Representations of Cultural Resistance in Film in the Kurdish-Dutch Diaspora

A Visual Discourse Analysis

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May the Kurdish people find a peaceful future.

Abstract

This thesis aims to address the question: "How does the representation of Kurdish cultural resistance in visual art made by the Kurdish-Dutch diaspora fit within the Kurdish political discourse?" To answer this question, films by Beri Shalmashi and Reber Dosky were analyzed by means of Visual Discourse Analysis on the basis of themes and symbols that fit within Kurdish political discourse. Unlike traditional International Relations (IR), this thesis takes an aesthetic turn and presents a more expressive and critical view from a diasporic narrative of the Kurdish question, which will deepen the knowledge concerning this conflict through visual discourse analysis. The themes and symbols discussed are cultural memory and collective trauma, the geo-linguistic homeland, autonomy, feminism, and the Kurdish mountains. These themes and symbols are all linked to Kurdish nationalism and cultural resistance and play an important role in the creation of a Kurdish identity among the Kurds living in diaspora. Moreover, this thesis demonstrates how the Kurdish diasporic community represents itself and how politicized Kurdish culture is.

Introduction

The Kurds are the world's largest ethnic group without a homeland (Gunter 2008, 2) and the fourth largest ethnic people of the Middle East (Mojab and Gorman 2007, 63). The Kurdish question deals with the lack of a Kurdish nation state and the conflict surrounding that question. The use of the word 'question' implies that the existence of the Kurds causes some kind of ethno-political problem that needs to be resolved (Bruinessen 2004, 4). It is a complex political problem, which has resulted in a century-long dispute regarding the rights of the Kurds who live in Turkey, Syria, Iraq, and Iran, in which the Kurdish region is situated. In the meantime, many (other) states have become involved in the problem; territorial differences, nationalism and uneven power-relations have prolonged the situation and are likely to continue in the foreseeable future (Ünver 2013, 197 – 223). Much of this conflict has been played out in everyday politics, leading to many deaths. The Kurds have a long history of trauma, and even genocide was committed against them, for instance, during the Anfal campaigns, in which Saddam Hussein targeted Kurdish *peshmergas* (Kurdish freedom fighters) and civilians with chemical weapons, which resulted in the death of at least tens of thousands of Kurds and the displacement of millions of Kurds (Gunter 2008, 1- 19). Many of those displaced persons have dispersed across Europe. It is hard to give an exact estimate of the size of the Kurdish diaspora in Europe, due to the fact that the Kurds do not have a Kurdish national identity, but rather that of one of the occupying countries. However, the most widely accepted estimates set about 850,000 Kurds in Western Europe, far out the most live in Germany, followed by France and the Netherlands (Başer 2013, 8; Institut Kurde de Paris, n.d.). With so many Kurds in Europe who can be easily mobilized, it is crucial to understand the way in which identity and resistance is framed in the European diasporic community.

The realm of International Relations (IR) is often concerned with nation-states, conflict, and trade negotiations. However, over the last few decades, a different approach has become increasingly popular, one that looks at IR from a cultural perspective and incorporates the effect that aesthetics has in world politics as it provides a way to reflect on political conflict and offers a new perspective on the matter (Bleiker 2009a, 1 -3). Nonetheless, little of this 'aesthetic turn' can be seen when researching the Kurds. Much of the research on the Kurds pertains to the areas of human rights, ethnicity, language, religion, or (international) politics, and conflict (Cockrell-Abdullah 2018, 109). Research concerning Kurdish art is minimal, while research into Kurdish art amongst the Dutch diaspora seems to be non-existent. Over the past few years, many newspaper articles have been

written about successful Dutch-Kurdish artists (Schoorl 2020, Belgers 2018, Van der Kamp 2020, Beukers 2020 etc.) and last year, a documentary by a Dutch-Kurdish artist won the Best Dutch Documentary Award at the IDFA (International Documentary Film Festival Amsterdam). In an interview filmmaker Reber Dosky said that making documentaries about Kurdistan was his way to fight for the Kurdish question (Dosky 2020, 1:13 – 2:00). Despite the obvious successes of Dutch-Kurdish artists and the way they link their art to Kurdish politics, it is surprising that no research has been conducted on this topic, especially considering the large number of Kurds living in the Netherlands.

Suncem Koçer, Associate Professor at the Kadir Has University in Istanbul, argues that "Kurdish cinema as a discursive space has always been transnational by nature, in the absence of an official state that creates and regulates a national cinema industry to enable film production" (Koçer 2014, 485). Moreover, the diasporic community in Europe has led to the transnationalization of Kurdish political activism. Since Kurdish diasporic communities were able to interact, communicate and collaborate freely in Europe, they were able to protect Kurdish culture and tradition and develop political agency (Gourlay 2018, 31). The Kurdish diaspora is even thought of as the most politically active migrant group in Europe (Başer 2011). However, little to no academic research seems to have been done on political discourse in the Dutch Kurdish diasporic community, even though the largest immigrant group living in the Netherlands has a Turkish background, of which it is estimated that at least 15% of these immigrants identify themselves as Kurdish (Van den Bos and Nell 2006, 203). This is the reason why this research will analyze representations of Kurdish cultural resistance in visual art made by Kurdish-Dutch artists, study whether their art is inherently political, and if and how these fits within Kurdish political discourse. In this research certain themes and symbols that can be found in Kurdish-Dutch visual art will be linked to the Kurdish political discourse in the diaspora. This method offers a new way of interpreting the Kurdish question from a more personal, critical, and aesthetic viewpoint by looking at resistance outside the region and differs from mainstream IR approaches in which conflicts or states are the main actors. It provides a deeper understanding of a long-lasting conflict and the formation of ethnic identity from within the diaspora, and what's more, an interesting insight into the aesthetic dimensions of resistance from the diasporic narrative which, until now, has not been researched in depth.

Literature Review

Kurdish Political Discourse in the Diaspora

Most literature on Kurdish art relates to cinematic instances, linguistic problems and often discusses Kurds living in Turkey. However, this research will not include cinematic or commercial films, but rather documentaries and short films with a focus on how certain symbols and themes fit within Kurdish political activism. In order to link these forms of visual art to political activism, a short introduction of Kurdish political discourse in the diaspora is necessary.

The Kurds do not form a homogenous ethnic group: they speak different languages, have different nationalities, ideologies, and interests. Due to the absence of a common homeland, they are scattered all over the world (Tugdar and Al 2018, xv). As mentioned earlier, the diaspora has played a very important role in Kurdish political activism (Gourlay 2018 31; Başer 2011). Despite the differences, some common objectives can be found in Kurdish political discourse.

The Kurdish diaspora has played a vital role in the promotion of a Kurdish identity and a Kurdish homeland. It has enabled Kurds to mobilize and organize transnational activities in which their demands for statehood and democratic autonomy could be propagated (Kaya 2020, 159 – 160). Ufkes, Dovido and Tel argue that the Kurdish diaspora in Europe, by being so politically active and developing a truly transnational discourse, has promoted Kurdish identity and intergroup harmony. At the same time, these trigger further collective action and demands for social change (Ufkes, Dovido and Tel 2015, 177). Because of this and the fact that the Kurds diaspora has such a transnational nature and is praised for creating 'brotherhood' and unity in their differences (Eliassi 2016, 1416), the broader Kurdish diaspora in Europe and its political discourse calls for further research. However, the European diaspora is beyond the scope of this thesis, and therefore this research focuses on Kurdish artists in the Netherlands. Very little research has been conducted on the Kurdish diaspora in the Netherlands, and what has been done is concerned with the Turkish-Kurds in the Netherlands (Østergaard-Nielsen 2001, Van den Bos and Nell 2006, Özgür 2021), probably due to the large number of people with a Turkish immigrant background. Nevertheless, the transnational nature of the Kurdish diaspora in Europe, causes for a lot of similarities between the different diasporas and offers an opportunity to look at research conducted on the Kurdish diaspora in other European countries and apply this to this thesis.

