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Kurdish Lyrical Expression: the Terrain of Acoustic Migration

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Kurdish Lyrical Protest: The Terrain of Acoustic Migration

Introduction

With these haunting words the exiled Kurdish singer and composer Muhamed Abbas Bahram is introduced in our performative ethnographic documentary film, titled *Silent Song*¹:

I composed a lot of songs when I arrived to this country [Britain], and the affection was of course of all my memory back home in Kurdistan. And last time when I heard from my sister and family, they say, okay, don't turn your face back. I say why? She say, everything you had in the past been looted by government. That means all my studio, all my library, all my memory, all my interviews with Kurdish professional singers like Ali Merdan, Muhamed Salih Dilan, like a lot of singers like Hussein Ali, Qader Dilan, like Salah Dawda, which maybe, most of them they are dead now. All the hard work is bye-bye. So, that itself is a symphony. If you want to compose a symphony about Kurdistan and my memory – that is a symphony.

Spoken in an exilic tongue particular to the exigencies of enforced migration, they convey an historical experience of cultural displacement, of irreversible loss that is always re-routed through the prism of the present. This voiceover of Abbas Bharam is visually accompanied by tracking shots of Edinburgh city centre, intercut with video footage of Qamishlo, situated in Kurdistan of Syria, filmed by the speaking subject during the course of his unsuccessful attempt to enter Kurdistan of Iraq via Syria in 1999.

Several interrelated questions fundamental to a visual media engagement with the acoustics of migration framed our initial ethnographic encounter with Abbas Bharam in early 1999 in the context of a Refugee Drop-In-Centre in Edinburgh, which he frequented weekly in solidarity with new arrivals while working in odd jobs in restaurants and car sales. What does migration sound like? – the polyphony it produces by way of linguistic mixing and cultural influences of an acoustic nature

such as music? How does the language of song, conceived as an acoustic grammar linking past and present, provide expression of cultural memory for the diasporic Kurdish musician? What narrative structures and modes of storytelling in ethnographic film practice are adequate to the task of translating the dis(embodied) residues of diasporic cultural memory? Disentangling the speaking from the spoken 'voice' – namely, who speaks, for whom and when? – has long been a representational problem for ethnographic film practitioners (MacDougall 1998). This question remains charged when posed in a short 15-minute documentary film such as *Silent Song*, in which exilic testimony to a public concert in Baghdad in 1976 is re-collected and theatrically performed on stage.

Before addressing these concerns by means of an examination, in two key sections of this paper, of the methodological and thematic considerations underlying the documentary video production of *Silent Song*, a rudimentary biographical sketch of Abbas Bahram is necessary.² Compiled and re-visited during the course of videoed interviews and across multiple ethnographic sites – in such places as the Medya Kurdish Satellite Television Station, Belgium, a sound recording studio and the musician's domestic home – the following account provides a partial narrative, situating the ethnographic subject of the documentary in a geopolitical landscape predating his enforced departure from Kurdistan of Iraq via Iran to Britain in the mid-1980s.

Born in 1954, Bahram departed his native city of Kirkuk to study music at the Institute of Fine Arts in Baghdad in 1972. While enrolled at the Institute, he worked in the Kurdish-language broadcasting section of Iraqi Radio and Television, resisting unrelenting pressure on Kurds, dissenting Iraqis and communists to join the ruling

Arab Ba'ath Socialist party. Bharam's public refusal to sing before a Ba'ath party audience in the context of the Kurdish New Year pre-Islamic festival of *Newroz* on 21 March 1976, organised by the Institute as a propaganda concert designed to demonstrate the party's support for Kurdish cultural and artistic expression, abruptly halted his public media persona as a promising Kurdish singer. For in the period prior to this incident dating back to 1970, at which time the Kurdish Democratic Party under Mulla Mustafa Barzani signed an agreement with the Iraqi government laying down the principles for greater Kurdish autonomy, implemented in part by the Ba'athist regime, Bharam's reputation as a performing artist among Kurds of Iraq was growing, enhanced by the circulation of his popular love song '*Egirêkî bê Xollemêsh*' (Fire with no Ash) on both Kurdish-language television and radio broadcasting from Kirkuk.³

Anecdotal diasporic tribute to Bharam's musical prominence during the mid-1970s, in the form of the retrospective account of a Kurdish boy, then ten years old and listening to Kurdish music on the radio from his home in Duhok, who in 1989 happened to encounter Bharam in Glasgow, is provided by the Kurdish-language interpreter and human rights activist, Peri Ibrahim:

Every day before the lunch-time radio news, '*Egirêkî bê Xollemêsh*' was played in the Kurdish dialect of Sorani. As this was a different dialect to mine [Kurmanji], my understanding of the lyrics was limited. Even before I had learned all of the song, I was acting out the lyrics in my imagination while playing in the street with my childhood friends. I became a great fan of this artist whose song of love and friendship fired the imagination of a young boy who longed for peace and normality in his life. The Kurdish radio station that I listened to daily was sadly outlawed by the Iraqi regime in their relentless censorship of Kurdish culture. When my family moved to Kurdistan of Syria in 1978, I never forgot the words of the song or the person who sang them. I later learned that Bahram had become a *peshmarga* [freedom fighter] and was captured and executed by the Iraqi army. . . . Many years later I came to Britain as a refugee. On one occasion I was invited into a Kurdish family home in Glasgow for an evening meal. When the other guest arrived I did not immediately recognise Bharam. Fortunately the rumours of his death were untrue. To meet this boyhood hero of mine so far from Kurdistan was a dream come true. It's impossible to describe my emotions at the time.

