The Politics of Text and Context:

Kurdish Films in Turkey in a Period of Political Transformation

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I hereby declare that this thesis and the work presented in it is entirely my own. Where I have consulted the work of others, this is always clearly stated.

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ABSTRACT

This research concentrates on Kurdish films in Turkey with a particular focus on understanding the political dynamics of the nation in the realm of cinema, and investigates the relationships between 'cinema and the nation', 'film and politics', and more specifically 'socio-political conflicts and film', by exploring the issues and questions regarding these fields generated by the recent rise of Kurdish films and the birth of the concept of Kurdish cinema in Turkey during a period of political transformation. While analysing the prominent political meanings in Kurdish films, as well as their public reception, my aim is to interrogate the way in which Kurdish films incorporate with the political struggle over the future direction of Kurdish conflict in Turkey, the way their meanings are affected by this struggle, and finally, how they might have an impact on this struggle. How do films that directly address contemporary social tensions and political cleavages in a certain society enter into dialogue with those areas of socio-political conflict in their immediate context? This is one of the key questions I engage with in this thesis. In tackling these issues, I develop a contextual film analysis approach in my examination of the interpenetration of film and politics in the case of Kurdish films in Turkey, and I designate three main axes for this contextual analysis. The first axis concerns the socio-political operation of Kurdish cinema as a concept, the second develops a context-specific political analysis of individual Kurdish films, and the third concentrates on the social circulation and reception of these Kurdish films. And all of these axes are developed through close references to the period of political transformation in Turkey in the 2000s.

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CHAPTER 1:

INTRODUCTION

This research concentrates on Kurdish films in Turkey with a particular focus on understanding the political dynamics of the nation in the realm of cinema, and investigates the relationships between 'cinema and the nation', 'film and politics', and more specifically 'socio-political conflicts and film', by exploring the issues and questions regarding these fields generated by the recent rise of Kurdish films and the birth of the concept of Kurdish cinema in Turkey during a period of political transformation.

Kurdish cinema correlates with the Kurdish people who are widely recognised as one of the largest non-state nations. They have been physically divided into four main parts across Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Syria since the establishment of these states at the end of World War I, and they have thenceforth been subject to policies of denial, assimilation and oppression in the 'host' states. Moreover, as a result of the oppressive nation-state policies and the ongoing political conflicts in the Kurdish region, Kurdish people have become dispersed not only among these four countries, but all around the world, to constitute a widely dispersed large diasporic/exilic community. However, despite this picture of fragmentation, Kurdish political struggles based on the claim to be recognised as a nation have always been on the agenda and Kurdish people have maintained a national consciousness which has strengthened over the decades as an adverse effect of the oppression to which they have been subject.

Due to the social, political and economic circumstances they have historically experienced, the meeting of the Kurds with the medium of cinema was a notably retarded one. It was the 2000s when Kurdish filmmakers took to the stage, films narrating the Kurdish issue from the Kurdish perspective first came out, and the concept of Kurdish cinema came into existence. And the dissemination of Kurds worldwide was reflected in the fragmented nature of their cinema. When talking

about Kurdish films, we refer to films from the main host countries, and also, for example, a film by a Kurdish filmmaker from Iraq living in Norway, or a film by a Kurdish filmmaker from Turkey living in Germany. While 'Kurdish cinema' started to appear in festival programmes, film criticism, academic studies, as well as within political debates on the Kurdish issue, there have always been a cluster of questions shadowing the concept of Kurdish cinema. Any argument concerning Kurdish films first of all starts from the very question as to whether there is such a distinct and coherent group of films to be recognised and named as 'Kurdish cinema'. And, if so, what makes a film Kurdish? Is it the ethnicity of the director, the language, the theme, a specific aesthetic style, or a political stance that allows one to recognise it as a Kurdish film? Can we talk about a national cinema, ethnic cinema, or a minority cinema, or shall we take Kurdish cinema as an example of diasporic cinema, Third cinema or 'accented cinema'?

Because it is a rather new phenomenon, there is a very limited amount of literature dealing with Kurdish cinema. The first book on Kurdish cinema (and the only one in existence at present) was published in Turkey in 2009 (Arslan 2009). Alongside interviews with some Kurdish filmmakers, the book consists of articles that itemise and provide information about Kurdish films and filmmakers from the Kurdish region and the diaspora (e.g. Kılıç 2009a; Aktaş 2009; Rosebiani 2009), historicise Kurdish cinema by referring to films that can be regarded as 'Kurdish' in the cinema histories of various countries (e.g. Alakom 2009; Bakhchiyan 2009), analyse the common textual characteristics in Kurdish filmmaking that unite all Kurdish films from around the world (e.g. Arslan 2009a; Kılıç 2009b; Kennedy 2009; Aktaş 2009), and focus on certain filmmakers from an *auteur*ist perspective and analyse the formal characteristics of the films of individual directors (Kılıç 2009b; Çiftçi 2009; Erdönmez 2009; Özdil 2009). More generally, one of the prevailing approaches deployed in the articles in this book involve a focus on Kurdish cinema as the 'national cinema' of a 'nation without a state', and to analyse Kurdish films from around the world with respect to their commonalities, in line with the conventional framework of national cinema. Thus the book opens with a preface by Hamid Dabashi which begins, "The publishing of this compilation on Kurdish cinema once again brings forward the issue of the *national cinema* of a nation deprived from a united state apparatus" (Dabashi 2009: ix; emphasis in the original).

This research differs from this approach and in fact it takes up the definition/construction of Kurdish cinema as a national cinema in its analysis of the predominant discourses on the concept of Kurdish cinema. In this study, my aim is not to favour one of the many possible definitions of Kurdish cinema over another, or position Kurdish films in the theoretical framework of a certain established category or suggest a new definition. Instead, I find it crucial to emphasise that Kurdish films have emerged from a political context which renders the definition of Kurdish cinema as open as the status of the Kurdish people. This research holds the view that the ambiguity in labelling Kurdish films implies the fact that power struggles over the status of Kurds still persist. In this frame, how to approach the concept of Kurdish cinema becomes a matter of political stance; insofar as recognising Kurdish cinema warrants recognising the Kurds, defining Kurdish cinema means defining the Kurds. In this regard, the nature of Kurdish cinema makes it impossible to create a fixed definition of it; rather, it necessitates the study of structuring pressures on its definition, and thus this research attaches significance to investigating those debates that interpret, contextualise and construct the concept of Kurdish cinema from certain political perspectives.

Here, it is important to underline that theoretical arguments about the definition and identification of Kurdish cinema have been strongly linked to Kurdish collective efforts to assist in the growth and recognition of this cinema. In general, from the Kurdish political perspective, having an independent cinema functions in the same way, for instance, as having a distinct language does, and from this perspective Kurdish cinema becomes one of the representatives of a distinctive Kurdish national culture. Hence, it is important to note that, concurrently with the emergence of Kurdish films, politically motivated Kurdish collective efforts to support and promote these films created a discourse around the concept of Kurdish cinema and promptly institutionalised it. Thus the aforementioned first book on Kurdish cinema was also marked by political endeavours to support and give impetus to the newly born Kurdish cinema. The book was launched and edited by a Kurdish activist and filmmaker, Mizgin Müjde Arslan, and presented as "a concrete response to the ongoing argument about whether or not there is a Kurdish cinema" (Arslan 2009a: xiii); in this way, it came into being with the conscious intention of proving and

declaring the existence of Kurdish cinema. Following this book, the first ever conference on Kurdish cinema was organised in Diyarbakır, the capital city of the Kurdish region in Turkey. "As its location and institutional backing attest, the conference was endorsed by the Kurdish movement in Turkey" (Şengul 2013:240) and thus the idea of organising this kind of a conference was again mainly motivated by the idea of constructing a Kurdish cinema. Hence, what I want to emphasise here is the fact that the initial theoretical debates on Kurdish cinema have been intertwined with a certain political will that aimed to accelerate the rise of Kurdish cinema, amplifying its visibility and declaring the birth of Kurdish cinema as a national cinema.

Other than the aforementioned book, there are a few recently published articles that approach Kurdish cinema from new perspectives. Özgür Çiçek, for instance, focuses specifically on Kurdish cinema in Turkey by deploying Gilles Deleuze's theories about minority filmmaking and investigates the "archival potential" of Kurdish films "for the unrepresented history of Kurdish life in Turkey" (Çiçek 2011). Suncem Koçer on the other hand addresses the construction of Kurdish cinema as a national cinema in the transnational space by exploring "how agents characterize Kurdish films discursively, seek to nationalize them, and calibrate links and gaps between them" (Koçer 2014: 474). Defining Kurdish cinema as a "transnational discourse genre", she focuses on certain actors and institutions that have sought to historicise Kurdish cinema and nationalise Kurdish films in the transnational space through "discursive strategies" (ibid: 481). In his article entitled 'The First Kurdish Cinema Conference and the National Question', Ali Fuat Şengül (2013) focuses on the aforementioned Diyarbakır conference in an exploration of how Kurdish cinema was debated with reference to the national and the transnational by the participants and audience at this event. He treats the arguments made at the conference about the common textual characteristics of Kurdish films "as a way of negotiating an aesthetics for a Kurdish cinema to exist" (2013: 241). These studies are in harmony with the perspective of this thesis with reference to the debates on Kurdish cinema. However, I must clarify that these issues are related to only one dimension of my research, as questions about the definition of Kurdish cinema with regard to nationhood are neither the framework nor the main subject of this study. This is one of the issues I tackle in the process of seeking answers to other questions, such as

those that specifically concern the socio-political operation of Kurdish films in Turkey in a period of political transformation.

I formulate my research as an examination of the politics of 'cinema and the nation' through Kurdish cinema, concentrating on Turkey as an observational field and scrutinising the specific issues that Kurdish films evoke in this specific socio-political context. I identify Turkey as a national scale where the emergence of Kurdish films offers a substantial case study laden with various questions regarding the relationships between 'cinema and the nation', as well as the interactions between 'film and politics' and 'cinema and society'. In this regard, although this research is not a study of Kurdish cinema per se, the arguments about the definition of Kurdish cinema with regard to nationhood are relevant and significant for my research where I mainly focus on the interactions between Kurdish films and the Kurdish conflict in Turkey and examine the political meaning and public reverberations of the recent emergence of Kurdish films and the concept of Kurdish cinema specifically in Turkey. It is a crucial point for this thesis that while Kurdish cinema as a whole raises various complicated questions, these questions take different forms and new meanings within the culturally specific context of Turkey in the 2000s during an era of political transformation. Kurdish films made in Turkey on the one hand share ambiguities and complexities with Kurdish films from elsewhere, but on the other hand, questions regarding their position, identification, definition and political function have a different dimension, which is a product of the specificities of the history of the Kurdish issue in Turkey in general and the political developments in the 2000s in particular.

I believe that the theorisation of Kurdish cinema at large would benefit from an accumulation of diverse studies focusing on specific localities, specific historicities, and specific questions Kurdish films generate in different contexts. In this sense, one dimension of this study is still closely connected to the new research area on Kurdish cinema in that it asks how the theoretical issues regarding Kurdish cinema specifically translate into the context of Kurdish films in Turkey. Nonetheless, contributing to the newly born research area of Kurdish cinema studies is not my only goal in this thesis. In dealing with Kurdish films in Turkey, this thesis is particularly interested in reflecting on broader questions regarding relationships

between socio-political conflicts and films that engage with those conflicts. In order to explain how I will interrogate these relationships in my thesis and why I suggest that Kurdish films in Turkey offer a substantial case study for addressing this issue, first I need to briefly explain the political dynamics of the Kurdish conflict in Turkey.

As a consequence of the discourses and practices on nation-building and nation-maintenance enacted by the Turkish state, since the foundation of the republic in 1923, Kurdish identity has been strictly denied in Turkey. According to the official narration, Kurds were 'mountain Turks', there was no such thing as a Kurdish language (it was simply a 'dialect' of Turkish), and anyone claiming otherwise had to be financed by and the pawn of the 'external enemies' of the Turkish nation-state. All Kurdish attempts to break this policy of denial and oppression were violently suppressed, publicly speaking about the Kurdish issue was banned, and the Kurdish perspective on the issue was completely erased from the public realm. With the emergence of the PKK (Kurdistan Workers' Party), an armed national liberation movement inspired by Marxism-Leninism, the Kurdish conflict was transformed into a brutal internal war in 1984. While the PKK gained power and popularity amongst Kurds over the decades and dramatically changed the parameters of the conflict, the war fuelled anti-Kurdish sentiment in Turkish society and led to deep political polarisation in the country.

Turks of my generation grew up watching evening news programs that repeatedly showed heartbreaking scenes of martyrs' funerals, celebrated the death of Kurdish militants, and damned terrorism. Militarist and nationalist narrations of the conflict and the discourse of terrorism were so dominant that the majority of people in Turkish society never wondered about the socio-political origins of the Kurdish conflict. However, in recent years, the dynamics of the Kurdish issue in Turkey have significantly changed. With the emergence of the pro-Islamic AKP (Justice and Development Party) in the early 2000s as a new political actor, Turkey witnessed a large-scale political transformation. With the claim of breaking the anti-democratic state tradition in Turkey, the AKP attempted to erode the power of traditional state elites, and in the process the party gradually seized more power in all fundamental institutions of the state apparatus and embarked upon efforts to shift some long-

standing state ideologies and official policies regarding key national issues. The political transformation Turkey witnessed in the 2000s was a transformation concerning the very definition of the nation, national identity, and national history, and implementing a new Kurdish policy was one of the pillars of this immense political transformation. Emerging at a time when historical developments suggested that it would be impossible to sustain the traditional Kurdish policy and when the war between the Turkish military and the PKK was in a deadlock, the AKP expressed willingness to respond to the new dynamics of the Kurdish question, unlike previous traditional state actors. Thus, the AKP promised a reformist Kurdish policy which would regard the conflict as an issue of democracy rather than an issue of terrorism. In 2009, the government launched the 'Kurdish Opening', which was not really a concrete plan towards bringing about a political solution to the Kurdish conflict but rather official acknowledgement of the invalidity of the prevailing state policy towards the Kurdish issue and an official declaration of the government's willingness to develop a democratic solution to the longstanding conflict. Although the Kurdish Opening has been highly controversial and in a short period of time proved to be far from capable of ushering in a peaceful solution to the Kurdish issue, it nevertheless dramatically changed the course of the conflict. Most importantly, it abolished the decades-old policy of denial, officially recognised the existence of the Kurds, lifted the ban on speaking about the Kurdish issue, and initiated an unprecedented public debate in Turkey about the Kurdish conflict.

Traditional denial policy strictly banning any public representation of Kurdish identity and the Kurdish conflict had impinged on the cinema and left behind a void of representation in the film history of the country. Apart from a few individual attempts to implicitly touch upon the issue, up until recently the Kurdish issue had remained unrepresented in the cinema of Turkey. In the early 2000s, when Kurdish films started to spring forth worldwide, the first Kurdish films that explicitly addressed the Kurdish issue started to emerge in Turkey as well. The international growth of Kurdish filmmaking and the recognition of the notion of Kurdish cinema worldwide no doubt had a certain influence on the emergence of Kurdish films in Turkey. On the other hand, however, the rise of Kurdish films in Turkey was also an outcome of the general revival of cinema in Turkey. In the 2000s cinema in Turkey started to flourish with the growth of both commercial films and also politically and

artistically ambitious independent films. And Kurdish films benefited from the overall revival of the film industry in Turkey; from the new opportunities for film funding, the space for independent filmmaking, the growing audience interest in domestic films, as well as the considerable media interest in newly emergent domestic films.

Apart from these national and transnational cinematic dynamics, it was also the general political transformation and the shifting dynamics of the Kurdish conflict which played a crucial role in the rise of Kurdish films specifically in Turkey. The launch of the Kurdish Opening by the AKP government in 2009 in particular marks the beginning of a new era for Kurdish films in Turkey. After the launch of the 'Kurdish Opening', Turkey witnessed what we can certainly call a boom of Kurdish films, not only in reference to the growth of Kurdish films in terms of numbers, but also to the extraordinary public interest they received. As part of the unprecedented public debates on the Kurdish issue, in this period Kurdish films were widely promoted in the media and recommended by public figures to the conflict-driven society in Turkey with the hope that they can play a role in building communication between the Turkish and Kurdish segments of the country and narrow the gap between their beliefs, opinions, and emotions concerning the Kurdish conflict.

How do films that directly address contemporary social tensions and political cleavages in a certain society enter into dialogue with those areas of socio-political conflict in their immediate context? This is one of the key questions I intend to engage with in this thesis. Of primary interest to me is the mediation between filmic text and the social, and my aim is to interrogate the way in which Kurdish films incorporate with the political struggle over the future direction of Kurdish conflict in Turkey, the way their meanings are affected by this struggle, and finally, how they might have an impact on this struggle. Recent developments in the politics of the Kurdish issue and the observable politicisation of film culture in the 2000s in Turkey in parallel with political transformation provide an abundance of intriguing material for this thesis to reflect on the complicated and recondite interactions between film and its socio-political context, between films and the society to which they communicate.

In tackling these issues, I intend to develop a contextual film analysis approach in my examination of the interpenetration of film and politics in the case of Kurdish films in Turkey. Paul Willemen puts forward a very basic question regarding the text-context relationship: "Is the relation between a film (or a reading of a film) and its contemporary social-historical context so indisputable and so clearly defined that it deserves to be taken as a baseline?" (2010: 248). This is a valid question, as most studies on film involve a detailed picture of the social-historical context, but not always useful for coming up with insights about how that context relates to the following textual film analysis. Willemen continues by identifying one of the weaknesses in film studies: "By failing to attend to the intricate ways that the representation is animated by what it "presents", our theoretical toolkits have no means of assessing the relations between representations and the historical forces that speak "through" or "in" those representations" (ibid: 249). Annette Kuhn argues that "as a discipline, film studies models itself largely on literary studies, and to this extent is predominantly text-centred. […] Even debates within film studies concerning the nature of spectatorship in the cinema are predominantly about a spectator addressed or constructed by the film text" (2002: 3-4). Michael Ryan and Douglas Kellner also argue against the dominance of textual analysis in film studies and they write; "films function differently in different contexts [...], and we would suggest that the determination of their political meaning may be more complex, contested, and differentiated a matter than some structuralist film critics assume" (1988: 2).

The battle between textual and contextual analysis constitutes one of the major methodological debates in film studies. Andy Medhurst writes:

> In the struggle to establish itself as a distinct and dynamic body of knowledge, film theory in the 1970s made enormous gains. It achieved a radical break from the varieties of crude determinism and lavish aestheticism that occupied positions of dominance, but, as in any struggle, there were also losses. Most regrettable among these was any sense of the film text as social object. In order to gain more rigorous insights into their internal workings, texts were wrenched out of history, given autonomy, cast adrift from context into a sea of significatory interplay which need never be referred back to the historical specificities of the moment of production. (1984: 22)

Medhurst suggests that we must seek out ways of fusing the two approaches, but he also emphasises that "given the massive predominance in recent years of pure textualism, the case for the social nature of cultural production still has to be made quite insistently" (ibid: 35). John Hill also proposes that "instead of counterposing the two approaches, it would be far more useful to attempt to bring them together" (Hill 1990: 229). However, in his reviews of a number of books from the 'Cinema and Society' series published by Routledge, the main thrust of his criticism is that the majority of these studies fail to deploy a suitable methodology to carry out the promise of the title of the series, and this in fact indicates the difficulty of putting his proposition into effect.

From among the thirteen books of the series, Hill praises Annette Kuhn's approach in *Cinema, Censorship and Sexuality* on the basis that it examines how "the social inhabits meaning in the way that film texts are read", and "demonstrates how the 'meanings' of a text may require extratextual knowledge in order to be fully activated, or how extratextual discourses may impose a 'meaning' upon a text not necessarily underwritten, or implied, by the text itself" (Hill 1990: 229). While Kuhn concentrates specifically on the question of spectatorship in her discussion about text-context duality, Ryan and Kellner deploy a similar context-centred perspective in order to formulate a more general approach to this methodological issue, and they note: "We conceive of the relationship between film and social history as a process of discursive transcoding. We do so in order to emphasize the connections between the representations operative in film and the representations which give structure and shape to social life" (ibid: 12). And Barbara Klinger suggests a more elaborated contextual analysis approach for studying these 'connections':

> The relation of text to context is decisively important to a theoretical and critical construction of the cinema/ideology relation. Within the semiotic jungle produced by the representational manifestations of the 'culture industry', there are numerous and palpable intertextual interventions between a given text and its socio-ideological environ. The context which monitors any film's entry into the world is titanic; among its representational members are industrial practices of exhibition and distribution, including promotional advertising, and popular or academic criticism. The text, 'in practice', is an intersection at which multiple and 'extra-textual' practices of signification circulate. [...] The 'law' of the text, then, has to be tampered with to exact a

less streamlined, and more socially-responsive theory of the cinema/ideology relation (1984: 44).

What exactly contextual analysis means in film studies, whether the relationships between textual and contextual analysis can be formulated in a less contradictory and exclusive way, and how these two basic methodological approaches can communicate with each other in film analysis are not easy questions with ready answers. However, by setting up a dialogue with the arguments cited above, this thesis designates three main axes for the contextual analysis of Kurdish films in Turkey in the 2000s. The first axis concerns the socio-political operation of Kurdish cinema as a concept, the second develops a context-specific political analysis of individual Kurdish films, and the third concentrates on the social circulation and reception of these Kurdish films. And all of these axes are developed through close references to the period of political transformation in Turkey in the 2000s.

On the first axis, before engaging with individual Kurdish films, I will focus on Kurdish cinema as a concept from a context-centred perspective. Here I identify Turkey as a national scale where the antagonism between Turkish nationalist discourses and practices and Kurdish nation-building discourses and practices are reciprocated in the constructions and interpretations of 'Kurdish cinema' and also 'Turkish cinema' at a time of political turbulence. I will interrogate how some of the key debates in the literature of national cinema apply to the operation and public reception of the concept of national cinema, specifically in Turkey in the 2000s, at a time when the country experienced a significant political transformation regarding the very definition of national identity. Taking on Tom O'Regan's suggestion that we analyse the national cinema of a country as 'an object of knowledge', I will draw attention to the contextualising power of various social actors and observe how "each agent conceptualizes, analyses, recognizes" and calls Kurdish cinema into question "in particular ways, for its own practical purposes" (O'Regan 1996: 31-32). O'Regan's emphasis that national cinema is a discursively produced concept, "a domain in which different knowledges are produced and brought into relation" (1996: 25), is particularly significant in the study of Kurdish films, because I observe that the question of "What is Kurdish cinema?" is under constant transformation in relation to the ever-shifting political dynamics of the Kurdish issue in Turkey.

While investigating the complicated theoretical questions as well as the politically oriented public debates in Turkey regarding the definition of Kurdish cinema, I will also focus on how Kurdish cinema carries these questions and debates over to the concept of Turkish cinema; in doing so, I will discuss how defining Kurdish cinema inevitably means re-defining Turkish cinema and how these conceptual questions have taken shape under the over-determining impact of the politics of the Kurdish conflict in Turkey. When Kurdish films started to become widely public for the first time in 2009, they signalled a dramatic change in Turkey. In a country where Kurdish identity has been suppressed as it undermined the idea of the ethnic homogeneity of the Turkish national identity, the very existence of the Kurds has been denied, Kurdish language was decreed non-existent, and even the word 'Kurd' was banned for many decades, some films called *Kurdish films* taking part in the *national* competition of a *Turkish* film festival for the first time stimulated questions as to what 'national cinema' means (and what it should mean) in the case of Turkey. The recognition of Kurdish films as 'national films' in 2009 at Antalya Golden Orange Film Festival, the oldest and one of the biggest film festivals in Turkey, despite their identification as Kurdish films and despite for example needing Turkish subtitles to be screened at a national film festival in Turkey, was something that confused the definition of Turkish national cinema. Hence, I argue that the concept of 'Kurdish cinema' emerged in Turkey not only as a question, but also as a questioner, inasmuch as its existence complicated and disconcerted the notion of 'Turkish cinema'. Hence, following debates triggered by the emergence of Kurdish films, a new concept, *Türkiye Sineması* (Cinema in/of Turkey), was coined as a substitution for Turkish cinema and it started to be widely deployed for referring to films from Turkey without making any reference to Turkish ethnicity; as a discursive solution against the oppressive and exclusive connotations signalled in the concept of Turkish cinema. On the other hand, while the concept of Turkish cinema lost its legitimacy for a large section of film-related circles, it did not simply fall into disuse. Now, Turkish Cinema, Kurdish cinema and *Türkiye Sineması* are all used in Turkey, by different agents, in certain contexts, at different times. They all continue to circulate despite the ambiguities they bear, they are all marked by the process of the political transformations in Turkey, and they are all subject to power struggles and political debates.

While observing these developments, my argument is that the prevalent conceptual debates in Turkey regarding Kurdish cinema, Turkish cinema and *Türkiye sineması* in fact echo, reproduce and influence pressing political issues regarding national identity in contemporary Turkey. We see that, especially from 2009 onwards, political debates over the definition of national identity in Turkey started to be regenerated in the national cinema debate, in a quite direct manner. This is a remarkable observation with reference to the overall quest to explore the interplay between 'film and politics' in this thesis because my argument is that Kurdish films triggered large-scale public debates in Turkey not only on the basis of their topicality or their subject matter which neatly overlapped with controversial issues occupying the political agenda; in fact, prior to how they represented the Kurdish issue it was their emergence under the label of 'Kurdish cinema' that became subject to debate. And diverse reactions towards the concept of Kurdish cinema, favouring or disfavouring it, mirrored the reactions towards the policy change over the Kurdish conflict. In short, my main argument regarding the first axis of the thesis is that in a country where Kurdish identity was denied for decades, the emergence of a notion called 'Kurdish film' was itself something that not only bespoke a political transformation, but also became a means of debating this transformation.

The second axis of the thesis adopts a different contextual approach to address another dimension of the study of Kurdish films in Turkey. By conducting a context-specific analysis of the prominent themes, representations, discourses and political propositions that are apparent in Kurdish films, I intend to discuss the political character of the films under study. I suggest that one of the necessary pillars of exploring the interplay between 'film and politics' is the interpretation of Kurdish films as 'political films'. The directors of these films repeatedly highlight at every opportunity that while tackling politically significant issues in Turkey they believe in the potential of cinema to influence the public perception of the Kurdish conflict and to contribute to the peace-building process, and they express their desire to take an active part in contemporary political debates on the Kurdish issue via their films. The second axis of this thesis asks how filmmakers perform this political motivation in their films and examines how the aspiration to contribute to social peace in Turkey shapes Kurdish films. What kind of issues do Kurdish filmmakers speak of when

they gain access to the mechanisms of cinematic representation for the first time? Which hitherto unspoken issues are given primacy with the goal of joining the public debates on the Kurdish conflict that started at the same time these films started to emerge? In what ways do they "draw upon, incorporate, recontextualize and engage in dialogue with other texts" (Fairclough 2003: 17) while joining the intertextual struggles between multiple interpretations of the Kurdish issue? These are the kind of questions that shape the second axis of this thesis and my goal here is to analyse the textually evident political aspirations of these films with a particular focus on the complex intertextual dialogues between film and politics in a specific historical context. However, while focusing on the film texts in the second axis of my research, my aim is not to provide an in-depth analysis of the textual strategies of these films. In fact, I must underline that I deliberately refrain from performing a 'creative formal analysis' such as one that would discover hidden meanings in these texts, meanings that would be discernible only to professional film theoreticians, or suggesting alternative readings of these texts through close formal analysis. What I aim to accomplish in this chapter is to take up some politically significant meanings in Kurdish films that are explicit and observable to the general public in Turkey, the audience they address, as they have been central to the public debates these films have triggered. Following that, I interpret them with reference to the specificities of the political context in contemporary Turkey in which they circulate. This is thus the extent to which I engage with film texts in this context-based research.

One of my key propositions is that we can talk about convergences between 'past and present', 'reality and representation', and 'personal and social' in the case of Kurdish films in Turkey, which all originate from the politics of the Kurdish conflict. And I suggest that we can examine the political character of these films by focusing on these convergences. Kurdish films are not only utilised as but also widely regarded as one of the most significant means of making Kurdish memories visible and accessible to the general public in Turkey for the first time. Following the decades-long ban on publicly discussing the Kurdish issue, these films set out to reveal some unspoken historical issues and events regarding the Kurdish conflict and they deploy Kurdish memories against the dominant historicisation of the Kurdish issue. In doing so, the majority of these films do not focus on the past but on the remembrance of the past; they unravel the past through (real or fictional) characters

that remember the past in present-day Turkey and in this way they suggest inextricable ties between past and the present. Thus, it is not what happened in the past so much as the present effects of the past that is of primary interest to Kurdish filmmakers.

Primarily addressing Turkish audiences, Kurdish films communicate the Kurdish experience of the conflict and Kurdish suffering under state oppression in the past to those who had no access to the Kurdish perspective for decades in an attempt to influence the dominant thrust of Turkish public opinion about the conflict. As they acquire the means to break the silence, filmmakers first expose the price of the preceding silence by belatedly reporting on the oppressive mechanisms of silencing unleashed against the Kurdish people in the past. By screening state atrocities, filmmakers aim to contribute to social confrontations with a dark history and they utilise the medium of film as a mechanism of reconciliation and social justice without waiting for the official mechanisms to be established.

Another commonly used strategy in peace-building via film is the revising of dominant image of the Kurds and the Kurdish region in Turkish public memory. While providing the first visuals from the region that are not war footage disseminated by the Turkish military and introducing the Kurdish region to the wider public in Turkey, Kurdish films undermine and revise the prevailing negative image of the region in Turkish public memory which was disseminated through official discourses for many decades. They also aim at relieving the Kurds of the image of 'pre-modern, primitive, uncivilised Turks' and from the dehumanised image of 'bloody terrorists'. They flesh out and (re)introduce the Kurds via fictional and non-fictional characters and they give Kurdish people the opportunity to communicate their experiences and memories to Turkish audiences through the mediation of film.

In order to display the prevalence of the consequences of the dark history of the conflict in Kurdish society, Kurdish films tend to strongly link the personal to the social. As filmmakers often complain about the absence, or paucity, or inaccessibility of relevant historical archives regarding the Kurdish conflict, they are left with what they can access: personal memories available to them through spoken words or private collections such as photographs, family albums, letters, personal diaries, and

sound recordings. While turning private archives into social archives, personal memories into public memories, Kurdish films utilise the representative power of personal stories to attest to the wide-scale social effects of the conflict in Kurdish society.

Quite aware of the intense power struggles in the days of political transformation between opposing interpretations of the past in Turkey, Kurdish filmmakers seek out ways to claim that their narration of the past is 'the true version' among others. What is the most suitable way of telling some 'uncomfortable truths' (O'Regan 1996) to Turkish society about its past? How to undermine the political conventions that have been cutting off any attempts by the Kurds to express themselves, labelling them as 'terrorist propaganda'? How to render the average Turkish audience open to listening to the Kurdish issue from the Kurdish perspective? These are the kind of questions that seem to be significantly conditioning Kurdish films. Thus, I argue that, if speaking out about long-silenced issues, and thus building a communicative sphere for social confrontation, is the main motivation behind the *emergence* of Kurdish films, the challenge of accomplishing this motivation within the current political atmosphere is the main parameter defining the *structure* of these films.

I suggest that the predominance of documentary in Kurdish filmmaking can be seen as one of the reflections of the challenge of convincingly representing truths that conflict with truths that have been largely accepted in Turkish society for decades. In this sense, we can say that Kurdish filmmaking relies on the traditional perception that considers documentary film as more entitled to 'represent *the* reality', or to be more competent in 'unravelling *the* truth' than fiction film. On the other hand, however, what I observe and find more significant is a remarkable convergence between fiction and non-fiction in the case of Kurdish films in terms of their relationship with the notion of reality. In Kurdish filmmaking there is always a true story at the initial point, which then becomes a fiction or non-fiction film. The quest to represent reality in a way that maximises the reality effect finds its response in both forms. And my argument is that in both fiction and non-fiction filmmaking, directors who address the history of the Kurdish issue are in search of the most effective ways of communicating to their audience that 'what they are watching is not just a film'. In order to render the average Turkish audience more approachable,

and in order to break down ideological barriers, fiction films also endeavour to find ways of firmly knitting the representations with reality, anchoring their films to life. Thus I argue that, the drive to 'reveal the truth' and the claim of 'truth-telling' is observable not only in documentaries but in Kurdish fiction films as well.

While investigating the centrality of the notions of 'memory' and 'truth' in Kurdish films, I attach significance to the fact that the films addressed in this thesis render hitherto silenced Kurdish memories *publicly visible* and *publicly available*; they function as one of the major mediums of *publicising* the Kurdish interpretation of the truth regarding the history of the Kurdish conflict for the first time in Turkey. This emphasis is particularly significant for the general concerns of this thesis regarding the issue of 'film and politics'. Thus the third axis of this thesis focuses attention on how the Kurdish perspective on memory and truth represented in Kurdish films communicate to the society once they are public and asks what happens to the meanings discussed above, once the films are out of the hands of their creators, once they start their social circulation and get into intertextual dialogues with other texts regarding the Kurdish issue. In an attempt to respond to this inquiry, the final stage of my general exploration of the interplay between Kurdish films and the Kurdish conflict is based on another convergence, in this case the one between 'text and context' which I argue is again a consequence of the over-determination of politics concerning Kurdish films in Turkey in a period of political transformation.

As Toby Miller remarks, "texts accrete and attenuate meanings on their travels as they rub up against, trope, and are troped by other fictional and social texts" (2010: 142). In other words, the meaning of a filmic text undergoes a constant transformation during its social circulation, as it encounters other social texts that operate around the same subject. As the themes of Kurdish films are the themes of current affairs in Turkey, the process Miller talks about is something more readily observable in the case of Kurdish films. With the intention of exploring the immediate intertextual dialogues between films and the present-day politics, I appeal to the framework of 'reception studies' which directs attention to the historical, contextual, and intertextual forces that shape different interpretations of filmic meaning and which "provides a sense of what the historical prospects were for viewing at a given time by illuminating the meanings made available within that

moment" (Klinger 1997: 114). In Janet Staiger's description, reception studies aims at analysing "the historical context of the event of interpretation" and "seeks to understand textual interpretations as they are produced historically" (1992: 9). I argue that when the subject of research is films that specifically bring forth issues that dominate the present-day agenda of the society – issues that are highly subject to public controversy – as in the case of this research, then we can say that, directing our attention from text to context is necessary, even compulsory.

As previously remarked, from 2009 onwards Kurdish films started to be widely publicised and discussed in Turkey with reference to the political debates on the Kurdish issue in general and the new Kurdish policy in particular. At a time when Turkey witnessed radical shifts in the politics of the Kurdish issue, films that focused on the very issues that were at the heart of this political transformation came forward. Consequently, in this period, the film theatres in Turkey screening Kurdish films became an arena for debating the Kurdish issue, while the films turned into 'discussion material' for the general public to express their political opinions on the current political transformation and ventilate their disturbances, anxieties, angers and fears in an era of political turbulence. The potential political power of cinema was acknowledged and utilised by political parties active in the period who utilised films to publicly comment on recent developments regarding the Kurdish conflict. As a consequence, in this period, movie-going started to function as a political act, film comments as political commentary and film recommendations as coded political messages to the public. Furthermore, some Kurdish films struck up a direct dialogue with the parliamentary debates of the day on the Kurdish issue and filmmakers became public political figures who were regarded as 'experts' on the issues they addressed in their films and on the Kurdish issue in general.

Observing this picture in detail, in this thesis I argue that Kurdish films became mediators for debating the Kurdish conflict in the days of political turbulence; they participated in the ongoing struggle in Turkey over the future of the Kurdish conflict not only as a subject speaking out, but also an object spoken about; not only did they interrogate the Kurdish issue, but they also became an instrument for the public to interrogate the issue. Examining the salient dynamics within the highly politicised film culture in Turkey in a period of political transformation, I propose that the

stories Kurdish films tell, the political messages they convey, and the suggestions they make regarding peace-building transcended the finished films and extended outwards via the debates they triggered. My argument is that, although the actual audiences were limited in scope, owing to the extraordinary public interest they attracted and the wide public debates they triggered, the reach and sphere of influence of Kurdish films, always extended far beyond the actual audiences at the screenings.

Based on these three main axes, this research seeks to make a contribution to several areas. First of all, it contributes to the field of Kurdish cinema studies, which only very recently started flourishing and calls for new scholarly research concentrating on diverse aspects of Kurdish films from different perspectives. The study of Kurdish films in Turkey also partly offers a contribution to the study of 'cinema in Turkey', since these newly emergent Kurdish films are one of the most dynamic components of contemporary cinema in Turkey. Although a conceptual solution has been developed that includes Kurdish films in the cinema of the country, the question of how to theorise and study *Türkiye sineması* and how to tackle the complicated questions thatKurdish films have brought along into the film culture in Turkey is an issue that needs to be addressed by new academic research. So far, Savaş Arslan's recent book entitled *Cinema in Turkey: A New Critical History* (2011) is the only scholarly attempt to respond to this need. This thesis also makes a contribution to the general study of 'film and politics' and more specifically 'socio-political conflicts and film'. By developing a contextual film analysis approach based on three different axes which can then be used to help us understand the interplay between film and politics in the case of Kurdish films in Turkey, I propose a certain perspective that could be adopted in different studies tackling different cinemas, especially those that also examine how films that directly address contemporary social tensions and political cleavages in a certain society enter into dialogue with those areas of socio-political conflict in their immediate context. Lastly, this thesis also seeks to contribute to the field of national cinema studies by treating the case of Kurdish films in Turkey as a new example which demonstrates that analysing films with regards to nationhood does not have to feed into myths of national unity or ignore the diversities and conflicts within the nation. On the contrary, those dynamics of

political conflict are culturally specific to certain socio-historical contexts and that is why the national context still matters for film analysis.

After explaining the main axes of my thesis, I should clarify a few other points regarding the methodology of this research. The primary interests explained above that have shaped the structure of this thesis have also guided my responses to some basic methodological questions. In selecting the films to be discussed, no subjective criteria have been assigned on the basis of the 'aesthetic value' or 'political value' of the films, nor has a specific genre been selected as the focus of research. Since this thesis primarily focuses on the interactions between 'film and politics' and 'cinema and society' in the case of Kurdish films in Turkey in a period of political transformation, the selected films are those that have been publicly visible in the given period and that have been widely debated and contextualised with reference to the contemporary political debates in Turkey on the Kurdish conflict. Rather than aiming to give a comprehensive overview of all Kurdish films made in the period of time taken up in this study, I focused on those films which were most widely discussed in the media and in the public sphere in general; as such, those films best demonstrate the intense interplay between film and politics in the case of Kurdish films in Turkey. Again, as a natural consequence of the main questions and approaches followed in the research, I did not conduct my own interviews with filmmakers. Instead, I took directors' statements about their films to be one of the many contextualising forces impacting the meanings of the finished films, and therefore, while closely following the interpretation of Kurdish films by various actors within public film debates, I also followed the statements of the filmmakers that have been *publicly articulated*. Instead of conducting my own interviews with the goal of revealing something unknown about these films, in this thesis I refer to press releases, interviews and award ceremony speeches, in order to examine the ways filmmakers interpret and contextualise their own films in public and for the public and to discuss how their statements engage in dialogue with other dominant discourses and contextualising forces on Kurdish films.

Chapter Breakdown

In Chapter 2, I revisit the national cinema debate. Rather than being a literature review that scrutinises all of the prominent theories and significant debates in the literature, this chapter focuses on certain issues and questions regarding national cinema that are related to this research. Here, I must underline that I do not allot one whole chapter to the national cinema debate because I favour this concept for defining and categorising Kurdish cinema. One of the main objectives of this chapter is to emphasise and discuss the continuing significance of examining the relationships between cinema and the national today. While thoroughly discussing the growing suspicion towards national cinema studies, I engage with the literature in terms of subnational and transnational issues. In this chapter I also discuss and rework Paul Willemen's theorisation of 'cultural specificity' which I take up as a useful concept for understanding the sophisticated interplay between films and the socio-cultural domain of the nation. This is followed by a conceptual debate on national cinema and a discussion on the issue of categorising films in general. One of the main arguments here is that we cannot discount the fact that despite all the theoretical debates undermining the concept of national cinema, it continues to be in circulation as one of the main film categories in cultural use. And I emphasise the necessity of acknowledging this fact and incorporating the analysis of various discourses surrounding the national cinema of a country within the study of 'cinema and the nation' in the context of that country.

In Chapter 3, I explain the socio-political context of Turkey in the 2000s before moving on to my analysis of Kurdish cinema in Turkey in the following chapters. A thorough description of the main characteristics of politics in Turkey in the 2000s and a portrayal of the major political actors and dominant ideologies as well as some key events of the period is essential to this thesis as it focuses attention to the interpenetrations between Kurdish films and politics in a period of political transformation in Turkey and discusses films with close reference to the socio-political context. After drawing an overall picture of the political structure in Turkey since the founding of the Turkish Republic and discussing the characteristics of the traditional state ideology in Turkey, I examine the political character of the pro-Islamic party AKP which instigated a dramatic socio-political transformation in

recent times. I investigate how the 2000s witnessed "the structural disintegration of dominant power relations and paradigms in Turkey" (Cizre 2008: 4) as a result of the reorganisation of key state institutions; the revision of some fundamental principles of traditional state ideology; the displacement of long-standing official policies towards some key national issues; the attempt to redefine national identity; and the re-narration of some significant aspects of the national past. In the second section of the chapter I focus on the Kurdish conflict in Turkey which was at the heart of this dramatic transformation. After explaining the history of the Kurdish issue in Turkey, this chapter focuses on the new Kurdish policy introduced by the AKP government and discusses the shifting dynamics of the conflict in detail.

In Chapter 4, I first of all trace the socio-political and artistic historical developments that led to the rise of Kurdish cinema worldwide. I then I focus on the question of how to tackle the national within Kurdish cinema by returning to some of the key arguments in Chapter 2. In the second section of the chapter, I concentrate on Kurdish cinema in Turkey. I start by depicting and interpreting the void of representation in the cinema of Turkey before the advent of Kurdish films. After briefly addressing the few attempts that were made to break the on-screen silence concerning the Kurdish conflict, I focus on recent years which witnessed a boom of Kurdish films in Turkey with the emergence of films that for the first time directly and explicitly addressed the Kurdish issue from the Kurdish perspective. One of the main focuses of this chapter is a close observation of the conceptual debates in Turkey regarding Kurdish cinema, as well as Turkish Cinema and *Türkiye Sineması*, and in this chapter I draw attention to the parallels between these cinematic debates and the political debates regarding national identity in Turkey.

In Chapter 5, the focus of my thesis shifts from 'Kurdish cinema' to 'Kurdish films' with the aim of exploring the political character of the Kurdish films under study. Here, I deploy a context-specific political analysis of Kurdish films and discuss the prominent themes, representations, discourses, and political propositions that are apparent in these films with close reference to the socio-historical context. I suggest that, before moving onto the next chapter, where I explore the reception and the political contextualisation of the meanings of Kurdish films, it is necessary to first understand the political character of these films. We need to first observe and

contextualise the explicit meanings Kurdish films convey to their audience, in order to then interrogate what happens to those meanings once these films are out of the hands of their creators and they start to circulate in an overly politicised society. This chapter mainly focuses on the convergences between 'past and present', 'reality and representation', and 'personal and social' in Kurdish films in Turkey. I first address the act of screening memories of state oppression via film, as all Kurdish films of the period, without exception, focus on various aspects of state brutality and narrate Kurdish suffering in the past. I then discuss how Kurdish films embark upon revisions of the dominant image of the Kurds and the Kurdish region in Turkish public memory as a strategy of peace-building via film. My analysis of the filmic representations of Kurds and the Kurdish region is followed by an exploration of the convergence between individual memories and social history in Kurdish films. Here I interrogate how Kurdish films link the personal strongly to the social as a political commentary and position individual Kurdish experiences within the broader picture of the Kurdish conflict. Another issue discussed in this chapter is the issue of representing reality in Kurdish filmmaking. The main argument which I pursue in this section is that the challenge of communicating on the Kurdish issue against the background of decades-old dominant narratives is something that conditions Kurdish films. I suggest that while bringing the dark history of the Kurdish issue to the screen, these films make a certain 'claim of truth-telling' which I argue is not only evident in documentaries but is equally predominant in Kurdish fiction films as well.