Kurdish self-identification is one of the main aspects in Kurdish political discourse (Ünal 2017, 65). In the late twentieth century, ethnonationalism began to grow in the Middle East, Europe, and the Americas, with people becoming more conscious of their ethnic heritage. This led to political demands for minorities, such as self-determination, and opposition against the state as the perceived dominant actor in global politics. The Kurds are an example of this world-wide pattern (Entessar 2010, 1). Generally, there are two ways to fight for these demands in diaspora: directly and indirectly. The first instance may consist of economic, political, or military support in the Kurdish region. Indirect help can be mobilizing support in the host country and forming political organizations that operate from within the diaspora (Østergaard-Nielsen 2001, 272). The degree of shared experience, such as (socio-economic) marginalization, linguicide, displacement and genocide, is seen as the main contributor to Kurdish political activism (Ibid, 4).

Another very important aspect of the Kurdish diaspora is some form of collective trauma and cultural memory. The trauma can be one of exile, or other reasons for leaving the region, or the trauma may have been passed on from one generation to the next. This has helped to create a common identity and although it does not necessarily define a diasporic group, it does heavily influence their political identity (Başer 2015, 33). Moreover, the fact that the Kurds form a stateless diaspora is very defining for the political discourse. Just as a state-linked diaspora, it often has nationalist aspirations. However, a stateless diaspora does not only desire and imagine a homeland, but also has to fight for political representation and autonomy, and against cultural marginalization (Eliassi 2016, 1405 – 1406).

Political Art

Numerous scholars have written on the effect that culture and art have on politics and the other way around (Bleiker, Hall, Bal, Said etc.). Some artists create art with a political message. Others create political art unintentionally. Then there are those who create art that is not political at all. To research how representations of Kurdish cultural resistance in art made by the Dutch-Kurdish diaspora fit within the Kurdish political discourse, it is necessary to reflect on why it is important to look at aesthetics when analyzing world politics and what makes art political on the basis of a few characteristics of art.

As previously said, an 'aesthetic turn' can be seen in International Relations. This aesthetic turn is especially important in terms of representation. Roland Bleiker, professor of International Relations at the University of Queensland, argues that there are mimetic and aesthetic approaches to International Relations. The former have dominated International Relations scholarship and aim to represent politics as 'realistically' and as 'rationally' as possible. The aesthetic approach, on the other

hand, is aware that there is always a gap between representation and what is represented. Mimetic approaches do not consider this gap sufficiently and, therefore, never really grasp the political 'reality' they aim to represent, they lack self-reflection and are often too limited. An aesthetic approach challenges the reader to think about representation and offers a way to see world politics from a different point of view. That is why Bleiker suggests that, in order to gain a deeper understanding of our knowledge of world politics, we should look at aesthetics (Bleiker 2009b, 18 – 23).

Art can be political due to several characteristics of art. According to Mieke Bal, a Dutch cultural theorist, and Miguel Á. Hernández-Navarro, Associate Professor of Art History at the University of Murcia, all forms of art have a creator and are made for someone. For this reason, art is performative, not in the manner of performing arts, but in the sense that it is related to expression that is carried out on the audience. Because every action has a reaction, art precipitates from and contributes to a continuous state of movement. Due to this state of movement, the meaning as well as the agency of the piece of art can always change (Bal and Á Hernández-Navarro 2011, 9 - 20). Another characteristic of art is materiality. Materiality forms the foundation of interaction between the maker and the viewer. Mainstream media lacks this materiality, because there is a distance between the maker and the viewer, it has often a promotional nature, and a mimetic approach to reality (Ibid., 11). Materiality, when discussing aesthetics, has little to do with the physical matter of art, but goes beyond that and encompasses all that concerns the physical existence of a work of art and the aesthetic experience of the viewer. This is a unique experience for every person, which is where the above-mentioned continuous state of movement in art becomes relevant (Mills 2009, 1 – 7). Therefore, in this thesis an aesthetic approach has been chosen with a focus on political art.

Kurdish Identity and Art
In order to analyze symbols of Kurdish cultural resistance, we have to look at what makes art *Kurdish* art. Koçer formulated three criteria for a Kurdish film to be judged as Kurdish while studying Kurdish films made in Turkey. First of all, the usage of the Kurdish language is highly significant, which is associated with the long history of linguicide committed against the Kurds and the pride they take in their language. Secondly, it is important that the filmmaker identifies him- or herself as Kurdish (Koçer 2014, 479). Since the Kurds do not have a nation-state, they can also operate under their national identity, while excluding their Kurdish ethnicity. It is, therefore, obvious that in order for a film to be judged as Kurdish, the artist has to embrace their Kurdish identity. The third criteria involves the subject matter of the film and the way in which the Kurds are portrayed. It is often emphasized that the representation of the Kurds needs to counter existing images and popular

imaginations of the Kurds, in which they are often portrayed as backward or folkloric (Ibid). Koçer explains that there is no clear consensus on these criteria, but when Kurdish films are evaluated and ranked in terms of 'Kurdishness', at least one or a combination of the criteria mentioned above are considered. Koçer also suggests that, when examining Kurdish cinema, one should not only look at the images itself, but also at the meaning of certain symbols, the multiplicity of interpretation and the political discourse it tries to create (Ibid, 479 – 480). Koçer's analysis is a useful reminder that the criteria sometimes seem to be more a matter of opinion or interpretation of Kurdish film than of sound principles. Elif Akçali, Assistant Professor at the Kadir Has University, noted another characteristic of Kurdish films, arguing that Kurdish films have 'essayistic tendencies' in which they produce an alternative representation of the Kurds, Kurdish identity, and Kurdish history. This is highly political, as they offer a solution to the crisis of representation and fight the marginalization of the Kurds. In doing so, Kurdish artists usually refrain from direct engagement and offer subject matter through symbols, metaphors, and representation. Thus, the story is subjective and open for interpretation, but also highly effective in shaping a certain Kurdish political discourse (Akçali 2019, 20 – 34). Koçer and Akçali's criteria and analyses are useful to keep in mind and may provide some guidance as to what to look for while studying Kurdish cinema, even if our analyses may differ. As mentioned above, both articles discuss Kurdish cinema in Turkey. The Kurds in Turkey have been marginalized and discriminated against for decades, during which repressive measures were taken against Kurdish cultural and political activities and the usage of Kurdish language in public spaces was banned (Salih 2020, 10). Due to the transnational nature of the Kurdish diaspora, we might be able to see similar characteristics although one can safely assume that the Dutch-Kurdish artists, the group this thesis focusses on, were able to create their films without fear of possible persecution, which is not the case for many Kurdish artists in Turkey and may have influenced their work.

Kurdish identity is almost intrinsically intertwined with identity politics and political status. It is also described as 'a mix of the aspirations of Kurdish nationalism and the Kurdish desire to find peace, stability, respect, and human dignity in the particular state in which they live' (O'Leary and MacDonald 2007, 255 – 256). Therefore, Kurdish art in which the Kurdish identity is represented usually has a political character. Cultural Anthropologist Autumn Cockrell-Abdullah argues the importance of researching Kurdish art, in her case, in Iraqi Kurdistan. She explains that even though much has been written about the history, politics, and culture of the Kurds, the latter always remains a complicated topic, due to the heterogeneous character of Kurdish culture. However, it is precisely this part of Kurdish culture that is so important in order to understand their position. By not studying their art, the Kurds are further being marginalized as representations of Kurdish identities are being

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ignored (Cockrell-Abdullah 2018, 107 – 109). This article has been very useful for the research conducted in this paper, even though the author focuses on Kurdish art made in Iraqi Kurdistan, and this research investigates visual artworks by the Kurdish diaspora in the Netherlands, because, as mentioned in the introduction of this thesis, Kurdish visual art as a discursive space is a transnational one and much of the cultural production of Kurdish art is issued from within the diaspora (Koçer 2014, 475 – 485). Vera Eccarius-Kelly, Professor in Political Science at Siena College, wrote a chapter in a book on Kurdish art and identity, in which she discussed activism in the diaspora. The author analyzes how the diaspora is mobilized and how ethnic identity can be expressed without the fear of facing political repercussions. The chapter specifically deals with Kurds living in the United States and Germany, some of whom have been interviewed about the representation of Kurdish artists in museums (Eccarius-Kelly 2020, 64 – 95). Although this topic is of considerable interest and concentrates on the diasporic community, this research will not focus on the physical representation of the Kurds (e.g., in museums or broadcasts, etc.), but on political aesthetics, which is not related to the reception of an artwork, but rather to the interpretation of a work of art.