In response to Bharam's politically defiant gesture in 1976, the Institute of Fine Arts in Baghdad refused validation of his Diploma in Music, which he completed the same year. Formal accreditation of his qualification was however obtained in 1977; Bharam had no choice but to bribe Ba'ath party officials for the requisite documentation. Further disciplinary action resulted in a punitive transfer from his position in Kurdish-language broadcasting to a post in Arab-language, social and cultural affairs within the Iraqi Information Ministry where he worked, albeit uncooperatively, until his eventual dismissal in 1978. Barred, given his resistance to membership in the Ba'ath party from employment within Iraqi radio and television broadcasting, Bharam was relocated to an Arab-language primary school in Kirkuk. With the advent of the Iraq-Iran war in 1980, he was forcibly conscripted into the Iraqi army yet managed to avoid serving time on the frontline by sharing half his teaching salary with Ba'ath party officials in Kirkuk. Such an arrangement prevailed until 1982 when a change in the Iraqi military leadership governing Kirkuk clamped down on non-Ba'ath party members who had successfully evaded military service. Bharam, together with other Kurds, was consequently despatched to Al Kut from where he shortly deserted the Iraqi army, finding his way to the Kurdish city of Sulaiminiyah, where he was, until 1984, active among the *peshmargakan* (freedom fighters). Pursued by Iraqi forces for desertion and in fear of execution if apprehended, he crossed over the border into Iran. His passport confiscated by Iranian border guards, he secured temporary shelter in an Iraqi refugee camp policed by Iranian military personnel in Karaj, near Tehran. In December 1985, having bribed camp officials to return his passport and leaving behind a brother, sister, uncle and cousins, Bharam boarded a Europe-bound flight from Tehran – a journey which would take him via Vienna, East Berlin and Amsterdam, finally arriving in London and subsequently Edinburgh, where he sought

and was granted political asylum, followed by eleven years of ‘exceptional leave to remain’ before acquiring British citizenship in 1996.

‘*Karwan u Sinûr*’ (The Caravan and the Border) is the title of his first music compact disc, independently produced and composed in exile in late 1999, whose projected audience comprised Kurds living within the Western diaspora, together with listeners in different regions of Kurdistan.⁴ Consisting of eight tracks sung in the Kurdish dialect of Sorani, it was initially conceived while crossing the mountains between Iraq and Iran in the early 1980s en route to exile in Britain. Bahram recounts how he came across a plaque, placed there by the British following WW1, registering the border between Iraq and Iran without mention of Kurdistan. Incensed by this omission, he remembers spitting on the plaque and thinking how both sides of the border, part of the artificially divided land of Kurdistan, metaphorically resembled neglected children of his own. This is an abiding motif in his CD compilation of song and a recurring political reality dating back to the broken promise of the French, British and Turkish governments to grant Kurds an autonomous State in the wake of the disintegration of the Ottoman Empire. ‘Kurdistan’ is metaphorically imagined as a helpless child flung across the present day borders of Turkey, Iraq, Iran and Syria, always in need of urgent attention. His sentiments, compounded by geographical and temporal removal from the land, are given lyrical and emotive expression in the following lines from the CD’s title song, ‘*Karwan u Sinûr*’, written and composed in 1998:

Dellên nergis rengî gorra
Boni gorra, hesitî gorra
Boye kesas u melûle
Le binbrra cêgi gorra
Giyankem jînim, uf Kurdistan

(They say *Nergis* has changed colour,
Her fragrance and feelings transformed,
That is why she is sad and dejected,
Displaced and uprooted.
Such has befallen my Kurdistan.)⁵

For Bham, the city of Edinburgh and the wider Scottish landscape provide, in his words, an ‘adopted home’, in part made up of the Kurdish and Islamic community, in other parts comprising a secure material location within which he can compose and perform the lived stories of Kurdistan. Furthermore, it is the place to which he returns following occasional charitable concert performances in European countries such as Sweden, Finland, Denmark, France, Belgium, Austria and Germany, held especially during *Newroz* and organised by Kurdish community organisations and groups in exile.

Bham is one of many accomplished Kurdish musicians exiled to and resident in Europe since the 1970s. The ambitious yet necessary task of documenting the names, alongside the European locations within which these Kurdish performers from Sorani- and Kurmanji-speaking regions of Kurdistan reside, was attempted in the final rolling sequence to *Silent Song*, musically accompanied by a polyinstrumental track from a concert performance in the Théâtre de la Ville, Paris (22 May 1995) by the acclaimed Iranian ensemble, the Kâmkârs – a Kurdish family, comprising seven brothers, one sister and her son, singers and instrumentalists based in Sanandaj, Iran, who perform regularly to audiences in Iran, Iraq and the Kurdish diaspora in Europe. Two of the most prominent and established singers and composers on the film’s list of performing Kurdish musicians in Europe are the Swedish-based Nasir Razazi and Sivan Perwer, both renowned for their political songs celebrating Kurdish nationalism and originating respectively from Sanandaj, Iran and Urfa province, Turkey. A biographical entry in the Grove Dictionary of Music summarising Razazi’s musical composition and contribution to Kurdish musical production in the diaspora, reads as follows:

He was jailed for performing political and nationalist Kurdish songs just before and after the 1979 Iranian revolution and later joined the Kurdish autonomist movement as a *peshmarga* . . . Living in ‘liberated areas’, he began composing political songs and performing to live audiences and on clandestine radio stations. In 1984 Razazi, his wife Marziya Fariqi (also a singer) and their children resettled as refugees in Sweden; he continued to perform to the expanding Kurdish diaspora and on the first Kurdish satellite television channel, Med-TV, which was launched in Britain in 1995. By early 2000 Razazi had composed about 60 songs, including the first Kurdish birthday song, *Be Piroz*, and had produced 33 cassette tapes and four compact discs. Most of these recordings were goranî, popular songs of love, dance, political struggle and entertainment. He is one of the few singers to perform in different dialects of Kurdish. During the 1990s he conducted research on Kurdish music and musicians as well as teaching Kurdish in Swedish schools.⁶

