Gendering a War: The Cinematic (Female) Representation of the Kurds During the Iran-Iraq War

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Abstract

The Iran-Iraq War (1980 – 1988) was a complicated and bloody conflict in which many people lost their lives. The Kurds were geographically, but also as a target in the middle of the conflict and to aggravate the situation they were subject to genocidal campaign led by the regime of Saddam Hussein towards the end of the war.

This thesis analyzes the Kurdish representations in Kurdish films set during the Iran-Iraq War. In particular, it focuses on the Kurdish female representations. The aim is to further develop academic research on Kurdish cinema, provide an overview of cultural expressions through visual arts throughout space and time and emphasize the gap between the male and female gender in Kurdish representations.

The analysis proposes that Kurdish cinematic expressions of the Iran-Iraq War have two overarching themes that can roughly be classified under the heading of cultural memory and collective trauma and the heading of geo-linguistic homeland in which different representations between Kurds in general and female Kurds can be observed.

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Introduction

With approximately 30 million Kurds in the world, making them the largest ethnic group without a nation-state, the Kurdish region is roughly situated between Iraq, Iran, Turkey and Syria, and has led to a conflict that is often described as the 'Kurdish Question', which refers to the idea that the Kurds are an ethno-political problem that somehow should be resolved (Bruinessen 2004, 4). Due to the lack of a homeland, they have been subjected to decades if not centuries of discrimination, marginalization and oppression (Gunter 2008, 2).

In 1980, the Iran-Iraq War broke out. It was a savage armed conflict which started with the invasion of Iran by its neighboring country Iraq on 22 September 1980. The war lasted for almost 8 years, in which approximately 500,000 civilians lost their lives, child soldiers were deployed and whole villages were destroyed until the war ended on 20 August 1988 (Karsch 2002, 7- 11). Initially, the war seemed to offer opportunities for the Kurds both on the Iranian and the Iraqi side, in the sense that it might put an end to the targeting of Kurdish communities. However, the war soon proved to be disastrous for the Kurds. Since most of the regions on either side of the border of Iran and Iraq are predominantly inhabited by Kurds, they were stuck in the middle of the conflict and many Kurdish cities and villages came under artillery attack on both fronts. Moreover, from 1984 onwards, the Iranian government launched massive operations against the Kurds, during which over 70 villages came under the control of the Iranian government. As a result, tens of thousands of Kurds fled their villages, since the *peshmerga* (Kurdish guerilla forces) did not stand a chance against the Iranian army. Around the same time, the Iraqi government started carrying out chemical attacks on villages in the border regions, mainly Iranian Kurdish residential areas, causing thousands of casualties and many more injured people (Yildiz and Taysi 2007, 27). Meanwhile, the Kurds in Iraq became the victim of Saddam Hussein's 'Anfal Operation', which was conducted by his cousin Ali Hassan al-Majid and lasted for over two years. During this operation, millions of Kurds were displaced, and thousands were killed due to the use of aerial bombings, firing squads and chemical weapons. The latter led to the nickname for al-Majid: Chemical Ali. Over 180,000 citizens were murdered by their own government because of their ethnicity (Holden 2012, 259).

The Iran-Iraq War was a tragic period for all involved, and not in the least for the Kurds. The tragedy of this war has been expressed and perpetuated through all kinds of art forms. However, it seems that little research has been conducted on the influence of the Iran-Iraq War on Kurdish art; only

one research paper has analyzed the influence of the massacre of Halabja in films[1] and one chapter in a book is dedicated to Kurdish fictional literature set during the war.[2]

This led to my research question: How are (female) Kurds represented in Kurdish films set during the Iran-Iraq War? This thesis aims to examine the Kurdish experience during the Iran-Iraq war through Kurdish cinema. In doing so, a distinction between the Kurdish male and female experience of this war will be made by examining several films set against the background of the Iran-Iraq War. This research aspires to explore the Kurdish narrative of the Iran-Iraq War in an attempt to broaden and deepen the general understanding of the impact of this war on the Kurds. Exhaustive studies have been written on the Iran-Iraq War (Razoux and Elliot 2015; Murray and Woods 2014; Karsh 1989; Karsch 2002; etc.), but I was unable to find research exclusively about the Kurdish experience of this war. Also, a lot of research has been conducted on the cinematic expression of the Iran-Iraq War (e.g., Varzi 2008; Abecassis 2011; Naficy 2012; Khakpour et al. 2016; etc.). However, all these studies focus exclusively on Iranian cinema. This research will delve into the Kurdish representation by not only analyzing films produced in Iran, but also in Iraq and the Kurdish diaspora. Although research on Kurdish cinema is limited and relatively new, a positive development can be observed, especially with regard to the Kurdish cinema in Turkey (Koçer 2014; Koçer and Candan 2016; Köksal 2016; Aydinlik 2021; etc.). Recently, Bahar Şimşek finished her dissertation on Kurdish cinema, in which she conducted a qualitative film analysis based on Jacques Rancière's theory on aesthetics and ethics, analyzing whether we can speak of Kurdish cinema and what the politics of Kurdish cinema are. Şimşek connects Kurdish cinema to Kurdish identity and provides examples of how these are heavily intertwined. She recognizes the problematics in Kurdish cinema, namely that we cannot speak of a national cinema and that, since the Kurds in the region also have to abide by the production rules of the occupying countries, they are limited in their expression. She argues that Kurdish identity is inherently political and aims "to depict an aestheticized Kurdish identity as a response to the politics of oppression and resistance" (Şimşek 2021, 9). She concludes her research with the observation that Kurdish language and oral tradition form the basis of Kurdish cinema and that Kurdish cinematography it is rooted in the re-claiming of Kurdish identity within the world of cinematography (Şimşek 2021, 197 – 212). Since this is the only academic in-depth study on the existence of Kurdish cinema, incorporating films from the entire Kurdish region (e.g., Iran, Turkey,

[1] Edith Szanto, "Mourning Halabja on Screen: Or Reading Kurdish Politics through Anfal Films," *Review of Middle Eastern Studies* 52, no. 1 (2018): 135 – 146.

[2] Mardin Aminpour, "Representation of Iran-Iraq War in Kurdish Fiction," in *Moments of Silence: Authenticity in the Cultural Expressions of the Iran-Iraq War, 1980 – 1988*, ed. Arta Khakpour, Souleh Vatanabadi and Mohammed Mehdi Khorrami (New York: New York University Press, 2016): 193 – 205.

Iraq, and Syria) as well as from diasporic or exiled filmmakers, this work will be used as a reference for the ideas on Kurdish cinema presented in this research.

Furthermore, a distinction will be made between the representation of the Kurdish male and female. In her dissertation, Şimşek argues that there is a strong difference between male and female representation in Kurdish cinema, which emphasizes the patriarchal character of Kurdish society (Şimşek 2021, 29). This research will further explore this gap. Since the uprise of the Islamic State (IS) in 2014, and the evident success of the Kurds in defeating them, Kurdish women have gained a lot of attention. The Kurds, in general, received attention of Western scholars and more research was conducted on the Kurds, also in gender studies, but the focus was mainly on Kurdish women fighting as *peshmerga*, not the lives of other, 'everyday' women (Bengio 2016, 30). Therefore, this research will concentrate on the representation of Kurdish women, although it is not possible to do this without discussing the male representation, as they often oppose and strengthen each other.

In the context of war, the female experience has been drastically understudied, even though understanding the *experiences* of war is extremely important to understand a war (Sylvester 2013, 2 - 7). Women have to deal with different security issues during a war and its aftermath. For instance, whereas men often have to deal with violence on the frontline, women more often become victims of domestic or sexual violence during a war. Whilst in some cases women gain more power and agency during a war, a return to unequal gender relations existing prior to the conflict is often seen in a post-war situation (Jurasz and Mouthaan, 1 – 7). Some studies have been concerned with the differentiation of gender regarding the Iran-Iraq War (Efrati 1999; Koolaee 2014; Farzaneh 2021; etc.), however, none of these studies give any or significant attention to Kurdish women.

According to Ofra Bengio, between 2001 and the rise of IS in 2014, only two notable works had been written about Kurdish women[3] (Bengio 2016, 30). One of these is the book by Choman Hardi, a Kurdish poet and scholar, on the gendered experiences of the Anfal operation (2011). Her research is the only academic literature on the Anfal operation that acknowledges gender and the different experiences of war on Kurdish women. She explains how gendering this genocide is necessary, since Kurdish women, just like women in many other Middle Eastern societies, are already the oppressed gender group. Generally, there are more opportunities for men, whereas the role of women is often

[3] Sharhzad Mojab ed., *Women of a Non-State Nation: the Kurds* (Costa Mesa: Mazda Publishers, 2001); Choman Hardi, *Gendered Experiences of Genocide: Anfal Survivors in Kurdistan-Iraq* (Farnham/Burlington: Ashgate, 2011).

confined to the domestic sphere. They belong to their family until they are (sometimes forcibly) married, they are almost exclusively the victim of honor killings, are often less educated and hold a low status in their societies. Because of these social constructs, Kurdish women will conform to them, which increases the gap between genders (Hardi 2011, 1 – 11).

Regarding the Anfal operation, women were generally victimized in a different way. Firstly, during the war, the women became the sole caretaker of the family while the men were fighting, but they also were increasingly subjected to (sexual) violence. Secondly, during the Anfal operation, many men died, and as a result many women were left behind in deep poverty, bad health, no education and nowhere to go, while having to take care of their children. Hardi argues that it is, therefore, necessary to give a voice to those who have been silenced (Hardi 2011, 1 – 11). Although Hardi's work is very useful for this research, it is important to note that the book only focuses on the Anfal operation and its aftermath, not on the Iran-Iraq War. Moreover, the research is based on ethnographic research, which might differ from cinematic representations.

In her article on female representation in the aftermath of the Iran-Iraq War, Roxanne Varzi points out that womanhood will always be overshadowed by motherhood. She distinguishes three types of mothers: the mother who is endorsed by the Islamic State, a secular mother and the silent mother (Varzi 2008, 86 – 98). In her book *Allegory in Iranian Cinema*, Michelle Langford builds upon Varzi's theory, explaining how women are often presented as an allegory for the homeland. On the basis of examples from Iran-Iraq War films, she explains that female bodies are allegorically used to emphasize the pain and struggle of the war and its aftermath, and portrayed as gendered symbolism of the wounds inflicted on Iran as a nation during the Iran-Iraq War (Langford 2019, 169 – 192). These studies provide an interesting basis for the present research, although both focus solely on the Iranian experience of this war. However, Şimşek made a similar argument in her article on Kurdish language in Kurdish cinema. Şimşek argues that, "the fetishization of the maternal body or of the future of the motherland through female bodies reveal patriarchal tendencies in relation to the violated motherland" (Şimşek 2016, 367). This thesis delves into this topic deeper and further explores the theme of the feminization of the motherland in Kurdish films.

The aim of this thesis is to broaden the research to gendered experiences of the Iran-Iraq war by analyzing the Kurdish representations in three films, by applying the theory of Hamid Naficy and using the methodology of Lothar Mikos on qualitative film analysis, which will be explained further in Chapter 1.

Chapter 2 provides a short historical background of the situation of the Kurds during the Iran-Iraq War and an overview of all films set during that war which contain Kurdish representations and were therefore considered for this thesis.

In the subsequent chapters, the following films will be discussed: *Marooned in Iraq, Pako,* and *Kilomètre Zéro.* These films were chosen because they were made in different periods of time, by different Kurdish filmmakers and produced in different countries to ensure that the research includes as many aspects as possible. Moreover, all films are fictional and of feature-length. Chapters 3, 4 and 5 will each deal with the analysis of one film.

In Chapter 6, an interpretation of the analyses will be offered, based on the discussion of the films in the previous chapters of which two overarching themes are derived.

This thesis ends with concluding remarks based on the analyses of this research. In doing so, I hope to ensure that all voices are heard (also those who express themselves in silence) and underline the gender gap in cinematic representations of the Kurds, and the difference between men and women in experience and memory of war. Moreover, it will expand the research on the still underdeveloped field in academics: the Kurdish cinema.