Methodological Approach

This research will focus exclusively on the Kurdish-Dutch diaspora by using a visual methodology. Cultural Theorist Stuart Hall argues that when one examines cultural representation by concentrating on visual language, it can only be properly analyzed by using concrete practices such as signifying, reading, and interpreting symbols, images, narrative, etc., in which symbolic means are expressed. The researcher is not looking for absolute truth, since meanings and interpretations can be contested, but merely to an interpretation of the truth. The debate as to whether or not this is a correct interpretation can be settled by justifying the argumentation and by giving concrete examples which produce a certain meaning (Hall 1997, 9). With regard to film in particular, meaning is expressed through the interaction of different modalities, such as music, text, camera effects, the order of camera shots, etc. These modalities all create a dynamically unfolding discourse. Therefore, when analyzing film, a focus on the visual language, symbiotics and actual language is necessary if one wants to research the discourse (Wildfeuer 2014, 1).

To do so, one needs a concrete methodological approach and more specifically to this research, an approach in which semiotics are interpreted and can be applied to the discourse of Kurdish resistance. This will be done by drawing on the theories proposed by Peggy Albers, Professor of Language and Literacy at Georgia State University, and Gillian Rose, Professor of Human Geography at Oxford University, both of whom are involved in (Visual) Discourse Analysis or semiotics. Rose does not refer to it as 'visual' discourse analysis, but merely as a different form of discourse analysis that focuses on the image. In this paper the term Visual Discourse Analysis (VDA) as defined by Albers will be used. Albers explains: "VDA is a general term for an approach to analyzing art as a language and its use. It is concerned with a theory and method of studying the structures and conventions within visual texts and identifying how certain social activities and social identities get played out in their production" (Albers 2007, 83). Rose argues that this form of discourse analysis focuses on the notion of discourse articulated through visual images and verbal texts and looks at how artists use visual language to construct their account of the world (Rose 2001, 139 – 140). It is also a method that explores the nature and the function of symbols as well as the underlying expression and representation. "Semiotics offer a way of thinking about meaning in which written/oral language and visual texts work in concert, and in which written/oral language is not the primary source through which meaning is mediated and represented" (Albers 2007, 83).

Gillian Rose argues that there are five themes that need to be considered when analyzing the social effects of visual imagery. Firstly, the instance that images themselves have a certain effect. They can be a potential site of resistance, but to articulate that might be difficult. Therefore, the visual is not

the same as language. Rose also argues that knowledges are conveyed through all sorts of media, including the visual, and the form of visual media researched in this paper includes language or some form of text. Secondly, visual culture is concerned with the way in which images visualize social difference. Thirdly, when analyzing visual culture, one is not only concerned with how the images look, but how they are looked at. For instance, images of social difference work not only by what they show, but also by what is missing and what kind of 'seeing' they invite, namely, to look at the bigger picture and the wider cultural construction of the difference in representation. Fourthly, Rose mentions the emphasis in the term 'visual culture' on how visual images are embedded in a wider culture. Lastly, it is important to remember that just like an image might be a site of resistance, so too might be a particular audience. As Hall pointed out, there is no absolute truth, so debate about the meaning may occur (Rose 2001, 5 – 15).

There is little research on how to specifically analyze a short film, particularly with regard to political influence. A short film is usually considered to be a film of less than 30 minutes. When cinematography first started, most films were short, but today it can be considered a different genre in the film industry. Just as long films, a short film depends on visual action as well as the illusion of reality which is inherent to the usage of film as a visual medium. However, short films are much simpler and freer. The simplicity lies in the fact that there are only a few characters, and the plot is simple. The freedom of a short film consists in the possibility to use metaphors and literary devices that cannot be used in commercially oriented long films. Therefore, this genre is often compared to other short art forms, such as short stories, poems, and photography (Cooper and Dancyger 2015, 1 – 6). However, when analyzing a short film, it still has the same modalities as a longer film, but often deals with more semiotics and less actual text, and can, therefore, be analyzed in a similar way (Wildfeurer 2014, 22). The political influence of films is often underestimated because they are seen as entertainment and people are aware that they are watching fiction, which is why people lower their political guard. Research has shown, however, that due to certain memory associations, films do have influence on the political attitudes of an audience (Adkins and Castle 2014, 1232 – 1233).

Much more research has been conducted on documentaries, and it has been demonstrated that their political influence is undisputed (Nichols 2016, 220). When watching a documentary, one must be aware of a paradox: a documentary supposedly transmits knowledge in a clear and understandable way, but the more a documentary presents the truth, the more one should doubt it. They can aim to represent the truth, but how the truth is constructed depends on the filmmaker's own view of what is true and what is right (Steyerl 2007). Steyerl states: "Thus, the political importance of documentary forms does not primarily reside in their subject matter, but in the ways

in which they are organized" (Ibid). However, this thesis is not a search for the truth, but an analysis of the representation of cultural resistance.

The political impact of documentaries can be argued on the basis of three concepts that build upon each other. Firstly, most documentaries represent those who challenge the status quo. They give a voice to those who cannot speak, and show these people in imaginative, compelling, and aesthetic ways. This offers the viewer a new way of thinking on the topic the producer wants to address (Selvelli 2016, 209 – 239; Nichols 2016, 221 – 222). Furthermore, documentaries often do not feature political parties or an organized movement. They embody a more personal account of larger views, such as human rights or certain conflicts, without presenting a political orientation (Nichols 2016, 222). Lastly, political documentaries are often concerned with showing a representation of the 'social impact'. Since documentaries offer a representation of those who are underrepresented, they show how this affects them and offer a way to empower them (Ibid, 222 - 223).

In this thesis, I will apply this method to a few themes and symbols visible in two types of visual art, namely fictional and non-fictional. I will look at two short films written and directed by Beri Shalmashi, called *Shouted from the Rooftops* (2017) and *Frontline* (2016) (originally called *Het Front*) and two documentaries by Reber Dosky, called *Sidik and the Panther* (2019) (originally called *Sidik en de Panter*) and *Radio Kobanî* (2016). I will look at the themes of collective trauma and cultural memory, the geo-linguistic homeland, autonomy, Kurdish feminism, and the Kurdish mountains. Both Shalmashi and Dosky are Dutch-Kurdish artists, and their work is heavily influenced by their Kurdish descent. These films all form contemporary reflections and representations of the Kurds, and all include different narratives and views on these themes and symbols that can be interpreted as Kurdish cultural resistance and fit within Kurdish political discourse.

Visual Discourse Analysis Applied to Kurdish-Dutch Films and Documentaries

In this chapter a visual discourse analysis will be applied based on five themes described by Gillian Rose which can be interpreted as representative of Kurdish cultural resistance and fit within the discourse of Kurdish political activism in the diaspora. These themes and symbols are visible in two types of visual art: fictional and non-fictional. The analysis will be based on two short films (fictional), written, and directed by Beri Shalmashi called *Shouted from the Rooftops* (2017) and *Frontline* (2016) (original title *Het Front*) and two documentaries (non-fictional) by Reber Dosky, *Sidik and the Panther* (2019) (original title *Sidik en de Panter*) and *Radio Kobanî* (2016). Beri Shalmashi (1983) is a Dutch-Kurdish filmmaker, screenwriter, and columnist for the Dutch newspaper *De Volkskrant*. She was born in Paris, where her parents fled to after the Iranian revolution. They returned with their baby to the Kurdish region in Iran, but not being safe, they returned to Europe and settled in the Netherlands. In 2012, Shalmashi moved to Erbil, the capital of the Kurdish Region in Iraq. In 2015 she decided to move back to the Netherlands, as the rise of ISIS made working and living conditions in the region very tough. She comes from a resilient family, as both her parents fought in the resistance and her uncle was murdered by the Iranian regime for his activities in the opposition. In the Netherlands she gained fame with her television drama *Mama*, for which she received a 'Gouden Kalf', a prestigious award conferred at the Netherlands Film Festival (Beukers 2020). She has also made two short films about Kurdistan or Kurdish heritage, which will be discussed in this chapter. The other two documentaries analyzed in this chapter have been directed by Reber Dosky. Dosky (1975) was born in the mountains of Barzan in the Kurdish region of Iraq. He came to the Netherlands as a refugee in 1997, fleeing the very repressive, anti-Kurdish regime of Saddam Hussein. In 2013 he graduated from the Dutch Film Academy and only a few years later, in 2016, he received the award for Best Dutch Documentary at the IDFA (International Documentary Film Festival Amsterdam) for his documentary *Radio Kobanî.* In 2019, his documentary *Sidik and the Panther* won the same award. Dosky's documentaries are known for their highly aesthetic value as well as their political message (Van der Kamp 2020, Smit 2020.)