Unlike Razazi, Perwer’s musical career was launched in conditions of diaspora, his many recordings and songs championing the struggle of peasants, workers and Kurdish national liberation movements. Fearing persecution for defying a Turkish government ban in 1967 prohibiting singing in Kurdish, a decree further outlawing the possession and distribution of recordings in a language other than Turkish, Perwer sought refuge in exile, arriving in Europe in 1976.⁷ Interviewed twenty-two years later by a Turkish Amnesty International journalist about the changing nature of his musical composition in exile, this iconic Kurdish singer and composer, who often accompanies his songs on the *tanbûr* and performs duets with his wife, Gulistan, replied:

I have been writing and singing in the same spirit since the very first days of exile. . . . The conditions and opportunities in Europe have improved and enriched my musical style. For instance, there is no fear of the police at our door, waiting to raid the concert or arrest us. This peace of mind helps the music blossom freely. However, it is not simply the civil liberties we enjoy in Europe, but also a variety of encouragement and support. For example, in some European countries, the technical and financial support for minorities provided by the authorities helps them preserve and revitalise their cultural identity. Given all these freedoms and benefits, you can concentrate and push your art forward in new, more colourful paths. . . . People in other parts of Kurdistan have better access to my music than Kurds in Turkey. As for myself, the musician, I am totally banned in Turkey (Öztürk 1998: 127).

Perwer’s liberatory reflections on the material conditions of Kurdish music production and dissemination in Europe are developed further in the second section to this paper. We examine the circulation, exchange and distribution of diasporic Kurdish media of

which music is one vital component, foregrounding Kurdish satellite television and music websites as significant conduits for Kurdish artistic expression.

Bharam's reputation as a performing artist in the Kurdish diaspora is, it should be said, not comparable in stature to that of Razazi and Perwer. The latter 'dramatise the continuing vitality of Kurdish culture' (Blum and Hassanpour 1996: 334) by virtue of performing regularly in live concerts to audiences in both Kurdistan and the diaspora, in addition to reviving, reproducing and adapting Kurdish rural and nationalist songs to new and far-flung audiences.⁸ What drew our attention to Bharam as a compelling migrant musician worthy of ethnographic representation in *Silent Song* was a combination of factors: a formal musical training in Baghdad and his popularity in the mid-1970s evidenced by his appearance on Iraqi television, his flight into exile and CD composition fourteen years later of *'Karwan u Siniür'*, together with Bharam's longstanding marginality as a Kurdish singer and composer resident in Scotland, lacking an ensemble backing and access to 'technical and financial support' available to a musician such as Perwer.

The Production of *Silent Song*

Any attempt at framing the Kurdish voice in exile carries mixed, if not contradictory, connotations, since the activity of 'framing' generally refers to the process of interpretation and the subsequent enclosure, albeit momentary, of meaning; for to frame a cultural event or, indeed, a historical moment in time, one must always inflect it with a particular narrative form and coherence in order that it may reach an audience of readers, listeners, or in the case of *Silent Song*, spectators of a short ethnographic film. Our objective in its production was to profile selectively Bharam's musical composition, using the documentary format as a 'meditative vehicle' (Tyler

quoted in Renov 1999: 141) rather than as illustrative ethnographic text. A fundamental consideration was to respect the chronological narrative of Bharam's life story, while simultaneously utilising the documentary medium as an audio-visual space within which to translate the dialectical process of ethnographic fieldwork and the performative dimensions of acoustic memory, understood as the domain of 'evocation' (Tyler 1986: 123; 1987) and 'tacit knowledge' MacDougall (1998: 273) as opposed to descriptive representation.

Constructing a visual and aural argument for *Silent Song* entailed the sifting through of historically relevant media footage, in part belonging to Bharam's personal video library and further obtained from the Kurdish Institute in Paris; an examination of Western and Kurdish photographic source material assembled archivally in both book form and as a corresponding website (Meiselas 1997), alongside the viewing, selection and editing of videoed interview footage with Bharam.⁹ In so doing, our concern was not so much with *finding* suitable material for inclusion in the film but rather with how to narrate a 'story' or 'chronicle' of events in a short documentary format, condensing a multi-locale ethnography into a constrained, at least in terms of duration, visual ethnographic object, coherent in terms of a story or plot. For unlike single-sited ethnographic research Marcus (1995: 105) argues that multi-sited research¹⁰:

[I]s designed around chains, paths, threads, conjunctions, or juxtapositions of locations in which the ethnographer establishes some form of literal, physical presence, with an explicit, posited logic of association or connection among sites that in fact defines the argument of the ethnography... a revival of a sophisticated practice of [avant-garde] constructivism.

From the outset of the documentary a dissonant space is opened up in which a dialogue between sounds and images of contrasting transcultural locations is staged for the spectator. Techniques of visual and aural montage (Eisenstein: 1949; Marcus:

1994; Vaughan: 1999), augmented by the documentary's computer-mediated simulation of broadcast and new media communication technologies, together with voice-over and the juxtaposition of seemingly incongruent shots, shape the primary narrative structure of the first two thirds of the film. Beginning with an opening shot of the exterior of Bharam's council estate building in Sighthill, Edinburgh, rendered via the audio and graphic simulation of an interactive window, the spectator is immediately introduced to a concrete domestic setting with, perhaps, a 'local' resonance.



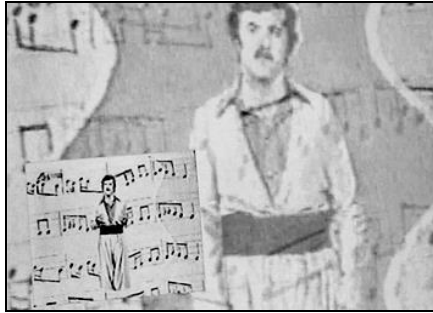
Camcorder footage shot by Bharam in Kurdistan of Syria, retained in its original format, immediately interrupts this 'familiar' scene and directs the gaze toward an 'other' landscape. Digital video footage of Edinburgh's city centre at night further mediates this radical disjuncture between the 'here' and the 'elsewhere,' furnishing a narrative framework within which to address the (dis)embodied dimensions of acoustic memory.