Chapter 1: Theoretical and Methodological Framework

Theoretical Framework

Since the Kurds are the largest ethnic group without a nation state and the fourth largest ethnic group in the Middle East (Mojab and Gorman 2007, 63), we can safely assume that films are being produced for and by persons from this group. Up until this day, the Kurdish nation state has not been realized, and therefore their films are official productions of the occupying states. However, since the establishment of the KRG (Kurdish Regional Government), an autonomous Kurdish region in Iraq, enterprises have been started to develop Kurdish films with Kurdish financial support (Şimşek 2021, 51). For the clarity of this research, I will define Kurdish cinema based on a theory developed by the famous Iranian scholar in cultural studies and diaspora, also an expert in Iranian and Middle Eastern cinema, Hamid Naficy, on 'accented cinema'. In his book *An Accented Cinema: Diasporic and Exilic Filmmaking* (2001), he argues that films made by 'deterritorialized peoples, meaning exiled or diasporic people, share certain features that distinguish them from other films, so called 'accents'. These accents not only deal with the feeling of displacement of the filmmaker and the form of artisanal production, but also with the way the characters are formed and the multilingual and self-reflexive structures of the film. Accented cinema is both global and local, and criticizes both the host land and the homeland (Naficy 2001, 3 – 9).

This theory seems suitable for this research, because a filmmaker who considers himself Kurdish is automatically classified as belonging to the Kurdish diaspora. However, Naficy's theory is based on filmmakers who *migrated* to the West. According to him, accented filmmakers come from postcolonial countries, the Global South or Third World countries, and generally migrated to the West between the 1950s – 1970s after the decolonization of the Third World, and between the 1980s - 1990s after the failure of nationalism, socialism, and communism. In his theory, he makes a distinction between exilic and diasporic filmmakers. Both types carry a sense of trauma with them and a longing for their homeland. While exile can be both a collective and an individual experience, diaspora in its meaning, origin and destination is collective. Therefore, diasporic films are often more accented and less centered around the filmmaker's relationship with a single homeland and the idea that they represent it and its people (Naficy 2001, 10 – 16), "While binarism and subtraction in particular accent exilic films, diasporic films are accented more by multiplicity and addition" (Naficy 2001, 16).

The main aim of this research is to embrace the idea of Kurdish cinema in its entirety to gain a deeper understanding of the filmic expressions of the Iran-Iraq War. It, therefore, does not necessarily focus on Kurds in the Western diaspora, but also on Kurds in the Kurdish region. However, in her article "Outside In: 'Accented Cinema' at Large" (2006), Asuman Suner argues that Naficy's theory of accented cinema can also be applied to films that are produced under the auspices of national cinemas, while being produced by or portraying the story of marginalized ethnicities of that nation. As an example, Suner applies her theory to the film *A Time for Drunken Horses* (1999) by the Iranian Kurdish filmmaker Bahman Ghobadi. She concludes her research by suggesting that accented cinema features questions of identity and belonging and their effect on filmmaking rather than the geopolitical location of the filmmaker (Suner 2006, 363 – 382). In one of his later books, Naficy argues on the basis of Ghobadi's films that Kurdish cinema is also a form of indigenous accented cinema, due to the geopolitical displacement of the Kurds (Naficy 2012, 236). This is why I will use this interpretation of Naficy's theory by implementing the concept of accented cinema to Kurdish cinema, despite the fact that the filmmakers of the films I will analyze may or may not have migrated to the West. This is highly influential in terms of the context of the films, but it is not a binding factor for this research.

I will specifically focus on the Kurdish female experience of the Iran-Iraq War represented in films by further elaborating the theory of Christine Sylvester, scholar in Feminist and International Relations Theory, discussed in her book *War as an Experience: Contributions from International Relations* (2013). Sylvester provides an overview of the way in which mainstream International Relations (IR) Theories and Feminist Theories have thus far discussed war. She explains that traditionally IR theories operate on a rather abstract level of analysis when studying war, which leads to over generalizations and anonymous victims. For instance, when it comes to gender, the common understanding of war is that "men do war, and women suffer, support or protest war" (Sylvester 2013, 38). Sylvester proposes to look at war as bodily and emotional experiences, and provides the following definition of war, "think of collective violence used to achieve a political agenda, the usual IR understanding of war; but think about the nature of that collective violence instead of its existence as a "mere" defining fact" (Sylvester 2013, 3). If we use this definition, we must study war as a social institution, because people and their experiences and relations contribute to and change the developments of a war, just as much as new legislation of strategies would. In this way "everyday people are involved in the social institution of war in straightforward as well as complicated and often unnoted ways" (Sylvester 2013, 4). In her research, any person - individual or in a group - is the essential unit, whether they are fighting, observing or faraway spectators of a conflict. This means that everyone has war experiences. Sylvester defines this as follows,

"Experience is therefore the physical and emotional connections with war that people live – with their bodies and their minds and as social creatures in specific circumstances" (Sylvester 2013, 5). People can experience war physically through injuries, hunger, filming war, etc., and mentally: emotions, trauma, etc. (Sylvester, 6). This theory is very interesting for my analysis, since it offers a new way to analyze war. Because of its inclusion of everyday people, it allows for a closer look at a gendered experience of war, which is traditionally underestimated, generalized or understudied. Furthermore, this theory is not only applicable to the characters in the films that will be analyzed, but also to the filmmakers. Most filmmakers discussed in this thesis have their own experiences of the Iran-Iraq War. Some have lived through it; others may have been distant spectators and decided to share their experiences on screen. In Naficy's theory, the diasporic or exilic experience influences the way it is brought on screen. Similarly, Sylvester's theory allows for a closer look at the filmmakers' war experience.

Another theory that provides an interesting basis for this research is described in the chapter "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" by Laura Mulvey in the book *Feminism and Film Theory* (1988). In this chapter, Mulvey applies psychoanalytic theory to films to prove its usage as a political weapon to form the representation of an unconscious patriarchal society in film. She argues that the function of women in creating such a society is two-fold, "she first symbolizes the castration threat by her real absence of a penis and second thereby raises her child into the symbolic. Once this has been achieved, her meaning in the process is at end, it does not last into the world of law and language except as a memory which oscillates between memory of maternal plenitude and memory of lack" (Mulvey 1988, 57 – 58). In this way, she turns her child into the signifier of her own desires and will stay tied to her role of bearer of meaning, not maker of meaning. The patriarchal structure is increased as there is a gap between the active male versus the passive female. The male gaze projects his ideas and phantasies on the female figure, and she corresponds to it accordingly. The presence of women is indispensable in most films, although their visual presence often works against the development of the plot. Yet, it is not about what a woman does, it is what she provokes in the male character, what makes him act in the way he does (Mulvey 1988, 62). Building upon this theory, Özlem Güçlü argues that such patriarchal structures result in new female representations in Turkish cinema, namely that of silent, inaudible women (Güçlu 2016, 2). Suner Asuman also argues that female silence and female absence can be noted in Turkish cinema. Asuman points out that the absence of women in Turkish cinema prevents the audience from learning about the female character's perspective of the world, which reproduces patriarchal society. On the other hand, she also detects a positive element, in the sense that new wave films sometimes include a self-critical

awareness concerning their patriarchal society (Asuman 2010, 163). Though these studies focused on Turkish cinema, Güçlü argues that female silence and ignoring female characters is not limited to Turkish cinema, and also provides some examples of female silences in Kurdish cinema (Güçlu 2016, 3 – 4). These theories clearly give a deeper insight into the role of the female and prove that it is impossible to merely discuss the representation of Kurdish women in films and discard the representation of Kurdish men, as women do not function as the signifier. Moreover, it helps to gain a deeper understanding on gendered roles and how they are formed by a patriarchal society and also actually reinforce that society.

Methodological Framework

This research will focus on the gendered representation of Kurds in films set in the Iran-Iraq War. As Cultural Theorist Stuart Hall argues, cultural identity is not a transparent identity. It is a production that is never complete. Cultural practices such as cinema take part in this process and help clarify the positions from where a community speaks (Hall 1989, 222). Building upon this, Gillian Rose argues that visual culture depicts social differences, but can also help construct certain social structures (Rose 2001, 10 – 11).

In order to analyze each film as exhaustively as possible, I have chosen for a comparative, qualitative film analysis based on the theory of Lothar Mikos, scholar in Film and Television Studies. He argues that films are more often than not referred to as a whole, despite the fact that it is also important to look at individual components of a film. When ignoring these components, one only stresses the subjective meaning of the film, but to produce knowledge one should also seek the objective and the verified intersubjectivity. In particular, his research analyzes the way in which a film communicates with the viewers, thus film as a communication tool (Mikos 2014, 409 – 410). This methodology can be applied to this research, since it focuses on the way the Kurds are represented in films on the Iran-Iraq War and compliments Hall's idea of representation: this means that the overarching message of the film is not central, but the experience of Kurds projected onto and communicated through film is.

The three films will be analyzed based on the following five aspects: content and representation (1), narration and dramaturgy (2), characters and actors (3), aesthetics and configuration (4), and contexts (5) (Mikos, 415 – 424). For each component, Mikos provides an overview of steps to follow, and elements that are important to consider when analyzing the various aspects. This methodology aims to provide a full analysis of films and may be useful for this research since it is highly systematic

and makes a distinction between the male and female representation, which benefits academic research. By using this methodology, I aim to keep my research as objective as possible, while amplifying the voice in the representation of both genders.

Although all aspects of Mikos's theory are important, this research will primarily focus on content, and representation and contexts. Regarding the latter, Mikos uses Stuart Hall's interpretation of representation as used in his book *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices* (1997). In this book, Hall explains that representation means "the production of meaning through language" (Hall 1997, 29). This language needs to be interpreted through symbols, images, narratives, etc., so as to gain a better understanding of its meaning (Hall 1997, 9). Films play a big role in representation, which is why this sort of analysis is important to expand our knowledge and understanding of representations. Regarding context, Mikos argues that films only acquire meaning through interaction with the viewers. The place where this interaction happens is the context. This makes the context important, because it directly affects the film texts as well as the meaning of the film. Since people interpret films, their interpretation is influenced by the context, but also scriptwriters are influenced by context (Mikos 2014, 223). Although the emphasis will be on the two aspects mentioned above, all components will be included in the analysis, since Mikos argues that all of them can be analyzed separately, but only to some extent, because all aspects of the film influence each other (Mikos 2014, 223).

Based on these components, I will conduct a comparative film analysis of three films that take place during the Iran-Iraq War and involve Kurdish representations. The films that will be analyzed each represent a different contextual background in order to gain a wide perspective on Kurdish representations and the experience of war by the Kurds, in particular, by Kurdish women. The selection of the three films is based on the ethnicity of the filmmaker, year of production, and the country of production: Iran, the KRG (Iraqi Kurdistan) and one from the diaspora. All films are of feature-length and are fictional. Ideally, a female filmmaker should have been included, but unfortunately there was no-one who met these requirements.

The first film to be discussed is Bahman Ghobadi's *Marooned in Iraq: Songs of my Motherland* (2002). Bahman Ghobadi is a well-known Kurdish Iranian filmmaker who gained international attention with his first film *A Time for Drunken Horses* (2000), the first Kurdish film made in Iran, which also won the *Caméra d'Or Prize* at the Cannes Film Festival. Most of Ghobadi's films critically reflect Iran's society, and in particular the treatment of the Kurds in the region. This led to his forced

exile in 2010, after having been arrested for making yet another critical film (Naficy 2012, 188). I have chosen to include *Marooned in Iraq* in my analysis, not only because Ghobadi is one of the most famous Kurdish directors, and his films portray the fate of Kurdish Iranians as well as Kurds from other regions, but also because the film includes various characters of different backgrounds and gender and will provide a good case study. It was filmed and produced in the Kurdish region of Iran, while Saddam Hussein was still in power over Iraq. This can be of interest for this research to see what kind of influence that would have on a film on the Iran-Iraq War.