Chapter 6 suggests that the politics of Kurdish films, the interplay between film and politics, is evident and significant beyond the fact that Kurdish films are literally 'political films'. This is where I add the convergence between 'text and context' into my analysis of the political meaning of Kurdish films. I argue that we can talk about 'the politicisation of film culture' in Turkey in the early 2000s, which is a result of the historical conjunction of two dynamics that took place in Turkey in this period: the political transformation addressed in Chapter 3 and the revival of cinema discussed in Chapter 4. And, one of the most significant aspects of the political transformation in question was the policy shift in the state's attitude towards the Kurdish conflict, while one of the most dynamic components of the new cinema in Turkey was the emergence of Kurdish films. I argue that this historical conjunction rendered Kurdish films a prominent means of debating the Kurdish conflict in

Turkey. This chapter is mainly concerned with observing the prominent discourses on Kurdish films that widely circulated in Turkey in the immediate context of their release and analysing the predominant contextualisations of these films in relation to the politics of the Kurdish issue. Therefore, I explore how various actors including politicians, filmmakers, festival organisers, audiences and the media deployed Kurdish films in this period to comment on the Kurdish conflict from varying political perspectives and positions of interest. After focusing on specific examples that demonstrate the intense interpenetration between Kurdish films and politics, I finalise this chapter by analysing the reception of *Breath*, a film that directly focuses on the Kurdish conflict but not from the Kurdish perspective, as public debates about this film have added new layers to the issues addressed in this chapter.

CHAPTER 2:

THE NATIONAL CINEMA DEBATE

Introduction

In the early years of film studies, national cinema as a category has been widely deployed without much critical reflection on it and the concept of national cinema has been functioning as one of the main organizing and descriptive concepts for film analysis. From the 1980s on, however, the assumption of commonality among the films of a nation has been superseded by a suspicion towards it. Thus, film scholars have for some decades been questioning the validity of the national cinema concept, criticising former definitions, seeking new approaches, suggesting various alternative categories that undermine the significance of the national in film analysis.

Within the growing suspicion towards national cinema, two directions can be marked as the main axes of the argument. One of them is concerned with the subnational level, arguing that the national cinema approach assimilates the differences within the films of a nation. On the other hand, the second vein in the criticism of national cinema is more concerned with the transnational level, concentrating on the permeability of national borders while problematising the national cinema concept for seemingly limiting itself inside national borders at the very moment they seem to be becoming erased. From a wider perspective, these critical arguments are related to the complexity of the political questions surrounding the notions of nation and nationalism. What is to be done with the concept of national cinema has ultimately been a political decision. Put basically, the nation-state is a scale of political power; and for all anti-nationalist political movements, how to break the dominance of the power that operates at the national scale has always been a question of political strategy. In this context, two main conflicting routes emerge at the primary stage of deciding either to assign the national as the scale of struggle or to suggest a struggle that operates below or above the national scale; the first one underlines the

continuing significance of the national, whereas the latter one focuses on the possibilities of rendering it insignificant. The opposing approaches in film studies are, in a sense, the translation of this political argument into the theory of national cinema. Following this point, we can say that all critical studies undermining national cinema are principally characterised by an anti-nationalist consciousness. However, although sharing this consciousness with similar ideological concerns, some scholars emphasise the continuing significance of the national and find it problematic to abandon the idea of national cinema altogether.

One of the main objectives of this chapter is to emphasise the continuing significance of examining the relationships between cinema and the national today. I argue that we need to make a distinction between 'national cinema' studies and the study of 'cinema and the national' because the tendency to discredit the concept of national cinema involves a confusion between the two and more often than not results in declaring the invalidity or insignificance of studying films with regards to nationhood at all. However, even in a 'globalised world' the nation-state still flags a domain of power, and as all power relationships embody cleavages, conflicts, and struggles, the national borders of a country continue to designate a territory of socio-political conflicts – conflicts that are historically specific to that national context. Thus, I argue that the study of 'cinema and the national' should focus on the interactions between films and the national dynamics of diversity and conflict. On the other hand, national borders also continue to demarcate a certain 'cultural specificity'. Regarding Paul Willemen's (2006) conceptualisation of 'cultural specificity' as a favourable concept for understanding the sophisticated interplay between films and the socio-cultural domain of the nation, I endeavour to rework this concept in this chapter. I suggest that the cultural specificity of the nation is one of the contextual powers that significantly influence the meaning of filmic texts, as we can talk about the superimposition of the cultural codes used in processes of encoding and decoding film meaning and the socio-historically familiar cultural codes within a certain national context.

In this chapter I also make a conceptual argument and discuss the issue of categorising and labelling films in general. I stress that, despite the prevalent academic tendency of discrediting national cinema, the concept continues to be in

cultural circulation outside of film theory and the nationality of a film continues to be one of the main references contextually framing films. For this reason, I emphasise that studies regarding 'cinema and the nation' must observe the diverse definitions, interpretations, cultural usages and political contextualisations of a national cinema as a concept within a certain socio-historically specific context and also involve various discourses that construct it as an 'object of knowledge' (O'Regan 1996).

I acknowledge that the literature is quite broad and multifaceted, as national cinema studies take on various aspects covering not only film production, but also many other areas of research, from the idea of a national audience to the policy making of the nation-state. My aim here is not to cover all these areas, but to discuss some key arguments that have played a significant role in shaping the dominant conceptions of national cinema in the last decades and also to specifically address certain aspects of the national debate that are particularly relevant to my analysis of Kurdish films in Turkey. Overall, it seems timely to sort through the criticisms regarding the concept of national cinema and reflect on the strengths and weakness of some of the prevailing arguments. This also involves reassessing the significance of examining the relationships between cinema and the national today, which is a key aspect of my research on Kurdish films in Turkey.

The Nation and the Transnational

Broadly speaking, we can say that transnational cinema studies basically concentrate on the permeability of the national borders and problematise the national cinema approach from this perspective. It is not appropriate though to mark one dominant approach, since numerous concepts deployed for the study of cinematic border-crossings indicate the variety of diverse approaches. Categories such as global cinema, international cinema, multicultural cinema, intercultural cinema, diasporic cinema, exilic cinema, world cinema, and European cinema can all be seen within the scope of transcending the national borders in film studies, yet each of these concepts represents a different approach to its subject. Here I am using the concept of transnational cinema as a general inclusive title, because in recent years, it has been

becoming an established concept used for subsuming diverse studies addressing different aspects of the cinematic border-crossings. However, although it has been increasingly deployed in film studies, the definition of transnational cinema is still a vague and contradictory issue. As Leon Hunt and Leung Wing-Fai remark, "The word 'transnational' is used more often than it is defined, and definitions remain abstract by nature" (2008: 2). Similarly, Mette Hjort states that "the discourse of cinematic transnationalism has been characterized less by competing theories and approaches than by a tendency to use the term "transnational" as a largely self-evident qualifier requiring only minimal conceptual clarification" (2010: 13). With reference to this ambiguity, Will Higbee and Song Hwee Lim question the necessity of the term transnational, and ask whether it risks "becoming a replacement for existing terms such as 'world cinema' as a means of merely describing non-Anglophone films" (2010: 17).

Ezra and Rowden remark that "cinema has from its inception been transnational, circulating more or less freely across borders and utilizing international personnel" (2006: 2). Similarly, O'Regan suggests that "what distinguishes the cinema from a good proportion of broadcasting and book publishing is that it is from inception international" (1996: 262). What is new is, Ezra and Rowden explain, "the conditions of financing, production, distribution and reception of cinema today" (2006:1). Despite the emphases of transnationality as an inherent characteristic of the cinema, obviously, the historicity of the interest in the transnational phenomena is rooted in the emergence of the notion of globalisation. As Hunt and Wing-Fai remark, leaving aside the contradictions over definition, transnational studies generally presents itself with reference to the cultural and economic flows of globalisation, the erosion of the traditional nation-state in a globalised world, and the idea of a 'borderless world' evoked by these socio-historical processes (2008: 3).

Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson's argument of the globalisation's effect on the formation of cultural identities is important for understanding the criticisms towards national cinema from the transnational perspective:

> Something like a transnational public sphere has certainly rendered any strictly bounded sense of community or locality obsolete. At the same time,

it has enabled the creation of forms of solidarity and identity that do not rest on an appropriation of space where contiguity and face-to-face contact are paramount. (1992: 9)

Related to this point, Andrew Higson (2000) criticises the national cinema approach asserting that it tends to assume that national identities are fixed in place within borders, which are, again, assumed to be effective in shaping these identities. He argues that "In fact of course, borders are always leaky and there is a considerable degree of movement across them (even in the most authoritarian states). It is in this migration, this border crossing, that the transnational emerges" (2000: 61). Higbee and Hwee Lim find Higson's approach problematic on the basis that while seeing the national model as 'limiting', he draws a national/transnational binary opposition and positions the transnational as a subtler means of understanding cinema's relationship to the cultural and economic formations (2010: 9). Regarding the national and the transnational as binary notions is the most debatable approach in the transnational cinema writing. For example, Sheldon Hsiao-peng Lu's suggestion is a very straightforward expression of this perspective, suggesting that "The study of national cinemas must then transform into transnational film studies" (1997: 25).

As Michael Billig simply puts it, "the nation is always a nation in a world of nations. 'Internationalism' is not the polar opposite of 'nationalism', as if it constitutes a rival ideological consciousness" (2002: 61). In Toby Miller's words, "We live in an international age that by its very formulation decrees that we are also in a national one" (1999: 94). And globalisation does not invalidate this principle, inasmuch as the world remains to be divided into nation-states. Ezra and Rowden read nationalism as "a canny dialogical partner" of transnationalism "whose voice often seems to be growing stronger at the very moment that its substance is fading away" (2006: 4). This approach represents the wishful thinking that is common in the transnational cinema writing, in that it interprets even the continuing power of nationalism as evidence to its disappearance. However, as Craig Calhoun underlines, "globalization has not put an end to nationalism – not to nationalist conflicts nor to the role of nationalist categories in organizing ordinary people's sense of belonging in the world" (2007: 171). We can say that what globalisation has done is introducing new power dynamics into the multifaceted relationships between the national and the

international; adding new dimensions to our understanding of 'the nation in a world of nations'. As O'Regan's suggests, these new dynamics "are not eroding the nation state so much as inaugurating another turn in the national coordination of a nation's internal and external relations" (1996: 122).

From this perspective, it is not reasonable to turn away from the consideration of the national context in film studies, and put forward the concept of transnational cinema as a substitution for national cinema, with the proclamation of national cinema as either an inadequate, outdated, or politically problematic approach. Instead, the transnational enquiries in film studies must be considered as part of the research of 'cinema and the national', focusing on the transnational aspects of the issue with a relational approach to the interplay between the subnational, national and transnational. As O'Regan suggests, "Like the national cinema itself, national cinema writing needs to combine the local and the international" (1996: 3).

In their comprehensive article working through the concepts of transnational cinema, Higbee and Hwee Lim argue that it is naive not to see that the transnational model also brings with it "boundaries, hegemonies, ideologies, limitations and marginalizations of its own kind, or replicate those of the national model" (2010: 10). In order to inform these aspects, they designate their paradigm as 'critical transnationalism' which underlines the necessity of scrutinising the issues regarding the national and the transnational with the emphasis of the dialogic character of their relationships.

> [W]hat we will term a 'critical transnationalism' might help us interpret more productively the interface between global and local, national and transnational, as well as moving away from a binary approach to national/transnational and from a Eurocentric tendency of how such films might be read. (2010: 10)

While formulating a dialogic relationship between the national and the transnational, it is crucial to note that this dialogue does not only consist of contradiction, but it also involves coordination and cooperation. And considering that these relationships are subject to the manipulation of the power relationships which can, for example, render a contradiction into conciliation, this dialogic relationship manifests itself as a

rather complex issue. Moreover, although in theoretical debates it sounds like there are two actors in question, of course, in reality their reference scope comprises multiple nations, which renders the contradiction/cooperation dynamics unstable and relative.

Focusing on the increase in the international co-productions in filmmaking, exploring the effects of the growing international film funding bodies, researching the transnationalisation of the film exhibition and distribution channels, analysing the aesthetic or thematic commonalities between the cinemas of the intercultural/multicultural/diasporic/ exilic filmmakers, are all significant enquiries considering different aspects of the transnationalism in the cinema. However, in order to avoid simplistic and hasty conclusions in transnational film studies, the political implications of these studies must be taken into central consideration, for the overall outcome of these transnational processes is rather complex, as exemplified by Higbee and Hwee Lim's remark that "in fact the national continues to exert the force of its presence even within transnational film-making practices" (2010: 10). When the transnational aspects of the cinema are isolated from their relational interplay with the national, it is not possible to interpret the occasions where the transnational dynamics serve to the nationalist ideologies and practices, for example. Or, it is possible to ignore the complicated processes like the one John Hill addresses: "While British cinema may depend upon international finance and audiences for its viability this may actually strengthen its ability to probe national questions" (2006: 110).

The Nation and the Subnational

In the national cinema literature, the arguments concerned with the subnational issues are mainly structured around the critique of essentialism. The essentialism debate in national cinema theory interrogates the affinity of 'national cinema' with the myths of national unity imposed by the practices of the nation-state and the discourses of nationalism. The main concern of this argument is that 'national cinema' echoes the exercise of nation-states and the discourse of nationalisms in the way it manipulates differences into the common denominator of the nation. This

argument in film studies follows a paradigm shift in national studies with the impact of the prominent works by Ernst Gellner (1983), Eric Hobsbawm (1990), Benedict Anderson (1991) and Michael Billig (2002). Breaking the essentialist view that naturalises the notion of the nation, this new vein in sociological studies understands the nation as a modern creation constructed by nationalism for the ideological needs of the modern nation-state, and focuses on the socio-historical mechanisms of nation-building and nation-maintenance. Hence echoing these sociological debates, film scholars have started to track the essentialist reverberations in film studies, and delve into the ideological issues that the national cinema concept brings along.

Thomas Elsaesser states that in the early years of film studies, it used to be assumed that "the films produced in a particular country "reflect" something essential about this country as a "nation"" (2005: 60). He regards Siegfried Kracauer's study of the cinema of the Weimar Republic *From Caligari to Hitler*(1947) as the founding text of essentialist national cinema theory, and argues that following Kracauer, during the 1950s and 1960s, national cinema has been connoted as "a nation's unconscious deep-structure, the reading of which gave insights about secret fantasies, political pressure points, collective wishes and anxieties" (Elsaesser 2005: 64). Elsaesser remarks that this approach was dangerous not only because it was essentialist, but also because it "risked being tautological, insofar as only those films tended to be selected as typical of a national cinema which confirmed the pre-established profile" (ibid: 64). This issue is one of the bases of Andrew Higson's argument, while concerning "the limiting imagination of national cinema" (2000). According to him, the foundational problem about national cinema is that it bears the assumption that national identities are fixed in a unified community. The result of this assumption, for Higson, is "the tendency to focus only on those films that narrate the nation as just this finite, limited space, inhabited by a tightly coherent and unified community, closed off to other identities besides national identity" (2000: 60). Consequently, he emphasises the potential inherent in the national cinema concept to function in a way parallel to the operation of the nationalist project, in that it closes off the acceptance of the diversities within the nation.

While undermining former paradigms, the issue of how to approach 'national cinema' without falling into the trap of essentialism has been central to the recent

debates on 'national cinema'. Thus, with the impact of growing sociological research on the ideological practices of nation-states to construct, maintain and naturalise the nation as a unity, film studies has become more inclined to investigate the ways in which national cinemas contribute to the construction of the nation. Susan Hayward (2000) is amongst the scholars who suggest a constructivist approach, following the inspiration of Gellner's theory of the nation as an invention of nationalism. Hayward argues that nations "disguise themselves as abstract historicised subject-objects" (2000: 87) and the applications of national cinema always carry the risk of being in line with the masquerading practices of the nation. In this respect, she argues for a national cinema approach that would resist the assimilationist discourse of nationalism and underlines the significance of analysing national cinemas via the question of how they contribute to the construction of nations.

The study of film as a means of social communication has been one of the main theoretical approaches in the constructivist view of 'national cinema'. Philip Schlesinger asserts that "questions about 'national cinema' may usefully be resituated as part of a line of sociological inquiry that centres on the prior matter of how the *nation* may be conceived as a communicative space" (2000: 17). One of the earlier studies of this vein by Karl W. Deutsch (1966), which is also the base of Schlesinger's approach, addresses the central role of communication in the construction of national identities. According to Deutsch, "Peoples are held together "from within" by this communicative efficiency, the complementarity of the communicative facilities acquired by their members" (1966: 98). Deutsch does not discuss the role of the media as exclusively as Gellner, or Anderson; he emphasises all kinds of socially standardized system of symbols as a part of this social communication including the memories, habits, and traditions of a culture. Also, he does not particularly mention the nation-state; instead, he refers to the nation as 'people'. Schlesinger interprets this point by analysing that Deutsch prefers using the notion of 'people', because his theory entertains the idea of 'the nation without a state' without explicitly naming it (2000: 17).

Gellner, on the other hand, regards culture as "the distinctive style of conduct and communication of a given community" (1983: 92). His approach is more concerned with understanding the nation-building mechanisms of the nation-state; therefore he

discusses the role of communication from this perspective and examines the modern institutional forms of communication. He argues that the modern media, as the nation-wide communication medium, serves the nation-state's need of binding the people together through the very essential structural characteristics of it:

> [T]he media themselves, the pervasiveness and importance of abstract, centralised, standardised, one to many communication, which itself automatically engendered the core idea of nationalism, quite irrespective of what in particular is being put into the specific messages transmitted. The most important and persistent message is generated by the medium itself, by the role which such media have acquired in modern life. (ibid: 127)

Anderson's theory of 'imagined communities' (1991) suggests a similar, but more exclusive argument on this issue. Given that Anderson's concept has been of particular interest to national cinema studies, and that the debates around his theory touch various significant issues of the national cinema theory, I would like to focus on Anderson in more detail. Clearly, one of the reasons Anderson's concept has been consistently appropriated in film studies is the fact that it evokes the imagination process inherent in the cinematic mechanism itself. However, how to interpret this imagination has been a rather confused and contentious issue. In fact, we can say that, the debates on the "imagined communities" theory bear the traces of the confusions surrounding the conceptualisation of 'national cinema', in general. For example, Chris Berry considers Anderson's theory as the promoter of the "conceptual shift that works to erase the naturalized realm of the essential" (1998: 143), whereas Wimal Dissanayake criticises Anderson's formulation as it pays scant attention to the internal divisions and local resistances the nation contains (1998: 529). However, even though it has stimulated conflicting interpretations, as Michael Walsh observes, "of all the theorists of nationalism in the fields of history and political science, Anderson has been the only writer consistently appropriated by those working on issues of the national in film studies" (1996: 6). Like Dissanayake, Elsaesser also is sceptical about this widely-used appropriation, firstly because he questions the significance of the media in shaping national identities. According to him, Anderson's theory has been serving as a rescue for national cinema theories through creative misapplications of it. Thus, he asserts that "media studies needed Anderson's arguments more than his arguments needed media studies" (Elsaesser 2005: 65).

If we return to the original theory, for Benedict Anderson, the collective consumption of the media is of central importance in the nation-building process. The nation is an 'imagined political community', because "the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion" (Anderson 1991: 6), and according to Anderson, the print media has a central role in the creation of this image. Thus, he regards the novel and the newspaper as "two forms of imagining" that have a significant role in the birth of the nation as an imagined community (ibid: 24). The crucial point regarding the newspaper is that it is not the content of the newspaper Anderson places emphasis on; it is the way it is consumed largely and the way this consumption creates the feeling of being part of the community. While talking about "the almost precisely simultaneous consumption ('imagining') of the newspaper-as fiction" (ibid: 35), he uses the term 'consumption' as synonymous with 'imagining'. This supports the idea that for Anderson, it is the time and space consciousness within the national space that generates the 'imagined community', simply through the act of reading the newspaper at a certain time, in a bordered society, simultaneously with the other members of that community. In this regard, the newspaper provides a form of imagining before the effect of its content, just with the very mechanism of large-scale consumption in a demarcated time and space.

This description of the newspaper's role in the self-imagining process of the national community seems to be more analogous to television studies than film studies. This is one of the main arguments of Elsaesser; he asserts that for television, there is a 'national audience' and we can speak of a 'national television', "but precisely to the degree that one is talking about a 'national cinema', one is not talking about audiences, but filmmakers" (2005: 38). This emphasis is important in that it reminds us of the centrality of the audience and consumption to Anderson's theory. Following this argument, Elsaesser's conclusion is that "the idea of a national self-image specific to the cinema and yet with distinct contours in each national media culture is therefore – for better or worse – different from Anderson's imagined communities" (ibid: 67).

Although not having a similar mode of consumption with the newspaper, the role of the cinema as a form of imagining can be seen more akin to that of the novel. With reference to Anderson, Ella Shohat and Robert Stamdraw a continuity between the societal function of the novel and the film, as two forms of fiction. Their proposition is that the fiction film has "inherited the social role of the nineteenth-century realist novel in relation to national imaginaries" (1994: 102). They make particular mention of the fiction film because their application of Anderson's theory to the cinema is mainly based on the nation's need to be narrated: "The cinema, as the world's storyteller *par excellence*, was ideally suited to relay the projected narratives of nations and empires. National self-consciousness, generally seen as a precondition for nationhood – that is, the shared belief of disparate individuals that they share common origins, status, location, and aspirations – became broadly linked to cinematic fictions" (ibid: 101).

This definition of a cinema with regards to nationhood needs some consideration from different perspectives. When the concept of imagined community is interpreted mainly in terms of the role of story-telling in the formation of communities, it seems reasonable to adapt the concept to other community formations as well, given that self-narration is fundamental for any community. Hence, Anderson's theory has been widely decontextualized in this sense from its national context and expanded to explore other community units. Arjun Appadurai, for instance, remarks that the role of the print media addressed by Anderson can be applied to the forms of electronic media, and he posits the idea that these new forms of communication can have similar or even more powerful effects with the print media, because they do not operate only at the level of the nation-state (2000: 8). He discusses the role of the electronic media in binding people across borders through transnational conversations, and remarks that through the instrument of technological developments, a similar link to Anderson's description can be found between the work of the imagination and the emergence of a post-national political world (ibid: 21-22). Considering the international circulation of films and the increasing role of the new electronic media in this circulation, we can say that, unlike the national newspaper and national television, the cinema can be regarded as an effective channel for imagining communities not only within the nation-state, but also beyond the state's borders.

Even when we put aside the issue of internationalisation, it is questionable that the national audience of cinema is wide enough for the application of Anderson's theory in the sense that Shohat and Stam suggest. Considering cinema as a popular media form, Shohat and Stam assert that films have the effect of an "institutional ritual of gathering a community" which is "in a sense the symbolic gathering of the nation", and for them, "Anderson's sense of the nation as 'horizontal comradeship' evokes the movie audience as a provisional 'nation' forged by spectatorship" (1994: 103). However, as Hill discusses, it is problematic to assume that national audience is homogenous to the nation, given that "even at its peak, the cinema audience was never fully representative of the nation" (2006: 105). As Toby Miller suggests, "it is hardly an empirical audience arrayed in front of the screen as before the flag at a citizenship ceremony" (1999: 94). In this respect, the function of the cinema as a story-telling medium cannot be discussed with the presumption of a large national audience. For this reason, the societal role of the cinema must be considered as a less direct and less instant one, when compared to the newspaper and television. In the following parts, I will try to reflect on the issue of 'cinema and the society' in general, and 'cinema and the nation' in particular, from this perspective, and explain this assertion in depth.

In conclusion, the reviewed vein of sociological approaches needs an extensive re-interpretation within the frame of the cinema. The fact that the medium of cinema is not as centralised and standardised as Gellner discusses for the media in general is significant, because it suggests the potential of cinema to enable the re-imaginations of the nation. The faithful applications of Anderson's theory always carry the risk of focusing on the ways films contribute to the binding of the nation, while ignoring the cinematic re-imaginations that unbind it. On the other hand, the overall problem about the constructivist approach in film studies, and thus the applications of the 'imagined community' concept, is that while arguing against the essentialist formulations, they generally portray a national cinema that is subservient to the nationalist ideology. However, the study of 'cinema and the nation' with respect to the notion of communication needs to be reconsidered in a way that is capable of informing the power struggles within this dialogue. And for this, as much as analysing the power of the dominant agents (in the form of a nation-state or any other

forms implying a dominant political actor), it is also important to inform the more complex mechanisms of the politics of the nation, for understanding the dynamics of diversity and conflict in the national cinema.

The Issue of Cultural Specificity

John Hill particularly favours Paul Willemen's conceptualisation of 'national specificity' while arguing for the capacity of 'national cinema' to encompass different ways of addressing the complexity of the nation and to inform the diversities of the nation:

> The national cinema which genuinely addresses national specificity will actually be at odds with the 'homogenising project' of nationalism insofar as this entails a critical engagement with 'the complex, multidimensional and multidirectional tensions that characterise and shape a social formation's cultural configurations'. (Hill 2006: 110)

As James Chapman mentions, the concept of national cinema inevitably centres around the question of what is specific to that cinema with the questions such as "What is uniquely 'British' about British cinema, or what is specifically 'German' about German cinema?" (2003: 47). In this sense, it can be argued that the idea of specificity is already inherent in the concept. And, for Elsaesser (2005) for instance, it is the very idea of the specificity of a nation, and a national cinema, that feeds into an essentialist understanding of nation. Therefore, we need to examine Willemen's conceptualisation of specificity more closely to consider how it might be suggesting something more than the innate idea of specificity in the national cinema concept.

Willemen basically introduces a national cinema approach that would avoid the confusion between the discourses of nationalism and the issue of national specificity. He highlights the distinction between "the national identity and the specificity of a cultural formation", and gives the example of black British films as "part of a British specificity, but not of a British nationalism" (Willemen 2006: 33). Willemen's study is a significant input into the national cinema theory, as it is one of the first

theoretical resistances against the rush to abandon 'national cinema' and to discredit the significance of the national in film theory. And I particularly find his argument valuable for studying the complex issues of 'nationhood' that Kurdish films in Turkey brings about, however, although agreeing with his general approach, I think Willemen's theory needs to be reworked.

One of the problems about Willemen's argument is that the source of cultural specificity and the way it comes to existence within the socio-historical sphere of the nation is not clearly defined. In one part, he identifies the source of the specificity primarily in terms of the practices of the nation-state:

> [I]n film studies, the issue of specificity is primarily a national one: the boundaries of cultural specificity in cinema are established by governmental actions implemented through institutions such as the legal framework of censorship, industrial and financial measures on the economic level, the gearing of training institutions towards employment in national media structures, systems of licensing governed by aspects of corporate law, and so on for the purposes of film culture.(Willemen 2006: 33)

Here, he points at the direct governmental actions on the cinema for supporting or suppressing films as the main determining aspect of the cultural specificity. However, the dominance of the nation-state varies in each national cinema case. Moreover, this approach is not capable of informing the ways in which cultural specificity is at work in the cases of cinemas regarding non-state nations, which is a significant aspect for my research. Considering the potency level of the nation-state's power on the cinema and examining the specific ways in which each nation regulates the cinema is an important aspect of the study of national cinemas, but not the cultural specificities of national cinemas. The concept of cultural specificity must be rather formulated in a way that would correspond to the intricacy of the notion of 'culture' it implies. As Edensor suggests, it is not only the state's legislative framework that shapes the national identity and national culture:

> [I]n addition to this legal, bureaucratic framework there are familiar places and generic landscapes; there are a multitude of shared conventions, habits and enactions; there are a plethora of familiar commonly used objects in households, communal spaces and in the world of commodities which constitute material commonplaces amongst national subjects; and there are shared narratives and representations which circulate throughout quotidian

life, in the media, in convivial talk and in politics. These numerous cultural forms and practices provide an epistemological and ontological basis which foregrounds the nation as a hegemonic, common-sense entity. (2002: 4)

From this point of view, I will regard cultural specificity as a favourable concept to understand the sophisticated interplay between films and the socio-cultural domain of the nation. Later in his article, Willemen discusses the notion of cultural specificity from a closer perspective to this approach. Within the context of my discussion, the most notable part in Willemen's article is the piece where he talks about the universalising ethnocentricity at work in film studies. He criticises this approach because it ignores "the specific knowledges that may be at work in a text, such as shorthand references to particular, historically accrued modes of making sense (often referred to as cultural traditions)" (Willemen 2006: 35). This point is significant for my application of the idea of cultural specificity as a national issue and I would like to reinterpret Willemen's theory starting from here. Tom O'Regan understands the concept of cultural specificity with a similar approach to this emphasis, attaching importance to the common cultural archives accumulated throughout the history of a nation; "each national cinema stresses its social texts, drawing as it does on its public record and the cultural archives particular to it. These common archives of information, story and archetype are shared by film-maker and local audience alike" (1996: 173).

Above I had stated that the social role of the cinema must be considered as a less direct and less instant one. In order to develop this assertion it is significant to study the ways in which films operate in relation to the 'historically accrued modes of making sense' within the cultural memory of a nation. This approach might also suggest some solutions to the above discussed problems about the research of the social function of the cinema with reference to the nation as a communicative space. In this regard, Peter Sahlins's criticism of Anderson's theory is important; Sahlins remarks that "approaches like Anderson's still fail to focus on the specific ways in which individuals and communities construct symbolically, in their own communities, the means of linking themselves to the wider worlds of the nation" (1998: 32). Stuart Hall's definition of the nation is akin to that of Anderson, but more adequate to respond to Sahlins's criticism as he identifies the nation as a "symbolic

community" and focuses on the "systems of cultural representations" of the nation (Hall 1992: 293).

Interpreting the idea of cultural specificity in accordance with Hall's definition of the nation means placing emphasis on the narrational conventions established within a culture, as much as the narratives of a culture. Robert Wuthnow (1992) stresses the importance of analyzing a culture through the examination of the symbol production, symbol manipulation, and symbolic practices within that culture. He remarks that we cannot understand a culture through simply thematising the contents of its narratives, but we need to examine "the complex relationships between form and content within symbolic codes themselves and the ways in which these codes relate to symbolic dimensions of the broader social environment" (Wuthnow 1992: 13). Jay Lemke's (1995) study based on the concept of 'textual politics' elaborately addresses these symbolic dimensions for explaining the political aspects of the cultural texts circulating in a community:

> Sign systems are semiotic *resource* systems; they enable us to make meaningful actions (including utterances) by deploying these resources in recognizable, mostly habitual (and marginally creative) ways. The habitual ways in which we deploy them are identifiable as *semiotic formations:* the regular and repeatable, recognizably meaningful, culturally and historically specific patterns of co-deployment of semiotic resources in a community. (1995: 85)

Following this point we can regard nation as a cultural domain where the recognizably meaningful semiotic codes operate within the same resource system shared by its members. Norman Fairclough refers to the formation of a common cultural archive with the concept of 'members' resources', "which people have in their heads and draw upon when they produce or interpret texts - including their knowledge of language, representations of the natural and social worlds they inhabit, values, beliefs, assumptions, and so on" (Fairclough 1996: 24).

Here, it is important to note that the notion of a shared 'resource system' does not refer to an ideological agreement or a political consensus, and it does not exclude the societal conflicts and power struggles. On the contrary, I suggest that the recognition of the same codes within the same system is the necessary ground for the practice of

re-framing, re-coding, and subverting these codes. Thus in Chapter 5 and Chapter 6, this point will be significant for my analysis of representations of the Kurdish issue in cinema as well as the public reception of these representations in Turkey in the 2000s. The transformation of the cultural codes with the impact of societal struggles, or the deployment of the cultural codes for re-coding them as a political textual strategy, can only happen on the ground of a shared 'meaning system', that provides the contextuality within which individual images, symbols and texts make sense in a particular way: "Meaning consists in relations and systems of relations of relations. These relations are basically *contextualizing* relations; they tell us what the contexts are in relation to which an act or event has its meanings in our community" (Lemke 1995: 142).

Studying the cultural specificity of national cinemas within the context I suggest means examining the filmic text within the web of its intertextual relationships with other cultural texts that contribute to the shared 'meaning system'. Drawing upon Mikhail Bakhtin's theorisation of intertextuality, Ron Scollon remarks that "all communication is positioned within multiple, overlapping, and even conflicting discourses", and "all communications (particular utterances) borrow from other discourses and texts and are, in turn, used in later discourses"(2001: 8). Here, I attach importance to the question Fairclough raises asking how exactly texts draw upon, incorporate, recontextualize and engage in dialogue with other texts (2003: 17). Fairclough emphasises the aspect of intertextuality that focuses on the relationship between texts, on the one hand, and the ideological structures and societal struggles, on the other. In this regard, while deploying the concept of intertextuality, I do not only refer to the contact between film texts. Because as O'Regan remarks, "the intertextuality of film-making is not only an accomplishment turning on relations with other films but also on relations with other social and textual entities outside film" (1996: 173). Also, my interest is not only of the intertextual relationships surrounding films at the thematic level, which is easier to observe and analyse, but also the intertextuality enabled through the shared symbolic meaning systems.

From this perspective, cultural specificity can also be interpreted within the context of 'collective memory'. Maurice Halbwachs (1992), a student of Durkheim and Bergson, introduced the concept of 'collective memory' which posited the view that

all memory is a social phenomenon. He was the first to theorise individual memory as a phenomenon structured by a communal sense of the past constructed by social groups. He argues that what we remember, as well as why and how we remember it, is strongly informed by collectively inscribed versions of the past. Halbwach's concept of collective memory has been widely used in studies regarding the communal sense of belonging and the formation of social identities shaped by the feeling of being a part of 'a communal past' and the idea that there is "some connection between what happened in general and how they were involved as individuals" (Dijck 2004: 267). It is through collective memory that individuals' sense of time extends beyond their lifespans and their identities span the history of the social group, thus embodying the narration of events that happened long before the individual existed. It is mainly this point that makes the notion of collective memory particularly significant in the analysis of the formation and maintenance of nationhood. In line with sociological enquiries that de-mythicise the nation, Halbwach's theory of collective memory has been widely applied in analyses of the construction of the idea of 'national unity' and 'national identities' through the narration of a mythical past of the nation, inscribing a nation's past into the collective memory of its members. For example, Susan Hayward points out that "Nationalism's investment in history to create its nation and its identity means that the modern nation is built on shared memories of some past or pasts that can mobilise and unite its members" (2000: 83).

Collective memory is a valuable concept in understanding how nationalism constructs a national past, and through the institutional mechanisms of the state, it ensures that the members of the nation not only share knowledge about this narrated past, but also share a common interpretation of and shared feelings regarding the nation's past. However, national formation is never a conflict-free process, and constructed collective memory is always fraught with contested narratives and discordant feelings about significant events in a given national history. As Sune Haugbolle argues, "Despite its significance, state-centred nationalism only accounts for the production, not the reception and ensuing negotiation, of national memory". She continues:

Despite nationalist imagination's predilection for immutable history, the negotiation of national memory continues to evolve in ways that incorporate recent events and give new meaning to old myths, and indeed undermine those myths. In the evolving histories of states, revolution, war and national liberation generate new foci for nationalist imagination. (2010: 8)

Thus, as the history of the nation evolves, the collective memory of the nation also evolves with the driving force of diverse agents recalling historical events that were excluded from the narration of the national past, re-interpreting well-known events, undermining national myths, and fracturing the monolithic picture of collective memory. The original conception of collective memory does not imply absolute agreement among the members of a group, and as Halbwachs argues, collective memory is not conflict-free terrain. The question is whether we can talk about a collective memory if there is always contestation about political interpretations of the past, or if narrations of the past are not monolithic but a conflictingly polyphonic. The answer should be yes, based on an understanding of collective memory that emphasises *sharing* and not necessarily *agreeing*. As Jose van Dijck states, individuals "may 'share' a memory even if their accounts are antithetical" (2004: 267). Or, in Hobsbawm's words, "To be a member of any human community is to situate oneself with regard to one's (its) past, if only by rejecting it"(1972: 3). This idea of a collective memory does not exclude on the contrary necessarily include the socio-political disagreements over the communal past. This approach will be central to my analysis of representations of the past in Kurdish films and the receptions of these representations in Chapter 5 and Chapter 6, where I will reinterpret Willemen's notion of "cultural specificity" from the perspective of collective memory specifically in the national context of Turkey.

Jill A. Edy remarks that "the idea that multiple and competing versions of the past might somehow be pulled together and represented as the collective memory—the story that everyone knows—is generally absent from the literature on collective memory" (2006: 3). This point links back to my argument on the issue of 'cultural specificity' and my reinterpretation of it with reference to Lemke's idea of a common 'resource system' in a society, as well as Fairclough's theory on 'members' resources' with emphasis on the fact that these notions do not imply political

consensus but refer to the significance of the recognition of the same codes by members of a society in the same system.

Within the domain of a shared system of meaning, or a shared memory, an object seen in the background of a frame, or the accent of a character, a landscape, or any detail in a filmic text for that matter, can "become identifiable symbolic cultural elements. And the process of representation adds a further density to the ways in which these are apprehended, producing more points of association through which they accrue meaning" (Edensor 2002: 140). In this way, recognised cultural codes appeal to members' resources or shared memories via the superimposition of the film's symbolic system with the socio-historically familiar symbols of the culture of the nation. In this sense, we can say that the cultural specificity of the nation is one of the contextual powers that significantly influence the meaning of filmic texts. In this point of view, cultural specificity in national cinema implies a common 'resource system' with the usage of the same cultural codes in processes of encoding and decoding.

Thus, the cultural specificity of a nation provides a meaning layer in the filmic texts, which is specific to the members who recognise the connotative meanings embedded in the symbolic system of films, and which is lost in translation outside the domain of that cultural specificity. Here, I am not referring to the idea of an 'original meaning' of a filmic text which can be misinterpreted outside its own cultural roots, and I am not interested in the argument of the productive (or unproductive) 'misreadings' in the frame of this study. But I am simply referring to the shifting meaning structures in different contexts, which means placing emphasis on the specific meanings of films which can only occur in the national cultural domain, with an interest of the way these specific meanings shape the cultural meaning and the societal function of films within the politics of the nation. And this argument will be highly significant in Chapter 6, where I analyse the public reception of Kurdish films in Turkey in the 2000s and interpret diverse interpretations, contextualisations and manipulations of film meaning and interrogate the intertextual dialogues of film texts with other dominant cultural texts on the Kurdish issue in Turkey in the 2000s.

The Validity of National Cinema as a Concept

From this point, I would like to return to the beginning and reflect on the functionality of national cinema as a concept. I have been building my argument mainly through responding to the literature of the 'essentialist versus constructivism' debate. However, in the progress of national cinema theory, the essentialism debate has gone beyond the criticism of early film studies and resulted in a scepticism about the concept of national cinema at large with a suspicion towards the possibility of national cinema studies escaping any forms of essentialism. In this direction, the constructivist approach has also become subject to criticism. According to this, the argument is no longer about deciding on the most appropriate approach to national cinema, but rather questioning the validity of the concept altogether. In this vein, Thomas Elsaesser states that, from a historical perspective, the classic analyses of national cinemas were on the whole essentialist, including the ones applying a constructivist approach, because "they looked to the cinema, its narratives, iconography or recurring motifs with the expectation that they could reveal something unique or specific about a country's values and beliefs" (2005: 64). From this point of view, given that national cinema concept inevitably implies the notion of national specificity, any study researching films in terms of national specificity becomes questionable, regardless of the paradigm they suggest. This is the suggestion of Elsaesser while asserting that "national cinema has become a floating designation, neither essentialist nor constructivist, but more like something that hovers uncertainly over a film's "identity" (ibid: 76). Then, we must ask, is 'national cinema' nothing more than a blank signifier if it refers to a non-existent, but imposed national specificity?

At this point we need to make a distinction between the study of 'national cinema' and the study of 'cinema and the national' in order to minimise the confusing aspects of the debate, because in some cases the criticisms originally directed to certain ways of approaching national cinema also sound like alluding to the invalidity of studying films with regards to nationhood at all. To clear up this vagueness, we can draw a distinction between pronouncing the insignificance of the national context in film studies altogether, and accepting the continuing significance of the national while

finding the concept of national cinema problematic. I believe that so far it must be clear that my approach in this study emphasises the significance of the national in the cinema, and finds it crucial to stress the materiality of the concepts of nation and nationalism within the context of their socio-historical background, and recognise the need to understand "how they are produced and reproduced, how they work and how they can be changed" (Calhoun 2007: 9).

When we affirm the significance of the national for film analysis from this point of view, it then becomes a question of the appropriateness of 'national cinema' as a concept for the examination of this significance. Following the anti-essentialist critical vein in national cinema theory, Chris Berry and Mary Farquhar also remark that the national in films can no longer be studied adequately using "the old national cinemas approach, which took the national for granted as something known" (2006: 2). However, they also argue against the rush to abandon the national altogether, and suggest "a reconfiguration of the academic discourse known as "national cinemas" as an analytic framework within which to examine cinema and the national" (ibid: 8). According to them, the old national cinema model which assumed that "nation-states were stable and coherent and that films expressed singular national identity" (ibid: 195) needs to be abandoned, but the study of 'cinema and the national' is still significant as "a framework within which to consider a range of questions and issues about the national" (ibid: 2).

Like Berry and Farquhar, John Hill (2006) also emphasises the ongoing significance of the national, but, unlike them, he does not find it necessary to change the discourse to discredit the national cinema concept. He argues against the formulations of 'national cinema' which regard the concept as if it is by definition linked to the myths of national unity. While discussing the British cinema, Hill argues that "this formulation of a national cinema underestimates the possibilities for a national cinema to reimagine the nation, or rather nations within Britain. And also to address the specificities of a national culture in a way which does not presume a homogenous or 'pure' national identity" (2006: 110). When we consider that national cinema theory has already been accommodating a wide variety of research addressing the political complexities of the notion of nation, Hill's argument becomes more sensible. At this point it is worth remarking that the proportion of

critical studies in the national cinema literature has now become much larger than the old national cinema approaches they argue against. In fact, the awareness of the ideological ballast 'national cinema' carries has become so well established in the film theory that any new researcher in the area now gets acquainted with the literature through the criticisms of the old national cinema view, before a first-hand encounter with the subject of criticism. In this sense, studies regarding 'cinema and the national' might benefit from not structuring the argument against an insubstantial opponent any more.

'National cinema' as a concept does not have to ignore the multidimensional conflicts within the nation, and stressing the significance of the national does not have to lead to studies that focus only on the films that narrate the nation as a unified community, as Higson (2000) suggests. On the contrary, the cinema of a nation can be conceived as one of the observational fields for exploring the cleavages of the nation. If homogeneity is an imposition of the governing power of the nation-state, in imposing homogeneity, it always has to expose heterogeneity. The exercise of power for this imposition works by repressing and oppressing the dissonant voices that break the forced monotone harmony. However, no oppression is entirely successful, no repression can completely erase the repressed, and the marginalised persists in the margins of the society. In this regard, within the cinema of a nation, we can explore not only how the myth of unity is imposed, but also how it cannot entirely be imposed; we can analyse how the imposition of homogeneity works, but also how it does not and cannot work. We can always hear the repressed, oppressed, marginalised, expelled voices from within the fissures of the enforced monophony, and cinema is one of the cultural territories of societal fissures. In this respect, it is would be reasonable to suggest the value of retaining the national cinema as a concept for the very reasons that Berry and Ferquhar suggest avoiding it; it could be argued that it is significant to keep the concept in use while studying diversities and conflicts in order to emphasise that that is exactly what a national cinema is, or what it could be; a territory of diversities and cleavages bearing the traces of the societal conflicts the nation embodies. National cinema as a concept implies homogeneity, whereas the films that embody it suggest heterogeneity; this tension is the essential definition of national cinema.