I will begin by giving a brief summary of the films analyzed. Then I will provide the analysis divided in the themes of collective trauma and cultural memory, the geo-linguistic homeland, autonomy, Kurdish feminism, and the Kurdish mountains. Both Shalmashi and Dosky are Dutch-Kurdish artists, and their work is heavily influenced by their Kurdish roots.

Film Summaries

Shouted from the Rooftops is a short drama of approximately 7 minutes, written and directed by Beri Shalmashi. It was broadcasted on national television in the Netherlands and shown at several film festivals (Topkapi Films n.d., NPO 3 n.d.). It is a romantic story about Ferhat (Ismail Zagros) who lives in a war-torn Kurdish town. He is in love with his neighbor Sherin (Nawroz Sinjari). They communicate with each other by shouting to each other from the rooftops. It is inferred that Sherin leaves to become a *peshmerga* and does not survive the battle. Sherin's family decides to leave the town which is increasingly deteriorating and exists of burning rubble. Ferhat decides to stay, as, according to him: 'someone who leaves, will always become someone who wants to return' (*Shouted from the Rooftops* 2017, 4:59; my translation).

Frontline (2016) is a short film of approximately 11 minutes, written by Beri Shalmashi and directed by Floris Parlevliet. The story is about the Dutch-Kurdish Ceylan (Maryam Hassouni) who lives a seemingly happy life in the Netherlands with her Dutch boyfriend Bastiaan (Teun Kuilboer). However, in her home country the *peshmergas* are fighting IS and she is determined to join them. She prepares for the war on the shooting range and has to say goodbye to her boyfriend for an indefinite period of time (*Frontline* 2016).

Radio Kobanî (2016) is a documentary directed by Reber Dosky and is a coproduction of Jos de Putter/Diepscherpte BV and Human. It tells the story of a young woman named Dilovan Kiko, who starts her own radio station as soon as Kobane begins to be liberated from IS in 2014. Dilovan's radio station and her interviews function as the red line in the documentary, whilst we see Kobane being further liberated, people returning to their houses and trying to live their life as 'normal' as possible again. Throughout the documentary, we hear the voice-over of Dilovan in the form of a letter to her unborn child, with the story of how Radio Kobanî came to be.

Sidik and the Panther (2019) is also documentary by Reber Dosky and is a production of Jos de Putter/Dieptescherpte BV. The documentary is set in the Kurdish mountains in northern Iraq and follows a Kurdish man named Sidik Barzani, who is convinced that the Persian leopard still lives in these mountains. For 25 years he has been looking for this leopard, by walking through the mountainous area, talking to people about the leopard and making notes. He hopes to find the leopard, because, in his eyes, that would mean that the area will become a protected nature reserve and that the conflict in that area will end (IDFA n.d.).

Cultural Memory and Collective Trauma

As briefly mentioned in the literature review, cultural memory and collective trauma play a big part in the discourse of Kurdish political activism. Anh Hua, Associate Professor at the San Diego State University, argues that: "Memory is an important term of analysis for diaspora and feminist theorizing precisely because it is closely tied to historical and political struggles. Memory has become a faculty that is gendered, appropriated, politicized, nationalized, medicalized and aestheticized" (Hua 2018, 197). The difference between personal memory and collective memory lies in the fact that personal memory is an individual and often first-hand experience. Cultural or collective memory is a construction that encompasses generations and is shared by people from the same group, class or in this case, ethnicity (Ibid, 198). Similarly, a collective trauma is historically made, not born. Therefore, it does not mean that everyone who feels the trauma has to have experienced a certain event, or even the same event. It is, however, an important factor in creating a collective identity (Smelser 2004, 35 -55). The representation of trauma can be literal, voyeuristic, a preferred reality or a way to deal with trauma for the artist personally. Therefore, it always carries political power (McInnes and Schaub 2019, xi). "One of the many complexities of trauma includes the absence of fixity and thus an enforced degree of tolerance variously of disintegration and fragmentation, suppression, intrusive expression, re-integration and recovery, where recovery stands for a new encounter with a re-formed self, no longer separated or defined by trauma" (Ibid).

Visual arts can provide the means to represent trauma in an expressive manner and offers the viewers an engagement in the politics of trauma (Ibid, xii). Due to years of oppression, displacement and genocide, the Kurds have become a subaltern people. The countries in which the Kurdish region is situated often did not allow any Kurdish cultural activities and denied their existence. In the diaspora, they found an opportunity to speak again, explore their cultural richness and gain agency despite the situation (Koçer 2014, 473 – 488). Through aesthetics, collective memory can be created, as it can suffice as a tool to connect the past and the present, which is crucial for the creation of a common cultural identity. In Kurdish migratory aesthetics, such as songs, movies and documentaries, we often see dealing with trauma and shaping trauma in a certain way that is accessible for the Kurdish diaspora and creates a greater feeling of unity (Volgsten and Pripp 2016, 144 – 164). By repossessing their own traumas and memories, the Kurds take the narrative into their own hands and give their own representation of the represented. The representation of cultural memory and collective trauma is highly visible in the films analyzed.

In *Shouted from the Rooftops*, at the end of the film, Sherin's family leaves the town they were living in after Sherin's death. Sherin's sister asks Ferhat to leave as well. He refuses, saying that: "someone

who leaves, will always become someone who wants to return" (*Shouted from the Rooftops* 2017, 4:59; my translation). This statement refers to a collective trauma of the Kurds: the absence of a homeland and the fact that the Kurds have a long history of (forced) migration, because of wars, political oppression and genocide committed against their people. So, the instance of leaving your home functions as a cultural memory and a collective trauma (Volgsten and Pripp 2016, 145). Through individuals, families and other forms of relational ties, cultural memory is shaped and can also be shaped in the form of a collective trauma. These memories are linked to a communal past and propagate a certain understanding of their history, traditions, and geographic locations. The act of remembering those communal memories and reproducing them leads to a deeper understanding of the collective trauma and, especially in a diasporic narrative, enhances the feeling of Kurdish identity and belonging (Eccarius-Kelly 2015, 185). Ferhat's statement is obviously deeply filled with knowledge of the collective trauma of leaving the place you belong to. It also refers to the pain Sherin must have felt when she left to fight as a *peshmerga*. It is highly political since it appeals to the memory of one's people and the notion of belonging. The fact that Ferhat decides to stay is an option that not many people have, although we can wonder if it really is an option, since the town is seemingly empty and completely destroyed by the time the family of Sherin leaves. Moreover, the film does not indicate an exact time or setting. The war-torn Kurdish village could have been any town that has been targeted throughout the years of violence against the Kurds. This indicates that just like the film, the trauma of the Kurds is timeless and can be a recent trauma, or one that has been passed on for generations, creating a cultural memory.