The second film to be analyzed is Walid M. Taher's *Pako* (2015). Taher is a Kurd from Iraq, and the film was produced and financed by the KRG in Iraq. Very little information can be found on Taher's career, except that he has been involved with the acting and directing of a couple of Dutch films and series related to the Kurdish Question (IMDB, n.d.). I have chosen to include this film in my analysis, because it is the only film that was actually produced in the Kurdish territory. This means that the producers did not have to deal with restrictions on their films, as is the case with films made in Iran, for instance. Moreover, it was made (more than) a decade later than the other films, which may have affected the way in which the Iran-Iraq War is remembered.

Lastly, I will analyze Hineer Saleem's *Kilomètre Zéro* (2005). Saleem is an Iraqi-Kurdish film director, who fled Iraq at the age of 17 and came to Europe. For the last few decades, he has been living in France. His best-known film, *My Sweet Pepper Land* (2013), was nominated for several awards (Broeken 2022). *Kilomètre Zéro* is a European-Iraqi co-production and is interesting for my research, because the film was made in the diaspora and may offer new elements for my analysis. Moreover, it was produced two years after the American invasion in Iraq and the arrest on Saddam Hussein. Therefore, it could be filmed in Iraqi Kurdistan. This possibly could change the representation of the Kurds, as by then they had more freedom.

By choosing Iranian Kurdish, Iraqi Kurdish, and Kurdish diasporic directors, I hope to create an analysis that can be as representative as possible within the scope of this research. Considering the fact that female Kurdish representations form a large part of my analysis, it is unfortunate that no female directors could be included. I will, however, pay more attention to female directors in the film historical background in the next chapter. In the analysis of each film, I will conduct the steps suggested by Mikos and apply, amongst others, the theories of Naficy, Sylvester and Mulvey in order to provide an idea of the representation of Kurdish women in films on the Iran-Iraq War.

Chapter 2: (Film) Historical Background

Historical Background Iran-Iraq War

The Iran-Iraq War was a conflict that lasted for almost eight years. Hundreds of thousands of casualties were inflicted on each side and many more atrocities took place. It goes beyond the scope of this research to go into detail, but I will give a brief summary of the main events. The chapter ends with an overview of all films that include Kurdish representations and are set during the Iran-Iraq war and which, therefore, were considered for this research.

The Iran-Iraq War began on September 22, 1980, with a full-scale invasion of Iran by Iraqi troops under Saddam Hussein's command. The year before, in 1979, Iran had been subjected to a regime change under the Iranian or Islamic Revolution, from a monarchy under the rule of Shah Mohammed Reza Pahlavi of the Pahlavi dynasty to an Islamic Republic ruled by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini.

In that same year, Saddam had formally become Iraq's fifth president, although he had in fact been in power for several years. He was a member of the Ba'ath Party in Iraq, an Arab-nationalist and pan-Arabic party that overthrew King Faisal II in 1958 and thus became the dominant party in the cabinet. In 1968, Ahmed Hassan al-Bakr became president of Iraq, although it was clear that Saddam was the driving force behind all his decisions. In 1976, Saddam became general of the Iraqi army and as a result the strongest politician in the country, as al-Bakr was elderly and could not fulfill all his duties. In 1979, Saddam effortlessly became president after he forced al-Bakr to resign (Murray and Woods 2014, 15 – 23).

Initially, the Ba'ath party consisted mainly of Shia members, but when more and more Sunni joined., Shia Muslims became hesitant to participate in the Ba'ath party, since the party was pan-Arab orientated, and most Arabs are Sunni. Thus, the Ba'ath party became Sunni dominated (Murray and Woods, 66). In Iraq the Shia population had always formed the majority, but from then on, the Shia were ruled by the Sunni Ba'athists.

With the Iranian monarchy being replaced by a Shia Islamic Republic, Saddam feared that Khomeini would want to spread the Islamic Revolution over secular Iraq (Murray and Woods, 1). Moreover, there had been a long history of political conflict between Iran and Iraq, in which the Kurds also played a large role. In the early 1970s, Iraq had been dealing with Kurdish uprisings to obtain independence. The Shah had been supporting the Kurds in this insurgency. In March 1975, this

dispute led to the Algiers Agreement, in which the conflicts concerning the common border (particularly the Shatt al-Arab, a river running through both countries and Iraq's only waterway to the Gulf) were settled, and an agreement was made regarding the Kurds. In the Algiers Agreement, it was decided that Iran would end their support for the Kurds. In return, Iraq definitely had to make the largest concessions by agreeing to a shared sovereignty of the Shatt-al Arab waterway and abandoning its claim to certain areas in West Iran, such as Khuzestan (or as the Arabs persistently called it 'Arabistan'). Because the borders were closed after this agreement, it was a very expensive agreement (Karsh 2002, 7 – 9). Saddam had felt that the treaty was extremely humiliating for Iraq, which had more or less been forced into accepting it due to international pressure. However, after the regime change in Iran and the subsequent chaos, Saddam felt it might be the right moment to break the agreement (Murray and Woods 2014, 47 – 48).

This eventually led to a full-fledged invasion by the Iraqi army on 22 September 1980 into Khuzestan, a province in the Southwest of Iran. Iran had a very long military culture and history, and outnumbered Iraq with almost 3 times as many residents. Also, Iran's material was in a much better condition than Iraq's weapons sponsored by the Soviet Union. However, Iran's army had always been a priority during the Shah's regime, largely supported by American and British help. Once the Shah was gone, that help came to a halt (instead the United States began to support Iraq), and Iran's equipment was no longer up to date. Khomeini did not trust the Iranian army, because it had played an important role in keeping the Shah in power as long as possible. As a result, the Islamic government purged the military and established their own army: the Revolutionary Guards (*Pasdaran*) to counter the regular national army (Murray and Woods, 72 – 75). As the *Pasdaran* and the national army worked alongside each other and not together, they had not fully completed their preparations when Iraq invaded Iran (Karsh 2002, 25).

What followed was an intense war, during which hundreds of thousands lost their lives. Iran infamously sent boy soldiers, known as *Basij* boys, sometimes as young as 12 years of age, onto the battlefield. These 'volunteers', often from very poor backgrounds, had to defend their country with the promise of martyrdom and paradise (Karsh, 62 – 65). Iraq on the other hand resorted to mass civilian massacres, not only on the Iranian side, but also by committing genocide on the Kurds in Iraq.

After eight years of war, Iran's resources were exhausted, and the regime could no longer keep up with the continuous attacks. On August 20, 1988, Iran accepted, therefore, UN Resolution 598 which

called for an immediate cease fire, leading to peace negotiations, although each party identified the other as the aggressor. Saddam refused to call back the Iraqi soldiers. Despite the fact that he was still widely supported by the international community, he came under increasing pressure to accept a ceasefire. Iran was the first to do so, whereas Saddam would only accept it if Iran was ready to enter into direct negotiations, once again, acting as though Iran was the aggressor. Iran, reluctantly, accepted the terms and so the war ended. Due to Saddam's insistence on full control of the Shatt al-Arab waterway, and Iran's insistence on full compliance with the 1975 Algiers Agreement, the peace talks came to a deadlock (Karsh, 79 – 83). Eventually, the only outcome of the war was economic devastation, the loss of hundreds of thousands of people, genocide, and increased tensions between the United States and Iran.

Not much has been written about the Kurds during the Iran-Iraq War, but since the Kurdish region is on either side of the Iran-Iraq border, it is clear that they were at the center of the battlefield, both physically and metaphorically. Iran decided to use the Iranian Kurds by giving them their support. Thus, they gained strength on the Iranian side, but also caused anti-government uprisings by the Kurds on the Iraqi side (McDowall 1997, 272 – 277). Foreseeing the dangers of a Kurdish-Iranian cooperation while Iran attempted to invade North-Iraq (a predominantly Kurdish region in Iraq), Saddam tried to divide the Kurds from within by recruiting pro-government Kurdish forces, which were referred to as *jash,* meaning 'donkey's foal' (collaborator). In order to crush the Kurdish resistance, Saddam ordered the genocidal Anfal Operation. He appointed his cousin Ali Hassan al-Majid as governor of the north of Iraq, where he began a terrifying operation against the Kurds, in which chemical weapons were used. The *jash* would lead the Iraqi troops to unmapped Kurdish villages, deemed safe by the Kurds, which they destroyed. The most gruesome attack is known as the Halabja massacre on 16 March 1988, in which around 5,000 civilians died and many more had to live with permanent injuries as a result of the attack. Iranian Kurds and other civilians were also subjected to Iraq's use of chemical weapons, as he targeted villages on both sides of the border. The international community failed to respond as many countries were allies of Iraq and were later accused of supplying Iraq with the materials to succeed in chemical warfare (McDowall, 352 – 363).

Historical Background in Films

The impact of war on people is very diverse, but when an attempt is made to exterminate a specific ethnic group, it understandably causes huge trauma. Moreover, the Iran-Iraq War further left the Kurds dispersed and displaced. The tragedy of Saddam's genocide on the Kurds has become a trope in various portraits in Kurdish cinema: most of the films that are set during the Iran-Iraq War and

include Kurdish representations are related to the Kurdish genocide. To my knowledge, the only film that does not refer to the genocide is *The Tear of the Cold* (2004) by Azizollah Hamidnezhad: a tragic love story, set in 1983, between a Kurdish shepherdess who is helping Kurdish militias to gain independence, and an Iranian soldier. The story is almost Romeo and Juliet-like, a trope that is also visible in Walid Taher's *Pako* (2015), although in a different form, which I will discuss later in this thesis. *Pako* also tells the story of Kurds who are (unwillingly) fighting in the Iraqi army. This is also one of the main storylines of Hiner Saleem's *Kilomètre Zéro* (2005). Both films deal with the narrative of fighting for a country that hates you and in a war you do not believe in, and the consequences of desertion. However, in *Kilomètre Zéro* the love story plays a much smaller role than in *Pako*.

Samira Makhmalbaf's *Blackboards* (2000) portrays the fate of the Kurds during the Iran-Iraq War, roaming the Kurdish mountains, carrying everything they own on their backs while constantly having to hide from aerial attacks. Makhmalbaf deserves special attention in this thesis, as she is, to my knowledge, the only female filmmaker who made a feature fiction film on the Iran-Iraq War that includes Kurdish representations. Still, she was not included in the analysis, since she is not a Kurd herself. The film is the first on this topic and was made when Makhmalbaf was only 20 years old. She is the daughter of the famous Iranian filmmaker Mohsen Makhmalbaf who helped her write the script and edit the film (Weale 2000). The film is almost completely spoken in Kurdish, and interestingly Bahman Ghobadi himself plays a role in it. Similar to Ghobadi's own film, *Marooned in Iraq* (2002), *Blackboards* is set mainly in the Kurdish mountains. A famous Kurdish saying is, 'The Kurds have no friends but the mountains', referring to their feelings of betrayal and loneliness, but also to their love for the mountains which are the only place where they feel safe. The mountains also function as the theatre of the *peshmerga* during their guerilla wars (Smets and Akayya 2016, 12 – 13). Understandably, the mountains are very often present in Kurdish films.

In *Halabja: The Lost Children* (2001), the genocide plays a much larger role than in the previously discussed films. The film is directed by Akram Hidou, a Kurd from Iraq who fled to Germany when he was 18 (Kurdisches Film Festival, n.d). This film tells the story of a 21-year-old Kurdish man who returns from Iran to his hometown Halabja to look for his family. The story of children being separated from their parents because of the genocide is also portrayed in *Marooned in Iraq* (2002), but that film is set during the Iran-Iraq War and is not a homecoming story, as Hidou's film is. However, most films discussed do use the trope of journeying. *Burning Nests* (2012), directed by Shahram Maslakhi, an Iranian Kurd, deals with the topic of separation just like *Halabja: The Lost*

Children. In this film an Iranian man discovers that the woman who raised him is not his real mother and that his family was actually killed in Halabja. Also, like Hidou's film, Jano Rosebiani's *Jiyan* (2002) tells the story of an American Kurd who returns to what is left of Halabja five years after the attack. Jano Rosebiani himself fled from Iraqi Kurdistan to the United States when he was 17. It is not unusual that two filmmakers living in the diaspora create such films. According to Naficy's theory, homecoming stories are very typical of exilic or diasporic filmmakers. The films often include a story of self-discovery or salvation and are built upon the narrative of a collective memory (Naficy 2001, 237).