On the other hand, as the subject of this research exemplifies, some cases particularly expose this definitional tension, and thus overflow this tension. It is common in the national cinema writing to simply list diverse types of conflicts consecutively while talking about the inner divisions of the nation. An example can be seen in Elsaesser's argument: "A nation, especially when used in a context that suggests cultural identity, must repress differences of class, gender, race, religion, and history in order to assert its coherence, and is thus another name for internal colonization" (2005: 36). However, it is important to study these diverse dynamics of conflicts separately, with a close examination of the specific tension forms in their relationships with the nation. In the case of Kurdish films in Turkey, for instance, the division of ethnicity as an inner conflict functions in a way that essentially fractures Turkish cinema. Different from the class, gender, or race differences, ethnic differences carry the potential of questioning national cinema from the very basis of it, and thus reaching to a point where it cannot be regarded as an element in the definitional heterogeneity of the nation. In other words, two separate claims of national homogeneity cannot live under the same roof of heterogeneity inherent in the national cinema concept. "What happens then?" is generally one of the main questions I will address in detail in Chapter 4. But in order to find the theoretical frame for addressing this question, here, I find it useful to reflect on the way film categories operate, in general.

The Issue of Categorising Films

While reflecting on national cinema as a category, first of all, it is worth remembering that conceptualising and categorising processes are the main principles of human thinking; basic thinking tools of our minds for making sense of (or representing) the world. And all categories created by the human mind ignore differences within the category, whether it be colours, or tables, or films which are being culturally organised. Converging divergent elements is what categorising most simply is, and categorising is always *attributing* coherence. In this respect, there is a confusing aspect to the criticisms of 'national cinema' in terms of the essentialism which I introduced earlier.

While discussing the possibility/impossibility of 'national cinema' to inform the contradictory voices within the nation, it is important to note that the problems relating to the conceptualisation of 'national cinema' are not unique to but common to all film categories. For example women's cinema, Middle Eastern Cinema, French New Wave cinema, New Hollywood cinema, transnational cinema, or queer cinema are all selective, homogenising concepts, closed to differences within the group. And they all have the tendency to focus only on those films that enable the relevant category, just as Higson (2000) suggests national cinema does. Again, each of these categories select some films amenable to its process of grouping, each "attributes a weight" to "large blocks of textuality", as Philip Rosen argues with respect to national cinema (2006: 17). Thus, the criticism of national cinema cannot be simply conducted on the basis that, while labelling films with regards to the nation, it ignores differences. Any selective grouping requires determining the primary/central point according to which all other elements would be secondary/contingent. Ignoring differences is culturally inevitable, and methodologically legitimate.

Another problem about the criticism of national cinema as a category can be identified in relation to the socio-cultural historicity of film categories. While underlining the fact that the same principles are at work for all film categories, it is also important to differentiate film categories in terms of the social dynamics that have given birth to them. For example, some film categories come into existence directly through the agency of their producers. Third Cinema, or Dogma Cinema, for example, are based on manifestos, thus for the study of these categories, this declaration of commonality, or the claim for being regarded as a coherent unity, would inevitably be a key reference to the analysis. Here, the category is not an attribution of film theory, but the presentation of filmmakers. This is an example of the cases where the category is a *found-category* for the theoretician. Whether a category is established within the discipline of film theory for methodological use, or has its roots outside the realm of theory, is always a significant differentiation for the analysis of that category. For example, 'accented cinema' is a concept introduced by Hamid Naficy (2001) that suggests categorising some certain films under this concept; it is a theoretical/methodological category invented for the needs of the analysis of some aspects of a certain group of films. So, in some cases, it is the film

theoretician who suggests contextualising a group of films under a theoretically defined category, which previously does not have a life outside of theory. Other film categories, however, are not solely subject to the acknowledgement of the discipline of film theory.

Returning to our original argument, although film theory has had a major role in the establishment of national cinema as a category, it is an example of a film category that is not introduced and maintained by the discipline of film theory per se. The differentiation drawn between film categories with reference to their relationship to theory is crucial to our argument, because national cinema debates mostly address national cinema as if it is just a theoretical category. Hence there is a tendency to question the legitimacy of national cinema in a way as if the history of national cinema approach starts with the analysis of them, and would end with the decision of abandoning the concept. However, despite all the theoretical enquiries of the last three decades, national cinema as a category continues to be in circulation; French cinema, Russian Cinema, Japanese cinema, may all be found in a festival catalogue, on a DVD cover, or in a film review, and thus the nationality of a film continues to be one of the main references contextually framing films. Even when we have a look at the list of the festivals happening in London, we see that the majority of the numerous festivals in London are nationally labelled ones: Korean, Greek, Iranian, Romanian, Turkish, Portuguese, Russian film festivals, just to name a few. This picture exposes a gap between theory and the culture it engages in, that needs to be reflected upon.

This discussion brings us to the need of understanding 'national cinema' as something more than a theoretical tool, but as a long-established cultural entity. Like all cultural entities it embodies contradictory views concerning its definition insofar as it bears the history of social dynamics and power relationships. Tom O'Regan's study of Australian cinema is one of the seminal works regarding my argument, since it emphasises that "for a national cinema to function it must become 'an object of knowledge'. It must be put into discourse: narrated, discursively represented by tropes, words, phrases, archives, verbal associations, texts" (1996: 25), and thus he involves the cultural construction of Australian cinema in his study, exploring the ways Australian cinema becomes an object of knowledge. He remarks that from

audiences to film critics, from filmmakers to governments, "diverse agents take up film stories using them for their own purposes" (ibid: 15). He emphasizes that national cinema is discursively produced and regards it as "a domain in which different knowledges are produced and brought into relation" (ibid: 25), and, stresses that his task is not one of deciding the right way of defining the Australian cinema, but of "showing how each element explains and discloses something about it" (ibid: 4). I believe that this approach, which suggests that we take into consideration the diverse definitions, interpretations, cultural usages, political contextualisations and power struggles regarding the national cinema of a country, must be one of the main pillars of any study that engages with issues regarding cinema and the nation.

Conclusions

The national cinema debate is significant for this thesis as one of my main aims in the following chapters is to interrogate the political dynamics of the nation in the realm of cinema and address the complex relationships between film and politics in the national context through the case of Kurdish films in Turkey. While arguing for the continuing significance of the national context for film studies, this chapter engaged with the literature on national cinema in terms of subnational and transnational issues. These arguments are particularly important for the rest of this thesis because the recent emergence of Kurdish films in Turkey is a dynamic which has put pressure on Turkish national identity and Turkish cinema from within (at the subnational level, by questioning the very definition of Turkishness and hence the notion of Turkish cinema) and from outside (at the transnational level, by being a part of Kurdish cinema as a transnational cinema).

In this chapter I suggested that rather than constructing 'transnational cinema' as a substitution for 'national cinema', we need to formulate a dialogic relationship between the national and the transnational which not only consists of contradictions but also involves coordination. On the other hand, I tackled the debate over essentialism in the literature on national cinema at length as part of my exploration of

subnational issues. I suggested that analysing films with regards to nationhood does not have to presuppose an essentialist view, feed into myths of national unity, or ignore the diversities and conflicts within the nation. On the contrary, the cinema of a nation is a territory of diversities and cleavages that bears the traces of the societal conflicts that the nation embodies. Hence I remarked that national cinema as a concept implies homogeneity, whereas the films of a nation expose heterogeneity, and concentrating on this tension is essential to the study of cinema and the national. An emphasis on the interactions between films and national dynamics of diversity and conflict is central to the study of Kurdish films in Turkey, as these films direct their cameras to the national past, display the price that the Kurdish people have paid as the result of state ideologies which imposed the idea of an ethnically homogenous nation, and bring forward issues regarding the bitter conflict that emerged in the national context.

In discussing British cinema, John Hill (1992) argues that the existence of Black cinema, or Scottish cinema, makes it impossible to define a homogenous national cinema and suggests that it would be preferable to refer to 'national cinemas' instead of a single 'national cinema'. How does this discussion relate to the example of Kurdish cinema in Turkey? Is the antagonism between the nationalist practices of the Turkish nation-state and Kurdish nation-building practices reciprocated in the controversial relationship between Turkish cinema and Kurdish cinema? How do these two concepts, referring to two diverse national identities, yet existing within the same nation-state borders influence the definition of each other? In the following chapters, I will address these questions by investigating the conceptual debates on Kurdish cinema and Turkish cinema in Turkey in the 2000s. That investigation will link back to one of the focuses in this chapter on the issue of categorising films in general and the question of how to tackle national cinema as a concept. Tom O'Regan's general perspective on national cinema and his suggestion that we examine national cinema as an 'object of knowledge' will be central in the following chapters in which I identify Turkey as the national scale where the antagonism between Turkish nationalist discourses and practices and Kurdish nation-building discourses and practices are reciprocated in the constructions and interpretations of 'Turkish cinema' and 'Kurdish cinema' during a time of political turbulence. In this way, my lengthy conceptual argument in this chapter will be crucial for my analysis

of the notions of 'Kurdish cinema' and 'Turkish cinema'; and rather than merely 'defining' them, I will investigate the construction, contextualisation, and political manipulation of these concepts in Turkey in the 2000s.

Another key debate in this chapter was on Willemen's conceptualisation of 'cultural specificity'. I suggested that this concept can be reworked to allow for an examination of the filmic text within the web of its intertextual relationships with other cultural texts in a specific socio-historical context; for analysing how films operate in relation to the 'historically accrued modes of making sense' within a nation. I argued that within the domain of a shared system of meaning, recognised cultural codes appeal to 'members' resources'(Fairclough 1996: 24) via the superimposition of the film's symbolic system with the socio-historically familiar symbols of the culture of the nation. Building upon this point, I suggested that the cultural specificity of the nation is one of the contextual powers that has a major influence on the meaning of filmic texts. In this point of view, cultural specificity in national cinema implies a common 'resource system' (Lemke 1995) through the usage of the same cultural codes in processes of encoding and decoding. This was one of the key arguments of this chapter, which also influences the overall perspective of this thesis in the examination of the predominant meanings that are apparent in Kurdish films and the reception of those meanings in Turkey in the 2000s.

CHAPTER 3:

THE 'NEW TURKEY': POLITICAL TRANSFORMATION IN THE 2000S TURKEY

Introduction

'New Turkey' is a widely and increasingly deployed concept in academic studies as well as political analyses that focus on the recent historical period in Turkey. Turkey has been under a significant socio-political transformation since the early 2000s; a transformation instigated and led by the AKP (Justice and Democracy Party) which has been in government since 2002. In fact, 'new Turkey' is a concept which was initially introduced by the AKP itself. Routinely declaring "its commitment to the idea of transformation" (Duran 2008: 80), AKP discourses constructed two diverse images of Turkey, drawing a sharp line between what they called the 'old Turkey' and the "new Turkey". 'Old Turkey' was a reference to the Turkey under the rule of the Kemalist elites – that is from the foundation of the Republic in 1923 up until the 2000s – , whereas 'new Turkey' signalled, and in fact proclaimed, the beginning of a brand new phase in Turkey in the AKP era. Although the continuities and discontinuities between Kemalism – the traditional official ideology of the Turkish state named after Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the founder of the Turkish Republic – and the AKP's ideology has been subject to debate, it is undeniable that the AKP government "signifies the beginning of a new phase of interaction between secularism and Islam, state and society, and politics and society" (Çınar 2008: 111).

Turkey in the 2000s witnessed "the structural disintegration of dominant power relations and paradigms in Turkey" (Cizre 2008a: 4) as a result of the reorganisation of key state institutions; the revision of some fundamental principles of traditional state ideology; the displacement of long-standing official policies towards some key national issues; the attempt to redefine national identity; and the re-narration of some significant aspects of the national past. In this sense, the political transformation

Turkey witnessed in the 2000s was a transformation concerning the very definition of the nation, national identity and national history. And the consequence of this was an unprecedented power struggle over who controlled the definition and narration of the nation in Turkey, which initiated heated public debates nationwide on various key national issues, not only between political actors and public figures, but also amongst the confused ordinary citizens witnessing this transformation.

As the long-standing Kurdish conflict in Turkey was one of the main issues which necessitated such a dramatic shift in the foundational state ideologies and policies and which was one of the key areas of transformation, examining the political dynamics of this transformation is vital for the study of Kurdish films in Turkey. Mapping out the historical and socio-political context by focusing on the key events and prominent political debates within this period is quite necessary for and closely related to my analysis of Kurdish films in Turkey in the following chapters. For this research, which aspires to develop a contextual film analysis approach, this chapter is essential beyond simply giving a general idea about the socio-historical background of the films under investigation. While analysing the reverberations of the emergence of the concept of 'Kurdish cinema' in Turkey in Chapter 4, conducting a context-specific formal and thematic analysis of individual Kurdish films in Chapter 5, and investigating the public reception and political impact of these Kurdish films in the 2000s Turkey in Chapter 6, it will be necessary to remember the key arguments addressed in this chapter regarding the general characteristics of this era in Turkey as well as some specific historical developments of the period under consideration.

The Emergence of the AKP as a New Political Actor in Turkey

"Islamist movements are almost exclusively seen as anti-modern, anti-democratic and mostly violent political movements based primarily on the portrayal of Islam as an essentially dysfunctional religion for both modernity and democracy" (Çınar and Duran 2008: 17). This understanding of Islam as a religion incompatible with modern Western values had been fully appropriated by the founding elite of the Turkish Republic in their imagining of Turkey as a Muslim yet strictly secular

country highly committed to the project of Westernisation. "The authoritarian nationalist military officers, bureaucrats, academics, journalists and intellectuals who formed the nucleus of the Kemalist elite were profoundly affected by European thought" (Zeydanlıoğlu 2008: 161), and, the national goal of the Kemalist leadership was the 'achievement of contemporary civilization', a formula that equated modernization with Westernization. Within this perspective, Islam was considered to represent "a set of traditions, values, legal rules, and norms which were intrinsically non-Western in character and hence an inherent obstacle to be overcome" (Gülalp 2003: 388). And this approach has been one of the fundamental components of state ideology for decades since the foundation of the republic.

On the other hand, however, despite this secularist conception of Islam as an obstacle and threat to the republic, Kemalist policies towards Islam cannot be conceived of simply and merely in terms of exclusion and oppression. As Sakallıoglu remarks, since its inception, "the Turkish state adopted a double discourse: on the one hand establishing a rigid segregation between Islam and the political realm: on the other, accommodating and incorporating Islamic politics into the system in various ways" (Sakallıoğlu 1996: 231). This "double discourse" is evident in the very definition of Turkish national identity by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk which involves, and does not exclude, religion as one of the unifying factors cementing the Turkish Republic as a new nation-state.

> Atatürk's own notion of secularism (*laiklik*) imagined a religiously homogeneous, rather than pluralist, nation. [...] Even though Atatürk's goal was to eliminate the public role of religion, his anti-clerical yet homogenizing policies amounted to forcing the entire Muslim-born population to conform to Sunni Muslim orthodoxy in religious practices and education. In Perry Anderson's (2008) words, "Turkish secularism has always depended on what it repressed," that is to say, religious identity (Bakıner 2013: 701).

Sultan Tepe also argues against the common misconception of the relationship between Kemalism and Islam simply as a power struggle between two antagonistic forces, and she writes:

> Since the foundation of the Turkish Republic, Islam has performed a dual and contradictory role. The state elite have often relied on Islam as a common identity marker of the peoples who constitute the Turkish nation. It has also

perceived Islam as a threat, because of its inherent capacity to challenge state power by offering an alternative source of legitimacy (2006: 110).

This argument is significant for the following sections in this chapter for understanding the characteristics of politics in Turkey in the 2000s, following the rise of the AKP. Because the misrepresentation of the historical relationship between the Kemalists and the Islamic movement as mere antagonism has been one of the key discourses of the AKP, and, in its struggle for gaining legitimacy and popularity, the AKP government has benefited from presenting itself as the ultimate rival and the victim of the Kemalist regime. Hence, in the 2000s, it has become common in the wider public's perception to dismiss the fact that, for the Turkish state, political Islam has not been an ultimate enemy that has to be entirely erased from the social structure, but a dangerous, yet functional, social dynamic that needs to be kept alive, but under control, as an instrument appropriated in the processes of the construction and maintenance of the nation.

Historical developments from 1980 to the present depict the paradoxical nature of the Kemalist attitude towards Islam and also demonstrate the active role of the Kemalist elites in the growing power of the pro-Islamic movement in Turkey. The military coup experienced in 1980 marks one of the most dramatic turning points in Turkish history. The September 12 military coup, which introduced a sudden, dramatic and forced transformation in Turkey in every socio-political aspect, was a milestone also in terms of the place and the role of political Islam on the Turkish political stage. Before 1980, Turkey had already experienced two successive military interventions, in 1960 and in 1971. Since the foundation of the republic, the military has been the backbone of the Kemalist state and the TSK (Turkish Army Forces) has always considered itself to be the true owner of the Kemalist state. As Sakallıoğlu expresses it, "the ultimate justification for the military's political predominance rests on its 'guardianship of the national interest', of which maintaining national unity is considered to be the most important component" (1997: 154). Thus, the three successive military interventions experienced at ten-year intervals demonstrate the TSK's "capacity to militarize political issues that it categorizes as 'regime issues'" (Cizre 2011: 61).

The 1980 military coup was a counter-revolutionary act carried out by the Kemalist establishment against the socialist revolutionary movement in Turkey, which had increasingly gained strength during the 1960s and the 1970s. During these years, communism was regarded by the Turkish state as the biggest threat to the regime and, of course, the existence of the Soviet Union just on the other side of the Black Sea was something that amplified this fear of communism. In 1980, the TSK played its 'guardian role' to protect the Kemalist regime and staged a coup against the 'threat of communism'. As Feroz Ahmad remarks, "the principal concern of the junta was the political and institutional restructuring of the country and they set about the task with great abandon. They were determined to de-politicise the urban youth who had come to play such an important role since the 1960s. That required crushing every manifestation of dissent from the left" (1993: 184). The initial steps of the junta involved the physical destruction of all democratic and socialist groups by brutal military force. Thus, the September 12 coup was one of the bloodiest coup experiences in world history.

> A total of 650,000 people were detained and most suspects were either beaten or tortured. Over 500 people died while under detention as a result of torture; 85,000 people were placed on trial mainly in relation to thought crimes by association; 1,683,000 people were officially listed in police files as suspects; 348,000 Turks and Kurds were banned from travelling abroad; 15,509 people were fired from their jobs for political reasons; 114,000 books were seized and burned; 937 films were banned; 2,729 writers, translators, journalists and actors were put on trial for expressing their opinions. (Zeydanlıoğlu 2009: 79)

On the other hand, the military coup was not just a reactionary and short-sighted move with the sole purpose of demolishing the socialist movement; it was the first stage of a major plan for socio-political transformation envisioned by the Kemalist establishment. Amongst the large-scale and multifaceted transformations experienced in Turkey with the 1980 coup, one that is significant for our discussion is the shifting official policy towards Islam and Islamic movements in the post-coup era. Following the physical destruction of the socialist movement, some long-term policies were adopted to prevent the emergence of a similar 'threat of communism' in the future. One of these policies against the left was "to engineer a new form of

depoliticized Turkish-Islamic culture" (Yavuz 2003: 73) by encouraging religious dynamics in society and smoothing the way for Islamic movements.

> The generals who came to power on September 12, 1980, instead of showing secular disregard for Islam, took several steps to strengthen it. [...] The leaders of the military coup, ironically, depended on Islamic institutions and symbols for legitimization; fusing Islamic ideas with national goals, they hoped to create a more homogeneous and less political Islamic community. [...] Moreover, the leadership of the 1980 coup considered Islam a pacifying and submissive ideology preferable to the threat of communism. (Yavuz 1997: 67)

Following the military takeover, Turkey returned to parliamentary democracy in 1983 with the AP (Motherland Party) government headed by Turgut Özal. In line with the global wave of neo-liberalism in the 1980s, the AP government introduced a Thatcher-style economic programme for the implementation of neo-liberalism in Turkey. Thus, in harmony with the policy of utilising Islam as a means of moving towards a depoliticised society, shifting economic policies in the post-coup era provided favourable ground for the pro-Islamic movement to flourish financially. Of course, obtaining economic power meant having access to the "opportunity spaces" (Yavuz 2003) for gaining cultural and political power as well. For example, "the expansion of higher education, print media, and mass communication played a critical role in the public emergence of an Islamic identity in the late 1980s" (Yavuz 1997: 69). In the post-coup era, pro-Islamic circles established their own intellectuals, businessmen, scholars, and artists (Yavuz 2003: ix), overall "increasing their participation in the social, economic and political spheres from which they had been significantly blocked for many decades" (Yılmaz 2009: 114). On the other hand, the state provided the most fundamental "opportunity space" for Islamic movements to flourish by Islamicizing the whole educational system. In the post-coup era, "the state introduced compulsory religious instruction into primary and secondary schools" (Sakallıoğlu 1996: 246), and, "more Imam Hatips high schools (in which religious education is taught along with modern courses), Qur'anic teaching seminaries, and new Islamic private colleges and high schools" were established (Yavuz, 1997: 70).

At this point, it is important to underline that the Kemalist strategy of utilising Islam in engineering a more conservative, religious and depoliticised society does not mean that the Kemalist establishment entirely discarded their secularist ideals and sensitivities. Thus, the RP (Welfare Party) incident in the early post-coup days illustrates the continuing secularist concerns of the Kemalist bloc in that period even while paving the way for Islamic dynamics. The pro-Islamist RP, headed by Necmettin Erbakan and established shortly after the military coup, was disallowed by the generals from entering the 1983 elections. As this example demonstrates, for the Kemalists, it was a process where two conflicting policies went hand in hand; that is, supporting Islam while at the same time trying to keep it under state control. However, the 1990s proved the risky nature of such an ambivalent policy towards Islam for the traditional Kemalist power base and the decade witnessed developments as a result of which political Islam, along with the Kurdish movement, came to be identified by the Turkish military as one of the two biggest internal threats.

In 1996, Erbakan and the RP took to the stage again to be one of the leading actors of another historical moment in the relationship between Kemalism and the Islamic movement. Economic growth and the cultural flourishing of Islam in the post-coup era had its reflection in the parliamentary politics of the 1990s. The RP, which was banned from the 1983 elections, thenceforth gained popularity as the political face of the Islamic movement, and in 1996, formed a coalition government with the centre-right DYP (True Path Party). And Erbakan, the leader of the RP, became the prime minister. This was a significant moment in the Turkish parliamentary system as "for the first time, the Turkish republic had a prime minister whose political philosophy was based on Islam" (Yavuz 1997: 63). Hence, this development triggered the secularist reflexes of the TSK. The military "took the accession of the RP into government as confirmation of its belief that Islamist reactionism, *irtica* in Turkish, had become a substantial threat to the secular character of the republic" (Sakallıoğlu and Çınar 2003: 309). Consequently, the coalition government did not last long and collapsed in 1997 as a result of a military intervention which is referred to as the 'February 28 process', or 'the postmodern coup'. It is commonly named as a 'postmodern coup', because unlike the previous military coups in the history of the republic, this time the TSK did not directly take power. Instead, "the military-

dominated National Security Council (NSC) issued a list of measures to the coalition government led by the Islamist Welfare Party (RP) to eliminate the 'creeping Islamization,' and the tension finally led to the resignation of the government, closure of the party by the Constitutional Court and the banning of its key policymakers from active politics" (Cizre 2008a: 4). Sakallıoğlu and Çınar see the February 28 process as a breaking point in terms of the relationship between the state establishment and political Islam after the 1980 military coup:

> Contrary to the ''neorepublican'' policies that prevailed after the post-1980 military rule when elements of Islam were incorporated into public discourse to provide a moral basis, ideological unity, and some certainty in the face of global capitalism, the February 28 process seeks to usher back the republic's radical secularism. That represents a complete reversal from the republican pattern of state-Islam relations that, in the past, allowed for negotiation, compromise, and reconciliation between Turkey's political Islamists and the establishment. (2003: 312)

It was the February 28 process which led to the emergence of the AKP as a new political actor in Turkey. After the coalition government collapsed as a result of the February 28 process and the RP was banned from politics by the Constitutional Court in 1998, the pro-Islamic political movement split into two diverse groups. The 'reformists', spearheaded by Tayyip Erdoğan, separated from Erbakan and his followers, who came to be known as 'traditionalists' after this separation. And the 'reformist' faction established the AKP in 2001 with a significantly new vision, differentiating itself from the political perspective and the image of the traditional pro-Islamic movement. The redefinition of the pro-Islamic vision came to fruition for the AKP shortly after its establishment. The AKP came to power with the 2002 elections, winning 34 percent of the vote, which, according to Gereth Jenkins, represented "the greatest challenge to the traditional concept of Turkish secularism since the foundation of the Republic" (2006: 185). The AKP also won two consecutive general elections in 2007 and 2011, increasing its share of the vote in each election.

The ideological character of the AKP has been subject to much confusion and has triggered debates in Turkey since the day it came to power. Since its establishment, the AKP has sedulously distanced itself from its pro-Islamic roots and presented

itself as a more inclusive 'conservative democrat' party. This self-definition of the AKP not only attracted the support of centre-right voters, but more importantly, it served a more pressing need for the AKP. Underlining its distinction from the traditional pro-Islamic movement was mainly a survival strategy for the AKP. Having learnt a lesson from the February 28 experience, the AKP realised that the success of a pro-Islamic party in Turkey can be "a self-defeating success" (Dağı 2006: 90). Therefore, especially in its early years, the AKP has been very careful in its actions and its discourses to avoid suffering the same fate as its predecessors: "The JDP's [AKP] power-sharing strategy with the establishment is centred on a moderate non-polarizing discourse avoiding ostentatious and exaggerated signs of religiosity and raising issues about Islamic identity in the language of individual freedoms". (Çınar 2008: 120).

One of the key aspects of the AKP's self-presentation and its performance in government, which generated confused perceptions of the party by the public and also helped the AKP avoid probable adverse reactions of the Kemalist establishment, was the adaptation of democracy and human rights discourse into the party's policies and discourses. İhsan Dağı argues that, in order to secure its position in the government against the Kemalist threat, the AKP developed "a three-layered strategy: first, adopt a language of human rights and democracy as a discursive shield; second, mobilize popular support as a form of democratic legitimacy; and third, build a liberal-democratic coalition with modern-secular sectors that recognize the JDP [AKP] as a legitimate political actor" (2006: 88-89).

The adoption of the perspective of democracy and human rights by the AKP into its discourses and policies was also in line with the requirements of the European Union for Turkey's accession process. As Dağı states, "the Islamists began to realize that Western demands for democratization and human rights in Turkey overlapped with their own search for protection against the Kemalist establishment, especially the military and the judiciary" (2006: 143). Improving the image of Turkey in the West, accelerating the EU process, and thus gaining the support of the West functioned in favour of the AKP in domestic politics in many ways. Above all, progress in the EU accession process had a paradigm-shifting effect on the established ideological structure in Turkish politics, and empowered the AKP in its ideological struggle vis-

à-vis the Kemalist bloc. As Ahmet İnsel discusses, it was "a paradoxical period in which statist-Westernizing elites are forced to swerve into anti-Western positions" (İnsel 2003: 306), and the Kemalist ideal of Westernisation is represented and executed by a pro-Islamic actor. Hence, the Kemalist establishment, which traditionally defined itself with regard to its dedication to the objectives of modernisation and westernisation, and regarded Islam as an obstacle, even a threat, in this process, found itself representing the 'conservative' camp against a 'progressive' pro-Islamic party who presented a reform agenda in line with the EU requirements. Overall, the self-promoted image of the AKP as a party dedicated to human rights and democracy allowed itto disempower the Kemalist elite within a legitimate scenario, presenting its steps towards shifting the balance of power in its favour as a fight for democracy. In this way, the AKP was able to construct its democratic image basically as a counter-image of Kemalism, gaining strength from the anti-democratic and authoritarian character of the Kemalist establishment.

Shifting Balance of Power between the Old and the New Power Elites in Turkey

The most strategic action of the AKP against the Kemalist establishment was also the most legitimate one, as it targeted the military tutelage in Turkey. A civil government finally calling a halt to military oppression in politics was in tune with the AKP's discourse of democracy and also with EU requirements. As Cizre states, "EU entry requirements have provided one external impetus for the JDP [AKP] government attempts to reshape military-civilian relations" (2008b: 134). The first step towards disempowering the military was to reduce "the legal-institutional sphere of the military's influence" (Çınar 2011: 112). The harmonisation package passed by parliament in 2003 introduced reforms "limiting the jurisdiction of military courts over civilians, [...] repealing the executive powers of the general secretary of the NSC [National Security Council], [...] and opening the way for appointment of a civilian secretariat general for the NSC" (Dağı 2006: 99). In 2004, as a part of another package of amendments, "the State Security Courts were abolished" and "the military representative on the higher education board was removed" (ibid: 100). All these changes gradually limited the political power of the TSK. It was the first time

in the history of Turkey that a political actor dared to question the role of the military in politics, attempted to redefine its role and limit its authority. These steps, consequently, put the TSK in a paradoxical situation. Despite considering and projecting itself as the true representative of the republic and the guardian of the Kemalist objectives such as Westernisation, the TSK had to reject the democratic requirements of the EU, and find itself in opposition to the West, if it were to counteract the AKP's reforms restructuring civil-military relationships.

However, despite finding itself in such an ontological dilemma, the Kemalist centre still felt the urge to take action against the AKP. From the Kemalist-secularist perspective, the AKP's disclaiming of its pro-Islamic legacy has never been convincing. Considering themselves to be the true representatives of the republic above all political parties, and also the citizens who might be deceived by those political parties, they believed that the AKP's "claim of change is the manifestation of an insincere, masked position", and "removing this mask must be the first priority of both state and society" (Yıldız 2008: 49). Thus, the Kemalist camp always found ways of expressing their distrust of the AKP, projecting their concerns, and warning the government at its every significant step. Eventually, in 2007, the tension came to a point where the Kemalists decided that it was time to take further action against the AKP government beyond expressing concerns and giving warnings. When Abdullah Gül, a prominent figure in the history of the pro-Islamic political movement and one of the founders of the AKP, was nominated for the presidential elections, an ultimatum-like statement was released on the website of the General Staff, which came to be known as the 'e-memorandum'. Following this, a series of street protests, called 'republic protests' (*cumhuriyet mitingleri*), were organised in the three principal cities with the participation of large crowds showing their support for the TSK's ultimatum and chanting the slogan "Turkey is secular, it will remain secular". Thus, the tension between the Kemalist state actors and the AKP hit the streets for the first time with pro-Kemalist citizens directly getting involved in the conflict and taking sides with the Kemalist-secularist bloc. On the other hand, the e-memorandum drew strong reactions from other circles that had been supporting the AKP in its struggle against military tutelage.

Later, in 2008, several months after the AKP's re-election in 2007, a court case was opened by the State Prosecutor to close down the AKP on the grounds that the party had become "a focal point for anti-secularist activities" (*Hurriyet Daily News*, 14 March 2008). Although the court ultimately decided not to close down the party, the case functioned as a powerful symbolic act and as an ultimatum by the establishment against the AKP. However, these counteractions against the government by the Kemalist-secularists, especially the e-memorandum and the attempt to ban the AKP, had a reverse effect on the balance of power and functioned to the benefit of the AKP, because "in the public eye the AKP was seen as the victim in the face of the uncompromising attitude of the secularists" (Yılmaz 2009: 121). It would be easier to understand this public response when we consider the fact that diverse political groups in Turkey have traditionally identified and positioned themselves in opposition to the Kemalist ideology, conflicting with the traditional Kemalist state actors, and suffering politically from military tutelage. In this sense, it can be said that Islamists, Kurds, socialists and liberal-democrats in Turkey have historically clashed with a 'common enemy' – albeit on different grounds. Therefore, it was a rather tough ideological task for many political players to decide upon their position vis-à-vis the conflict between the AKP government and the Kemalist establishment. Thus, a large section of the political factions listed above supported the AKP for the sake of democracy against the Kemalist camp, particularly the TSK. And, the counteractions of the Kemalist establishment paradoxically helped the AKP to mobilise the support of a wider spectrum of society to establish its legitimacy.

Following the incidents of the e-memorandum and the closure case, the AKP carried its struggle to limit Kemalist power a step further and escalated the conflict by launching a more open, harsher and forceful operation against them. Having started to reshape the political structure by means of democratic reform packages, in its second term in government, the AKP continued this transformation with more confident steps and bolder strategies. In 2008, the Ergenekon operations started; retired and active-duty military members, mostly high-ranking officers, including former Chief of Military Staff İlker Başbuğ, alongside some other public figures such as journalists and lawyers, were arrested for getting involved in a plot to overthrow the AKP government. In the court file, Ergenekon was defined as an 'armed terrorist organisation', and the military officers were charged with participation in 'terrorist

activities'. The trials continued for years with new waves of prosecutions and with an indictment thousands of pages long. The controversial Ergenekon trial was undoubtedly a major blow against the most powerful players in the Kemalist bloc. First of all, it tied the TSK's hands as the Ergenekon trial represented the authority to arrest any military personnel, even with some vague accusations and without much evidence. On the other hand, the Ergenekon trial not only undermined the institutional power of the military, but also tarnished its image and discredited it, and thus ideologically and psychologically disempowered it. Consequently, "the balance of forces in Turkish civil-military relations has been gradually transformed in favour of the civilian government" (Akça and Paker 2013: 77)**.**

Another significant step by the AKP for reshaping the power structure in Turkish politics was constitutional reform. While the limitation of the military's institutional power fundamentally changed the power dynamics in Turkey, constitutional reform targeted another key institutional power base of the Kemalist establishment. As Cizre explains, "as the possibility of the military bureaucracy's intervention in the political system lessens because of the EU reform process and the emergence of an atmosphere of openness in society, Turkey's judiciary has begun to take the role of "system guardianship""(2011: 58). Therefore, the AKP's objective of transforming the political structure and eliminating all potential oppositional voices this time focused on the judiciary. In 2010, Turkey went to the polls to vote for the controversial referendum on constitutional amendments as proposed by the government and "designed to reshape the structure of higher administrative courts and reduce the role of the military in Turkish politics" (Cizre 2011: 57).

As Baç and Keyman put it, "The referendum passed with 58 percent of approval, but it left behind considerable bitterness as opponents complained that the AKP was seeking not so much to consolidate democracy as to cement its own hold on power"(2012: 86). As the AKP continued to seize more power in all fundamental institutions of the state apparatus, and as the balance of power shifted in favour of the AKP, Turkey witnessed the gradual transition of the AKP into an anti-democratic authoritarian power. While the AKP managed to impress a significant segment of society in Turkey with its claim of dedication to human rights and democracy and built the image of a 'democratizing Turkey' in the international arena in its first term,

in the process of the long years of the AKP government, critical voices towards the AKP's performance started to increase, both at home and abroad. For instance, Ziya Öniş talks about "the marked decline in democratization impulse and the emergence of creeping authoritarianism" (2013: 104) in the later phase of the AKP era and points at "a kind of "civilian tutelage" that seems to have replaced the "military tutelage" of the previous era" (ibid: 107). Cuma Çiçek argues that "its election for the second time in 2007, its considerable majority in the national assembly and the international support behind it facilitate the AKP's dominant, exclusive and coercive ruling style" which "provoked civil tyranny discussions in Turkey" (2011: 23).

The new phase of the AKP era eventually upset not only pro-Kemalists and secularists who were never convinced by the party's promises in the first place, but a much wider segment of the society, including left-wing liberal-democrats who had supported the government in its early years, and in fact helped the AKP in convincing both the national and international public of its democratic impetus. One reflection of the AKP's changing attitude was the bold steps taken towards "moving Turkish society in a more conservative direction, with religion having an increasingly important role in public space" which limited "the space for the more Western-oriented, secular segments of Turkish society" (Öniş 2013: 108). The AKP's increasingly authoritarian tendencies were also reflected in terms of "controls over the press and freedom of expression, the lack of tolerance for opposition, and the notorious malfunctioning of the judicial system" (ibid: 107). Akser and Hawks remark that "Turkish media is under siege today by the ruling government of the AKP. The level of political pressure and legal restraints on news-reporting are visible in an unprecedented scale" (Akser and Hawks 2012: 302). In a 2012 article, Berna Turam draws the following picture of Turkey with regard to the anti-democratic attitudes of the government:

> About seventy journalists and an increasing number of academics are now in jail or some other form of detention as they prepare to face charges of illegal political activity or ties with terrorist groups. In nearly every case, the actual "offense" is that of having expressed a political opinion offensive to someone in power. The Council of Europe recently expressed its concern that more than a thousand cases currently before the European Court of Human Rights have to do with freedom of expression issues in Turkey. [...] The government has also been active in the field of Internet censorship, denying access to

YouTube videos and occasionally closing down satirical or otherwise critical websites. (2012: 112)

The accumulation of disturbance experienced by diverse segments of society due to this deteriorating anti-democratic situation eventually manifested itself in a massive uprising in Turkey in 2013. Starting as a small protest to resist the demolition of Gezi Park in central İstanbul according to the plan of the government to build a big shopping mall in the area, events unexpectedly spawned a widespread nation-wide uprising against the AKP government. Prime Minister Tayyip Erdoğan projected the Gezi protests that continued for months all over the country merely as a Kemalist movement, reacting to the fact that they had lost their privileges in the AKP era. He claimed that the Gezi uprising was a "coup attempt" against the government, referring to the protestors as "coup-seekers" as well as "scum", "marginals" or "drunkards". Whilst the demonstrations continued, he threatened the protestors with unleashing his supporters, claiming that he could "hardly hold back 50% of the people in their homes" (*Milliyet*, 3 June 2013). Eventually all protests in different cities were violently suppressed by the police, as a result of which eleven people died and hundreds of people were seriously injured. In response to the protestors' demand for "the prosecution of those responsible for the violence against demonstrators", Erdoğan blatantly stated that he had personally given the order to the police (*Radikal*, 24 June 2013).

Heated debates on various questions raised by the Gezi Uprising and its reverberations continue in Turkey in 2014, as the research for this thesis is being conducted, and the academic literature on this socio-political event is still quite limited for the present. However, it no doubt marks a milestone with regard to the political transformation Turkey has been witnessing in the AKP era, as depicted in this chapter. The outburst of a nation-wide uprising stands as a bold manifestation of the disillusionment of the masses with the AKP's human rights and democracy discourse. Furthermore, it can be said that the government's response to the Gezi protests once again confirmed and indeed deepened the concerns of the protestors.

The History of the Kurdish Conflict in Turkey

In building a nation-state on a multi-religious and multi-ethnic territory, the founding elite of the Turkish Republic adopted a "nationalism-from-above" strategy: "In this construct, the state could demarcate the boundaries of the nation and determine the margins beyond which the necessary unity of the collective body would be threatened" (Keyder 1997: 42). For the construction of a homogeneous nation-state, Turkish identity was designated as the source of ethnic unity, which meant all the non-Turkish residues of the Ottoman Empire within the boundaries of the nation-state were to be eliminated or suppressed. Welat Zeydanlıoğlu gives a brief account of the initial steps taken by the new state in this direction: "significant homogenisation was achieved by the extermination of most Armenians between 1915-1916 and the move of approximately 1.2 million Greek Orthodox Christians to Greece and 500,000 Muslims emigrating from Greece to Turkey as part of a population exchange between the two countries" (Zeydanlıoğlu 2008: 162). Alongside these bold and grisly nation-building practices, targeting non-Muslims and forcibly reshaping the profile of the population, the construction of a homogeneous Turkish nation also required "the dilution of the largest culturally and linguistically distinct non-Turkish people: the Kurds" (ibid: 161). In order to accomplish this, "all those who were now citizens of the Turkish Republic, including Kurds, were invited to become Turks. Accordingly, a comprehensive policy of compulsory assimilation began to be implemented" (Yeğen 2011a: 230).

> Kurds were no longer members of a "sibling nation", but "Mountain Turks", who had "forgotten" their Turkishness or were in "denial" of their Turkish origins and who needed to be told the "truth." [...] The Kurdish language, traditional dress, folklore and any expression of Kurdish culture were banned and reconstructed as "Turkish". [...] All references to a territory called "Kurdistan", which had been widely acknowledged during the Ottoman era, were removed from maps and official documents, and Turkish names gradually replaced the names of Kurdish towns and villages. (Zeydanlıoğlu 2008: 162)

These denial and assimilation policies promptly triggered unrest amongst the Kurdish population and the early years of the Turkish Republic witnessed Kurdish

revolts against the new state. However, the founding elite identified these revolts as a manifestation of resentment towards the modernisation project:

> Believing to be representing the present, Turkish nationalism considered the Kurdish unrest of the time as the resistance of premodern social structures and adherences. Tribes and banditry were the leading components of such structures. As the Kurds 'did not exist' any more, those who resisted the new regime could not be the Kurds with an ethno-political cause, but only the tribes and bandits threatened by the dissemination of modern state power into the region. (Yeğen 2007: 129)

This interpretation of the first Kurdish revolts in the new-born Turkish Republic captures one of the permanent key discourses embraced by the Turkish state in dealing with all future Kurdish revolts at different junctures of its history. It not only concealed and denied the actual socio-political origins of Kurdish unrest, but also planted the seeds of the stereotypical Kurdish image prevailing in the west of the country since then: "a persistent image of the Kurds as culturally backward, socially tribal, religiously fanatic, economically lagging and an internal threat to the territorial integrity of Turkey" (Zeydanlıoğlu 2008: 163), and as such, against everything the Kemalist modernisation project represented.

The rigid denial of Kurdish reality and the Kemalist policies implemented to oppress the Kurds and suppress all cultural elements of Kurdishness conversely gave strength and continuity to Kurdish dissent and politicised Kurdish identity. Consequently, the Kurdish issue remained unresolved and Kurdish rebellions kept surfacing at different times from the 1920s onwards, taking different political and ideological forms at different junctures according to the shifting socio-political contexts of the times when it re-emerged.

In the 1960s and 1970s, Kurdish resistance was influenced by and became a part of the growing left-wing socialist movement in Turkey. And, later in the 1980s, Kurdish socialists suffered greatly from the military junta's atrocities, together with other segments of the left-wing revolutionary movement of the period. As Zeydanlıoğlu remarks, "the systematic repression and assimilation of the Kurds reached its peak with the 1980 coup, which specifically singled out the Kurdish region as a particular threat to national unity" (Zeydanlıoğlu 2008: 166). Following the military coup, the

Kurdish language, Kurdish folk songs, Kurdish names on birth certificates as well as Kurdish place names were all prohibited under new laws (MacDowall 2007). Also, "in 1987 a governor-general was appointed over the eight Kurdish provinces in which a state of emergency was declared" (ibid: 427), and that provided legitimate grounds for state brutality in the region right up to 2002.

The experience of Diyarbakır Military Prison best illustrates the extent of the oppression Kurds experienced during the junta years. Kurdish left-wing activists who were imprisoned after the coup faced incredible methods of systematic torture in this military prison in the 1980s. After giving an account of the horrifying acts of torture performed by the military, Zeydanlıoğlu states that "the prison seemed to have functioned as a laboratory for humiliation, punishment and 'rehabilitation' of Kurdish prisoners through torture as Turkification" (2009: 85). And he underlines that these military practices, that attempted not only to terrorise but also to Turkify Kurdish political prisoners, "played a crucial role in the crystallisation of nationalist secessionist ideas and the radicalisation of a generation of Kurds, large numbers of which went on to join the ranks of the militant Kurdistan Worker's Party (PKK)" (Zeydanlıoğlu 2009: 81). In fact, it is widely agreed that the 1980 military coup in general has played a significant role in the emergence of the biggest and the longest-running Kurdish insurgency in Turkey, gaining determination and strength from the fierce oppression and physical destruction a large number of Kurds experienced during the junta years.

