in massive underdevelopment born of state negligence and paranoia” (Yadirgi 2017, 213). Unlike protracted fascistic military dictatorships, as in Brazil, Spain or Chile, Kemalist modernity outlived its namesake because the repressive military apparatus was accompanied by a highly effective ideological apparatus. This durable institutionalized ideology is a major site of struggle in Kurdish aesthetic production and historiography.

Until the 1950s, the state articulated the Kurdish Question as an issue of backward, reactionary feudal structures and a civilizing mission of state-modernization. The republic’s founders depicted ensuing Kurdish revolts as the work of reactionary feudal leaders against a rational modern state (Yadirgi 2017, 31-2). The introduction of procedural democracy in the 1950s led to a change in this rhetoric – the policy and discourse changed from cultural backwardness requiring civilization (cultural assimilation) to an economic backwardness requiring “development” (economic assimilation), though the former persisted and often combined with the latter. The state’s economic articulation was ultimately a moot agenda since the succeeding Turkish governments remained in continual alliance with a Kurdish clientele rural elite who oppressed the Kurdish masses. The real agenda of these postwar governments was development of mechanized agriculture in the Kurdish periphery in order to accord with the US-led international division of labor and Cold War “containment of communism” policy (Zürcher 2004). The cooperation of Turkish political elites with Kurdish rural

elites and international capital created and sustained damaging social structures in Kurdistan (Yadirgi 2017).

The Cold War, Kurdish “Underdevelopment” and the Birth of Kurdish Cinema

With the end of World War II and the fall of fascist regimes, many states, including Turkey, began transitioning to a multi-party system and adopting policies (Bretton Woods, The Truman Doctrine, Marshall Plan) “encouraged” by a now fully-fledged US superpower (Arrighi 1994). Under the newly elected DP (Demokratik Parti) and Turkey’s accession to NATO in 1952, Turkey’s economic reforms were guided by the IBRD and later IMF. These reforms stressed the priority of cheap mechanized agricultural production in the Third World in order to curtail the exploited masses from joining the communist bloc (Yadirgi 2017; Arrighi 1994). The Turkish state deployed US Cold War “containment of communism” policies to pre-empt peasant revolutions. This containment in the Global South propagated passive revolutions, which is the gradual transformation of the economy and the state through a slow process of incorporation with piecemeal reform. Passive revolutions led to unbridled urbanization (Matin 2019, 128), and this process directly affected Kurdistan. A surfeit of new agricultural equipment (especially tractors) arrived from the US, providing the DP-supported Kurdish landowning-class an extraordinary amount of power through the mechanized accumulation of relative surplus value. This “Cold War primitive accumulation regime” left a multitude of landless Kurdish laborers under the sway of the owners of land and machines (McDowall 2004, 401). Consequently, Kurdish urban migration exploded,

especially in slums. In the context of rapid (lumpen)proletarianization, Kurds became sharply aware of their Kurdishness as the state strictly controlled the outlawing of their native language in their new environment and they were “othered” due to their lack of fluency in Turkish. A sort of reverse scenario existed for urban Kurds who, having never learned their native language and speaking only Turkish, were becoming aware of a sense of loss. Many Kurdish films dramatize the social and cultural fallout of this process, such as in Erol Mintaş’s *Klama Dayîka Min* (2014), Öztürk’s *Toz Bezi* (2015) and Çınar’s *Di Navberê De* (2018), to be discussed in the following chapters.

As the decade progressed, DP’s economic hold on the country fell apart, which resulted in the 1960 coup by a military suspicious of DP’s anti-Kemalism. Alarmed by ten years of DP rule that was based on rural populism and an agrarian bourgeoisie, the new military regime rewrote the constitution in 1961 in order to “preclude the rule of the rural majority over the urban minority and...to guard against any act incongruous with the interests of the industrial bourgeoisie” (Cengiz 2021, 43). The new urban coalition led to certain forms of political liberalization, such as the right to strike and increased freedom in universities and media. The political left benefited from the rise of an industrial working class and political liberalization, and established new parties such as the influential TİP (Workers Party of Turkey – the first socialist party to enter parliament). However, the Turkish armed forces, still loyal to NATO and METO (a UK-led Middle East NATO-style alliance), shouldered the responsibility of fighting communism. Many urbanized Kurds allied themselves with TİP because the party supported Kurdish political demands and challenged the landowning classes that the

Kurds had come to resent. The TİP brought together a leftist sentiment amongst Kurds and Turkish-Kurdish solidarity.

Kurdish cinema emerged in this post-1960 context. Although moving images of the Kurds existed in the early 20th century, it was not until this politically-dynamic period in Turkey that Kurdish struggles for collective cultural identity, independence, and autonomy began to seriously challenge four decades of state-Kemalist “Turkification” (Güneş 2017, 2). The TİP-associated Marxist ‘Young Cinema Movement’ (*Genç Sineması*) advocated a revolutionary independent cinema outside the film industry. Although the organized left sympathized with Kurdish oppression and rights, *Genç Sinema*’s agenda did not reflect this. Like many socialist movements at the time, they advocated a unified urban working class based on a linear-stagist model and sidelined heterogeneous histories that “lagged behind”, like the Kurds (Candan 2016, 4). As a result, left-oriented Kurdish cultural organizations emerged. Reminiscent of the 19th century Kurdish poet Koyi discussed earlier, Kurdish intellectuals understood that without Kurdish literature and intellectual leadership, a national project would be impossible. The Kurdish DDKO (Revolutionary Eastern Cultural Hearths), supported and recognized by the TİP, was one of these key groups and they established educational programs.

Social unrest culminated in the 1971 military memorandum, resolving uncontrollable violence between a radicalized right and left. The TİP was banned, and the newly installed technocratic Nihat Erim-government acted in the interests of big industrialists. This led to even further contradictions between labor and capital and a socially-explosive situation in the ‘70s (Cengiz 2021). Like in Iran at the time, these

explosive contradictions created by the compulsion of uneven development could only be contained by sheer repression and violence (Matin 2019). The state destroyed the organized left (TİP) and the US increased its Cold War military involvement in Turkey. The CIA and Turkish state sponsored aggressive far-right paramilitary organizations, such as the infamous Grey Wolves. These organizations unleashed violence on Kurds and leftists throughout the country and were part of a nexus that included the NATO/CIA-organized counter-guerilla operation codenamed GLADIO. Civil instability and government failure to establish order resulted in another military coup in 1980, this time headed by the leader of GLADIO in Turkey, General Kenan Evren. Evren's coup was modeled on that of Pinochet's (Tuğal 2022). The coup was a decisive breaking point because, like Pinochet's Chile, it sealed the Turkish state's marriage to the West, which opened the door to the neoliberal policies being brought forth at the time (Tuğal 2022).

Kurdish cinema first emerged in the volatile social context between 1960–80. Kurdish cinema began with Yilmaz Güney – a world-renowned Kurdish filmmaker and actor, the recognized forerunner of Kurdish cinema in Turkey and a leftist militant involved in the political conflicts at the time. Güney created films that depicted ethnically unspecified “Eastern” village life, Kurdish ballads and cinematically unique images that read as ethnographic scenes of Kurdish rural life in the ‘70s (especially his late works *Sürü* and *Yol*, the latter winning the *Palme d’Or* at Cannes in 1982 while it was simultaneously banned in Turkey for almost two decades) (Candan 2016). This was particularly radical in a time when the Kurdish languages were strictly banned in Turkey following the political events between 1960–80. Güney's globally recognized film *Yol* (co-directed by Şerif Gören, as Güney wrote the film from prison), narrates the grim

encounters of five Kurdish political convicts imprisoned in the west following the 1980 coup. They are released on a short furlough to visit their families in the east. When one of the convicts arrives in Diyarbakir (the de facto Kurdish capital in Turkey), the word “Kurdistan” appears as a superimposed title in the original film. Even when the Turkish government finally lifted the ban on the film in 1999, the superimposed “Kurdistan” was erased from the restored Turkish version (Candan 2016). Güney’s fictional films are the first attempts to express Kurdish identity in Turkish cinema and it remains contentious today. Many narratives in contemporary Kurdish films deal with the same forces and tensions released by the events between 1960–80 and the “dirty war” that was made possible following the 1980 coup.

The 1980 coup re-instituted state order between 1980 and 1983, which helped Özal’s successive government guide Turkey in its neoliberal transformation (Ulus 2010). In the case of the 1980 conservative coup that opened the doors to a “post-Kemalist” future, this was the reorganization of the relations of production by the military dictatorship for an export-based neoliberal model accomplished through the disciplining of labor, outlawing of political parties, media censorship (including 937 films), imprisonment and exile, autocratic rewriting of the constitution with the passing of hundreds of new laws and the creation of new institutions in education, language, media, “national security” and development (Cengiz 2021). This neoliberal shock therapy burrowed deeper into the subterranean layers of the everyday lifeworld. This contradictory process initiated primitive accumulation in Kurdistan in its neoliberal iteration. Neoliberal policies devastated rural Kurdistan’s primary economy – agriculture. This socio-economic de-development of Kurdistan initiated the “dirty war” with the

Kurds in the '80s and '90s, which displaced millions. It went hand in hand with top-down state and market institutions intended to produce a new docile subjectivity amongst the Kurds. Many Kurdish filmmakers challenge the ideology that underwrote this process: the modern Turkish nation-state as a necessary progressive force vis-à-vis a reactionary “terrorist” Kurdish society. Films like Çelik’s *Salvation Rain* (2018) or Karabey’s *Were Dengê Min* (2014) dramatize the contradictory social and cultural effects of this history. Similarly, Güney’s 1978 film *Sürü* recounts the disintegration of a superstitious Kurdish nomadic life into a corrupt, modern industrialized Turkey in this period of violent socio-economic change and displacement.

During this volatile period, a group of radical leftists led by Abdullah Öcalan organized the influential PKK (Kurdistan Worker’s Party) and began a decades-long insurgency against the Turkish state in 1984. Their main contention was that the growth of fascist paramilitary groups (Grey Wolves) and the state-apparatus were a direct existential problem for the Kurds. Moreover, the PKK disagreed with the Turkish left because, like the *Genç Sinema* (Young Cinema) movement, they reduce the Kurdish Question to a secondary issue vis-à-vis the primacy of social transformation in the urban centers of Turkey’s metropolitan west. The Turkish state portrayed the PKK as the cause of the “Kurdish Question”, but the ironic truth was that the PKK was its product. Still, the state represented the Kurdish Question as one of “terrorism.”

Özal’s technocratic neoliberal ambitions and the initiation of the “dirty war” forcibly evacuated, razed and incinerated thousands of villages and hamlets in Kurdistan. A scorched-earth policy destroyed 3,848 settlements and displaced at least three million (Yadirgi 2017, 224). This was a neoliberal iteration of primitive accumulation and

uneven development in the 1980s. Several Kurdish films describe the everyday realities of this volatile situation. Çelik's film *Salvation Rain* (2018) depicts the traumatic, alienating distortion of memory induced by the experiences of this violent displacement. Using traditional Kurdish literary form to challenge state narrative techniques, Karabey's *Were Denge Min* (2014) recounts the complex realities everyday people experienced during the dirty war. These films are examples of how fiction from the Kurdish periphery can effectively register the world-system by chronicling the disasters of late capitalism and its manifest violence and unevenness (WReC 2015). Using different aesthetic techniques, these films challenge dominant narratives of progress by depicting its costs.

Özal's policy rapidly implemented top-down development projects in Kurdistan, such as GAP (*Southeast Anatolian Development Project*). GAP has been a massive assemblage of infrastructural projects, particularly ecologically destructive dams. Özal stated it to be a "long term and wider strategy of banishing the Kurds from their ancestral homelands by the construction of dams" (Yadirgi 2017, 224). President Demirel would later repeat Özal's chilling statement by declaring the following in a leaked 1993 memo (2017, 223):

Starting with the most troubled zones, village and hamlets in the mountains of the region should be gradually evacuated [and] resettled in the Western parts of the country according to a careful plan... Security forces should immediately move in and establish complete control in such areas... To prevent the locals' return to the region, the building of a large number of dams in appropriate places is an alternative.

GAP includes the controversial Ilusu Dam, which has recently inundated Hasankeyf – a continuously inhabited ancient Bronze Age city, estimated to be up to 12,000 years old, of incredible cultural and historical significance for Kurds, Armenians, Greeks, Arabs and Syriacs. Rûken Tekeş's film, *Aether* (2019), which documents the inundation of

Hasankeyf, depicts the sense of mortality and ephemerality that sets in following such events. Similar to Çelik, Tekeş's film registers the disaster and decay of capitalist development. By applying innovative techniques in film form (to be discussed in Chapter 4), these films challenge narratives of progress by showing its costs. Turkey's post-1980 neoliberal transformation, its restructuring of the economy, state and law, the rise of and war with the PKK, the reframing of the "Kurdish Question" as one of terrorism, and the use of mega-development projects to displace and repress the fabric of Kurdish society – these were all part of a development and accumulation campaign in the last quarter of the 20th century. Several Kurdish filmmakers, in addition to the ones mentioned above, have directly touched on the contradictions of this watershed period in their films.

Neoliberalism, AKP and Kurdish Cinema in the Binary of Multiculturalism and Terrorism

Turkey's neoliberal transition initiated the "absorption" of Kemalism into neoliberalism (Cengiz 2021). This was not unique to Turkey, as the collapse of national developmentalism (Kemalism) and other similar models around the globe was a structural issue on a world-scale; namely, the crisis of Keynesianism in the late '70s that paved the way for the neoliberal turn (Harvey 2005). Turkey's economy transformed from being protected to being "unprotected" on a competitive international market. Consequently, the military/state's control over religion became more important than ever. *Diyanet* (Turkey's chief institution of religious affairs) experienced massive increase in funding, personnel and mobilization in education and development, with big capitalists like Vehbi Koç and the Minister of Education Vehbi Dinçerler endorsing the use and

management of religion by the state to direct society (Sakallioğlu 1996). Religion re-galvanized a disappearing Kemalist nationalism that was the basis for the military-bureaucracy's legitimacy.

Due to the crisis of national capitalists and the triumph of an international market economy, new forms of individualism and marketization that challenged traditional state-society relations were instituted (Cengiz 2021). Religion was used by the state to reshape modernity “in line with the ideology of marketization while also resolving the problem of legitimacy” (Sakallioğlu 1996, 245). The incorporation of religion with the state was the best way to assimilate the volatile power of anti-neoliberal and anti-West Islamic fundamentalism (most notably the Necmettin Erbakan parties) that worried Turkey's big capitalists (Sakallioğlu 1996). This paved the way for the neoliberalization of political Islam that vexes the country today, which reshapes and deploys religion as an alternative to and containment of socialist politics. Neoliberal political Islam is not a traditionalist rejection of modernity or radicalization of Islam. It is the “Islamization” of a radicalism that is structurally generated by the brutal contradictions of uneven development (Davidson 2019, 68). This type of amalgam (religion-nationalism-neoliberalism) is an example of late capitalism's “cut-and-stitch” postmodernist logic. It is the contradictory combination of social and cultural practices deployed to absorb the volatility of uneven development.

The post-Cold War “external” pressure on Turkey during the Clinton-era, which pursued the global expansion of free market democracies, and the “internal” pressure from the Turkish bourgeoisie, whose economic interests accorded with accession to the European Union, necessitated a shift from a state-controlled to a market economy and the

expansion of political space for the domestic bourgeoisie (Cengiz 2021). Consequently, the development of new information and communication technologies weakened Turkey's state-information monopoly. The dissemination of information and images of human rights violations created new conditions for Kurdish media resistance (to be discussed below).

At the same time, this political transformation had contradictory effects on the Kurdish population. Although many repressive “Bonapartist” institutions established over the previous six decades were dissolved in the early ‘90s (such as the ban on the Kurdish language), new neoliberal forms of governmental power were developing. For example, while associations based on religion and ethnicity were officially permitted, including the official recognition of the Kurdish ethnicity, new vague “anti-terror” laws gave the state further powers of surveillance to persecute trade unionists, human rights activists, lawyers, journalists, and writers. This opened the door to a Deleuzian “society of control” (Zürcher 2004, 292; Deleuze 1990). “The state acknowledged the existence of the Kurds, but re-conceptualized the Kurdish question as a question of ‘separatist terror’” (Yadirgi 2017, 223). Furthermore, the army maintained control over the state apparatus through less formal mechanisms. This actually increased their power in the Kurdish southeast during this so-called liberalization phase underwritten by the Washington Consensus (Cengiz 2021). The Regional State of Emergency Governorate was formed, which implemented a state of emergency in 13 Kurdish cities from 1987 to 2002 during the height of conflict with the PKK. Karebey's early documentary-style film *Boran* (1999), which recounts the search by Kurdish families for their children disappeared by the state, illustrates the contradictions of this form of state power. His later feature-fiction, *Were*

Dengê Min (2014), provides a narrative of this geopolitical situation. It depicts the legal mechanisms of neoliberal governance: tailored legal tools rather than collective rights; and shows how technocracy and regional sub-imperialism lead to expulsions and shock therapies (Sassen 2014; Klein 2007).

Kurdish cultural workers have resisted these late 20th century policies. Alternative Kurdish media and educational platforms have challenged the continuing symbolic domination of Kemalist state “Turkishness.” The establishment of MED-TV in 1994 was the first major development in digital media resistance. MED-TV was a satellite television channel based in Europe that provided the Kurds in Turkey, as a “non-state nation”, with a way to resist Kemalist Turkish ethno-nationalism. MED-TV has been considered the first Kurdish mass media (Çoban 2013). This form of media resistance addresses Kurds not as an audience, but as citizens of a Kurdish state. It is more than a war of meanings and identities – it is one between nationalisms based on state power and a challenge to Turkey’s territorial state sovereignty (Hassanpour 2021). MED-TV’s digital/satellite “extra-territoriality” of media resistance was met by Turkey’s extra-territoriality of state power. Through various legal and extra-legal means, the Turkish state disrupted and attacked MED-TV and its affiliated groups beyond its borders in collaboration with EU states, who accorded with their “anti-terrorist” laws (Hassanpour 2021). The silencing of MED-TV required a complex coordination of state, inter-state, and market forces. With no state, and therefore no embassy networks or legislative organs, Kurds who rely on non-state institutions like MED-TV struggle to attain the financial, political, and social capital necessary to uphold transnational and extra-territorial platforms that support resistance to symbolic violence within Turkish borders.

At first glance, the initial success of MED-TV seems to support the claim that globalization and media consumption have signaled the end of the modern nation-state and the rise of new forms of de-centralized power (Appadurai 1996). However, the transnationalization of culture is not the cause or sign of the disappearance of the nation-state; it is the effect of the further entrenchment of the 21st century globalized nation-state. As the example of MED-TV shows, international states cooperate in the enclosure of such “de-centered” non-state actors deemed too dangerous for social order. Along with the market, the state – by classifying friend and foe, terrorist and refugee, etc. – is the key apparatus that organizes, among other things, the symbolic world.

It was not until the ‘90s, due to the mentioned necessity for a “democratic” transition, that prospects for organized Kurdish cultural resistance became more feasible. One of the most important organizations that emerged in Turkey in this period was the Mesopotamia Cultural Center (MKM). MKM was founded by and supported both Kurdish and Turkish intellectuals interested in the Kurdish Question in Turkey. The aforementioned development of MED-TV occurred concurrently. By 1996, MKM began offering film courses with the support of *Genç Sinema*. The same year, the Mesopotamia Cinema Collective (KSM) was established as part of MKM with the goal of creating an alternative Kurdish cinema in opposition to national and commercial cinema (Candan 2016, 6). As the example of MED-TV also shows, the transnational dimension in the formation and politicization of Kurdish identity is important (Koçer 2014; Sheyholislami 2011; Smets 2015). It questions the predominance of the nation-state in cultural production. Kurdish cinema, as a national cinema without a state, has emerged in this transnational space. Kurdish linguistic ethno-nationalism was a response to the Turkish

nationalism that was part of Turkey's nation-state-building project since 1923 (Koçer 2014). However, Kevin Smets (2015) has highlighted how Kurdish transnational ethnic media and “mediated nationhood” are not always radical, critical or progressive; these networks construct varying versions of the imagined nation and how it should be embedded in the state. Moreover, these media are not mere “conduits” of discourses or constructions of nationhood external to them; they are key players in the conflict of statehood itself. This explains the Turkish state's anxious and aggressive policies to shut down MED-TV (Candan 2016, 12-13).