Another filmmaker who lived in exile for 25 years, but then returned to Iraqi Kurdistan is Shawat Amin Korki. His film *Memories on Stone* (2015) is both a film about the history of the Anfal Operation in the setting of the Iran-Iraq War and a reflection on contemporary Kurdish society.

The above shows that some similarities can be identified regarding Kurdish films set during the Iran-Iraq War, even though they have been made in different moments in time and by filmmakers with different backgrounds. In the next chapters the similarities and differences will be analyzed more deeply.

Chapter 3: Analysis Marooned in Iraq (2002)

Context

As discussed in Chapter 1, the analysis of the films will be based on the five aspects identified by Lothar Mikos, with the main focus on context, and content and representations. The other steps suggested by Mikos will be taken into consideration, but will not be described as extensively as the first two aspects of film. The production of meaning of a film does not happen independently of the context (Mikos 2014, 423). Therefore, the analysis of the context needs to be included in order to gain a deeper perspective of the representations offered in the film.

Marooned in Iraq: Songs of my Motherland (Gomgashtei dar Aragh: Avazhayé Sarzaminé Madariyam) (2002) is a film directed by the Iranian Kurd Bahman Ghobadi. He is an exponent of the Iranian 'new wave' cinema and, according to Hamid Naficy, "almost single-handedly pushed into existence a new, indigenous accented cinema, a Kurdish cinema of diaspora" (Naficy 2012, 234). *Marooned in Iraq* was his second feature film, after *A Time for Drunken Horses* (2000), with which he gained international credit after winning the *Caméra d'Or* prize at the Cannes Film Festival. His third feature film *Turtles Can Fly* (2004) won the Glass Bear and Peace Prize at the Berlin International Film Festival (Naficy 2012, 234). In 2009, Ghobadi directed *Nobody Knows about Persian Cats,* a film about underground Persian artists, which criticizes the censorship in Iran. The film was banned by the Iranian government, as it was shot without the permission of the Iranian Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance, which forced Ghobadi to flee the country and continue his life in exile (Naficy 2012, 188).

Marooned in Iraq was produced in Iran, which means that, in accordance with Islamic law, all women in the film wear a veil. There is, however, some space for the Kurdish language, although very little for critique on Iran. The entire film criticizes Saddam's regime, while Iran is portrayed as a safe haven. It is true that Iran was considerably safer for Kurds during the Iran-Iraq War than Iraq. All of this is mainly implied. The film combines elements of comedy and tragedy and should not be considered as a war movie but rather as a drama with a war story in the background. The film tries to reinforce the discourse of Kurdish resilience and resistance, while integrating typical Kurdish traditions and customs to enhance Kurdish nationalism. The film also portrays a journey and a border crossing, a subject that is often seen in accented cinema. In this film, it is not only a journey with a quest, but also a journey of identity, as will be further discussed under the heading Representation.

The film was released in 2002, when Saddam Hussein was still in power in Iraq. That is probably the reason why the film was made in the Kurdish region of Iran. Due to the fact that the film is in Kurdish and features the typical landscapes of the region, the film feels, in Hamid Naficy's words, 'ethnic' and 'indigenous', though heavily accented (Naficy 2012, 236). This means that although his films have not necessarily been made from in the diaspora or exile, they show similar features as other accented films, and the style that characterizes his films show the same fragmentation, self-reflexiveness and cinematic (dis)location of the filmmaker (Naficy 2001, 4). Despite the fact that the film gained a lot of international success, the nature of the film, such as the sole usage of Kurdish language and the intimate glimpse of Kurdish culture and traditions, conveys the impression that the film was not necessarily made for an international audience.

Content

According to Lothar Mikos, "we can generally confirm that everything said and shown represents content" (Mikos 2014, 416). Basically, it is the story the film aims to tell. *Marooned in Iraq* does not have a narrator but follows three male main characters. Mirza (Shahab Ebrahimi), an old father and famous musician in the Kurdish community, lives in the Kurdish region in Iran where he teaches children to sing and play an instrument. When he hears that his ex-wife Hanareh (Iran Ghobadi) is in trouble, he asks his sons Audeh (Allah-Morad Rashtian) and Barat (Faegh Mohamadi) to bring him to the Iraqi side of the border. This takes place during the Iran-Iraq War. Audeh has seven wives and eleven daughters (no sons, to his frustration) and heavily criticizes his father for still being hung-up on his ex-wife, even though she left him for his best friend and ran off with him to Iraq. Audeh is worried about what the community might think of his father and wants him to murder Hanareh, as that is the proper way to solve her betrayal and preserve his honor. Barat is less outspoken and still single. Together, the three men form a musical trio, taking their instruments with them on their journey as a pretext in case they get caught. They make the dangerous crossing while the war is raging in the background. On their journey they meet all kinds of characters. Barat falls in love with a woman he hears singing, but when he tells her it is forbidden to sing, she runs away from him. After his father has talked to him, Barat changes his mind and accepts her as his wife-to-be. We learn that the fact that Hanareh was not allowed to sing was the reason why she left her husband and went to Iraq. When the men come across a camp for orphaned children, Audeh talks to one of the women who run the camp. He asks her if she would be able to birth him sons, after which she angrily points out to him that there are many children who desperately need a family: he should leave his wives alone and stop trying to bring more children into the world. He decides to adopt two boys from the

camp who seem to have the same musical talent he and his family share. In the end, Mirza finds Hanareh's friends who won't let him see Hanareh, telling him that her husband has died during one of Saddam's chemical attacks while Hanareh has been heavily injured. Mirza has to bury Hanareh's husband, once his best friend. Finally, Hanareh's friends reluctantly give him her child, Sinour (Kurdish for 'border'[4]). After Mirza leaves, we see the friends talking to Hanareh asking her if she made the right decision and if she should not go after Mirza, as he came all this way to see her. In a voice obviously affected by chemicals she lets her friends know that this was the right, and only choice for her. In a scene that is strongly reminiscent of the most iconic scene of the Kurdish pioneer film *Yol* (1982) by Yilmaz Güney, Mirza carries the child on his back across the Iranian border.

Representation

Mikos uses Stuart Hall's definition of representation, "the process by which members of a culture use language to produce meaning" (Hall 1997, 61). In this case, representation comprises much more than the mere act of speaking, because, when analyzing film, one should also incorporate visual language. Hall argues that representations can only be properly analyzed by using concrete practices such as signifying, reading, and interpreting symbols, images, narrative, etc., which have symbolic content. The researcher is not looking for absolute truth, since meanings and interpretations can be contested, but for an interpretation of the truth (Hall 1997, 9). In this analysis, I will focus on Kurdish representations, female representations in particular. However, as mentioned in the Introduction, it is impossible to analyze the female characters without analyzing male characters as well, or as Laura Mulvey argues, "Woman then stands in patriarchal culture as signifier for the male other" (Mulvey 1988, 58).

Kurdish representations

The first and most important identifiable characteristic of Kurdish representation in *Marooned in Iraq* is that almost the entire film is spoken in Kurdish. A study in the 1980s estimated that in terms of number of speakers, out of the 7000 languages in the world, Kurdish ranks around the 40th most spoken language. This is especially remarkable considering the long history of linguicide the Kurdish language has had to deal with and still deals with today (Hassanpour, Sheyholislami and Skutnabb-Kangass 2017, 2). Language plays a very important role in the forming of a national and collective identity and is one of the most important means to construct and reproduce such an identity (Sheyholislami 2010, 290). It is also a typical feature of accented films to include one's original

[4] Author's own translation.

language. Naficy argues that “one of the greatest deprivations of exile is the gradual deterioration in and potential loss of one’s original language, for language serves to shape not only individual identity but also regional and national identities prior to displacement” (Naficy 2001, 24). Moreover, the use of the Kurdish language in film can be regarded as a semiotic process of ‘iconization’; in that sense the language becomes the standard for the representation of Kurdish people. In addition to this process, it also serves as a symbol for resilience and agency of the Kurds. Just as the Kurds survived a genocide, their language has survived a linguicide. And the use of that language symbolizes their resistance against the oppression of various states (Koçer 2014, 483).

The importance of the Kurdish language is also visible in the subtitle of the film, *Songs of my Motherland*. First of all, it is an indicator of the director’s position. The acknowledgement of one’s Kurdish identity is very important. Since the Kurds are spread over various countries and lack a ‘real’ homeland, they hold the nationality of the country they live in. By giving the film a subtitle, which includes ‘my motherland’ it indicates that the director acknowledges his Kurdish ethnicity and identity, and since all the songs are in Kurdish, the motherland he refers to is the imagined Kurdish homeland. Not only the Kurdish language of the songs is important, but also what the songs symbolize should be considered. *Marooned in Iraq* is not the only Kurdish film with such a (sub)title. In her research on Kurdish films in which music plays a big role, Bahar Şimşek argues that Kurdish films with similar titles fetishize the mother(land) and often are related to memories of the past that still haunt the present. Family relations, therefore, become the symbol of the homeland; the reconstruction of the homeland and thus the reconstruction of the family are central to the future of the Kurds and what it means to be Kurdish (Şimşek 2016, 355). According to Şimşek, “the embodiment of acousmatic voices through images exposes a desire to name the unnamable trauma experience with a surplus meaning of voice that goes beyond the incommunicable. Furthermore, Kurdish cinema — in the sense both of a ‘cinema of Kurds’ and ‘cinema in Kurdish’ — emerges as a force of subjectification that transforms and transcends the decisiveness of conflict between modernism and tradition in a transnational era” (Şimşek 2016, 366 – 367).

Another typical Kurdish representation is the music Mirza, and his sons make. According to Naficy, Ghobadi once said in an interview, “We can survive for a week or so without food or drink, but not without music.” (Naficy 2012, 234). Furthermore, the journey takes place in a typically Kurdish setting: the mountains. Remember the saying, ‘The Kurds have no friends but the mountains’. This film also shows how treacherous the mountains can be as they are also a part of the Kurdish fight, in this case, against nature.

The journey takes place in the mountains. Naficy argues that this a recurring subject in accented cinema and cites many examples of this phenomenon in Kurdish films. Such a journey frequently has to do with escape or a search for a homeland, and often includes a journey towards a new identity (Naficy 2001, 222 – 236). All of these instances are visible in the film. Naficy also argues that for accented filmmakers the crossing of borders is extremely important and is often paired with an emotional or euphoric setting (Naficy, 237). In the case of *Marooned in Iraq*, the journey of the three men is representational of the entire Kurdish community; it not only lacks the safety of their own nation, but also deals with crossing dangerous borders in the middle of a war. The emotional effect of crossing the border is highlighted by setting the event in the middle of the winter, with the snowstorm representing the hardships the Kurds have to endure.

Kurdish female representations

The most important female character in the film is Hanareh. She was Mirza's first wife and left him for his best friend to become a singer in the Kurdish region in Iraq. This betrayal means that, according to the rules of the community, she should be killed to preserve Mirza's honor. He, however, still loves her dearly and does not even think of murdering her. As Mulvey suggest, a male character can only overcome this form of castration, or in this case betrayal, if he either punishes the female character, or saves her (Mulvey 1988, 64). He rejects the first option, and still becomes the hero of the story. Most striking about the character of Hanareh is that she is actually barely present in the film. The entire film is a journey to find her: Mirza's most famous song, which he repeats several times, is called "Hanareh", but we do not get to see her. Only once do we hear her voice while she is sitting with her back to the camera, and that is when we learn that her voice, and possibly her appearance, is severely damaged by the chemical attack.