The combined use of voice-over, visual montage and simulated interactivity in *Silent Song* engages with representational practices at the level of narrative implication in contrast to documentary explication. A shift of emphasis, outlined by Nichols (1994) in his discussion of performative documentary, signalling a move

from the evidential discourse of the referent to the poetic and affective dimensions of the text:

Questions of pragmatics shift the dominant from the work's referential relation, its indexical binding to fragments of the historical world, to its relation to its viewers. . . . Performative films rely less heavily on argument than suggestion; they do not explain or summarise so much as imply or intimate (Nichols 1994: 100).

The montage sequences in the documentary, comprising disparate archival material, are used illustratively in response to a series of voice-overs by Bharam yet also follow a more abstract associational logic. This visual media material, digitally manipulated and mediated by the replication of a virtual aesthetic in the form of a Web-based navigation interface, Quick-Time environments and streamed video footage included: newsreel of Kurdish protest marches; footage of Bharam performing '*Egirêkî bê Xollemêsh*' (Fire with no Ash) on Iraqi television in the mid-1970s; shots of *peshmarga* operating within the Kurdish autonomous region accompanied by the signature tune of the English-language clandestine radio station, 'The Voice of Kurdistan', broadcasting from the Kurdish liberated areas in 1974; and photographic images of the public and private use of communication technologies, particular to and preceding the historical period, for example, a typewriter operating in the field of armed combat, or a Kurdish family in Soviet Armenia in the mid-1950s, crouched around a table listening to Radio Yerevan. As such, the self-reflexive reconstruction in *Silent Song* of a mixed media narrative structure, necessarily incorporating old and new media communication technologies such as radio, satellite television and Internet, is designed to reflect the historical and contemporary political deployment of these technologies by Kurdish constituencies in both Kurdistan and across the metropolitan centres of the Kurdish diaspora – a thematic integral to the production concerns of *Silent Song* and discussed further in this section.



Bharam, we were to discover, was a fluent storyteller and an amateur camera buff, eager to collaborate and participate in the intersubjective ethnographic encounter (Jackson 2002), contributing photographs, diaries, song lyrics, recordings and video footage shot by him in Kurdistan of Syria. This footage had to be carefully negotiated, however, necessitating censorship of images considered potentially incriminating for those friends posing innocently before his camera on a balcony in Qamishlo or elsewhere. The final decisions made in postproduction (picture and sound editing) were thus not systematically planned in advance, but reflected instead Barbash and Taylor's (1997) elucidation of the unexpected, often serendipitous encounter that shapes the fluid boundaries between preproduction, production, and postproduction in cross-cultural documentary practice. Reflecting on questions of process inherent in documentary production, MacDougall (1998) writes:

For a viewer, the structure of a film, in the absence of any alternatives, is something given, but for the filmmaker it is the structure that survives after a series of conscious and unconscious rearrangements and amputations. The film has finally come to *this*. It may have found a certain form and been saved from its worst blunders, but in the process it has sacrificed the many other films that were always latent in the rushes (MacDougall 1998: 28).

Bharam's evolving rendition of his past life, often mediated through song, contained several modes of 'storying', including 'autobiography, testimony, life story and memory' (Gray 2003: 114), since every song from his repertoire was accompanied by meticulously constructed accounts of the conditions of its

composition, the connotations of poetic content and the appropriate mode of performance. Each set of lyrics represented what Terkel describes as ‘memory sites’ (quoted in Gray: 123), social references to both individual and collective memory, to events documented by Bharam following his departure from Iraq and later compiled musically in the composition of *Karwan u Siniir*.

Many of Bharam’s stories, however, once revisited or repeated acquired a different inflection and anecdotal inference; the basics of the story remained the same but never sounded quite the same, twice or three times told. Describing the constructed nature of the life story, Plummer writes:

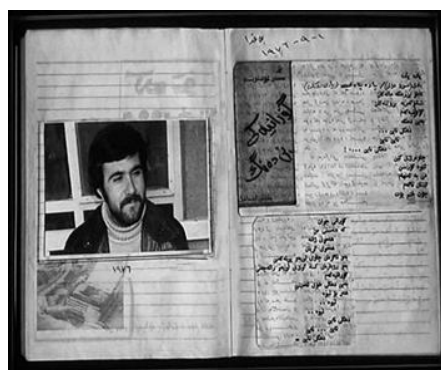
If we accept, as I think we must, that all stories are composed – that the stories of our lives are indeed constructed, fabricated, invented, made up – this does not mean that all stories we hear have to be seen as equally valid, truthful or deceptive. We can differentiate. To say that all lives are invented is not to force us down some extreme path where anything at all can be said about a life. Indeed, I believe it is just the opposite: to recognise that lives are constructed means that we then need to search out ways for evaluating just what it is said that is being constructed. (Plummer 2001: 238).

Collaborating with Bharam thus necessitated a careful negotiation in which we strove to maintain the integrity of a given ‘event’ as remembered and narrated by him, yet remained attentive to the rich layers, nuances, additional incidental details that bolster second or third renditions of a tale. Similarly, Benjamin writes of how the ‘short-lived reminiscences of the storyteller’ (1969: 98) elicit a supplemental response on the part of the listener. The storyteller can never exhaustively explicate the details of the story; equally, the listener reciprocates by imaginatively filling in the gaps, elisions that help shape the dynamics of the tale – to each party the story remains productively incomplete and always in transition.