In 1984, the PKK, a Kurdish guerrilla movement inspired by Marxism-Leninism and led by Abdullah Öcalan, launched an armed national liberation struggle by attacking Turkish army forces in the Kurdish region. The Turkish state's response to the PKK exacerbated the conflict with the perception that military intervention accompanied by further oppressive measures in the region was the most appropriate and expedient solution to the conflict. The policy of denial towards the Kurdish issue remained intact after the emergence of the PKK; state discourse represented the PKK as a terrorist organisation invented and manipulated by foreign enemies of the Turkish state, and thus obscured the socio-historical origins of the PKK and the armed conflict. The consequence was a decades-long war leaving behind approximately

forty thousand dead alongside the multi-faceted long-term social impacts of a decades-long internal war.

While the armed conflict between the Turkish army and the PKK reached at its peak in the early 1990s, state forces started to carry out illegal counter-guerrilla activities in the Kurdish region. Paramilitary forces were mobilised to deal with the Kurdish movement, such as JITEM(Gendarmerie Intelligence and Counter-Terrorism), the existence of which was denied by the state until the 2000s. Moreover, in order to restrain the growing mass support for the Kurdish movement, the 'war on terrorism' was extended from the PKK guerrillas over to civilian Kurds. Within the scope of this strategy, a large number of civilian Kurds suffered from village evacuations for allegedly assisting the PKK militants. The extreme brutality deployed during the evacuations included "deliberately degrading behaviour, arbitrary arrest, violence, torture, extra-judicial killings, sexual violence or threats of violence and the wanton destruction (or plunder) of moveable property, livestock and food stocks" (MacDowall 2007: 440). Village evacuations were amongst the most traumatic Kurdish experiences in the history of the conflict with long-term broad social consequences.

On the other hand, the strategy of extending the 'war on terror' to Kurdish civilians was not limited to Kurdish peasants. Kurdish intellectuals, journalists, human rights activists and politicians also became the target of state brutality. First of all, the activities of these groups were strategically delegitimized by official discourse; "human rights activists were "denounced as defenders of "internal enemies" of the State [...], violations of human rights were justified in the name of "national defence" and the very notion of human rights – like the concept of democracy itself – became something suspicious" (Bozarslan 2001: 50). Thus, the efforts of the Kurdish intellectuals, journalists and activists to expose state crimes and to claim basic human rights in the region were answered in the same oppressive manner by the state. A large number of these people 'disappeared' during the 1990s, and most of the cases remain as 'unidentified murders' up to today. The figures reflecting the overall results of these state atrocities in the 1990s were extreme; "more than 2,000 people, mostly intellectuals, were killed by 'unidentified' persons; some 1,779 villages and hamlets, and 6,153 settlements were partly or completely destroyed, along with

several towns (Şırnak, Kulp, and Lice, for instance); and almost three million people were forced to leave their homes" (ibid: 45).

Not surprisingly, this picture led to further growing Kurdish unrest and more popular support for the PKK – which had in such an atmosphere of oppression turned into "a defender of Kurdish dignity" (Bozarslan 2001: 46-47) in the eyes of a large number of Kurdish people. "By the early 1990s, the armed struggle of the PKK was echoed by an eager discontent of the Kurdish masses" (Yeğen 2007: 135-136)and "the PKK offensive was eclipsed by the burgeoning civil resistance to the security forces" (MacDowall 2007: 429). Public funerals for fallen PKK fighters, street protests against state policies, and celebrations on symbolic days for Kurdish identity started to be organised. All these public gatherings were dense with slogans and symbols showing support for the PKK and loyalty to PKK leader Öcalan. Although the state forces did not tolerate these events and more often than not dispersed these mass demonstrations by using brutal force[1], Kurdish civil resistance continued to grow despite the heavy price being paid. Thus, with its capacity for mobilising mass support, in the 1990s the PKK turned into something beyond a guerrilla movement; the armed wing of a mass grassroots movement, the political representative of Kurdish people and their interests.

The Kurdish Conflict and Social Polarisation in Turkey

While the situation explained above was the Kurdish experience of the war, in the west of the country, all people heard about what was going on in the Kurdish region was the official narrative of 'bloody separatist terrorists' provoked and financed by external forces. Especially during the 1990s, the terrorism discourse used to occupy the headlines of the Turkish media every day. Zeydanlıoğlu emphasises the mainstream Turkish media's role in shaping the perception of the Kurds and the Kurdish conflict in the Turkish public by "inflaming fears and stigmatising the

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[1]For example, about 100 Kurdish civilians were killed by state forces in 1992 during the Newroz celebrations in three Kurdish towns (The Newroz day originally marks the beginning of the spring in the Kurdish culture, yet the celebrations has been politicised over the last decades, turning into a celebration of Kurdish identity and a manifestation of popular support for the PKK).

Kurds" (2008: 167). Also underlining the fact that the Turkish media have been utilised for propagating the official narrative of the conflict to the west of the country, Wall and Sezgin write, "Kurds are kept silent in media coverage (discussion is 'about' them not 'with' them), are mostly associated with terrorism (the PKK), and are portrayed as divisive and as putting forth unreasonable demands" (2005: 795).

Overall, rigid state control over the narration of the war, refusing to let real information flow to the west of the country and deploying a discourse on terrorism in narrating the conflict, created a wide gap between the experience and the knowledge of the Kurds and the Turks on the war[2]. The result was two segregated perceptions of the conflict in the same country. In her study of socio-political polarisation in Turkey, Ayşe Betül Çelik remarks that "long-lived violent conflicts leave a legacy of mistrust between the citizens" and notes that "whereas most Kurds feel a lack of justice, humiliation, and silencing, many Turks feel afraid (that "their land" will be taken away), angry (that "terrorism" took away their sons), and proud (to be a "Turk" for centuries)" (2012: 256). Consequently, as Zeynep Gambetti stresses, the war created two "antagonistic publics" in Turkey and "by the early 1990s, it was barely impossible to speak from a "middle ground.""(2008: 96).

The wave of internal migration from the Kurdish region to the other parts of the country did not help to narrow this gap, either. On the contrary, it can be said that Turks and Kurds became politically more distant as they grew physically closer. As a consequence of the overall underdevelopment of the Kurdish region in comparison with the rest of the country, Kurdish migrants came to the big western cities with various disadvantages that rendered the integration process even harder for them. Çelik emphasises that "low levels of education" and the "language barrier" were some of the main disadvantages experienced by the Kurdish migrants in the west(2005a: 141). Apart from creating difficulties for the Kurdish migrants in their integration process, this profile was also something that reinforced and stiffened the long-established Kemalist image of culturally backward pre-modern Kurds as an object of disdain and hatred, and thus justified the exclusion and discrimination of

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[2] There are several surveys and studies that reveal the profound contrast between the Turkish and Kurdish perceptions of the conflict. For example, see the findings of the national surveys by SETA (2009) and KONDA (2011). Also see (Kılıç, 1992);(Haşimi, 2009); (Çelebi, et al., 2014); (Saraçoğlu, 2010); (Dixon andErgin, 2010).

the Kurdish migrants in the western cities. Çelik stresses that Kurdish migrants in the west have faced social exclusion, racism and discrimination and experienced "blocked access to many social and economic opportunities in the city primarily due to their Kurdish identity" (ibid: 152).

Zeydanlıoğlu discusses the impact of Kurdish migration to Turkish cities with regard to the spread of the consequences of the Kurdish conflict across the whole country: "The "Kurdish question" has now become a "Turkish question", in the sense that the conflict and its impact is also increasingly present in the daily lives of urban Turks who might otherwise have been fairly immune to the conflict" (Zeydanlıoğlu 2008: 167). However, he acknowledges that this has had a rather negative impact on inter-ethnic relationships in Turkey. While Kurdish migration enabled the first face-to-face encounters between the Kurdish and Turkish people on a large social scale, the outcome of these encounters was far from bringing the two communities closer. On the contrary, encounters between Turkish city-dwellers and poor Kurdish migrants living in the Kurdish ghettos of these cities have been not only limited but also marked by "inter-ethnic tensions" (Çelik 2005a: 141).

The tension between Kurdish migrants and the locals in the western cities increased so intensely in the 1990s that, in 1996, a human rights association, Mazlum-Der, warned a parliamentary commission in the following words: "In cities like Adana, Mersin and Antalya, Turkish and Kurdish districts are emerging. Turks cannot enter the Kurdish district and *vice versa.* One should realise that with a little provocation this will lead to very serious social clashes" (MacDowall 2007: 449). Yet despite warnings, no measures were taken to prevent such incidents and thus the tension between Turkish and Kurdish people turned into clashes (mostly in the form of lynching attempts against Kurds) on numerous occasions from the early 1990s. And the picture got worse after the capture of Öcalan:

> After the arrest of PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan in 1999 a new tendency emerged. Anti-Kurdish resentment became widespread, and signs of polarization started to be observed. [...] A discourse that defined not only the PKK but also the "Kurds" (taken as a homogeneous subjectivity) as the enemy became prevalent. This banal nationalist discourse, which defines the Kurds as barbarians while criminalizing them not only politically but also

socially and ethically, signifies the dangerous replacement of assimilationist optimism with a violent non-assimilationism. (Bora 2011: 58)

Mesut Yeğen also makes a similar observation and talks about a shift in mainstream Turkish nationalism's understanding of the Kurds and the Kurdish issue in the 2000s. He states that "the confidence of Turkish nationalism as to the Kurds' potential of becoming Turkish is not as firm as it used to be" (Yeğen 2011a: 240). He takes the term "pseudo-citizens" used with reference to Kurds by the Turkish General Staff in 2005 as a "notorious sign" confirming his observation (ibid: 241). That year, big Newroz demonstrations were organised in several cities with broad participation of Kurdish crowds carrying posters of Öcalan and Kurdish flags, which was enough to agitate Turkish nationalist sentiments but, in addition, the Turkish flag was taken down by some protesters in one of these demonstrations, which of course intensified nationalist reactions. It was about pictures of these demonstrations that the term "pseudo-citizens" was used by the TSK. Yeğen takes this term and theorises it to describe the new official approach towards the Kurds. He suggests that the way the Kurdish issue developed since the emergence of the PKK created disappointment in the Turkish state and, by the 2000s, the Kemalist establishment was "on the verge of revising its image of Kurds" (2011a: 241). For Yeğen, the "pseudo-citizens" statement signalled the "erosion in the long-standing image of Kurds as Turks-to-be" (ibid: 245).

The Pressing Necessity of a Political Solution to the Kurdish Conflict

While historical developments after 1984 slowly led to an understanding of the Kurds as "unassimilable" (Yeğen 2011a: 244) and eventually stirred up direct hostility towards Kurdish citizens on the one hand, the same picture engendered a growing realisation in some quarters that the traditional Kurdish policy was unsustainable and an alternative approach was needed. The capture of PKK leader Öcalan was one of the significant historical developments whose consequences reinforced this realisation. Despite the Turkish state's hope that Öcalan's capture would be the beginning of the end of the PKK and the Kurdish conflict, the course of

events refuted this prediction. After a period of confusion and hanging in the balance, the PKK bounced back and declared the permanence of the leadership of Öcalan despite his imprisonment in isolation on İmralı Island, and started to attract new militants. Popular support for the PKK and Öcalan also continued, and even gained momentum in the 2000s.

While these developments disproved the state's high expectations arising from Öcalan's capture, on the other hand, this process ultimately led to a transformation in the Kurdish movement, which eventually cornered the Turkish state not in military terms but in the field of ideological and political struggle. In the 2000s, the Kurdish movement underwent a significant transformation in its organisational structure, political perspective and strategies. The PKK, which had originally emerged as a national liberation movement inspired by socialism, adopted a democratic discourse in the 2000s and modified its demands from a democratic perspective, articulating a will to live together within a democratised Turkey and making it clear that their struggle would no longer be for an independent Kurdish nation-state, as long as Kurdish identity and the democratic rights of the Kurds as a community were recognised. Subsequently, the Kurdish movement started to advance their activities in the legal, democratic sphere by creating new organisations and instruments concentrating on the democratic struggle.

> The pro-Kurdish political parties have been articulating Kurdish identity and national demands within the discourse of democracy and human rights, and as a way to end the conflict put forward proposals to reform the existing political framework to recognise the Kurdish identity and difference in Turkey. They have been consistently emphasizing the need to build an open, participatory and plural democratic society that respects human and cultural rights, and the accommodation of Kurdish rights and demands. Initially, the pro-Kurdish parties campaigned more specifically on political reconciliation and the political solution of the conflict. Highlighting the exclusionary, authoritarian, homogenising and anti-democratic character of the republican order in Turkey, the pro-Kurdish democratic discourse proposes peaceful political change and seeks to weaken the antagonisms created by this conflict.(Güneş 2014: 268)

This transformation of the Kurdish movement raised the possibility, and in fact the necessity, of a political solution to the Kurdish conflict, as it was something that rendered the traditional Kemalist idea of a militarist solution untenable. On the other

hand, the new political perspective of the Kurdish movement created new political channels with the potential to communicate with western Turkey. As Güneş remarks, in this period, the Kurdish movement developed "links with other groups in Turkey who also advocate democratisation, such as trade unions, socialist groups and other minorities"(2014: 261) and, "increasingly over the years we have seen the emergence of civil society activism in Turkey around the peaceful resolution of the Kurdish question" (ibid: 267). All these activities showed the Turkish state a way out of the deadlock and in fact compelled change in the classic state attitude.

Another significant historical development that influenced the direction of the Kurdish conflict in Turkey towards the option of a political solution was the foundation of the Kurdish Regional Government in the neighbouring country of Iraq. Çiçek gives an overall explanation as to how the changing political status of the Kurds in the wider region pressurized the Turkish state into a policy shift:

> The founding of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in Iraq after 2003 has made it much more difficult to stick to traditional security policies that have denied Kurds and their ethnic identity. [...] The Kurds whose distinct identity has been denied throughout the Republican history and defined as the "mountain Turks" had a federal state just on the other side of the border named "Kurdistan Region." Furthermore, the new era after 2003 in Iraq, has led the Kurds to become more visible in the international political arena, on the one hand; the KRG has been recognized by international political actors including the US and EU member-states, on the other hand. Consequently, the denial of Kurdish identity and the refusal of the Kurdish claims have become much more difficult and unacceptable in the international political arena after 2003 for Turkey (Çiçek 2011: 19).

In conclusion, the sum of all the historical developments explained above rendered the official denial policy of the Turkish Republic dysfunctional and highlighted the urgency of a new Kurdish policy responsive to the peace-seeking approach of the Kurdish movement. However, apart from some hesitant statements and weak attempts by some political players in the past, it was not until the AKP government that the necessity of a new Kurdish policy was officially recognised and explicitly articulated by any state actor in Turkey. In fact, as I will discuss in the following section, the Kemalist establishment by the 2000s was still persistent in maintaining its traditional approach to the Kurdish issue at any cost and was tenaciously upholding its past attitudes, regarding any compromise as tantamount to self-

contradiction. Therefore, while on the on the one hand underlining that it is the historical evolution of the dynamics of the Kurdish conflict that underlined the urgency of a reformist Kurdish policy in Turkey, on the other hand we must recognise the significance of the rise of the AKP on the political scene with an anti-Kemalist ideological background that allows it to recognise and not deny the necessity and inevitability of developing an alternative approach to the Kurdish conflict.

The Revision of State Nationalism in the 2000s: The Kurdish Conflict and the AKP

As emphasised at the beginning of this chapter, the subject of dispute between the AKP and the Kemalists not only concerned religion; it has been much broader, with significant discrepancies in their approach to some key national issues. The political transformation Turkey witnessed in the 2000s was a transformation concerning the very definition of the nation, national identity and national history. It is certainly a risky political move for any governing power in a nation-state to unsettle such fundamental national matters that are more than likely to stir up some sensitive and highly charged socio-political issues. Thus no political actor would go to this trouble had not some issues forced such a transformation. What encouraged the AKP to initiate such a bold revisionist project was mainly the Kurdish conflict. One of the main promises of the AKP since its foundation was to develop an alternative policy towards the Kurdish conflict and to put an end to the decades-long war in Turkey. The AKP promised to replace the previous policy of denial and oppression towards the Kurdish issue, which approached the conflict as an issue of terrorism, with a reformist policy, which would regard the conflict as an issue of democracy.

Beyond just recognising the urgency of a new Kurdish policy, the AKP in fact saw the potential of the Kurdish conflict as a ground for manoeuvre in its struggle against the Kemalist power elites as well. First of all, approaching the Kurdish conflict from the perspective of human rights and democracy was in line with the self-portrayal of the AKP as a democratising force in Turkey, breaking the anti-democratic state

tradition of Kemalist power. In this respect, developing a reformist Kurdish policy was in keeping with the strategy of incapacitating the Kemalist bloc, especially the military, which owed much of its hegemonic power in Turkish politics to the continuation of the war in the Kurdish region of the country. On the other hand, a more reformist Kurdish policy was also in line with requirements for EU accession. This meant that, once again, the AKP was able to corner the pro-Kemalists on the ground of their westernisation ideal, this time through the Kurdish issue.

In essence, the AKP's discourse on the Kurdish issue was mainly based on blaming the Kemalist understanding of nationalism and presenting itself as a natural ally for the Kurdish people "insofar as Kurds and Islamists have both been defined as the Other of the Republican hegemony of Turkish secularism" (Casier et al. 2011: 124). While envisioning an alternative Turkey with a redefined sense of nationhood, the main element for national unity proposed by the AKP was a shared Islamic heritage. In this regard, the AKP "used the Kurdish issue as a weapon against secularism in Turkey, identifying secularism as a cause of division between Turks and Kurds" and offering "its own solution – "Islam as cement" – to end the societal polarization of Turkey" (Yavuz and Özcan 2006: 103). As the AKP government raked up the Kurdish issue, it triggered the two greatest Kemalist fears at once: the Kurdish issue and political Islam. And, ultimately, the resolution of the Kurdish conflict became one of the main areas of dispute between the AKP and the Kemalist actors, revealing the distinctions between the two, intensifying their contradictions and escalating the conflict. In this regard, it can be said that the power struggle over the direction of the Kurdish issue turned into a battleground for hegemony between the two camps.

As mentioned above, the most radical attempt by the AKP in this context, which violated the red lines of the Kemalist state tradition and increased tension, was publicly questioning the very basic Kemalist definition of Turkish national identity which was previously – since the foundation of the republic – imposed by state ideology as non-negotiable. In need of a new definition of national identity in Turkey which does not deny and exclude the Kurds but recognises and includes them, the AKP sought new formulations of national identity "without making any reference to ethnic roots of a certain kind and hence strengthening societal bonds" (Yıldız 2008: 55). In 2005, Prime Minister Tayyip Erdoğan gave a speech in Diyarbakır,

addressing the Kurdish issue as an issue of democracy and acknowledging the existence of the Turkish state's wrongdoings in the history of the Kurdish conflict. It was in this speech that he propounded the term "supra-national identity" for the first time: "No matter which ethnicity or religion any citizen of this country belongs to, we should all unite to live as brothers under the supra-national identity of citizenship of Turkey" (*Sabah*, 23 November 2005). This speech was widely recognised as a historic moment in the history of the Kurdish conflict in Turkey. In other speeches Erdoğan also deployed the notion of *Türkiyelilik* (an ethnically neutral concept meaning 'being from Turkey' and representing a civic understanding of the nation) in an attempt to reformulate citizenship in Turkey in a way that acknowledges the multi-ethnicity of Turkish society.

The new terminology adopted by the government in defining national identity was extremely disturbing to the Kemalist bloc and they responded promptly. The military addressed the issue at The National Security Council meeting and responded to Tayyip Erdoğan's latest speeches by stating that "the debates on primary and sub-identities would erode national identity, and micro-nationalism would endanger Turkey's unitary structure, harming its integrity and unity" (Yavuz and Özcan 2006: 112). On the other side, the questioning of the Kemalist understanding of nationalism by the AKP inspired hope amongst the Kurds and other anti-Kemalist parties. In fact, the Prime Minister's above-mentioned speeches were even applauded as a manifestation of the AKP's "anti-nationalist" democratic attitude in some left-wing liberal democrat circles. In reality, the aim of the AKP was of course not to abolish nationalism from official ideology altogether, but to displace the Kemalist conception of nationalism with a revised interpretation, one that is more suitable for the alternative national project envisioned by the AKP. Umut Özkırımlı underlines that the AKP's discourse is "not situated beyond or outside the nationalist parameters" and that "they aspire to an alternative Turkey, not for an "un-national" or "supranational" order" (2011: 97). Özkırımlı appeals to the following quote from Prasenjit Duara to explain the political scene in Turkey, comprising multiple interpretations of nationalism interacting with each other in various ways: "In place of the harmonized, monologic voice of the Nation, we find a polyphony of voices, overlapping and criss-crossing; contradictory and ambiguous: opposing, affirming and negotiating their views of the nation" (cited in, Özkırımlı 2011: 84). With a

similar approach to that of Duara's, Tanıl Bora stresses that "one must consider Turkish nationalism not as a homogeneous discourse but as a series of discourses with a vast lexis" (Bora 2011: 62), and he talks about a "struggle for hegemony among nationalisms" (ibid: 79). He positions the Islamist movement's understanding of nationalism within this picture and remarks that "after the 1980s Turkish modern Islamist intellectuals developed a radical criticism of the nation-state and of nationalism", where "the Muslim community *(ummet)* stands above the nation", yet he also highlights "the strong nationalist implications in the discourse of the Islamist movement in Turkey" (ibid: 77). Following these arguments, we can conclude that the AKP, as a new political actor, introduced a new interpretation of nationalism in Turkey and opted into the "struggle for hegemony among nationalisms" in the 2000s.

While talking about a 'struggle', though, it is important to specify that whilst clashing with the *pro-Kemalists* over the conception of nationalism, the AKP government never completely discarded *Kemalism* itself in dealing with the Kurdish conflict and the key national issues connected with this conflict. In this regard, the nature of the relationship between Kemalism and the AKP has always confirmed Özkırımlı's emphasis that "at times the two nationalisms reach a *modus vivendi* and coexist peacefully; at other times they clash" (2011: 97). Thus, as I will discuss further in the following sections of this chapter, the AKP has never been consistent in its aspiration to deconstruct the Kemalist conception of nationalism, inasmuch as it continued to rely on traditional state nationalism, promoting it at certain junctures when it was more beneficial for their specific needs in dealing with the ever-changing parameters of the Kurdish issue.

Kurdish Opening and the Peace Process

From 2002 to 2009, the AKP's aspiration to develop an alternative approach to the Kurdish conflict expressed itself mainly in the discursive realm, and despite hope-inspiring discourses, not so much in concrete steps towards a peaceful resolution to the conflict. At a time when pointed remarks on the government's performance vis-à-vis the Kurdish issue started to increase, in 2009 the AKP took a step forward by

officially launching the 'Kurdish Opening' (alternatively translated into English as the 'Kurdish Initiative'). The Kurdish Opening was not a comprehensive reform package, and it was not a clear road map for the political solution of the conflict either. Yet it was still a historic step basically as a manifestation of the official recognition of the Kurdish conflict as an issue of democracy, the official acknowledgement of the invalidity of the prevailing state policy towards the conflict, and the official declaration of the government's will to develop a democratic solution to the long-standing conflict.

Following the launch of the Kurdish Opening a few reforms were introduced, such as "allowing the teaching of Kurdish language as an elective course in schools and teaching different languages and dialects in private institutions", "allowing the formation of Kurdish institutes and/or Kurdish Literature departments in universities" and "renaming the places of former 'locally-named' places" (Çelik 2012: 253). Also, TRT-6, a state-owned channel broadcasting in Kurdish was launched within the scope of the Kurdish Opening. However, these steps were far from meeting the demands of the Kurdish community and the Kurdish Opening was not found satisfying within Kurdish circles, who had been expecting the government to take some concrete steps since 2002 and who had developed high expectations based on the government's promising public statements. Conversely, the government had gone too far, according to one dominant Turkish view, concerned about the 'Kurdish separatist threat'. Hence, from the day it was launched, the Kurdish Opening became subject to harsh criticisms from diverse political positions for varying reasons. Heated debates on the Kurdish Opening, and the Kurdish issue at large, occupied parliamentary discussions, as well as media coverage and daily conversations amongst citizens. Those were quite extraordinary days in Turkey, witnessing an overwhelming nation-wide debate on a subject which had been strictly banned from public discussion in the past.

From the Kurdish perspective, the Kurdish Opening was widely criticised for not only being limited in its scope but also for being quite vague, "leading to discussions over whether there actually was a clear package or plan" (Casier et al. 2011: 122). In fact, even the name of the project was ambiguous. It was initially announced as the "Kurdish Opening", which implies a project that specifically addresses the Kurdish

issue, but soon afterwards, the government started to refer to the project as the "Democratic Initiative", and finally as the "National Union and Brotherhood Project". Whether this rapid name-changing in a short span of time was a result of confusion, hesitation, or pragmatist manoeuvre, the inconstancy in the naming process of the project symbolised the ambiguous character of the entire attitude of the government in dealing with the Kurdish issue.

One of the further problems with the Kurdish Opening, and more generally the Kurdish policy of the AKP, was the exclusion of the Kurdish political representatives from the process and the oppressive strategies deployed to eliminate them.

> Although enlarging the political arena is among the primary steps to resolve the Kurdish issue and to disarm the PKK, the AKP has narrowed the political arena for pro-Kurdish politics during the democratic initiative [Kurdish Opening] process. While both Kurdish and Turkish societies have expected that the PKK's militants would return during the democratic initiative, and the Kurdish issue would freely be discussed in the political arena, the Constitutional Court has closed the DTP [the pro-Kurdish Democratic Society Party] and has introduced a political ban for 37 party members including co-presidents of the DTP who have been accepted as the most moderate names in the party. Moreover, nearly 1,500 Kurdish politicians alleged members of the KCK, the urban branch of the PKK, and nearly 2,000 children for throwing stones at police force have been arrested. (Çiçek 2011: 16)

With these developments, it quickly became clear that the Kurdish Opening project had never intended to recognise the political representatives of the Kurdish people and conduct a peace process by officially coming to the table with them. Quite the contrary, it was evident that one of the main objectives of the new Kurdish policy was to discredit and eliminate the Kurdish movement, as the core of the AKP's plan was "to integrate Kurds through depoliticising the Kurdish identity" (Güneş 2014: 253). As Çınar expresses it, "the AKP was intent on emerging as the true representative of the Kurdish people in Turkey, and thereby substantiate its claim to be the one and only democratic and democratizing force" (2011:120). The government had its own understanding of a 'political solution' to the Kurdish conflict and was resolved to keep the process within the limits of its own agenda, and the Kurdish movement constituted a major obstacle to the government's intention to proceed with the process on its own terms. The arrest of thousands of respected

Kurdish politicians and activists under the KCK operations, including elected members of parliament, resulted in disillusionment with the government and its Kurdish Opening project amongst the Kurds, as Casier et al. observed: "Supporters of the Kurdish movement share a deepening sense of hostility towards the ruling party and have come to denounce the Kurdish opening as a Kurd-less opening or an opening without Kurds. Less radical voices merely state their loss of enthusiasm, disappointment, and lack of hope for anything to transpire from the government's initiative at this point". (2011: 28)

One significant incident that damaged the trust between the government and the Kurds in the early days of the peace process was the Habur incident. Imprisoned PKK leader Öcalan had completed a road map in 2009, in essence proposing "a democratization and decentralization of the Turkish state into what he has termed at various times a democratic republic, a democratic confederalism, a democratic nation, or a democratic homeland" (Gunter 2013: 89), and explicating the necessary concrete steps to be taken by both sides within a time schedule towards peace. The Kurdish movement as a whole kept pressing the government for a response to Öcalan's road map, officially recognising him as the representative of the movement, and getting into direct dialogue with him for the peaceful solution of the conflict. While the government on the one hand maintained the discourse on terrorism, repeatedly declaring to the public that "no matter what they would not come to the same table with terrorists"[3], on the other hand the MIT (Turkish National Intelligence Organisation) had confidential meetings with Öcalan and the most significant outcome of these meetings was the initiation of a publicly undisclosed plan towards the disarmament and retreat of the PKK (Çandar 2012). In agreement with the MIT, several months after the launch of the Kurdish Opening, Öcalan declared that delegations of Kurdish militants would return to Turkey as 'peace groups'. The arrival of the first 'peace group' from the Habur border gate in October 2009 was a historic moment in Turkey, broadcast live, followed and discussed nationwide. The

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[3] Tayyip Erdoğan kept the old discourse on terrorism alive and deployed it on numerous occasions. For instance, shortly after his hope-inspiring Diyarbakır speech in 2005, he refused to meet with Ahmet Türk, the co-chairman of the pro-Kurdish party DTP, "on the grounds that the DTP does not recognize the PKK as a terrorist organization and condemn it" (Çınar 2008: 124). Another occasion where the AKP conflicted with its democratic discourse on the Kurdish issue was an extreme example; Tayyip Erdoğan attacked the MHP, the ultra-nationalist oppositional party who was in the parliament in 1999, for not supporting the execution of the "terrorist leader" Öcalan when he was first captured.

group was welcomed by hundreds of thousands of Kurdish people celebrating the beginning of the ceasefire and peace process. Their arrival was pictured in the *Hurriyet* newspaper as follows:

> Dressed in combat vests, pants and with sashes around their waists, the group smiled and made victory signs while crossing the border. The group likewise received an enthusiastic welcome from the thousands of jubilant Kurdish demonstrators waiting outside the border gate chanting, "Welcome peace ambassadors!" The group also carried a letter listing a series of requests addressed to Turkish officials. They were released after more than 24 hours of questioning, drawing reaction from Turkish nationalists, the court of public opinion, and the families of soldiers who lost their lives fighting the PKK in the country's Southeast. (*Hurriyet Daily News*, 21 October 2009)

The picture of some PKK members in their guerrilla uniform being welcomed by a huge joyous Kurdish crowd was interpreted as the PKK's 'victory parade' by a significant part of the Turkish public and it stirred up nationalist hatred towards the PKK and the Kurds in general. The disturbance was expressed in some angry nationalist protests which were immediately organised in several cities. Moreover, the two main opposition parties, the pro-Kemalist CHP (Republican People's Party) and the ultra-nationalist MHP (Nationalist Movement Party), both accused the government of treason. The government promptly responded to these negative reactions by suspending the project and shifting the discourse; "the government's narrative of unity was quickly replaced with one portraying the firmly 'reliable' government and the 'unreliable' Kurdish side" (Nykanen 2013: 89). Seven members of the 'peace group' were in the end sentenced to 77.5 years of imprisonment in total with accusations of being members of and making propaganda for a terrorist organization. (*Bianet*, 25 April 2012). Furthermore, it was shortly after the Habur incident that the pro-Kurdish party DTP was banned. The furious reactions from the Turkish nationalists were disconcerting for the Kurds who gathered that day to celebrate peace, and the government's immediate step back was a disappointment for the Kurdish movement. Consequently, the Habur incident proved to be a clear indicator of the striking discrepancy between the conceptions of the 'peace process' by the government and the Kurds.

Whilst the Kurdish Opening from the very beginning triggered unrest in the majority of the Turkish public on the one hand and disappointment amongst Kurdish citizens on the other hand, time also showed that the government's strategy to eliminate the Kurdish movement was far from yielding the intended results. A new pro-Kurdish party, BDP (Peace and Democracy Party), was formed straightaway following the closure of the DTP. And the Kurdish politicians benefited from the break from the traditional denial policy and effectively used the new opportunity to publicly address the Kurdish issue. The BDP's parliamentary performance gave more visibility to the Kurdish perspective and Kurdish interests amongst the Turkish public and also more legitimacy to Kurdish representatives. The Kurdish party became a powerful voice in the ongoing public debate on the Kurdish issue and "pushed the boundaries of the democratization process" (Kurban, 2013a).

As the AKP government's plan to discredit and liquidate the Kurdish political movement collapsed, the peace process continued with an intense power struggle between the two political actors. In 2012, the AKP government's effort to keep Öcalan in absolute isolation, preventing him from seeing anyone, including his lawyers, drew a reaction from the Kurdish public. Eventually, hundreds of Kurdish prisoners started a hunger strike, demanding an end to Öcalan's solitary confinement, and the larger Kurdish community supported the strike with street protests. The hunger strike continued for sixty-eight days and ended only when Öcalan called for an end to the strike via a message carried by his brother. After this incidence, seeking ways of rebuilding hope and trust amongst Kurds and restoring the process, Prime Minister Erdoğan for the first time disclosed to the public that the MIT had been in dialogue with Öcalan. The government also permitted delegations of BDP deputies to visit Öcalan. Thus, as Villellas notes, "for the first time the Turkish Government has publicly recognised Abdullah Öcalan as its interlocutor in peace talks and as a central figure for millions of Kurds in Turkey" (Villellas 2013: 21).

In 2013, Öcalan sent a public message to the Kurdish people, which was read out at the Newroz celebrations in Diyarbakır. In this message, Öcalan called on the PKK to initiate a ceasefire and to withdraw from Turkey, and he suggested that the Kurdish movement needed to enhance their legal political practices on democratic grounds. Following this historic message, the PKK started the process of withdrawing its

guerrilla forces from Turkey. However, the process did not continue with full harmony between the government and the Kurdish movement; it was laden with disagreements and tensions due to disparate views and expectations of the fundamentals of the process and its ultimate destination.

> For the government, the ultimate aim is the cessation of armed conflict, and the PKK's withdrawal beyond Turkey's borders and laying down arms. For the Kurdish political movement, the goal is to find a democratic solution to the Kurdish question based on structural constitutional and legislative reforms to grant the Kurds political status and equal rights. The leaked minutes of the meeting between Öcalan and the BDP delegation on 23 February 2013 make clear that Öcalan has no intention to immediately and unconditionally call on its troops to lay down their arms. Rather, he envisions a long term process where the two parties will gradually take coordinated and consecutive steps towards an eventual peace settlement. (Kurban, 2013a)

Hence within only a few months of Öcalan's historic Newroz message, the mood of optimism once again collapsed. The PKK suspended the withdrawal process, claiming that the government had not been taking the necessary steps agreed under the peace process. With these developments putting a strain on the government, the 2013 'democratisation package' was announced. The reforms included allowing politicians to use "any language other than Turkish", allowing education in "languages other than Turkish" at non-state schools, "decriminalizing the use of Kurdish letters not found in the Turkish alphabet" and "permission for villages to use their original Kurdish names" (*Zaman*, 30 September 2013). Also, as a part of this 'democratisation package', the AKP removed the 'student oath' which had been compulsory for primary school students to memorise and read out loud in unison at the beginning of each school day since 1932. It was a nationalist oath that started with the lines "I'm Turkish, I'm righteous, I'm hardworking" and ended with the famous phrase of Atatürk; "How happy is the one who says I am a Turk". This phrase used to be one of the key slogans of Kemalist nationalism that could be found written in various public spaces everywhere in the country, even on the mountains in the Kurdish region written in huge letters. With the 'democratisation package', the AKP also removed one of these signs in Diyarbakır which had been set up on a city street after the 1980 military coup. Thus, removing this sign that represented the official oppression policies towards the Kurds and was a constant reminder of the Turkish military coup that had tortured, imprisoned and killed a great number of

Kurds, from a city recognised as the capital city by the Kurds had great symbolic value.

Yet, once again, the government's attempt was found weak from the Kurdish perspective. Gülten Kışanak, the co-chair of the BDP, for instance, said "the package does not address the need for democratization, broader freedoms and rights, solutions to problems and an acceptance of citizens as they are", and she also added that "the package was drafted to meet the needs of the AKP, not the people" (*Today's Zaman*, 30 September 2013). Dilek Kurban interprets these negative reactions with regards to the timing of the package: "Had Erdoğan made this announcement after the opening of the EU accession talks in 2005 or as part of his government programme after his re-election in 2007, or even in the context of the 'Kurdish opening' in 2009, many more people than just core constituents, party members and supporters in the pro-government media would have wholeheartedly welcomed the measures" (Kurban 2013b). Thus she emphasises that the scope of the package fell behind its times, behind the specific necessities of the current circumstances of the process and the present expectations of the Kurds.

Nevertheless, despite all the negative developments, fundamental disagreements and conflicts, the 'peace process' has continued to date, albeit with ups and downs, and with the Kurdish movement's frequent criticisms and warnings to the government, even threats to back out of the process. In general, the Kurdish movement as a whole retained its determination to seek peace. In fact, abstaining from "damaging the peace process" (now a famous phrase) became the core principle determining the Kurdish movement's position towards any current political issue, at times to the cost of receiving harsh criticisms from some left-wing anti-government parties that had been the main if not the only ally of the Kurdish struggle in the past.

On the other hand, the AKP has never been able to fully control the direction and outcomes of the public debate on the Kurdish issue, despite the advantageous position it holds as the government party. As Casier et al. suggest, "even as it attempted to initiate this break with traditional statist ideology— and in the midst of apparent competition, rather than cooperation with the Kurdish movement—the AKP was unable to control the official narrative" (2011: 108). First of all, as discussed

above, the process beginning with the Kurdish Opening had given more visibility and legitimacy to the Kurdish movement and had transformed the Kurdish political movement "from an outcast to the facilitator of peace" (Kurban, 2013a). While the Kurdish movement turned into a publicly visible political actor, challenging the government and disallowing it to freely create its own narrative of the issue, on the other hand, pro-Kemalist political players have also remained capable of challenging the government in terms of its Kurdish policy, and Kemalism as an ideology has continued to influence a large section of the Turkish population, although the Kemalists dramatically lost power during the AKP era. So, considering this picture, with multiple political actors each with their own capacity to influence and manipulate public opinion on the Kurdish issue in different segments of society, the AKP government's aspiration to solve the issue in its own terms proved to be difficult to fulfil. Thus, the destination of the Kurdish conflict became a subject of political struggle as never before; the past of the conflict turned into a contested open-ended narrative to be rewritten, whereas the future of the conflict became an area of power struggle embodying various potential paths pointing in different directions.

Public Consequences of the New Kurdish Policy

As all the above discussed developments make clear, the AKP government's Kurdish policy is far from being a democracy-seeking policy; it is yet another authoritarian and anti-democratic policy, but with a significantly different approach from its predecessors'; a new policy that can be called a "patronising embrace" towards the Kurds, as Kerem Öktem (2008) aptly puts it. However, the AKP government's attempt to shift traditional state policy towards the Kurdish issue indisputably represents a milestone in the history of the conflict, mainly because it dramatically shifted the dynamics of the conflict regardless of the government's intentions. Most importantly, in order to change the course of the conflict in their preferred direction, the government had to expand the areas of freedom in certain respects. And to be able to obtain the Turkish public's support in this bold policy shift, they had to reshape the dominant public perception of the Kurdish conflict, which necessitated

an open and extensive public debate on the issue. This was in a sense the most significant aspect of the official launch of the Kurdish Opening; lifting the strict ban over speaking about the Kurdish issue, breaking the enforced silence, and encouraging an unprecedented broad public debate on the issue.

As Cemalettin Haşimi writes; "The continuous increase in the discussions on the Kurdish issue and the greater importance attributed to the problem verify that the initiative [Kurdish Opening] acted as an opening of Pandora's box. Marking a rupture moment, the very act of announcement began to re-write and re-encounter the whole memory of the problem in the public perception". (2009: 23). The public debate generated by the Kurdish Opening consequently gave voice to some long silenced realities of the conflict and gave public visibility to the previously suppressed historical context of the conflict. The oppressively controlled monophonic official narration of the Kurdish conflict by the Kemalist state was publicly questioned for the first time or, we can say, this traditional narration of the conflict became just one of many narrations amongst the polyphony of voices narrating the conflict from various perspectives and struggling with each other to be the dominant narrative in the new era.

Generally, the explosion of a wide public debate on a formerly suppressed issue of socio-political conflict in a society can be regarded as a positive phenomenon in itself. However, the new era in the Kurdish conflict in Turkey depicted in this chapter brings not only positive potential for a peaceful solution to the conflict, but also potential risks of actually intensifying the conflict. In evaluating the AKP's Kurdish policy in terms of the political tensions in society, Somer and Liaras share the following observations:

> Turks' predominant image of their society no longer resembles a homogeneous melting pot. [...] It is unclear how much it translates into recognition of difference, respect for the other and acceptance of particular rights, rather than fear of difference, the vilification of the other and sociopolitical polarization. There are signs of both. Liberal views of pluralism and coexistence, diversity-skeptical views nurtured by intolerance and prevalent interpretations of history, and anti-Kurdish values fed by the PKK conflict or ethnic Turkish nationalism all seem to be expressed increasingly. (2010: 157)

Çelik argues that "the social polarization dimension of the conflict is the most neglected side of the issue" (2012: 256) and draws attention to the long-settled "spillover effects" of the war in the big cities reflected in turn in societal polarisation. Approaching the Kurdish Opening from this perspective, she writes, "many fear that if this chance of resolving the conflict is missed, social polarization of Kurds and Turks might result" (ibid: 255).

In 2013, the government set up a controversial 'committee of Wise People' that was composed of intellectuals, artists, academicians and other public figures with the aim of influencing public opinion about the Kurdish conflict and winning the hearts and minds of the people as regards the new Kurdish policy. The committee members were assigned to seven regions of the country and they were expected to organise meetings in various cities to explain the peace process to the public. However, as was previously explained, that year the relationship between the Kurdish movement and the government suffered severe setbacks following a failed attempt to get the PKK to withdraw. At the same time, the Gezi protests in the summer of 2013 had dramatically changed the political dynamics in the country and tarnished the government's image. In this political atmosphere, the committee of Wise People could not operate. With the government's loss of credibility, some members left the committee and in a short period of time the committee became inactive and the Wise People project came to a halt without being officially cancelled or a government statement.

We can say that, one of the main problems that gives rise to the risk of further political polarisation in Turkey is the uncertainties, inconsistencies and contradictions in the AKP government's new Kurdish policy, which has been "causing insecurity among ethnic Turks and Kurds alike" (Yavuz and Özcan 2006: 115). A governing power radically shuffling the dynamics of such a severe and long-standing social conflict in a deeply polarised society without a clear plan no doubt creates a risky political atmosphere with the potential of triggering some long-accumulated political tensions in that society. For example, the expanding liberty to publicly address the Kurdish issue more openly is no doubt a positive development towards a more democratic society. On the other hand though, we can say that a political atmosphere that allowed the Kurdish issue to be freely debated from the

Kurdish perspective would also allow opposing perspectives and anti-Kurdish sentiments to be fired as well. The former policy of denial, while strictly ordering silence on the Kurdish issue, in fact silenced all possible commentaries on the issue from any political position, including discourses of enmity and racism against the Kurds. Put simply, it had been impossible to hate Kurds by name, when naming Kurds as such was forbidden. In short, a political atmosphere that enables Kurds to speak out inevitably enables other views to speak as well. And, following Haşimi's metaphor quoted above, we can say that once Pandora's Box is opened, what comes out are all sorts of opinions, beliefs, and sentiments from different and clashing positions that have developed throughout the long history of the conflict.

Conclusions

In conclusion, we can say that even though the AKP's Kurdish policy has been highly controversial and has largely failed to meet Kurdish demands, it nevertheless dramatically changed the course of the conflict. As a result of the ceasefire and ongoing peace talks, the conflict between the Turkish state and the Kurdish political movement has been transformed into an intense political struggle rather than armed conflict. On the other hand, breaking the traditional state policy of denial made it possible for the Kurdish identity and Kurdish political perspective to be visible and accessible to Turkish society for the first time. While the past and the future of the conflict became subject to open power struggles between multiple actors as never before, the Kurdish voice became one of the dominant voices within the heated public debate on the Kurdish issue.