The absence and silence of female characters is not something new and also not limited to Kurdish cinema. Like Asuman Suner argues, "the absence of women is one of the characteristics of the new wave cinema. Again and again, we encounter mute women in these films" (Suner 2010, 163). In *Marooned in Iraq*, the female character is not only largely absent from the film, but also literally silenced due to the damage to her voice. She left Mirza and Iran to become a singer, since women are not allowed to perform in public in Iran. The fact that her voice is damaged means that she once again has had to give up her dreams. Thus, almost her entire character is explained through the male characters, except in the end when her child becomes the signifier of her desire. Not only does her child bear the symbolical name of 'Border', but she is also brought to safety to the Iranian side of the border by Mirza. This is what Hanareh longed for but was too ashamed to do, due to her past actions

and the physical trauma of the chemical attack. Keeping Christine Sylvester's notion of war as both a bodily and an emotional experience in mind, Choman Hardi argues that gas survivors are often stigmatized in the community, as they are considered contaminated and are deemed as unsuitable marriage material. Moreover, gas survivors not only feel ashamed of their new appearance, but also often have to deal with serious psychological problems. Especially in a patriarchal society, the stories of these women are often ignored or marginalized (Hardi 2011, 116).

Özlem Glüçlü writes about how the representation of silent females has been growing in Turkish cinema. Both Glüçlü and Suner argue that there is a link between representations of silent females and national politics (Glüçlü 2016; Suner 2010). This means that Hanareh's absence for the most part of the film and her silence in the latter part can be interpreted as a symbol for the Kurds. The woman who once was brave enough to fight for herself and to make her own choices was silenced by the chemical attacks by Saddam. Just like the Kurds, who wanted to stand up for themselves and were harshly punished for it. Furthermore, Şimşek argues that in Kurdish films, the fetishization of the mother, which is a symbol of the motherland, is often visible, especially the female body is central in the masculinized conflict. She suggests that the future of the Kurdish motherland is represented through the mother's body (Şimşek 2016, 367). In this case, Hanareh's body is disfigured by the chemical attacks, just as the imagined motherland took a big hit when the genocide took place. However, she gave birth to a girl who is called 'border' and will represent the new and more hopeful future of the Kurds, since the mother parted with her daughter to give her a better life.

Another important figure is Rojan, a woman who works at the camp for orphaned children. Audeh automatically assumes she is married. When she tells him she is not and is there to help the children, he explains that he is looking for a wife to give him a son, so he can teach him to be a singer. She asks him why he doesn't teach his daughters to do so and tells him to leave his poor wives alone. He does not want his daughters to grow up like Hanareh and tarnish his honor as she did. Rojan is actually the only woman with a significant dialogue in the film, and she makes Audeh realize that he should not look for more wives. It still does not change the fact that he wants a son, so he later adopts two boys from the orphanage camp. Although Rojan tries to stand up for the women, it makes little difference. However, she does make him realize that he can also solve his problems another way. This, together with the fact that Mirza refuses to kill Hanareh for leaving him and tells Barat that he should not make a problem if the woman he wants to marry sings if he really loves her, are obvious criticisms on the patriarchal society. Like Suner suggests, films in which female absences

are included strengthen the patriarchal society, because the audience does not get to view the female representation. However, in many cases the filmmakers also seem to criticize (Asuman 2010, 136) and, in this case, even seems to mock it.

Chapter 4: Analysis *Pako* (2015)

Context

Pako is a film made in 2015 by director Walid M. Taher. Little information can be found on Taher, but from his previous work we can gather that he lives or has lived in the Netherlands in the diaspora (IMDB, n.d.). The film was produced as a collaboration between Germany and the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) in Iraq, an autonomous Kurdish region in Iraq established in 1992. After the Gulf War in 1991, many Kurds revolted against Saddam Hussein, who immediately retaliated by brutally repressing the rebellion. Thousands of Kurds were displaced or murdered, which led to about 1.5 million Kurds trying to flee Iraq. As a result Saddam bombed the roads leading towards the borders of Iraq. Reluctantly, the United States created a safe-haven and a no-fly zone for the Kurds, resulting in the emergence of a de facto Kurdish state in northern Iraq (Gunter 2008, 14; McDowall 1997, 371 – 373).

In comparison to the young KRG region, Kurdish directors in Iran, Syria, Turkey and in the diaspora have produced many more films. However, during the last two decades the KRG has invested a considerable amount of money in the development of the Kurdish film industry (Şimşek 2021, 53). Because the KRG is the only official Kurdish government, it puts films produced in the KRG in a different perspective. Whereas films in Iran and Turkey still deal with limitations concerning language and criticism on the treatment of the Kurds, Kurdish directors are stimulated by the KRG to make Kurdish films, "the KRG's investment in the Kurdish film industry follows the national patterns for any film industry by promoting the production of films in Kurdish languages by Kurdish directors, holding public showings of such films, and hosting its international Kurdish film festival (…), Duhok International Film Festival, since 2011" (Şimşek 2021, 52). Because *Pako* was a co-production of the KRG and Germany, there was less censorship compared to *Marooned in Iraq*. Whereas in Iran films have to be approved by the Iranian Ministry of Islamic Guidance and Culture, no such institution exists in the KRG. That is why in this film it was possible for a man and a woman to hold hands, lay in bed together while a sex scene was implied. This is much more progressive compared to films produced in Iran, in which men and women are not allowed to touch. It also means that most of the women were not veiled in the film.

The film is a war drama story, filmed in Iraqi Kurdistan. It was brought out in 2015, which is whilst the KRG was under threat of IS. It may have had no effect on the film, but it makes sense to keep these circumstances in mind, especially since the fight against IS heavily affected the Kurdish

national identity and collective memory. The Kurds have always been a very heterogeneous ethnic group. Although there are many different Kurdish representations, the global struggle against IS and the role of the Kurds in it have gained worldwide attention and showed a particular representation of the Kurds, namely the secular Kurds. Thus, not only did the fight against IS offer new hope for the Kurds on an international level, it also caused a new surge of Kurdish nationalism within the community (Kardaş and Yeşiltaş 2017, 9 – 10; 20). Within this same context, the film addresses Kurdish nationalism, Kurdish collective memory and trauma, whilst also appealing to a more international audience, since it portrays secular, peaceful and democratic Kurds.

Content

Pako is about a Kurdish man named Pako (Rekash Shahbaz), who lives somewhere in Iraq during the Iran-Iraq War. He is a soldier in the army of Saddam but returns to his village for his engagement celebration with his bride to be, Hivi (Berivan Isa). The celebration is interrupted by a military leader of the village, Awad (Fathi Evari), who secretly loves Hivi and stops the celebratory activities to honor Saddam. Soon after their engagement, Pako reluctantly returns to the front; because he has to, not because he believes in the war.

During an attack on his compound, he seizes the opportunity to escape. He is registered as 'missing', and a coffin is returned to his family with the message that he has died on the battlefield. Meanwhile, Pako comes across some Arabs who help him, and then ask him to take a little girl, whom they found and rescued during one of the Anfal attacks, with him to the village. A teacher of his village helps him to hide the girl, while Pako goes into hiding in his parents' basement, where Hivi lived while she thought he was dead. The family continues to pretend that Pako is dead, as the punishment for desertion is execution.

The village thinks it is a disgrace that Hivi keeps on living with her parents-in-law, and Awad asks her father for her hand to save her honor. The father declines saying that Hivi needs some more time to mourn. When Hivi falls pregnant the rumours in the village escalate and the more her belly grows, the more she is publicly shamed. Awad returns once more to her and (unbeknownst to Awad) Pako's house, to ask her hand once more to save her honor. When she does not respond, he returns every night with his soldiers to try to unlock the door and harass her. After a couple of nights, Pako has had enough and opens the door, thus scaring the soldiers away. By doing so, he has put everyone in danger. Hivi, Pako and the little girl leave the village. Some of the town elderly, like Pako and Hivi's fathers and their friends, are arrested and forced to join the military in Pako's place. Pako, Hivi and

the girl find help in a church and try to cross the border, similar to *Marooned in Iraq*, by venturing the snowy mountain range.

Representation

Kurdish representations

Firstly, the film makes a clear distinction between those who are considered Kurds and those who are Arabs. Awad only talks in Arabic, and in the army only Arabic is spoken. However, Pako and Hivi and their families talk Kurdish amongst themselves. Some characters do not even answer when they are addressed in Arabic, even though they do seem to understand what is being said. This can either mean that they do not speak the language or refuse to speak it. Although Kurdish has many different dialects, it is an Indo-European language related to Persian. It is very different from Arabic, which is a Semitic language, and from Turkic languages. Throughout history, Kurdish languages have often been overshadowed by Arabic and Turkish (Kreyenbroek 1992, 53 – 54). The film clearly shows that the language which embodies power (e.g., the mullah, the military, etc.) is Arabic. This is how the director makes a clear distinction between the villains (Arab speaking, pro-Saddam) and the victims (peaceful, sectarian Kurds). However, it should be observed that the people who helped rescue the little girl and brought Pako back to his village were Arabs.

Moreover, Walid M. Taher, the director, emphasizes the diversity amongst Kurds. A large majority of the Kurds are Sunni Muslims, yet most Kurds are not fervently religious. There are also many religious minorities, such as Shia Muslims, Yezidis, Zoroastrians, Christians and Jews. Since there is not a heavy focus on religion within the culture, the KRG prefers to emphasize that the feeling of unity should come from the Kurdish ethnicity, not religion. It is therefore not uncommon to find people from a religious minority in high-ranking political positions (Stansfield 2003, 38 – 39). This representation can be found in the film when Taher chooses Christian Kurds to help Pako and Hivi cross the border.

Furthermore, we can see similar expressions of traditional culture in *Pako* as we did in *Marooned in Iraq*. At the beginning of the film, Pako and Hivi celebrate their engagement. There is typical Kurdish music, with typical Kurdish dances, and all, except Pako and the other soldiers, are wearing traditional Kurdish clothes. After the party, Hivi and Pako go for a stroll and she tells him that the next time they will see each other, on their wedding day, she will be wearing her most beautiful Kurdish dress. Kurdish clothes are very distinctive and have a long tradition. Today they are increasingly disappearing, and often only used for celebrations. The clothes can tell a lot about the

region someone is from and offer many possibilities for personal expression. During some parts of the 1980s, Kurdish clothing was forbidden by Saddam. Nowadays, the KRG initiated a Kurdish Clothing Day, celebrated every year on the 10th of March, in which many people participate and wear their Kurdish clothes to ensure that the tradition will not be lost (Ghafour 2021). By letting the characters wear Kurdish clothes, the director further distinguishes the Kurdish characters from the others and emphasizes the importance of this tradition.

Whereas normally the child is the signifier of the woman, in this film, the little girl is actually the one who is silenced. Just like Hanareh in *Marooned in Iraq*, the child is unable to talk after surviving the chemical attack by Saddam. In her dissertation, Şimşek argues that using a child as the protagonist of a narrative of violence is linked to the 'shock of the real' effect articulated by Beatriz Jaguaribe (Şimşek 2021, 66). With this concept, Jaguaribe refers to "specific representations in both written narrative and visual imagery that unleash an intense, dramatic discharge that destabilizes notions of reality itself" (Jaguaribe 2005, 70). It is specifically related to historical and social occurrences related to violence that provoke strong emotional responses in visual culture (Jaguaribe, 70). A child being the victim of chemical weapons, losing her entire family as well as her voice causes a shock of the real to occur in the audience, and helps delineate the discourse of the Kurds victimized during the Iran-Iraq War and in particular, under the regime of Saddam Hussein.

Female Kurdish representations

The Kurdish society has a long tradition of mixed rural, urban and tribal communities. Often, patriarchal structures within Kurdish society are justified based on the 'tribal myth'. Shahrzad Mojab argues, however, that patriarchal relations in Kurdish society are much more complex, and feminist theorists should not fall into this trap. In Kurdish society, it is common for women to have a free choice in veiling, and men and women are generally not separated during social events. Kurds also have a long history of opposition against women's oppression, Kurdish women have fought alongside the peshmerga, and Kurdish women have taken up high-ranking political positions for decades. However, patriarchy is heavily imbedded in society, and consequently women are seriously marginalized. They are being let free, however, with the idea that Kurdish women behave accordingly and will not tarnish their family's honor. The retaliation for defiling that honor leads to gendered violence, sometimes in the form of honor killings, which take place both in times of peace and war. The Iran-Iraq War disturbed the economic and political order in the region, and so violence became a large part of everyday life. When Kurdish women, who are seen as the property of the family, do not behave as expected of them, they can face severe retaliation (Mojab 2004, 108 – 133).