During the course of numerous discussions with Bharam, typically characterised by our ongoing exposure to fresh anecdotal material and carefully

preserved songs written in the Sorani script, we were unexpectedly presented with the following poem titled ‘*Goraniyekî Bêdng*’ (A Silent Song), written in 1976 by the Kurdish radio and television broadcaster Bakhtyar Ismail Siyamensurî as a tribute to Bahram’s politically disobedient act before a Ba’athist party audience in the Baghdad Institute of Fine Arts:

<p><i>‘Goraniyekî Bêdng’</i></p> <p>Yade, yadî tablo bêrenge matekan Yade, yadî shanogeriye be wênekan</p> <p>Goraniyekem bebê rengê, dengî nayia, naye, naye Goraniyekem bebê rengê, dengî nayia, naye, naye</p> <p>Çawerrêyê kê? Ewe korsin Ewe korsin; min beteniyam Lêtan nagem; çon billêm bot</p> <p>Con billêm bot, goranî ciwan Goranî ciwan ke hestî min hemûyî jane u hemûyî grîfan</p> <p>Bew agirey çawî leyew pêdekenê Bew rûbarey giwêy leyew radeçanê Goraniyekem bebê dengî xoy denêbê</p> <p>Her bo ewe, ewe, ewe, dengî nayê, nayê nayê dengî nayê Goraniyekem bebê dengî xoy demênê</p>	<p>(A Silent Song)</p> <p>(Remembrance. . . of a colourless painting, of a drama without characters.</p> <p>My song is silent, producing no sound. My song is silent, producing no sound.</p> <p>So, why are you waiting? You are the chorus and I am alone. I don’t understand you. How could I sing for you?</p> <p>How can I sing beautiful songs for you? While my feelings are all sorrow and tears.</p> <p>I swear by the fire that is laughing, by the river that is listening, that my song will remain silent.</p> <p>For you, it will never be heard. My song will remain silent.)</p>
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In this poem the dominant Iraqi State discourse is criticised in relation to censorship of Kurdish cultural expression through competing subject positions foregrounded explicitly in a series of opposing pronouns. The history of this composition provided

an important narrative thread for the film, with Bharam recounting its background composition initially on voice-over, shifting to an exclusive face-to-face interview on camera.

A central methodological question was how to both re-enact and capture the historical resonance of such an ‘event’ within a filmic present – an ‘event’ encompassing Bharam’s refusal to sing, his friend’s tribute in the form of a poem, and the subsequent rendition of the poem into a musical score. The notion of a ‘spectral present’ (Das 1989: 324) offered one way to think about the methodological implications of historical retrieval in a documentary film format. The term critically fuses an anthropological concept of synchronic time, which stresses the cultural practices of the everyday, with a historiographical diachronic mode of inquiry. This critical nexus or productive tension between the synchronic and diachronic therefore enabled us to contextualise the performance of ‘A Silent Song’ as diegetically framed by the geopolitical circumstances surrounding its compositional inception in 1976, together with its filmic articulation in August 2000. Hence, the film’s oxymoronic title *Silent Song* alludes to this genealogy and to Bharam’s act of resistance, one of many historical micropolitical protests that Kurdish cultural producers have enacted in refusing appropriation by State-dominated media industries in countries such as Turkey, Iraq, Syria and Iran. Bharam recounts his politically defiant gesture in the film in the following words:

So, my college, they knew I am the Kurdish professional singer at that time, so they want me to sing in that particular Ba’athist party and they wanted to use me as a Kurdish for themselves, to show the other Kurdish people there is no problem. Look, he is a professional singer. He is a Kurdish. He is not Ba’athist. He could sing. And they surround me by all the teacher, they say, okay, your turn third. I say, okay. So I told my friend, he is a singer as well. I told him could you make your song longer? He say why? I say because I am going to go down to the odeon [auditorium] from there I am going out. I’m not going to sing. And I took the opportunity to the stair, right the way out.

Translated into a musical score before his eventual departure from Kurdistan in 1985, 'A Silent Song' was first recorded and performed at The Royal Lyceum Theatre, Edinburgh for the exclusive purposes of the film. In refusing to sing for members of the Ba'athist regime, Bahram's act of self-censorship becomes in itself an act of resistance to be celebrated, chronicled and performed in the future.

The cross-cultural documentary challenge of how to stage cinematically a politically charged 'event' of the past within the temporal framework of an exilic present remains methodologically open-ended nevertheless, underscoring a key thematic address of *Silent Song* – the historical formation of a predominantly oral Kurdish culture, allied to the developing constitution of a technologically mediated diasporic Kurdish public sphere in which the performance and repertoire of the Kurdish musician, relayed via satellite television or through the interactive environment of the Internet, serves as a compelling antidote to Turkish and Middle Eastern state censorship. For the Kurdish 'listening public includes anyone who expresses approval or disapproval of performances offered by Kurdish musicians' (Blum and Hassanpour 1996: 327), and has never been confined to any particular location. Rather, it is dispersed across the real and imagined landscapes of Kurdistan, traversing parts of Iraq, Iran, Turkey and Syria in addition to the diaspora of an estimated one million Kurds living in Europe, North America and Australia. Historically, the formation of this musically attentive public has been dependent on, and constituted through, face-to-face exchanges between performers and audiences in villages and urban tea-houses, and fundamentally sustained by the practices of oral performance whereby the individual Kurdish musician's repertoire carries the symbolic equivalent of an acoustic archive.

The parameters of this ‘listening public’, of Kurdish media production and reception have, however, expanded in time from the early decades of the twentieth century to the present day in accordance with the advent of gramophones, broadcast media and virtual technologies.¹¹ For Blum and Hassanpour, the political impetus of Kurdish linguistic expression and musical production together comprise vital modes of cultural exchange that cannot be underestimated:

All the arguments and techniques that states can deploy in attempting to suppress languages and cultures have become familiar to Kurds, who constitute the largest non-state nation in the world. Kurds living in Turkey, Syria, Iraq and Iran have yet to obtain unrestricted rights to education, publishing and broadcasting in Kurmanji and Sorani . . . Kurdish broadcasting and publishing remains tightly controlled by the government in Iraq and Iran; in Turkey the distribution of Kurdish publications and cassettes was legalised in 1991, but distributors and purchasers face various types of interference from officials and others. . . . Those who tell Kurds that their language does not exist create conditions in which the singing or listening to a popular song are a sign of life (Blum and Hassanpour 1996: 325).