The value of these analyses notwithstanding, U&CD goes beyond transnational theories of cultural production. Koçer has suggested that the dynamics of censorship and transnational media circulation gives Kurdish cinema a distinct characteristic – a pendulum that swings between “the past and the present”, “the traditional and the modern”, and “documentary and fiction” (Koçer 2013, 727). What is noteworthy for her is how the national-censorship—international-circulation interaction supports these experimentations in film form. While this may be true, the distinct aesthetics outlined by Koçer can also be explained through political-economy and geopolitics (Jameson 1992b). The aesthetic and media practices correctly outlined by Koçer and Smets represent the very systemic processes that create the transnationalization of culture. The global periphery is a place where the violent social transformations that lead to transnational flows (displacement, migration, war) are acutely experienced. The periphery is subjected to the sudden onrush of capitalist modernity (primitive accumulation, neoliberal shock therapies, the disorientation of structural adjustment programs); and these experiences uniquely exist there within living memory. Koçer's aesthetic pendulums are expressions

of the unstable collisions in the periphery, which is thrust into contact with advanced economic formations and simultaneously forced to adopt the very imperatives of “advancement” that keep it in a state of backwardness (Christie 2019, 222). Koçer’s pendulums are in fact combinations in Kurdish film aesthetics that convey the unevenness and non-linearity of capitalist development. In this way, the periphery is privileged in revealing the hidden violence and inequality of the world-system, which is erased from view in the core “who cannot even imagine these things” (Davidson 2019, 208). This is expressed in the form and content of peripheral cultural products. The films of Kazım Öz, which Koçer (2013) analyzes, are an example of this “peripheral realism” or “modernism”, which will be discussed in Chapter 4.

The rise of AKP (Justice and Development Party) has had a profound impact on Turkey’s Kurdish population and Kurdish cultural production. AKP has been in power for over twenty years and the party is Turkey’s culmination of neoliberal political Islam. Earlier I critiqued essentialist frameworks, such as “Oriental despotism” and “exceptionalism.” Political Islam must be approached similarly. Orientalists misrepresent Islam by attributing an essence to the religion, its culture and therefore its geography and history (Bayat 2007; Said 2003). Political Islam is a political ideology that is integrated with and intervenes in society in its modern and postmodern forms. Analysis should focus on how such movements attempt to establish hegemony by reducing the reading of sacred texts to one suitable to certain political interests (Rodinson 2007; Bayat 2007).

With the onset of the ‘war on terror’ in 2001 and the Iraq War in 2003, the US became more involved in Turkey’s political orientation (Cengiz 2021). Turkey’s new rising domestic bourgeoisie, empowered by an export-led economy, was disenchanted by

the astronomically expensive, heavy-handed approach of the Turkish military in handling the PKK and the Kurds. They increasingly demanded an alternative, liberal approach to the Kurdish Question (Yadirgi 2017). AKP's platform at the time, a mixture of neoliberal market fundamentalism, 'moderate' Islamic conservatism and formal democracy, coincided with the domestic bourgeoisie, the IMF, EU accession ambitions, and US policy in the Middle East. The US aimed at achieving the necessary social and political stability in Turkey amenable to post-Cold War global hegemony. The political and cultural contradictions of this historical transition is depicted in Karabey's film *Gitmek: My Marlon and Brando* (2008). Karabey uses a mixture of ethnographic cinéma vérité techniques and a fictional narrative to satirize US hegemony as well as the geopolitical and cultural absurdities in Turkey, Iran, and Iraq.

AKP rule began in 2002. AKP's renovation and moderation of Islamic radicalism into a US-style "politically-centrist" neoliberal conservatism was successful in overcoming the Kemalist state (Tuğal 2007). They gained the support of many domestic liberals and socialists who favored the enhancement of democratic standards. Civilian control of the military and civil rights were supported, challenging the executive power of the NSC that had had devastating effects in the Kurdish southeast. Consequently, restrictions on Kurdish languages and education were repealed, opening new avenues to public radio and television in Kurdish as well as Kurdish cultural institutions that worked in literature, music, publishing, and film production (Hassanpour 2021). AKP's contradictory relationship to these processes will be outlined below.

KSM had already been active during this period and has been a bastion for Kurdish cinema for the last 25 years, particularly politically-oriented documentary and

fiction films. It has been the key institution for well-known filmmakers like Kazim Öz, Özkan Küçük and Hüseyin Karabey. As Karabey stated in our interview, and others at the KSM have indicated elsewhere, many of these filmmakers began with a journalistic-documentary motive. They sought to record and disseminate the silenced injustices foisted by the state and market in the Kurdish southeast. Many also focused on the impoverished urban zones in the west that absorbed millions of uprooted Kurds as a source of cheap labor following demographic engineering by the state. Thus, Kurdish cultural production has historically been based on territorial and economic factors (uneven development) in addition to the ethno-linguistic.

Candan, referencing the Kurdish word “*belgefilm*” – meaning document film – describes this political-cinematic practice: “[it] signal[s] the culturally-assigned role of the filmmaker as the one who documents their people’s history, culture and traditional way of life, the language under threat, somewhat in the vein of salvage ethnography... In [*belgefilm*], Kurds continue to write their histories... [using] personal witness accounts as well as archival materials and, with extensive archival and oral history research, they record memories of resistance and point to the role of documentary in digging out lived experiences [to remind] us of what happened” (Candan 2016, 25-6). *Belgefilm* is a manifestation of how geopolitics influences cultural production. Along with the *belgefilm* motive, fiction film was also embraced by many of these filmmakers beginning in the ‘90s. This opened up pathways to innovative film form that goes beyond the fiction–non-fiction binary (Koçer 2014; Çiftçi 2016). Candan makes the following point about Kurdish filmmakers who practice *belgefilm*, which also applies to Kurdish fiction film:

[They] continue to face numerous obstacles in Turkey. In an ongoing war against their neighborhoods, towns and cities in Kurdistan, Kurds are trying to stay alive and keep themselves and their families from harm's way. In such a daily struggle for survival, could there be any chance to continue making films? Even when the films are made, state censorship is preventing [them] from reaching audiences (especially non-Kurdish) where they can have a chance to counter state controlled propaganda. For example, a documentary film like *Bakur* (North – 2015), which was destined to be a trailblazer in its portrayal of Kurdish guerillas as human beings, has been kept away from especially non-Kurdish audiences... In the continuing armed struggle between the Turkish state and the PKK, when Turkish soldiers are killed, the mainstream media reports they have become martyrs; when Kurdish guerillas are killed, the mainstream media reports they have been “rendered ineffective.” In such a way, the first thing that gets thrown out is the truth, which is the main source of documentary cinema.

How did AKP's “democratization” lead to the war and censorship discussed above in Candan's extract? Despite AKP's initial democratic developments, the recent Erdoğan-led AKP authoritarian turn is an outcome of neoliberal governance. The “liberal democratic” transition in Turkey that culminated with AKP's 2002 election and ended with Erdoğan's authoritarian turn in 2011 has shown us in hindsight that this was none other than a “war of position” by a rising AKP-led conservative bourgeoisie empowered by a new globally-integrated neoliberal economy in Turkey (Gramsci 1971; Cengiz 2021). We must not see AKP as initially the agent of a “democratic transition” that subsequently betrayed its progressivist role with its ongoing authoritarianism. On the contrary, AKP is a product of an economically-rooted process of neoliberal transformation. The newly expanding ruling class represented by AKP was the product of an alliance among the other domestic ruling classes who were forced to adopt a new strategy to deal with a growing Kurdish “problem” in the 1990s that, along with the incentives of the EU process, necessitated the transition from military rule to a “democratic” form of class domination. This culminated in the AKP, who, as a Muslim conservative party, found itself taking charge of a liberal democratic transition that

required the taming of the military apparatus (Cengiz 2021, 20-2). The early stages of this transition opened up a certain amount of space for Kurdish media, but was then closed off following AKP's authoritarian turn. The problematic effects caused by the unpredictable vacillations between democratic and authoritarian governance was repeatedly discussed by the filmmakers in this study, and the contradictions of this neoliberal authoritarianism are represented in Kurdish films, to be discussed later.

Despite its rhetoric of liberal human rights, AKP was willing to “exculpate the military of their crimes against the Kurds, Armenians, socialists and human rights activists in the history of the Turkish Republic” (Cengiz 2021, 171-72). The democratic transition in Turkey was exposed as an impossibility under AKP neoliberal reformist policy. During AKP's downsizing of the Kemalist military state, discretionary police power has greatly expanded at the expense of civil liberties. Unprecedented extra-judicial police powers, a sharp increase in extra-legal incarceration, construction of hundreds of new prisons, human rights violations, and increased surveillance have accompanied this process. Rather than the state's repressive apparatus being tamed by a “democratic transition”, it has mutated into a new form.

AKP's post-2011 authoritarian turn has developed into a neo-Ottomanist sub-imperialism – an outcome of its transition to an export-led economy in the '80s (Cengiz 2021). It is a transformation following the crisis of world capitalist accumulation of the late '70s. A peripheral dependent country becomes a sub-imperialist one that functions as a global intermediary between the dominating imperialist core and dominated periphery (Frank 1989). Neo-Ottoman sub-imperialism is a manifestation of two dimensions of neoliberal globalization: an export-led economy that drives national bourgeoisies to

integrate regional markets and an emerging global south that has created a multi-centric world-system (Rehbein 2015). Moreover, the neo-Ottoman discourse that adorns Turkey's current regional imperialist policy is a new form of "imagined community" that is required and called forth by the current state of global capitalism (regional sub-imperialism and postmodernism) (Karatani 2004, 45). This combination of premodern identities (Ottomanism) and neoliberal policy (regional sub-imperialism) is an outcome of U&CD. While many Kurdish films rather blatantly expose this form of neo-Ottoman sub-imperialism, such as Selim Yıldız's documentaries, subtler depictions of the inequalities it produces are depicted in fiction films like Mintaş's *Klama Dayika Min* (2014), Öztürk's *Toz Bezi* (2015) and Ali Kemal Çınar's films.

In the development of AKP's neo-Ottomanist sub-imperialism, state policy towards Kurdish cultural expression has shifted in an almost spastic manner in accordance with their shifting political-economic and regional geopolitical interests. The early 2000s were marked by strong censorship and silencing of more radical Kurdish cultural products. The AKP government – required to expand democratic rights in its bid to join the European Union – began broadcasting a Kurdish program in 2004 on TRT, Turkey's public television broadcaster (Smets 2015). Five years later, a "Kurdish Opening" began in Turkey's domestic politics during its EU accession bid. This resulted in the creation of TRT-6 – an exclusively Kurdish television channel sponsored by the Turkish state under AKP (a first of its kind in the Republic). Despite the AKP's rhetorical gloss of democratic cultural rights, Smets (2015) has correctly argued that TRT-6 has in fact been an effective assimilation tool for the regime. AKP uses the media platform to attract a large Kurdish audience who might identify with the regime's ideology. By

disseminating state-approved Kurdish broadcasting on TRT-6 while simultaneously censoring critical Kurdish media, the AKP government not only mollifies a complex history of violence and injustice amongst its broad Kurdish audience with the hollow façade of Muslim brotherhood, but also attempts to incorporate these subjects into the government's neoliberal agenda.

Since AKP's 2011 election victory and consequent authoritarian turn, political and economic power in Turkey has entered into severe crisis. AKP has been unable to absorb important elements of civil society, and has therefore resorted to authoritarian populism to maintain power through charismatic leadership and the manipulation of formal democratic mechanisms (Cengiz 2021). Erdoğan's articulation of the crisis as a binary struggle between the popular will of the Sunni-Muslim majority on one side and a profane minority elitist invasion on the other covers up the devastation wrought by decades of neoliberal policy. This has transformed a socio-economic problem into a highly polarized cultural one (Erol and Şahin 2021). Neoliberal authoritarianism attempts to contain the socially explosive by-products of uneven development through such articulations. Öztürk's film *Toz Bezi* (2015) explores the tensions of gender, ethnicity and class in the context of this "contained devastation", the deadlocks of contemporary Turkey and AKP's ambiguous hegemony. The film narrates the story of two Kurdish women who struggle with the abandonment induced by patriarchy, the denial of their ethnicity and the exploitation of their reproductive labor as lower-class migrant caregivers in Istanbul, all in the context of the contradictions of AKP's Turkey.

During AKP's hegemonic crisis, the dramatic rise of the center-left pro-Kurdish HDP party in 2015 led to a sharp turn in AKP's relationship to the Kurdish issue.

Between 2013 and 2015, a seemingly hopeful peace process was initiated with Kurdish political actors to resolve the decades-long conflict, which was foiled and followed by a brutal resumption of war in the southeast after the 2015 election that democratically challenged AKP. This was another opportunity for the military to gain influence and force a compromise with the AKP government. AKP provided the military with legal immunity in brutal counter-terrorism operations in the Kurdish southeast. This military immunity was coupled with the unyielding imprisonment of democratically elected Kurdish MPs and mayors, legitimated by fabricated terrorist charges. On July 15, 2016, the climax of the conflict between Erdoğan and his former ally-cum-enemy Gülen manifested as a failed coup-attempt that has resulted in unprecedented AKP authoritarian power. Erdoğan, using a two-year state of emergency decree, executive power and a new ambiguous alliance with the military, has purged the state and a broad sweep of anti-AKP segments of political and civil society: journalists, writers, media platforms, lawyers, judges, university professors, human rights activists, and elected politicians. Almost all of the interviewed filmmakers in this study have been directly or indirectly subject to this purge. This recent ‘purification’ of society has especially affected the Kurds, with the pro-Kurdish HDP party being effectively outlawed (elected politicians have been detained).

Two examples will help clarify how AKP’s authoritarianism has direct effects on Kurdish films and filmmaking. *Bakur (North)* by Mavioğlu and Demirel is a documentary film released in 2015 that humanizes the PKK guerilla. Reactionary pundits have claimed the film was a white-washing of the PKK (Maheshwari 2015), but they ignore its political importance. It was filmed and produced during the 2013 – 2015 peace-

negotiation process between the Turkish state and the PKK (Carney 2016). One of the film's motivations was a message of peace and hope in a historically significant period that attempted to overcome decades of violence. As discussed earlier, AKP aborted this short-lived peace process in 2015 as its increasing authoritarian and regional geo-political ambitions (neo-Ottoman sub-imperialism) no longer coincided with its interests in EU accession, a non-violent path to Kurdish democratic rights, and military de-escalation in the southeast. The Kurds were once again the prime target of the government. *Bakur* was abruptly banned by the state from its world premiere at the Istanbul Film Festival (the country's key cinematic event) just hours before its screening by using an obscure "official registration" law as "a bludgeon for politically challenging films" to illegalize *Bakur* (Carney 2016, 140-65). This same law, applied rarely and exceptionally due to its ambiguous form, had been used in 2006 to ban Demirel's first film, *38* – which focused on the massacre of Kurds in Dersim by the Turkish government in 1938 – sending it into an endless limbo. The directors of *Bakur* were not only under legal pressure from the state, but in the wake of the Ankara bombings in 2015 at an HDP rally, the filmmakers were forced to take a more cautious approach to screenings (Carney 2016). Although direct force was never carried out by the government, *Bakur* existed in a silenced liminal state between state-legalistic control and extra-governmental civilian violence.

Akhil Gupta's study (2012) of the invisible structures of violence made possible by the use of writing and legal documents in neoliberal bureaucracies shows how, like AKP's neoliberal governance of Kurdish subjectivity, a paternally caring state systematically reproduces and augments the suffering of the oppressed they attempt to alleviate. As Giorgio Agamben (1998) has described, for *homo sacer* – that which is

made sacred by expulsion from political life – liminality is itself the juridical sentence. *Homo sacer*'s relation to the law, being within and without its reach at the same time, is the inverse of the sovereign's, who is both subject to the law and can warrant its exception. AKP's political opportunism to seek war and nationalism over peace in order to maintain political and economic power means that films like *Bakur* "represents both what the AKP had sanctified and then elected to abandon" (Carney 2016, 159).

In 2016 the Kurdish filmmaker Selim Yıldız (interviewed in this study) had his film *Bira Mi'tetin* similarly forced out of the Ankara Film Festival. Yıldız explained in our interview that he consciously refused to apply for the registration certificate because if he did so, the film would be declared officially illegal in the almost certain case of the application being rejected. Filmmakers operate in a double-bind: register and be officially banned or do not register and be effectively banned (Carney 2016). Despite the façade of liberal democratic rights, AKP's mechanism of censorship helps maintain its hegemony. Power is ensured by the mystifications and irrationalities of juridical-legal bureaucracy and extra-governmental civilian violence.

The abovementioned circumstance corresponds to Veena Das's (2006, 163, 174) disruption of "transparent state structures" in which the "signature of the state" creates an "aura of legal operation" even when undertaking overtly illegal acts. In this case, it is more useful to see the state as a form of regulation that oscillates between "a rational mode and a magical mode of being" (Das 2006, 162). Das's study helps us understand the illegibility of the Turkish state in its policies towards Kurdish films. The Turkish state has authorized and sometimes funded the production and circulation of Kurdish films, especially during its "democratization" policies that fluctuated between 2009 and 2015.

At the same time, the state uses obscure legal tools, extra-legal power and promotes civilian reaction to de-authorize and censor many Kurdish films. The state's illegibility is a mystifying experience for many Kurdish filmmakers. However, as will be outlined in the next chapter, Kurdish filmmakers are well aware of the economic, symbolic, and state-repressive power involved in the "game." For example, many of the interviewed filmmakers purposely chose to produce and premier their films in Europe because when they achieve international (especially European) acclaim, the Turkish state is forced to reconsider their censorship policies. The effect of the European gaze is an unwritten rule inscribed into the state's illegibility, and Kurdish filmmakers figure out these rules to adapt and challenge state power. In other words, when Kurdish filmmakers "figure out the rules of the game" and use their international prestige to shake up the Turkish state's censorship policies, the state's illegibility is challenged, and aesthetics becomes politics.

In addition to *belgefilm*, the AKP's neoliberal governance operates in relation to fiction film. Koçer's (2011) study of two Kurdish films released in 2009, considered the beginning of the AKP-sanctioned "Kurdish Opening", demonstrates this form of governance and how the Kurdish issue is reproduced in Turkey's popular consciousness. The Kurdish filmmaker Kazım Öz released his feature fiction *Bahoz (The Storm)* in 2008. It depicts the complex process of political subjectivization of Kurdish students in Istanbul. Mahsun Kırmızıgül's *Güneşi Gördüm (I Saw the Sun 2009)* was released the same year. It depicts the humanitarian tragedies faced by a Kurdish family who find resolve by being obedient to a newly reflexive and paternally caring state. AKP internationally promoted *Güneşi Gördüm* (submitted by the state for entry into the Academy Awards and currently distributed by Netflix) and effectively banned *Bahoz*.

AKP's "Kurdish Opening" was based on the ideology of neoliberal multiculturalism and it helps "the Turkish government's larger program of neoliberalism in a global market economy" by silencing narratives critical of the state and market (Koçer 2011, 187).

