

# *“I trust in the mountains”*

*The birth of the guerrilla film*



*Şehîd Xelûl Dag*



*in memory of*  
*Şehîd Xelîl Dağ*

# *“My most wonderful time”*

## *- a text by Sehîd Xelîl Dag*

“I was born in Germany in 1973 as the first child of a father from Izmir and a mother from Ağrı. During primary school I moved back and forth between Izmir and Germany. I completed the middle and high school in Izmir at the Private Turkish College. Afterwards I came to Europe, where I worked during the day and took part in photography courses at night schools. During my three years in Europe I got to know the freedom movement. In 1994, I participated in the work to establish the first Kurdish television station in Europe, MED TV. On April 1, 1995 I travelled to the Middle East as an assistant to a German cameraman for an interview with Abdullah Öcalan. During the interview I got to know the guerrilla fighters in the central party school of the PKK better. After this interview with Abdullah Öcalan, which also represents my first meaningful work, I decided not to return and to continue my life's journey here. Since then my life takes place in the mountains of Kurdistan, together with the Kurdish freedom fighters.

## *My way to the film*

I never thought I'd make a movie. Not even in my dreams... If I hadn't gone to the mountains and become a guerrilla fighter, if I hadn't met the children of the Kurdish people and hadn't witnessed their experiences, I wouldn't have been able to make this film. For me the film represents my journey in the mountains. This journey started with photography.

I was not born and raised in this country. Apart from its mountains, I have never travelled to this country we call Kurdistan. Only from afar I have been able to see the lights of the cities. But I swam in the rivers of this country, touched its rocks, my sweat mixed with its green summer heat. Here I made new friends, my friends have fallen. I have pitied them. I lived with the people of these mountains, where I had come only to take pictures. I shared the food, the blankets, the cold with them. I witnessed their death.

At first I felt like a stranger. For me there was no East after Izmir. I only knew that my mother came from Ağrı. That was all. I never cared to know more. I got to know the Kurdish people in the guerrilla. Before that, I had lived with them in different places at different times. But the first people that I consciously perceived as Kurdish were guerrilla fighters. In front of the people themselves I met their heroes. Suddenly I became a friend of the most dynamic and beautiful chosen people of a society. Perhaps this was my greatest happiness.

The spring of 1995, when I landed in the holy city of the Middle East, Damascus<sup>1</sup>, with my very limited training in photography and camera, marked the beginning of my struggle and vocation. At that time I was only 22 years old. In Izmir I had gone to a private school. In Europe I had shown interest in different professions, but somehow never found the answers to my questions. I was an untrained photographer who had turned to the Middle East. In those days, leaving everything behind, I decided on a trip to the centre of the Middle East not to return. Full of enthusiasm, I could feel that I would find there everything I was looking for in my life and profession. I walked to this unknown part of the earth with its people unknown to me, of whose language I did not understand a word. My photographic camera and my camcorder were ready to record this new life. My soul was ready to live this life without limits. My journey into the life of the freedom fighters began together with my journey into the world of pictures. The enthusiasm of these two parallel journeys nourished each other for years. But at that time I could not know that my experiences in the

mountains of Kurdistan would one day carry me to the shore of the cinema.

I used my camera and my camcorder in the mountains for years. I noticed how the pictures I took at first with the excitement of a newcomer turned into a valuable commodity over time. The more I lived with the guerrillas, got to know them, saw them, loved them, made friends with them and thus became one of them, the more I tried to capture their faces and words. And this is how I arrived at the first principle of my life and my profession: I wouldn't exchange a single face captured in the mountains, not a single word for something else. I shouldn't skip anything and I should never move only on the edge.



Murat Karayilan (3rd from left), on the right Celal Başkale (Mahir Koç) in Amasya. Photo by Xelîl Dağ (H. Uysal).