The film clearly acknowledges the patriarchal Kurdish society and the atrocities that come with it, such as threatening and harassing women. Awad keeps coming back for Hivi, even though, significantly, throughout the film she does not speak one word to him. Hivi is subjected to retaliation due to the fact that she is unmarried and pregnant Some villagers suggest to her father that they should move away, if not they have to kill Hivi. Heroically, Pako rescues Hivi. Once again, we see a man who is metaphorically castrated, since he is in hiding in a basement, confined to the place which typically belongs to the female environment, and unable to protect his woman. The only way to redress this is either for the women to be subjected to violence, or by coming forward himself, as he does towards the end of the film. Even though Hivi has the freedom to move around, her only actions are traditionally female ones, such as fetching water, doing the dishes, the laundry, and being pregnant. While the men are busy fighting, Hivi is portrayed as merely being busy in and around the house. All her actions are confined to the domestic sphere and problems that occur outside of that sphere need to be resolved by the men surrounding her. Hivi is characterized by her role as a daughter, a wife, a mother, a lust object, but hardly as a person herself. Her experience of war is therefore overlooked and ignored.

The name Hivi means 'hope' in Kurdish[5], and in all likelihood has a double meaning in the film. First of all, she represents hope for the Kurds. Since the Kurds have had to deal with decades (if not centuries) of war, marginalization and repression, there often remains a strong sense of hope in the Kurdish community: either for better times, more acknowledgement, or to obtain their own homeland. The homeland is typically portrayed as female, as it is nurturing and warm, a domestic space, typically associated with the mother (Naficy 2001, 154). Therefore, it is not surprising that the female character is named 'hope'. Simultaneously, it can also represent hope for Kurdish women. Honor killings still take place in certain Kurdish families. It is possible that Taher tries to take a stance concerning the position of women in Kurdish society and argues that more people should refuse to commit honor killings, such as Hivi's father (although not very openly, since he still refuses to have contact with her) and that the tradition of honor killings should be abolished. It is clear that Hivi herself cannot change her situation and needs to be rescued by men, however, she is the signifier of the desire to do so and of the Kurdish people.

Other women than Hivi are hardly represented (or only as extras in the background) except for the voiceless little girl, whose experiences of the war are visible due to the scars in her face. Only men can fill in her experience for her. The only other female character that has some influence in the plot

[5] Author's own translation.

of the film is Hivi's stepmother, even though she is only visible in a very short scene. The stepmother apparently is a young woman who married Hivi's father. It seems that she wanted Hivi to marry her brother, but Hivi refused. Because Hivi and her stepmother do not like each other and fight a lot, Hivi decides to move in with Pako's parents before they are married, while she is waiting for him to return. Hivi's stepmother judges her for this and tells her that it is wrong and that she is a "dirty girl", because it is improper to move out of her father's house before she is married. When her father, who is obviously torn between his wife and his daughter, visits her at the house of Pako's parents, he asks her why she moved out, worrying that the other villagers will think "that they were not able to feed her". Hivi is sitting with a bowed head (as she always does when a man other than Pako speaks to her), but before she can answer, her father-in-law says that it is fine for Hivi to stay and that they will take care of her. Her father agrees with Pako's father and leaves. Later in the film, when everyone thinks Pako has died, Hivi still does not want to return to her father's house because of his wife. The audience does not get to see the stepmother anymore. We only hear her opinion voiced through Hivi's father. Here we see another example of the patriarchal culture amongst Kurds combined with a great fear of what others in the community think of them, which is closely linked to the idea of the tribal myth mentioned above. In this sense, patriarchy is justified by tribalism. Furthermore, the patriarchal system is not only kept in place by men, but also by women. As Mojab argues, honor killings and the judgement that precedes them is not exclusively a male activity, "A woman was the *namûs* or "honor" of the whole family but especially of its male members" (Mojab 2004, 113). In the film, it is represented as though the stepmother is more worried about the family's honor than Hivi's father, but we cannot know for sure, as the opinion of the stepmother is mostly voiced through the father. Once more, we see the silencing of women. Hivi's father seems to be in the power of his wife, however, we cannot know for certain since he usually talks for her. He does seem to blame every one of his opinions on her. Hivi is also silenced, due to the fact that her father-in-law, who is her new guardian and therefore her new voice, speaks for her. Her father even agrees with him, because "she is their bride now". Again, we see the idea of the woman as a possession. Now that Hivi is going to be a bride, she will be the possession and therefore also the representation of the honor of her new family.

Chapter 5: Analysis *Kilomètre Zéro* (2005)

Context

Kilomètre Zéro (2005) is a film by the Kurdish filmmaker Hiner Saleem, an Iraqi Kurd, born in 1964 in the Kurdish city of Aqrah. At the age of 17 he left Iraq, in the middle of the Iran-Iraq War. He fled to Italy, where he finished his education and moved to France, where he resides to this day. In 2004, he published his memoirs, entitled *My Father's Rifle,* which has been translated into several languages. In this book he describes his life as a young boy growing up in the Kurdish region of Iraq.

Saleem is best known for his films *Vodka Lemon* (2003), which won the San Marco Prize at the Venice Film Festival, and *My Sweet Pepperland* (2013), screened at *Un Certain Regard* section of the Cannes Film Festival (Broeken 2022; Khduhur 2019, 36-37).

Kilomètre Zéro is a co-production between French film producers and Saleem's own production company stationed in Iraq. It is clearly visible in the film that less restrictions were imposed on the content than, for instance, in *Marooned in Iraq*, which was produced in Iran. The detailed way in which the soldiers talk about women, describing their body parts, and the way men and women interact with each other in the film is different from what you would typically find in Middle Eastern films. Although the language used in the film is mostly Arabic or Kurdish, the film has a European feel to it. The opening and closing credits are completely in French, as well as the first and last scene of the film. In the opening credits, Saleem indicates that the film was made with the support of the Kurdish Regional Government and its prime-minister Nechervan Barzani. The film comes across as a typical arthouse film: in the words of Hamid Naficy, "The art-house and experimental cinemas (…) reject the exclusionary high culture, authoritarian certainties, and politicized aesthetics of modernism for the more nuanced, open, ambiguous, self-reflexive, self-inscriptional, intertextual, pluralist, playful, and humanist ethics and aesthetics of postmodernism. Finally, the art-house films are postnational and postcinema, in that they exist both outside the originating nation and outside traditional movie houses: they live in transnational, international, and global mediascapes—film festivals, commercial movie houses, art-house venues (…)" (Naficy 2012, 176).

The film was released in 2005, two years after the US invasion of Iraq, and the subsequent fall of Saddam. This meant that Saleem was able to return to Iraq and make the film in the Kurdish region. This is reflected in the title of his film. Saleem believes that under the regime of Saddam, Iraq could not move forward, particularly in its stance towards the Kurds. With Saddam gone, a restart is possible and *Kilomètre Zéro* is the beginning (Hunter 2005).

Content

Although the film is a tragicomic war drama set during the 1980s in Iraq, it begins in a car somewhere in France, where the car radio tells us that all over the world people are demonstrating against President Bush for invading Iraq, but that many Kurds are happy about it, because even though it might be an act of imperialism, they would rather deal with America than with Saddam Hussein. The man and the woman in the car get out and stare at the flat French landscape. The rest of the film is a flashback. It follows the life of a Kurdish man, Ako (Nazmi Kirik), who is forced to join the Iraqi army in the fight against Iran. He knows he is going to be drafted and wants to escape to Europe with his wife and young child before that happens. His wife, Selma (Belçim Bilgin), refuses to leave as long as her bed-ridden father (Ehmed Sari) is alive, because he is too weak and old to flee the country. Ako tries to convince his father-in-law that they will leave with or without him, but the man refuses to leave, and so does Selma. Ako is drafted together with his friend Sami (Ehmed Qeladizeyi), a fat and clumsy man, who seems totally unfit for the army. Their Arab superiors discriminate them for being Kurds. Severe penalties are imposed on Kurds who try to leave the military base, and those who are caught leaving with their weapon face the death penalty. To set an example, Kurdish soldiers have to watch the execution of fellow Kurds. This is done out of fear that the Kurds will desert the army and start fighting against the Iraqi army by joining the Kurdish *peshmerga* resistance movement in the mountains. Ako, who does not believe in the regime of Saddam Hussein, regrets that he did not do so in the first place. After scenes of trench warfare reminiscent of pictures of the First World War, Ako is asked to return the body of a 'martyr', one of his fellow soldiers, to his family in a Kurdish village in Iraq. His driver (Eyam Ekrem) is an Arab man who does not like Kurds. Together they drive through the country while they are being stopped at every checkpoint, as it is not allowed to use the main roads during daytime and the Arab soldiers do not allow Ako, being Kurdish, to pass. While waiting to continue their journey together with tens of other typically Iraqi taxicabs, Ako talks to a fellow Kurd who is also bringing back a body. He informs Ako that it is his friend Sami. Ako is devastated and decides to escape. When they arrive in the city where the martyr's family lives, Ako pretends that the family has moved away to his own hometown and that they have to go there. When he and his driver are stranded in the desert, they untie the coffin of the martyr. The driver drives away, leaving Ako without any food or drink. He walks until he finds a deserted Kurdish village which was subjected to chemical attacks. Everyone that used to live there either died or fled, except for one young man. Ako asks him to bring his wife, child and father-in-law to him in exchange for money, which the man does. A short moment of happiness follows when the family is reunited in this deserted village. It is implied that Ako and his wife want to have sexual intercourse and, therefore, they leave Selma's immobile father underneath a tree. After they

are done, planes start to fly over and drop bombs everywhere. We see all the trees being blown up, presumably leading to the death of Selma's father.
The next and last scene is filmed in an apartment in Paris. Ako and Selma are looking out of the window. On the radio we hear that Baghdad has fallen to the American troops. Ako and Selma scream out of their window, "We are free! We are free!"

The film is a typically accented one. The contrast between France and the Kurdistan Region is very much emphasized. Naficy argues that place is a segment of space which has a special value, not only geographically, but also in our social relations. "Most of us take for granted our place in the world and come face-to-face with it only when we are threatened with displacement. Thus, placement is tied to its opposite, displacement" (Naficy 2001, 152). In this case the chronotope of the homeland is represented as sunny, warm, filled with people who know each other, a language that is their own. The representation of the displacement, in this case France, is rainy, dark, Ako and Selma only have each other, and a foreign tongue tells them what is going on in their own country. Once again, we see the mountains as a representation of the Kurdish homeland. Naficy argues that mountains play a large role in accented cinema by Kurds, and that these mountains express the nostalgia of a 'world before' (Naficy, 160). It is a stark contrast with the French green and flat landscape and the busy and rainy city of Paris.

Representation

Kurdish representation

Important to know is that the film indicates that the Iran-Iraq War was firstly a war against the Kurds, and secondly a war against Iran. The Kurdish representation in this film is mainly expressed in the contrast between France and the Kurdistan Region and the contrasts amongst the people represented in the film. The character of Sami in particular represents the humiliations Kurds have to endure when they are amongst Arabs. He is constantly maltreated, degraded and beaten by Arab soldiers. The distinction is immediately made clear at the beginning of the film, when a soldier asks him if he is an Arab or a Kurd. "Iraqi, Sir," he answers. "I know you are Iraqi, but are you an Arab or a Kurd?" "A Kurd, Sir". He is forced to strip his clothes and do a dance for the soldiers, which indicates the beginning of many undignified moments for Sami throughout the film. Until, in a tragic irony, he dies at the front as a martyr for Iraq and is brought home to his family with his coffin wrapped in an Iraqi flag. It is painfully clear that a man, like thousands of other Kurds, has died for a country that hates him.