Turkey has become a state of exception. Using Carl Schmitt's concept of the state of exception with reference to the perpetual rhetoric of development, William Mazzarella's (2013) study on cinematic censorship in India demonstrates the process of the state preparing the population by educating the masses to participate in a modern world. This provides the state an endless justification for protecting them from media they are not wise enough to understand. Capitalist development and modernization legitimizes the state of exception – in this case the exception to the right of free expression. There is a divide between those who are wise enough to be the exception to the exception (exempt from censorship) and those who must be "protected" from their own instincts by the censor (Carney 2016, 157). This logic, whether guided by the rhetoric of development in its state-industrialist or neoliberal form, has been at work in Turkey since the founding of the Republic, and has mutated over time rather than overcome.

Kurdish cinema critical of mainstream narratives operate in this complex field of power. In the late 20th and early 21st century, video and later digital technologies permeated a globalizing, post-colonial, and transnational world. Oppressed minorities found new opportunities for cultural preservation, dissent, political awareness, and, perhaps most importantly, creating counter-hegemonic narratives that challenged those that conditioned them in earlier phases of modernization. However, "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” (Koçer and Candan 2016: x-xi). Kurdish cinema engages with these dynamics in its narratives and its forms. This will now be discussed in the following two ethnographic chapters.

3. The Social Conditions of Filmmaking in Kurdish Cinema

The focus of this chapter is the social and material conditions of Kurdish directors in Turkey. Kurdish films are often censored by the Turkish state. However, economic exclusion and symbolic power also play a significant role in the production and circulation of films. In this chapter, I clarify how these forces intersect and affect filmmaking.

The interviewed filmmakers discussed three essential concerns regarding their social conditions: economic exclusion, symbolic power, and state repression. These three criteria are interconnected. In the first section, I discuss the economic conditions in which Kurdish filmmakers operate. I argue that there are two mutually influencing economic factors that affect film form and content: (1) the differential in production costs of various film forms (documentary, short, feature-fiction) and (2) the provision of public and private capital in the national and international arena. In the second section, I explore how symbolic power plays a significant role in the internalization of social inequality and, conversely, how it also stimulates a search for an aesthetic language. In the final section, I show that repressive state power continues to play a crucial role in governing cultural production.

I argue that these three interconnected forces help us understand how hegemony works today. Many nation-states today no longer need democratic institutions or mass affirmation of the social order in order for ruling classes/blocs to maintain hegemonic leadership. These states combine repression and symbolic power under a new flexibility. Within this flexibility, the most important strategy is the marginalization of alternatives

to promote indifference towards the possibility of change. I use this to prefigure Chapter 4, where I show how film aesthetics engage this form of power.

The Economic – The Vicious Circle of Cultural Production

Filmmaking is a financially demanding venture. Even most independent and low-budget films require significant funds and coordination. As many of the filmmakers in this study confirmed, this is especially true for feature-length fiction films. The other two forms in this study, documentary and short-fiction, were more amenable to low-budget production. However, while only half of the interviewed filmmakers have so far produced feature-fiction films, financial barriers were consistently mentioned even for the less costly short and documentary forms. Economic constraints influence the production and circulation of their films. Veysel Çelik, who recently moved to Germany, has directed four short-fiction films. In our interview, he stated,

In fact, we have encountered obstacles at every stage of filmmaking. It actually starts from the screenplay-writing stage. There are very few institutions that you can get support or funds from in order to shoot a movie in Turkey. The Ministry of Culture is one of them. I have been making films for 15 years. I've been to a lot of festivals. I received awards both in Turkey and abroad... Of course, I haven't received any support from the Turkish Ministry of Culture in all my 15 years of filmmaking. I couldn't even get 1 lira (Turkish currency). Actually, the first hurdle starts here.

All the filmmakers stated that financial demands affect their practice. The capricious changes of state policy towards the Kurds determines the availability of formal financing through the Turkish Ministry of Culture (MoC hereafter). When the state applies a multiculturalist policy, the MoC provides occasional funding and domestic film festivals open their doors to certain “Kurdish films.” The state often oscillates in its policy and then attempts to prohibit these films through economic exclusion. The MoC

cuts funding and film festivals close their doors to any films that critically represent the Kurdish issue in Turkey. Ahu Öztürk, a graduate in the departments of cinema and philosophy, has directed a short-fiction and an internationally awarded feature-fiction.

She stated that,

We [filmmakers] send the film and scripts to the Turkish Ministry of Culture, which is a filmmaker's main source of funding. From there, money is allotted according to how they evaluate what we send. We try to gain the support of the ministry, because, after all, that's what the ministry of culture is supposed to be about... at the same time, it is so important that [our] scripts and films point out [Kurdish social/political] issues. If you depict these Kurdish issues directly.. especially if you are talking about the guerrilla, you won't get any funding [from the Turkish Ministry]. Not possible. On the other hand, let's say you have a 'sensitive' scene in your film. You censor it out of the film yourself before sending the script or film to the ministry. You cannot write everything, because they won't offer funds. If they don't fund you, you won't film. It works in this kind of vicious circle.

Öztürk's comment is particularly relevant for the feature-length fiction form, which requires significant funding to produce. The filmmakers explained that although funding is also important for short films, self-financing or informal means are often sufficient. Those who discussed feature-length fiction films agreed that without some kind of formal or institutional funding, filming is essentially impossible. Therefore, it is the feature-fiction form that is significantly caught in the "vicious circle" of qualified production and content censorship. Many of the participants, including the documentary filmmakers, agreed that the feature-fiction is the most creative film form. Kurdish films have been experimentally blurring the lines between fiction and non-fiction for this very reason (Koçer 2016). The convergence of the economic constraints and repressive state policy have direct effects on film form and content.

Almost every interviewed filmmaker had directly faced disagreement with and were withheld support from the MoC and Turkish film festivals. Five of the participants

were eventually able to participate in key Turkish film festivals and four received funding in some form from the MoC. However, this only occurred under one of two conditions.

The first condition was international prestige. Three of the filmmakers that eventually received funding from the MoC were initially rejected. Only after they had received prestigious international awards for these rejected films were they then funded by the MoC, albeit nominally and negligibly. These filmmakers explained that the most important part of this international circuit was not the belated funding that came from the MoC, but the partial de-censoring of their films in Turkey. Hüseyin Karabey – a veteran of Kurdish cinema, a globally-recognized filmmaker, and a regular participant at Cannes, Berlinale and Venice Film Festival – stated the following,

I can easily say that if there were no foreign film festivals in my career, then I wouldn't be able to continue in Turkey as a filmmaker. This international acceptance gives me a space to continue... Luckily, most foreign film festivals are done in a democratic way.

Rûken Tekeş is a former UN human rights specialist and university professor. As a filmmaker, she has rapidly gained global recognition. Tekeş experienced similar treatment from the MoC following the production of her first short film *Heverk* (2016):

Heverk started its trip – I said fuck Turkey I don't want to start with Turkey, I want to start with A+ and A+ is not Turkey, it's Europe, North America, whatever. So, I said to myself that would be good because if I premiered in Europe or US, it would be much more difficult for me to be censored [in Turkey]. And that's what happened – I traveled a year before any festival in Turkey accepted me... Some people said [my] film is more political than the other films that were censored during that period, but my film was not censored... [*Heverk*] was already awarded so much and known [internationally]. You can't censor a film that has already been released everywhere, it's everywhere, you know, how can you censor it!

Tekeş stated that *Heverk* was initially rejected in Turkey after its first round of international screenings. Only after it was premiered at *Clermont-Ferrand*, “the Mecca of short films”, did Turkish film festivals and the Turkish MoC accept her work. Following

Heverk, Tekeş completed her first feature-length genre-bending documentary, *Aether* (2019), and similarly circulated the film outside Turkey before it was eventually received domestically. Following her first two internationally successful productions, Tekeş finally received funding from the MoC for her third project currently under production.

She said,

I just recently learned that our [new] project is selected for Cannes Atelier [as a film] from Turkey... so that type of thing affects decisions. Once you have the Cannes logo on your film that has not even been shot.. a friend of mine was saying “[The MoC] will close their jacket before reading the script” (meaning: the approval decision has already been made before reading the script), because you’ve been approved by a place that is difficult to challenge. Especially countries like Turkey and others where it’s not easy to touch any subject you want to in the way you want to, for these countries these kinds of logos are, well, important!

Both Karabey and Tekeş stated that their stance towards the MoC in relation to funding is a somewhat skewed one. It has changed over time during their struggle to obtain public capital as cultural workers of Turkey in order to produce their films. The contradiction is that, on the one hand, private capital is either unavailable or suppressed by the state², and on the other hand, the primary means to fund films, especially feature-length fiction films, is public capital administered by the state. Karabey states:

I was thinking differently from my comrades – Kurdish leftists, etc. – they rejected the state totally, ‘don’t do anything with the state’. I didn’t agree – they are collecting our tax and they spend it in their own way – the ministry of culture. They give money to filmmakers and festivals. So I have a right to apply there – they can accept or reject me, that’s their concern. But if I don’t send it – I will accept their “kingdom” beforehand.

Kurdish filmmakers operate in a double bind. Kurds have been economically “de-developed”, repressed by law and institutionally inhibited by the state (“their kingdom”),

² The Turkish state has consistently imprisoned or intimidated economically or socially powerful actors interested in funding progressive institutions in the Kurdish regions of Turkey; recent examples of such prisoners are progressive businessman Osman Kavala and intellectuals like Ismail Besikci.

making the only realistic means of domestic capital available for film production the MoC, which keeps tight control on film content. Tekeş, now embarking on her first feature-fiction partially supported by *Cannes Atelier* and other European institutions, similarly states:

It's the first time I applied to the Ministry of Culture. For this one I thought I have the right to apply, for the previous ones I was protesting (*Heverk* and *Aether* were informally financed). But for this one, first because of the [feature-length fiction] story; and then I started to think that the money they are giving is not *their* money, it's *our* money. It's *our* tax, for god's sake. What am I protesting for here! And I gave them exactly [the script] I'm going to shoot. Compared to *Heverk* it's a much more openly political film. And it's very interesting, they've already given me project development support. I'm shocked.

As discussed, Tekeş speculated that her approval by the state would have been impossible without her global prestige and visibility established by her first two internationally circulated films. Accordingly, Kurdish filmmakers in Turkey who seek to work with politically critical content in their films experience a demanding circumstance – private capital is institutionally unavailable and public capital is withheld. International prestige and recognition has a certain amount of leverage in obtaining public funds and visibility in Turkey, as in the case of Tekeş.

Karabey has also stressed that despite his international recognition, he is still consistently rejected and harassed by the Turkish state and its ministries depending on its political posture at a given time. Karabey comes from a working class background with minimal economic, social or cultural capital before he began filmmaking. He stated that although he knew there was a political agenda behind MoC's decisions on his films, the erratic and incoherent nature of the ministries in dealing with his films made him subconsciously feel that he was simply not a capable filmmaker. This experience parallels the illegibility of the state discussed earlier in which an "aura of legal action"

oscillates between a “rational and a magical mode” (Das 2006, 162). It is this illegibility that has incoherent effects on filmmakers, like Karabey, that sometimes leads to hesitation, self-doubt, and pessimism. Karabey realized his self-doubts were not objective only after receiving consistent recognition abroad. The experiences of Tekeş and Karabey demonstrate how the interplay between inclusion and exclusion as well as the effects of the international circuit transform aesthetics into politics. International acclaim and recognition challenges the way the Turkish state judges and funds. If censorship remains rigid regardless of international recognition, the Turkish state’s aesthetic judgment would be revealed as repressive. The state maneuvers the delicate boundaries between open repression and legitimacy when Kurdish filmmakers attempt to use the international circuit to their advantage.

Filmmakers are not necessarily incapacitated when state policy oscillates towards open censorship or suppression. Karabey’s most recent film, *İçerdekiler* (2018) is a 120’ single-scene feature-length “theater style” drama about the psychology of incarceration. He indicated that this unusual aesthetic form was an adaptive strategy he made in dealing with economic exclusion and ‘invisibilization’ practices by the state and MoC. These state policies were manifestations of the 2016 post-coup state of emergency that lasted until 2018. *İçerdekiler* is a two-hour single-scene sequence shot entirely in one room and is performed by three professional actors that “pro bono” supported Karabey’s project. This significantly cut the budget and sustained the film’s independence in the face of repressive state of emergency policies without having to sacrifice quality or notability. The film’s form was a result of the oppressive reality in which the film was made, while the narrative analogously illustrates the psychological costs of the militarization of justice

and society. Karabey, a bugbear of the Turkish state and MoC, averted the state's economic exclusion and emergency powers at the time by adaptively making the film the way he did. This repressive social atmosphere was Karabey's motivation to make the film. Karabey's self-proclaimed *vérité* style in *Içerdekiler* is expressed in its form through restrained montage. The restricted feeling of a single room and the stifling sense of endless repetition of a two-hour single scene all reflect the "reality" of Turkey's post-coup social asphyxiation that the film was created in.

The second condition under which the MoC funded films and domestic films festivals selected and screened them was based on the content and scripts. Two participating filmmakers, Serdal Altun and Mustafa Efelti, claimed they were immediately received by several important Turkish film festivals without having to gain international prestige beforehand. Altun received funds from the MoC for his first short fiction film without any prior releases. Two others in this study, Müjde Arslan and Veysel Çelik, were also received by a few Turkish film festivals as neophyte filmmakers during the short-lived "peace negotiation" and "democratization" period of Turkey when the state's policy towards the Kurds changed for a few years. Later on, their more mature and internationally-awarded films were subsequently censored and snubbed by Turkish film festivals. A propos, they both emigrated from Turkey in order to continue their filmmaking in a "safer space" (England and Germany, respectively).

State managed funding and visibility are directly linked to the content of films. As discussed in Chapter 2, state policy towards the Kurdish question has oscillated between inclusion and exclusion. Karabey was welcomed by a few Turkish film festivals early on in his career during this intermittent "democratization period" for the same reason; but he

was subsequently censored and could only attain visibility in Turkey after completing the international film festival circuit. Mustafa Efelti was born and raised in the Kurdish southeast region of Silopi and moved to the west (Istanbul) in his mid-20s. He was one of the filmmakers welcomed early in his career into the Turkish festival circuit and is now funded by MoC for his current feature-fiction project. He explicitly stated that his films are not intended to be “political” and rather aim to explore everyday reality in a “naïve and poetic way.” His films are not related to the political conflicts he had experienced as a Kurd in Turkey. He does not identify as a Kurdish filmmaker and added that his inspiration and motivation stem from more universal themes such as gender, human-animal relations, and modern alienation – themes that don’t directly irritate the mainstream Turkish discourse of the Kurds.

As I argued in Chapter 2, this discourse is based on the state’s rationale in its governance of Kurdish subjectivity, which is focused on two expediencies: (1) coaxing and drawing large swathes of the Kurdish population in Turkey towards AKP’s “moderate” conservative neoliberal agenda (through media mechanisms such as TRT-6, amongst other means) and (2) steering Kurdish political subjectivity away from neighboring Kurds in Rojava (Syrian Kurdistan). The state permits films that are not overtly and controversially political vis-à-vis the “Kurdish Question.” Similar to Koçer’s study discussed in Chapter 2, these examples show that the ideology of multiculturalism helps “the Turkish government’s larger program of neoliberalism in a global market economy” by silencing narratives critical of the state and market (Koçer 2011, 187). This leads us to question how neoliberal governance commodifies and incorporates alterity

and thus problematizes art's critical social function (Christie and Degirmencioglu 2019). This will be elaborated in the next chapters.

Serdal Altun's films have been funded, welcomed and applauded by the current government. He creates films for children that do indeed touch on certain social issues, albeit subliminally and with religious and mythic overtones. Such reworking of content and images is ultimately admitted by the governing bodies into the Turkish state's representational regime. This substantiates the claims of other filmmakers who produce films that present less ambiguous images that challenge hegemonic narratives and its representation of reality. Efeltili acknowledged that despite certain opinions he holds about the impossibility of objectively representing subjectively-experienced social issues related to the Kurdish Question, that

Maybe there is a control, also, that doesn't give us motivation to talk about the political things.. there are some reasons that we don't face or even know why; there are many reasons to not do a political film.. your life is controlled by some political 'gods' from everywhere somehow, and maybe there is not enough courage to do political stuff.

A filmmaker like Efeltili, who claimed that his approach to film is not political in the "classical" sense, is nevertheless able to comprehend the blurry boundary between politics and violence, whether symbolic or repressive. These political "gods" represent the phantasmagoric illegibility of the state as exemplified by the experience of Mavioglu and Demirel with their film *Bakur*, discussed in Chapter 2 or as Karabey discussed above. Öztürk's statement above about the "vicious circle" of MoC funding, (self) censorship and script-writing is clearly demonstrated in the national and international conditions of Kurdish filmmaking in Turkey. Öztürk falls somewhere between the two conditions of circumventing censorship (international prestige and tolerable content) under which

Kurdish films are “made visible” in Turkey’s society. She indicated that her films are implicitly, not explicitly, political. She said,

While we were working at the Mesopotamia Cultural Center, most of the films we sent were not accepted [by the MoC and festivals]. But those films were ‘tougher’. Mine aren’t like that. My film (*Toz Bezi*) is tough in essence, but doesn’t ‘shout’ with politically tough words. Maybe that’s why they (Turkish state and ministry) didn’t do anything about it... Also, [it helped that] it was released in Berlin first.

Öztürk only once received negligible funding from the MoC over ten years ago following the release of her first short fiction film, *Açık Yara* – a discreet father-son drama which, according to her, was “wholly undecipherable as a politically controversial film.” She added that the MoC provided this financial support when there was “a milder policy atmosphere” – referring to the short-lived democratization period of the Turkish state towards Kurds. Öztürk claimed this was only possible because she “already had international awards in hand”, and so it was the exception to the rule of economic exclusion by the Turkish state and its ministries. As many other participating filmmakers concurred, these infrequent and negligible grants from the MoC are purely “symbolic gestures” to publically cover their own tracks in the broader structural inequality of funding and visibility. These micro-politics of film visibility and censorship are part of the complex political balance-sheet the current government must maneuver in dealing with its hegemonic crisis and authoritarian turn that has unfolded over the last years. Öztürk needed to find additional funds to complete her acclaimed feature *Toz Bezi*, eventually finding a German producer. After premiering her film in Berlin and screening in several international film festivals, Öztürk returned to Turkey where she won one of the most prestigious film awards of the country – Best Film at Istanbul Film Festival – run by a private non-profit institution, but one that must abide by the state’s authority. It

was here and at other Turkish film festivals where she faced a striking form of symbolic violence to be discussed below.

The final factor in the economy of Kurdish filmmaking is the seemingly mundane matter of film festival application fees. While the more internationally-established filmmakers do not face this problem currently, many of the participants discussed this as a non-trivial issue. It functions as a significant barrier to potentially promising younger filmmakers who need international avenues to gain a foothold in Turkey and who live in a state that consistently impedes institutional provision. As the Turkish currency continuously inflates, filmmakers struggle to send \$50-\$100 application fees to international film festivals. With no guarantees of approval, these fees add up to a significant barrier to less-established filmmakers seeking spaces to screen their films abroad due to domestic repression. This constraint demonstrates how the Turkish state's management of public capital restricts opportunities for filmmakers caught in an economically unequal international system.

Before gaining any international or domestic notability, Karabey worked primarily on his early 'underground' docu-reportage material. He said it was a stroke of blind luck that his 1999 docu-fiction *Boran* was unexpectedly allowed to be screened in mainstream Turkish film festivals during the short-lived "democratization period" towards Kurds; and it was this momentary flash of visibility of his film that allowed him to be recognized and invited to Europe, setting off the chain reaction of his career. This eventually gave him the necessary internationally-based leverage against the status quo repression and censorship that resumed in Turkey following the end of the fleeting democratization period. Now that the short-lived democratic posture of the Turkish state

towards the Kurds is over, the ability to slip through the cracks with politically critical films within Turkey has become more difficult, while the high-cost no-guarantee international application processes simultaneously curb options beyond Turkish borders. The only other alternative to this double-bind would be to rework the form and/or content of the films, whether consciously or unconsciously, whether conformingly or subversively.