Unlike *Shouted From the Rooftops*, the indication of time is much clearer in *Frontline*. The film was issued in 2016, whilst the Kurds were still fighting Islamic State (IS), therefore, it is safe to assume that the film takes place around that time. The Kurds were heavily attacked by Islamic State, especially in the Syrian city of Kobane, where the majority of the inhabitants are Kurdish; moreover it is situated in the Rojava region, which the Kurds consider a part of Syrian-Kurdistan (Federici 2015, 88). Even though it is not mentioned where Ceylan will serve as a *peshmerga*, William Gourlay, Research Associate at Deakin University and specialized in Kurdish politics, argues that attacks on the Kurdish people like those by IS, but also further back in history such as the attacks on Halabja in Iraqi Kurdistan[1] and the aftermath of those attacks, have created a deep collective trauma in the Kurds, which has given them the feeling they can only depend on each other. This creates a deeper solidarity amongst the heterogeneous Kurdish community. The traumas of multiple conflicts also

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[1] Chemical attack committed against the Kurds in the city of Halabja on March 16, 1988, which resulted in the death of thousands of civilians (Gunter 2008, 14).

highlight the Kurds' differences from the Arabs and Turks (Gourlay 2018, 34 – 40). In *Shouted from the Rooftops* the principle of collective trauma can be observed again, and how this trauma is caused by many different conflicts, whilst simultaneously enhancing the feeling of 'Kurdishness'. In the film, we can see that Ceylan experiences trauma from the news she hears from her region (*Frontline* 2016, 00:40 – 01:12). Therefore, she feels that being a Kurd, she should support the peshmergas in their battle and join the fight alongside them.

Radio Kobanî also shows the process of collective trauma and how it turns into a cultural memory, as it is a major theme throughout the documentary. First, the audience gets to experience some of the trauma the people had to endure, as they witness how bodies are being cleared from the ruins in the city, while the children in Kobane children are the seemingly indifferent spectators (*Radio Kobanî* 2016, 09:17 – 15:00). We also get to see the liberation of Kobane, as the audience is taken to the front, where IS fighters fire directly at the cameraman (Dosky himself) and the Kurdish militia (*Radio Kobanî* 2016, 15:30 – 21:39). Second, we get a sense of the trauma Dilovan, the main character of this documentary, has endured: her brother and father have gone away to fight, and her best friend was decapitated in a public execution by IS. She talks about her trauma in the letter to her unborn child, but also discusses the subject with people she interviews for her radio station. As the reconstruction of Kobane progresses, we briefly follow a Kurdish sniper, who talks very openly with his barber about his traumatic experiences. He tells, for instance, how IS brainwashed children into fighting for them and used them as suicide bombers. Often, he only discovered after he had killed them and came to retrieve their weapons, that they were children. He tells the barber how he has sleepless nights over these events, "however, you are at war and you have to fight. If I don't kill them, they will continue to harm my people" (*Radio Kobanî* 2016, 38:32 – 41:17, my translation). So, while we see the rebuilding of Kobane, we also experience the processing of trauma by the people involved in this conflict, which gives the documentary a very humane aspect. Even more so once we see people beginning to pick up their daily life again. Dilovan is a young woman, of about twenty. During the war, the things she missed most were the Friday picknicks with her friends and flirting with boys in the park. Once Kobane is liberated, we see her enjoying the picknicks once again, we see her flirting with boys and even marrying a boy she likes. This is a clear example of "what doesn't kill you, makes you stronger," although it is evident that the memories of the war will leave their scars. The documentary ends with the marriage of Dilovan, a hopeful new beginning for her and for the people of Kobane.

As in *Radio Kobanî,* we can see the processing of collective trauma and the creation of collective memory throughout *Sidik and the Panther* as well. While Sidik is searching the mountains in Iraqi Kurdistan to find a leopard, the audience gains insight into the writings in his notebook through the voice over. He tells of his experiences during the regime of dictator Saddam Hussein, and how his village has been destroyed. The people he meets in the mountains also share their stories, how loved ones have been taken away from them and how their relatives died fighting for their freedom. Dosky himself also makes an appearance in the documentary and tells Sidik that his grandfather has died fighting in those mountains as a *peshmerga*. Together they build a memorial out of stones and flowers (*Sidik and the Panther* 2019, 26:01 – 29:00). This is a very clear and literal symbol of processing trauma. It is also a way to regain possession of a cultural memory and to take the narrative into your own hands.

Geo-linguistic Homeland
As mentioned before, the idea of a 'Kurdish homeland', which transcends transnational borders, is a binding factor in Kurdish cultural identity. This idea is mostly created and promoted in the Kurdish diaspora. The conditions that enhance this idea are a strong shared cultural identity and new media that allow for Kurdish cultural instances to be shared and spread throughout the world, especially concerning Kurdish language (Koçer 2014, 475). Through aesthetic and discursive signification, the Kurdish diaspora aims to give a positive representation of Kurdish cultural identity. Especially during the fight against IS in the past few years, the aim of the Kurds was to show the world secular-civilized Kurds, positive gender politics and the willingness to adhere to democratic ideals. By doing so, they have taken a globalized turn to gain international recognition for their imagined homeland (Kardaş and Yesiltaş 2017, 20). The theme of the imagined homeland often explores notions of borderlands, migration, displacement, positionality, questions of identity, and the imagination of a Kurdish nation state in a transnational space. It also tends to deal with the imaginary and physical fight for a nation-state, the trauma that is linked to the lack of a homeland, linguicide and having to deal with discrimination in the Kurdish region as well as in their new country of destination combined with the trauma of forced immigration (Eliassi 2015, 45 – 49). These themes are evidently present in the documentaries.

In *Shouted from the Rooftops*, a very important aspect that can be regarded as political is the use of language. The Kurds have their own language, although there are many different dialects. A study in the 1980s estimated that in terms of number of speakers, the Kurdish language ranks around fortieth amongst the about 7000 languages in the world. This ranking is especially remarkable considering the

long history of linguicide the Kurdish language has had to deal with (and still does today in some parts of the world). (Hassanpour, Sheyholislami and Skutnabb-Kangas 2017, 2). Presumably, the number of Kurdish speakers has grown since the 1980s, since the use of their language has become less restricted in the Kurdish region: in 2003, Kurdish gained official status in Iraq, in contrast the language was completely banned in Turkey until 1992 and is only tolerated today. In Syria it too has been subjected to linguicide and in Iran it only became tolerated after the Iranian Revolution in 1979 (Sheyholislami 2010, 290). It is widely accepted that language plays a large role in national and collective identity and is one of the most important means to reproduce and construct that identity (Ibid). The fact that the Kurdish language is burdened with history makes its significance all the more important. It is common for Kurdish artists to use Kurdish language in their art works, especially if they are in a situation in which they can use that language freely, for instance when a film is issued in a free country, i.e., the Netherlands. The use of the Kurdish language in film can be seen as a semiotic process of 'iconization', in which language becomes iconic and standard for the representation of Kurdish people. In addition to the iconization, it also serves as a symbol for cultural resilience and political agency, because, just like the Kurds, it shows to have survived attacks on its existence (linguicide), while the use of the Kurdish language also symbolizes the resistance against state oppression (Koçer 2014, 483). Philip Kreyenbroek, Professor Emeritus of Iranian Studies argues that "the Kurdish language is both proof and symbol of the separate identity of the Kurds, and impressive efforts made to preserve and develop it" (Kreyenbroek 1991, 53). In *Shouted from the Rooftop*, only Kurdish is spoken. When the film begins, there is no music in the background and the camera shoots slow, calm close-ups of Ferhat, along with his voice. Due to the calm nature of the film at that moment, the audience is drawn completely into Ferhat's voice and language usage. Ferhat's first sentence is: "I had never expected that we would reach this point of silence" (*Shouted from the Rooftops* 2017, 0:28; my translation). This is a reference to the fact that since Sherin is gone, they cannot speak to each other anymore from their rooftops. This sentence can also be interpreted as the history of Kurdish language: Ferhat knows their language has suffered a lot, but he never expected that he would no longer be able to express his love through his language.