The contrast is also illustrated in the relationship between Ako and the driver. When Ako's hands become dirty, he wipes them off on an Iraqi flag. The driver gets angry and yells at him that, since the creation of Iraq, the Kurds have always ruined everything. Ako makes fun of the flag, as in his opinion it changes with every leader. The Kurdish flag (which is used as the official flag of the KRG) exists since 1920 and was presented at the Paris Peace Conference in the year that the independence of Kurdistan was proposed as part of the Treaty of Sèvres. Since then, the flag has always been a symbol of resistance and has been widely used (Institut Kurde de Paris, n.d.). Between 1920 and 2008, the Iraqi flag has changed more than 9 times (Cahoon, n.d.). The changes were usually in line with the many changes in leadership Iraq has seen over the last century, such as the change from mandate to monarchy, to republic, and to dictatorship, etc. Ako calls attention to the fact that the Kurdish flag symbolizes the resistance of the Kurds and their (presumed) homogenous belief in that cause. When they point out to each other that Ako does not like Arabs and the driver does not like Kurds, they want to start a conversation on the reasons for their mutual dislike, but neither of them speaks (or perhaps neither of them has a good argument). Before the driver leaves Ako stranded in the desert with the excuse that he is going to get food, he tells him, "You are a nice guy, but I'll swear to Allah, I'd cut your throat if I could, Kurd!" Ako replies, "Yeah, you're nice too. But take more than 15 minutes and I'll shoot you down, Arab!" This scene is an obviously comical way to criticize the relationship between Kurds and Arabs. They don't know *why* they do not like each other; they cannot explain it, they do not even feel dislike on a human level, yet the social structures are such that they are destined to hate each other.

Once again, the Kurdish language plays a very important role. As in the previous films discussed, language functions as a symbol of the Kurds and the Arab domination. Arabic is the language that the Kurds have to speak to try to save themselves from being illegally drafted into the army, the language they have to speak while they are in the army and the language, they have to speak to show that they are submissive to the Arab domination. When Ako is stopped at a checkpoint, he talks to the guard in Arabic who immediately hears that Ako has an accent and asks where he is from. When Ako tells him the name of the town the guard knows he is Kurdish and answers, "Why do you Kurds refuse to be civilized? Why refuse to learn Arabic? Why not become real Iraqis?" Here the importance of language is crystal clear: according to the guard, the fact that the Kurds speak Kurdish instead of Arabic (even though Ako speaks Arabic), makes them not real Iraqis, not real humans.

Kurdish female representation

The Kurdish female representation is, once again, very limited and mainly expressed through men. We see the stereotypical idea of men going leaving for the front and women quietly waiting until they return. Selma is the most important female character and is only shown at the start and the end of the film. The audience does not know what she is doing while Ako is in the military. However, we do know that everything he does is to get her and their child out of the country. This film not only shows the silencing of women, but openly ignores women and their experience.

The name Selma means 'peaceful', which is not a coincidence. When Ako leaves Selma, he is going to participate in a war he does not believe in. When they are together, they find peace. Although the entire story is about him, his wishes are signified through her existence. It should be mentioned that it is Selma's father who prevents them from finding that peace. Even though Selma has told Ako that she will not leave the country as long as her father is alive, Ako decides to ignore her wishes and tries to convince the old man to allow them to leave. This does not only undermine her wishes; it also leaves their fate completely in the hands of Ako and/or the father. Selma's father literally has to explode before they can find that peace. Once again, we see the woman as 'the bearer of meaning, not maker of meaning' (Mulvey 1988, 58). Moreover, we see the feminization of the motherland once again. Selma symbolizes a certain hope and desire for a peaceful homeland for the Kurds.

The audience does not get to know anything about Selma, apart from her relationship with the men surrounding her. We only know that Selma is a daughter, a wife (who abides by her wifely duties), and a mother. Anything remotely related to her personality is utterly ignored. More importantly, her experience of war is completely ignored. The audience does not get a glimpse of Selma's character while Ako is at war. At the beginning of the film, while Ako and Selma are in the car in France and hear about the demonstrations and how thousands of Kurds have been murdered by chemical weapons during and after the Iran-Iraq War, Ako steps out of the car and watches the landscape. Selma, who also has lived through a war, who presumably saw her father explode before her eyes, who also had to flee her homeland to arrive in a foreign country, smiles faintly and also steps out of the car. She does not touch Ako, but stands approximately one meter behind him, also watching the landscape. This is before the audience has seen their war experiences. The scene gives the impression that Selma steps out to comfort her husband, while her own war experience is ignored, not only through the actions of the characters, but also through the narrative the director portrays.

Further female representations are absent. Weeping widows, a common portrayal of women in war films (Naficy 2012, 24), are made fun of to give the film comical features: when Ako and the driver stop by a house to ask for a screwdriver to repair their car, the women in the house immediately start wailing loudly as they see the coffin on top of the car and assume it is a loved one. The driver yells at them that it is someone else, but their weeping is so loud that they cannot hear him, and he runs away.

Another instance when women are ridiculed is during a stereotypical 'guys talk' in the army. The Kurds very explicitly talk about Anita Ekberg's breasts and bottom while prancing around in the Trevi Fountain in the film *La Dolce Vita* (1960). They use it to illustrate their argument that Europe is great, and they should all flee to Europe. The masculinity of the men has been undermined, because they are being humiliated in the army and are forced to fight for a cause that is aimed at their own destruction. Men talk enhances their masculinity and keeps up the patriarchal idea that women are only good for sexual purposes (Mulvey 1988, 62). This idea is highlighted when Selma and Ako have sexual intercourse, because it confirms one of the few things, we know about her: she is Ako's wife and, therefore, she is his to take whenever he so desires.

Chapter 6: Interpretation of Analyses and Comparative Analysis

In the previous chapters, I have offered an analysis of the content and the context of the films *Marooned in Iraq, Pako* and *Kilomètre Zéro*. This chapter aims to provide a comparative interpretation of the analyses based on the two overarching topics in the films, namely those of cultural memory and collective trauma and the geo-linguistic homeland, from which we can draw some comparative remarks. Based on the previous analyses, I will offer interpretations regarding context and content, especially concerning Kurdish representations and Kurdish female representations.

Cultural Memory and Collective Trauma

The theme of cultural memory and collective trauma is present in all films discussed. It plays an important role in Kurdish society and the creation of a Kurdish identity. Memory elements represent the Kurdish historical past, often including wars, oppression, genocide or personal traumas (Galip 2015, 88). Ann Hua 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). Naficy argues that the Kurdish cinema is inherently accented, due to the diasporic nature and ethnic and indigenous feel (Naficy 2012, 236). The diasporic identity is often nurtured by cultural memory and collective trauma and can lead to an idealized imagination of the homeland (Naficy 2001, 14).

Context

Contextually, the films provide an interesting overview of contemporary Kurdish history and the memories and traumas that are aligned with it. The films were produced in different periods of time, namely in 2002, 2005 and 2015. This timeline is in itself interesting, as *Marooned in Iraq* was, for instance, produced while Saddam was still in power in Iraq. The characters in the film make hateful remarks about Saddam and emphasize the atrocious situation the Kurds experienced during the Iran-Iraq War. Such remarks would have been impossible, if the film had been made in Iraq during that time, and therefore it was filmed in the Kurdish region in Iran. Moreover, it is one of the earliest films set during the Iran-Iraq War that included representations of Kurds. This may mean that the Kurdish cinema needed some time to develop. Edith Szanto explains that the 1990s were turbulent years for the Iraqi Kurds, and therefore few Iraqi Kurdish films were made (Szanto 2018, 137). In Iran, there was more tolerance towards the Kurds and Kurdish language since the Iranian Revolution

(Sheyholislami 2010, 290), which may have made it easier for Ghobadi to make films in Kurdish. *Kilomètre Zéro* was produced in 2005, two years after the American invasion in Iraq and the arrest of Saddam Hussein. The film was filmed in Iraqi Kurdistan (for Saleem the first time he returned to Iraq after living in exile for 25 years) and the title and ending of the film suggest that the removal of Saddam could be the beginning of a new start for the Kurds. During the film, multiple times a statue of Saddam can be seen touring Iraq. The filmmaker had some trouble while shooting the film, and the maker of the statue was arrested and only released after Saleem explained the story (Ford 2005). The film also provides the audience with a controversial ending, namely that the American invasion in Iraq was a liberation. However, as voiced in the beginning of the film, the stance is not necessarily pro-American, it is anti-Saddam. When the audience hears a Kurd being interviewed about the American invasion in Iraq in the beginning of the film, he says, "We know America is imperialistic. But we want to be rid of Hussein. He imposed 35 years of tyranny on us. (…) We would have welcomed liberation by France, Switzerland, Scandinavia, but no one else came".

Pako was produced in 2015. That means that the KRG had had more time to further develop a form of national cinema. Although both *Pako* and *Kilomètre Zéro* were filmed in Iraqi Kurdistan, the conditions Taher and Saleem had to deal with were probably vastly different. Though both films look like they were made on a small budget, *Pako* was sponsored by the KRG. For Saleem, such funds were not yet available, and he had to bring his equipment from France (Ford 2005). Moreover, *Pako* was filmed whilst the Islamic State was rapidly taking over large parts of Iraq, posing a new, terrifying threat to the Kurds. As mentioned before, that was a time in which Kurdish nationalism rose and gained worldwide attention (Kardaş and Yeşiltaş 2017, 9 – 10; 20). Once IS was defeated by the Iraqi army in Mosul in 2014, Kurdish cinema started to revive again, however, the stories had changed. Whereas films between 2009 and 2014 are described as the 'golden era' by Szanto, in which the KRG was portrayed as the hero and the future for Kurdish independence looked bright, Kurdish films after the attacks of ISIS have a more cynical character (Szanto 2018, 138 – 144).

Pako and *Kilomètre Zéro* have a similar plot, even though the context and the message of the films are completely different. *Kilomètre Zéro* ends on a hopeful note with the idea of a brighter future for the Kurds. *Pako* does not indicate such a thing and focuses more on the history of the Kurds and their suffering. The Kurds have a long history of betrayal by the West, and for many, the defeat of ISIS, in which the Kurdish *peshmerga* played a very important role, seemed like an opportunity for self-determination. Once more their wishes were ignored (Phillips 2019, 1 – 7). Although *Pako* was produced in the KRG, it is neither the KRG nor a foreign entity that is the hero. Rather, it tells the story of how the Kurds rely on each other, despite their differences.

All films discussed portray the suffering of the Kurds, the collective trauma of being in the middle of the conflict of a war, targeted in a war they were forced to fight and genocide. Even though one might not have been a part of this trauma, it is collective in nature, because it is historically made, not born. This means that, although individually it may feel different, it is nonetheless a trauma that is passed on from one generation to the other (Smelser 2004, 35 – 55). By repeating the story through visual arts, it further develops the discourse of cultural memory. In this way, the filmmakers also included their own (cultural) memories and (collective) traumas which were born of their experience of war.

Content and Kurdish Representations

Content-wise, the reproduction of cultural memory and collective trauma for the Kurds in general is clear. All films offer a view of the Kurds being in the middle of a conflict they do not want to be a part of. In *Marooned in Iraq*, where the Kurds are left entirely out of the conflict, they still are clearly a victim of it. Both in *Pako* and in *Kilomètre Zéro*, the Kurds are forced to fight on the Iraqi side of the war, even though the Iraqi army actively fights against the Kurdish guerrilla militias. Following Sylvester's idea of 'war as an experience', *Marooned in Iraq* particularly shows how everyday Kurdish people are harmed by the war, even though, contrary to the other films, the war only takes a place in the background. It portrays the everyday life of Kurdish people and how they try to keep it as normal as possible, even though their actions and lives are deeply affected by the war.