The Symbolic – Search for a Language

Economic exclusion affects film writing and content. Çelik explains this in the following statement:

The financial and censorship situation affects almost all stages of a movie. Even before shooting, our problems begin when we write. We know that we will not be able to find [institutional] support for our film, and so we are trying to write a project within our limits during the creation and writing process. Of course, although [these limits] can enhance creativity, it actually also undermines it somewhat. In other words, it actually blocks our search for a language.

Çelik's statement reveals how economic conditions begin to affect filmmaking on a symbolic level. The effect of economic conditions on film form and content have been analyzed, and in this section I focus on how self-censorship and symbolic power affect the search for a language.

Çelik continues by explaining that in order to arrange the necessary technical equipment, film crew, and actors, “you have to find people who can work for a fifth of what they would otherwise earn commercially and who, most importantly, believe in your project.” This dimension of solidarity resonated with all the participating filmmakers in this study. A-list actors and actresses of Turkey like Serra Yilmaz, Nazan

Kesal, Asiye Dinçsoy, Caner Cindoruk and Gizem Soysaldı were casted in the films of Karabey and Öztürk. These actors and actresses, who are not all Kurdish, refused to accept remuneration in solidarity with their projects. Öztürk states:

Absolutely, there is comradeship. Generally, *they* [A-list actors in solidarity] are the ones who say to *us*: “come on, shoot the film; don’t worry, we will come.” I mean, on top of it they even give us money! They act in professional films and TV series and earn good salaries there, but emotionally they are not satisfied by this. They also want to embody (literally, “be wrapped in the flesh and bones of”) the fictional scenarios and characters they personally find attractive and powerful. That’s why they want to perform in our films [for free].

This type of solidarity and support structure that includes professional A-list actors who possess significant symbolic, social, and cultural capital was, not surprisingly, only an influential factor for the more internationally-established filmmakers who sometimes prefer to work with professional actors. Other filmmakers followed a similar trend who mostly practiced the neorealist approach of casting non-professional actors.³ Globally-recognized Kurdish filmmakers interested in dealing with politically-critical content at odds with the Turkish state’s policies/narratives are able to circumvent state-imposed restrictions on public economic capital through networks reinforced by social, cultural, and symbolic capital.

Kurdish filmmakers sometimes face disapproval from other Kurds. Thus, solidarity and symbolic capital are more complex than comradeship amongst artists.

Speaking about the documentary filmmaking process in her rural Kurdish hometown, Müjde Arslan stated,

There are very sensitive issues. When you’re making films of this kind, everybody wants you to show them beautiful, strong, rich and all the elements of power; but this is not the

³ It should be noted that both Karabey and Öztürk have also and often casted non-professional actors in their films.

story you are after. When I made my film about my community.. it became a controversial issue. It puts barriers in front of me when I decide to make a film.. I don't want to show the beauty; it's more about the problems. I want to touch their wounds sometimes, [but then] the barriers appear. When I first went to my village and was making the film about my aunt, [my grandfather] came to me and my crew and he wanted us to leave because it is a "shame".. Before state censorship, the first problem starts from the small circle – your uncle, your family.

Although this experience may seem specific to documentary films or personal family conflicts, Çelik also stated that filming his fiction films on location in Kurdistan similarly encountered skepticism and disapproval from the local Kurdish community due to fear that the state would punish the locals, leading to tangible and psychological obstacles in writing, shooting, and distributing. Similarly, Tekeş claimed that her short fiction, *Heverk* (2016) – which depicts, on one hand, the domination of Kurdish children by the Turkish education system and, on the other hand, intra-Kurdish divisions and oppression – faced more reactionary disapproval from Kurdish spectators. She was even rejected by several Kurdish film festivals for its anti-heroic depiction of Kurds.

The inertia of Kurdish film art and the grain against which these filmmakers inevitably rub against is not a one-way street (images critical of the Turkish state). It runs both ways (images critical of Kurdish society). Thus, Kurdish nationalism, in addition to Turkish nationalism, has an impact on social inequality and symbolic power in Turkey's society. One of the best ways to understand symbolic power in the region is to take the point of departure of these filmmakers: self-criticism rather than self-valorization; representations of ambiguity rather than of victimhood and moral purity. Although a bit of a simplified adage: the artist, as agents of social self-criticism, must avoid the tendencies of partisanship, and this exposes relations of symbolic power within a given time and place through the artifacts. The artist also exposes this power, perhaps

unwittingly, through the various public forms of positive and negative judgment they attract during the production and distribution processes of their works.

Beyond intra-Kurdish disagreement, the reception of Kurdish images and narratives in western Turkish cities is also a significant issue. Öztürk's story is especially revealing. As stated earlier, Öztürk premiered her first feature-length fiction, *Toz Bezi* (2015), in Berlin. After receiving several awards internationally, she brought the film back to Turkey where she was awarded one of the most prestigious film prizes of the country: Best Film at Istanbul Film Festival. Öztürk's experience reveals a striking form of symbolic power. It is worth quoting her at length here in two separate but related sections of our interview:

My film, *Toz Bezi*, is definitely a political movie, but it doesn't 'shout' any partisan politics. But what did I experience? I was faced with very strange questions from the audience [in western Turkey]. For example, the film was screened at Ankara Film Festival in the capital. There, a man raised his hand and said, 'I loved your movie. Cleaning women are never mentioned or talked about. Thank you so much. You made them visible. It has affected me. But let me ask: Why Kurds?' I said, 'Because Kurds roam the bowels of the city. Look at the dirt of the city, the builders, the cleaners... Being Kurdish there isn't an anomaly. It's the norm. You may not see it. [But it's there]. Moreover, I am Kurdish. I wanted to tell the story I am most familiar with. My aunt was a cleaner. I dedicated it to her. I was describing the world I know.' I continued at length and responded to his question thoroughly. Now, you would think that this question has been answered, no? Immediately after another woman raised her hand and said 'Thank you. I am very sad. I cried. I will ask you something. Why are these women Kurdish?' I said, 'What do you mean?' And would you believe that the next question was: 'Why Kurdish?' I could never explain. Either they didn't hear it or they did it on purpose. Eventually I said to myself, 'If in my next feature film, I filmed a story about a Kurdish director making a movie about his struggle to make a movie about Kurds, and then he shot that movie and showed it, they would have asked the same question again: 'Why is this director Kurdish?' Do you see, once again, that I am subject to the same discrimination? With that said, although I faced such narrow-mindedness, I didn't face direct repressive barriers [like other Kurdish filmmakers].

A few moments later, Öztürk continues:

As I said, they gave my film the best film award at the Istanbul Film Festival. While I was speaking there, I referred to the war in the award speech. I said, 'I dedicate this to the

mothers out there who keep their children in the refrigerator.’ They [film festival organizers] told me, ‘Forget the ministry. You won’t receive any more funds. You won’t even be permitted to make movies.’ First, already while writing, and after, when going to the ministry, you have to *not* write ‘those scenes.’ This is censorship. Let’s say you do write it. No money. Second, you’re already psychologically self-censoring. For example, now I thought of telling a story about the 90s [in my next film] (an historically important period of war between the Kurds and the Turkish state called the ‘dirty war’). While I’m writing, I say ‘I can’t shoot this place, I can’t shoot that.’ That’s why you need to find more implicit and indirect ways while shooting. The story has to be set up like that to be able to do it in Turkey. Because whenever you put your finger on something [socially-sensitive], they are already accusing you of being a terrorist. When you say, ‘but I’m living this, I want to tell you,’ from the outset they simply don’t understand at all. Maybe if you find more implicit ways, you can catch some of them. You might make them question their authenticity for a moment. As I said, there’s self-censorship... Censorship is already the commandment of God (an ironic reference to a social dogma), self-censorship is there from the beginning... even before writing, while thinking! You’re already building another universe from the beginning. You try to find other ways. You try to find other symbolic expressions.

Öztürk’s experience demonstrates the incapacity of spectators at film festivals in Turkey to incorporate unambiguous images in Kurdish films. It demonstrates a form of symbolic power. I consider Öztürk’s experience as an illustration of Bourdieu’s “fourth species” of capital – symbolic capital. Bourdieu (2000, 241) writes:

One of the most unequal of all distributions, and probably...the most cruel, is the distribution of symbolic capital, that is, of social importance and of reasons for living... In the hierarchy of worth and unworthiness, which can never be perfectly superimposed on the hierarchy of wealth and powers, the nobleman, [or] the State nobility - is opposed to the stigmatized pariah, [who] bears the curse of a negative symbolic capital...there is no worse dispossession...than that of the losers in the symbolic struggle for recognition, for access to a socially recognized social being, in a word, to humanity...this symbolic power... appears endowed with an objective reality, as if determining the gazes which produce it.

Bourdieu even appeared to suggest that “the symbolic affects all sorts of capital” (2000, 242). Bourdieu takes this further and suggests that society reproduces the state most fundamentally through the general accumulation of symbolic capital: a kind of “meta-capital” that maintains the social inequalities of the state while simultaneously erasing the genetic traces of these inequalities that would disclose their mutability,

ephemerality, and ‘un-static-ness’ (2014, 133). As he states at the end of *Pascalian Meditations* (2000, 240): “as the central bank of symbolic capital, the State is able to confer that form of capital whose particularity is that it contains its own justification.”

These concepts help us frame Öztürk’s experience of spectators’ inability to acknowledge something quite unequivocal. It also points to the general atmosphere within the social institution of prestigious Turkish film festivals – which are an ideological state apparatus like any other. Bourdieu’s model helps us understand, like in Öztürk’s experience, that the border between state and society is not straightforward. Bourdieu (2000, 242)

explains how symbolic capital blurs this border:

Every kind of capital (economic, cultural, social) tends (to different degrees) to function as symbolic capital (so that it might be better to speak of the symbolic effects of capital) when it obtains an explicit or practical recognition, that of a habitus structured according to the very structures of the space in which it has been engendered. In other words, symbolic capital is not a particular kind of capital but what every kind of capital becomes when it is misrecognized as capital, that is, as force, a power or capacity for (actual or potential) exploitation, and therefore recognized as legitimate. More precisely, capital exists and acts as symbolic capital in its relationship with a habitus predisposed to perceive it as a sign, and as a sign of importance, that is, to know and recognize it on the basis of cognitive structures able and inclined to grant it recognition because they are attuned to what it is. Produced by the transfiguration of a power relation into a sense relation, symbolic capital rescues agents from insignificance, the absence of importance and of meaning.

Spectators at film festivals in Turkey are often unable to comprehend the inequality Kurds experience in cities like Istanbul. The way these inequalities are represented in films like Öztürk’s more-or-less do “obtain onto reality.” This inability may have several explanations and is not necessarily a result of outright censorship or ignorance. It is valid enough for an audience member to challenge the ethnic dimension of a class question as it is represented in Öztürk’s film. Nonetheless, I believe Öztürk’s experience is a result of how society reproduces itself through the state’s general

accumulation of symbolic capital, which leads to the internalization of structural inequality (Bourdieu 1984). The fact that the lines of connection between the “Kurdish Question” and the “class question” (a major theme in Öztürk’s film) are unrecognizable in Turkish film festivals is a misrecognition of objective conditions and a manifestation of symbolic power. These tensions, along with the financial constraints Kurdish filmmakers must navigate, creates a situation in which a “symbolic struggle for recognition” requires a search for a language. This search for symbolic expressions must be shrewd, and even cunning, if it is to cause the spectator to “question their authenticity for a moment.”

Any optimistic suggestion of the artist’s creative undertaking in search of a language should not be exaggerated. Almost every participating filmmaker described their practice as a bittersweet and, at times, even tormenting and depressing process that only temporarily casts out their inner-phantoms. Öztürk stated that she fell into depression multiple times due to the social contradictions involved in her filmmaking practice, and that she is currently “pessimistic and heavy-hearted” about filmmaking in the socio-political conditions of Turkey. She has recently decided to temporarily step away from filmmaking. In addition to the suffocating authoritarian climate of the country, she is periodically overcome by feelings of shame as a filmmaker for engaging in abstract creative practices while tangible forms of injustice and violence continue in her society.

Selim Yıldız, an experienced photo-documentarist from Van in eastern Turkey, has stated that “being a director is a very difficult thing in this geography”, and that shooting films are not something he can say he “enjoys.” Rather than for creative pleasure, he practices filmmaking as a kind of existential necessity. “These stories make

me sleepless, they are my nightmares, they are my story, my problems, and I feel a little relieved when I'm done shooting it, I come back to myself a little.” The platitude of the troubled psychological experience of the ‘haunted’ artist cannot be reduced to a kind of abnormal idiosyncratic psychology of the creative outcast. It needs to be understood as a product of social power.

Müjde Arslan’s statement drives this point home. Arslan repeatedly stated that internalized repression and unconscious self-censorship was not only a result of direct state force (for example, Arslan was accosted and detained by the police after releasing her documentary, *Ez Firyam Tu Ma Li Cih*). It is also an outcome of the perpetual din and clamor of banal everyday apparatuses like television, radio, and Turkey’s various nationalist sounds and images.⁴ In reference to why broadcasting TV sets were a recurring image in her films, Arslan stated that

[Turkish TV] is a voice inside our ears and our brain – these loud voices shouting, commanding, telling you, always accusing you, always putting you in a criminal position for something you have or haven’t done. It’s like a school teacher constantly shouting at you. This is why I put it in my film.

When asked about her experience of being detained by Turkish police, Arslan stated

[The Turkish state] has this kind of paranoia, if they want to accuse you it’s so easy. I knew I was going to make more films about social issues and then it became impossible – there are two eyes following and watching you and asking you silly questions all the time... to be creative you have to feel relatively safe first. The censorship works. It kind of haunts you, you change, the language you speak changes. I need time, lots of time, to get rid of this fear and paranoia of being taken away by somebody, being listened to by somebody. You put on lots of layers to hide, you don’t show your true opinions, even if they are very simple, even if they are not provocative. I’m not a provocative person anyways, it just

⁴ These include nationalist anthems recited in school, statues and monuments of ‘heroic’ Turkish figures in Kurdish cities, and the eerily threatening ever-present colossal nationalist epigrams engraved into the most visible hillsides of all major Kurdish cities and towns in southeast Turkey.

changes the way you think, the way you write, create. I wanted to be free first. This sense of freedom was very important for me.

Like Çelik, Arslan left Turkey for European soil in order to be free from the internalized paranoia imposed by an illegible state and the lingering possibility of one heedlessly becoming a kind of automaton if domination prevails. It is in this demanding context that these filmmakers search for a language that challenges a symbolic field that produces the invisibility of their images and the blindness of their spectators. As discussed in Chapter 2, Kurdish cultural production has a long history of geographic division. Yet there is a paradox to the issue of “being free” in exile abroad in the 21st century while making politically-critical cultural products regarding Kurdistan and unfreedom in Turkey. As Karabey stated in our interview:

Barriers exist. For me, to find the right way to express myself, these barriers also help for me to create new art forms – sometimes, censorship helps artists to create more interesting language. Of course, we are not masochist artists, but it is obvious – if there is oppression, there will be difficulties. If there were no difficulties, I’m not sure I’d want to continue making films.

The State – Anti-Politics and Counter-Models of Filmmaking

So far, I have analyzed the way economic exclusion and symbolic power influence Kurdish filmmakers. I used this as a basis to show the state’s relationship to these forces. In this section, I turn to the definition of the state as a repressive and bureaucratic force.

As discussed in Chapter 2, the Turkish state uses obscure legal powers to censor cultural products. In my interview with Nazmi Karaman, he discussed his experience of this kind of censorship. Karaman is a trained theater actor and playwright with over twenty years of professional experience who has recently released his first independent

short-film, *Beru* (2020). As a theater director, he has led performances of Dario Fo's play *Trumpets and Raspberries* throughout the Kurdish region of Turkey. These performances were done in Turkish and were authorized by the state. After the state had authorized the play to be performed in Kurdish, it was canceled two hours before the performance by the police. Karaman said,

Their claim is that the play is disseminating propaganda for a [terrorist] 'organization', but the play's content has nothing to do with that. Unfortunately, they canceled the play only because it is in a Kurdish language and for the first time in Turkey, it was to be in official city theaters. The court case is still pending. We perform in our private halls, but we can't buy the state theater.

Fo's *Trumpets and Raspberries* depicts the distortion between the state, capital, bosses and the people. And although it was written in the 1970s, this distortion is unfortunately still evident in today's system. That's why I chose this play. Likewise, when Fo first released it in Italy, it caused great controversy in the [Italian] parliament. Their television shows and tours were cancelled. Like us, he was under pressure. ... It is very important for us that the plays we choose in Kurdish theater depict these very social problems [we face in performing]. We choose plays that express the injustices that people experience in the system. That's why Dario Fo's play was relevant for us. Its main theme is that this system has not changed for centuries, that the laws are only on the side of the rich and that it is a system that exploits the people.

Karaman's experience is similar to Öztürk's of symbolic power discussed earlier. In Karaman's case, it is bureaucratic power – what Bourdieu (2014) would describe as a kind of secular theological authority performed by agencies of state bureaucracy; and what Das (2006) referred to as the illegibility of this performance as it oscillates between a rational and magical mode. The thread that links Öztürk's and Karaman's experiences is the lack of visibility that reproduces itself in state and society. Throughout our interview, Karaman described the destabilizing unpredictable ways the police intervenes in Kurdish aesthetic practices. Filmmaker and documentarist Selim Yıldız extracts the key lesson from Karaman's story:

As soon as you show that the current social problems in Turkey and Kurdistan are state-oriented, they won't show that movie... the biggest disadvantage in film distribution is that the Kurds do not have a state. When there is no state, you don't even have a stand at [festivals organized according to national cinema]. [Due to] statelessness, Kurdish cinema is fragmented similar to its own society. Kurdish filmmakers get along.. but we do not have a network where we come together and organize to produce and distribute these films.

It is debatable whether simply establishing a national state would solve all problems of distribution and censorship, as Tekeş's experience of Kurdish disapproval shows. Still, more than half of the interviewed filmmakers have either been imprisoned, detained, exiled, or are in an ongoing trial.

The state's legal and extralegal powers are fundamental in regulating cultural production. In 2016, a failed coup-attempt in Turkey led to a two-year state of emergency that gave the AKP government sweeping extralegal power, with all the trappings of imprisonment, discharge, and exile mentioned earlier. The post-2016 cascade of anti-democratic repression and the restructuring of Turkey's society is a book-length topic, but it would be impossible to understand the current conditions of Turkey's Kurdish filmmakers without bearing in mind this ongoing context. The hidden rule of state sovereignty – its extralegal powers – has been implemented for a century in the Kurdish southeast, posing itself as a necessary 'anomaly' so that 'order' may be maintained. There is nothing anomalous about the state's extra-legality, and this dimension of the political permeates cinema, as Mazzarella's (2013) analysis of the Indian state's management of cinema discussed earlier illustrates. The Turkish state's extra-legal censorship with reference to the perpetual rhetoric of development support's Mazzarella's study. The state prepares the population by educating the masses to participate in a

modern world and this provides the state an endless justification for protecting them from media they are not wise enough to understand.

Turkey's Kurdish borderlands have developed in these shadowy margins of state and law. Mazzarella's study reveals the relationship between capitalist development, the state's extra-legal powers, and cinematic censorship. As discussed in Chapter 2, the Kurdish Question has been articulated as an issue of "underdevelopment", and development projects were deliberately implemented to de-politicize and displace millions of Kurds. The anti-political feedback loop in Kurdistan is fundamentally conditioned by top-down state development projects.⁵ James Ferguson (1990) argues that a "development discourse fantasy" pervades large-scale economic development projects operating in the "Third World" with de-politicizing effects. Like Ferguson's study, the Kurdish borderlands have been wrapped up in these aporias – of a global development apparatus intent on the endless accumulation of capital. Unlike Ferguson's study in Lesotho, however, the Turkish state has also deployed a state/police security apparatus hell-bent on solving a nearly fifty-year war through technocratic-developmental means.