 Just as in Shalmashi's films, language plays an important role in the documentaries by Reber Dosky. They are both entirely spoken in Kurdish and the main characters are Kurdish. The Kurdish language is emphasized in *Radio Kobanî* when they film how an IS fighter is being questioned about his motives by the Kurdish soldiers, for which they need an interpreter to translate from Kurdish to Arabic and vice versa. The audience hears the interpreter speak. This is very important, because to an unknowing ear Arabic and Kurdish might sound the same. Since the documentary is subtitled, Dosky

could have chosen to edit the voice of the interpreter out of the documentary and let the subtitles do their job. In that case the general public would not have been aware that the Kurdish soldiers and the IS fighters don't understand each other (*Radio Kobanî* 2016, 46:55 – 49:51). Kurdish is an Indo-European language related to Persian and very different from Arabic, a Semitic language, and Turkish. Throughout its history the Kurdish language has often been completely overshadowed by Arabic or Turkish (Kreyenbroek 1992, 53 – 54). The emphasis on the fact that the Kurdish fighters do not speak Arabic serves two purposes. First, it underlines not only the difference between Kurdish fighters and IS fighters but also between Kurds and Arabs, and shows that they really have their own Kurdish identity. By the way the documentary is edited, this is also made clear to, for instance, the European audience who does not understand these languages. Second, it demonstrates that just like the Kurds, the Kurdish language is strong and even though it has always been subjected to linguicide, it has survived even though many Kurds were forced to learn and speak a different language than their own.

A very clear example of the 'imagined homeland' is to be found in several instances in *Sidik and the Panther*. Sidik has been looking for the leopard for over 25 years. Throughout the documentary, we see the seasons change, as the mountains go from green and flowery to dry, and then covered in snow. This creates the feeling that Sidik's search is almost a version of Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* (1953).[2] Most of the people Sidik encounters only remember their elders talking about leopards in the area, and nobody seems to have actually seen them. The area has been heavily subjected to conflict aimed at the Kurds over the past decades. The leopard in this sense is not only the symbol of hope for a better future, but also of the 'imagined' homeland. In Kurdish diasporic narrative, this homeland can often be interpreted in two ways. Firstly, finding the leopard will mean that the area will become a protected nature reserve, and will hopefully bring stability to the region. 'Home' in this sense is a safe space where one can find a stable place of residence. It also refers to a territorial homeland (Galip 2014, 84), in this case, Sidik's theatre, the Kurdish mountains and the Kurdish region. The leopard symbolizes the Kurds in the sense that the Kurdish mountains were his natural habitat, but due to several wars it was severely disturbed, leaving his species seriously endangered (CITES 2020, 11). At the end of the documentary, we are introduced to Hana Reza, a wildlife specialist who is conducting a research regarding the Persian leopard in the Zagros mountains, who provides students with proof that the leopard has been spotted, an indication that

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[2] Play by Samuel Beckett in which two characters meet by a leafless tree which in the following act has grown leaves, indicating that time has passed. In the meanwhile, they are having discussions while awaiting Godot, who will never arrive (Beckett 1953).

the leopard has returned to its natural habitat. It remains unclear if Sidik is aware of this research or if he ever encounters a leopard, but the audience is left with the knowledge that Sidik's search has not been in vain and that his goal is within reach. "Kurdish documentary cinema is just one of the several means of resistance capable of transforming the subaltern subject into a main actor who can re-write history with his or her own outlook and point of view" (Sevelli 2016, 219). By informing the audience that the leopard has returned, Dosky not only changes the narrative of Sidik but also shows that, even though the natural habitat of the Kurds has been disrupted, the ideal of a Kurdish homeland is within reach.

Autonomy

This part of the analysis discusses representations of autonomy, a subject that does not appear in literature on Kurdish art but is very important in Kurdish political discourse. The Kurds in Iraq have been oppressed for decades. The fall of dictator Saddam Hussein resulted in the autonomous Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) in federal Iraq. This has inspired Kurds all over the world to fight for autonomy (Gunter 2008, 1). Moreover, the Kurdish *peshmerga* as well as members of, for instance, the People's Protection Units (YPG) have mobilized their forces militarily and call for democratic autonomy within the existing state (Federici 2015, 83). They showed a large degree of autonomy during the war against IS, in which the Kurds gained worldwide fame for their significant help in defeating IS, with little external aid (Aziz and Cottey 2021, 226). The act of handling certain situations autonomously is very evident in Kurdish art, as it is an important part of Kurdish politics.

In both *Shouted from the Rooftops* and *Frontline*, there are obvious links to Kurdish autonomy, namely the fact that Sherin leaves her family to be a *peshmerga*, just as Ceylan leaves the Netherlands for the same reason. This autonomous way of operating dates back to the era of the Ottoman Empire, in which, during several conflicts, Kurdish tribes came together to protect themselves from outside threats (McDowall 2004, 38 – 66). After the Second World War they started to organize under the name *peshmerga*, 'those who face death' (McDowall 2004, 311). Aziz and Cottey argue that this name is not only intertwined with the idea of Kurdish bravery and has strong heroic connotations, but also a call for young Kurds to overcome their fear of death and fight for freedom (Aziz and Cottey 2021, 234). Today they operate in a grey area between a form of regular state-controlled military by the KRG, and a guerilla force fighting for independence (Ibid, 228 – 230). These Kurdish nationalist fighters play an important role in Kurdish nationalist discourse (Charountaki 2018, 1585) and have become an integral part of Kurdish culture: *peshmergas* who died as martyrs have been eternalized in the public space by memorials, sculptures, films etc. (Fisher-Tahir 2012, 92).

Inclusion of *peshmergas* in Kurdish film has become a common feature and propagates the idea of Kurdish resilience and bravery. It also emphasizes the idea of Kurdish autonomy. In *Shouted from the Rooftops*, Shalmashi literally demonstrates the meaning of *peshmerga* with the death of Sherin. In *Frontline*, Ceylan lives in the Netherlands and is not necessarily involved in the war with IS. She is troubled so deeply by the footage she sees on tv that she feels that it is her duty as a Kurd to help her people, since nobody else will. This also refers to the fact that, generally from within the diaspora, there are two ways of fighting open to the Kurds: directly and indirectly (Østergaard-Nielsen 2001, 272). In this case, Ceylan chooses for the direct approach. Arguably, Shalmashi uses the indirect approach by making these films. The inclusion of *peshmerga* in these short films reminds them of their history, their current situation, and their future.

Unlike *Shouted from the Rooftops* and *Frontline*, the war is very apparent in Dosky's documentary *Radio Kobanî*. We see how disfigured bodies are found underneath the rubble of bombed houses and how they are being taken away without anybody looking shocked, as for them, this is daily business (*Radio Kobanî* 2016, 09:17 – 15:00). We also see Dosky as the cameraman run for his life as he is in the middle of an attack on the *peshmergas* by the IS fighters that are left in Kobane. During this footage, the sound takes turns between the sounds of the shouting and the heavy breathing of Dosky who is running for his life, and the voice-over of Dilovan, in which she tells what happened to her and her family after IS sieged Kobane (*Radio Kobanî* 2016, 15:30 – 21:39). "Kurdish militias in Syria and Iraq, including the Iraqi peshmerga and the People's Defense Units, or YPG, are considered secularists and Marxists, respectively, and are therefore marked for death" (Weiss and Hassan 2016, 164). In their war against IS, the Kurds had to deal with human casualties, as well as costs concerning infrastructure, economy, and security, but at the same time they made significant gains, with the liberation of Kobane as a climax of their victory. After the initial shock, the Kurds, with the backing of international powers, were quick to start counterattacks against the IS offensive, pushing the terrorists outside of Kurdish territory. Since the beginning of the Syrian Civil War, no other situation gained as much international media coverage as the fight for Kobane between the Kurds and IS. Thus, Kobane gained a symbolic significance to the Kurds, which exceeded its strategic significance and strengthened Kurdish nationalist consciousness (Dalay 2018, 78). This situation is something Dalay refers to as 'discursive formations': "In this respect, the fight over and the liberation of Kobane has provided the Kurdish nationalism with a significant narrative together with new images and symbolism" (Ibid). This also becomes clear in the documentary. The documentary starts in 2014, which is still in the heat of the fight, but most of the city is still in the hands of IS. Slowly, we see parts of the city taken back by the Kurds, who encounter serious dangers. The footage of Kurdish fighters shooting at IS gets humanized by the voice-over of Dilovan, who explains *why* they need to use this

kind of violence. We see people returning with everything they can carry; however, they return to a completely destroyed city. Some return with one suitcase only, others with their dog or their family and hopeful children singing songs as they arrive home (*Radio Kobanî* 2016, 23:53 – 26:51). Over the course of two years, we also see daily life continuing , as reported by Dilovan: there are soccer tournaments for children and the bakery reopens. The documentary is a story of a city that is being liberated and freed by the Kurds autonomously, while fighting for their autonomy. This is not only a documentation of what happened in Kobane, but also a symbol of Kurdish resilience and how they, seemingly on their own as help by other countries is not mentioned, are strong and brave enough to fight IS and return from their battle much stronger. It is also a symbol of hope for a homeland. The battle of Kobane represents the internationalization of a local struggle and forms a symbolic meaning for the people who watch these images in the form of meaning-making and opinion forming concerning the situation that benefits the Kurds. It not only provided the Kurds with a higher sense of Kurdish nationalism, but it also gained them international military and political support for Kurdish autonomy (Kardaş and Yeşiltaş 2017, 4 – 5).