# *Words and faces of the mountains*

For me, the words and faces of the mountains are the strongest expression of the creation days of a people. They are the only reason for me to wander through this part of the earth for years. My friends in the mountains have become the object of my field of vision and the subject of my heart. Sometimes I observed them through my lens, but mostly we were together. Sometimes I was a stranger, sometimes one of them. I walked behind them from mountain to mountain. To reach every height they climbed, every range they reached, my sweat dripped. I did everything in my power to record every word, every face. But deep inside I always felt the pain of never really being able to grasp them. Always something was missing. Next to the mountains I recorded there were always countless words and faces waiting to be captured. The words and faces that I could not record, I have painted into my heart. I call them pictures of my heart. The dark nights, the painful songs, silent laughter, pranks of childish innocence, secret loves that cannot be captured by any lens in the world, I have placed in the frame of my heart.

It is at this point that filming entered my life. So many images had piled up in my heart that I had to find a way to express them. I found the possibility for this in film. Now the time had come to capture the experiences of this country, which I can now call home more than ever, and to make them timeless. I want people to remember what happened here. Remembering means liberation. But forgetting means vanishing. That is why I cannot forget anything and carry all that I have experienced within me, just like the people in these mountains. I add everything to the pictures that my heart has shot. But our memory is not capable of carrying all that we have experienced into the future. We cannot face the wear and tear of time. It is essential for us to share the images, thoughts and feelings stored in our memories and make them accessible to everyone.

I have never experienced this war like the other guerrilla fighters. I did not get this war on my shoulders with the responsibility of a guerrilla. I have not fought face to face, out of breath on the front line. I was always feeling sad to always be one step behind on these paths. Had I been a common guerrilla, I would probably have a calmer conscience.

## *That's the reason for my filmmaking.*

If I don't share what I experienced in the mountains and don't make an effort to communicate this to humanity, I will feel guilty. That will then be my greatest guilt. That is why I do not let go of my projects and persistently run after them. The desire to guard my friendships, my testimonies, my experiences and myself keeps me busy. This is why I insist on filming. I believe that cinema can express what we have experienced



in these mountains, the life we call guerrilla. Perhaps the film will seem very tiny between everything else, but its language will express the mountains, the children of the mountains, the Kurdish people. If there is something missing in the middle of this war, it might be the cinema. I would love to give an answer as a guerrilla to this time when betrayal, deception, selling the self and the people have reached their peak and attempts are being made to distort the Kurdish memory. I would so much like to march forward with the rage of a guerrilla to break the dark history of malice. Because I couldn't be like the other guerrilla fighters I make films now.

The guerilla is everything. I am very well aware of that. If one day the guerrillas are defeated, everything will be defeated. There will be no photos, writings or films left behind. That's why I'm here, that's why I'm in the mountains, that's why I'm with the guerrillas. And the only place where I can make films is here, among the guerrillas. If I want something, it will be from the guerrillas. If I open my hand, it will be only from the guerrillas. If I am to serve anybody, it is only the guerrillas. Maybe they will say that the mountains are not the right place for making movies. But I can't make films anywhere else. Because I believe in these mountains and in the children of the mountains. I know that theoretically you can make these films somewhere else. Many of our friends are also doing this. But I exist for guerilla film. My journey to life and to the pictures has brought me here.

## *An Urge*

I feel an urge. My strongest feeling at the beginning of film making was an urge. I felt the urge to fill with life everything that had been enriching my soul over the years in the guerrilla. I had no experience with and no knowledge of film. But I trusted the world of ideas in which I lived. I trusted in the way of seeing and thinking in the mountains.

First I waited for a while. I expected that the Kurdish filmmakers would not close their eyes to the guerrilla and the reality that gave life to this people again. If Kurdish cinema were to enter a new phase, this would have to be done outside the existing system. Because the content and form of Kurdish cinema cannot be formed in Tehran, Baghdad or Istanbul. The same applies to the cities of Europe. But the first films by and about Kurds that reached me back then disappointed me. The films were about poor Kurds. In an unavoidable way, the Kurdish person was narrated on the basis of his or her



poverty and helplessness. But I had met heroic Kurdish people in the mountains of Kurdistan and lived with them for years. Up to a certain point the portrayal of the poor Kurd can perhaps be understood. But I felt then for the first time that the insistence on these characters is the mistake of the Kurdish directors. Of course I couldn't deny the existence of the poor Kurd, but this could only be recognized as a starting point for the revolutionary phase. But if this rapprochement is maintained, it is only a misconception.