Despite the continuing importance of the live concert for the Kurdish musician marked by the symbolic integrity of the face-to-face exchange, satellite television stations and music websites facilitate a widening of the Kurdish ‘listening public’ sphere, undermining state-controlled media networks, while simultaneously encouraging the ongoing legitimisation of Kurdish culture beyond the boundaries of dominant nation-state infrastructures. The burgeoning proliferation of Kurdish music websites provides a virtual mode of communication between Kurdish musicians. Constituting a nodal point for the dissemination of individual musicians’ repertoires, these sites have brought the ritual of oral performance to a larger imagined audience, connecting Kurds transnationally across Europe, the Middle East and Asia. The diasporic circulation and consumption of music videos, the downloading of popular song on the Web coupled with satellite television and community radio programmes broadcasting contemporary and traditional Kurdish music, collectively effect a

reciprocal and dynamic exchange between migrant Kurds and their audience in different regions of Kurdistan.¹²

Illustrative of this culturally symbiotic process, intensified emphatically in its scope and frequency since the pioneering establishment in 1995 of the first Kurdish satellite television station MED-TV, is the arts programme *Saniesin*. Dedicated to live musical performance and phone-in discussions with the celebrity musician in which the audience is at liberty to request the performance of a certain song, *Saniesin* is globally transmitted through the Belgian-based station Medya (formerly MED-TV, whose licence was revoked as a result of the satellite war waged by Turkey during the 1990s).¹³ In the context of preproduction research, we accompanied Bharam in February 2000 on a trip to Medya, where he was invited to appear on *Saniesin* following the release of his CD '*Karwan u Siniür*'. In between answering questions from the presenter and live performances of his repertoire, beamed to a projected audience of 15 million Kurds across Europe, West Asia and North Africa, Bharam was obliged to field telephone inquiries concerning his musical interests and everyday life in Edinburgh, responding selectively to individual requests, from places as far apart as Sulaiminiyah and Hamburg, calling for the performance of a favourite number.

Given the mechanisms of exclusion on the part of dominant state media networks in relation to the Kurds, the online distribution of music, language, art, culture and Kurdish party political propaganda via the Internet, promises to reconfigure previously restricted networks of media access and consumption towards a more diverse range of competing public spheres. For as Hansen comments in her Foreword to Negt and Kluge's (1993) important theoretical contribution to debates on

the public sphere: '[W]hat constitutes a counterpublic cannot be answered in any singular, foundational manner but is a matter of relationality, of conjunctural shifts and alliances, with making connections with other publics and other types of publicity (1993: XXXIX)'. The diasporic and decentralised establishment of electronically mediated Kurdish 'publics' has resulted in the politically necessary creation of what Kurdish cultural producers and media practitioners depict as a 'virtual Kurdistan'; yet questions of restricted access in Kurdistan itself to this 'extended electronic public sphere' (Holmes 1997: 14) remain, together with celebratory discourses surrounding the constitution of cyberspace as a public sphere democratically different to, and distinguishable from, traditional formations of community.¹⁴

The Performance of 'A Silent Song'

The documentary's suspension of narrative plenitude is foregrounded dramatically in the final section when 'A Silent Song' is performed in an empty auditorium, albeit in an imperially resonant European playhouse deliberately bereft of an audience and remote from a concert hall in Baghdad, simultaneously recuperating and celebrating an event that never occurred, yet is memorialised twenty-four years later in this concrete performative act. The performance is introduced on screen by the appearance of an online buffering zone counting down to zero, simulating interactivity characteristic of listening to and viewing clips of a Kurdish concert on the Internet. Lasting approximately five minutes in duration, 'A Silent Song' is filmed in a series of close, medium and long shots. Dressed in black, Bharam is positioned in the centre of a proscenium stage lit in low-key with a mobile camera circling around him. Subtitled in English and sung in his native Sorani, our intention was to retrieve from his personal archive this little known composition and render it into a live performance.



In the context of the film shoot the song was performed in three takes and sung without accompaniment. On completion of the song, the camera moves to frame a back silhouette shot of Bharam standing and facing the dark space of the auditorium. As the last residues of his voice echo out into the theatre space, the lights are lifted gradually to reveal a theatre without an audience, save the rows of rich red seating running the breadth of the auditorium. Bharam exits the stage and the final point of view is framed from a perspective looking towards the empty auditorium, out through the stage curtains to the theatre, with its layered bucket balconies, chandeliers and concave stalls.



The song that tells a story about a refusal to perform is not sung simply as a lament but acts as a reminder of the continuing repression of Kurdish cultural practices in the present. Moreover, an imagined and dispersed Kurdish audience is actively summoned as witness to the historical event, and the cinematic recording of the song's performance provides an archival and media outlet for wider circulation.

The next cut alters the context abruptly to a tracking sequence, shot by Bharam in Kurdistan of Syria in 1999, driving slowly past a cluster of derelict Kurdish homes, with his voice-over recorded a year later in interview, harrowing in its content, overlaid on the footage:

But I don't think it's safe even when I die to be buried in Kurdistan because I saw by my eye how the government destroyed all the grave, including my father's grave – they destroy it, and they took all the bones and they burned them, and they built houses. So they have no respect ... even for dead. That was in Kirkuk. And the place called Tapay Mallah Abdullah; there is a cemetery there, Qarbizan. So I am frightened, there will be no cemetery even in Kurdistan – you can't find even my bones.