Pako and *Kilomètre Zéro* show the more militarized part of the war and how soldiers had to change their behaviour to save themselves. Moreover, all films show the consequences of the genocide against the Kurds. In her article "Mourning Halabja on Screen: Or Reading Kurdish Politics through Anfal Films", Szanto analyses Anfal films and divides them into three eras: 1997 – 2009, 2009 – 2014 and 2015 – 2017. She concludes her analysis with, "Kurdish society is idealized during the first two stages but portrayed as rigid and morally exhausted by the third era. Kurds remain victims, whether of Saddam, political and economic crises, or their own notions of honor. Their victimhood hinders them from acting and rising above tribal views of honor, and by the third stage, from forming a democratic government." Although this analysis does not only concern Anfal films, all films include the narrative of Anfal. This is not surprising since the Anfal operation had a huge impact on the Kurdish community and clearly shows their position during the Iran-Iraq War. By telling the story of the Iran-Iraq War and the genocide on the Kurds that followed, the filmmakers memorialize the tragic events and contribute to the construction of a Kurdish identity.

Content and Female Kurdish Representations

The above mentioned holds true for the Kurdish female characters as well, but their cultural memory and collective trauma are portrayed very differently. Whereas male characters share the trauma of being forcibly enlisted in the Iraqi army, or the memory of heroically saving Kurdish women from Arab aggressors, the female trauma is represented in a very different way. On the one hand they are (literally) silent bystanders in the war, waiting until their husbands or sons come home. On the other hand, they are the victim of Kurdish patriarchal society and gendered violence, in the form of honor killings. The former is not necessarily limited to Kurdish films, as Naficy mentioned, most films set during the Iran-Iraq War in Iranian cinema had similar characteristics, "The Iraqi enemy was generally portrayed as incompetent, venal, and heretical, while their Iranian counterparts were represented as devout, idealistic, and heroic. Moreover, the majority of stories involved men and all the directors were men. If women were shown, they were grieving family members" (Naficy 2012, 24). Only in *Marooned in Iraq* did a woman make her own decision by leaving her husband and her country to improve her life. Despite the fact that she escapes her fate of being subjected to a honor killing, her character is still punished by becoming the victim of a chemical attack, losing her second husband, her voice and having to give up her child.

In *Pako*, according to the customs of Kurdish society, Hivi should be murdered by her family, however, once more we see the husband heroically saving her, and her father being hesitant of the idea. In *Kilomètre Zéro,* Selma is merely portrayed as the wife waiting for her husband. As Sylvester argues, "Commonplace understandings of war today can still be starkly sex-differentiated: men do war and women suffer, support or protest war" (Sylvester 2013, 38). This is clearly the representation that these (male) filmmakers offer. Any female experience of the war itself is undermined by the fact that the female characters in these films are silenced, drowned out by male characters or altogether ignored. Yet, the films clearly show their criticism of gendered violence, because the male characters dismiss the idea as well. In this way, the female characters in the films are fighting two wars at the same time: one against patriarchy, one against Kurdish oppression. By showing these narratives, the filmmakers simultaneously ignore the female as an actor in a war, while pointing out and criticizing their position in Kurdish society. This conclusion perfectly corresponds to Mojab's remark that Kurdish society has a centuries long history of fighting against female oppression, because "the exercise of patriarchal power is embedded in relations among and between social class, religion, nationalism, modernity and the state" (Mojab 2004, 111).

Geo-linguistic Homeland

Context

Another common theme in the films is the usage of the geo-linguistic homeland. As I have argued in a previous thesis on films by the Kurdish diaspora in the Netherlands, the imagined Kurdish homeland and the Kurdish language play a very important role in Kurdish cinema (Hussein 2021, 19 - 22). The idea of the Kurdish homeland transcends national borders, not only because the Kurdish region transcends national borders, but also due to the diasporic state of the Kurdish people. Therefore, this image was mainly born and further developed in the diaspora. Also due to the fact that within the Kurdish region, Kurds still have to deal with marginalization and oppression, it is not as easy to share Kurdish cultural expressions as it is in, for instance, the Western diaspora. The conditions that enhance this idea are a strong, shared cultural identity, despite the heterogenous identity of the Kurds. New media and visual arts allow for Kurdish cultural instances to be shared and spread throughout the world, especially concerning Kurdish language (Koçer 2014, 475). Building upon the topic of cultural memory and collective trauma, the theme of the imagined homeland is often aligned with explorations of borderlands, migration, displacement, questions regarding identity and, of course, the imagination of a Kurdish nation-state. Often, it deals with both the imaginary as the actual physical fight for a homeland and the trauma that is linked to lack of that homeland, discrimination within the Kurdish region and the traumas of forced immigration (Eliassi 2015, 45 – 49).

All filmmakers have a different background, and therefore, different experiences. As mentioned earlier, Ghobadi is an Iranian Kurd and made the film in the Kurdish region of Iran. Although the Kurdish language is tolerated in Iran, it is not accepted wholeheartedly and expressions in Kurdish language are still being discouraged (Sheyholislami 2012, 41). In an interview, Ghobadi argued that he made the first film that was completely in Kurdish, and after that, a few more films in Kurdish. After three films he got into trouble. “Even though none of the previous three were political films, in the fourth one, they called right before the filming began, telling me not to make it in the Kurdish language, or else limit it to 20% of the dialogue. But I am a Kurd, I am an Iranian Kurd, and I have some rights in this land. Kurdish people are a part of Iran, and they should have the right to their own language” (Ghobadi 2007; 11:31 - 11:46). The fact that all three filmmakers decided to make a film in the Kurdish language is a demonstration of political resistance and expresses their hope for an imagined homeland.

Content and Kurdish Representations

For Hiner Saleem, who returned to Iraq for the first time to film *Kilomètre Zéro,* and gave the film this name, it meant a new, hopeful beginning for the Kurds. It is remarkable that his film is the only one that actually mentions the word 'Kurdistan'. Cities that were in the Kurdish region were not referred to as either located in Iraq or Iran, but in Kurdistan. In doing so, the filmmaker takes an obvious stance with respect to his hopes of the establishment of a Kurdish nation.

This does not mean that the Kurdish homeland does not play an important role in the other films. *Pako* shows the difference between Kurds and Arabs or Persians through language and through expressions of Kurdish culture. Similarly, *Marooned in Iraq* also uses these expressions in the form of song, and like Saleem, it refers to the imagined homeland in the subtitle of the film: *Songs of my Motherland*. Furthermore, all films feature either a road trip, or a large part of the film is a journey, a chronotope typically seen with the accented filmmakers. These journeys not only refer to the actual history of the Kurds, but also function as a metaphor for their journey towards a homeland. Obviously, the Kurds have a complicated relationship with borders, as it is the object that artificially separates them. This is made very visible in the films. All include the crossing of borders, but also long journeys through the mountainous areas. As Naficy argues, "accented filmmakers consistently feature a journey of some sort in their films, for their own journeys set them off from their homes, profoundly shaping both their experiences and their identities henceforward" (Naficy 2001, 223). In *Marooned in Iraq*, this is visible in the way the borders between Iran and Iraq are constantly crossed. Ghobadi argued, in an interview, that, "this film is kind of a road movie because the story of the Kurdish people is like a road movie. There has never been a place where we could settle for a long time, you see… I mean we've had a 'road' life" (Ghobadi 2007; 7:52 – 8:00). A similar idea can be seen in both *Pako* as in *Kilomètre Zéro*.

Content and Female Kurdish Representations

As mentioned in the analysis of *Marooned in Iraq*, the motherland is often femininized. In all films, the journey homeward leads to a female love interest. If we agree that the motherland is coherent with the female representation, then we can conclude that the journey is towards a motherland. Even though in all films the male and female protagonists are reconciled, their reconciliation is time and again disturbed by the Arab enemy. In the case of *Marooned in Iraq*, Hanareh lost her voice due to the chemical attacks, which makes her too ashamed to join Mirza and, instead, gives up her daughter to give her a better life. Her daughter, Sinour, then symbolizes the Kurdish homeland, obstructed by borders. In the case of *Pako*, Hivi falls pregnant and is constantly harassed by the Arab

villagers until she and Pako have to flee the country. And in *Kilomètre Zéro,* Ako and Selma are subjected to a bombing when they thought they found safety at last. Again, a metaphor for the Kurdish motherland. All men are in search of the safety of a homeland; however, the Arab aggressor undermines this process and forces them to continue their fate of roaming the world without a homeland.

This might explain the ignoring and the silencing of the female characters in the film. Not only is it a referral to and criticism of Kurdish patriarchal society, but if the woman symbolizes the imagined homeland, her silence can be considered a metaphor for the oppression of the Kurds and the active thwarting of the establishment of a Kurdish homeland.

Conclusion

The Iran-Iraq War and the consequential genocide committed against the Kurds by Saddam Hussein has deeply affected the Kurdish community. Throughout the years, we see that the memory and trauma of such events have taken on a cultural or collective nature, in which, in the case of this thesis, through visual arts, the experience of war is expressed as a way to deal with the trauma and emphasize the commonalities amongst the highly heterogenous Kurdish society.

Through the analyses of the films *Marooned in Iraq*, *Pako* and *Kilomètre Zéro,* this thesis aimed to explore the Kurdish narrative of the Iran-Iraq War through Kurdish representations in film. By doing so, we have seen that throughout time and space, the contextual backgrounds of the films highly differ and provide an interesting timeline in which the Kurdish past, present and hopes for the future are combined and all films are highly accented in their characteristics.

Concerning time, we see different attitudes towards the future of the Kurds and different ways to commemorate the war. Concerning place, differences in the area of production led to vast differences regarding the explicitness of films. All films expressed the victimhood of the Kurds during the war, but also the years before and after. All films offered a representation of the Kurds in which they are being marginalized, discriminated against and deprived of a homeland. This took place while they were being forced to fight a war, in which they were also the target. Moreover, the films expressed the differences between the Kurds and the natives of the occupying country, in which specifically Arabs under the power of Saddam were portrayed as the aggressor. Through language and other cultural expressions such as music, dance, and song, their representations were differentiated from the Arab representations. Meanwhile, the mountain ranges in the Kurdish region function as their imagined homeland and a symbol of their past and present, through which they have to keep on travelling, unable to settle. These are also characteristics that fit within the theory of accented cinema.

Specifically, this thesis aims to offer a separate analysis of female Kurdish representations, in order to emphasize the gap between male and female Kurdish representations in Kurdish cinema, and a gendered exploration of the Kurdish female experience of the Iran-Iraq War. Regarding female representations, the experience of war is usually limited to the domestic sphere. Women are not portrayed as the victims of war, but rather as the victims of Kurdish patriarchal society. Female obedience and women as a symbol of honor of the family are the standard. The patriarchal society, in which gendered violence is common, is criticized and heroically prevented by male characters. Female representations are more often than not ignored, silenced and/or dominated by the male

protagonists. Since women are mostly confined to the domestic sphere, their personality is often limited to that of daughter, wife and/or mother. Particularly the role of a mother is important and fetishized to the point where the female protagonist symbolizes the imagined Kurdish homeland. Here we see that the journey narrative is once more extremely important, as the male protagonists travel and symbolically try to reach the mother(land). In each of the three films, the reconciliation takes place, but is somehow obstructed, just as the journey towards a homeland is always obstructed.

The analysis in this thesis further develops the research of Kurdish cinema, in particular regarding the representation of women in Kurdish films. This analysis might have had a different outcome if a female filmmaker had been included. However, none of the very limited number of films directed by a female filmmaker met the requirements set for this film analysis. New research regarding female representations in Kurdish film will in all likelihood benefit from including female film directors.

This thesis also offers an analysis of visual representations of the Kurds during the Iran-Iraq War: a topic that is largely overlooked in scholarly research and overshadowed by the atrocious genocide committed against the Kurds towards the end of that war. My aim was to offer a diverse overview by including ethnically Kurdish filmmakers of different backgrounds, who produced in different countries a feature-length fiction film set during the Iran-Iraq War.

To sum, the Kurdish representation in films set during the Iran-Iraq War is one of victimhood: the Kurds are either victims of Saddam, the absence of a homeland, or their own patriarchal society. With this representation the filmmakers aim to use this victimhood as a common ground, to fight against oppression of all sorts and emphasize that, despite the fact that the Kurdish community is a heterogenous one, their memories, traumas and beliefs are the same. Thus, they feed the discourse of Kurdish nationalism. At the same time, the filmmakers emphasize that it is the same victimhood that deprives the Kurds of having an equal, democratic society and a homeland, and seals their fate of being unable to settle.

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