Contrary to Turkish state narratives, I argued in Chapter 2 that the "dirty war" in Kurdistan between the PKK and Turkish state was not the cause of the Kurdish Question, but its effect. The destructive socio-economic effects of large-scale technocratic development projects, such as GAP, have been a basis for Kurdish insurgency (Bilgen 2017). As Bilgen argues, these projects have created a regressive feedback loop of de-politicization. One of the key motives for both private NGO intervention ('sustainable

⁵ Such as the Southeastern Anatolia Project (GAP) – an ongoing fifty-year regional mega-development project officially estimated to directly affect over 10 million people in Kurdish southeast Turkey.

development' and social services) and extralegal state intervention (the removal and incarceration of democratically elected politicians and support for paramilitary groups) is to depoliticize and eliminate any obstacles to inflexible top-down development projects in Kurdistan, such as GAP. This leaves the affected people with no state-sanctioned agency, therefore giving further justification to take up arms. Artists like Karaman and Yıldız attempt to create plays and films that problematize the inequalities of these practices. The state brands them as terrorists and uses its legal and extra-legal powers to censor them in order to protect the population from media they are not wise enough to understand.

The state has used its extra-legal powers to dismiss and red-flag Kurdish filmmakers. During the 2009-2015 “peace negotiation” years, over 10,000 Kurds, mostly politicians and NGO workers, had been incarcerated as political prisoners.⁶ In 2012, these prisoners began a hunger strike. Subsequently, over 200 academics in Turkey signed a petition, known as Academics for Peace (*Bariş İçin Akademisyenler*, BAK), supporting the demands of the prisoners. In 2015, when negotiations collapsed and the government began a war in the southeast with the Kurds, BAK mobilized and gained 2,000 signatures in early 2016 who demanded that independent observers evaluate the situation in Kurdish cities. 300 foreign academics, including Judith Butler and Noam Chomsky, joined the list of signatories.⁷ Subsequently, the signatories in Turkey were systematically attacked by the government, leading to their removals from universities and several arrests. Three of the interviewed filmmakers were signatories of the BAK, including Tekeş, who was a

⁶ <https://www.redpepper.org.uk/women-for-democracy-in-turkey/>

⁷ <https://bianet.org/english/human-rights/170978-academics-we-will-not-be-a-party-to-this-crime>

university professor at the time. As a result, she was dismissed from her post. Öztürk stated that at one point, when BAK was gathering signatures, they approached Kurdish filmmakers to join them and many of them willingly complied. These filmmakers were consequently defunded, red-flagged and censored by the MoC.

Filmmakers attempt to find new models of filmmaking that can face the challenges of censorship. As discussed earlier, Karabey was able to obtain funds from the MoC for his first feature-fiction, *Gitmek* (2008), by slipping through the cracks during the early peace-process period. As he stated, “they didn’t know who I was at the time.” But his second 2014 feature-fiction film, *Were Dengê Min*, was “rejected by Turkish authorities” due to the high profile he earned from *Gitmek*. This project was eventually funded by European institutions. Finally, in speaking about his third and most recent 2018 feature-fiction film, *İçerdekiler*, Karabey stated

The conditions of my third feature-fiction movie were terrible, with the political situation. I was rejected from any kind of funds from Turkey because we signed a peace declaration [BAK] and all academicians and artists had difficulties with the government. We were an open target for the state. But I said we shouldn’t give up. Let’s find other ways to make our movies. If we can’t afford many shooting sites, let’s shoot in one site/space. I wanted to make [*İçerdekiler*] for a long time and was waiting for the right moment. I spoke with good professional actors, and they became part of the production, they put some money into it... they paid themselves, the camera, etc. So what we did was *create a different model*. For example, we shared the rights of the movie. In our case [even though] it means our money will never come back to us in the short term, they (participating actors, crew, etc.) need to believe in something more than just practical things – they had to believe in the project.

This passage reminds us of Çelik’s and Öztürk’s earlier statements that described the solidarity of A-list actors and their thirst to act in films they find to be important and meaningful. What Karabey adds to this type of collaboration is how it can be turned into a new model of filmmaking. This collaborative model was similarly used by Çelik and Tekeş, albeit, in the latter’s case, without casting professional actors. In our interview,

Karabey explained that his third film *İçerdekiler* was produced collaboratively with cast and crew and distributed via alternative digital platforms during the recent period of state censorship. The film is based on a play he saw over thirty years ago, when his young and curious conscience was first stirred by the unsettling political events at the time (the dirty war). The play, depicting the disorienting psychology of political prisoners, was literally experienced and embodied by Karabey himself some years after he saw it performed on stage when he was incarcerated for being part of an activist student group at his university. During his imprisonment, Karabey identified so much with the play that he promised himself he would one day write a film based on it. This promise lay dormant for thirty years, until similarly oppressive social conditions resurfaced and closed off opportunities for academics and artists in 2016. In this environment, Karabey developed a new model by writing and directing this single-scene play-adaptation.

The examples in this chapter prod the blurry line between state repression and symbolic power. Bourdieu argues that state and society are co-implicated in one another through “durable and transposable dispositions through which we perceive, judge and act in the world”; or *habitus* (1990, 53). He argues that the state facilitates the operation of and accumulation of capital within different fields (economic, social, cultural, etc.), i.e. *nomos*. The state incorporates itself into actors in society who recognize their subjective experience of themselves in the social hierarchy as an objective condition, i.e. *doxa* (2014, 93-6). The state is integrated into cognition and habitual practices necessary for conducting everyday social life. Therefore, the state remains invisible and society reproduces the state unwittingly, even when law is seemingly being defied. In this way, perpetual inequalities are concealed.

The importance of Bourdieu's model notwithstanding, the examples in this section have shown that his model is not seamlessly applicable to states like Turkey, where centralized militaries and police maintain effective extra-legal social power. Military or police force never substantively appear in Bourdieu's theoretical accounts, and the repressive apparatus in states like Turkey remain fundamental in (re)producing social order (Burawoy 2019; Anderson 1976, 55). Gramsci delineated state power between a repressive apparatus in the East and the sturdy structure of civil society in the West in the early 20th century. What makes the 21st century nation-state unique – especially in the periphery, but increasingly in the core – is its ability to incorporate both symbolic and repressive violence into a new flexibility. This is especially the case in the global periphery where blatantly undemocratic forms of governance unevenly combine with modern technologies of power.

Unlike 20th century nation-states, contemporary “flexible” states use repression and symbolic power to absorb conflict without the need for democratic institutions (Davidson 2019, 20). Gramsci's notion of hegemony remains important because it is the combination of articulated institutions in state and civil society that sustain this flexibility. Today, hegemony does not require mass popular affirmation for what the system objectively produces socially; it is maintained by the way it has “hitherto marginalized alternatives against it, which in turn promotes the notion of apathy and disinterestedness in the very possibility of change” (2019, 22). The Turkish state's restless censorship of Kurdish films corroborates with this strategy. For those who apathy is impossible due to their unbearable position in society, political capacities and conceptual tools to understand their objective position in the system are made

unavailable. For this reason, Mazzarella's (2013) anthropological study on cinematic censorship in India is important in showing the link between this contemporary form of hegemony and national cinema. His study demonstrates how the state prepares the population by educating the masses to participate in a modern world, which provides the state an endless justification for protecting them from media they are not wise enough to understand. The state is thus able to marginalize alternatives and maintain hegemonic leadership. Likewise, nationalism and religion are irreplaceable components of capitalist hegemony, which prevent those most systematically oppressed from acquiring the capacities and tools to understand their objective conditions. In the next chapter, I will show how Kurdish films challenge these institutions.

In this chapter, we have seen (1) how economic exclusion and international institutions condition film form and content, (2) how symbolic power initiates a creative search for a filmic language while simultaneously reinforcing an inhibiting atmosphere of invisibility and paranoia, and (3) how extra-legal state repression conditions filmmaking. I argued that the Turkish state incorporates economic exclusion with symbolic and repressive violence under a new flexibility. In Chapter 2, I critiqued the strong state tradition through a political-economic analysis. Authoritarian-military states are a product of uneven development in the periphery and directly linked to the dominant class through capitalist institutionalization. In this chapter, I extended this argument to show that so-called "strong states" are supple and complex in their new flexibility. The examples in this chapter have shown that Kurdish films are either repressively censored by the state through "state of emergency" rule (Mazzarella 2013), effectively censored through the "illegibility of the state" (Das 2006), misrecognized through symbolic violence or even

self-censored by filmmakers during writing and production. Bourdieu was infamously pessimistic about the capacity for social agents to move beyond the structures of domination that condition them, but his model also implicitly upholds the possibility to do so through practice. In the next chapter, I will investigate how film aesthetics engage these challenges.

4. History and Memory in Kurdish Cinema

In the preceding chapter, I discussed the conditions of filmmaking. In this chapter, I analyze aesthetic practices and how Kurdish filmmakers engage with history and memory in their films. I rely and build on what Koçer has described as a pendulum that swings between “the past and the present”, “the traditional and the modern” and between “documentary and fiction” in Kurdish cinema (Koçer 2013, 727). Using a world-systems approach, I frame Kurdish cinema as a cinema from the periphery that is effective in revealing the contradictions of the world-system. Kurdish films innovatively deploy aesthetic techniques that challenge narratives of progress and development as well as their underlying political-economic structures.

The four sections in this chapter explore the various ways Kurdish filmmakers negotiate the tension between history and memory. The first section explores how filmmakers use childhood experiences and family histories as a basis for their production. Every filmmaker interviewed in this study referred to exploring childhood memories as a central technique in their practice. Their retrospective critical exploration of the past carries unique political insight and significance. The second section discusses the way filmmakers experience and respond to institutionalized destruction of cultural heritage. Filmmakers attempt to represent these experiences as a means not only to salvage cultural heritage but also to discredit hegemonic Turkish narratives of progress.

The third section explores the radical potential of film narratives written by filmmakers who continue to experience the world-system’s structural violence in their art practice – borders, migration and exile. The focus on memory and history in the context of structural violence allows me to register the interconnection between local and global

forces as they appear from the periphery. The last section explores how Kurdish films critique the repressive and ideological apparatuses of the Turkish state – namely, education and militarization. I argue that the Kurdish films analyzed in this chapter not only recount “bleak” narratives about the victims of history but also offer insight into how ongoing social and economic oppression is a systemic process (as discussed in previous chapters). The guiding thread of these four sections is the idea that analyzing cultural production at the periphery allows critical reflection on how the Turkish state, and, by extension, other powerful states in the world-system, maintains its cultural legitimacy despite a history of oppression and violence.

The tension and negotiation between history and memory is a recurring theme in Kurdish films and has been reiterated by Kurdish filmmakers as a central problematic in their aesthetic production. Of historians working on memory, Enzo Traverso is useful for this study. He has pointed to the coincidence of the post-Cold War proliferation of “memory” in public discourse in which memory has achieved an unprecedented status in recent decades, especially in film (2016b). Traverso, like Benjamin, frames the “memory landscape” of the last three decades as a political struggle over the meaning of the past (2016b, xv, 14). For Traverso, a historically-committed thinker or activist should politicize the present and move beyond victimhood by critically engaging with the memory of the past. The maxim that the winners always (re)write history in any given epoch is evidenced by today’s ‘common sense’ historical memory in Turkey, which presents Kurdish and other political struggles as heedless failures. Turkey offers only one consolation for historical violence: memorializing its victims.

Traverso’s perspective on struggles over the meaning of history helps me analyze

ambiguity and complexity in Kurdish films. In Veysel Çelik's short-fiction *Kefaret Yağmuru* (*Salvation Rain* 2018), a Kurdish man returns to his village that was destroyed years earlier during the “dirty war” campaign. He undergoes a disturbing memory-contorted mourning process, where images of childhood and violence haunt the protagonist. In our interview, Çelik stated that “the truth is this: the artist, the filmmaker, feeds on their childhood...I am describing what I have seen and witnessed.” This kind of aesthetic production in the periphery engages the way the past is articulated in the present and the different ways people remember. The film's central imagery is of a Kurdish town destroyed under the state's scorched-earth policy, which is an erased and unknown history in Turkey's education, media, and cultural products. Such films have the potential to provide a more critical reflection of a world-system that inherently produces violence and inequality.

Another way Kurdish films negotiate the tension between history and memory is by problematizing the meaning of the past. Müjde Arslan's film *Ez Firiyam Tu Ma Li Cih* (*I Flew You Stayed* 2012) is an autobiographical film that traces her own journey in discovering her father's life, whom she never met because he joined the Kurdish guerilla and died in the “dirty war” shortly after her birth. The film depicts the political complexity of the war. By excavating the historical depth of the Kurdish Question through her personal life, her film revitalizes the past and challenges narratives that tend to reduce these histories to moral binaries. Arslan implicitly takes up Traverso's challenge to move beyond memorialization and victimhood, offering a subtler, un-dogmatic engagement with historical memory, a trend in Kurdish filmmaking that I elaborate further in this chapter.

Many Kurdish films engage the issue of heritage and memorialization, and its politics and aesthetics are fundamental for understanding narratives of progress and development. The post-Cold War world is “guided by two watchwords: memory and heritage” (Hartog 2003, 11). The sudden increase in memorials and heritage sites around the world are an indication of this phenomenon. Traverso insists that to challenge the way victimhood de-politicizes the present, we need to uncover the past dialectically, or, using Benjamin’s terminology, to build a montage of dialectical images that function as lamps to illuminate the past anew in order to politicize the present. The work of memory is not meant to protect victims from the oblivion of amnesia, but to recover the vanquished in order to engage the “now.” In our interview, Rûken Tekeş stated that “resistance and resilience against oblivion – I’m interested in those things that are towards their end...I’m trying to capture and digitize them to remind myself and the community – listen, this is ending, this is really almost extinct.” As I will later argue, although Tekeş’s two films *Heverk* (Circle 2016) and *Aether* (2019) and her statement above seem to suggest a drive to protect the victims of history from oblivion, they actually go further by politically engaging the “now” through resistance against oblivion. In *Aether* – a non-narrative genre-defying film about the destructive inundation of her hometown Hasankeyf by the state-sanctioned GAP development project – she provides a brilliant montage of images that illuminates the past anew and implicitly discredits hegemonic narratives of progress and development. This will be further analyzed later.

John Berger (2007, 10) once wrote that “the living reduce the dead to those who have lived, yet the dead already include the living in their own great collective.” I will argue throughout this chapter that only by taking this approach can we mourn and redeem

the oppressed past and thus more effectively dramatize the struggle to replace the present system with something else. Conventional memorial and heritage practices leave the work of remembrance dangerously unfinished. This often surrenders such practices to the dominant narrative of a given time by reducing the dead to those who have lived. The films in this study are examples of challenging narratives of the past to politicize the present.

Childhood

Every participating filmmaker emphasized the importance of memory in their films. They all referred to the importance of childhood, either their own or in their films. They were never specifically prompted about childhood and were only provided an open-ended question on the role and value of historical memory in their filmmaking. Here are just a few of the many passages from the interviews discussing the importance of childhood:

I rely on my childhood memories... childhood for any person, but especially a filmmaker, is a treasure.

Müjde Arslan

The artist, the filmmaker feeds on their childhood.

Veysel Çelik

I observe and choose stories from my own life, my own childhood.

Ayten Başer

Every artist is the worker of their childhood. There they search and find what they are looking for.

Serdal Altun

Everything is based on my memory of my childhood. It's a period to which I'm always going. It's uncanny when you go back and think about such things. Now, you go back for cinema, and you take a camera and shoot from zero.

Mustafa Efeltili

The memory of childhood can absorb us when reaching an age of critical retrospection. Veysel Çelik's discussion of memory and childhood in its full makes this clearer. Çelik relates this to the ambiguity of being identified as a Kurdish filmmaker in Turkey. He said,

Because at every stage, [Turkish filmmakers] make you feel that you are the 'other', the foreigner... in every environment, at all festivals... 'I am a Kurdish director who makes Kurdish stories': they think that's how I approached cinema. For example, my friend, a French director who is ethnically Turkish, said to me: 'Don't you think we need to move on from all these Kurdish stories?' As if I was merely using my Kurdish ethnicity and exploiting Kurdish stories!... They say: 'We're bored of these Kurdish stories, and now they've [Kurdish filmmakers] started spinning these stories in their heads.' But the truth is this: the artist, the filmmaker, feeds on their childhood. I am describing what I have seen and witnessed.

These "Kurdish stories" considered redundant by fellow filmmakers are the narratives of violence experienced by many in Kurdistan, like Çelik. He is describing what he has witnessed. Yet, as discussed in the last chapter, straightforwardly recounting what one has witnessed is not enough to performatively politicize the past. Çelik stated that it requires a search for a language, given the conditions of censorship and symbolic power that influence aesthetics, as outlined in Chapter 3. This is especially relevant to his latest short-fiction *Salvation Rain*. He stated that his first few films were not experimental in form, and that his motivation in these first productions, like many other Kurdish filmmakers, was to document the social issues going on at the time. As he gained experience, he, like several others in this study, realized that the "classic" forms (i.e. documentation, realism) were not enough, and he began to experiment. This

experimentation is an example of what was discussed earlier: the pendulum between documentary and fiction, past and present, in Kurdish cinema (Koçer 2013, 727). Çelik claims that *Salvation Rain* is his first step in this direction.

As discussed in Chapter 2, the “dirty war” was a shock therapy and primitive accumulation campaign in Kurdistan by the Turkish state – a manifestation of its transition from a state-development to an export-led neoliberal political-economic model. *Salvation Rain* depicts a young man returning to the ruins of his rural hometown in Kurdistan that was destroyed under the scorched-earth policies of the “dirty war” in the ‘80s and ‘90s. The young man undergoes a painful mourning process through dramatic psychological experiences based on memories of his childhood before and during the town’s destruction.

The experience is represented in the film in a modernist expressionist aesthetic, rather than a realist narrative. This innovation does not imply that Çelik is stepping away from a “more historical” or “political” approach that uses a documentary realist form and is embracing a “less historical-political” approach by deploying a modernist representation of individual experience. Rather, I argue that Çelik’s aesthetic implicitly challenges positivist linear historiography. This is because positivist historiography demands the undemandable – for memory to provide a factual rendition of the past – but memory has as its *modus operandi* the very integration of the past into the present (Esmeir 2007). What positivist and linear historiographies ignore is the difficulty and ambiguity of writing history in the context of the experience and trauma of violence. When filmmakers like Çelik develop their aesthetics, they attempt to integrate the past into the present by representing the psychological effects of this trauma through form. In

this vein, Çelik's aesthetics in *Salvation Rain* are unconcerned with unearthing the objective facts of the past, and more concerned with form. The event itself exists only as a trace. Rather than individual testimony or traditional storytelling practices, this cultural understanding of memory investigates both what becomes entrenched as trauma as well as that which is left out from dominant narratives. It is an innovation driven by Çelik's search for a language that can politicize the past within the realities of censorship and symbolic power discussed in Chapter 3. Despite experimentation, Çelik is not willing to disengage with personal and collective memories of violence:

Anyone else's boredom or opposition to 'boring stories' can't prevent me from talking about it. I can't write a romantic story. They say: 'Why do you always write stories like this? Why is there always blood, a massacre, etc.? Why don't you think of a romantic story or something...' I can't be fed by such things because I'm still trying to purge my childhood memories and pain... I am actually starting to face my childhood as an other, a foreigner, in Turkey. Why am I interested in these issues? [For example,] together with the mourning process of the main character [in my latest film, *Salvation Rain*], I actually experienced my own mourning process; a mourning process whose origin, whose need and demand, was forgotten. I actually went through a period of mourning that was twenty years overdue. Because we cannot mourn in a social sense, both individually and socially, in Turkey.