Bharam's painful recollection juxtaposed with an imagined projection into a desolate future conveys a powerful narrative about the material reality of both physical and psychological displacement. In this concluding scene, however, the relationship between what is seen and what is heard has been contrived in postproduction. For the presence of burnt bundles of hay lying stacked on the side of the road resembling the shape of a funeral pyre, together with passing glimpses of Kurdish homes, appears to generate the illusion of symmetry between sound and vision; whereas the footage on screen bears no referential relationship to the geographical and psychic landscape being referenced on the voice track. In this deliberate narrative disjuncture, the acoustic referent is irreversibly severed from its autochthonal moorings. The question who speaks and for whom in documentary representation is never fully determined or answered by the literal anchoring of the voice to the visualised body in film, nor is it answered through a detailed decoding of authorial identity in the image. In the making of *Silent Song*, such questions have been inextricably linked to the politics of cultural difference and representation – critical factors, which emerged out of the encounter between filmmakers and documentary subject. For as MacDougall writes, commenting on the fate of the documentary subject:

Rather than dealing with products of the imagination, we are dealing with real human beings encountering a filmmaker who coexists with them historically... We interpret the perplexing exteriors of social actors in some ways as we interpret people in daily life, but we also perceive them through the narrative apparatus that the filmmaker has erected for us (MacDougall 1998: 101).

Distinctive authorial ‘voices’ emerge in *Silent Song*: Bharam’s narrative voice, as evidenced in his explicit voice-over throughout and in his implicit narration in the final performance of ‘A Silent Song’; and the narrative voices of the filmmakers – not literally heard on soundtrack, nevertheless textually inscribed since we crafted, in collaboration with Bharam, how his ‘story’ should be told. Bharam frequently visited the editing suite to view the work in progress, offering feedback in the form of suggested modifications to sound levels and length of film. He would have in fact preferred a longer and more comprehensive documentation of his musical repertoire yet compromises were struck in postproduction when the pressures of editing (deadlines, finance, and the structural demands of crafting an accessible ethnographic narrative) necessarily interrupted the intersubjective collaborative process.

Recorded and filmed on location in the Royal Lyceum Theatre though not incorporated into *Silent Song*, for instance, was the creation of a sound archive of prominent Kurdish musical ‘voices’ – singers and composers who had influenced Bharam throughout his career. This medley of sound, conceptualised in the initial written treatment of the documentary, comprised a selection of music from Kurdistan of Iraq and Iran recorded from radio and gramophone over four decades between 1930 and 1970. Our aim was to fuse the past with the present, orchestrating a scene where ghostly voices from the Kurdish past gradually infuse the empty auditorium, creating an opening sequence for Bharam’s performance on stage of ‘A Silent Song’. Featuring music selected by Bharam from his archival collection of Kurdish song, the

medley incorporated the acclaimed voices of Miriam Xian (Bardinan, Iraq), Seyd ‘Elî ‘Esxer Kurdistani (Sanadaj, Iran), Tahir Toñiq (Koy Sanjaq, Iraq), Hassen Zirek (Mukryan, Iran), and Mamosta Ali Merdan (Kirkuk, Iraq). The soundtrack concluded with the synchronisation of two voices, that of Bharam and his music teacher at the Institute of Fine Arts in Baghdad, the late Ali Merdan, born in Kirkuk (1913-1981), who had a perfect understanding of Kurdish *Maqam* – an improvisational form of Kurdish music used to designate a particular melodic structure. He was an excellent polyinstrumentalist (tanbour, violin, târ, balabân), a renowned collector of traditional melodies to which he added his own compositions, having recorded and helped make familiar to many households over 700 authentic Kurdish pieces.

For Bharam, the most difficult concession of all was our decision to edit out of the film – due to our need to maintain the narrative integrity of his ‘story’ about refusing to sing for the Ba’athists – his staged and emotive rendition of ‘*Azadi Bo Kurdistan*’ (Freedom for Kurdistan), a composition written in 1988 and featured on his CD in which the unified map and lived territory of Kurdistan is laid out in a series of key place names. The omission of the performance of this song from the documentary, described by Bharam as his own ‘unofficial Kurdish anthem’, is partially rectified here in presenting by way of concluding, the song’s Sorani lyrics in their entirety:

‘Azadi Bo Kurdistan’

Kurdistanîm zor ciwane beheshtî ser cihane
 Deba zû azadî keyîn bo Kurd em Kurditane
 Mehadîm neberde, yekem komarî Kurde, he Kurde [1]
 "Peshewa" qet namirê giyanibaxtîkerî Kurde [2]
 Sîne u Sabîllax yan Bokan, Kirmashan u Merîwan
 Serdeshî u ciwanî Bane, awedan bê Kurdistan
 Diyarbakîr rengîne, xakî Kurdî dêrîne
 Urfe u Mardîn u Dersîm serçawey hemu jîne
 Qamîshlî ta Serçawe, Afrîn hêzûhanawe

(Freedom for Kurdistan)

My Kurdistan is beautiful; she is the
 paradise of this world. With our effort we
 shall liberate her for Kurds; this Kurdistan.
 Mahabad is not to be defeated, the first
 Kurdish republic. Peshawa never dies, a
 sacrifice for Kurds¹⁵. Sina and Sablakh,
 Kirmanshah and Mariwan, Sardasht and
 the beauty of Bannah; I wish that
 Kurdistan be brought to life. Diyarbakir
 is full of colour, an ancient land – Urfa

Dîrîk u Derbsiye gisht be Nêrigiz razawe
Babagûrrgûrr to ciwanî sharî mardî Kurdani
Kerkuk hergîz nagorrê gisht germîan u kiwêstanî

Awadan bê slêmanî bo helmet u qurbanî
Legell Hewilêr [3]u Koye shadamarî Kurdanî
Tikam le gishit Kurdane herçî Kurd le gîhane
Hemû yek dill yekbigrîn mebestiman Kurdistane
Nêrigiz bo Kurd xellat keyin beser em xake ciwane
Deba nêrigiz xallat keyin azadî Kurdistane

Mardin, Darsim are the source of life.

Qamishli, Sarchawa and Afrin are our
strength. Dirik and Darbasiya are
enriched with narcissus. Baba Gurgur,
you are enchanting, a town of brave
Kurds. Kirkuk will never change,
both summer and winter quarters of the
nomads.