In the following chapters, I will focus on Kurdish films in Turkey that were made and released in this period of political transformation. It was the shift in official Kurdish policy which enabled and even encouraged the emergence of the first Kurdish films in Turkey which explicitly tackle the Kurdish issue after decades of silence on the screen. The socio-political context discussed in this chapter is highly significant in terms of one of the key questions that shapes this entire study: the potential political influence of Kurdish films in Turkey in this period of political

transformation. As discussed above, the new political dynamics of the Kurdish conflict bear the potential to lead Turkey towards a peaceful resolution of the conflict or towards a deepening of the conflict. And one of the fundamental characteristics of Kurdish films of the period is their aspiration to play a positive role in this process towards building social peace in Turkey.

The kinds of filmic strategies Kurdish films deploy to accomplish this political goal and whether or not these strategies are likely to have an influence on political opinions dominant in the conflict-driven society of Turkey are issues I will address in the following chapters. As I will argue in detail, the complicated political dynamics explained in this chapter have had a strong influence on the salient themes and formal patters in Kurdish filmmaking. Furthermore, since these films circulated in a period of dramatic political transformation when intense public debates on the Kurdish issue were high on the public agenda, their public reception was always overtly determined by the political characteristics of the 2000s in Turkey.

CHAPTER 4: KURDISH CINEMA IN TURKEY AS A QUESTION AND A QUESTIONER

Introduction

In this chapter I will interrogate how the national cinema debates addressed in Chapter 2 apply to the operation and cultural reception of the concept of national cinema, specifically in Turkey in the 2000s, at a time when the country experienced a significant political transformation regarding the very definition of national identity, as explained in Chapter 3. The recent emergence of Kurdish cinema in Turkey offers a substantial case study laden with significant questions regarding the multiple and evolving constructions and perceptions of national cinema under the influence of national politics. With a particular interest in understanding the political dynamics of the nation in the realm of cinema, in this chapter, I will concentrate on Turkey to interrogate how the rise of Kurdish films and the birth of the concept of Kurdish cinema generate (and reveal) various questions regarding the relationships between cinema and the nation.

As I pointed out in Chapter 2, it is common in the literature on national cinema to just consecutively list diverse types of conflicts (based on class, gender, race, ethnicity, and religion) while directing attention to the inner divisions of the nation with the aim of undermining essentialist understandings of the notion of national cinema. On this point, I argued that each of these socio-political conflict dynamics in fact generate unique forms of tension in their relationships with the nation. Different from class or gender differences, for example, ethnic differences carry the potential of questioning the very basis of national cinema. And in the case of 'Kurdish cinema' in Turkey, the division of ethnicity as an internal conflict functions in a way that essentially fractures 'Turkish cinema'. One of the key frames of this chapter is that here I identify Turkey as a national scale where the antagonism between Turkish nationalist discourses and practices and Kurdish nation-building discourses and

practices are reciprocated in the constructions and interpretations of 'Turkish cinema' and 'Kurdish cinema' at a time of political turbulence.

In order to address these issues, I will first trace the socio-political and artistic historical developments that led to the boom of Kurdish films in Turkey in the 2000s by examining the double alignment of these films. I will first focus on the global emergence of Kurdish cinema in the 2000s, as Kurdish films in Turkey are a part of and in touch with the rise of Kurdish cinema as a transnational phenomenon. On the other hand, the birth of Kurdish films in Turkey also needs to be specifically addressed in the context of Turkey, and therefore I will position these films within the specific socio-political context of the Kurdish issue in Turkey and also analyse them as part of the general revival of cinema in Turkey in the 2000s. While Kurdish cinema as a whole raises various complicated questions, these questions take different forms and new meanings within the culturally specific context of Turkey in the 2000s. Kurdish films made in Turkey on the one hand share ambiguities and complexities with Kurdish films from elsewhere, but on the other hand, questions regarding their position, identification and definition have a different dimension, which is a product of the specificities of the history of the Kurdish issue in Turkey in general and the political developments in the 2000s in particular.

While investigating the complicated questions regarding the definition of Kurdish cinema in Turkey, I will also focus on how Kurdish cinema carries these questions over to the concept of Turkish cinema, how defining Kurdish cinema inevitably means re-defining Turkish cinema, and, how these conceptual questions take shape under the over-determining impact of the politics of the Kurdish conflict in Turkey. In Chapter 2, I took on Tom O'Regan's suggestion that we analyse the national cinema of a country as 'an object of knowledge' and pay special attention to the diverse discursive constructions of it by diverse agents. In his study on Australian cinema, O'Regan draws attention to the contextualising power of "the multitude of actors within the national cinema itself – filmmakers, government officials, film festival coordinators, multinational distributors, private investors, cultural critics and audiences, [and] publishers" (1996: 31-32). In line with O'Regan's approach, rather than proposing my own definition of Kurdish cinema, I will closely investigate the political power struggles that have arisen in Turkey in recent years between various

social actors with the aim of defining, interpreting, contextualising, constructing and manipulating the concepts of 'Kurdish cinema', as well as 'Turkish cinema'. This issue is significant for the following two chapters, in which I focus on individual films and question the potential political impact of Kurdish films in Turkey. Arguments regarding what Kurdish cinema is and what it should be have an influence on the thematic and formal choices in Kurdish filmmaking that I analyse in Chapter 5. On the other hand, the emergence of the concept of Kurdish cinema has had an impact on the public reception of individual Kurdish films in Turkey that is in the focus of Chapter 6.

In that chapter, I will interrogate how Kurdish films from 2009 onwards became one of the chief means of debating the Kurdish issue in Turkey. But first, my point here is that Kurdish films triggered wide public debates not only on the basis of their topicality or their subject matter which neatly overlapped the controversial issues occupying the political agenda; in fact, prior to how they represented the Kurdish issue it was their emergence under the label of 'Kurdish cinema' that became subject to debate. In a country where even the very existence of Kurds has been denied and the word 'Kurd' was banned for decades, the emergence of a notion called 'Kurdish film' was itself something that bespoke a political transformation, and that became a means of debating this transformation.

The Birth of Kurdish Cinema

The meeting of the Kurds with the medium of cinema was a notably retarded one, due to the social, political and economic circumstances they have historically experienced. Kurdish filmmakers took to the stage and the concept of Kurdish cinema came into existence at a time when the world was celebrating the centenary of the birth of cinema. It was the 2000s when films made by Kurdish filmmakers narrating the Kurdish issue from the Kurdish perspective first came out. In terms of the socio-political context that led to the recent emergence of Kurdish films, we can point to the historical developments in the Kurdish region from the 1990s onwards, which gave international visibility and recognition to the Kurds and the Kurdish

issue, as explained in the previous chapter. On the other hand, Kurdish political struggle against oppression and assimilation, which had grown stronger in previous decades and which reinforced the sense of community amongst Kurds, politicised Kurdish identity and cultivated a Kurdish political awakening, is no doubt one of the most prominent factors behind the emergence of Kurdish films. Kurdish political struggle not only politically influenced Kurdish films but also played a more practical role in developing Kurdish filmmaking. Certain mediums and institutions established by the Kurdish movement – such as Kurdish newspapers, TV stations, and art and culture institutions – provided the ground for a young generation of Kurds to gain certain skills adaptable to filmmaking.

In 2000, Bahman Ghobadi, a Kurdish filmmaker from Iran, won the Golden Camera Award at the Cannes Film Festival with *A Time for Drunken Horses*, a film that is woven with certain elements distinctly identifiable as 'Kurdish', such as its language, theme and geography. Making a name for himself with his success at Cannes, Ghobadi gave voice to the Kurdish identity not only through his film; he also publicly inscribed Kurdish identity into his identity as a filmmaker by defining himself as "a Kurdish filmmaker making films for the Kurds" and stating that he is "fighting for Kurdish rights through his cinema" and "using his films to show the suffering of the Kurdish people" (Ghobadi 2007). Thus, he was the first filmmaker to vocalize the notion of Kurdish filmmaking on the platforms of international film culture. Hence, Ghobadi's international recognition under the label of a 'Kurdish filmmaker' has been a milestone for Kurdish filmmaking, in that it inspired and motivated new Kurdish filmmakers and moreover, helped the notion of Kurdish cinema to be heard and recognised widely. After all, all cinemas need their *auteurs*, and Ghobadi in this sense has an iconic significance in the history of Kurdish cinema as the first Kurdish *auteur* to gain international recognition.

In fact it wasGhobadi's success that even helped some Kurdish activists to crystallise the idea of organising Kurdish film festivals. In explaining how they arrived at the idea of establishing the London Kurdish Film Festival (LKFF), the first ever Kurdish film festival in the world, Mustafa Gündoğdu, the founder and director of the LKFF, says, "That year, Bahman Ghobadi had won an award at the Cannes Film Festival. We came together with a few friends and started talking about what we could do.

The idea of a Kurdish film festival came out" (Koçer 2014: 477). The LKFF later turned into the institutional representative and the world centre of Kurdish cinema, where over time film archives (as well as knowledge about Kurdish films) accumulated and were concentrated. It became the leading institution of Kurdish cinema in its early years, taking an active role in almost all activities and events regarding Kurdish films, and deploying its resources to assist the flourishing of the web of cultural activities and institutions surrounding Kurdish films.

Following the LKFF in 2001, and in fact with the guidance of the LKFF, a large number of Kurdish film festivals started to spring up in other places. The wide dispersion of the rapidly growing Kurdish film festivals in various cities – from Paris to New York, even to Carrick-on-Shannon in Ireland – reflected the historical dispersal of the Kurds all around the world. Within a few years, the idea of Kurdish film festivals spread into the Kurdish mainland as well, with the organisation of local Kurdish film festivals. On the other hand, following in Ghobadi's footsteps, various Kurdish filmmakers continued to gain visibility through prominent international film festivals. And, other than these individual screenings, in 2010, the Pusan Film Festival in South Korea for instance showcased a special programme featuring Kurdish films.

From 2009 onwards, all prominent domestic film festivals in Turkey included a selection of Kurdish films in their programme. The first book on Kurdish cinema was published in İstanbul in 2009. And the same year, a conference was organised in Diyarbakır (the biggest Kurdish city in Turkey and the unofficial capital of Kurdistan), which brought together a group of Kurdish filmmakers from different parts of the world, Mustafa Gündoğdu from the LKFF, a representative from the Ministry of Culture of Iraqi Kurdistan, and a couple of scholars researching Kurdish films, to theoretically address the definition of Kurdish cinema as well as to discuss the problems and needs of Kurdish filmmaking. Through all these historical developments and organised efforts, Kurdish films gained visibility and recognition in the main countries hosting a Kurdish population, as well as on international platforms, and the concept of 'Kurdish cinema' was born.

Kurdish Activism and the Political Construction of Kurdish Cinema

While 'Kurdish cinema' started to appear increasingly in festival programmes, film criticism, academic studies, as well as within political debates on the Kurdish issue, there have always been a cluster of questions shadowing the concept of Kurdish cinema. Any argument concerning Kurdish films first of all starts from the very question as to whether there is such a distinct and coherent group of films to be recognised and named as 'Kurdish cinema'. And, if so, what makes a film Kurdish? Is it the ethnicity of the director, the theme, the language, a specific aesthetic style, or a political stance that allows one to recognise it as a Kurdish film? Can we talk about a national cinema, or should we talk about an ethnic cinema, or a minority cinema? These are questions that tag along with Kurdish films everywhere they travel. And, no doubt, all these questions actually reverberate and reproduce some other questions, in a quite direct manner; questions regarding the political status of the Kurdish people.

Kurdish films correlate with the Kurdish people who, with an estimated population of over 30 million, are widely recognised as one of the largest non-state nations. They have been physically divided into four main parts across Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Syria since the establishment of these states at the end of World War I. Moreover, as a result of the oppressive nation-state policies and the ongoing political conflicts in the Kurdish region, Kurdish people have become dispersed not only among these four countries, but all around the world, to constitute a widely dispersed large diasporic/exilic community. And, as Hassanpour states, "the Kurdish nation, with its distinctive society and culture, has had to confront in all of the 'host' states centralizing, ethnically–based nationalist regimes – Turkish, Arab and Persian – with little or no tolerance for expressions of national autonomy within their borders" (1994: 3). Nevertheless, Kurdish political struggles based on the claim to be recognised as a nation have always been on the agenda; this claim has been regarded as a threat to the unity of the states they inhabit and suppressed with rigid, oppressive policies.

In this picture of fragmentation, each Kurdish political movement in history has concentrated its efforts mainly on one part of Kurdistan. However, "the dynamics of assimilation, repression and Kurdish resistance in each country have affected the direction and outcome of the Kurdish struggles in the neighbouring countries" (Hassanpour 1994: 3). So, on the one hand Kurdish societies are internally complex and fractured, but on the other hand, despite this situation, Kurdish people have preserved the shared elements of Kurdishness and constructed a national consciousness which has strengthened in relation to the oppression to which they have been subject. Hence, the discourses of fragmented political struggles have always referred to a Kurdish nationality which goes beyond the national scale of the struggle, embracing Kurds under the imagined national unity of all Kurds.

This complex picture regarding the definition of Kurdishness cannot be worked out on the basis of lists of similarities and differences among the dispersed Kurdish communities. For any community claiming a distinctive collective identity, the role of agency has to be taken into consideration. As Stuart Hall remarks, national identity is "cross-cut by deep internal divisions and differences, and 'unified' only though the exercise of different forms of cultural power" (1992: 297). Employing a similar approach, Fredrik Barth regards "the maintenance of a boundary" as the key element for understanding ethnic units: "the critical focus of investigation from this point of view becomes the ethnic boundary that defines the group, not the cultural stuff that it encloses" (1969: 10). Although ethnic categories construct their distinctiveness on the basis of their cultural differences, for Barth, there is no simple one-to-one relationship between ethnic units and cultural similarities and differences:

> The cultural features that signal the boundary may change, and the cultural characteristics of the members may likewise be transformed, indeed even the organizational form of the group may change – yet the fact of continuing dichotomization between members and outsiders allows us to specify the nature of continuity, and investigate the changing cultural form and content" (ibid:14).

In this regard, even if the culture of an ethnic group shows internal differences, this does not affect the unity of the group as long as it maintains the boundary distinguishing that ethnicity from the others. Tim Edensor, while analysing national identity, stresses the importance of understanding identity as a process, not an

essence, and states that identities are constructed through an 'internal-external dialectic" (2002: 24). As such, he introduces a similar approach to that of Barth, remarking that the process of identification of national identity is the drawing of boundaries between 'self' and 'other'. On the ground of these arguments, we can say that Kurds have established the channels of politicising their ethnicity and preserving a sense of national identity, despite their history of fragmentation. In this sense, Ernest Gellner's argument that "two people could be considered from the same nation if and only if they *recognize* each other as from the same nation" (1983: 7) can be considered as the most powerful aspect of Kurdish national identity.

We can say that, in parallel with this briefly explained socio-political context, Kurdish cinema functions as a new emergent means of politicising ethnicity and as a new medium for Kurds to 'recognise' each other as members of the same nation. In the process of the politicisation of ethnicity, having an independent cinema functions in the same way, for instance, as having a distinct language does, and thus Kurdish cinema becomes one of the representatives of a distinctive Kurdish national culture. And, in this sense, Kurdish cinema functions as an instrumental cultural tool to counter and to break the historical denial of Kurdish identity.

At this point, it is crucial to draw attention to the relationship between Kurdish cinema and Kurdish political struggle. As a highly politicised community, long before the emergence of Kurdish films, Kurdish people have established various institutional channels in different places that contribute to the binding together of the community, the preservation of Kurdish culture, and the maintenance of a sense of unity. This politically organised character of the Kurdish community manifests itself in the institutional practices contributing to the construction of Kurdish cinema. For example, we can say that the role played by the widespread Kurdish film festivals in the rise of Kurdish cinema went far beyond simply providing a venue for showcasing Kurdish films, as they actually set the necessary stage for the growth of Kurdish films and played a crucial role in the construction, contextualisation and institutionalisation of the concept of Kurdish cinema. Hence, in an interview, Gündoğdu clearly states that the initial idea of founding a Kurdish film festival was a politically motivated idea, rather than being influenced by artistic ambitions. He remarks that the LKFF was "designed as a response to cultural imperialism that

systematically attempted to eradicate Kurdish heritage from the cultural landscape".
(Koçer 2014: 478). He further points to the role of Kurdish film festivals in the
building and maintenance of Kurdish collective identity:

> Cinema has a peculiar capacity to bring the Kurdish nation together; when a
> Kurd from Iraq sits in a European movie theatre next to a Kurd from Turkey
> and watches a film narrating a Kurdish funeral or wedding in Iran, that
> experience becomes effective in healing the ruptures of time and history in
> cultural knowledge, historical memory, and identity. (ibid: 478)

The audience reaction to the trailer for the 7th London Kurdish Film Festival in
November 2011 demonstrates the success of the festival in delivering the role
Gündoğdu describes. That year, the trailer for the festival was an animation in which
a hand draws the map of the officially non-existent Kurdistan. When the map of the
region is finished, the hand first names the neighbour countries, and finally writes
'Kurdistan' in the middle of its map. On the opening night, when the trailer for the
festival was screened for the first time, there was huge applause in the theatre at the
moment 'Kurdistan' was written. This applause gives expression to the mechanism
of relating Kurdish films to the Kurdish political struggle and demonstrates how the
LKFF functions as a meeting point for cinema and politics; and how the festival
itself – just as much as the films it showcases – contributes to the Kurdish sense of
belonging and becomes a venue for the celebration of national identity. Thus, it
implies that Kurdish cinema becomes a part of Kurdish nation-building not only
through filmic texts, but also through the contextualisation of the films with
reference to a collective Kurdish political identity.

Not only Kurdish film festivals, but also other cultural activities related to Kurdish
cinema exhibit a certain political will towards assisting the birth and growth of
Kurdish cinema. For instance, the editor of the first book on Kurdish cinema was
Mizgin Müjde Arslan, a Kurdish activist and filmmaker. In the introduction to the
book, Arslan presents the book as a concrete response to the ongoing argument about
whether or not there is a Kurdish cinema (2009a: xiii). And it is indeed true that the
mere existence of a book on Kurdish cinema is something that functions as a reply to
queries concerning the existence of Kurdish cinema, regardless of what is actually
said about Kurdish cinema inside the book. But what is significant here for my

current argument is the fact that this book project has been conducted with the conscious intention of proving and declaring the existence of Kurdish cinema.

More generally speaking, what is striking about all the early cultural practices around Kurdish films is their sense of urgency in responding to an only just burgeoning dynamic. The first film events, festivals, books and conferences on Kurdish cinema did something beyond just recognising and showcasing an already ripened cinematic dynamic; they gave impetus to the growth of an as yet rudimentary dynamic at the time these activities were conducted. In a way, we can say that the construction and institutionalisation of Kurdish cinema preceded the growth of Kurdish films, and, it was a certain political will that accelerated the rise of Kurdish cinema and amplified its visibility. We can for instance read the criticism of Zeynel Doğan, a Kurdish filmmaker from Turkey, from this point of view:

> Our problem is that we set off with the aim of making Kurdish cinema. That is a wrong point to start from. We organise conferences, we write, we discuss, but there is not much production when it actually comes to filmmaking. I don't mean to belittle what is being done, but I am just arguing that it is not enough" (Doğan 2012a)

Collective Kurdish efforts to support Kurdish films also worked towards writing the history of, or writing a history for, Kurdish cinema. Every cultural entity seeks its own history; this is true for individuals, for nations, and for cinemas as well. And the process of 'seeking one's own history' is never motiveless; behind the necessity of having a history, of having roots in the past, there is always a motivating dynamic in the present day. In this regard, the recent emergence of Kurdish films is the dynamic that necessitated the need to write the history of Kurdish cinema, to seek its ancestors and to mark its inception. All the aforementioned cultural activities regarding Kurdish films played a crucial role in historicising current Kurdish films. The case of *Zarê* (1926, Amo Bek-Nazaryan), which is now recognised as the first ever Kurdish film, best demonstrates the history-writing process of Kurdish cinema. Suncem Koçer's research shows how *Zarê* was discovered and "nationalised" by the LKFF:

> When Gündoğdu and his colleagues planned the London Kurdish Film Festival in 2001, they sought, in addition to erasing borders that fragment a people, to render Kurds visible both by encouraging new cinematic

production and by reclaiming films that "belonged to Kurds." [...] They conducted research on films about and/or by Kurds with the aim of reclaiming them as part of a Kurdish cultural legacy. After encountering a reference to *Zarê* in an online article, Gündoğdu contacted Armenian officials to inquire about the film. In 2006, after tedious bureaucratic maneuvering with the Armenian government, he finally managed to salvage a print of the film from the Armenian national archives. At a well-publicized screening at the fourth London Kurdish Film Festival, viewers saw what was billed as the first film ever produced about the Kurds. Retrieving *Zarê* from Armenian national archives, according to Gündoğdu, proved that the London Kurdish Film Festival had achieved its founding mission: to make Kurds visible within the pages of history. (2014: 478)

Yet the Kurdishness of *Zarê* is a controversial issue as it is an Armenian production directed by an Armenian filmmaker, but it tells the story of a Kurdish village in Armenia. Thus Koçer for instance argues that *Zarê* contradicts "the critical norms of Kurdish cinema that have been established in debates among Kurdish filmmakers and film critics" (ibid: 479). However, given the LKFF's dominance in the establishment of Kurdish cinema, it is not surprising that *Zarê* quickly came to be widely recognised as the earliest example of Kurdish cinema. Later in 2011, with the initiation of Gündoğdu, *Zarê* was screened in Turkey, as a special event hosted by the Kurdish municipality in Diyarbakır and also in İstanbul at the If Istanbul Film Festival. Both screenings were accompanied by a live music performance by Tara Jaff, a Kurdish harpist from Iraq, and, the screening of *Zarê* in Turkey was publicised as a historical moment with discourses celebrating the first Kurdish film returning its homeland to meet its people for the first time after many decades. Thus, as this specific example demonstrates, politically motivated cultural activities played a fundamental role in discovering/constructing the history of Kurdish cinema.

Kurdish Cinema and the National

One of the prevailing approaches deployed in defining Kurdish cinema is to regard it as the 'national cinema' of a 'nation without a state', and to analyse Kurdish films from all around the world with respect to their commonalities in line with the conventional framework of national cinema. And the context summarised above in the previous section seems to be actually justifying this kind of theoretical treatment

of Kurdish films. However, I believe that this approach would not only be insufficient in coping with the multifaceted character of Kurdish cinema, but it will also mean ignoring, or repressing, its potential for suggesting new approaches with regards to the theory of 'cinema and the nation'.

The difficulty in fitting Kurdish cinema into a self-evident recognised theoretical frame is not something we can overcome by making a note of its 'uniqueness'. The fact that it does not properly fit the theory tells us something not only about Kurdish cinema, but also about the theories it invokes. In order to decide how to tackle the national within Kurdish cinema, we need not only to review and utilise theories of national cinema, but also to utilise the complexity of Kurdish cinema to reinvestigate the already complex issues of national cinema theory. In this regard, I see Kurdish cinema as an opportunity to rethink possible ways of approaching 'national cinema' as a realm of socio-political conflict.

The concept of 'Kurdish cinema' evokes the theoretical debates addressed in the second chapter within a highly complicated case. To begin with, we can say that the widely criticised presumption of commonality amongst the films of a nation is replaced by a suspicion towards commonality in the case of Kurdish films. In other words, for Kurdish films the issue of commonality turns into a 'claim' that needs to be justified or proved. And the ambiguity in labelling Kurdish films implies the fact that power struggles over the status of Kurds still persist. In this frame, how to approach the concept of Kurdish cinema becomes a matter of political stance; insofar as recognising Kurdish cinema warrants recognising the Kurds, defining Kurdish cinema means defining the Kurds. And the struggle over the definition of Kurdish films bears the weight of the history of the Kurdish issue.

Although it is a complicated case, the complexities of Kurdish cinema always revolve around questions regarding nationhood. In this respect, it is true that the ground for the debate on Kurdish films is essentially characterised by the notion of nation; the national informs all the questions surrounding Kurdish films. However, this emphasis is not the same as simply stating that Kurdish cinema is a national cinema. We can rather say that Kurdish cinema in itself carries the tension of the possibility/impossibility of being a national cinema, and moreover it carries over the

same tension to other related national cinemas, because the possibility of Kurdish cinema as a 'national cinema' seems to imply the impossibility of 'Iranian cinema', or 'Turkish cinema', for example. In this sense, defining Kurdish cinema is inevitably re-defining the cinemas of other nations that are interrelated with the Kurds.

When talking about Kurdish films, we refer to films from the main host countries, and also, for example, a film by a Kurdish filmmaker from Iraq living in Norway, or a film by a Kurdish filmmaker from Turkey living in Germany. The issues regarding nation within Kurdish cinema always concerns at least two national formations. In terms of production, distribution and consumption processes, all Kurdish films are in dialogue with more than one nation; the films of Bahman Ghobadi, for example, are a part of both 'Kurdish cinema' and 'Iranian cinema' at the same time, or the films of Kazım Öz are in contact with both 'Kurdish cinema' and 'Turkish cinema'. The picture can become even more complex in the case of diasporic filmmakers. For instance, until recently, Yüksel Yavuz was considered as a 'Turkish-German filmmaker', but since the emergence of the concept of 'Kurdish cinema', he is regarded as a diasporic Kurdish filmmaker; in this respect we can say that his films concern three different nations and three national cinemas. In this context, Kurdish films cannot solely be conceived of as the national cinema of Kurds, since they carry the marks of different nations. The way they address multiple nations highlights the fault lines in the notion of the nation; how the formation of a nation is related to another's; how the history constructed by a nation steals some elements from another's. Kurdish films, conceived of as a meeting point for interconnecting national issues regarding diverse nations, expose the aspect of nation as a construction within the tensions created by the power struggles from above and below the nation.

Questions surrounding the concept of Kurdish cinema also link back to the transnational cinema debates addressed in the Chapter 2. On the textual level, we can speak of an intertextual and transnational dialogue between Kurdish films emerging from different parts of the world. The fact that Kurdish filmmakers, who have been dispersed around the globe have the characters that they depict, produce films that maintain a substantial intertextual dialogue regarding the Kurdish issue, is one of the

most powerful traits that binds Kurdish films together. For example, if the Kurdish guerrilla in *Photograph* (2001, Kazım Öz) had not died, he would maybe have become the ex-guerrilla in Yüksel Yavuz's film *A Little Bit of Freedom* (2003), working in a *kebap* shop in Germany. Or, we can think that the arm of Saddam's statue that repeatedly appears in *Kilometer Zero* (2005, Hineer Saleem) is the arm that is given to the little boy Satellite in *Turtles Can Fly* (2004, Bahman Ghobadi) upon Saddam's fall. Here we have a group of films that talk to each other, that continue each other's stories, that take the floor from one another, that transfer characters from one to another. For this fragmented nation narrative provides an important means to keep interconnected memories in cultural circulation. The fragmented memories re-join through the path of this communication, a path which is composed of stories. By narrating the stories of Kurdishness, the practice of story-telling reveals the common experiences, common feelings and common desires of Kurdish people dispersed all over the world and thus draws a map of Kurdistan which extends the borders of the actual Kurdistan to wherever Kurds are. The practice of narrating Kurdishness in cinema reveals the commonalities of the physically divided but historically connected stories of the Kurdish people. And through the intertextual, transnational dialogue between Kurdish films, each film adds one piece to the jigsaw of the history of the Kurdish issue, which is scattered all around the world. Thus, these films draw a 'narrative map' through the stories dispersed all around the world map; from Turkey to Iran, Iraq, Germany, Norway, and Paris. This is a map that binds 'being Kurdish' on a transnational scale, a Kurdish map that is formed through stories. In this regard, we can say that we are talking about films that go beyond national, geographical boundaries; that get into a transnational dialogue which contributes to the sense of national belonging. On the other hand, the transnational within Kurdish cinema is not only a matter of textuality. As discussed earlier, the institutional practices that work towards building a Kurdish film culture also operate transnationally, however, they mobilise their institutional means towards reinforcing the sense of national unity amongst Kurds.

We can say that Kurdish cinema is a case that confirms the argument for the necessity of a formulation of transnationalism with the emphasis on its complex dialogue with the national. The fact that as a result of the history of political conflicts, Kurdish people have become dispersed not only in Iran, Iraq, Turkey and

Syria, but all around the world, makes the existence of Kurdish films from very different geographies possible. Thus, due to the socio-historical background of the Kurdish issue, Kurdish cinema is from its inception a transnational cinema. On the other hand, however, despite fragmentation, Kurdish people have historically constructed and maintained a national consciousness, which is evident in the textual and contextual formation of Kurdish cinema. So, with reference to this socio-historical background, Kurdish cinema can be considered as a cinema that reflects and reproduces a national consciousness in a transnational space.

In fact, based on all the arguments introduced so far, it would be theoretically justifiable to regard Kurdish cinema as a subnational cinema, national cinema, or a transnational cinema. However, rather than fixing it in one of these categories, we can see Kurdish cinema as an example that demonstrates the importance of understanding the relationships between the national, subnational and transnational from a relational perspective. Kurdish films, as a meeting point for interconnecting national issues regarding diverse nations, expose the aspect of nation as a construction within the tensions created by power struggles from above and below the nation.

By this point, it must be clear that my aim here is not to favour one of the potential definitions of Kurdish cinema, or to suggest a new definition. Instead, I find it crucial to emphasise that Kurdish films have emerged from a political context which renders the definition of Kurdish cinema as open as the status of the Kurdish people. Kurdish cinema makes it impossible to fix a definition of it; it rather necessitates involving the study of the structuring pressures on its definition.

In Chapter 2, I argued for the necessity of recognising 'national cinema' as something more than a theoretical tool, as a long-established cultural entity. This perspective helps us understand the functioning of Kurdish cinema as a concept. All the questions raised by Kurdish cinema actually function towards putting the concept into discourse and thus contribute to the construction of Kurdish cinema. In this sense, although always bringing up more questions than answers, we can say that Kurdish cinema has been constructed as 'an object of knowledge' through these questions. Even when we think of the very first and most fundamental question, "Is

there a Kurdish cinema?", we can say that Kurdish cinema has come into existence through, and within this question. To put it in another way, Kurdish cinema has come into existence since the question of its existence entered circulation. For cultural entities come into existence not necessarily through fixed definitions and agreements on how to identify them, but also through the questions, ambiguities, debates and power struggles around them.

In this context, Tom O'Regan's emphasis that national cinema is a discursively produced concept, "a domain in which different knowledges are produced and brought into relation" (1996: 25), is particularly useful and necessary in the study of Kurdish films, because the question of "What is Kurdish cinema?" is under constant transformation in relation to the ever-shifting political dynamics of the Kurdish issue, and thus, we can say that studying Kurdish cinema involves studying this transformation. And within this transformation, what is particularly salient is observing how Kurdish cinema concurrently makes different, even conflicting, answers to the same questions possible and legitimate. Kurdish cinema embodies contradictory views concerning its definition insofar as it bears the history of social dynamics and power relationships, and it is crucial to observe the social circulation of the concept from this perspective.

On a final note; while tackling the concept of Kurdish cinema as 'an object of knowledge', as a discursive subject that has a life outside of theory, we must also take into account the effect of the contextualising power of the Kurdish political struggle on Kurdish cinema. When we consider the previously discussed fact that certain agents operate towards contextualising and institutionalising Kurdish cinema as such, the question, for example, of whether Kurdish films constitute a common and distinctive unity is no longer a question that could be addressed simply and only through theoretical analysis. In other words, as there are certain cultural powers at work that contextualise these films and unite them under the label of Kurdish cinema, this question is no longer merely a matter of theoretical judgement. For example, one dominant argument repeatedly vocalised by Kurdish agents is that Kurdish films *must* feature the Kurdish language and that *should be* the main defining element of Kurdish cinema. This proposition was one of the most dominant issues discussed at the Diyarbakır conference, for example. We can also see how the

LKFF deploys its institutional power in this context, too, in the slogan of the 8th LKFF; "Cinema is beautiful in Kurdish". It is in this sense important to observe that the commonality debate is shaped not only through the interrogation of what the characteristics of Kurdish films *are*, but also through the propositions as to what they *should be*.

All these complex arguments regarding the definition of Kurdish cinema with regard to nationhood are highly relevant for the rest of this chapter in which I focus on the public reverberations of the emergence of Kurdish films and the concept of Kurdish cinema specifically in Turkey. Inasmuch as Kurdish films in Turkey constitute a segment of transnational Kurdish cinema, the first Kurdish films that became visible in the public sphere in the 2000s introduced all these questions and issues to the film culture in Turkey. As I emphasised earlier, however, these general questions took on different forms and meanings as they were translated into the particular context of Kurdish films in Turkey during an era of political transformation. In the following sections, I will interrogate this particular situation, and in order to do that, I will first briefly trace the historical trajectory of representations of the Kurdish issue in cinema in Turkey.

The Void of Representation in Turkey Preceding Kurdish Films

Traditional denial policy in Turkey strictly banning any public representation of Kurdish identity and the Kurdish conflict impinged on the cinema, leaving behind a void of representation in the film history of the country. Cinema in Turkey experienced its heyday during the era of Yeşilçam cinema (named after Yeşilçam Street in İstanbul) which continued from the 1950s to the early 1990s. Characteristically, Yeşilçam was never a cinema that directly touched upon political issues of any kind in the first place. Yeşilçam rather steered clear of the social realities and political conflicts of its time and produced popular entertainment films, predominantly in the genres of melodrama and comedy. The political-ideological formation of Yeşilçam was overall in line with the dominant ideological frame of the nation-state in that it "ignored the ethnic mosaic of the country in favour of the

official state policy of national identity based on homogeneity" (Colin 2008: 15), and, "failed to reflect the country's ethnic and regional diversity" (Arslan 2011: 85). It is in this sense no surprise that the Kurdish issue was kept off the screen by Yeşilçam cinema. Thus, up until the mid-1990s, when a 'new cinema' in Turkey began to flourish after the break-up of Yeşilçam, the socio-political realities of the Kurdish issue remained unrepresented on screen.

On the other hand, Kurds were misrepresented rather than being unrepresented in Turkish cinema, as they recurrently appeared in popular Yeşilçam films, not with their authentic identity, but through a tacitly implied Kurdish image; a cinematic construction of Kurdishness.

> The Kurdish issue and the war in the south-east have been thorny subjects for Turkish cinema, which until the 1990s, showed the Kurds as Turks. The Kurds were the poor illiterate easterners from the mountains. They were identified by their black shalvar (loose pants), their poverty and their lack of proper discourse in the official language. [...] Commercial cinema used the Kurdish characters and the geography of their homeland without giving a name or language, but rather with an orientalising gaze. (Colin 2008: 91)

This cinematic representation of the Kurds was of course not an invention of the Turkish film industry, but a cinematic reproduction of the stereotypical Kurdish image which was long established in the dominant Turkish nationalist discourse, as discussed in Chapter 3. Avoiding any actual socio-political references to the Kurdish issue, and abstaining from even mentioning the word 'Kurd', popular Turkish cinema built the implicit image of 'Kurds as Easterners' on screen – 'Easterner' being the dominant discursive substitute for 'Kurdish' with derogatory resonances deployed in the official and daily language in the west of the country. It is with reference to this representation of Kurds in cinema that prominent Kurdish filmmaker Kazım Öz argues that "Turkish cinema has been doing to the Kurds what Hollywood has done to the American Indians" (Colin 2008: 94). Though, before Kazım Öz and his contemporaries gained agency over the representation of Kurdish culture and identity, during long decades when the Kurds were completely deprived of the means of representing themselves, the only trace of the Kurds in cinema had been this

distorted and implicit representation of Kurdishness, portraying Kurds as underdeveloped Turks.

The lack of dissonant voices in cinema representing the Kurdish perspective is only one dimension of the absence of the Kurdish issue in Turkish cinema. What is perhaps more remarkable is that, not only the Kurdish perspective, but also Turkish nationalist views of the issue have been completely kept off-screen. This means, we cannot find any examples of nationalist, militarist, anti-Kurdish takes on the Kurdish issue either in the history of cinema in Turkey. In this sense, it is striking that cinema has not been utilised by the Kemalist power elite in shaping the ideological construction of the Kurdish issue, especially considering the significance of manipulating public opinion for the nation-state to win the hearts and minds of a mass public on the so-called 'war against terrorism'.

In analysing the lack of representations of Turkish soldiers and their experiences of the Kurdish conflict in fiction genres, Sevilay Çelenk writes; "At a time when thousands of soldiers were killed, there has been no 'martyr's mother' character appearing in any domestic TV series, even as a supporting character. No fiction character has a colleague, or neighbour, who has lost his/her spouse, children, or siblings in the Southeast" (2010: 94-95). Her interpretation is that, for the Turkish state, fiction genres in particular carried the potential risk of a "meaning excess", which means that, compared to documentaries or newscasts, fiction narratives held a higher 'risk' of conveying some unintended meanings to the public on such a politically sensitive issue. And, the Kurdish policy of the Turkish state would not tolerate any risk of a "meaning excess" on this issue. What Çelenk argues specifically in terms of the absolute absence of Turkish soldiers' experience of war in fiction genres could be extended to the interpretation of the lack of representation of Kurdish issue from the dominant Turkish nationalist perspective in cinema. This point directly links back to one of my arguments in Chapter 3, where I suggested that the traditional denial policy in fact silenced all possible commentaries on the issue from any political position, including discourses of enmity and racism against the Kurds, and, with reference to the new era of politics in Turkey in the 2000s, highlighted that a political atmosphere that enables Kurds to speak out inevitably enables other views to speak as well. In this sense, it is interesting to observe that

films with Turkish nationalist tendencies – such as *Nefes: Vatan Sağolsun/Breath: Long Live the Homeland* (2009, Levent Semercioğlu) or *Dağ/Mountain* (2012, Alper Çağlar) – were made after and only after the emergence of films that treated the issue from the Kurdish point of view.

It is also significant to note here that Çelenk, for instance, develops the argument cited above through her analysis of a 2009 film, *Breath*; the first film in Turkey to address the Kurdish conflict with the war genre. Generally, it was only after the release of *Breath* that the lack of films on the internal war in Turkey became a widely addressed issue, with intrigued comments of a sudden realisation of the preceding void. In this sense, the emergence of *Breath* generated public awareness of the previous lack of films dealing with the war in Turkey. This is significant as an example that shows that for silence to become 'visible' there needs to be a sound breaking it. And this applies to the more general issue of the representation of the Kurds and the Kurdish issue in cinema in Turkey. It was only after the emergence of Kurdish films that academic and non-academic cinema writing started to tackle the preceding silence on the Kurdish issue in cinema[4]. Hence, this example represents one of those cases where a void gains visibility and public recognition only at the moment when it is filled.

For this research, the decades-long silence of Turkish cinema on the Kurdish conflict is not an issue that needed to be addressed only for drawing a historical picture of cinematic representations of the Kurdish issue. This matter has further significance in relation to different facets of my research, as the void of representation in question is something that informs Kurdish films of the 2000s. Because of the void preceding them, the analysis of the first Kurdish films in Turkey must first of all begin with the analysis of 'what the *existence* of these films says', before 'what these films say'. For being the first sound following a long silence, prior to the meanings embedded in film texts, the mere existence of Kurdish films actually conveys certain meanings. For example, when we think of the first films to feature the Kurdish language, we need to acknowledge that these films signal the fact that "it is now possible to speak

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[4]For example, Müslüm Yücel's book entitled *Türk Sinemasında Kürtler* (*Kurds in Turkish Cinema*) is the first research on the misrepresentation of the Kurds in Turkish cinema; yet the book was published only recently, in 2008.

in Kurdish and make films in the Kurdish language", and that is the very first meaning they convey even before communicating their internal meaning to their viewer. In this sense, the element of the Kurdish language in these films operates towards expressing something beyond what is said in that language, merely by its presence. Thus, more generally, we can say that the preceding void in the history of cinema has a certain impact on the communication between Kurdish films and society in 2000s Turkey as I will thoroughly discuss in Chapter 5 and Chapter 6.

Yılmaz Güney: Tacit Representations of Kurdishness on Screen

Until the late 1990s, the only exception to break the onscreen silence on the Kurdish issue was the legendary filmmaker Yılmaz Güney, one of the biggest stars of all times in Turkey, a Kurdish and socialist actor-turned-director. Güney became a legend not only through his films, but also for his personal life story. He spent a large part of his short life in prison; he was sent to prison in 1961 for publishing a short story that was deemed communist propaganda, in 1972 for sheltering some wanted socialist-revolutionaries, and finally in 1976 for shooting a judge dead, for which he was sentenced to nineteen years in prison. Despite his short career interrupted by these events, Güney appeared in a great number of films as an actor, taking on roles in around twenty films per year during the golden years of the film industry. He started to direct his own films in the mid-1960s. After making a great many violent, blood and guts genre commercial films in tandem with his acting career, he established his social-realist aesthetics in *Seyyit Han/The Bride of the Earth* (1968), and especially in *Umut/Hope* (1971), which is widely recognised as the breakthrough in Güney's career as a filmmaker.

The first attempt by Güney to allude to Kurdishness in his films was in *Bride of the Earth*, merely through giving Kurdish names to his characters, yet this was sufficient reason for the authorities to censor the film. In *Sürü/The Herd* (1979), he depicted characters struggling with the feudal and patriarchal structure of their society whose Kurdishness was again an implicit message hidden in their names. Güney continued filmmaking during his years in prison. His most popular film *Yol/The Way* (1982)

was written by him while in prison, shot by Şerif Gören under his supervision, and edited in Paris after he escaped from prison in 1981. The film is set in the post-military coup days and depicts the militarist state's oppression through the journey of a group of prisoners who are permitted to visit their hometowns for a short duration. *The Way* was the first film in Turkey to feature Kurdish culture, use Kurdish folk songs, and depict Kurdish characters truly with their own identity. Moreover, as Fuat Şengül points out, it was also the first film to introduce "'Kurdistan' as a new cinematic space" (2013: 243). *The Way* was politically progressive, not only because it depicted Kurdistan in a realistic manner, but also as it literally named it; during the bus journey of the prisoners towards the east of the country, at the moment while they pass by the city of Urfa, an inter-title appears on screen as a substitution for a roadside sign, marking the landscape as 'Kurdistan'.

In his last interview, conducted by Chris Kutschera in Paris just before his death, Güney talks about how the constraints of the oppressive attitude of the state affected his filmmaking:

> During my whole life as a creator, I have had to use indirect means to express my thoughts, and I must frankly admit that to date my works have not totally expressed what I wanted, either in their style or in their spirit. The dominant element in these works is that they are a compromise. *The Herd*, in fact, is the history of the Kurdish people, but I could not even use the Kurdish language in this film; if we had used the Kurdish language, all those who took part in this film would have been sent to jail. In the case of *The Way*, the focus was to be on Diyarbakir, Urfa and Siirt. I tried to create a Kurdish atmosphere by the use of music. But although the film was dubbed in Europe, I did not succeed in making it all in Kurdish. (Güney 1983)

Still, his masterpiece and the film that stands out in his filmography for touching most boldly upon the Kurdish issue was *The Way*. And it was of course considered extremely dangerous by the Turkish state, and thus the film was banned in Turkey for seventeen years, until the late 1990s. After escaping from prison and fleeing abroad, Güney was awarded the Palme d'Or Grand Prize at Cannes Film Festival in 1982 for *The Way*. He attended the award ceremony at Cannes, and disappeared again. His Turkish citizenship was revoked in 1983, and the following year he died of cancer in Paris at the age of forty-seven. Yet, Yılmaz Güney with his films and his life story turned into an icon for the Kurds. In Gündoğdu's words, "he remains

perhaps the single most influential figure in Kurdish cinema and it is no understatement to note that his films have left a powerful and indelible mark on Kurdish consciousness" (Gündoğdu 2010).