Çelik's attempt to "purge my childhood memories and pain" was similarly repeated in other interviews. Crucial to understanding the function of memory is to see it as a social practice, in that memories "made public" are always done so in cultural contexts and that individual memories are dialectically produced with the social group (Abu-Lughod 2007, 7). Violence in *Salvation Rain* is represented through the protagonist's memories of a personal tragedy that is also a social and national one – war, displacement, accumulation. These inequalities of progress and development go unchallenged in the dominant narrative and leave the past "un-mournable." Jameson (1992b, 2019) has shown that political passivity towards these systemic inequalities is

well-established in the core. The overt violence and contradictoriness of the world-system is more effectively concealed and de-politicized there. In Chapter 2 we saw how these events were hidden or represented as necessities for progress by the Turkish state and in Chapter 3 we saw how cultural products, such as films, that attempted to challenge these representations were suppressed: through the state of exception (Mazzarella 2013), the “illegibility of the state” (Das 2006) and symbolic power.

As argued in Chapter 2, the world-system creates explosive contradictions between development and underdevelopment. Cultural products from the periphery are privileged in excavating and registering these processes because these contradictions manifest there in their most naked forms – such as the Turkish state’s CIA-backed shock therapies and accumulation campaigns in Kurdistan depicted in Çelik’s film. Unlike the core, these events still exist there in living memory. Through the film’s protagonist, Çelik depicts the fallout and experience of these contradictions. The protagonist’s spectral memories of the violence of these historical events are depicted through imagery rather than narrated and the trauma and mourning he undergoes is not evidently resolved. Below, I will argue that this expressionist aesthetic that suspends narrative and resolution is an example of “peripheral modernism” that challenges historiographies and myths of progress (WReC 2015).

As stated above, memory has as its *modus operandi* the integration of the past into the present. How is it possible to narrate the past objectively if the trauma of the past has not ended? In Chapter 1, I argued with Tomba (2013, 40) that breaking with bourgeois linear historiography is not simply an alternative re-telling of the past; it is breaking with its very form of representation. Abandoning a narrative arc and suspending

resolution is a way of breaking with this form, which is exhibited in Çelik's and other Kurdish films. The past haunts the protagonist's memories through the ghosts and signs of past violence and suffering, where images of the dead return through his psychological trauma and memory. This form of remembrance is a powerful political act because it disrupts the linear form of historiography. Linear historiography sees the past as that which has happened and fails to see it from the standpoint of memory. With memory, the past is not just past. The past is present. The fate of the dead and the disappeared clings tenaciously to the present to those who have borne witness to it. The persistent fear and irresolution experienced by those who have borne witness to such atrocities committed with impunity is the inability to mourn (Zur 1994, 466). Grief and mourning for the dead, as it is depicted in Çelik's film, produces a new way of seeing and feeling; it allows us to see through dominant myths of consensus, permanence and progress by creating a new sense of solidarity with "tormentable bodies" – the real price paid for this so-called progress (Adorno 1961; Spencer 2019).

Fiction from the periphery often deploys innovative forms of realism and modernism to politicize the meaning of the past. This type of fiction disputes late capitalism's modes of perception by articulating excluded voices and experiences from the periphery. This fiction counteracts neoliberal myths of shared universal purpose that conveniently ignore or suppress these voices and experiences. "Peripheral aesthetics" that draw on haunted memories and the spectral point to the alienation and disenchantment with modern myths of progress. This is an aesthetics frequently employed in literature and film from the global south and it reveals something important about "what it is that

so darkens our world”: the moral imperative of progress itself (Christie and Demircioglu 2019).

Representations of alienation in peripheral cultural products like Kurdish cinema are politically unique in how they critique myths of progress. Unlike representations of individual alienation in the core, such as the experiences of rootlessness and loss of identity without origin, the alienation of Çelik’s protagonist is reunited to its origins – capitalism’s restoration and victory brought about by neoliberalism’s redeployment of a founding civilizational violence (shock-therapies, scorched-earth policies, primitive accumulation) (Benjamin 1968). As Çelik stated, he has struggled to search for a language in the context of symbolic domination where overtly critical depictions of state violence are censored or marginalized. Though the Turkish state is not explicitly depicted in his film, the state nevertheless remains implicit through sporadic images of scorched-earth violence. Alienation in peripheral modernism is unique because it is reunited to this founding civilizational violence of the state, even if the state remains unnamed. This founding violence is the use of extra-legal violence to establish and implement law. Esmeir (2007, 243) explains how the atrocities of rape, murder and state violence constitute the manifest exceptions to law; she writes: “[b]ecause the exception is rooted in the general rule, the testimonies about it, especially the testimonies of those who experienced it, will also address it as part of the general rule and as indistinguishable from it.” The experiencing, witnessing, and recalling of atrocities as the exception rooted in the general rule are what constitute the composite truth-value of memory – a form of truth disapproved by positive law and historiography. The ineffability of experiencing such brutal exceptions first-hand is what leads filmmakers to represent it in innovative

ways, such as in Çelik's film as well as the films of others to be discussed in this chapter. By doing so, the historical narratives of victims/survivors break the limits and hubris of linear time. This provides the unique capacity of speaking a form of unsanctioned truth that elucidates that the state of exception is in fact the rule.

Capital's moribundity and discreditedness is confirmed by its ceaseless need to resort to extreme forms of violence following its inherent crises-ridden developmental process. For example, since the '70s, monopoly capital was only able to counter its inherent stagnation through the "super-exploitation" of the periphery, which required the establishment of brutal authoritarian governments organized by core states (Amin 2010). As discussed in Chapter 2, Turkey's policies in the Kurdish southeast – the context of Çelik's film – were part of this world-systemic process. Narratives and depictions of the disenchantment of violence in the periphery simultaneously reveal the paradox of this social order's moribundity – its ability to reconstitute itself through a resilient and destructive vigor (Spencer 2019). The ambiguous lack of resolution in *Salvation Rain* underlines this paradox because it indicates that despite the manifest brutality of the social order, any exit from its cycles of violence remains uncertain. This paradox, which for Walter Benjamin was absolutely central for historical materialism and socialist struggle, is most acutely experienced in the periphery today. Such structural contradictions are more effectively unveiled in the periphery, while their shared global experience creates new solidarities in a period of their exhaustion.

Representations of the past can easily take on reactionary or fascistic forms, but in the case of cultural workers, it may also offer an opportunity for critical art practice. Arslan states, "sometimes I wonder 'do I repeat myself, am I repetitive', but it's not.

Because if it's still there (inside me), it means I haven't explored it enough and I want to get to the bottom of this issue.”

Many filmmakers have described their experience as one of returning to the memory of the past to deal with and understand the present. As people age, especially those more predisposed to questioning social conventions, they may acquire a retrospective gaze on the past that challenges the one they have inherited through institutions like the education system, compulsory military service, mass media, and the national narrative. Critical art practice challenges the way the dominant narrative makes meaning of our past, present, and future. Struggling against the temptations of reaction, for a form of representation that would move beyond victimhood and towards politicizing the meaning of the past involves the remembrance of the vanquished past.

Arslan's *Ez Firiyam Tu Ma Li Cih (I Flew You Stayed 2012)* is an example of politicizing the meaning of the past – a biographical and semi-autobiographical documentary that shows Arslan's own journey in discovering the life of her father whom she had never met because he was killed serving in the Kurdish guerilla during the “dirty war.” Arslan deals with her own temporal crisis by cinematically documenting her past as well as the memories and stories of people who knew her father. Arslan's undogmatic, critical depiction of herself, her milieu and her father is a remembrance of the vanquished, which engages the complex meaning of the past, rather than being a static collage of victimhood that would reproduce the dominant narrative. Arslan attempts “to get to the bottom of the issue” by going beyond static victimhood and binary representations of war. Like Çelik, she suspends resolution and restores complexity to history, which challenges supposedly resolved, unambiguous narratives.

The examples in this section show that Kurdish filmmakers consistently return to childhood as a way of engaging the past. This critical retrospection creates the conditions of possibility to challenge ideologies and narratives of progress and shared universal purpose. I have argued that the periphery is a privileged site in challenging these narratives because the structural inequalities and violence that constitute the world-system are most acutely experienced there and exist there in living memory. Filmmakers deploy innovative aesthetics that blur the boundaries between the past and present, documentary and fiction, to provide a vivid reflection of a social order that produces explosive inequality.

Media, Heritage and Language

Several of the interviewed filmmakers reiterated how normalized childhood memories eventually ‘break the surface’ when one begins to think critically as an adult and engage these memories with film practice. One of the techniques of the state repeatedly discussed in the interviews was the issue of media and its representations.

Discussing the representation of Kurds in Turkish films, Karaman states:

Generally, all those movies take place in villages, and those movies depicted Kurds speaking a sloppy Turkish, [with] aghas (feudal lords), tribal and feudal customs, etc.... I was laughing when I watched these when I was a kid. Later, when I arrived at a different level of consciousness, I was able to notice [the harm of these images].

Karaman discusses a famous Turkish film, *Kibar Feyzo* (1978), directed by legendary filmmaker Atif Yılmaz and starring renowned actors Kemal Sunal and Müjde Ar.

Admitting he eagerly watched the film as a child, laughing at its vulgar depiction of Kurdish society, he stated that “when I watch it now, I realize that they actually destroyed the memory and language of the Kurds.” These films preceding the 1980 coup, known as

the Yeşilçam era in Turkish cinema, depicted a retrograde Kurdish society, which shrouded the history of the state's policies in the region. Furthermore, as Karaman's statement below shows, it is not only the linguicide and de-development discussed in Chapter 2 that destroy memory. It is also how the social inequality resulting from these processes is misrepresented and internalized as an *explanans* of inferiority:

Kurdish illiteracy was produced by the state. They literally produced us (Kurds)...In a way, it's a system about actually destroying the memory of the people, the society...we were actually laughing at ourselves...which destroyed our memory. You are affected by many events you experienced as a child, and then everything seems normal to you. But as you get older...after a certain level of intellectual development, all those normalized memories come back to you again differently. The state tries to cover up reality, but those memories somehow re-surface; one way or another, all those injustices break through the surface.

Similarly discussed in the previous section, the way social memory is managed through ideological apparatuses can lead many, like cultural workers, to critique the dominant way the past, present, and future has been narrated. Veysel Çelik had similarly stated the role of media and representation through a spatial dynamic in his experience of moving from the Kurdish southeast to metropolitan western Turkey:

I was the 'other' in the country I live in. I was a Kurd. I came from east to west. I knew all the features, all the cultures, all the details of [western Turkey] via television or occasional travel there... But after I came to live in western Turkey, I realized that the people I live in the same country with do not know us. They were approaching me only in the way they knew from the various TV series and films.

Çelik's statement shows that the mediation of the east-west divide in Turkey is through a heavily state-governed media sphere. The way the Kurds are represented in this sphere is conditioned by the prevailing discourse on the Kurds of a given time: uncivilized, underdeveloped, terrorism. Çelik states that when he moved to western Turkey, his friends there would assume he grew up the way the east was depicted on TV and in films:

My Turkish flat-mates in Istanbul thought that the people 'on that side' always lived in...big tribal houses with feudal lords and patriarchy, etc. Unbelievable. It was just banal,

very monotonous and routinized information. I think my struggle of story-telling started after I encountered this... because they made me realize that I was an 'other' and I had to describe myself outside the stereotypes. I had to prove, and I say this using inverted commas, that I was not 'a terrorist Kurd'. I think I started with this impulse.

In the arena of the nation-state, the destruction and production of memory leads to new forms of subjectivization. As discussed in Chapter 2, the neoliberal transformation of Turkey after the 1980 coup was also the transformation of the representation of the “Kurdish Question” from a de-historicized underdevelopment issue (as in *Kibar Feyzo* above; in the age of Cold War state-monopoly capitalism) to an issue of “terrorism” during and after the ‘80s (in many contemporary Turkish films and TV series; in the age of neoliberalism and multinational capitalism). Turkey’s military-led state-development model from 1960 to 1980 meant that the predominant discourse of the Kurdish Question, including in films, was underdevelopment and backwardness, whereas the rapid post-1980 neoliberal transformation led these representations to shift towards “terrorism” and “security.” Transitions such as these are the mechanism of how reality is produced on a national and increasingly on a global scale and how they are conditioned by uneven development.

Karabey, an ethnic Kurd who was raised in one of the many working-class neighborhoods (*gecekondu*) in the Istanbul urban periphery, reiterates Karaman and Çelik’s experiences. He discusses the following story of childhood shared by thousands like him during the massive waves of Kurdish urban migration that resulted from the mechanized agricultural development of the countryside in the second half of the 20th century:

Growing up in Istanbul, our parents decided not to teach us Kurdish because they had a big struggle with it during their education in Malatya (a city on the margin of southeast Turkey that has an ethnically mixed population) – humiliation and other things, the racist history.

When I was growing up in Istanbul I was speaking Turkish and I never felt I belonged to another culture or race. At age 12, I then heard my father, uncles and grandmother speaking in a different language (Kurdish). I thought “what is this”? They never gave us an answer, most of the time the answer was “you will understand and don’t ask more questions”. But I think I was aware of what was going on when I was 15 and when you reject some serious things in your teenage years – it is a good way to learn because you question everything again.

We see with these examples how media, education, and intra-national migration induced by economic inequality attempt to institute a form of amnesia and how a critical reflection may emerge with time. Reiterating Karaman and Çelik, Öztürk states:

Concerning all histories and peoples, what strikes me is exactly what is forgotten as opposed to what is remembered in history. I want to take a look at what we’ve left out. For example, there are many key events in Turkey... massacres, lynchings, pogroms. [I choose to remember] these painful things. But there are also those things that I unconsciously forget. Why? Can I follow that feeling?...In my feature-fiction, *Toz Bezi*, I didn’t explicitly deal with social memory in the film. But the things I had previously chosen to erase and forget in my own memory somehow entered the film, because writing is like facing yourself. The journey towards the suppressed is through writing, towards that which we have chosen to forget.

How do we forget and why? Or, rather, what is even perceivable in contexts of inequality and violence? Öztürk’s *Toz Bezi* (*Dust Cloth* 2015) is a film that depicts the complexities of gender, ethnicity, and class in the contradictions of 21st century Turkey. Öztürk stated that she dedicated the film to her aunt, who worked in precarious conditions as a house cleaner during the “dirty” history of displacement and urban migration in the late 20th century. I understood from my conversation with Öztürk that her aim, perhaps even subconsciously, was to move away from the “key events” – the massacres and pogroms – and use cinema and the camera to reorient the spectator’s perception towards something so fundamentally connected to the violence of these key events, yet so easily overlooked due to their everydayness: precarious urban labor that results from mass displacement and how it is immersed in the social inequalities of 21st

century Turkey defined by gender (patriarchy) and ethnicity (shame of identifying as a Kurd in metropolitan Istanbul). The politics of memory deals with what is perceivable. Öztürk's claim on the division of what is remembered versus what is forgotten in history has a direct correlation to what is perceptible in the present, where social inequalities are de-historicized, misrepresented and thus forgotten. As discussed earlier, film and literature from the periphery is privileged in challenging the violence, contradictoriness and mythology of the neoliberal consensus. *Toz Bezi* depicts the everyday inequalities involved in AKP's neoliberal Turkey.

Öztürk's depiction of displacement and precarious labor in the 21st century metropolis of Istanbul implicitly broaches the quickening and increasingly problematic relationship between global political economy and exploited labor migration. Saskia Sassen's work (1988; 1991) on the emerging global economic matrix is helpful in understanding how transnational migration is structured by economic forces, such as foreign direct investment and the forceful integration of the former Third World into a new global economy. Sassen's model complexifies the core-periphery dichotomy by showing that this opposition is less a matter of location and more a matter of power. However, Sassen's model only makes sense in relation to Öztürk's film if we consider Istanbul as a global city, rather than as the central metropolis of the Turkish nation-state. Öztürk's film never suggests the former and points wholly to the latter. Aesthetically and culturally, nothing of the global nor the transnational is represented in her film, while the economic, ethnic and gender contradictions suggest a thoroughly national space. Thus, we may also consider Neil Smith's (2010) analysis of uneven development that retains the national along with the global and urban scales when considering capitalist

development and labor migration. As argued in Chapter 2, Turkey's economic policies actively underdeveloped the southeast Kurdish region, leading to various waves of migration to cities. Sassen's analysis (1998: xxi), however, reveals something relevant to Öztürk's film – that disadvantaged workers in emerging global cities are disproportionately women and ethnic minorities, whose political sense of self and identities are not necessarily embedded in the national community. In this respect, Öztürk's subtle depiction of these conflicts of belonging and identity embodied by two disadvantaged, informally-working Kurdish women corroborates with Sassen's study.

Aether (2019), Rûken Tekeş's "documentary" film about the recent flooding of the ancient emblematic city of Hasankeyf (part of the GAP and Ilisu Dam project), is also a film that deals with the politics of time, history, and memory. The film is unique because it uses a non-narrative form. Without a single word uttered for its entire 82' runtime and with the haunting use of imagery rather than reportage, *Aether* challenges the very category of genre. Tekeş states:

Resistance and resilience against oblivion – I'm interested in those things that are towards their end. I'm trying to capture and digitize them to remind myself and the community – listen, this is ending, this is really almost extinct. That's my late analysis of my own films.

Tekeş explained that when she received the news that Hasankeyf, her hometown, was officially going to be flooded in 2019 (the flooding was the subject of a fierce debate for years), she prioritized the task of organizing a crew to film the final moments of the city. Somewhat miraculously, this is exactly what she accomplished. The flooding of Hasankeyf is the result of the infamous Ilisu Dam project, part of the larger mega-project GAP discussed in Chapter 2 and 3. These projects have been deliberately directed by Turkey's heads of state at demographically engineering the Kurds through displacement

(see p. 44). The development projects have been represented by the state as necessary and beneficial for the modernization of the underdeveloped southeast, which needs to “catch up” to the developed west in order to end Kurdish “sectarianism.” As discussed in Chapter 2, the ironic truth was that the heavy-handed implementation of these undemocratic projects is what created the conditions for Kurdish insurgency.

A world heritage site needs to meet only 1 out of UNESCO’s 10 criteria for inclusion, which would protect it from destruction. Hasankeyf met 9 out of 10 of the criteria and Turkey never submitted it for inclusion. While it is completely unthinkable for the Acropolis of Athens to be bulldozed to make way for a solar farm, in the context of Turkey’s socio-economic unevenness, such absurdities of inequality are very much sensible. This is because the continuing structural violence that has persisted from the Kemalist period until today in the Kurdish southeast has been carried out through deliberate de-development, on one hand, and technocratic development on the other (Bilgen 2017). With little support from international institutions and Turkey’s anti-democratic domestic policy, the flooding of Hasankeyf, for most Kurds, was quite literally unthinkable, arousing a sense of radical horror.

It is this unthinkability, or unspeakability, that is so well captured in Tekeş’s film. In two potent scenes, which are the only short moments of testimony or speech in an otherwise 82’ “speechless” film, the two “speakers” filmed in these scenes were deaf and therefore suffered from speech-impairment or muteness. When I asked Tekeş why she included these two short scenes, which seemed to interrupt the imagistic flow of the rest of the film, she refused to give an answer from an interpretive perspective, as she left that up to the spectator. She was willing to provide a “practical” answer. She explained that

when she arrived with her crew at the site, she had no organized plan for directing except for two guiding principles – (1) to use imagery and cinematography to capture the “soul” (aether) of her homeland, Hasankeyf, and salvage it digitally before it is destroyed and (2) she wanted to avoid any and all human-narration in the film as this would obfuscate the first goal. Tekeş admittedly explained that because she was utterly disappointed by the methods of resistance to the flooding of Hasankeyf by civil and political society (full of empty oratory, as it were), she refused to assent to any oratory in capturing Hasankeyf. The inclusion of the two deaf interlocutors was unplanned, and she explained that she decided to include them on site. As she said, her whole idea of capturing Hasankeyf without testimony was based on the idea that only that which is outside the frailties of language is universal; but when she encountered these two interlocutors in Hasankeyf and experienced complete communication with them about Hasankeyf’s impending inundation without the need for conventional speech, she felt that her entire idea of universality was challenged. It was at that point she felt obliged to include these two scenes.