Feminism

A frequent topic among Western feminist scholars is whether nationalism and feminism are compatible or mutually exclusive. In the Middle East, feminists struggle with religion, but also with the stigmatization of the word 'feminism' and the fact that feminism in the Middle East possibly has a different connotation than in the West (Pratt and Al-Ali 2011, 340 - 341). In this thesis, the definition of feminism as defined by Pratt and Al-Ali will be used, which is: "those women struggling for a greater role for women in the public sphere, a greater allocation of resources and/or opportunities for women or the end of gender discrimination in legislation as 'women's rights activists'" (Pratt and Al-Ali 2011, 340), on the understanding that feminism in this paper does not exclusively mean women struggling for a greater role for women, but that men can play an important role in changing the public space as well. The Kurds have a long history of feminism, often associated with the idea of *jineology* (*jin* meaning woman in Kurdish). This idea was relaunched by the imprisoned leader of the Kurdish Workers' Party (PKK), Abdullah Öcalan, and is based on the notion that the Kurds will never have a nation-state if there is no equality between men and women (Al-Ali and Käser 2020, 8). However, Kurdish feminism dates back much longer and is not merely based on Öcalan's idea. Kurdish women have been involved in the struggle for Kurdish rights for many decades. Until 1991,[3] their fight was mainly focused on gaining rights for the Kurds, rather than

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[3] In 1991, the Kurds gained their first official international mention and protection by the UN as a result of the Gulf War and the mass flight of Kurdish refugees to the mountains. The United States then reluctantly provided

having a gender-specific agenda. However, they were involved in the resistance and nationalist forces, which are often considered as predominantly male activities (Pratt and Al-Ali 2011, 343). Since 1991 women have been involved in state-building projects and other forms of mobilization by the Kurds, whilst launching women's rights agendas (Shavashi 2018, 7). As mentioned, the media paid a lot of attention to female *peshmergas* during the war against IS. Due to this extensive media attention, these women were looked at with an Orientalist vision, resulting in false representations being circulated (Kardaş and Yeşiltaş 2017, 20). It also spread the assumption that female *peshmergas* were a new phenomenon, whilst Kurdish women have a long history of joining Kurdish guerrilla militia (Fischer-Tahir 2012, 95 – 97). Especially from within the diaspora, Kurdish feminism started to grow. While diasporas are the product of armed conflict in the Kurdish region, Kurdish women (and men) who went into exile have acquired skills which empower them to be important contributors to the reconstruction and the democratization of the area and to organize themselves more easily and in a transnational manner (Mojab and Gorman 2007, 59). Feminism is a subject that is often visible in Kurdish art, especially concerning female warriors. Due to the fact that Kurdish artists can take the representation into their own hands, they create their own narrative of what Kurdish feminism really is. We can also see this clearly in the films analyzed.

Interestingly, in both films, Shalmashi chose a female character to participate in the war. In films, it is often seen that Kurdish artists want to offer a representation that is different from how the general public perceives the Kurds. Going to war and being a part of military forces is generally seen as a predominantly male experience. However, the *peshmergas* gained worldwide fame with pictures of Kurdish women participating in the war against IS as a *peshmerga*. For the Kurds, this image was beneficial in their own fight for freedom, as it suggested that they were a secular and self-ruled society, in which men and women are equal. The women were sensationalized by international media and H&M even brought out a clothing line that was seemingly inspired by the *peshmerga* women, thus exposing their physical appearance to the Orientalizing 'male gaze' and portraying them as exotic novelties for Western consumption (for which H&M offered their apologies). In other representations, Kurdish women were depicted as 'superwomen' whose bravery is a part of their Otherness and who do not need support or protection (Shahvisi 2018, 4 - 5). International media often seemed concerned with the rather Orientalist view that these women were not only fighting IS, but also fighting for Western democratic principles (Kardaş and Yeşiltaş 2017, 20). This demonstrates how the representation of women in armed forces is very different from men and is often sexualised

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a safe-haven and a no-fly zone for the Kurds, which was the start of the de facto Kurdish autonomous state in northern Iraq (Gunter 2008, 14).

while also implying that women must have ulterior motives to join a war. Kurdish women have a long history of fighting as *peshmerga,* however, world wide media only picked this up during the war against IS, which makes it seem like it is a new phenomenon. Problematically, these portrayals distracted from the fact that most women fight due to a certain conviction and systematically erased the explicit political nature of women's struggle by consciously leaving out ideological underpinnings of these women's motivations to fight" (Dirik 2017, 74). Western media often seemed to have difficulty with accepting female soldiers or the fact that Kurdish women can act autonomously (Shahvisi 2018, 4). *Shouted from the Rooftops* as well as *Frontline* deromanticize the idea of female *peshmergas*. Both women leave their loved ones because their convictions weigh heavier. In *Shouted from the Rooftops*, the idea of the female *peshmerga* is deromanticized by the fact that Sherin does not return from the battlefield, which denounces the idea that women fighting in a war is something 'sexy', but rather a dangerous occupation that one only chooses if they are sure of their motivation. In *Frontline*, it is even more clear that Ceylan feels the fear and doubt that goes along with giving up her comfortable and safe life in the Netherlands and the love of her life, to fight against IS. She breaks-up with her boyfriend, and buys a one-way ticket, since she is not certain that she will return. It shows that in this case, there are no ulterior motives, she leaves, because she feels that she has to: she is not a 'superwoman' who joins combat without a second thought. It clearly is not an easy decision for her. The idea that she joins the peshmerga for romantic reasons is undermined by the fact that she is at a shooting range preparing for her soon-to-be new life as a *peshmerga*. When Bastiaan kisses her and asks her to stay, she pushes him away and continues to practice shooting (*Frontline* 2016, 07:12 – 07:53), confirming that she has made up her mind and knows what she is getting into.

In *Radio Kobanî*, we also see a female protagonist, Dilovan, fighting for the Kurds, albeit in a more peaceful way. Kurdish feminists share common or interrelated histories of political struggle with regard to national oppression. They are not only fighting the structures of oppression against the Kurdish ethnicity, but also the ones that are rooted in class, gender, and race (Mojab and Gorman 2015, 80). As mentioned above, Western coverage often follows Orientalist narratives. Dosky avoids this representation by presenting a strong female protagonist, who fights anti-feminist IS in a peaceful way, namely by making radio programs. Nisa Göksel, Research Fellow at the Center for Middle Eastern Studies at Lund University, argues that the participation of female *peshmerga* in combat has challenged other Kurdish women to think about their way of life as well (i.e., being tied to traditional gender roles) and has led to an increasing number of women fighting for Kurdish freedom in other ways within the scope of their revolutionary aspirations (Göksel 2019, 1129). This is

very visible in the documentary in which Dosky has made a very considerate feminist documentation when portraying Dilovan. In the first place she is an educated girl who has had to quit her study due to the war. She values education very much and would like to marry an educated man of her choosing. At the same time, she is a very brave woman who has the courage to start a Kurdish radio network, while IS still occupying some parts of the city. In this way, Dosky does not only show that there are Kurdish females in combat, but also Kurdish females who offer resistance in other ways. Moreover, he portrays a woman who makes life decisions independently and has agency, which goes against many Orientalist views of Kurdish women. Women's experiences in war are often underrepresented and their narrative is frequently neglected (Begikhani, Hamelink and Weiss 2018, 5). Dosky provides us with a female narrative that differs from most portrayals of Kurdish women.