I believed that the time for the film of the heroic Kurd had come. The Kurdish directors and Kurdish filmmakers could no longer escape this reality. We were in the time of heroism, which had decisively determined the last thirty years of the Kurds. These heroes could no longer be ignored. In the last thirty years the Kurdish mothers had created the noblest heroes in human history. They have not only given birth to poor people. The Kurdish children have written epics in the mountains. I got to know these people, I made friends with them, I lived with them. Those who act in the name of Kurdish cinema could not simply pretend that all this did not happen.

It was up to me to make the film of the heroic Kurds. If everyone else told about misery, I would tell about heroism. The Kurdish people deserved this after thirty years of armed resistance. When a people rises up with thousands of dead, when it pays homage to its children in the mountains with dignity, when it screams with all its strength that it exists, but the Kurdish artists do not see all this, this cannot be excused.

I started the work without any knowledge or experience. I knew that the Kurdish filmmakers would not even take notice of Tîrêj<sup>2</sup>. But I wanted to show that it is possible to take a different view of the Kurds. I wanted to insist on that. I knew that I was far from a cinematic aesthetic, but I trusted the view of the mountains. I was determined to show, not only with words but also with deeds, that it was necessary to look at the Kurds with the eyes of a Kurd and not of a

foreigner or a westerner. I knew that the biggest mistake lays here.

The Kurdish artist, the Kurdish filmmaker looked at his own society from the West, from Tehran, from Istanbul. That was my biggest criticism. It was necessary to look at the Kurdish people from the mountains. Not with the eye of another, but with one's own eye. The perspective of the Kurdish director was not that of the Kurdish people. This is perhaps the biggest mistake of the Kurdish intellectuals. It is impossible not to notice this strangeness. Kurdish directors look at the Kurdish people like strangers. They look at the society as others want them to.

Kurdish cinema will start in the mountains. Only when the Kurdish artists manage to see the mountains will they be able to create their own cinema. The mountains are the greatest asset created by the Kurdish people. The mountains represent the biggest accumulation and the biggest memory of the Kurdish people. This treasure has been created from the young bodies of Kurdish children. Throughout the history of humankind, the mountains have been the only support for the Kurdish people. The Kurdish people created the mountains. Thinking and seeing in the mountains is a characteristic of Kurds. For this reason, both Kurdish art and Kurdish cinema will be created here.

The Kurdish filmmakers should not look for their world of ideas in the distance, not in the cities where they are alienated, but in the mountains. That is one of my obligations. One of my goals is to make this understandable. I have always tried to express this. I wanted to show the Kurdish filmmakers that they should be proud of their people. Instead of pitying them like strangers, they should see what greatness this people is capable of. If a people has sent thousands of its children to the mountains, then the artists of this people must be able to touch the heart of the people. Otherwise they will not be able to make films for this people.



Guerrilla fighter marching in the snow Photo by Xelîl Dağ (H. Uysal).

## *My Way*

The films that we have made in the mountains over the past five years, from *Tîrêj* to *Bêrîtan*<sup>3</sup>, do not belong only to us. These films belong to all guerrilla fighters who live in the mountains. That is the most beautiful thing about the mountains. Here everything that is created belongs to everyone. From the military actions to the most ordinary work, everything belongs to everyone. Everything is accepted by everyone as if they had done it themselves. Then it is discussed and what is wrong or missing is criticized. All our projects have gone through these stages. Not only our film team, but all guerrilla units in the mountains have discussed our films and criticism has come from many different sides. These films belong to all guerrilla fighters who live in the mountains. That is the most beautiful thing about the mountains. Here everything that is created belongs to everyone. From the military actions to the most ordinary work, everything belongs to everyone. Everything is accepted by everyone

as if they had done it themselves. Then it is discussed and what is wrong or missing is criticized. All our projects have gone through these stages. At first this was not easy for me. In the beginning I had difficulties to accept criticism from friends who have no idea about cinema. No guerrilla here had any experience with filming. But every guerilla had something to say. At the beginning I thought most of the criticism was wrong.

Later I realized something essential. I told stories about the guerrillas. But my friends couldn't recognize themselves in my work. That showed that I didn't express the guerrilla correctly. This reality was hidden behind their words and criticism. This showed me that I had not yet succeeded in grasping their heart. Afterwards I went deeper and more profoundly. I tried to listen to the guerrillas better and to go deeper into what was essential. None of them had any academic knowledge about filming. Some of them hadn't seen a single film for years. But they treated my work as if it were theirs, criticized it accordingly and sometimes got upset.