The imagery in the film is suggestive of Henri Lefebvre’s (1995, 307) analysis of modernity. This analysis uncovers the unevenness, the historically determinate ‘coexistence’ in any given place and time “of realities from radically different moments in history – handicrafts alongside the great cartels, peasant fields with the Krupp factories or the Ford plant in the distance” – all connected through a historical logic of combination whose initial appearance deceptively displays contingency and asystematicism. The film’s suggestive juxtapositions by montage: a catastrophic development project with scenes of wild landscapes and fauna; the slow intimate bonds between domestic nature and agrarian culture juxtaposed with the modern franticness of

automobiles, traffic, and industry; the acoustics of birdsong followed by the grinding din of mega-machines. All these combined contradictions perhaps reflect the film's most challenging one about the horror of the city's flooding: on one hand, the incommunicability of the event – its insensibility, unthinkability reflected in the film's non-narrative form; and, on the other hand, its simultaneous communicability – the recording and digitalized archiving of its last moments through the materiality of film itself; the possibility of “testimony” only through the universal language of mutes, who could never participate in the decadent, repetitive chatter of formal politics. I argue that Hasankeyf in *Aether* is depicted through an aesthetic that is unique to the periphery of the world-system. Through the abovementioned juxtapositions, *Aether* uncovers the combined unevenness of development – when the massive 21st century machinery of technocratic development inundates a world heritage site and destroys lifeworlds that move to the agrarian rhythms of nature.

Aether is not well suited to be understood by any prevailing aesthetic categories, but this is especially the case for the conventional categories of literary or film theory – realism, modernism, postmodernism (WReC 2015, 68). Turkey's Kurdistan has experienced a complex uneven process of “the development of under-development” (Frank 1989), with GAP, the İlisu Dam and especially Hasankeyf's inundation as arguably this entire history's most crystallized emblem. This lends itself to be represented by an aesthetic that attempts to re-combine the fragments and splinters created by this process through film. This is a unique aesthetic form in the periphery – both realist and modernist and perhaps neither. Experiences of top-down development and the unevenness of rapid modernization – these are directly incorporated in *Aether*'s aesthetic.

As discussed earlier, such peripheral aesthetics are effective at revealing the paradox of our social order – its lateness and discreditedness, on one hand, and its destructive vigor in reconstituting itself, on the other.

Migration and Exile

Continuing about the process of mourning and the contradiction of having to choose between being either a “political” Kurdish filmmaker or a cosmopolitan auteur, Çelik states:

I am one of the lucky ones able to heal myself with art... [but] my motivation for writing is always progressively increasing in a social sense. When I'm making movies, I don't make stories about the changing feelings of the *individual* and their concerns in the modern world. I am trying to paint a picture through *societies*. That's why I said we need to get rid of this idea of ‘the political Kurdish story’. I am currently a director working on memory, and I take reference from the place I know best: my own geography, language, society. This does not make me a Kurdish political filmmaker. It should make me a director who works on memory. The alienation and marginalization [from the conventions of filmmaking] actually starts here.

One of the most important conventions Kurdish filmmakers have to contend with is the institution of national cinemas. Çelik continues by explaining that the centrality of memory in his filmmaking practice came full circle when he attained asylum and migrated to Germany: “you start to look at the land in which you were born and grew up with a different eye as you get farther away from it.”

The paradox of exile and emigration is that though the expediency of gaining some level of freedom from state repression may be realized, the social context of cultural production is itself contorted. As Çelik states when he settled in Germany: “I felt like I was among people with whom I did not share a common memory... after a while, my conversations were very superficial because, for me, collective memory is always

with people I have shared a social experience with.” Like the difficult circumstance of an émigré poet or even a foreign comedian attempting to write verse in the newly adopted language, it is not so much linguistic incapability that hinders the poet or orator, but the lack of shared tropes embedded in the social memory of the host society.

Exiled filmmakers are involved in an art practice that attempts to find a connection between the local and an increasingly important global scale that they experience first-hand. Both intra-national and international patterns are thoroughly effects of global forces. World-systemic processes affect every, not only the macro, scale (Wilson and Dissanayake 1996). The issue is particularly important when the audience changes from one with an already established field of collective memory (i.e. a nation-state with shared public tropes, images and symbols) to one with a less-established or even absent one.

Filmmakers like Çelik and Arslan attempt to create films that engage with history and memory from exile, but their new contexts present problems of communication. The goal of this practice is not to merely decode and convert information into a new language or context. Art is art exactly because it is more than the communication of information (White 1973). Arslan, an émigré based in London, made an important point about how the images of her films changed when she migrated and received funding from European film institutions to write her next film:

The target is global now. This is affecting story-telling, because when you tell a story to your own people, you expect they know certain things and you’re trying to say something new; but when you have this global audience, the filmmaking is changing because you expect them to know nothing or almost zero [about your society]. There is one big thing that is different from these two groups (intra-national and international): one of them has memory – some things happened that you know and they know, and you try to interpret these memories and say something new; this is all evolving and an exploration of these

feelings in film. When you speak to a bigger audience that is a more “emotionless” group of people like the global audience, you don’t have a memory. So you *create memory* first, then you build your new statement. You build a story around this memory or around this conscience. You build this memory with this new type of audience.

Arslan’s task is to create a “memory landscape” for a new audience or scale that registers the inequality involved in processes of globalization that she experiences first-hand. Arslan’s most recent short-fiction *Arin*, which narrates the contradictions of migration, asylum and the unthinkability of remembering a disappeared son/brother from the geographic circumstance of exile, is a way of building a new memory landscape. The experience of borders, state violence, migrations and global socio-economic inequalities creates the conditions for innovative film aesthetics that registers these dimensions of the social order. Like Arslan, the Palestinian filmmaker Elia Suleiman stated in an interview (Halabi 2021) about his latest film *It Must Be Heaven* (2019):

Now your alienation is felt almost skin-wise. You’re living in your own country, but actually, you have been exiled. I think some of it, of course without rhetorical interpretation, has to do with globalization and with it, global violence. This film asks: how Palestinianized has the world become? This is really what this film is about. It’s about the Palestinization of the world. This character leaves all the time thinking he might identify a little bit with the new place to which he travels, but he finds his only identification to be with the globalized Palestine: violence everywhere, checkpoints, security apparatuses, etc.

Suleiman’s comments help us see that “local” experiences are radically global and may “lead to the universalization of the particular and the localization of the universal”

(Harootunian 2015, 237). The development of aesthetic techniques by filmmakers from the periphery can help create an image of reality that reveals, among other things, the “Palestinianization of the world”, like in Arslan’s *Arin*. These filmmakers experience an inherent aspect of the world-system (displacement, exile, asylum) and register it in their films for a global audience.

Based on this notion, I suggest that exilic art practice in the 21st century creates the conditions for the development of narrativity, from knowing to telling, in a global age chafed and scraped with wars, borders, and migration that result from U&CD (White 1980). A filmmaker's increasing contact with and experience of the very global forces that condition the socio-political circumstances of their filmmaking can nurture their ability to understand, narrate and fictionalize global inequalities. This enriched ability tends to be uniquely available to the periphery of the world-system.

This understanding of U&CD also provides a way to integrate and go beyond transnational analyses of culture that attempt to answer questions of how global forces affect the development of aesthetics. Koçer (2013, 727) suggests that the form and aesthetics of contemporary Kurdish cinema tends to express a pendulum between the modern and traditional, fact and fiction, which is a result of its transnationalization. This process is better explained through the framework of U&CD. These pendulums that we see in Kurdish films are actually what defines the development of aesthetic modernism, because modernism emerged as a result of the sudden onrush of capitalist modernity, particularly industrialization and urbanization, in pre-capitalist societies (Davidson 2019). This violent, perplexing onrush led to the aesthetic innovations that define modernism, because the rapid transformations of the social order existed there within living memory, creating a collision between the traditional and modern. Modernism consisted of formal innovations as ways to represent this experience in culture. These rapid transformations continue to be an everyday reality in much of the global periphery, such as Kurdistan. The examples in this chapter show that Koçer's pendulums in Kurdish cinema correspond to this political-economic process of the development of aesthetic modernism.

U&CD helps frame this dynamic in two additional ways that integrates transnational flows: (1) that this abovementioned process that defines the emergence of modernism will continue so long as capitalist development has not ceased and (2) this process itself takes on unique characteristics (especially core-periphery and local-global dynamics) depending on the historical stage of capitalism. These two points are politically significant for contemporary cultural production in the periphery, like Kurdish cinema. Aesthetic tendencies in the periphery (certain forms of realism and modernism) are not “outdated”, as they are considered to be in relation to the “more advanced” core. As argued, aesthetics from the periphery are effective in registering systemic processes. This is because modernity in the 21st century has been undergoing an explosively unequal global integration as a result of the shift from Cold War policy to neoliberal globalization and multinational capitalism (Mandel 1999). As mentioned earlier, Cold War monopoly capital in its transition to post-Cold War multinational capital was only able to overcome its inherent stagnation through the “super-exploitation” of the periphery (Amin 2010). Many of the narratives, images, and themes of Kurdish films, like those discussed in this chapter, are premised on or directly represent this political-economic process. Recent decades of free-trade utopianism have restructured inequality through the violent integration of non-capitalist regions of the former Third World, resulting in the collapse of distance between and the compression of the “advanced and backward”, the “inside and outside” of capitalism (Harvey 1990). Peripheral aesthetics – like those in Çelik’s *Salvation Rain*, Tekeş’s *Aether* or Arslan’s *Arin* – register the disorienting experience (structural adjustment programs, shock therapies, mega-development projects, displacement, etc.) induced by this process.

Education and Militarization

The Turkish state's educational and military institutions are a recurring critical theme in Kurdish films: amongst those interviewed, Tekes's *Heverk* and Arslan's *Asya*, as well as several examples beyond the interviews such as Kazim Öz's *Bahoz*, Ferit Karahan's *Okul Tıraşı* (2021) or Eşkıya and Doğan's *İki Dil Bir Bavul* (2009). Critical narratives of education have an allegorical connection to an oppositional-history that attempts to counteract the machinations of the "official" historical narrative of a nation-state. This official narrative interpellates subjects in a variety of sites, including the household, education, compulsory military service, the media and even architecture/space (i.e., grand public displays of Turkish nationalism in Kurdish regions). As Karabey stated:

During childhood, in [compulsory] education they teach "official" history to us. Not just teach, but they push you to believe what they say. There's no questioning the history of the nation, history of Turkey, the state... my interest is with history now, more than ever because...I can see that it is easy to write a new history by asking the right simple questions... I even question our opposition history too. They (Kurds) can hide the weak part [of our history] and only show the powerful part of our story.

Karabey's experience of Turkey's distorted national narrative bred and indoctrinated in the educational state apparatus has led him not only to critique it, but to question the Kurdish narratives as well. Therefore, it is childhood and the education system that become avenues for a generalized critique of nation, because, along with mass media and compulsory military service, it is a central apparatus in the construction of the national imaginary.

Before analyzing Kurdish films based on this premise, I want to elaborate the significance and specificity of compulsory education and military service in Turkey. In

Chapter 2, we discussed the history of Turkish nationalism, its effects on the Kurds and the the prevailing ideologies of the Kurdish Question (civilizing, developing, anti-terrorism). Now, we may understand Turkey's repressive and ideological apparatuses (education, military) that reproduce the state within social agents. A materialist anthropology reveals the specificity of this process in non-industrial modernizing states in the early 20th century, like Turkey, that underwent different paths to industrialization.

Karatani states (1980, 132):

[R]evolutionary governments in nations that lack factories or what Marx called an industrial proletariat tend to establish school systems and military draft systems before anything else (since building factories is impossible), thus reorganizing the state as a de facto factory through its schools and its armies. It does not matter what the specific ideology of these states is. The modern nation state itself is an educational apparatus that produces 'the human being.'

While the content of education has been the object of countless pedagogical discussions, it is the education system itself that seems to elude our attention. The simultaneous institutionalization of the military and compulsory education systems in late developing states like Turkey were not a modular modernization process that "replicated" a Euro-American model. This would ignore the unevenness of development. Referring to late developing states' particular form of modernization, Karatani states: "Human beings' were produced by both the school system and the military." These two institutions were intertwined in modernizing Turkey, which, as discussed in Chapter 2, were central to the Kurdish Question.

As analyzed in Chapter 2, the early Republican Turkish state took on a fascistic form because fascism is a response to a specific political crisis in the imperialist stage of capitalism in which political class-representation breaks down and the transition to

monopoly capitalism is fulfilled under the ideological state apparatuses controlled by the fascist party (in this case, Kemalism) (Poulantzas 1975). “These totalitarian tendencies of Kemalism were accompanied by promoting a palingenetic myth of national history” (Cağaptay 2004, 87-8). As a manifestation of uneven development, this was a response to the financial asphyxiation caused by British and French imperialism. In the case of Turkey and its mission to assimilate the Kurds, this was a German/Japanese style “state as a de facto factory” model where ethno-linguistic homogeneity and military conscription predominated as part of its late development. The “production of the human” in a given nation-state has specific political-economic roots.

Modernization in Turkey turned the whole state “into a de facto factory” through a new compulsory education system (homogeneously conducted in a new Turkish language/script) and a Prussian style conscript military. In contemporary Turkey, the “memory” of this history has mostly dissolved into social amnesia, but arguably the most significant group who continue to experience the contradictions of this process today, and therefore retains it in their social memory apparatus, are the Kurds. Arslan states, “as a Kurdish filmmaker, first of all, I have to tell that there is a written history of us that is not including us – a written history of us without us... So as filmmakers, we have a big job to re-write this history.” In processes of capitalist modernization, such as in Kemal’s bourgeois revolution, institutions like the national narrative represent “backward” Kurdish tribal structures as an *explanans* for “uncivility”, “underdevelopment” or “fanatic terrorism.” This representation completely rides roughshod over history’s complexity by avoiding the crucial problem that this *explanans* itself needs explaining

(Yadirgi 2017). It is the task of cultural workers to re-write history “against the grain.” I will now analyze some Kurdish films on this basis.

Like Karabey’s statement above, Tekeş has similarly not been wary of critically representing Kurdish nationalism in the framework of childhood and education. Based on a true story, Tekeş’s short-fiction, *Heverk (The Circle 2016)*, has drawn criticism from Kurds for her unheroic and self-critical depiction of discrimination and violence within Kurdish society. She said that some Kurdish film festivals even refused to screen her film. *Heverk* begins with a typical feature of the Turkish state “civilizing” its eastern provinces – it depicts a day at elementary school in Kurdistan, in which a Turkish teacher sent from the west is shown chauvinistically teaching the Turkish language and alphabet to schoolchildren. The letter of the morning is “O”, and words beginning with the letter are taught by rote and repetition. The scene illustrates the “soft” power of the state through the ideological apparatus of education.

However, the drama of the film takes place after this scene, amongst the children during break-time where the melting pot of languages, religions, and ethnicities – Turkish, Kurdish, Arabic – are released from the imposed homogeneity of the classroom. One of the girls, Zelal, is a Yezidi – a minority religious group within Kurdish society who are an object of discrimination by the majority Sunni Shafi Kurds. In the playground, she is placed and trapped in a “devil’s circle” (a reference to the Yezedi religion) by Bekir and a group of children and is ridiculed to the point of psychological breakdown. Zeki, a timid admirer of Zelal, looks on passively and concedingly in dismay from a distance. Later in the classroom, in the last moments of the film, the teacher calls

on the somewhat aloof Zeki and asks him to say a Turkish word that begins with letter “P”, the next letter in the alphabet. Zeki answers: “*poşman*” (regret).

The film depicts a complex circle of power that Tekeş refuses to simply see as a Manichean one. Let’s remember Tekeş’s late analysis of her own films mentioned earlier, that her goal is to “remind myself and the community – listen, this is ending, this is really almost extinct.” The Yezidis represent, like Hasankeyf itself, an ancient ethno-religious group far older than the rigid governance of State (Sunni) Islam that arrived in the Middle Ages or the subsequent dominant nations of the various modern states in the Middle East. In other words, the way Tekeş represents the discrimination of Yezidis in the film addresses more than this specific community; it disrupts the more-or-less agreed-upon historical narrative of the clash of dominant nations and states in the region, Kurds included, and presents this “othered” group on the edge of extinction. The modern Kurdish national imaginary is not exempt from its own practices of oppression and discrimination. Tekeş attempts to reorient “Kurdishness” away from the national imaginary and more towards social inequality. Her narrative restores complexity to history and calls on the audience to question “the modern nation state as an educational apparatus that produces the human being” (Karatani 1980, 132).

Tekeş stated that the film is based on a story told by her father just before his death, who was, according to Tekeş, a revolutionary activist during the ’68 uprisings. When she asked her father, shortly before his death, what his biggest regret in life is, he said it was the event in his childhood that was later depicted in *Heverk* (he was indeed Zeki) and his timid inaction in the face of clear injustice. He told his daughter that when he was radicalized as a youth in the ‘60s, it was the lingering, haunting image of Zelal

that provided him with a kind of poignant stimulation. *Heverk* dramatizes the complexities of ideological power embodied in education and the school system. The film subtly disrupts the dominator-dominated binary when the “colonial” Turkish teacher appears justifiably horrified by the treatment of Zelal, and when the Sunni Kurdish boys themselves are divided on the issue.

Heverk depicts modern childhood in its specificity vis-à-vis uneven development and the “production of the human.” Similarly, in Ali Kemal Çinar’s *Di Navberê De (In Between 2018)*, state-sanctioned linguicide is represented with a modernist aesthetic. Osman (Ali’s brother) understands Kurdish but cannot speak it, and speaks Turkish but cannot understand it. Osman thus embodies, in an individual, the shatter zones created in North Kurdistan over the decades through the Turkish state’s politics of assimilation, modernization and development. This illiteracy is not a premodern remnant, it is a product of modernization and uneven development.

Kazım Öz has made successful fiction and documentary films, which have likely provoked the most state suppression and censorship in Kurdish cinema, as Koçer (2013) has shown. His films are banned in Turkey and he has been under an ongoing prosecution by the state. Öz’s feature-fiction films depict a certain level of complexity regarding Kurdish subjectivity. His fiction films re-write the history of education and militarization, and later I will argue that his documentaries are serious vignettes on the inequalities of capitalist development.

His feature-fiction *Fotoğraf* (1999) is a narrative extension to the Greek auteur Angelopoulos’s masterpiece *The Suspended Step of the Stork (To Metéωρο Βήμα Του Πελαργού 1991)*, which is the first in his “Trilogy of Borders.” Angelopoulos’s film

depicts the story of a journalist who arrives to report on a refugee border town, known as “the waiting room”, full of Turkish, Kurdish and Albanian political refugees. The film depicts the psychological and social experience of political corruption and its human cost in wars and borders represented by the “waiting room.” The refugees in Angelopoulos’s film were, in addition to the Balkan wars, part of the infamous wave during the dirty war in Turkey. A wave of migrants fled Turkish borders following the “Pinochet-style” 1980 Evren coup that disappeared and exiled thousands. In Angelopoulos’s film, the refugees were represented with great honesty in relation to the overall theme of the border in a twofold way – the border as adjacency, a neighboring point of contact, an intimacy through a shared historical experience, but at the same time, the border as a site of separation, where the “other side” is inexorably alien and thus capable of being made disposable. This duality was expressed in Angelopoulos’s cinematography (such as his use of symbolism and his famous long-shot), which allowed the refugees to be both backgrounded but not marginalized, leaving the viewer with a sense of curiosity to the unknown history of these people in the “waiting room.”