First Attempts of Turkish Filmmakers to Break the Silence on the Kurdish Conflict

The silence on the Kurdish issue in Turkish cinema continued during and after the exceptional example of Yılmaz Güney. Only after many years, in 1996, Yavuz Turgul made a weak attempt at representing Kurdishness on screen with *Eşkıya/Bandit*; a box office hit with over 2 million viewers and one of the precursors of the revival of cinema in Turkey. The film features characters with Kurdish names and "the bandit wears a black shalvar and supports the poshu (the traditional scarf that also connotes liberation of the Kurds from the oppression of the Turkish state), but his identity is irrelevant to the narrative" (Colin 2008: 93). The same year Reis Çelik made *Işıklar Sönmesin/Let There Be Light* (1996), which focused more directly on the Kurdish conflict via the metaphorical story of a PKK guerrilla and a Turkish soldier marooned in the mountains after the avalanche fall that kills all the other members of both groups during a shootout. Yet despite being a bold attempt in terms of its subject matter, the political stance of the film and its representation of both the Turkish soldiers and the Kurdish guerrillas was criticised by Turks and Kurds alike (Colin 2008).

Güneşe Yolculuk/Journey to the Sun (1999, Yeşim Ustaoğlu) is a landmark in Turkey in terms of the representation of the Kurdish issue on screen, for the complexity of its narrative, providing a multi-layered depiction of the Kurdish issue, for its positioning of Kurdish characters within a socio-political context, for its sympathetic treatment of the Kurdish experience, and for its counter-official stance and peace-seeking approach to the conflict. Director Ustaoğlu defines the film as "the product of ten years of feeling guilt for living in this society and keeping silent" (Colin 2008: 97). The film is set in İstanbul and tells the story of three people: working-class Mehmet, who is actually a Turkish guy from west end of Turkey but looks Kurdish because of

his dark skin, his working class girlfriend Arzu, and Berzan, a Kurdish guy who has fled from his hometown in the Kurdish region to Istanbul and who is actively involved in the Kurdish political movement. When Berzan gets murdered by the Turkish police during a demonstration, his friend Mehmet embarks upon a 'journey to the sun', towards the Kurdish region, to take his friend's coffin to his Kurdish village, yet only to find out that there is no village left. *Journey to the Sun* is an outstanding film in the history of cinema in Turkey not only for its political treatment of the issue of discrimination against the Kurds, but also because it was the first film to feature the Kurdish language.

Ustaoğlu's film was released in 1999, just after the PKK leader Öcalan was captured, and, no distributor was found who was willing to distribute this film during a time when the Turkish nationalist upsurge was so strong. Ustaoğlu comments that "a film which dealt with the issue of ignorance was completely ignored" (Ustaoğlu 2014), as the media, national film festivals, and the industry all blocked out the film, as she recalls. The film was even removed from the programmes of festivals abroad through the coercion of the Turkish state. However, in time *Journey to the Sun* turned into a cult movie in Turkey. It played a key role in breaking the silence, encouraging a new generation of filmmakers to address the Kurdish issue, and even inspired the emergence of Kurdish filmmaking in Turkey.

Another prominent film is *Büyük Adam Küçük Aşk/Hejar* (2001, Handan İpekçi), made by another left-wing female Turkish filmmaker two years after *Journey to the Sun*. The main characters of the film are a retired judge who evidently represents the Kemalist power elite and a little Kurdish girl, Hejar, who sneaks into the judge's house when the police raid the neighbour's apartment opposite in search of some members of a revolutionary organisation. As all the people in the house get killed during the raid, the judge is left with this Kurdish girl who does not speak any Turkish. The film draws an allegorical picture of the policy of denial towards Kurdish identity through the difficult relationship between a hard-line Kemalist and an innocent yet stubborn Kurdish kid and the language barrier between them. In one scene, the judge takes Hejar out shopping, and when an acquaintance tries, without success, to make conversation with the little girl, the judge breaks in saying "She does not speak Turkish". The acquaintance asks with surprise, "How come? Is she

not Turkish?". The judge's contemplative silence hints at the conflicts embedded in the Kemalist understanding of the Kurds as Turks. *Hejar* is a story about "the Turks who cannot speak Turkish", "the Turks who don't look like Turks", and "the real Turks" who do not know what to do with them. And, like *Journey to the Sun*, *Hejar* stands out as a notable example where a Turkish filmmaker sympathetic to the Kurdish perspective tackles the issue by undermining the dominant Turkish interpretation of the Kurdish conflict. Even though *Hejar* was initially funded by the Turkish Ministry of Culture, it was then banned by the Ministry "for violating the principle of the indivisible integrity of the state" by "highlighting Kurdish nationalism and portraying Turkish police in a derogatory manner", and director İpekçi was brought to trial for "insulting the police" (Colin 2008: 101-102).

Uğur Yücel's *Yazı Tura/Toss Up* (2004) is also noteworthy as an example of attempts by left-wing liberal Turkish filmmakers to address the Kurdish issue on screen, before the emergence of Kurdish filmmakers. It tells the story of two young Turkish men returning home after completing their obligatory military service in Southeast Turkey, the Kurdish region, one of them with a missing leg and the other one with hearing loss due to the war. Deploying a narrative similar to that of the generic anti-war narratives of the Vietnam films of Hollywood, *Toss Up* takes a critical stance towards the war not by focusing on the Kurdish experience, but on the post-war traumas of the Turkish soldiers who have taken an active role in the war, in the front line of the Turkish military. Yet although this narrative approach to war has been widely criticised in the case of the Vietnam films, it was a significant first attempt in the case of Turkey, given that the war experiences of the private soldiers remained an unspoken issue in Turkey up until recent times. The only way Turkish soldiers appeared in the media was in the news as 'martyrs'. In this sense, Turkish soldiers have been un-represented and over-represented at the same time; the over-representation of the image of martyrs' coffins silenced the ones who were still alive and had stories to share with the public. For instance, when Nadire Mater's (2005) collection of interviews with forty-two ex-soldiers, who had done their military service in southeast Turkey between 1994 and 1998, were compiled in a book in 1999, Mater was charged with 'insulting and belittling the military' and the book was banned. As this famous incident also shows, it was not only Kurdish people whose voice was completely silenced for decades, but also the soldiers who had

'encountered' the Kurds in the 'state of emergency region' within a war scenario. And, in this regard, *Toss Up* was a significant first attempt as it addressed a taboo subject in Turkey.

Overall, it is striking that before the emergence of Kurdish films, we find only a handful of films that have directly addressed the Kurdish issue, attempted to break the ban over speaking on the Kurdish issue in cinema and narrated stories that contrast with the dominant narration of the Kurdish issue. Though, few as they are, the films addressed here stand as influential examples making way for future filmmakers to treat the Kurdish issue in cinema.

The Emergence of Kurdish Films in Turkey in the late 1990s

Although Kurdish films gained recognition and public visibility in Turkey mainly from 2009 onwards, that is, after the launch of the Kurdish Initiative, Kurdish filmmaking in Turkey actually dates back to the mid-1990s. The initial development of Kurdish filmmaking in Turkey had strong ties with the Kurdish movement. Kurdish political struggle against oppression and assimilation, which grew stronger in the 1990s and reinforced the sense of community amongst the Kurdish people in Turkey, politicised Kurdish identity, cultivated Kurdish political awakening, and is no doubt one of the most prominent factors behind the emergence of Kurdish films. Kurdish director Mizgin Müjde Arslan emphasises this link in stating that the emergence of Kurdish films in the 1990s was "contingent on the Kurdish political movement" (Koçer 2014: 482). Another prominent Kurdish filmmaker Kazım Öz explains his understanding of the relationship between the Kurdish movement and Kurdish arts in general as follows:

> All Kurdish cultural and artistic activities in Turkey have risen on the foundation laid by the Kurdish movement. In this sense the Kurdish experience is different than others. For example, Kurdish literature did not inspire the Kurdish movement. On the contrary, the Kurdish movement set the ground for Kurdish literature. [...] Therefore, Kurdish cultural and artistic activities thrived in the period when the Kurdish political movement thrived. That does not mean that these two will always go in parallel. [...] However, at

this stage, when the very basic problems of the Kurdish people, even the language issue, remain unsolved, the artists and intellectuals naturally have to act in unison with the Kurdish movement". (Öz 2011)

The role of the Kurdish movement in the development of Kurdish filmmaking was not limited to its political influence; the movement in fact played a more direct and active role in the process. The first Kurdish films in Turkey were products of the political vision of the Kurdish movement to maintain, foster and institutionalise Kurdish culture. As discussed in the previous chapter, in the 1990s, the PKK's political influence had created a Kurdish mass movement in Turkey and the Kurdish political struggle had expanded into the legal-democratic sphere through various institutions and organisations, most of them directly linked to the Kurdish political movement via organic relationships, and some indirectly via political proximity and a bond of communion. The Mesopotamia Culture Center (MKM) was amongst these institutions; a centre established in 1992 with the aspiration of maintaining Kurdish culture and cultivating Kurdish cultural and artistic practices. In 1995, a cinema unit (Mesopotamia Cinema Collective) was formed as a branch under the MKM. Politically active young Kurds with an interest in filmmaking gathered in this cinema unit at the İstanbul branch of the MKM and they participated in workshops offered by some left-wing filmmakers. Initially, Mesopotamia Cinema Collective produced a number of short films as part of the training. Also, a group of attendees at this cinema unit formed part of the film crew of *Journey to the Sun*, which gave them the opportunity of gaining professional experience. Some of the most well-known filmmakers of the 2000s who focused on the Kurdish issue in their films emerged out of the Mesopotamia Cinema Collective, such as Kazım Öz, Hüseyin Karabey, Özkan Küçük, and Özcan Alper. Mustafa Gündoğdu, who later founded the first Kurdish film festival in London and became a prominent figure in the rise of the Kurdish cinema, was also a member of this cinema unit.

Mustafa Gündoğdu remarks that the idea behind the Mesopotamia Cinema Collective was "to train people interested in cinema to become a new generation of Kurdish filmmakers and to make films about the Kurds and their struggle for recognition and equal rights" (Gündoğdu 2010: 20). Kazım Öz explains that the main aim of this cinema unit was "supporting the formation of a Kurdish cinema by training its cadres" (Öz 2011). As these statements of the members of the Mesopotamia Cinema

Collective also clearly indicate, there was a certain political will behind the emergence of Kurdish films in Turkey, rather than artistic motivations. In this sense, we must underline the fact that the Kurdish filmmaking experience in Turkey initially emerged as an appendage of the Kurdish political struggle and as an implementation of the political vision of the Kurdish movement to create the cultural tools for favouring Kurdish culture, strengthening Kurdish identity, propagating Kurdish political interests, and legitimising the Kurdish struggle.

The first film by the Mesopotamia Cinema Collective to be released was a short film called *Ax/The Land* (1999, Kazım Öz) which tells the story of an old man who has persisted in staying in his village after the village had been evacuated by the Turkish military and who lives all alone with the memories of his village before it was destroyed. The journey of *The Land* itself in fact summarises the difficult conditions in which the Mesopotamia Cinema Collective produced and distributed their films. Director Öz (2008) relates that they originally wanted to shoot the film in a village in Dersim, in the Kurdish region, though it was not easy because of the ongoing war and strict military controls. The crew first attempted to enter the village by attending a funeral, but Turkish soldiers showed up at the funeral, checking everyone's identity cards, and bombarding the film crew with questions. After this experience they realised the impossibility of filming in the Kurdish region and found a Turkish village in central Anatolia. However, they never told the villagers the actual subject matter of the film. When the film was completed, it was selected for the Short Film Competition of the Milano Film Festival. Not having the financial resources, they sent a 16 mm copy of the film with a woman from the Mesopotamia Centre circle, who was to travel to Milano. "Next day it was in the news: A PKK courier captured at the airport with a mysterious 16mm film" (Öz 2008), Öz recalls, and notes that the woman carrying the film was arrested on suspicion of supporting the PKK. When they eventually managed to send *The Land* to the festival, it won the Best Short Film Award. However, the film was rejected by the Ankara Film Festival in Turkey. One of the members of that year's selection committee, Mahmut Tali Öngören, later published an article in *Milliyet Sanat* magazine disclosing that in 1999 the festival had complied with the state directive dictating that the festival was not to showcase *The Land*. After the Ankara Film Festival's rejection of the film, *The Land* was

banned by the Ministry of Culture and director Kazım Öz was put on trial for his film.

Starting from *The Land*, all films produced by Mesopotamia Cinema have been subject to diverse facets of censorship. Therefore, these first Kurdish films never had the opportunity of obtaining a wide audience in Turkey. However, they became widely known and gained acclaim amongst the Kurdish political community. Kazım Öz became a leading figure, inspiring future Kurdish filmmakers as a new Kurdish *auteur* winning prestigious awards at various international film festivals. And, we can say that these first Kurdish films did break the ban over speaking on the Kurdish issue even though they were banned. The Kurdish voice was now out there on screen, although still within banned films, which nevertheless speak from the Kurdish perspective and boldly articulate Kurdish political interests in cinema for the first time.

Kurdish Filmmaking and the Revival of Cinema in Turkey in the 2000s

The actual rise of Kurdish films in Turkey, their dramatic emergence in public sphere, and their encounter with large audiences nationwide took place in the 2000s. The international growth of Kurdish filmmaking and the recognition of the notion of Kurdish cinema worldwide no doubt had a certain influence on the emergence of Kurdish films in Turkey. Kurdish films emerging from Turkey are interrelated with the birth of the transnational Kurdish cinema phenomenon in the sense that they benefited from the same developments that generated the rise of Kurdish films worldwide. Various statements by Kurdish filmmakers from Turkey demonstrate their excitement about the birth of the concept of Kurdish cinema, their close interest in Kurdish directors from other countries, their admiration for the international successes of Bahman Ghobadi, as well as the encouraging impact of the growing Kurdish film festivals in various cities in the world on their own filmmaking experience. In this sense, Kurdish films from Turkey are a part of, and in touch with, the emergent Kurdish cinema as a transnational phenomenon.

On the other hand, however, the rise of Kurdish films in Turkey is also an outcome of the general revival of cinema in Turkey in the 2000s. After the decline of Yeşilçam in the 1980s and its break-up in the 1990s, the film industry in Turkey experienced some years of stagnation. Yet, from the mid-1990s onwards, cinema in Turkey "began to reconfigure both its financial and narrative strategies in an effort to revive and reinvent itself after the collapse of Yesilçam" (Köstepen 2009a: 6). And in the 2000s cinema in Turkey started to flourish with the growth of both commercial films and also politically and artistically ambitious independent films. A new generation of filmmakers took to the stage in these years and their films attracted interest in Turkey and also gained international acclaim through international film festivals, which gave rise to the phenomenon of 'New Turkish Cinema'. Growing opportunities for film funding (mainly funds granted by the Turkish Ministry of Culture and Eurimages funds) played a significant role in the revival of cinema in Turkey as they enabled a space for independent filmmaking. As Enis Köstepen remarks, the diversity of the emergent independent films in Turkey "signifies the growth of a space for filmmaking in Turkey independent from commercial pressures" (Köstepen 2009b: 6). And Kurdish films in Turkey came out in this new era of filmmaking in Turkey; they benefited from the overall revival of the film industry, the new opportunities for film funding, the space for independent filmmaking, the growing audience interest in domestic films, as well as the considerable media interest in newly emergent domestic films.

One of the notable phenomena in this new era of filmmaking in Turkey was the "steady increase in the number of films touching on political issues" (Göl 2007: 27). And that involves both "individual efforts by independent directors focusing on Turkey's unresolved issues, and mainstream political films" (ibid: 23). As Gökçe and Onaran suggest, in recent years, with the emergence of a new generation of filmmakers in Turkey, "perhaps the most significant cinematic voices came to be heard, responding to the manifold character of contemporary politics and social traumas that had previously remained untreated in artistic production" (Gökçe and Onaran 2007: 30). Asuman Suner (2010) dedicates one chapter of her book on "new Turkish cinema" to the study of this salient tendency. In analysing a group of recent films in Turkey which she labels as "new political films", she writes, "new political cinema overtly tackles history and politics. New political films typically focus

attention on how the lives of ordinary people have been destroyed by the turbulent political climate of Turkey during the recent past" (Suner 2010: 53). On the other hand, Enis Köstepen addresses this new dynamic with regards to audience interest and argues that "the choice of political subject matter has also enabled these directors and films to address a larger audience within Turkey" (2009b: 8). Pointing at the box office success of some of the contemporary political films in Turkey, he concludes that "a successful match between thoughtful film language and relevant political issues can attract a larger domestic audience than previously was expected from independent films" (ibid: 9). Looking at this picture, we can regard Kurdish films as part of the apparent tendency in contemporary filmmaking in Turkey to tackle some significant political issues and address some uncomfortable political events of recent history.

In sum, Kurdish films in Turkey benefited from the diverse yet contemporaneous dynamics of both the growth of Kurdish cinema worldwide and the revival of cinema in Turkey in the 2000s. Hence we can say that the concurrence of these two developments goes to explain how Kurdish films from Turkey quickly came to be the most competent and productive component of Kurdish cinema worldwide. Though due to this double alignment that has been at work since their inception, the definition of Kurdish films in Turkey always oscillates between the two axes under the influence of everyday politics and this oscillation is one of the main issues that will be interrogated in the following sections.

The Public Exposure of Kurdish Films after the 'Kurdish Opening'

Apart from the national and transnational cinematic dynamics addressed above, it was also the political transformation in Turkey which played a crucial role in the rise of Kurdish films specifically in Turkey. The launch of the Kurdish Opening in 2009 in particular marks the beginning of a new era for Kurdish films in Turkey. From 2009 onwards Turkey witnessed what we can certainly call a boom of Kurdish films, in reference not only to the growth of Kurdish films in number, but also to the

extraordinary public interest they received, to their sudden and dramatic rise in the public sphere.

After 2009, all prominent national film festivals of Turkey started to feature a number of Kurdish films in their programmes each year. Within a few years, Kurdish film festivals also started to be launched (e.g. Amed Film Festival in Diyarbakır, Yılmaz Güney Film Festival in Batman, and Lake Van Film Festival in Van), alongside many small-scale local film events focusing on Kurdish films organised in various Kurdish cities, mostly with the support of Kurdish municipalities. The previously mentioned book on Kurdish cinema (Arslan, 2009) was published in 2009 and the first ever conference on Kurdish Cinema was organised in Diyarbakır, again in 2009. Kurdish films began to be highlighted, discussed and recommended widely in mainstream newspapers and on TV channels, the screenings of Kurdish films at national film festivals and the audience reactions they received became a fixed element in the media coverage of those annual festivals, film magazines gave wide coverage to Kurdish films and even published special issues dedicated to the Kurdish cinema debate. Shortly after the launch of the Kurdish Opening, in 2010, If Istanbul Film Festival showcased a special programme of Kurdish films with the help of Mustafa Gündoğdu from the LKFF and called the programme 'The Opening'. They also hosted a panel with the participation of some Kurdish filmmakers and Mustafa Gündoğdu discussing Kurdish cinema and the Kurdish Opening. The following year If Istanbul continued to feature Kurdish films, this time under a bolder title: 'The Ones in the Mountains'. Thus as all these developments manifest, following the launch of the Kurdish Opening, Kurdish films suddenly turned into a significant cinematic (and political) phenomenon in Turkey.

The first and most observable impact on Kurdish films of the political transformation discussed in Chapter 3 was that the shift in official policy to some extent freed Kurdish filmmaking from the constraints of censorship and oppression. The new political climate in Turkey enabled the production and exhibition of films that directly engaged with the Kurdish conflict from the Kurdish point of view and that explicitly featured Kurdish identity and culture as well as the Kurdish language. Shortly after its launch, director Mizgin Müjde Arslan interpreted the significance of the Kurdish Opening for Kurdish filmmaking in the following words:

I believe this process will have a positive impact. [...] Already Kurdish cinema has been featured at three big festivals of the country. When I made my first short film three years ago, it did not have any dialogues, because I wasn't sure about what language to use. My following films were in Kurdish, but then the question was how and where to show them. Now Kurdish language films have the opportunities of exhibition, and this will encourage more Kurdish language films. (Arslan 2009c)

The statements of Sedat Yılmaz on the other hand demonstrate how the launch of the Kurdish Opening shifted the conditions of Kurdish filmmaking in a flash. Yılmaz is the director of *Press* (2010), a feature film that deals with the subject of state control over the Kurdish press. The story centres on a group of Kurdish journalists who are constantly exposed to threats, raids, assaults and even assassinations, because they work for *Özgür Gündem*, the daily Kurdish newspaper of the 1990s that reported the state atrocities and human right abuses in the Kurdish region. Yılmaz remarks that they had actually completed the production of *Press* in 2008, but it was not released until 2010 due to the political atmosphere, and, he also says;

When we were working on the project, we did not even consider applying to the Ministry of Culture for funding. We would not have any chance to get any funding anyway. Besides, it would be like grassing on ourselves for making such a film. [...] Whereas, whilst applying to the ministry for getting licence for the Altın Portakal Film Festival screening of *Press* in 2010, this time we had no worries. The film was the same, but Turkey was different. (Yılmaz 2011a)

Yet the significance of the political transformation was not limited to the loosening of the censorship regarding representations on screen of Kurdish identity, Kurdish language and Kurdish political interests. The 'New Turkey' not only enabled Kurdish films to be made, but it spotlighted them. From 2009 onwards Kurdish films started to be widely publicised with reference to the political debates on the new Kurdish policy. Exactly in the days when the launch of the Kurdish Opening had spawned an intense public debate and the Kurdish issue occupied the whole country's political agenda, Kurdish films took the stage and received profound media interest, to the point that they turned into a big and widely debated artistic and political phenomenon, making their mark on film culture in Turkey. They were widely put forward as evidence of democratization and the designation 'Kurdish

film' was deployed as a discursive instrument for its potential of contributing to the acclimatisation of the society to the shifts in official Kurdish policy. Hence, for the first time in the history, the political dynamics of the Kurdish conflict smoothed the way for the development of Kurdish films, instead of blocking their way.

In 2009, Antalya Golden Orange Film Festival, the oldest and one of the most significant film festivals in Turkey, included two Kurdish films in the National Competition for the first time; the documentary film *İki Dil Bir Bavul/On the Way to School* (2009, Özgür Doğan and Orhan Eskiköy) and *Min Dit/The Children of Diyarbakır* (2009, Miraz Bezar), a Kurdish language feature film. The media showed huge interest in the selection of these two films in the national competition of Altın Portakal. They reported this occurrence by contextualising it with reference to the Kurdish Opening with headlines such as 'Kurdish Opening in Cinema', 'The Altın Portakal 'Opening'', 'The 'Opening' on Silver Screen', etc. And, within this discourse, *The Children of Diyarbakır* was publicised everywhere as "the first ever Kurdish language film". Yet this was not entirely true; preceding *The Children of Diyarbakır*, there had been documentary films and short films made in Turkey in the Kurdish language (e.g. the films produced by the Mesopotamia Cinema Collective), and, there were also fiction films that partly featured the Kurdish language (e.g. *The Journey to the Sun*, or *Photograph*), though those films never had the chance to enjoy any media attention and they had been blocked out if not directly censored. As in the case of the presentation of *The Children of Diyarbakır* as the first ever Kurdish language film, the general media coverage of the new Kurdish films completely dismissed the former examples and treated the Kurdish films of 2009 as if they had come out of nowhere and thus historically decontextualised them. After all, the Kurdish Opening process needed its 'firsts'. Hence, whilst some Kurdish circles and institutions narrated the history of Kurdish films from their own perspective, another history of Kurdish films started to be written for the Turkish public in the early days of the Kurdish Opening.

A Conceptual Shift: From 'Turkish Cinema' to '*Türkiye Sineması*'

Some films called 'Kurdish films' taking part in the *national* competition of a Turkish film festival stimulated questions as to what 'national cinema' meant (and what it should mean) in the case of Turkey. The recognition of *The Children of Diyarbakır* and *On the Way to School* as 'national films', despite their identification as Kurdish films and despite for example needing Turkish subtitles to be screened at a national film festival in Turkey, was something that confused the definition of Turkish national cinema. Public reverberations of Kurdish films gaining visibility in Turkey explicitly demonstrate how Kurdish films put pressure on the notion of Turkish cinema in terms of the possibility/impossibility of national cinema. In this regard, the concept of 'Kurdish cinema' emerged in Turkey not only as a question, but also as a questioner, inasmuch as its existence complicated and disconcerted the notion of 'Turkish cinema' and the question of how to define Kurdish cinema inevitably put forth the necessity of redefining Turkish cinema.

Kurdish films challenged 'Turkish cinema' not only in the present day, but historically as well, as the case of Yılmaz Güney best demonstrates. As discussed earlier, one fundamental pillar of Kurdish collective efforts towards the construction of Kurdish cinema has been writing the history of Kurdish cinema. And, within this history-writing, Yılmaz Güney has been re-discovered and reclaimed as a Kurdish filmmaker. This claim has been built not only within and through writings on Kurdish cinema either; for example, Kurdish film festivals in Turkey have been giving special awards in memory of Yılmaz Güney and Kurdish filmmakers have been repeatedly referring to him as their biggest source of inspiration and dedicating their awards to him. What brings Yilmaz Güney's Kurdish identity as a filmmaker and the traces of Kurdishness in his films to the public's attention today is the fact that Kurdish films of the present seek their own history; they aspire to find their ancestors, their *auteurs* in the past. Yet the struggle of Kurdish cinema to find and claim its distinct identity and history creates a rupture in the history of Turkish cinema.

Yılmaz Güney used to be known as aprominent 'Turkish filmmaker' up until the recent emergence of Kurdish films in Turkey. Even in academic studies, which actually acknowledged his Kurdish identity, Güney was regarded without hesitation as a 'Turkish filmmaker'. For example, Hamid Naficy refers to him as a "Turkish exile director", despite in the same breath analysing his "desire for an independent Kurdish homeland yet to come" in the textual strategies of *The Way* (Naficy 2001: 184). Another example can be found in Asuman Suner's book where she writes, "*The Way* is most arguably the most internationally acclaimed Turkish film ever made to date" (Suner 2010: 5). Yet it would be now impossible to imagine any scholarly writing on Yılmaz Güney that would name him as a 'Turkish filmmaker' with no note of hesitation, with no acknowledgement of the debates regarding his identity, dismissing Kurdish efforts to reclaim him as a 'Kurdish filmmaker'. Thus, as the example of the reinterpretation of Güney's persona as a filmmaker, and re-identification of his cinema show, the struggle of Kurdish cinema to define itself creates a rupture in Turkish cinema history.

Following debates triggered by Kurdish films regarding the present and the past, the concept of 'Turkish cinema' eventually came to be reconsidered. The tendency of questioning the legitimacy of the designation of Turkish cinema is evident in the discourses of film criticism and academic film studies, where we can observe efforts to seek, deploy and theorise alternative concepts to avoid and replace the concept of Turkish cinema. Although concepts like 'domestic cinema', or 'local cinema' also appeared in cinema writing from 2009 onwards, the prevailing alternative concept has been *Türkiye Sineması* (Cinema in/of Turkey), and, within a few years this concept came to be the established substitution for 'Turkish cinema'. As explained in the previous chapter, *Türkiyelilik* is a notion thatrepresents a civic understanding of national identity in Turkey and that was deployed by Tayyip Erdoğan in an attempt to find a new formulation of nationality that would not exclude Kurdish identity. Thus, *Türkiye Sineması* is a direct adaptation of this civic definition of national identity into the identification of films; a new concept coined for referring to films from Turkey without making any reference to Turkish ethnicity; a discursive solution against the oppressive and exclusive connotations signalled in the concept of Turkish cinema. In this sense, we see that, especially from 2009 onwards, political debates

over the definition of national identity in Turkey started to be regenerated in the national cinema debate, in a quite direct manner.

The monthly cinema magazine *Altyazı* prepared a series of books and booklets for different film events and festivals abroad that featured film selections from Turkey and articles in these publications provide some of the few in-depth studies of contemporary filmmaking in Turkey. Yet the conceptual shift observed in the titles of these books with similar contents edited by the same magazine within the time span of only a few years reflects the conceptual ambiguities cinema writing experienced in those years. The first of these books, which was published in 2007, was entitled 'Turkish Cinema Now' (Gökçe 2007) and the next one was published in 2009 with the title of 'Young Turkish Cinema' (Aytaç and Onaran 2009a). Whereas the next one that came out in the second half of 2009 was called 'New Cinema from Turkey' (Aytaç and Onaran 2009b), and the following book prepared for the Cannes Film Festival was entitled 'Cinema Turkey: New Times, New Tendencies' (Yücel and Onaran 2011). The editors explain the choice of title in the following words:

> We preferred to call this book 'Cinema Turkey' rather than 'Turkish Cinema', since the 2000s have become the first period in the country's history during which filmmaking became relatively democratic and much more representative than ever before. This title signals many things at once: the wave of independent films made with low budgets and digital cameras; the rise of new filmmakers based in cities other than İstanbul [...] and their productions that spread filmmaking practices to a wider geography; the increase in the visibility of films made by minorities reflecting their specific issues through their own voice and perspective, especially the emergence of Kurdish directors who just recently gained the relative freedom to shoot films in their own language; and last but not least, the new wave of documentary filmmaking, which directly and more or less spontaneously points to sociopolitical issues of the times, with cameras scanning a much wider scene (politically and geographically) than ever before. (2011: 4)

We can observe the same conceptual shift in the academic literature as well. Once regarded as a legitimate concept used without much hesitation, 'Turkish cinema' has recently started to be problematized and undermined in scholarly writing. For example, Asuman Suner's book entitled *New Turkish Cinema* (2010) was published in what can be considered as the transition years of the conceptual shift in question. Despite questioning the category of national cinema in general, Suner still uses the

concept of Turkish cinema and despite focusing on some Kurdish issue themed films under the title of "new political films", she does not feel the need to mention the concept of 'Kurdish film' in this book. Yet, in the conclusion of the chapter on "new political films", she acknowledges the problems inherent in the concept of 'Turkish cinema' in a brief note:

> These films certainly pose unsettling questions about national belonging and identity. In fact, they challenge the very notion of 'Turkish cinema' as a classifactory designation because of the emphasis on 'Turkishness' it entails. 'The cinema of Turkey', I believe, is a more fitting designation for these films, since it places the emphasis not so much on 'Turkishness' as ethnic identity, but on Turkey as a geographical entity and a locus of divergent ethnic, religious, and, cultural identities. (Suner 2010: 74-75)

On the other hand, Savaş Arslan's book published a few years after Suner's, puts the problematisation of the concept of Turkish cinema at the heart of his study and suggests replacing it with concepts like "cinema of Turkey', or, 'cinema in Turkey' which gives his book its title. He draws attention to the necessity of a conceptual shift in the following words:

> In view of this plurality and multiplicity, it is no longer appropriate to conceive of contemporary cinema in Turkey as the new *Turkish* cinema. Instead, a more apt term would be *the new cinema of Turkey.* [...]Following the rapid transformation of society since the 1990s, the new cinema of Turkey is heterogeneous, reflecting a multitude of voices and viewpoints. Unlike Yeşilçam, the new cinema of Turkey is no longer limited by a narrowly defined notion of 'Turkishness'. (Arslan 2011: 95)

These debates also led to a change in the title of the only local annual film studies conference in Turkey. Organised since 1998, this conference for many years used to be called 'New Directions in Turkish Cinema Studies'. However, after some arguments that took place during the panels from 2010 onwards, the title of the conference was eventually changed in 2013 by replacing the word 'Turkish' with 'Turkey'.

The use of the newly coined concept of *Türkiye Sineması* was not limited to academic and intellectual circles either; it circulated widely and was debated in the popular media as well. And as this new term became widespread, it started to trigger

debates. In 2014, Nuri Bilge Ceylan won the Golden Palm at the Cannes Film Festival for his film *Kış Uykusu/Winter Sleep*. At the ceremony he dedicated the award to "the young people in Turkey and those who lost their lives in the last year", alluding to the Gezi protests. This speech provoked quite an unpredictable debate in Turkey. Ceylan had delivered his speech in English and the phrase of "young people in Turkey" he used in his speech was widely translated into Turkish as '*Türk gençleri*', meaning '*Turkish* youth'. The arguments about what he actually said and how exactly it translates into Turkish turned into a debate on 'Turkishness' and on the hesitation over using the designation 'Turkish'. What added another layer to these arguments was that Ceylan had symbolically clenched his fist whilst receiving the award, just as the Kurdish filmmaker Yılmaz Güney had famously done in receiving the Golden Palm for *The Way* back in 1982. The news that Ceylan had received the Golden Palm was reported on the web page of *Altyazı* magazine where Ceylan was mentioned as *Türkiyeli yönetmen*, meaning director from/of Turkey, which is a concept that has been used in line with *Türkiye Sineması*, as a replacement for *Türk yönetmen* (Turkish director). The web page received numerous heated reader comments arguing with each other and reflecting the confusions regarding concepts of Turk/Turkish, Turkish Cinema/Cinema of Turkey, sub-identity/supra-identity, nationality/ethnicity, with reference to both Güney and Ceylan. Thus, Ceylan's *Winter Sleep* unpredictably turned into something that revealed the political confusions, disturbances and conflicts that have been dominating the recent public agenda in Turkey, despite having no relevance to these issues in the film text.

In 2014, the Altın Portakal Film Festival witnessed a shocking debate on this conceptual shift. At the award ceremony Ertem Göreç, one of the prominent directors of Yeşilçam cinema, made a speech and said "Nowadays they call Turkish cinema *Türkiye Sineması*. If someone's name is Ahmet, can you call him Mehmet?" and shockingly he continued with foul language addressing the ones using *Türkiye Sineması*. Yet, following this speech, a Kurdish film, *Annemin Şarkısı/Song of My Mother* (2014, Erol Mintaş) received awards in four categories, including the Best Debut award. While receiving the awards, Kurdish filmmaker Erol Mintaş responded to Göreç: "Yes, we say *Türkiye Sineması*, because we imagine a new Turkey in the 2000s. And, we will hereafter persistently continue to use the term *Türkiye Sineması*".

Although *Türkiye sineması* has started to be widely deployed in academic writing and favoured as a substitution for Turkish cinema, from a theoretical point of view, it is also laden with ambiguities, and it fails to escape the questions discrediting any conceptualisation alluding to a national cinema. Thus, film scholar Canan Balan, for instance, assesses the expedience of *Türkiye sineması* with reference to the familiar arguments addressed in Chapter 2 undermining the validity of national cinema, and she concludes that *Türkiye sineması* offers no potential to overcome the problems inherent in Turkish cinema (Balan 2011).

Like Erol Mintaş, Kurdish filmmakers in general embraced the term *Türkiye Sineması*, the majority expressing their preference for this term over Turkish cinema. However, this categorisation has never been totally free of confusions and controversies either. For example, when asked about how he feels about the use of *Türkiye Sineması*, Kazım Öz first says, "It is a more democratic term at least in comparison to Turkish cinema", but then he continues; "Though I still question whether it is just another term that still refers to the nation-state" (Öz 2011b). Overall, favouring *Türkiye Sineması* is in line with the recently modified political vision of the Kurdish political movement which no longer aspires to independence but articulates a will for living together within a democratised Turkey where Kurdish identity and the democratic rights of the Kurds as a community are recognised. However, as explained in the previous chapter, the peace process has never been free of doubts, frustrations, conflicts and showdowns. And, the ever-changing political dynamics of the peace process, the ups and downs of the process, and the fluctuation of Kurdish people between hope and grievance are reflected in the issue of the designation of Kurdish films. Thus, while the concept of *Türkiye Sineması* is generally favoured by Kurdish filmmakers, at times when conflicts prevail over faith in peace, dissonant voices are heard approaching this term with suspicion.

On the other hand, while the concept of Turkish cinema lost its legitimacy for a large section of film-related circles, it did not simply fall into disuse. Now, Turkish Cinema, Kurdish cinema and *Türkiye Sineması* are all used in Turkey, by different agents, in certain contexts, at different times. They all continue to circulate despite the ambiguities they bear, they are all marked by the process of the political

transformations in Turkey, and they are all subject to power struggles and political debates. And diverse reactions towards these concepts, favouring or disfavouring them, mirror the reactions towards the policy change over the Kurdish conflict.

The Politics of the Definition of Kurdish Films in Turkey

While the defining characteristics of Kurdish cinema in general have always been full of ambiguities, the debates on the identification of Kurdish films in Turkey in particular involved some political criteria, specifically as a result of the political context of 2000s Turkey. The controversial case of *Güneşi Gördüm/I Saw the Sun* (2009, Mahsun Kırmızıgül) is a noteworthy example that demonstrates the politics of the definition of Kurdish films.

Kırmızıgül is originally a famous Arabesque singer who recently launched out on a career in filmmaking. His second film *I Saw the Sun* actually comprises certain Kurdish elements; the ethnicity of the director is Kurdish, the subject matter is the Kurdish conflict, the focus is on the suffering of the Kurdish people, the film location is in the Kurdish region, and although the language of the film is Turkish, the Kurdish language is featured in certain scenes with symbolic significance. However, despite ticking many boxes in terms of the range of criteria suggested in identifying Kurdish films, there has been a wide debate arguing against the identification of *I Saw the Sun* as a Kurdish film.

The first Kurdish cinema book included an article on *I Saw the Sun*, where Arslan criticised the representation of the state atrocities in the film. She claimed that the unrealistic scene where the Turkish soldiers politely request the Kurdish peasants to evacuate their village is sufficient to judge the political stance of the film (Arslan 2009b: 312). She further argued that Kırmızıgül relies on the few Kurdish words that he drops in to impress the Kurdish audience, but, she writes, "Those times are over when Kurds would start crying when they hear just one word of Kurdish. Kurds are now making films in Kurdish. There are Kurdish film festivals organised all around the world" (ibid: 317). Criticising the film from the same perspective, Azad Koala

writes; "The Turkish soldier's lines shouting "Stop firing! They are peasants!" when he realises that the group of people tracked by the military helicopter are actually smuggling villagers might have pleased the high state officers, but it is a tragicomic scene for the people of the region who know the truth and who have witnessed thousands of JITEM murders" (Koala n.d.). Emphasising similar points, Çetin Baskın (2009) concludes that *I Saw the Sun* is based on a hollow discourse of brotherhood. Hence, a film that represents the Kurdish conflict from the Kurdish perspective, with a sympathetic treatment of the Kurdish experience and a peace-seeking approach, was widely denounced on the basis of its political approach towards the issue.

Discourses favouring the idea of 'Kurdishness as a political identity' instead of 'Kurdishness as an ethnic identity' with regards to the definition and evaluation of films operated the other way round as well. For example Sedat Yılmaz, the director of *Press* is actually not Kurdish, and neither is Özcan Alper, the director of *Gelecek Uzun Sürer/Future Lasts Forever* (2011). Yet these films are nevertheless regarded as Kurdish films on the basis of their political alignment. Consequently, as the case of *I Saw the Sun* demonstrates, each potential criterion to define Kurdish films carries with it deep complications, and the paramount significance of the political alignment of films (and filmmakers) can override, even nullify, all other criteria.

Conclusions

Insofar as the concept of Kurdish cinema correlates with the Kurdish people whose political status has been and is still subject to power struggles, the definition of Kurdish cinema has never been a mere theoretical issue. Thus in this chapter I examined the over-determination of politics in the identification, definition, construction and contextualisation of Kurdish cinema. As the politics of the Kurdish conflict is still under constant transformation, the debates regarding Kurdish cinema inevitably carry (and will continue to carry) the marks of the significant political developments that have occurred within this transformation. And since the theoretical ambiguity of 'Kurdish cinema' is the product of the ambiguity of the

status of the Kurds in today's world, a change in this political status could easily alter the identification and definition of 'Kurdish cinema'. Put simply, for instance if political developments happen to lead to the establishment of an independent Kurdistan in the future, then all current Kurdish films will undoubtedly be (re)historicized as the first examples of 'Kurdish national cinema' and the groundings of all the arguments discussed above would fundamentally change. However, in this chapter I have focused on analysing the current complexities, ambiguities and instabilities of Kurdish cinema with a particular focus on the socio-political reverberations of these questions specifically in the 2000s Turkey.

The emergence of Kurdish films puts pressure on the concept of Turkish national identity and Turkish cinema, on the one hand, from the subnational level, by questioning the very definition of Turkishness, while on the other hand from the transnational level, by being a part of transnational Kurdish cinema. Kurdish films in Turkey can be considered within the scope of *Türkiye sineması*, but at the same time they are connected with Kurdish films produced outside Turkey and thus they are a part of this distinct Kurdish cinema that transcends national borders. What makes Kurdish films from Turkey closer to one of these two concurrent dynamics is a matter of politics. When the Kurdish issue in Turkey moves forward to a solution for 'living together in peace', this encourages the dynamics of Kurdish films to be a part of the film culture in Turkey. In contrast, when the conflict runs deeper to the point of a deadlock, their potential for aligning with Kurdish films produced outside Turkey gains dominance. Hence, each act within the dynamism of the political context exerts force on Kurdish films, pulling and pushing them from one side to another.

Kurdish films in Turkey embody diverse dynamics and incorporate various forms of potential within them. As I investigated in this chapter, different political factors and various social actors encourage some of these dynamics, while repressing others. And because they emerged at a time of political turbulence in Turkey, it is particularly crucial to examine the socio-political dynamics and discourses that are shaping and reshaping the questions and answers about Kurdish films, in parallel with everyday politics regarding the Kurdish issue in Turkey. Observing the impact of these structuring and contextualising forces on Kurdish films is significant

because the complex debates regarding the concepts of Kurdish cinema, Turkish cinema and *Türkiye sineması* in fact mirror, reproduce and influence pressing political issues regarding national identity in Turkey. Thus, we can say that the conceptual arguments generated by Kurdish films had already driven forward intense direct dialogues between politics and cinema in Turkey in the 2000s before public debates arose concerning the political meanings and propositions of individual films.

CHAPTER 5:

POLITICS OF TEXT

Introduction

In this chapter, the focus of the attention of my research shifts from 'Kurdish cinema' to 'Kurdish films'. One dimension of exploring the interplay between 'film and politics' is the interpretation of Kurdish films as 'political films'. Kurdish films are 'political films' in the sense that they tackle politically significant issues in contemporary Turkey with the goal of taking an active part in political debates on the Kurdish issue, influencing the direction of the Kurdish conflict, and contributing to the peace-building process. Before moving onto the next chapter, where I discuss the public reception and the political contextualisation of the meanings of Kurdish films, and where I explore the social circulation and the political influence of these films, it is necessary to first understand the political character of these films. We need to first observe and contextualise the explicit meanings Kurdish films convey to their audience, in order to then interrogate what happens to those meanings once these films are out of the hands of their creators and they start to circulate in an overly politicised society.

What kind of issues do Kurdish films speak of when they gain access to the mechanisms of cinematic representation for the first time? What are the apparent political propositions of these films? Through their films, how do the filmmakers aspire to contribute to the peace-building process? Which hitherto unspoken historical issues are given primacy with the goal of joining the public debates on the Kurdish issue that started at the same time these films started to emerge? In responding to these questions, in this chapter I will focus on the salient themes, discourses, representations, and political propositions we find in Kurdish films. However, in doing so, I will refrain from performing a 'creative formal analysis', such as discovering some hidden meanings in these texts that would be discernible

only to professional film theoreticians, or suggesting alternative readings of these texts through close formal analysis. What I aim to accomplish in this chapter is to take some politically significant meanings in Kurdish films that are explicit and observable to the general public in Turkey, to the audience they address, and that have been central to the public debates these films triggered, and to interpret them with reference to the specificities of the political context in contemporary Turkey where they circulate. Or in other words, to analyse the textually evident political aspirations of these films with a particular interest in the complex intertextual dialogues between film and politics in a specific historical context.