At first I was often offended, but later I learned to love this attitude. The fact that they saw my work, a film made by me, as their own work and wished for something better made me happy. And I noticed that something had accumulated in me during all this time. When I set out to tell stories about the guerrillas, I had to listen to them until the end and feel them in my heart. That's why I first presented each project to the guerrillas. Now I took even the most common evaluations seriously. The truth hidden in these evaluations should show me the right way. The art was hidden in the words of the guerrillas, I could feel that now. And now I had managed to seize and identify the biggest weakness of the Kurdish artists, the Kurdish filmmakers in my own soul.

For an artist, the first step is to understand the contradictions of the eople. Otherwise, neither academic titles nor the best technical education will bring success. The artist must first ask himself what his

people are going through, what their basic contradictions are. He must not only ask himself this question and provide answers, but also live these contradictions. The artist stands neither in front of nor behind his people, but in the middle of them. He/she must not regard his/her people as an object to be thematized in any field of art, but must live them as the subject of his/her life. If he/she wants to make a film about war, he/she must immerse himself/herself in the world of the fighters. If he/she wants to make a film about his/her people, he/she must bring the struggles between the Kurdish people and the Turkish state in the alleys and streets of Amed in spring 2006<sup>4</sup> to the screen. If he/she wants to make a film about a child, he/she has to hear with his/her own ears the words of a mother who carries her child killed by the police in her arms, see it with his/her own eyes.

The artist does not view his people from the distance, but lives in the midst of his people. A director whose life is separated from that of his people, whose thoughts are those of a refugee and whose feelings are those of a stranger, can still make films. But it will not be the cinema of one's own people. A true artist is one who laughs, cries, fights shoulder to shoulder on the streets with his people and is ready to die with them if necessary. As filmmakers of another people it would perhaps be much easier for us to make films. Maybe then we would not talk about all this at all. But if we have made it our goal to create art and cinema as artists of a people fighting a guerilla war, then we have to question our own lives.

Until the film *Bêrîtan*, I listened calmly to the criticism of hundreds of guerrilla fighters. These people are the children of the people. Their words are the words of a people. I myself asked the silent ones for their opinion. I wanted to hear how close I was to the people and their children. Before every film project I always spent a lot of time in the guerrilla units. I tried to smell the smell of sweat on their faces, to read the longing on their lips, to grasp the love in their hearts. This is my way in the cinema.



Images from the recording of the movie Beritan.

## *Fairy tale and melody...*

Actually the stories behind my films are bigger than the films themselves. This song started somewhere long before me. At some point I listened to its sound and much later I started to sing the song myself, albeit with shame.

The fact that I myself am a witness to my stories is again a greater difficulty. If I had only listened to these stories or read them somewhere, my work might be easier. In the beginning I thought it would be an advantage to have experienced these stories, and the pain, sadness and feelings hidden in them, myself. In time I realized that this was not the case. I lacked the knowledge and experience to tell a story cinematically. For a long time I held myself back because of this. But I had to start somewhere, so that I could do justice to my task with time. Therefore I had to sacrifice my first stories to my lack of experience. Still this makes me sad. The desire to shoot the film Tîrêj again is still like a twinge deep inside me.

I have recognized the following reality: The secret of Kurdish cinema is not in reality but in fairy tales. I won't tell a story I don't belong to, I won't find myself in, I won't find myself in a story that is not part of my soul. Tîrêj lived in these mountains before me. He was a doctor and lived in these mountains as a guerrilla commander. I met him only once on the paths of these mountains. Only his stature and his eyes remained in my memory. Years later, on the night he was wounded, in the indescribable coolness of the night, next to a fourthousand-year-old melody, I listened to his last words over the radio. While he was lying wounded in his position, humbly saying "Greetings to all comrades, condolences to the Kurdish people", I could not hold back my tears. These last words of Tîrêj hit me in the depths of my heart.



Kurdish guerrilla fighters Photo by Xelîl Dağ (H. Uysal).