Let Sulaiminiyah be brought to life, the
city of “attacks and sacrifices”. With Erbil
and Koya¹⁶ – Kurdish arteries. I urge all
Kurds to unite with one heart; our aim is
Kurdistan. Kurds are rewarded with
narcissus; in this beautiful land let us offer
narcissus for the freedom of Kurdistan.

Notes

- ¹ *Silent Song* (UK, 2000), researched, produced and directed by Alan Grossman and Áine O’Brien, has been screened at numerous international documentary film festivals, the most recent of which is the Taiwan Ethnographic Film Festival (Taipei, October 2003) in the section titled ‘Migration Stories’. All photographic images in text are stills from *Silent Song*.
- ² Hereafter referred to as Bharam.
- ³ Lyrics by Barzan Osman (1974).
- ⁴ M. A. Bahram, *Karwan u Sinûr* (The Caravan and the Border), Recorded Moston Studio, Edinburgh, 1999.
- ⁵ Lyrics of CD songs cited throughout translated from Sorani by Rebwar Fatah. ‘Nergis’ has a double connotation, referencing both the name of a flower (Narcissus) and that of a Kurdish female. Symbolically, it is the sign of spring and freedom. In the original Sorani lyrics, the personal pronoun does not indicate whether ‘Nergis’ refers to the name of a flower or a woman.
- ⁶ Hassanpour, A and Blum, S ‘Razzazi, Naser’, *The New Grove Dictionary of Music Online* Ed. (Accessed 15 September 2003), <<http://www.grovemusic.com>>. To date, there is a paucity of written publications on the subject of diasporic Kurdish musical production and dissemination in contrast to an established ethnomusicological literature of the history of Kurdish song and dance (Christensen 1967; Nezan 1979; and Tatsumura 1980). For a useful online discussion of traditional and contemporary aspects of Kurdish music, see Blum (with Dieter Christensen) ‘Kurdish Music’, *The New Grove Music Online* ed. (Accessed 10 September 2003), <<http://www.grovemusic.com>>.
- ⁷ While Perwer’s music is currently available in Turkey and recording companies are able to reproduce his CD’s, a *de facto* ban remains in place, evidenced by the fact that consumers of his music may be arrested and detained arbitrarily by the Turkish authorities. For a selective account of Perwer’s music, see *Chants du Kurdistan* (1989), Auvidis A 6145, Musiques Traditionnelles.
- ⁸ As a measure of Razazi’s standing in the Kurdish musical diaspora, he both lectured and performed in an inaugural London-based ‘Kurdish Music Conference’ (2 February 2001), organised by the Centre of Near and Middle Eastern Studies, Kurdish Studies Forum. For an outline of the programme, comprising presentations and recitals addressing the history of Kurdish music alongside its different styles and variations of vocal and instrumental forms, see <<http://www.kurdishmedia.com/ac/ac.asp?id=17>> (Accessed 10 August 2003).
- ⁹ See the interactive photographic and textual online archive, <<http://www.akaKURDISTAN.com>> (Accessed 16 February 2000).
- ¹⁰ For discussion of the use of media technologies in visual ethnographic research, see Prosser (1998); Banks (2001); and Pink (2001).
- ¹¹ For a discussion by Kurdish cultural critics and producers charting critically the evolution of Kurdish print, broadcast and electronic media production in the diaspora, see Hassanpour (1992; 1995); Fatah and Durroei (1998) ‘Centenary of Kurdish Media’ <<http://www.cogsi.ed.ac.uk/~siamakr/kurdica>> (Accessed 1 May 2000); and KurdishMedia.com (2000) ‘On the Kurdish Media:

- An Interview with Shahîn B. Soreklî' <<http://cogsci.ed.ac.uk/~siamakr/Kurdish/Kurdica/2000/shahin>> (Accessed 14 March 2003).
- ¹² Witness the transnational proliferation in recent years of both individual and institutional Kurdish music websites providing wide-ranging selections of Kurdish song. See also commercial websites specialising in the sale of videos of Kurdish concerts in both the diaspora and Kurdistan, for example, 'Memuzin Video Productions' <www.cogsci.ed.ac.uk/~siamakr/kurdish/Kurdica/2000/memuzin> (Accessed 29 September 2003).
- ¹³ For an informative discussion of MED-TV's formation, its organisational structure, programming schedule and broadcasting reception by the Turkish government, see Hassanpour, A (1995) 'A Stateless Nation's Quest for Sovereignty in the Sky' <<http://kurdweb.humanrights.de/keo/english/media/articles>> (Accessed 18 August 2003). See also Ryan (1997); Hassanpour (1998) and Fatah (2003) 'The role of Medya TV Satellite Channel on the Kurdish Language' <<http://www.kurdmedia.com/printarticles.asp?id=1527>> (Accessed 4 August 2003).
- ¹⁴ On the subject of the creation of a Kurdish state in cyberspace, see online interview with Rebwar Fatah, co-founder and Director of [Kurdishmedia.com](http://www.kurdmedia.com), an independent information provider established in 1998 <<http://www.kurdmedia.com/inter.asp?id=60>> (Accessed 14 March 2003). See also Napier (2001) 'Does the emergence of Kurdish Satellite Television and Internet Sites Signal the Prospect of a "Virtual Kurdistan"' <<http://www.kurdmedia.com/reports.asp?id=278>>; and Olsen (2001) 'Broadcasting and National Identity in a Non-State Nation – Kurdish Media and the Importance of Cyberspace' <<http://www.kurdmedia.com/reports.asp?id=340>> (Accessed 14 March 2003). For a critical account of the Internet as a new and democratic public sphere, see Poster (1997).
- ¹⁵ 'Peshawa' is the nickname of Qazi Mohammad, the president of the first Kurdish Republic, established in 1946. The Mahabad Republic lasted for less than a year. Qazi Mohammad, his brother Sadr Qazi and their cousin Seyf Qazi, were publicly hanged on March 31, 1947.
- ¹⁶ Koya is an abbreviation for Koysanjak, a town near Sulaiminiyah.

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