Kurdish Mountains
The last, more tangible symbol that is very evident in the films are the Kurdish mountains. Besides inherently having an aesthetic value, mountains play a special role in Kurdish history. There is a famous Kurdish saying which goes: "the Kurds have no friends but the mountains," and refers to the feeling of abandonment, betrayal, and loneliness given their historic and geographic situation. This saying is often used in films, literature, and in articles concerning the Kurds (Koçer 2014, 473 – 488, Smets and Akayya 2016, 12 – 13). One of the mountain ranges in the Kurdish region is Zagros, near the border between northern Iraq and Iran. It has a general historic value as it offers one of the earliest records of human existence (Renette 2018, 2), but the Kurds cherish the Zagros mountain range for much more immediate reasons. Throughout the wars and attacks the Kurds have had to endure they always found a safe haven in the mountains. That is why during Saddam's Anfal Operation, it was such a devastating shock when Iraqi troops were led through the mountains to search for unmapped villages and hide-out places to murder more Kurds (Brenneman 2007, 34 – 35). They had invaded their sacred place. The Kurdish mountains were also the theatre where the *peshmerga* fought their 'guerilla wars' (Smets and Akayya 2016, 12 – 13). So the mountains can be seen as a symbol of resistance, a bridge between the past and the present, and a constant spectator of every struggle, and a part of the larger ideal of having a homeland.

In *Frontline,* we briefly get a shot of the Kurdish mountains. At the end of the film, it becomes clear that Ceylan sticks with her decision to become a *peshmerga*, even though we do not see actual war. Just as in *Shouted from the Rooftops*, the war is only implied, we do not actually get to see the frontline. At the end of the film, Ceylan leaves the shooting range alone, carrying her weapon. As the camera turns around her, we see the setting change from the shooting range to the Kurdish mountains (*Frontline* 2016, 10:10 – 10:35). The mountains as the theatre of the *peshmergas* adds to

their heroic status, as they defy nature, because the mountains are not an obstacle but their friends (Aziz and Cottey 2021, 234). In the film, the sight of Ceylan carrying her weapon in the Kurdish mountains may indicate that on leaving the shooting range, she feels certain of her destiny and imagines herself in the Kurdish mountains. On the other hand, the smooth change of setting from the shooting range to the mountains can also function as a sort of time warp in which the audience gets a peek of Ceylan in the near future, the part in which she leaves to go to Kurdistan has been skipped, but the audience immediately gets the image of her as a *peshmerga*. The Kurdish mountains propagate the feeling of 'Kurdishness' once again, but also offer the powerful image of a woman with a weapon on top of a mountain.

In *Sidik and the Panther*, there is a special focus on the mountains, in fact, almost a personification of the mountains. It is not Sidik who is the main character of this documentary, but the Kurdish mountains. They have seen and endured all the wars and now, they are healing themselves. Sidik, in this case, merely functions as the voice that the mountains do not have. Not only do they give a high aesthetic value to the documentary, but they also function for the viewer as a way to notice the passing of time (e.g., the changing of the seasons) and as a reference to the Kurdish history, in which mountains have always played an important part. Just like in *Frontline*, the mountains also function as a basis for a large part of the Kurdish society, as despite the many differences between the Kurds, the mountains serve as a commonality in habitat, in which a common ethos and shared historical experiences form a feeling of 'Kurdishness' (Bruinessen 1992, 39). This gives the mountains a highly political scenery. Through Sidik's journey and the people he encounters, we learn of the history these mountains have witnessed. A great example is when Sidik passes a cave in which many names and dates have been engraved. 'The Kurds have no friends but the mountains' and '1975', he reads out loud (*Sidik and the Panther* 2019, 18:42 – 19:08, my translation). In the year 1975 the Second Iraqi-Kurdish war came to an end, in which hundreds of Kurds were murdered and thousands were displaced (Brenneman 2007, 32 – 33). This saying does not only refer to the betrayal experienced by and the loneliness of the Kurds (Smets and Akayya 2016, 12 – 13), it also refers to the fact that, throughout history, the mountains have proved to be the only constant and only dependable space in their lives. In this setting, Dosky makes sure that the mountains figure as a bridge between the past, the present and the imagined future, because even though the ruins of the past are still visible, it can heal again, just like the Kurds.

Conclusion

This thesis demonstrates that within the Dutch diaspora, there is a distinct determination to keep Kurdish identity alive, and fight against the many historical and current attempts to suppress any expression of 'Kurdishness'. Through visual art, Kurdish-Dutch artists have not only expressed their view of the conflict that is the Kurdish question, but also taken a stance regarding the representation of the Kurds and taking the narrative into their own hands. As demonstrated in the analysis, the Kurdish cultural and political identity have become intertwined to the degree that Kurdish nationalism has become both a cultural as well as a political aspect. Even the mountains are highly political. The films analyzed in this thesis have a highly aesthetic value, as well as many symbols that fit within Kurdish political discourse, that are being offered to the viewer in an explicit, as well as non-explicit manner. The diasporic nature of the Kurdish community has provided a stronger sense of Kurdish nationalism because the celebration of Kurdish language and culture became possible. Through these transnational ties, Kurds in Europe further mobilized, which is expressed in direct or indirect support of the Kurds. The diaspora and the growth of Kurdish autonomy has provided room for gender politics, in which the role of women became increasingly important in Kurdish political activism. This is not only important for the Kurdish community, but also an important aspect in their fight for self-determination. By showing the international community that they take gender roles into account and do not conform to traditionally patriarchic nationalism, they demonstrate their modernity and willingness to be a democratic state.

Furthermore, the diasporic community has put a focus on the common history of the Kurds and provided representations of cultural memory and collective trauma. This further nationalizes the Kurdish community, since the fact that the Kurdish community is a highly heterogenous one and differs in many instances is being overlooked. The analysis showed that no attention was given to this fact, but that there is more emphasis on how the Kurds differ from non-Kurdish ethnicities in the region, instead of showing the differences within the community. Although this might enhance the feeling of 'Kurdishness' and Kurdish resistance, in the long haul it might become a problem when one's individual identity is disregarded in the name of Kurdish independence, and individual needs are not met. However, it does explain the autonomous fighting of the Kurds, in which they take a lot of pride and for which they are often admired. The analysis demonstrates that this autonomy is represented in the films, and is also linked to many instances, such as the geo-linguistic homeland,

but also the loneliness of the Kurds as they had to start a guerilla militia to fight autonomously, as the international community was unwilling to protect them.

Both Beri Shalmashi and Reber Dosky have had remarkable success with their films in the Netherlands, leading to further attention for the Kurdish question, through, for instance, interviews, media coverage and large audiences viewing their films. Their films express their ideas concerning the Kurdish question and their own representations of the Kurds, creating a more authentic portrayal of Kurdish culture and politics. By producing these films, they also provide their audience with these representations enabling them to form their own opinion concerning the conflict. Through their visual art, they show the Dutch (or international) audience their side of the story, which can be an appeal to sympathize with or further help the Kurds.

The Kurdish question is a complicated and tragic situation. Through aesthetics, these artists have tried to explain the Kurdish question from their point of view and have tried to fight for the rights of the Kurds through cultural resistance. None of the films analyzed convey an overly explicit political message. However, it seems that the symbols used in these films, including Kurdish identity, are inherently political. They provide us with an alternative way of thinking about the Kurds and the Kurdish question. By focusing on their history, and providing ways to heal from cultural trauma, they take a step towards a brighter future. Both artists' families have fought for the Kurds as *peshmergas*. From within the diaspora, they have found a way to do the same through their films.

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