My films are inspired by true fairy tales. But every time I look at the end result, I think that this time it didn't work out either. However, I prefer to go on rather than wait. If I would have had the opportunity to watch movies in the beginning, some directors would have influenced me for sure. But at that time we had no access to films.

For example, the character analyses of Victor Hugo, the incredible motives of Orhan Pamuk and the stories of Murathan Mungan from Kurdistan may have been the real reason for my films. In my opinion, they are very strong writers. But I have been able to capture great images in their works. The strong structure and narrative forms in their books have deeply influenced me. Of course I can't come between them, but I can't deny their contribution to guerrilla films. I still have a book by one of these three writers with me before every shoot. Which book it should be I do not decide myself. As if they would decide it among themselves, one of their books always waits for me at the beginning of each shoot. Silently they tell their own fairy tale and suddenly become part of the film.

## *The secret of Kurdish cinema is not hidden in the word but in the melody*

I am convinced that Kurdish filmmakers cannot create a cinema only Kurdish films or the presentation of Kurdish themes. The depth of Kurdish music can also be an example for cinema. No matter where and under what circumstances, Kurdish melodies can always be heard. Between all sounds and tones they are recognizable. During the shooting of Bêrîtan I worked with a Kurdish girl. At each break I asked this beautiful girl from the mountains of Hakkari to sing us a song. I did not know why myself. I also didn't know what exactly I found in her Kurdish songs that I didn't understand. Maybe it is just a dream, but in my films I try to capture the unique melody of Kurdish music and the reality hidden in Kurdish fairy tales. This four-thousand-year-old vein, these fairy tales and melodies still form the core of Kurdish art today. The starting point of the Kurdish film is also not far from us, but hidden in the undeniable reality where fairy tales



and melody meet: the Dengbêj culture<sup>5</sup>. I wish I could understand it. That is my self-criticism.

## *Dare*

In these mountains there is a saying that the guerrillas like to use. If you go into the mountains one day, it may be the first thing you hear. Your guide<sup>6</sup> will then say "The best path is the one you know" and he/she will lead you along paths he/she knows very well. That this is not just a saying, but that it comes from the heart of the guerrilla, I understood during my life in the mountains. This sentence is even hidden in the hidden corners of the consciousness of the Kurdish people. I felt it in the wastelands of the soul of every Kurd I met.

With time I realized that this unwritten principle is the framework of my life in the mountains and my works are taking shape according to this principle. Now I always have to laugh when this sentence, which our guide said years ago, comes to my mind.



Winter in Kurdistan Photo by Xelîl Dağ (H. Uysal).

I believe that both Kurdish cinema and the kurds themselves are strongly connected to the pure reality. This is also the cipher of the heart of the Kurdish people. I am aware that Kurdish filmmakers cannot reach the Kurdish people without solving this cipher and deciphering the codification of Kurdish lives. I must add at this point that it is not possible to achieve universal principles without capturing one's own people. The way to the others is through ourselves. Nothing universal lies beyond ourselves.

The Kurdish people are not similar to any other people in their historical development. While most of the peoples on earth have gone through similar developments, the Kurdish people have either continued their development in their own way or where there was no possibility, they have stopped their development or even put an end to their lives. What I want to say is this: the Kurdish people have either followed their own way in their history or not at all. They have preferred the paths that were created from mountain cliffs to the asphalt roads of civilization. Not because of ignorance, but because of the inclination to freedom in their soul. Maybe it is this characteristic that has made the Kurds the oldest people in history and the main artery through which civilization has emerged.

I cannot know when Kurdish cinema will capture this reality. "What are we but history? What else but nothing are we together with our history?" asked the beautiful man on the island İmralı\*. He pointed out that the Kurdish artist has to start in the history of his people. The nature of the Kurdish person refuses to be someone else's repetitive, worn out, rough draft. Hundreds of years ago, she prefers to remain patiently in her own simplicity without wrapping herself in the form of another. That is the colour of the Kurds. The Kurdish artists and filmmakers must be able to capture this colour. Let us not forget that all the paths of history have passed through Kurdistan, but the Kurdish people have continued to open new paths in the mountains. We can call this rebelliousness or stubbornness. Whatever we call it,

it is the Kurdish attitude. We can't call it anything else. The Kurdish artist must capture this Kurdish attitude, this tendency towards freedom. Of course Kurds entered the field of film very late. Civilization is perhaps a century ahead of the Kurds in this field. None of us can deny the values that have been created by the art of film so far. The Kurdish filmmaker must explore, learn and appropriate these values.