One of the key observations that shapes this chapter is that in the case of Kurdish films in Turkey we can talk about convergences between 'past and present', 'reality and representation', and 'personal and social', and we can examine the political character of these films by focusing on these convergences. Following the decades-long ban over publicly addressing the Kurdish issue and narrating stories regarding a long-standing and harsh political conflict, Kurdish films embark upon 'revealing the historical truths regarding the Kurdish conflict' and suggest inextricable ties between the personal and social experiences in the history of the conflict.

Kurdish films emerged in a period of political transformation in which power struggles in the present to shape the future of the country centred upon the past, and national history has become an open narrative that is subject to political debates and contestations as never before. It was a dramatic shift, given that Turkish society used to be "frequently accused of being amnesiac" (Özyürek 2007: 3), or "used to suffer from a purposeful amnesia" (Kechriotis 2011: 101), or was even "considered an archetype of social amnesia" (Bakıner 2013: 697). Yet, the political transformation in the AKP era dramatically broke the traditional culture of 'amnesia' in Turkey and led to an "explosion of memory" (Bakıner 2013). As Schwartz et al. point out, "no society would go to the trouble to reconstruct its past had not some significant problem disrupted its normal pattern of living"; thus, it is the "periods of rapid change" when "new pasts are most likely to emerge" (1986: 150). Sune Haugbolle states that national memory is informed by "the disparities, catastrophes and traumas that cannot be captured by triumphant history and must, accordingly, be disseminated through less official channels" (2010: 8), and he writes, "in the aftermath of any

violent conflict, various master narratives are formed through which the past of different groups is understood, reinterpreted and incorporated into national history" (ibid: 27).

We can say that periods of discontinuities, ruptures, crises or transformations are generally times when the contestations over the national past most potently come to the surface. In Turkey, it was the AKP's project of eliminating old state actors and fundamentally restructuring the socio-political structure in Turkey which opened up to critique the pages of official national history that were written and strictly monitored by Kemalist elites. And, the Kurdish conflict was one of the most significant and controversial issues that urged a reinterpretation of the national past, and that dominated the memory wars in Turkey in the 2000s. Emerging in this period of political transformation, Kurdish films function as an unofficial channel for re-writing the history of the Kurds and the Kurdish issue in Turkey; they deploy Kurdish memories against the dominant historicisation of the Kurdish issue. Following the decades-old order of silence on the Kurdish issue, they dispute the official history by embarking upon telling the untold, showing the invisible, representing the unrepresented and documenting the suppressed through Kurdish memories that become public for the first time through film. Thus they build narratives that highlight the contrast and the tension between the Turkish state's history and the Kurdish people's memories. And, while narrating stories from an unspoken past in the days of memory wars in Turkey, these films build a certain claim of truth-telling; they seek ways to convince the audience that their version of the history of the Kurdish issue is the 'true version' among various other opposing narratives and conflicting interpretations. And in doing so, they enter into the realm of 'politics of memory' and 'politics of truth'.

What is particularly important for this research in this context is that the Kurdish films addressed in this study function as one of the major mediums of *publicising* Kurdish memories for the first time in Turkey; they render hitherto silenced Kurdish memories *publicly visible* and *publicly accessible*. Through Kurdish films, the Kurdish version of history in Turkey, and the Kurdish version of the truth regarding the conflict, become visible and available to the general public and compete with other versions to be the dominant narrative of the conflict. I attach importance

toMichael Schudson's notion of "available past" in this context; he writes, "Given that people choose from available past and that the available past is limited, are individuals free to choose as they wish? Far from it. There are a variety of ways in which the freedom to choose is constrained" (2011: 288). I would like to extend Schudson's phrase here and talk about 'publicly available pasts'. And, I deploy the concept of 'public memory' in this regard, for emphasising the importance of the *public availability* of diverse narrations of the past in investigating the relationship of a society with its history. My conception of public memory involves a reminder of the fact that power struggles over history take place in public, to influence the public opinion on the past, and it is a struggle between publicly available pasts only.

The significance of the controversial new Kurdish policy developed by the AKP in this context is that the new policy enabled the Kurdish perspective to become public, to communicate to the general public in Turkey. Although the "the disarticulation of Kemalist hegemony under the AKP government has merely made it possible for another state-centric (and highly coercive) memory framework to fill the gap, rather than having led to the affirmation of plurality in how citizens can remember the past" (Bakıner 2013:700), this new period has nevertheless brought about a dramatic change that engendered much public interest in the national past and it has witnessed power struggles among the multiple narrations of the history of the Kurdish issue from diverse perspectives representing conflicting political interests, including the Kurdish perspective. And the public availability of the Kurdish perspective means that the general public in Turkey now for the first time has access to the Kurdish version of the past. Contesting with both the old and the new official interpretations of the past, the Kurdish perspective is now one of the many voices that publicly narrate the history of the conflict and that compete with each other in the public sphere to influence public opinion. And Kurdish films are not only utilised as but also widely regarded as one of the most significant means of making Kurdish memories visible and accessible in this period.

The 'Burden of Representation': Screening Memories of State Oppression

As Forest et al. suggest, "Discussions about 'crimes' and responsibility are central to the politics of public memory, because national histories are (re)narrated through such debates" (2004: 358). One of the most commonly treated issues in Kurdish films is the state atrocities that have been committed against the Kurds in Turkey. Emerging in the days of 'peace talks', Kurdish films aim at expanding the understanding of peace from ceasefire and disarmament to social peace and reconciliation, and the filmmakers persistently emphasise the necessity of confrontation with state violence in the past for building peace in the present.

Some of the most prominent examples of screening memories of atrocity were made in the form of what we can call oral history films, or "testimonial cinema" (Chanan 1990: 40) which leave the floor to the memories of the victims and witnesses of state brutality. Although the question of the reliability of oral testimonies has been subject to much theoretical debate[5], "inevitably the proposal for a history from below led to a great deal of oral history" (Lynd 1993:1). On the other hand, as Lundy and McGovern highlight, "testimonial truth claims are also an important recognition that marginalized historical experiences, particularly in sites of conflict, often leave few other evidential traces than a witness's words" (2006: 84). Kurdish oral history films in this regard mainly originate from the lack of historical archives on the issues they bring to the screen. We can say that oral history is deployed in these films as one of the only possible ways of rendering the history of state atrocities in Turkey publicly available. And, although this type of documentary is widely disregarded as just 'talking heads', Kurdish testimonial documentaries have been highly successful in Turkey, maybe not commercially but politically.

Çayan Demirel's *38* (2006) was among the vanguard of Kurdish oral history films and it triggered an immense debate in the early days of the Kurdish Opening, as I will discuss in the following chapter. In this documentary film, Demirel addresses the Dersim massacre in 1938 where tens of thousands of Kurds were killed by the state forces of the young Turkish Republic. In his interviews, Demirel, who is also

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[5] For a comprehensive review of the main debates and prevalent paradigms in the field of oral history studies see (Thomson 2006).

originally from Dersim, remarks that the research for this documentary project took three years, as it had been extremely difficult to access the relevant archival documents, because the evidence of the event had either been destroyed or hidden away from public access. Through mainly witness accounts supported by some archive documents, photographs, and scholarly opinions, the film represents the Dersim massacre as a consequence of the project of the Turkification of the Kurds in the early republican era. The documentary starts with a self-reflexive moment that reveals the continuing fear of the victims whilst publicly speaking out about their Dersim 38 experience, even after many decades. An old man who was a child in 1938 says, "I will tell you about it. Though turn that camera off". Then he starts recalling the past, but after a minute he repeats, this time angrily, "The red light is on! I told you to turn it off!" While Demirel has kept this moment in order to express how difficult it is for the victims and witnesses to recall and publicly speak out about this traumatic memory and thus how challenging it was for him to make this documentary, he explains that he eventually managed to get through the fear by agreeing to the relatives of the witnesses conducting the interviews for him.

Another documentary film that again addresses the Dersim massacre is *İkiTutam Saç: Dersim'in Kayıp Kızları/Two Locks of Hair: The Missing Girls of Dersim* (2010, Nezahat Gündoğan), which reveals one of the darkest secrets of the history of the conflict by bringing to light the case of the young Kurdish girls whose parents were killed in 1938 and who were taken away from their remaining relatives to be forcibly adopted by high-ranking Turkish military officers and were raised as 'Turks'. Although the exact number of these adopted girls is yet unknown, it is estimated to be hundreds. Hence, following the film, Nezahat and Kazım Gündoğan published a book (2012) where they put together interviews with one hundred and fifty Kurdish women who were adopted in 1938. In her interviews, director Gündoğan has remarked that while working on this film they worked confidentially and they did not even ask for financial support from any organizations because they were worried that if they did, they would face restraints in the making of this film. Gündoğan deploys a traditional documentary language in the film with voice-over narration recounting the historical events, supported by interviews with a number of victims, as well as newspapers, photographs and archival video footage, but she puts the story of two sisters at the centre of this traditional structure. Within the three-year

period of research, Gündoğan made contact with two sisters who were adopted separately back in 1938, taken to different cities and had never seen each other since. The documentary brings the two sisters, now in their eighties, together while filming this process and capturing their emotional meeting after so many decades. In a sense, all the other materials used in the film in fact function towards historically contextualising and verifying this individual story.

Another significant oral history documentary of the period that touches upon one of the greatest state atrocities committed against the Kurds was also made by Çayan Demirel. In *5 No'lu Cezaevi/Prison No.5* (2009), Demirel brings forward the memories of the systematic torture inflicted on Kurdish political prisoners in Diyarbakır Prison, which was built after the 1980 military coup. In the film he interviews the survivors of the prison, many of whom are prominent Kurdish intellectuals and politicians in present-day Turkey. Listening to their accounts throughout this feature-length documentary borders on being an unbearable experience for the audience, as the witnesses recall memories such as Turkish soldiers forcing them to eat rats or their own excrement, raping them with batons, forcing them to memorise Turkish national marches and beating them when they fail to remember them perfectly, and so on. In their analysis of *Prison No.5*, Spence and Avcı write; "The memories expressed in *Prison No.5* are valuable not only because they break the conspiracy of whispers and innuendo to tell us of events, but also because they tell us what those events mean to the people who recount them. As people look back on their lives, their memories are vital sources of their feelings, beliefs, and values" (2013: 301). The act of speaking out is in its purest and strongest form in this film, as the victims publicly articulate their experiences of one of the most brutal state atrocities for the first time and with no interruption of manipulative film techniques, just staring into the eyes of the audience and unearthing their traumatic memories.

While these oral history films have been particularly successful in opening up certain state atrocities to public debate, in fact all Kurdish films of the period, without exception, focus on various aspects of state oppression and narrate Kurdish suffering in the past, including fiction films. Even an overall look at the subject matter of Kurdish films would be sufficient to see the centrality of representing memories of

state atrocities in these films. For instance, in *Min Dit/The Children of Diyarbakır* (2009), Miraz Bezar narrates the paramilitary activities in the Kurdish region in the 1990s via the story of two siblings whose parents are killed by JITEM in front of their eyes. *Press* (2010, Sedat Yılmaz) focuses on illegal state activities targeting the Kurdish press in the 1990s. *Babamın Sesi/Voice of My Father* (2012, Zeynel Doğan and Orhan Eskiköy) brings forward the state-orchestrated Alevi massacres in Maraş in 1978, told through the story of a family that has survived the massacre but still bears its scars. *Fırtına/The Storm* (2008, Kazım Öz) portrays the Kurdish student movement in the 1990s, where the anti-democratic and violent attitude of the state forces towards the legal activities of Kurdish youth is central to the narrative. *Kayıp Özgürlük/Lost Freedom* (2011, Umur Hozatlı) is yet another film that focuses on JITEM within a dark and claustrophobic torture narrative with dramatic real-time torture scenes. In *Gelecek Uzun Sürer/Future Lasts Forever* (2011), Özcan Alper uses formal interviews with the victims and eyewitnesses of state atrocities carried out in the 1990s – from village evacuations to unidentified murders –within a fictional narrative in which the interviews are motivated as the result of research conducted by fictional characters. In short, when we simply list the topics of Kurdish films, they all seem to emerge from an urge to speak out about all the unspoken traumatic experiences of Kurdish people, because, as all of the filmmakers highlight at every opportunity, they believe that narrating these true stories has the potential to contribute to social peace. As they acquire the means to break the silence, these filmmakers first expose the price of the preceding silence by belatedly reporting on the oppressive mechanisms of silencing unleashed against the Kurdish people in the past.

While screening memories of state oppression, Kurdish films on the one hand address the government, compelling it to acknowledge the past wrongdoings of the state, to identify and punish the alleged offenders, and to take action towards building institutional mechanisms of confrontation and reconciliation. Directors utilise their films in their advocacy for building Truth and Reconciliation Commissions on the issues they bring to the screen, usually referring to examples established in other countries dealing with a past laden with state atrocities, such as South Africa, Argentina or Chile. On the other hand, they address Turkish society at large, communicating the suffering of the Kurdish people to those who had no access

to the Kurdish perspective for decades, in an attempt to influence the dominant thrust of Turkish public opinion on the Kurdish conflict. As I will discuss in detail in the following chapter, these films have been highly successful in achieving their objective of bringing these dark past events onto the public agenda and pushing the limits of the current government's understanding of peace. We can say that in effect, by screening state atrocities, Kurdish films actually took on the task and utilised the medium of film as a mechanism of reconciliation and social justice, without waiting for the official mechanisms to be established.

What inspires Kurdish filmmaking is the amplitude of the untold traumatic stories of the Kurdish people waiting to be told. However, this amplitude does not always make the filmmakers' work easier. While representing Kurdish memories of state brutality, Kurdish films do not simply exercise an act of coming to terms with a traumatic past or healing the wounds of the past as a therapeutic attempt. They are not bringing forth the memories of a conflict that is already past, but the past of a still ongoing conflict; a past that has never become distanced from the present. They are active and political films in this sense, which speak out about the past with a high awareness of the current political use value of memories. There is a sense of urgency in the making of Kurdish films; a hurry to make use of the abolition of the ban on speaking on the Kurdish issue, to immediately join the ongoing political arguments about the past through the language of film, to have an impact on the direction of the power struggles over history, to add certain past events into the publicly available pasts, and to bring forth certain past issues that remain obscure even in the days of "explosion of memory", due to the selective remembering performed by the AKP government. The pressurising sense of urgency in choosing the most significant issues and dark events from history with the highest political use value in the present, and immediately bringing them forth in film whilst the power struggles over the interpretation of the past are at their most heated, is articulated by many filmmakers. For example, Özcan Alper says "I had to make this film now. If I had made this film ten years later, maybe it would have been a better film. I would have been a more experienced filmmaker by then. [...] But, I am glad I made it now, this film had to be made in this critical political period" (Alper 2011a).

We can say that Kurdish filmmakers suffer from a certain 'burden of representation'; in a similar way Kobena Mercer (1990) famously argues the first black artists in Britain have experienced. In discussing the reception of *The Other Story* exhibition that put together works of black artists in post-war Britain, Mercer writes; "*The Other Story* had to carry an impossible burden of representation in the sense that a single exhibition had to 'stand for' the totality of everything that could fall within the category of black art" (1990: 62). And he suggests that the works of black artists bear "the weight of the double meaning of the concept of representation", as they are "expected to *speak for* the black communities as if she or he were its political 'representative'" (ibid: 65).

> If, after many years of struggle, you arrive at the threshold of enunciation and are 'given' the right-to-speak and a limited space in which to tell your story, is it not the case that there will be an overwhelming pressure to try and tell the whole story all at once? If there is only one opportunity to make your voice heard, is it not the case that there will be an intolerable imperative to try and say everything there is to be said, all in one mouthful? (ibid: 62)

Director Özcan Alper for instance talks about the impact of this kind of a 'burden of representation' on Kurdish filmmaking:

> In our films, there is always the risk of trying to tell everything. There are only three or four examples preceding us, like Yeşim Ustaoğlu's *Journey to the Sun*, but many dimensions of the issue remains untouched. As a filmmaker, you cannot ignore this fact. For example, because *The Children of Diyarbakır* already treated the issue of unidentified murders, I didn't feel the need to give the background information on this issue in my film. If there were other films that touched upon different aspects of the issue, then I could easily focus on one single aspect in my film. When you think, "the audience knows too little, but other films did focus on this issue", it relieves your mind. (Alper 2011a)

Director Miraz Bezar says, "Because the Kurdish language and Kurdish culture were oppressed for such a very long time, we now want to take ten steps at once" (Bezar 2010a).As these statements also point out, the 'burden of representation' that marks Kurdish films in Turkey is very much related to the void of representation in the past and dramatic political transformation in the present. Suddenly gaining access to the means of speaking out about a multitude of hitherto unspoken issues that had

accumulated throughout the history of denial, and having the opportunity of utilising the medium of film towards communicating these issues to the general public in Turkey, filmmakers are left with the burden of deciding on the past issues with the highest representative power and with the biggest potential to influence the direction of the Kurdish issue in the present.

Revising the Image of the Kurdish Region in Public Memory

While bringing forth the history of the Kurdish issue in an attempt to contribute to the peace process, Kurdish films aim at revising the dominant image of the Kurds and the Kurdish region in Turkish public memory. One of the consequences of the official policy of denial and the severe armed conflict that continued in the region from 1984 onwards is the unfamiliarity of the Kurds and the Kurdish region for the majority of Turkish society living in western Turkey. The Kurdish conflict in a sense precluded state nationalism to involve the Kurdish region as part of the national discourse praising the national territory. The Turkish state declared sovereignty in the region via Turkish flags, Atatürk statues, and massive "How happy is the one who says I am a Turk" writings on buildings and on mountains, yet it failed to annexe and incorporate the region into the national imagination of the homeland. As addressed in Chapter 3, the region was first the territory of pre-modernity, underdevelopment, backwardness and primitiveness in the dominant national discourse, representing huge opposition to the Kemalist ideal of a westernised Turkey. Then, after the emergence of the PKK and the beginning of the armed conflict, the prevailing image of the Kurdish region became even darker, as it came to represent the dangerous geography of war and the territory of terrorism for the rest of the country. As a result, people from the west stayed away from the Kurdish region; only military personnel and teachers went to the region to do their 'obligatory service' in the 'state of emergency' region for a few years, and they were paid extra salary for serving there. TV programmes travelling around the country inch by inch introducing the geography and the culture of the homeland to the national audience, or TV food shows exploring the richness of diverse culinary traditions in different regions of Turkey, never visited the Kurdish region. This isolation and obscurity of

the region started to be broken down for the first time in the 2000s. And in the early days of the Kurdish Opening, the Turkish media started to 'advertise' Kurdish geography, presenting for instance the 'unexpected', beautiful landscape of Dersim with astonishment as an unknown tourist attraction for the Turkish people.

While attempting to narrow down the angle between Kurdish and Turkish memories of the conflict, Kurdish films make familiar the unfamiliar through their representation of the Kurdish region. When the first Kurdish films emerged, they provided the first visuals from the region that were not war footage disseminated by the Turkish military and they introduced the Kurdish region to the wider public in Turkey for the first time. Or, they re-introduced it with an alternative image; the image of a different Kurdish geography built through and within Kurdish memories to replace the prevailing negative public image disseminated through official discourse. The beautiful mountainous Kurdish rural landscape and Kurdish cities were featured for the first time in these films. Hence, using the Kurdish region as their setting has been one of the salient characteristics of Kurdish films, which gives them a distinct look and in fact the feeling of 'foreign films' for the audience in western Turkey. The unfamiliarity of Kurdish geography and culture, its virginity in the realm of visual representation, give these films a certain spectacular and ethnographical value, which has been particularly highlighted in most Kurdish films.

Kurdish films depict the Kurdish region as it lives in the Kurdish imagination and Kurdish memories. In this representation, the natural Kurdish landscape, the countryside and the villages, are particularly foregrounded and spectacularised, as these geographical images have a symbolic value in the Kurdish imagination of Kurdistan. As Maria T. O'Shea remarks, "Kurds have a strong attachment to both their real place of origin and also often to their concept of all of Kurdistan. For Kurds this attachment is most usually expressed through love of Kurdistan's natural features and landscape" (2004: 5). The mountain image particularly is so prominent in Kurdish films that it is regarded as one of the defining characteristics of Kurdish films in general (Arslan 2009a; Kennedy 2009, Kılıç 2009b). David McDowall remarks that for many Kurds, "the idea of Kurdistan is characterized by an almost mystical view of 'the mountain', an imaginary as well as a real place" (McDowall, 2007, s. 3). As the Kurdish region has a spectacularly mountainous landscape, it is

not surprising that the mountains have become the prominent symbol of the homeland in Kurdish culture. However, the mountain is not merely a natural feature of the region; it is the actual location of the Kurdish liberation struggle. As O'Shea states, in Kurdish culture we find the theme of "mountains as allies" in the armed struggle (2004, s. 140). Hence, the mountain image is not just a symbol of the homeland, but of the fight for the homeland. In this regard, the mountain is not a postcard image of the homeland in Kurdish films, or an idyll, but a political symbol dense with the history of the Kurdish conflict. It is so highly symbolic that it names the geography in Yüksel Yavuz's film, for example. *Close-up Kurdistan* opens with a full-frame image of a statuesque mountain accompanied by a sorrowful Kurdish folk song in the background, and, the title of the film, 'Close-up Kurdistan', falls on to this image; the worded naming of the land overlaps with the visual naming.

The symbolic power of the natural Kurdish landscape to represent the imagined homeland is widely deployed in Kurdish films. The spectacular and idyllic representation of the beautiful Kurdish landscape opposes the dominant imagination of the region in western Turkey as an arid, ugly and dark zone of terrorism. Some Kurdish documentaries particularly focus on life in the rural areas of the Kurdish region, aiming to capture Kurdish culture and geography in its most intact form, such as *Dûr/The Distance* (2005, Kazım Öz), *Son Mevsim: Şavaklar/The Last Season: Shawaks* (2009, Kazım Öz), *Bertij* (2010, Caner Canerik), and *Fecira* (2013, Piran Baydemir). *Shawaks* tells the story of the Shawaks, a nomadic Kurdish tribe living in the Dersim area. The film follows the four seasons of Shawaks who live in the village in winter, breeding their livestock, and move to the high pastures in the mountains with their lambs and live in tents throughout spring and summer. While communicating to the audience without narration and mainly through poetic images, the film performs an anthropological approach to the life and culture of the Shawaks, whose name was unheard of even in Turkey up until this documentary. Despite their many hardships, the film idealises their pre-modern life style, because it is in director Öz's words, "autonomous, independent from the dominant economic system, and nature-compatible" (Öz 2010). An interesting point about this film is that Öz remarks that one of the challenges in structuring his documentary was to manage to keep direct political references off-screen. He draws attention to the fact that it used to be too difficult, even impossible to access the village where the Shawaks live, because it

is located near one of the main war zones in the Kurdish region. He says, "The armed conflict was in fact still quite severe even when we were there. It was risky, our lives were in danger. There were times when we got caught in the crossfire. Therefore, it was very difficult to shoot this film without making the war its subject" (Öz 2010). Yet he still keeps the war off-screen, because for him, the political value of the film lies in the representation of the pre-modern life of the Shawaks, as he equates modernisation with assimilation. In this sense, according to him, representing the beauty of the Kurdish natural landscape and the indigenous culture of the Shawaks is a strong political comment in itself.

Not only the natural landscape, but also Kurdish cities were represented visually for the first time in Kurdish films. *The Children of Diyarbakır*, which was acclaimed as the first ever Kurdish-language film in Turkey, was also the first film to use Diyarbakır, the capital city of the Kurdish region, as its setting. In fact, director Miraz Bezar states that the initial idea that excited him was as simple as "making a film that is set in Diyarbakır"; he then goes to Diyarbakır to find a story and works on the script whilst staying there. In general, as much as the stories they narrate, taking the audience to the unknown Kurdish region through film is one of the initial motivations of many Kurdish films. The excitement of starring Diyarbakır for the first time is evident in the *The Children of Diyarbakır*. The film tells the story of two young siblings who are left to their own means after their parents are killed by JITEM before their very eyes. Because the kids start living in the streets, the majority of the film consists of outdoor scenes. This makes it possible for Miraz Bezar to make the most of being the first to introduce Diyarbakır in cinema, as the city literally becomes home to the two young orphans. Consequently, the city becomes one of the main subjects treated in the film along with the story of the siblings.

Future Lasts Forever is another film that gives a central role to Diyarbakır in its narrative. It is a film widely regarded as a 'Kurdish film' despite not being made by a 'Kurdish filmmaker', for it adopts the Kurdish perspective in representing the history of the Kurdish issue. And aptly, in *Future Lasts Forever* the audience meet the Kurdish region through the eyes of a visitor, an 'outsider'. The main character is Sumru, a doctoral student from western Turkey, who visits Diyarbakır to collect folk elegies for her research in ethnomusicology. The region is represented utterly as a

site of memory in the film, a cradle of unpleasant memories, opening up its past to its visitor with memories springing out from everywhere and everyone Sumru touches. The film primarily addresses the Turkish audience, and the obscurity of the Kurdish region for the majority of the Turkish audience is what influences its narrative structure. In an interview, Özcan Alper points out that the Kurdish region has been an obscure territory not only for the average Turk, but even for left-wing/socialist people who have actually been sympathetic to or who support the Kurdish political struggle, like himself and like his character Sumru. He says, "How well do we actually know the region? People from the Turkish left, do they ever visit Diyarbakır? Who showed the courage to go to Hakkari, or to Van? Nobody. There has always been a distance, maybe an unavoidable one" (Alper 2011a). While attempting to obliterate this distance in and through his film, he gives his audience a main character to identify with, a character as unfamiliar with the Kurdish region as the Turkish audience.

Director Alper remarks that he has been rigorous in terms of how he represents Diyarbakır: "One of the issues I have refrained from was representing Diyarbakır simply as a poor and downtrodden place. There is actually a cultural renaissance there. [...] A renaissance that has been built through a thirty years long political struggle" (Alper 2011a) he says. *Future Lasts Forever* draws an authentic and detailed picture of citylife in Diyarbakır, featuring its streets, historical buildings, cafés, museums, art and cultural centres, and thus utilises the power of representing the unrepresented, treating Diyarbakır as a treasure untouched in cinema. Before setting out to accomplish this, at the beginning, the film first comments on the prevailing image of the Kurdish region in the west of the country that it aims to dispel. When Sumru first arrives in Diyarbakır for her doctoral research, we see her walking in the streets while talking to her mother on the phone. We hear her trying to soothe her concerned mother, saying "Don't worry about me, mom. In fact İstanbul is more dangerous than here. Forget about what they say on TV. It is not like bombs exploding everywhere, you know?" With these words, the film begins by addressing the fear of its audience that originates from the dominant representation of the region and inviting them to overcome that fear, and then lets them see the region with their own eyes (through the lens of the camera).

Some films literally take the audience on a journey through Kurdistan in their attempts to make the unfamiliar region familiar. In these examples, the journey narrative allows the filmmakers to map out the Kurdish region for their audience. While characters travel around to unravel certain aspects of the history of the Kurdish issue, they explore and unravel Kurdish geography, too, before the eyes of the audience. In this sense, journey-narrative functions as an appropriate means of introducing the region with its geography and culture to the wider Turkish public.

Ben Uçtum Sen Kaldın/I Flew You Stayed (2011, Mizgin Arslan), is a first-person documentary film in which director Arslan tracks down traces of her departed father, who joined the Kurdish guerrilla movement when she was a baby. When she was studying at university, she received the news that her father had 'fallen a martyr'. When Arslan coincidentally meets someone in Armenia who used to know her father and listens to stories about this father she never met, she decides to take a journey to find out more about him. She says, "On my journey, I wanted to take a camera with me only because I did not want to feel alone. A camera gives you strength. Initially, I was not even sure whether this journey would turn out to be a film or not" (Arslan 2012a). *I Flew You Stayed* is not a fully pre-planned documentary journey; each person Arslan comes across and each new piece of information she gathers open up the next step and give direction to Arslan's journey. While traveling around to meet people who used to know her father, from family members to PKK militants, Arslan builds up a journey narrative in which the Kurdish region is foregrounded as a land in which her father's traces are engrained. And, while the director explores the traces of her father, she explores the Kurdish geography as well, presenting it to the eyes of the audience.

My Marlon and Brando (2008, Hüseyin Karabey) is a striking example of a Kurdish film that deploys journey-narrative. Ayça, an amateur Turkish actor from İstanbul, meets Hama Ali, a Kurdish actor from Iraq, on a film set; they fall in love and keep in touch after returning to their lives. During the days of the Iraq war, Ayça decides to travel to Iraq to meet Hama Ali. Departing from a loosely sketched script based on this plot, the film shapes the finer details of this fictional story through and within an improvised actual journey in which Ayça travels through actual settings in the region, talks with actual Kurdish people, and gets involved with actual events that

they come across during the filming process. Thus, representing the Kurdish region in an authentic manner and breaking through the obscurity of the Kurdish region is observed in its most spectacular form in this film.

Yakın Plan Kürtler/Close-up Kurdistan[6] (2007, Yüksel Yavuz) is another film that deploys the journey narrative. It is a documentary film made by a Kurdish director from Turkey who is based in Germany, and the film attempts to provide a macro-level historical study of the Kurdish issue via film. Starting with his own parents, Yavuz meets up with a large number of people to discuss the history of the Kurdish issue during a journey around Kurdistan. Like *I Flew You Stayed* and *My Marlon and Brando,* the documentary film *Close-Up Kurdistan* visualises the journey narrative with tracking shots taken from moving vehicles and interspersed throughout the film, featuring the Kurdish region as a land that is explored through a journey. In an interview, Yavuz explains how these tracking shots serve to affix the Kurdish geography to his personal memories and the memories of other people in the documentary, as well as to the social history this geography has witnessed:

> There are many tracking shots in the movie. Thus the film shows us the cities and the landscape, but even more complex circumstances are illustrated by it, too. For me the film was a personal journey into the recent past of the Turkish-Kurdish conflict. By using many tracking shots I show the cities and the landscapes I usually pass when I visit my parents. They show the variety and beauty, but also the decay of this land. And when Dr. Ismail Besikci talks about his numerous stays in prisons in different cities, he sure has passed many of the streets the film passes. While we traverse the Kurdish mountains we also pass places which have been scenes of heavy fights during the war between the Turkish army and the Kurdish guerrilla. This is the area where the German ex-guerrilla stayed during his time in Kurdistan. The Kurdish woman from the refugee camp Maxmur in Iraq also comes from this area. There are destroyed and abandoned villages everywhere, places which must have been a 'paradise on earth' for many before. (Yavuz 2009)

Martin Lefebvre (2006) distinguishes two diverse functions of landscape in film; 'landscape-as-setting' and 'autonomous landscape'. The former is "the place where something happens, where something takes place and unfolds" (Lefebvre 2006: 24).

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[6]Although *Close-up Kurdistan* was made in 2007, it was shown in Turkey for the first time in 2009, after the Kurdish Opening, as part of the 'Opening Films' programme of the If İstanbul Film Festival. Though, because the festival hesitated to showcase a film that features the word 'Kurdistan' in its title, they presented the film with the title of *Yakın Plan Kürtler /Close-up Kurds*.

Whereas, "autonomous landscape" directs "the spectator's attention toward the exterior space rather than toward the action taking place within it"; the audience experience the film "in the spectacular mode", and, their attention is directed "toward space in such a way as to free it from its subservience to narrative" (ibid: 33). Lefebvre applies to Seymour Chatman's study on Michelangelo Antonioni where he writes;

> The film says not that "this is such-and-such a place, in which event X occurs" but rather that "this place is important quite independently of the immediate exigencies of plot, and you will sense (if not understand) its odd valueif you scrutinize it carefully. This is why I give you time to do so." [...] Not that the simple space as stasis is turned into an event or action. It is rather that the camera's lingering makes the place pregnant with significance". (Chatman 1985: 125-126)

Applying this distinction to the analysis of Kurdish films in Turkey, we can say that the whole Kurdish region, with its natural landscapes as well as cities, is represented as an 'autonomous landscape' in these films. The lingering of the camera on the natural landscape or on a long shot of the city, without any narrative motivation, is something we find in all the films mentioned above. In all these films, we have breaks from the flowing story while the camera fixes its focus on Kurdish geography; we are given the time to reflect on the story events while resting our gaze on this obscure land; the internalisation of the story takes place in these pictorial portraits of the region. These portraits are 'significant in themselves', not because they host narrative events, but because they invite the audience to experience these visuals 'in the spectacular mode'. And the autonomous power of the Kurdish region derives from the obscurity of the region for the presumed Turkish audience.

(Re)introducing the Kurdish People via Film

While embarking upon the project of familiarising their audience with the Kurdish region, Kurdish films also (re)introduce the Kurdish people to their audience. This is a crucial dimension of contributing to the process of peace-building via film, because, as a consequence of the rigidity of state control over information on and the

narration of the Kurdish conflict, the official interpretation of the conflict has been the dominant narrative shared for decades by the vast majority of Turkish society. As discussed in Chapter 3, the result was two fundamentally opposing perceptions of the conflict and an immense gap between the dominant Kurdish and Turkish perspectives; between their knowledges, experiences, opinions, beliefs and emotions on the Kurdish issue. And, in an atmosphere marked by political polarisation and social segregation, the channels and opportunities for Turks and Kurds to listen to each other have been limited, if there have been any at all. Hence, commenting on his choice to combine actual testimonies of state atrocities with a fictional story in *Future Lasts Forever*, director Özcan Alper says: "The witnesses in my film never directly met the audience before, not even briefly. They never expressed themselves in their own language to the audience. They never met my mother, or the mother of a Turkish soldier from Trabzon or Istanbul. I wanted to make this film in such a way that it would be more than a film: a memory or testimony that conveys the weight of the past" (Alper 2011b).

While (re)introducing the Kurds, Kurdish films aim at relieving the Kurds of the image of 'pre-modern, primitive, uncivilised Turks' and from the dehumanised image of bloody terrorists. They humanise and flesh out the Kurds against a background of Kurdishness as a negative discursive object. At the beginning of Kazım Öz's documentary film *The Distance*, which is the first feature-length Kurdish film in Turkey, the camera focuses at length on the faces of a number of elderly Kurdish peasants one by one, in close-up. Each of them just stands in front of the camera with their faces bearing the traces of intense life experience, remaining completely silent whilst looking directly into the camera, that is, into the eyes of the audience. Thus the documentary film gives the audience the time to examine these faces at length, but whilst they are looking back at the audience, too. In this way, the film begins with this striking scene of 'first on-screen encounter with the Kurds' before entering into their lives and speaking with them. This unconventional technique was later deployed in exactly the same way in two more Kurdish films as well; in *Kirasê mirinê: Hewîtî / A Fatal Dress: Polygamy* (2009, Müjde Arslan) and in *Close Up Kurdistan*, which also leave their audience alone with the Kurdish people, face to face, eye to eye.

In fleshing out the Kurds via film, Kurdish films highlight elements of the highly distinctive Kurdish culture. Kurdish folk songs, elegies, local stories, ceremonies, dances, dresses, embroideries, tattoos are everywhere in these films. All these cultural elements stand in Kurdish films as a testament to the failure of the assimilation project and strongly undermine the discourses of the policy of denial. Featuring the hitherto denied, banned and criminalised Kurdish language is one of the most significant aspects of introducing Kurdish culture via film. All Kurdish filmmakers attach high importance to representing the Kurdish language authentically; depending on where their stories are set, they make an effort to portray the nuances of spoken language in different parts of the Kurdish region. And some films focus directly on the assimilation of the Kurdish language and display its impact on the lives of ordinary Kurdish individuals. For example, *Türkçe Pekiyi/Turkish A+* (2012, Murat Bayramoğlu) is a documentary film which narrates the alienation between different generations of a family due to the language barrier between them caused by assimilationist state policies. The film features a young Kurdish woman who has grown up in western Turkey and who can no longer speak any Kurdish and documents her visit to her village where she cannot even communicate with the older generation, including her grandmother, without the help of an interpreter. *Anadilim Nerede?/Where is My Mother Tongue?* (2012, Veli Kahraman),on the other hand, is a fiction film based on a true story, starring the director's parents playing themselves. The father, who is old and ill, decides that he has to pass on his knowledge of the Kurdish language to his children before he dies, so he starts keeping records of the Kurdish language.

The documentary film *İki Dil Bir Bavul/On the Way to School* (2009, Özgür Doğan and Orhan Eskiköy) follows the story of Emre, a newly graduated Turkish teacher from western Turkey, who is appointed to teach in a small Kurdish village. Yet, Emre cannot speak any Kurdish and his little students cannot speak any Turkish. Because his training has in no way prepared him for such a situation, he is left to his own devices in attempting to solve this problem. And thus Emre decides that the first thing to do, before engaging with the standard curriculum, is to teach his students Turkish. Just like their teacher, these students also struggle; on top of the new uniforms, the space, the social codes and the rules at school that might already make the children uncomfortable, they are confronted with a wholly new language. For

example, when one little girl needs to go to the restroom, she not only discovers that she must ask for permission, but also that she must learn how to do so in Turkish. The documentary is full of tragicomic moments that build sympathy for these kids, like the scene which shows the whole class shouting "watermelon" in Turkish with one voice when being showed the picture of a bird, to the teacher's annoyance. As I will discuss in the following chapter, *On the Way to School* was one of the most acclaimed Kurdish films of the period and it received positive acclaim from a broad swathe of Turkish audiences. Starring Kurdish kids while (re)introducing Kurds to the general Turkish public and depicting the suffering Kurdish kids endured as the result of policies of assimilation has been an effective strategy in the attempt to break down the dominant image of Kurds in western Turkey.

Alongside cultural identity, there is another fundamental element of Kurdishness: political identity. And this is the most challenging issue for Kurdish films to touch upon whilst appealing to the identification mechanisms of cinema to overcome political polarisation in Turkey. Three films that came out in the same year, *Voice of My Father*, *I Flew You Stayed*, and *Future Lasts Forever* all have an absent character who is at the centre of the story; they are absent because they joined the PKK, the Kurdish guerrilla movement. They are missing from the lives of the on-screen characters, thus missing from the screen. However, they are the focus of the narrative in their absence, in fact, due to their absence. They are in a sense hidden main characters.

As mentioned earlier, *I Flew You Stayed* is a first-person documentary film in which director Arslan tracks down traces of her departed father, who joined the Kurdish guerrilla movement when she was a baby, and whom she has never met. Following the traces of her father on a long journey and speaking to many people who used to know him, she tries to piece together everything said about her father so she can build up an image of him. *I Flew You Stayed* was a ground-breaking film in Turkey as it portrays a so-called 'terrorist' via his daughter's search and the memories of many others who miss and mourn him, such as his sister who became mentally ill when she heard that her brother had 'fallen a martyr' and has been sick in bed ever since then. Or, Arslan's mother who, for the first time, tells her daughter about how her husband went up into the mountains; she recounts the day when he had returned

home after being arrested and beaten unconscious. He was tortured and his toe nails were torn out, and she says it was the following day when he left to join the guerrilla movement.

Articulating the whereabouts of these missing characters means entering a hazardous zone for these films, with the potential of jeopardising their fragile communication with the Turkish audience, due to the extreme contrast between the dominant Kurdish perception of the PKK militants as freedom fighters and the dominant Turkish perception of them as violent terrorists. *Future Lasts Forever* takes its time, or gives the audience time, for the unfolding of information about the missing character, Mehmet. The story about Mehmet slowly unfolds through brief flashbacks, prompted by Sumru's memories and dreams when she is in Diyarbakır for her research on ethnomusicology, and they are intercut with the present time of the plot. We understand that Mehmet and Sumru used to be lovers, yet the flashbacks do not let the audience piece the story of Mehmet together until near the end of the film. Eventually the film reveals the fact that Sumru had met Mehmet during their university years in İstanbul, and together they had been part of the political youth movement, but one day Mehmet had disappeared to join the PKK, leaving a letter behind for Sumru. The film completely reveals this story only after the socio-historical context that gave rise to the Kurdish guerrilla movement is portrayed in depth through Sumru's interviews with the real victims of state atrocities and through the archives she researches that reveal the history of the Kurdish conflict. Only then are the whereabouts of Mehmet explicitly articulated to the audience. And from that point on the film continues with the exploration of Mehmet's story through Suna's journey to a remote village in Hakkari where Mehmet is buried.

Voice of My Father is a fiction film based on the true story of co-director Zeynel Doğan's family, where Doğan, his mother, and his wife play themselves. The main character is Base, Doğan's mother; a taciturn old Kurdish woman who always wears black and who lives alone in the family home in the desolate hills of their village burdened by all the weight of past. This is an Alevi-Kurdish family that survived the Maraş Massacre in 1978. The father works abroad in Saudi Arabia as a construction worker to earn money for the family and at the end of the film dies in a work accident. Hasan, the older brother of Zeynel Doğan, whom we never see in the film,

had joined the guerrillas some time ago. Just as in *Future Lasts Forever*,the reason for Hasan's absence remains unexplained throughout *Voice of My Father*. It is articulated for the first time towards the very end of the film, in one of the audiotapes from the past that Base has recorded for her husband as an audio-letter: "Hasan decided to join the guerrillas, he left saying not to expect him back. You'll get angry now and blame me. But it is not my fault". Until this audiotape, throughout the film, the mountain-image stands literally as a visual answer to the core question that is unanswered in the narrative: "Where is Hasan?". "He is in the mountains", is the answer, as in the famous euphemism for joining the PKK used by the Kurds. In answering the key question of the plot, the mountain-image concurrently represents Hasan and the Kurdish movement.

Zeynel Doğan says, "One of the main things we wanted to articulate in the film was that those people who are called 'terrorists' went to the mountains from households around us. How could Base call his son in the mountains a 'terrorist'? Or, her neighbours? What made Hasan go to the mountains are structural problems" (Doğan 2012b). In their interviews, co-directors Doğan and Eskiköy also repeatedly note that they consider *Voice of My Father* to be a sequel to their first film *On the Way to School* which follows the story of Kurdish kids at a primary school in a small Kurdish village.They say that while working on the scenerio they thought of Hasan in *Voice of My Father* as the future version of young Zülküf, the primary school student in *On the Way to School* who plays the lead role in tragicomic scenes in which he struggles to learn Turkish and who was the most beloved character of the documentary film. They explain that they particularly wanted to highlight the fact that the people who go to the mountains are the innocent kids that the audience met and loved in their first film. Remarking that *Voice of My Father* was like a test to see if the audience could relate to this kind of a story, Eskiköy says, "People who watched *On the Way to School* kept talking about what a beautiful kid Zülküf was. However, Zülküf has some problems, so what are you going to about those? In fact, now I think that it was actually a mistake that we created that close proximity between Zülküf and the audience in *On the Way to School*. [...] With *Voice of My Father*, we are saying to the audience, "Come and see the issue from this distance. How does it look now?""(Eskiköy 2012a). As these statements also point out, while (re)introducing Kurdish people to the public in their films, Kurdish films foreground

the political aspect of Kurdish identity, even though that is dangerous territory when the goal is to change the dominant image of Kurds in Turkish society.

On a final note, we can say that the representation of the Kurdish guerrillas in these films not only attempts to break the image of 'inhuman terrorists' built up in the past decades, but also to comment on one of the key conflicts in the present-day 'peace process'. Here, we need to remember one of the issues raised in Chapter 3. Since the beginning of the 'peace process', the government's main strategy has been to depoliticise Kurdish identity and drawing a distinction between 'Kurds to fight against' and 'Kurds to make peace with'. However, the project of weakening the popularity and the political influence of the Kurdish movement amongst the Kurds has failed, even backfired, many times throughout the process. So, considering the centrality of this issue in the present-day political atmosphere, it is not surprising that Kurdish films take up the challenge and seek appropriate strategies for portraying the political identity of the Kurds, by showing the strong ties between the Kurdish political movement and the Kurdish people, introducing Kurdish guerrillas as human beings, and pointing at the socio-historical context that gave rise to the emergence of the Kurdish armed struggle.