Öz’s *Fotoğraf* employs Angelopoulos’s famous long-shot and takes his setting as a point of departure by exploring this neighboring history within Turkey and Kurdistan. Two young Kurdish men living in Istanbul, Faruk and Ali, meet on a long bus ride going to Kurdistan. Faruk is on his way to conscription into the Turkish military and Ali, as a denunciation to forced conscription, decides to join the PKK guerilla. During their somewhat cordial interchange during the journey, they only reveal to each other that they are visiting family. Near the end of the film, a military altercation occurs in the mountains and Faruk emerges in Turkish military uniform. He notices that one of the

gunned-down guerilla is Ali. Öz expands on the geopolitical aesthetic of Angelopoulos and adds a dimension of complexity to the latter's critique of borders. He illustrates Turkey's militarization and the contradictions experienced by young Kurds – the binary of assimilation and militancy – which are the groundwork of the modern border.

Discussing his next film project, Karabey stated that his aesthetic engagement with history and memory is not exclusively focused on the Kurds. Suggesting a broader attempt to excavate the meaning of the past, he stated that his new project would focus on the '68 generation and the suppressive tactics of militarization used around the world at the time. He claimed his aesthetic is absolutely committed to “reality”, but that to truly adopt this approach means that one has to be willing to “let reality constantly surprise you.” He referred to these moments of disclosure in the encounter with reality as a “more than real.” Karabey explained that it is this process that he tries to integrate into his films, making his politically-committed realism a continuous process of integrating the “more than real.” Karabey does so through the ethnographic film techniques of *cinéma vérité*, giving his films a unique aesthetic blend of documentary and fiction.

Karabey's first feature-fiction, *Gitmek: My Marlon and Brando* (2008), came after more than ten years of directing non-fiction documentaries, giving the film a *vérité*-style that blurs the boundaries between documentary and fiction. Depicting a tragic-comic love story, the two lead actors play themselves in the film, and the narrative foregrounds the absurdities of 21st century US hegemony in the Middle East – the borders, the checkpoints, the militarization, the Iraq War, the predominance of American English. Two actors, the Turkish Ayça and the Iraqi-Kurdish Hama Ali, who can only communicate in somewhat broken English, fall in love on set but are then separated by

the breakout of the Iraq War. Ayça remains in Istanbul, living a modern lifestyle and rehearsing for an agit-prop play that denounces the Bush regime. Karabey juxtaposes reality with narrative fiction by casting actors who play themselves in the film and by using an ample amount of real footage and archival material in the film (actual checkpoints, real video cassettes of Hama Ali's superhero TV series from Iraq). While Hama Ali is unable to leave northern Iraq due to the war, Ayça's pensive indecision to travel to Iraq finally ends in her resolve to go, leading her through a rather alien and militarized eastern Turkey (Kurdistan) and eventually a clerical Iran full of cultural contradictions (the former a product of US hegemony and the latter a challenge to it). We get to see these unfamiliar places from the unique perspective of a modernized, "westernized" woman coming from a Muslim country (Ayça).

This perspective allows Karabey to challenge and shake up the "utilization of culture, religion and custom" (Harootunian 2015, 85) in both pro-US Turkey and anti-US Iran. For example, in a scene with Ayça riding to a border in a taxi in Kurdistan, Karabey, as he explained in our interview, recodes the image of Ibrahim Tatlıses to satirize the way the Turkish state utilizes culture and custom to represent the Kurd in Turkey. Tatlıses is a famous musician in Turkey of Kurdish descent who was groomed and promoted by the Turkish state to embody the image of the "good Kurd" through mass culture. Tatlıses emerged in the context of militarization and political hegemony from the '70s to the '90s. There is an irony in the scene. Both (Turkish) Ayça and the (Kurdish) taxi driver dislike Tatlıses, but, hiding their judgments from the other, both uncomfortably approve listening to him during the long ride because the one thinks the other likes him. This scene illustrates state tactics of cultural hegemony and satirically

recodes them. With the background of the Iraq War, one of the most representative examples of US imperialism, Karabey's story follows the subtleties of Ayça's experience of these same forces in Turkey and Iran. Karabey's recoding of culture, custom and religion exposes these contradictions produced by U&CD – modern technologies of war and militarization, the borders and checkpoints, alongside and intersecting with clerical power, superstition and vast socio-economic and geographical inequality.

In *Were Dengê Min (Come to My Voice 2014)*, Karabey's vérité style is not applied to cinematography. Rather, Karabey uses local non-professional actors who had lived through the history being recounted in the film. The film employs real Kurdish fables and the poetry of *dengbej* (Kurdish bardic poetry) to narrate an important micro-history during the dirty war of the '80s and '90s. As discussed in Chapter 2, the dirty war consisted of an assemblage of state-coordinated counter-terrorist groups – the military, JITEM gendarmerie, thuggish “village guards”, police, paramilitary groups, and the CIA. This coordinated assemblage extorted submission and obedience from everyday Kurds, forcing them to prove their loyalty by providing volunteers for the anti-PKK village guards. Those that did not yield were deemed PKK-supporters and were treated as such. One of the common ways the state governed these subjects was to imprison adult males without due process and force their families to hand over “hidden weapons” (presumably provided by the PKK) if they wanted them to be released. It is this micro-history of the war, with all its convoluted betrayals and conspiracies, that Karabey dramatizes in *Were Dengê Min*.

Rather than the typical perspective of a soldier or renegade, Karabey tells this story from the perspective of a young girl Jiyan and her grandmother Berfe. Jiyan's father

(Berfe's son) had been imprisoned by the police and would remain there until his family handed over a gun. The gun, of course, does not exist. As Karabey stated in our interview, he was captivated by the idea of how the entire aura and riddle of something as seemingly blatant as a gun can have a profoundly different meaning in the hands of a girl and in the absurd context of the dirty war in North Kurdistan. How ironic it is, he stated, that in such contexts, when one wants to find a gun to kill – no matter what side of the war one is on – it is almost effortless; but when you need a gun for the opposite reason – to save a life, to prevent death – it is nearly impossible to acquire. Karabey re-emplots this real history onto the figure of childhood immersed in the world of fable (the film narrative is threaded by a Kurdish fable recounted by Berfe to Jiyan), womens' experience during the war, and the continuity of *dengbej* as an institution of education in opposition to state education. This re-emplotment is a way to challenge the normalized militarization of society and to fight out how culture, religion and custom are utilized.

As discussed earlier, institutions of development and modernization must be studied in their specificities. “Stages” of development occur unevenly, at different temporal scales in different regions of the world as well as within different cultural conditions. The education and military apparatuses in Turkey are particularly severe and rigid institutions that wield effective social power. They are consistently represented in Kurdish films as central themes. Earlier, I argued that these two institutions were fundamental in Turkey's modernization as a late developing state. The concomitant institutionalization of compulsory education and military service was how Turkey initiated its accumulation process and transformed “the state into a de facto factory” (Karatani 1980, 132). These unique processes continue to express themselves in

particular contexts of everyday life, collective experience and, as discussed by the filmmaker Veysel Çelik, in the corresponding phenomenon of generational memory.

Why is this important for historical memory? Harootunian (2015, 179) writes:

In England, Marx observed the long wait, virtually three hundred years, until manufacturing and heavy industrialization were in a position to begin hiring workers in large numbers. By that time, he added, the long, painful experience of primitive accumulation had been virtually forgotten. For [late developing states], the shortness was a constant reminder of its permanent cruelty.

While many countries in the core have forgotten the “long, painful experience of primitive accumulation”, the majority of the planet, particularly the periphery, has not.

The “various encounters between local and a worldly capitalism produced the possibility of what Marx called ‘world history’ linked to the everyday... transmuting a purely ‘local being’ into a ‘universal being’ that would lead to the universalization of the particular and the localization of the universal” (2015, 237). I argue that the “everyday” phenomena depicted in many Kurdish films, like those discussed in this chapter, are a way to depict how world history is linked to the everyday. They are not redundant or bleak narratives on the permanence of violence. Though many Kurdish films do represent violence, they more fundamentally reveal the key institutions that have structured modern world history.

Another example of this “world history linked to the everyday” can be found in the documentary films of Kazım Öz. Öz’s documentaries deal with a wide range of issues focusing on the Kurdish-Zaza experience in Turkey. At first glance, his docu-films seem to aim at uncovering cultural difference. I argue that the social inequalities produced by modernization and development are the deeper thread that tie his documentaries together. Öz’s feature documentaries, *Demsala Dawî: Sewaxan (The Last Season: Shawaks 2009)*, *He Bû Tune Bû (Once Upon a Time 2014)*, and *Cinara Sipî (White Sycamore 2015)*,

narrate the Kurdish forms of life that exist on the periphery of urban capitalist modernity. Rather than a decontextualized gloss on culture, the nomadic-pastoralists, migrant agricultural laborers, and rustic bricoleur-pantologists illustrated in Öz's documentaries are set against a background intersected by forces of modernization and development that systematically assimilates and destroys these forms of life; or, of the penetration of capitalism's relations of production that sever and re-combine these forms of life according to the logic of accumulation.

He Bû Tune Bû narrates the everyday realities of the exploitation of seasonal migrant farm laborers⁸ in Turkey. The film follows a Kurdish family that collectively work as seasonal farm laborers and experience exploitation as a family. *He Bû Tune Bû* depicts how pre-capitalist kinship structures and their modes of production, social reproduction and exchange coalesce with modern forms of socio-economic inequality and domination anchored in the capitalist mode. The film reaffirms many studies in economic anthropology: such as Claude Meillassoux's (1981) critique of Sahlins's domestic mode of production, Eric Wolf's (1982) study on how modes of production combine and Jose Mariategui's (1926) on the layering of modes of production in Peru. Though they are consciously crafted by the director as homages to the integrity of various locally-distinct, typically Kurdish/Zaza lifeworlds and cultures, Öz's documentaries are also, in their political unconscious, serious vignettes on the process of U&CD in the 21st century.

⁸ The population of exploited seasonal farm workers is estimated at over one million in Turkey, who are mostly Kurds and with an increasing hyper-exploited Syrian refugee labor force (Semerci et al. 2004).

Öz's documentaries cinematically stage the interaction between the pre-capitalist and capitalist mode, the "outside" and the "inside" of development. Benjamin referred to these interactions as the "shafts of history" – the present (*Jetztzeit*) "shot through with splinters of messianic time" – that forcefully rub against the grain of modernization and development. Zeynel Dede, the central figure in *Cinara Sipi*, is the antithesis of modernization and development (primitive accumulation, displacement, industrialization, urbanization, division of labor). He is one of the few people who refused to leave his village after the infamous purges and pogroms in Dersim in 1938 – which was one of the state-sanctioned "modernization" shock therapies of the Kemalist era. At the same time, he is also the ultimate craftsman that defies the fragmentation of the subject by the wage-labor relation: proficient and self-taught in construction, farmsteading, luthier-ship, music, poetry, and most importantly, teaching. As the film depicts, there is no division between labor and play, child and adult, in his lifeworld, like in much of his village and family that he inspired. He is a quasi-mythical "Adam-ite" bricoleur, the pre-fragmented subject. Zeynel Dede's practice of craft labor in multiple trades defies the commodification of labor; his identity based on Alevism and his close-knit community defies the imagined national community; and his refusal to abandon his hometown and enter state education following military purges defies the state apparatus. He represents that which is outside modern civilization's continuous fragmentation and re-combination of subjectivity through the commodity-form, imagined community, and state apparatuses (Capital-Nation-State) (Karatani 2014).

Recurring themes in Kurdish films, such as of children, education and militarization, recurring forms, such as the indistinct border between fact and fiction, the

modern and premodern, or recurring aesthetics, such as realism and modernism, are neither coincidental nor evidence of Kurdish cinema's tendency to "lag behind" more "advanced" cultural products elsewhere. They offer a way to register the contradictions of the world-system and bear a direct relationship to what has been discussed about history and the politics of memory in this research. They show that both "political" and "non-political" films are made meaningful and manifest through this political unconscious.

5. Conclusion

In this research, I first analyzed the history of Kurds in Turkey. With the frameworks of world-systems analysis and uneven and combined development, I explored phenomena like nationalisms, ethno/linguicide, state policy, media censorship, religion, etc. I argued that these dynamics transformed through three principle stages of socio-economic change: the pre-war nation-building Kemalist phase, the Cold War “containment of communism” state-development phase and the contemporary post-1980 neoliberal phase. These changes had direct effects on the Kurdish Question. Each phase also corresponded to a dominant state narrative of the Kurdish Question in Turkey: civilizing, underdevelopment and terrorism.

In Chapter 3, I analyzed Kurdish filmmakers’ conditions of filmmaking. Interviewees pointed to three primary challenges in their filmmaking practice – economic inequality/exclusion, symbolic power and state repression. I argued that these three conditions point to a tendency in many contemporary nation-states, where hegemony and legitimacy are maintained through a new flexibility. In this flexibility, liberal democratic institutions are not important in maintaining legitimacy. All that is needed is the marginalizing of alternatives through a combination of techniques such as economic exclusion, state repression, censorship and symbolic power. This analysis corroborates with other anthropological studies of cinema, such as Mazzarella’s study of cinema in India (2013). I provided examples to show that these dynamics play a central role in conditioning the aesthetic techniques of Kurdish filmmakers.

In Chapter 4, I analyzed the aesthetic representations of history and memory in Kurdish films. I argued that though Kurdish filmmakers operate in difficult conditions,

many of their films are significant in registering and critiquing structures of power and inequality that define the world-system. By framing Kurdish films as a form of “peripheral aesthetics”, I argued that representations of history and memory in the films offer an acute insight into the explosive contradictions of the world-system. By exploring history and memory, Kurdish films also discredit dominant narratives of progress and development and therefore discredit the legitimacy of a social order that inherently produces inequality and violence.

In this thesis, I premised my arguments on the idea that Kurdish cinema represents cinema from the periphery of the world-system. The world-system is the uniquely bounded social universe created by capitalism and it is a system that is simultaneously one and profoundly unequal (Braudel 1985; Wallerstein 1974). Similarly, world-literature or world-cinema is neither a canon of masterworks nor a mode of reading. It is as a system. This system is one not based on difference, but on inequality (WReC 2015, 7-8). Thus, world cinema is a cinema of the world-system and this is a system that is simultaneously one and unequal, with a core and a periphery that are bound together in a relationship of inequality (Moretti 2000). Using Kurdish cinema as a case study, I have attempted to show how cultural production from the periphery can register the inequality and manifest unevenness of the world-system.

If we take the above-stated notion seriously, then we cannot simply read more texts and watch more films or import theories of globalization into literary and film studies. World-literature or world-cinema is itself a problem (Moretti 2000). We need to change our conventional way of looking at cultural production. We need a new critical epistemology. The *Warwick Research Collective* re-situates the study of world literature

and cinema, postcolonialism and cultural production according to the politics of uneven and combined development (WReC 2015). Their studies show that all cultural products that circulate in a world-literary or world-cinematic space are part and parcel of the modern world-system. These cultural products are therefore relevant in the analysis of the world-system.

How do representations of history and memory in Kurdish films corroborate with this framework? I have argued that one of the tasks of “re-writing history against the grain” is to take heed of how social and cultural institutions are combined and deployed through political-economic change. Kurdish films in Turkey attempt to re-write history by focusing on the institutions of ethno-nationalism, religion, development projects, militarization and education. One way I unpacked the specificity of these institutions was by focusing on Turkey as a “late developing state” vis-à-vis uneven and combined development. Ethno-nationalisms, military-bureaucracies and hegemonic interpretations of religion in late developing states like Turkey are a modern combined process in which neo-traditional forms emerge in periods of primitive accumulation and liberal piecemeal reforms (i.e. multiculturalism) emerge after this accumulation is complete (Nairn 1977). U&CD demonstrates that this process is never completed, that the system constantly produces it, and that these tensions continue to persist in especially the global south. Many Kurdish films critique these institutions and thus point to these systemic processes.

These political-economic issues are important for aesthetics because it problematizes how art can resist the destructiveness of progress and development. The crisis of neoliberalism’s commodification and incorporation of alterity into a degraded universality (i.e. multiculturalism, neoliberal myths of consensus and shared universal

purpose) has problematized art's critical social function. Peripheral cultural production, like Kurdish cinema, is valuable in registering these contradictions. I agree with the *Warwick Research Collective* [WReC] (2015, 9) that a theory of cultural production based on either a Bourdieu-style sociology or on a Frankfurt school-style political economy of culture, though helpful, are not sufficient enough to truly open up the social sciences and develop a "global" theory. I believe that U&CD and world-systems analysis are necessary for such a project.

U&CD helps us see how art can maintain its critical social function in the 21st century. Modernity is to be understood by its radical unevenness in two ways – (1) in terms of socio-economic inequality in which capitalist development does not smooth away but rather produces unevenness (underdevelopment, shatter zones, wastelands) and (2) in terms of Henri Lefebvre's (1995, 307) grasp of the historically determinate 'coexistence' in any given place and time "of realities from radically different moments in history – handicrafts alongside the great cartels, peasant fields with the Krupp factories or the Ford plant in the distance." These phenomena are all connected through a historical logic of combination whose initial appearance deceptively displays contingency and asystematicism (WReC 2015, 12). Thus, one of the goals of such an analysis, and therefore one of art's critical social functions, is to uncover the unevenness and combination of these disparate appearances. This would help reorient today's vision of futurism away from one fixated on the glittering promises of progress and development. Rather, the so-called marvels of civilization and progress must be represented along with all its shattered and splintered aspects – the devastated ecologies, the deindustrialized

urban wastelands, the ruins of modern warfare, the sprawling slums and mechanically-exhausted agricultural zones that all coexist and combine.

The aim of bringing these fragmented pieces into relation, of showing the structural connectedness and causality of these phenomena through cultural products, is to show that modernity is not a chronological nor a geographical category. Modernity is not something that “happens” here or there (first in the West or city and then in the East or country – as it is often represented). Modernity is something that entails uneven development – that is, the development of underdevelopment and dependency (WReC 2015, 13). Capitalism has no normal state. It constantly expands in order to survive. The price paid for this is the production of permanent unevenness, where some areas must be sacrificed for the development of others – the countryside for the city, one city for another, one nation for another, etc. (Harootunian 2000, xv).

I believe peripheral aesthetics like those in Kurdish cinema are helpful in registering this fundamental developmental process because their effects are experienced there most acutely and their experience still exists there in living memory. One of the tasks of cultural production is to grasp capitalist modernization and development in order to discredit its legitimacy and illuminate the possibility of change. To appreciate the importance of this insight, what must be avoided is any framework that considers modernity as a “western phenomenon”, which would obfuscate its singularity. I have shown that this understanding of modernity does not erase historical or cultural heterogeneity. These heterogeneities constitute differing inflections of the modern to which diverging representations of it in literature and film from around the world correspond. In this vein, my analysis of Kurdish cinema corroborates with WReC’s

concept of “peripheral modernities” – which are those in the peripheries of the world-system that are in coeval relation with capital’s multi-centric “core.” The concepts of peripheral modernities and peripheral aesthetics restore the agency and political immediacy of cultural products from the periphery in a world-system that produces manifest unevenness and inequality.

Postscript

In this research, there were two main limitations that could also be catalysts for further research. The first limitation was the lack of an empirical study of the inner workings of the Turkish Ministry of Culture. Such an analysis would provide a more detailed understanding of how the ministry selects, categorizes and censors films. The second limitation was the lack of audience reception analysis. This study was conducted during the Covid-19 pandemic, and therefore participating at film festivals and screenings was impossible. While such information is also difficult to find on the Internet in the context of Kurdish films in Turkey, it would nevertheless provide a richer understanding of the relationship between filmmakers, films and audience.

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