But beyond that, it is more important that Kurdish filmmakers follow their own path. We can walk on the paths of others, do successful work, make Kurdish women the subject of our films and be applauded. But this does not mean that we are Kurdish filmmakers and make Kurdish cinema. I am aware of the fact that cinema is a market under today's conditions and that you have to enter this market to bring your products to the masses. I know that the Kurdish film tries to build an existence between the teeth of this wheel. I can feel here, from the mountains, that Kurdish film makers are having difficulties because they do not have their own sector, their own market. But at the same time, I see the desire and longing to exist within this market as a shame for Kurdish But at the same time, I see the desire and longing to exist within this market as a shame for Kurdish filmmakers. I know that in order to make a film, financial resources and support are necessary, but to think that the real problem of Kurdish film is the nonexistent market is a mistake. In my opinion, Kurdish cinema cannot exist inside this market, but only outside it. I prefer that Kurdish films are secretly passed from hand to hand by young people, illegally but with a heart, rather than being put on the agenda from time to time like an oriental item within the market. Just as the Kurdish guerrilla has opened the way that leads the Kurdish people to freedom in the hiding places of the forests, the Kurdish film-makers must also have the courage to step into these forests. Just as the very young children of the Kurdish people have set out on their own path, history expects the Kurdish artists to take the same step. If art is a venture, we have to dare. Let us not go to the

market places. Let's not build our cinema in the midst of reductive trade relations, but on the basis of cooperative relations. I am guerrilla. As long as the sword of denial and annihilation is waved over the Kurdish people, I will live in the mountains with the weapon in my hand. Today I am a cameraman, tomorrow a photographer, the day after tomorrow a bread maker. When I am needed on the mountain tops, I am there. If I'm needed on guard duty, I'll be there. If I have to march through the night, I will. I'm ready for any task the Kurdish people give me. I don't know if I will make another film or not. But if those who have to do this task don't do it, then I will be a director again.”

## *Şehîd Xelîl Dağ*



## Footnote

1 Damascus: PKK's central party academy was in Damascus between 1992-1998

2 Tîrêj: Name of the first film made by Halil Dağ in the mountains (2002)

3 Berîtan: Film made by Halil Dağ in 2006 about the struggle of the Kurdish guerrilla fighter Gülnaz Karataş, fight name Bêrîtan. Bêrîtan joined the armed resistance at the age of twenty as a student in 1991. Within a short time she rose to become a guerrilla commander. Despite her very short time of only one and a half years in the mountains, she played a major role in the gender and class struggle within the PKK and posthumously exerted great influence on the development of the autonomous women's movement. Bêrîtan lost her life in the so-called "Southern War" waged by the Turkish army and the KDP-Peshmerga in autumn 1992. She fought until the last bullet against the advancing enemy and then first destroyed her rifle and then threw herself off the cliffs to avoid falling into the hands of the Peshmerga.

4 On 24 March 2006, 14 PKK guerrilla fighters were killed by the Turkish army with chemical weapons. Six of the murdered fighters were from the city of Amed (Turkish: Diyarbakır). On 28 March, they were buried by thousands and afterwards the biggest Kurdish uprising since 1999 took place. 13 people were killed.

5 Dengbêj = Kurdish folk singer who performs songs without instrumental accompaniment according to an old epic tradition.

6 This refers to Abdullah Öcalan, who has been imprisoned on the prison island İmralı in the Marmara Sea since February 1999. Abdullah Öcalan was forced out of Syria on 9 October 1998. He came to Europe for a political and peaceful solution to the Kurdish question. Instead, in an international clandestine operation between the secret service of Israel, United States, Turkey and others colonial powers, Abdullah Öcalan was kidnapped in Nairobi, Kenya's capital, and brought to Turkey. Abdullah Öcalan is now for more than 25 years in a prison where he is confined in isolation. There's more than three years that no information about his situation or health.