Personal Memories and Social Histories

Theories of 'collective memory' have always addressed the relationships between individual and collective remembering (and forgetting), starting from Halbwachs, who was the first to theorise the individual memory as a phenomenon structured by a communal sense of the past constructed by social groups. In pointing at the inextricable relationship of the individual memory to the collective memory, he wrote, "One may say that the individual remembers by placing himself in the perspective of the group, but one may also affirm that the memory of the group realizes and manifests itself in individual memories" (Halbwachs 1992: 40). However, the extent to which this integral connection is visible or obvious to the members of a society varies in the context of different historical periods of that society. The interconnection between the personal histories of individuals and the

broader social history in which those individuals are located can be more explicit, palpable and perceptible, or more obscure, vague and imperceptible in different historical contexts. It can be said that in general, periods of dramatic historical events tend to render the linkages between the personal and the social more perceptible for the witnesses of those periods.

One of the salient features found in Kurdish films in Turkey is the convergence between the personal and the social; between individual memories of Kurdish people and the social history of the Kurdish issue. While making Kurdish memories public through the medium of film, Kurdish films tend to link the personal strongly to the social, to position individual Kurdish experiences within the broader picture of the Kurdish conflict. On the one hand, this intended convergence is a reflection of the political character of Kurdish films; it is a political strategy of drawing upon personal stories as explicit representatives of broad social issues. On the other hand, it can be said that these films in fact make visible the already existing convergence between the individual and the social in the Kurdish experience. There is one fact that Kurdish people, and those who have been to the Kurdish region, know very well: in that region, almost all individual stories bear the traces and the scars of the social history of the Kurdish issue. Director Miraz Bezar, who started out making *The Children of Diyarbakır* with the motivation of using Diyarbakır as the setting for the first time in a film produced in Turkey, says, "Every single person has a story in Diyarbakır. Whoever you speak with, they have a story to share with you" (Bezar 2010b). As director Özcan Alper puts it, "Whoever you get in touch with, whoever you come across in the street, it's either his brother is in prison, or her father is missing, or another relative is murdered" (Alper 2011a). İlham Bakır, one of the organisers of the Amed Film Festival in Diyarbakır, says, "Kurdish cinema is lucky, because in the Kurdish region, wherever you direct the camera you would find a story for a film. [...] What has been experienced in the last thirty years in this region gives enough material to the filmmakers to last for fifty years in cinema" (*Evrensel*, 9 August 2012). In a sense, what Kurdish films do is to try to capture this fact and make it visible; to bring the prevalence of painful individual Kurdish stories marked by the socio-political history of the Kurdish issue into view, which when repeated as a pattern in many films, turns into a bold political comment on the Kurdish conflict in itself.

Bûka Baranê/The Children Chasing the Rainbow(2013, Dilek Gökçin) starts with a close-up of a photograph from 1989 taken in the primary school garden of a village in Yüksekova in Hakkari province, one of the war zones in the Kurdish region. We see the little students of the school posing for the camera together with their teacher and there is a rainbow in the bacground. İrfan Aktan's voice over introduces this picture from the past, identifying himself and his friends in the picture. He explains that he is about to take a journey to the village for the wedding of one of his friends from the picture and that this will be the first reunion in twenty-three years of these primary school friends. The documentary film continues with the wedding and then Aktan's interviews with his childhood friends, who are now in their early thirties, about their experiences from the year the photo was taken up to that day in 2013. Starting from how they struggled at school because they did not know any Turkish and how the teacher in the picture used to beat them, they all recount many stories they have experienced throughout the years since 1989: constant military raids into the village; the difficulties of living under military blockade; their family members being beaten, tortured or killed; their own experiences of torture and imprisonment; some of their friends from the picture joining the PKK; the evacuation of the village in the 1990s; the difficulties they experienced because of their Kurdish identity when they first went to western Turkey for their university education, etc. The outcome is a moving picture of recent Kurdish history that touches upon all the significant issues and events in the history of the conflict, told by first-hand accounts of ordinary Kurdish people. And the fact that a film is able to draw a large-scale historical picture of the conflict by starting off with a single photograph and merely taking up the memories of a group of friends is striking. Another documentary film, *Gerçekleri Yazdım: Lice Defteri / I Totally Wrote the Truths: The Notebook of Lice* (2012, Ersin Çelik) is based on the diaries of a villager from Lice, which have been kept regularly since 1945. The film follows up the events recounted in this diary by interviewing other people from the region and deploying archive footage. As Lice has been one of the Kurdish towns that has experienced the conflict most severely, the diary is brimming with accounts of village evacuations, tortures and slaughters targeting civilian Kurds. Thus, while the historical narrative in *The Children Chasing the Rainbow* is based on a single photograph,*The Notebook of Lice* departs from the

diaries of one ordinary Kurdish individual while mapping out the history of the Kurdish conflict.

While applying the representative power of personal stories to attest to the wide-scale social effects of the Kurdish conflict in Kurdish society, filmmakers usually direct their cameras to the nearest stories available and thus speak of the Kurdish issue through their own stories, or stories of their families, of villagers, and friends. While representing personal memories and social history as inseparably transient, Kurdish films frequently deploy the form of autobiographical narrative. Keeping in mind that all these filmmakers made their debuts in the 2000s, we can say that most of them started the cinematic narration of the Kurdish issue firstly from their own individual memories. As mentioned earlier, *Voice of My Father* is a fiction film based on the true story of co-director Zeynel Doğan's family, where Doğan, his mother, and his wife play themselves. What inspired Doğan with the idea of making a film based on the true story of his family was an actual archive of audiotapes that for years were used as letters between the father who worked abroad and the rest of the family. Listening to all these audio-letters, director Doğan retrospectively realised the power of these sound recordings in representing not only his family's history but also the history of the Kurdish issue in general. He says:

> We [Kurdish filmmakers] are good at telling stories we know well. You know all the details and the feelings engrained in that story very well. However, I have always been aware that this story had a representative power; that there are certain things that my and my family's experiences represent. This story did not only belong to me, because I knew that there were many people in this country that would find themselves in this story. (Doğan 2012c)

Doğan regards *Voice of My Father* as a personal journey that he had to take in order to confront his past:

> It is like killing two birds with one stone. You have these poisonous experiences about your past, about your relationship with your family, and you throw up that poison whilst making a film. I would have felt uneasy had I made a film about something else while I had this mother, this family at my elbow. I am at ease now; I can now look into other stories, as, I honoured my debt of gratitude in a sense and completed my confrontation with my dad and my family". (Doğan 2012a)

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Stitching together personal and social memories, filming the journey of a confrontation with personal memories in an attempt to contribute to the social confrontation with a dark history is central, too, to Müjde Arslan's documentary film, *I Flew You Stayed* which, as mentioned earlier, is a first-person documentary film in which director Arslan tracks down traces of her departed father whom she has never met as he joined the Kurdish guerrilla movement just after her birth. In her interviews, Arslan remarks that she has always been in need of a confrontation with her dad, that she wanted to understand why he had left her as a baby, to know what kind of a person he was, and to visit his grave. Throughout her filmed personal journey, she meets members of her family and other relatives to inquire about her father, asking questions that were suppressed amongst the family members for many years. She also meets new people, including people from the Kurdish movement who used to know her father. Eventually she goes to the Mahmur Camp in Iraq, which is officially a refugee camp hosting the Kurds who fled Turkey due to the war, though in Turkey it is known as a PKK camp, and the state identifies and presents it as such. There she meets an ex-PKK member who used to be a close friend of her father, and from him she hears the story of how her father died during a combat with Turkish soldiers. When Arslan wants him to take her to her father's grave, he says they cannot take the responsibility, as that area is not safe. Yet there is a scene in Mahmur Camp which materialises Arslan's father and his death, not through a grave, but by locating him amongst other Kurdish people who have lost their lives. In this scene Arslan visits the building of the 'Martyrs' Families Foundation' in the camp, which has empty rooms with all the walls covered with countless small pictures of Kurdish people who lost their lives due to the war, hanging next to each other. A woman, who has lost her son whose body was never found, guides Arslan through the pictures. The camera travels across the countless small pictures whilst the woman recounts their stories. The scene strikingly highlights the convergence between the individual and social, by portraying Arslan's father as just one of the thousands of Kurds – civilians as well as PKK militants – who have lost their lives in the conflict, and in this way, positioning Arslan's personal story within the bigger picture of the Kurdish conflict consisting of uncountable pictures encapsulating many stories, like Arslan's, like the story of this film. And the general tendency of the filmmakers to represent the Kurdish issue starting with their own stories in this example results in a documentary that draws the historical picture of the origins and the consequences of

the internal war in Turkey simply via a filmmaker's personal search for her lost father.

The documentary *Close-up Kurdistan*, which was discussed above, is the most epic historical documentary about the Kurdish issue made to date. The film attempts to provide an overview of the extremely complicated recent history of the Kurdish conflict in Turkey and it features interviews with a large number of people, including prominent Kurdish intellectuals and politicians, ordinary Kurdish citizens, ex-PKK guerrillas, and even an ex-Turkish soldier and an ex-JITEM member; that is one of the most notable achievements of the documentary as it is quite difficult to convince such people to publicly share their past experiences. Treating various aspects of the Kurdish issue and touching upon many significant historical events attesting to state atrocities in the Kurdish region, Yüksel Yavuz embarks upon drawing the big picture of the Kurdish issue in Turkey with thorough analyses and provides a macro-level historical study of the issue in film. Though, even in doing so, he too structures his documentary as a personal journey, in his own words, "a personal journey into the recent past of the Turkish-Kurdish conflict" (Yavuz 2009). He says, "I wanted to experience what has happened to the people who have been born and raised there like me, but who have continued to live there. I wanted to understand why a girlfriend of mine from my school days went to the mountains to become a guerrilla and never came back". Hence, the narration of his documentary is designed in a way to highlight that understanding these personal stories is possible only through a knowledge of the Kurdish issue in general and only by positioning individuals within a broad historical frame.

In the opening scene of *Close-up Kurdistan*, we see the director and his parents sitting in their village house, going through the family album and reminiscing about the old days, and about relatives and friends whilst looking at their photos. With each photo comes a story; of someone tortured by Turkish soldiers, someone who joined the PKK, someone who had to flee abroad, etc. The implication is that the consequences of the social history of the conflict are so prominent in the personal lives of Kurdish people that the stories hidden in the private family album of any Kurdish household when pieced together would create the larger picture of the Kurdish issue in Turkey. Following this scene, the documentary continues with

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formal interviews and archive footage commenting on the Kurdish issue in general, but it keeps coming back to the first scene, intercutting the narrative of the history of the Kurdish conflict with the stories of random Kurdish individuals in the family album.

Private collections that materialise personal memories in the form of photographs, family albums, letters, diaries, sound recordings play a central role in Kurdish films. This is on the one hand related to the lack of public archives on the history of the Kurdish issue in Turkey. As filmmakers often complain about the absence, or paucity, or inaccessibility of relevant historical archives, they are left with what they can access: private collections of personal memories available to them. Yet, this disadvantage becomes an advantage. Publicising the actual collections of private memories via film and pointing the camera at the family albums, personal diaries, and private sound recordings in Kurdish households grants Kurdish films one of their most potent political meanings. Personal memories mediated and collected in various forms take on new meaning as they are re-mediated and re-produced through the medium of film. Once featured in film, these private archives turn into social archives; personal memories into public memories. We can in fact talk about an inter-conversion between the personal and the social in these films, where they transform from one to the other in a cycle. For example, in *Voice of My Father*, Base has preserved newspapers from the Maraş Massacre days and hidden them away in a chest. As someone who has experienced those dark days, she has added the public archives of social incidents into her private collection of memories. Yet, when she opens her chest for her son's film, this public memory that was once transformed into private memory becomes public again. However, it is not simply a public memory any longer; it is 'a public memory mediated through personal memories'; 'social history mediated through the personal story'; social history that becomes flesh, that no longer refers to cold statistics but to living people. We can say that this is what Kurdish films in general do whilst utilising the power of individual stories to represent the social history of the Kurdish issue.

From Present to Past: What to Do With the Kurdish Memories?

"Memory is, by definition, a term which directs our attention not to the past but to the past-present relation", and, "it is because 'the past' has this living active existence in the present that it matters so much politically" (Popular Memory Group 2011: 256-257). One of the fundamental principles of history as well as memory is that they are constructed in the present and their representation of the past is always marked by the present. Specifically, in cases where history becomes a terrain of political struggle, conflicting representations of past events by diverse groups are highly informed by present-day politics:

> [T]o contest the past is also, of course, to pose questions about the present, and what the past means in the present. Our understanding of the past has strategic, political, and ethical consequences. Contests over the meaning of the past are also contests over the meaning of the present and over ways of taking the past forward. Ideas of restitution and reparation, evoking both financial or political justice and more abstruse compensations such as recognition of wrongs done, or readiness to hear and acknowledge hidden stories, all draw on a sense that the present is obliged to accommodate the past in order to move on from it. (Hodgkin and Radstone 2003: 1)

As for Kurdish films in Turkey, the specificities of the present-day political context of the Kurdish issue are highly significant in terms of their representation of the past. One specific point that is noteworthy in this context is that Kurdish films did not come out during the period when the political project of the Kurdish movement was national liberation and the armed struggle was regarded as the only way to materialise this goal. They came out during the days of peace talks, in a period when the Kurdish movement reformulated its ultimate goal and identified the solution to the Kurdish conflict as building peace and enhancing democracy in Turkey. This transformation was of course something that required certain modifications in the views, attitudes and feelings of the Kurdish people, the base of the movement. And the adaptation of the Kurds into the new era in the Kurdish conflict is strongly connected with the question of what to do with the past under the new political circumstances. Hence, *Future Lasts Forever*, for instance, raises this question directly in its opening with a written quotation from Cesare Pavese: "Now that I've

seen what war is, what civil war is, I know that everybody, if one day it should end, ought to ask himself: "And what shall we make of the fallen? Why are they dead?"".

In a sense, the 'political use' of traumatic Kurdish memories in the present day was clearer in the previous era, as memories of pain and suffering due to brutal state oppression were mobilised towards and gave power to the Kurdish political struggle for national liberation and independence. Yet the question of what to do with these memories, where to go with them, is more complicated in the new era of the Kurdish conflict. While talking about the necessity for social confrontation in Turkey, the first aspect that comes forward is the confrontation of the state, the guilty perpetrators, and Turkish society at large, with their roles in the crimes against the Kurdish people. Though for social peace, Kurdish people also need to undergo the process of confronting their memories and deciding what to do with them.

The question of what to do with the painful memories of Kurdishness is evident in Kurdish films. First of all, it is significant to note in this regard that the majority of these films do not focus on the past but on the remembrance of the past; they unravel the past through (real or fictional) characters that remember the past in present-day Turkey. They focus on the ones who have lost their lives in the past, through the stories of the survivors who in the present remember those lost ones. It is not what happened in the past so much as the present effects of the past that is of primary interest to Kurdish filmmakers. In this regard, what Kurdish films do is not only to represent history, but to represent the remembrance of history. Thus, the question in this context is no longer what to do with the past, but what to do with the memories of the past.

In *Future Lasts Forever*, Özcan Alper chooses to focus on fictional and non-fictional characters in the present who live with the weight of their memories of the 1990s, the years when the Kurdish conflict was at its peak, instead of writing a scenario that is directly set in those years. The film's narrative is overloaded with memories of the past, while the present time is drawn almost as a sketch that is developed just enough to host memories and only so as to render the past 'the remembered past'. The main characters, Sumru and Ahmet, who meet Kurdish people to hear and record their memories, who research into the archives of state violence, and who also struggle

with their own memories, fail to be fully developed characters in the present. Rather, they appear as the bearers of the memories of absent people; they are the mediators between the past and the present as remembering agents. A similar yet more dramatic example is *Voice of My Father*, which, rather than directly telling the story of the Maraş Massacre in a story set in 1978, brings forward the story of a family in present-day Turkey who cannot get over their memories of the massacre. Directors Doğan and Eskiköy say: "We realised that when talking about the past massacres in this country, we always focus on people who were killed. Yet, we believe that we need to know what the survivors feel and what kind of a future they imagine for this country" (*Radikal* 30 October 2012). *Voice of My Father*'s story is set in a frozen present time. As with *Future Lasts Forever*, so little happens in the present time of the story in terms of action and dialogue that the present time almost does not exist in the film. The main character Base appears like a mythical character, walking around the hills in silence, with a mysterious look in her long black dresses, preoccupied with memories, and with no trace of live-ness or mundane-ness. We see some fragments from the daily life of Base and her son Mehmet throughout the film, but with almost nothing happening. The very few dialogues between the two that break the silent present are conversations about the past. The viewer does not get to know the characters through their present-time actions or dialogues, but only through their memories of the time past. The film avoids disrupting its focus on the past with the mundaneness of the present. The lack of natural dialogues and daily life experiences represents the present as an impossible time. The present is solely the container of past time; a non-experienced time-space invaded by the memories of experiences in the past.

The stagnation of the present and the inertia of the characters in these films can be read with regards to the issue of integration. The integration of the hitherto excluded and oppressed Kurds into Turkey is in a sense their integration into the present. They need to come to terms with the past, they need to know what to do with their memories, in order to have an integrated life in the present of Turkey. "What to do with these memories?" is a question that is evident in Kurdish films and that puzzles their characters. In these films we hear Kurdish people repeatedly advising each other either to forget or not to forget; some reminding of the necessity of not forgetting, some articulating the devastating outcomes of remembering.

I Flew You Stayed could have been a biopic that directly portrayed Mizgin Arslan's father's life, but instead Arslan chose to portray him by positioning herself in the centre of the narrative longing for her father in the present and by revealing the memories of the people who remember him today. One of the most striking scenes in *I Flew You Stayed* is when Arslan visits her grandparents in her journey following the traces of her father. Visiting them in their house in a Kurdish village, Arslan asks her grandparents about her father, requesting all sorts of details about him to build a memory of her father whom she has never met. Yet the grandparents are reluctant to share his memory with their granddaughter and they disapprove Arslan's attempt to rake up the past. Though at one point, they show her a picture of her father hanging on their wall. It has been hung on the wall, yet covered with an old and shabby plastic shopping bag. The grandfather takes the picture off the wall and out of the bag, the camera zooms into the face of the missing father, the grandfather talks about his son looking at the picture, but then he suddenly stops and immediately hangs the picture back up, and covers it again with the plastic bag. This is a striking moment, revealing the issue of not knowing what to do with memories – Not *not* hanging his picture on the wall, putting it away and repressing that memory, but putting it up yet concealing it.

In *Voice of My Father*, Mehmet (based on and played by the co-director Zeynel Doğan) is keen to reveal the family history and discuss the past with her mother Base. However, Base resists sharing her memories with her son, although she carries the weight of the memories and lives in the past herself. Similar to the grandparents in *I Flew You Stayed*, she has *kept* everything that makes memories tangible, but she has *kept* them *away*. Her wooden chest is a private archive of family history, full of audiotapes, letters, photographs and newspapers, which she does not want to open. When Mehmet asks about the audiotapes that for years were used as letters between the father and the rest of the family, she lies: "I threw them away. What use are they?" Mehmet replies, "Is it so bad for a person to know about his past?" When Mehmet finds old newspapers from the Maraş massacre days hidden in Base's chest in the bedroom, he asks, "What are these? Why are you keeping them?" Base replies, "Leave them. Be glad you weren't born then and didn't see those days". But then, as Mehmet insists, she starts recounting how their relatives and neighbours were killed

by the crowd with knives and meat cleavers, how women's hands were cut off for their bracelets, and how they managed to escape from the massacre. She then says, "Your dad told me not to tell you. What would I have done if you had gone off like Hasan?" – referring to his older son who joined the PKK. This comment discloses the reason behind her resistance to sharing her memories with Mehmet. 'The voice of the father', on the other hand, openly advises, even dictates his family to forget, starting with their own language. In the audiotapes from the past, Base speaks in Kurdish, yet the father speaks in Turkish on the tapes he sends. The father repeatedly advises that kids should speak Turkish and stay away from trouble: "The kids need to fit in. Don't let them stand out", he says. On one of the tapes, it becomes clear why he keeps imposing forgetfulness on his kids: "Watch out for Hasan. Don't let him be angered by things he remembers. Don't let them feel hatred". Yet despite 'the voice of the father', as we find out towards the end of the film, Hasan does join the PKK.

In these examples we find the representation of a generation that is overly aware of the consequences of remembering memories of pain and suffering. In the years of war painful memories generated anger, anger generated war, and war generated more painful memories. Behind the emergence of the Kurdish armed struggle, and its growing power and popularity over years, was mainly the collective suffering of the Kurds under state oppression. Yet in the days of the 'peace process', the new generation go back to their family albums, open their mothers' chests, ask questions about the past, and rummage through private collections. And they narrate the process and the outcome of their memory hunt in their films. They remember within and through their films not for finding motivations in the past for fighting a war in the present, but, as they articulate at every opportunity, for contributing to the peace yet to come by making Kurdish memories public.

Claim of Truth-telling and Convergences between Fiction and Non-Fiction

Tom O'Regan remarks that "film-making is implicated in processes of popular socialization and social problem solving (locating social problems, identifying their causes, developing solutions for them)" (1996: 16), and he suggests that the films of

a nation can serve as "a forum for telling uncomfortable truths about its society" (ibid:10); "films investigate contemporary public issues [and] they register disturbing social and cultural truths, and foster alternative identities within the country" (ibid: 19). There is no scarcity of 'uncomfortable truths' in the recent and distant history of Turkey for Kurdish films to tackle; if anything, there is an overabundance of them. And, as noted earlier, this abundance is one of the main motivations driving Kurdish filmmaking, yet it also places a 'burden of representation' on the filmmakers. However, 'truth' is a highly politicised concept; what is to be recognised as truth in a society is always subject to power struggles, as well as what is to be done with the knowledge of those truths. Especially when we are talking about issues such as the Kurdish conflict, the politicization of the notion of truth becomes more explicit, and the power struggles over truth becomes more observable. And, as the themes of Kurdish films are the themes of an ongoing political struggle, these films take shape under the impact of the political power struggles over what is to be recognised as truth in relation to the Kurdish conflict.

Communicating on the Kurdish issue against the background of decades-old dominant narratives and to a wide spectrum of the Turkish audience is a difficult task, and this difficulty is something that conditions Kurdish films. While bringing the history of the Kurdish issue to the screen and telling some 'uncomfortable truths' to Turkish society about its past, Kurdish filmmakers search for ways of saying "This is *really* what happened in the past". 'Truth-telling' is one of the main motivations behind the making of Kurdish films, and, the 'claim of truth-telling' is one of the main characteristics of these films.

What could be the most effective way of telling a society some 'uncomfortable truths' about its past, when that society has been ideologically configured under the powerful impact of an official policy of denial that has been suppressing those truths? How to undermine the political conventions that have been cutting off any attempts by the Kurds to express themselves, labelling them as 'terrorist propaganda'? How to render the average Turkish audience open to listening to the Kurdish issue from the Kurdish perspective? These are the questions that seem to be significantly conditioning Kurdish films. If speaking out about long-silenced issues, and thus building a communicative sphere for social confrontation, is the main

motivation behind the *emergence* of Kurdish films, the challenge of accomplishing this motivation within the current political atmosphere is the main parameter defining the *structure* of these films.

The predominance of documentary in Kurdish filmmaking can be seen as one of the reflections of the challenge of convincingly representing truths that conflict with truths that have been largely accepted in Turkish society for decades. Documentary films have played a significant part in the recent boom of Kurdish films in Turkey. Kurdish documentaries of the period are all low budget independent films mostly directed by inexperienced filmmakers, usually making use of filmmakers' social networks as Kurds. Reflecting on the predominance of documentary genre in Kurdish filmmaking, we can point to the multiple reasons underlying this tendency. Firstly, the films in question are mostly the first films of Kurdish filmmakers, and, many beginners in filmmaking usually consider the documentary format 'easier' as it does not require the challenging steps involved in fiction filmmaking such as writing a fictional script, finding locations, directing actors, and so on. Moreover, documentary filmmaking is thought to be more accessible as it can be done independently and with a low budget, especially since the digitalisation of the medium. The documentary genre is also deployed by Kurdish filmmakers as a suitable medium for responding to the problem of the lack of historical archives on the Kurdish issue. As stated earlier, this problem is repeatedly underlined by many filmmakers. Özcan Alper even directly refers to this issue in *Future Lasts Forever*; his characters, who are carrying out research about the 1990s in the Kurdish region, routinely go to a place called the Musa Anter Audio-Visual Memory Centre (which does not exist in real life) and all the archival material Özcan Alper gathers for the film is presented as if it was collected under the roof of the centre. Alper says:

> While working on the film, I wanted to access sound recordings, newspaper archives, and photographs, but there are hardly any archives available. Then I started to talk with Kurdish people about this issue of a lack of archives. The Musa Anter Audio-Visual Memory Centre that we see in the film is a reference to this issue and also actually an implied suggestion that such a centre should be created. And that is why I quoted John Berger in the film: "We need to keep records, because the perpetrators not only destroy the innocents, but also try to destroy our memory". I can only hope that, following the film, such a centre is founded and the audio-visual documents

of this centre can be used by yet-to-be-founded Truth Commissions in the future". (Alper 2011b)

In commenting on his choice to use the documentary format for *38* which is structured around interviews with witnesses of the Dersim massacre supported by historical documents and archive footage, Çayan Demirel also underlines that the lack of Kurdish historical archives is a major problem in the region, and he states that this is why he felt the urge to bring to light the existing evidence and testimonies regarding this horrifying state atrocity through a documentary. He says, "If someone else had previously done research and unearthed these archives, then I could have considered making a fiction film addressing these issues"(Demirel 2008). In sum, as these statements also show, Kurdish documentary filmmaking in general is very much dedicated to the project of bringing to light historical archives concerning the Kurdish issue. We can say that Kurdish filmmakers see their film projects as historical research projects unearthing lost, hidden, or inaccessible historical materials and they have started building an on-screen historical archive of the Kurdish issue in Turkey with their films.

On the other hand, as noted above, the predominance of the documentary genre in Kurdish filmmaking can also be seen as a consequence of the difficulties Kurdish films face due to the over-politicization of the notion of truth in conflict-driven Turkey. For example, while commenting on why they preferred the documentary genre over fiction in *On the Way to School*, Orhan Eskiköy remarks that the audience would not have believed that kind of a story had they told it via a fiction film. He emphasises that using the documentary format was therefore particularly necessary in the narration of this story which touches upon a "sensitive issue", because the documentary format does not leave space for doubtful questions regarding the validity of the film (Eskiköy 2009). In pointing to the common tendency of Kurdish filmmakers to favour documentary over fiction film, director Hüseyin Karabey says:

> We thought, if we show people these issues in an objective way, people cannot remain unresponsive. [...] This was why we became interested in cinema in the first place. When you can't see yourself, the things around you, the things you have witnessed in cinema, you think, "We must be living in a different Turkey, or, the Turkey narrated in cinema is another Turkey". And,

we reckoned that the most objective way to do something about this was documentary (Karabey 2009)

As these comments also indicate, in order to break down some deep-seated ideological prejudices, to overcome the problem of persuasion, the Kurdish issue is mostly told in the documentary format. In this sense, Kurdish filmmaking draws upon the traditional perception that considers documentary film as more entitled to 'represent *the* reality', or to be more competent in 'unravelling *the* truth' than fiction film. We can say that what Spence and Avcı argues specifically for Çayan Demirel's documentary film *Prison No.5* (2009) in fact applies to the majority of the Kurdish documentaries of the period:

> *Prison No. 5* [...] does not see the notion of historical knowledge as a problem. It confidently substitutes one history for another. It never challenges conventional historical understandings of evidence. Nor does it include the search for meaning as part of the story. Nor does it critically and selfconsciously incorporate into the story the difficulty of discovering and telling the whole truth – or even a small part of the truth – about an event. [...] History is knowable and eyewitness testimony is evidence that can bring the past to us. We might describe its use of testimony as a positivist faith in truth and historical knowledge, a discursive transparency that hides its own power behind a naive epistemology. (2013: 302)

At this point we need to acknowledge that the rigidity of the traditional policy of denial and the rigorousness of the suppression of Kurdish voices in telling the history of the conflict have played a major role in this "positivist faith in truth and historical knowledge". Because the Turkish society has been oblivious of many 'historical *facts'* as regards the Kurdish conflict up until the 2000s, 'truth-telling' in Kurdish films first and foremost means 'revealing denied historical facts'. As the Turkish state for decades denied Kurdish identity, stringently controlled narrations of the conflict, and blocked the flow of information to the west of the country, primary questions regarding the history of the conflict, the first set of questions whose answers need consensus if the political polarisation in Turkey is to be healed are rather simple: "Is there such thing as a Kurdish language?", "Did the state forces kill thousands of Kurdish civilians in Dersim in 1938?", or "Was there a secret paramilitary organisation in the 1990s, established by the Turkish state and named JITEM, which tortured and killed tens of thousands Kurdish people?" There is a true and false answer to these questions; there is nothing subjective about them. However,

as we will see in the following chapter, even 'historical facts' are still subject to debate, contestation, and denial in contemporary Turkey. More complicated questions regarding truth, questions about what to do with the dark historical facts and how to interpret them, how to deal with them, and how to accommodate them in present-day Turkey, are of primary concern; they are crucial to the peace-building process, but they can be fully addressed only when there is consensus on historical facts, on what actually happened in the past. In sum, it is necessary to acknowledge that it is in this political atmosphere that Kurdish films perform a belief in "an opposition between the subordinate truth versus the dominant lie" (Hodgkin and Radstone 2003: 5) and deploy an approach that is not so self-conscious or sophisticated in dealing with the issue of representing reality in documentary film.

While the documentary genre has been widely deployed as a suitable medium for convincingly narrating historical facts regarding the Kurdish issue, on the other hand the drive to tell the truth and the claim of 'truth-telling' is in fact apparent not only in documentaries but in Kurdish fiction films as well.There is aremarkable convergence between fiction and non-fiction in the case of Kurdish films in Turkey, in terms of their relationship with the notion of reality. In the case of Kurdish films, the relationships between 'reality and representation', 'film and life', are so transitional that the distinctions between fiction and non-fiction also become transitional.

First of all, we can say that, the pre-production stage of most Kurdish fiction films is no different from that of documentary films. Treating film projects as historical research projects is something we find in fiction filmmaking as well. For example, in his interviews Sedat Yılmaz remarks that while writing the script for *Press* they were working on the diaries of Bayram Balcı, a Kurdish journalist who used to work for the newspaper *Özgür Gündem* in the 1990s and who also took part in the making of *Press* as a consultant; moreover, they interviewed other people who worked for *Özgür Gündem* in those years in order to create a faithful representation of the events and create a feeling of authenticity in this fiction film. Miraz Bezar, the director of *The Children of Diyarbakır*, says:

> Because I haven't experienced that period myself, I wanted to make this film with someone who has. And, Evrim knew the period very well, as she was a

journalist in the region back then. Together with her, we made an extensive research. We also went to the Human Rights Association in Diyarbakır and worked through the incidents in their files. We tried to deploy those incidents in our script. We were looking for a real example that would best represent the issue of unidentified murders". (Bezar 2009)

In short, most Kurdish filmmakers start off their projects with a thorough historical study as they create their fictional scripts. And, on the textual level, we observe that Kurdish fiction films also perform a certain claim of truth-telling; they are structured with a *claim* to be regarded as documentaries in terms of representing reality. There are various filmic ways of enunciating and prompting this claim. Here, we can briefly remember certain patterns we find in Kurdish films that are addressed earlier in this chapter. Kurdish fiction films use real locations, perform an authentic representation of Kurdish culture, employ non-professional actors, and generally fictionalise true stories. They widely deploy archival footage within fictional stories; photographs, videos, newspaper pages are interspersed within the fictional narratives as *reminders of reality*, contextualising the fictional narrative with reference to socio-historical realities. And, all these elements function in the role of positioning the textual fiction within a contextual reality, reminding the viewer of the reality in relation to which the film claims to be based.

In terms of incorporating the outcomes of their historical researches into fictional narratives, on the one hand we have films that literally blend fictional and non-fictional elements and thus exemplify 'hybrid genre' films such as *Voice of My Father*, which, as discussed earlier, is based on the true stories of the co-director Zeynel Doğan and his family and which is structured around the actual archive of audio tapes recorded in the past as audio-letters between family members. *Future Lasts Forever* is another example of hybrid genre Kurdish films where the main character is Sumru, as mentioned earlier, a Turkish doctoral student who visits the Kurdish region for her research in ethnomusicology. *Future Lasts Forever* makes use of densely integrated audio-visual archival footage as well as interviews with actual eyewitnesses of state violence, but these materials are all motivated within the narrative as material found by Sumru throughout her academic research. Hence, the film conveys real accounts of memories of atrocity through the mediation of fictional characters. When we look at the pre-production of *Future Lasts Forever*, we find a

documentary project behind the making of a fiction film. Before shooting the fictional parts of this film, director Özcan Alper has conducted a thorough historical research, accessed some significant archive footage from the 1990s and also recorded interviews with eyewitnesses of the village evacuations, tortures and unidentified murders, and he has later integrated this footage into the fictional story. In this sense it can be said that he has first made a documentary film based on testimonies and archival footage, one exactly like Çayan Demirel's testimonial documentaries, for example, but then framed it within a fictional story.

As mentioned earlier, in *My Marlon and Brando*, Ayça, an amateur Turkish actor, falls in love with a Kurdish actor from Iraq and she takes an adventurous journey to meet him during the days of the Iraq War. The story is the true story of Ayça Damgacı who co-wrote the script together with director Karabey and who plays herself in the film. The film mixes documentary footage with fiction in portraying Ayça's journey through the Kurdish region, by making use of a great variety of actual people, actual events and actual settings that they come across throughout the journey they took for the filmmaking process. For example, when they come across an actual wedding on the way, they stop and Ayça joins the wedding crowd and performs the traditional Kurdish dances with them, and Karabey integrates this scene into the film. Or, when Ayça needs to take a taxi according to the script, for instance, they find a real Kurdish taxi driver and film the spontaneous conversations between Ayça and the driver. Director Karabey says:

> We didn't want to lose the feeling of reality. For that reason, some of the actors in the film are acting themselves and others worked alongside people who participated in the real-life drama. Throughout the production, reality intercepted. When one of the drivers asked if he could stop at his parents' grave in a destroyed Kurdish village, we ended up incorporating this in the film because his experiences were so reflective of those we were trying to represent in the story. (Karabey 2008)

Hence, the convergence between fiction and non-fiction in *My Marlon and Brando* originates not only from the fact that the script is based on a true story, but also from the documentary footage that is smoothly fused with a fictional narrative.

Although there are examples that literally mix fiction and non-fiction, if we consider the centrality of the claim of truth-telling in all Kurdish fiction films, we can even conclude that theorising these films as 'hybrid genre' films is in fact insignificant. For instance, *The Children of Diyarbakır* is not a hybrid genre film but, as pointed out above, it is based on true stories and it makes extensive use of the documentary value of featuring Diyarbakır for the first time in cinema, so much so that we can say there is a fictional story in *The Children of Diyarbakır* that is set within a documentary film about Diyarbakır in the background. Thus, in general, one aspect of the convergence between fiction and non-fiction in Kurdish films is related to the previously discussed void of public representations of Kurds and the Kurdish region before the emergence of Kurdish films. Being the 'firsts' to introduce the Kurdish geography and culture to the wider public gives all Kurdish fictional films a certain 'documentary value'. We can also think about Sedat Yılmaz's extensive efforts to faithfully represent every single detail in drawing a realistic picture of the 1990s in *Press*, such as the fact that he consulted a number of people only to find out what kind of bags were used in those years by Kurdish kids who were employed to secretly deliver banned issues of *Özgür Gündem*. This kind of meticulousness is something we find in all Kurdish films, in their effort to represent the Kurdish geography and culture authentically and depict certain historical periods and past events truthfully. In this regard we can say that the filmmakers treat their fiction films as 'drama-documentaries' or 're-enactments'. And when *Press* ends with a written note itemising some historical facts (the number of Kurdish journalists murdered in the period depicted in the film, the number of indictments filed against *Özgür Gündem*, and so on), special attention is placed in its authentic and realistic narrative, and one last time stakes a claim to truth-telling that is as bold as in any documentary film. In this context, the hybrid-genre films discussed above can be seen as simply employing the strategy of enunciating the claim of representing *the* reality a step further.

What is the exact point in a fiction film where the reminders of reality interspersed within the story reach a certain level of intensity so that the film is no longer a 'pure' fiction film? Ultimately, this is a pointless question which demonstrates that the distinction between fiction and non-fiction is always subject to becoming vague when interrogated. Yet what is significant is that Kurdish films always bring this

interrogation forth, or they expose this vagueness, due to the way notions of reality and truth are evident in them. My argument is that it is the politics of the Kurdish issue that renders the fiction/non-fiction distinction in Kurdish films as a peculiarly complicated issue. In other words, the much-debated and theoretically vague distinction between fiction film and non-fiction film becomes even more indistinct in the case of Kurdish films due to the political context.

What is significant for our discussion, with regards to Kurdish fiction films that deploy historical material in different ways and to varying extents, is the reality effect brought about by the infiltration of real history into fictional stories. In explaining why he integrated actual victim accounts in his fiction film, Özcan Alper says, "when you make a film that tackles sociological realities and political issues, no matter how fictional your story is, the reality keeps badgering you", and he continues: "I wanted to avoid the audience to think that 'the film is making propaganda' and leave them alone with the reality" (Alper 2011a). An interviewer asks Orhan Eskiköy, the co-director of *Voice of My Father*, whether he particularly wants to highlight that the story of the film is a "true story". Eskiköy's response is, "What you are watching is not just a film; that is what I want to get through to my audience" (Eskiköy 2012b)**.**This seems to be the essential issue for Kurdish filmmakers; finding the most effective mechanisms, in either fiction or non-fiction filmmaking, for getting this through to Turkish audiences. For Kurdish films that find their stories in real life, the fundamental concern seems to be that of retaining the intrinsic link between the 'found real story' and their filmic story, and thus representing reality in a way that maximises the reality effect.

This concern may find response in a documentary film, a fiction film, or in a hybrid genre. For example, while thinking of making a film based on her true story, Müjde Arslan first starts working on a script for a fiction film. However, after working on the script for several years, she changes her mind and decides to make a documentary film, *I Flew You Stayed,* where she documents her journey following the traces of her departed father. In contrast, *Voice of My Father,* which was made the same year and which also comments on the Kurdish issue through the theme of a missing father, evolves in the reverse direction. Originally conceived as a documentary film by the co-director Zeynel Doğan, the project evolves into a fiction film based on the true

story of Doğan's family, with Doğan and his family playing themselves, and with the use of the actual sound-recordings of Doğan's father. Here, the important point is that in Kurdish filmmaking there is always a true story at the initial point, which then becomes a fiction or non-fiction film. The quest to represent reality in a way that maximises the reality effect finds its response in both forms, and it can be said that there is ultimately no difference between fictional and nonfictional Kurdish films in terms of their relationship to 'reality', resulting from the chosen form for narrating true stories.

To sum up, in both fiction and non-fiction filmmaking, filmmakers who address the history of the Kurdish issue are in search of the most effective ways of communicating to their audience that 'what they are watching is not just a film'. In order to render the average Turkish audience more approachable, and in order to break down ideological barriers, they endeavour to firmly knit the films together with reality. In this regard, the message we see in some films saying "All characters and events depicted in this film are fictional and any resemblance to real events, locales or persons is purely coincidental" works in the opposite direction in Kurdish films. It is as if all Kurdish films start with an unspoken, unwritten yet *ipso facto* present message: "All characters and events depicted in this film are correlated with real events, locales and persons and all resemblances are deliberate".

Conclusions

As a consequence of the rigidity of state control over information and narratives on the Kurdish issue, the official interpretation of the conflict has been the dominant narrative shared by the vast majority of Turkish society for decades, while on the other hand the Kurdish political movement has gained in popularity and built up communication among the Kurds over the years; this, in turn, has led to the establishment of a shared narrative about the conflict in Kurdish society. As discussed in Chapter 3, this state of affairs resulted in an immense gap between the dominant Kurdish and Turkish perspectives in terms of knowledge, experiences, opinions, beliefs and emotions concerning the Kurdish issue. When Kurdish films

emerged and became increasingly public in Turkey during the period of the peace talks, their primary objective was to bridge the gap between Turkish and Kurdish interpretations of the conflict and in this way contribute to processes of social peace and reconciliation in Turkey. In attempting to reduce political polarisation, Kurdish films have drawn on convergences between 'past and present', 'reality and representation', and 'personal and social', and the political propositions of these films have taken shape mainly on the axes of these convergences.

In treating true stories from history, without exception Kurdish films give priority to narrating the suffering of the Kurds in the past, and they bring to light evidence and speak of memories of state atrocities. While utilising film as a medium of social confrontation with the dark events of the past, filmmakers deploy Kurdish memories against the dominant historicisation of the Kurdish issue in Turkey and in doing so they have made those silenced Kurdish memories publicly available and accessible to the general Turkish public for the first time. It is important to underline that while the Turkish perspective on the conflict has always been known to the Kurds because it was imposed on them by oppressive state mechanisms, until recently Turkish society has been quite insulated from and unaware of the Kurdish perspective. During the internal war, the suffering of Turks brought on by 'terrorism' was amplified through official discourses and repeatedly displayed in the mainstream media, whereas Kurdish suffering was completely invisible in the west of the country. In this context, as they bring historical state atrocities to the screen Kurdish films not only push the limits of the AKP government's understanding of peace by forcing it to acknowledge past wrongdoings, but they also address Turkish society at large in an attempt to influence the dominant thrust of Turkish public opinion about the Kurdish conflict by bringing into view the magnitude of Kurdish suffering.

In order to display the prevalence of the consequences of the conflict in contemporary Kurdish society, Kurdish films tend to strongly link the personal to the social. They utilise the representative power of personal stories to attest to the wide-scale social effects of the conflict in Kurdish society. And in doing so these filmmakers usually direct their cameras to the nearest stories available and thus speak of the Kurdish issue through their own stories or the stories of their families, co-villagers, and friends. They compensate for the lack of historical materials

concerning the Kurdish issue by using the private collections of items in Kurdish households that materialise personal memories of ordinary people in the form of photographs, family albums, letters, diaries, and sound recordings. Kurdish films highlight that departing from the story of one Kurdish individual, following the story of a single photograph, or just going through the diaries of a single person is sufficient to draw the larger historical picture of the Kurdish conflict, and thus they show that the personal and the social have been strongly interconnected in the Kurdish experience.

Another commonly used strategy in peace-building via film is the revising of dominant image of the Kurdish region in Turkish public memory. The use of Kurdish cities and landscapes as settings, which previously hadn't been done in cinema in Turkey, is one of the distinct characteristics of Kurdish films. While making familiar the unfamiliar Kurdish geography, Kurdish films aim to undermine prevailing negative image of the region which was disseminated through official discourses for many decades. On the other hand, these films also (re)introduce the Kurds to the Turkish public, humanising and fleshing out the Kurds against a background of Kurdishness as a negative discursive object. Some filmmakers give the floor to actual Kurdish people in the documentary format, placing the audience eye-to-eye with ordinary Kurds who have much to share with them, while others prefer to utilise the power of the identification mechanisms of fiction film, building fictional Kurdish characters based on real people and their true stories. While all of these films attach much significance to authentically representing Kurdish culture, some films particularly highlight the fact that there is also another fundamental element of Kurdishness: Kurdish political identity. Even though it is a dangerous zone for Kurdish films to enter as they aim to build up communication between the Kurdish and Turkish segments of society, these films nevertheless endeavor to humanise Kurdish militants, to show the strong ties between the Kurdish political movement and the Kurdish people, and they point to the socio-historical context that gave rise to the emergence of the Kurdish armed struggle.

Quite aware of the power struggles over opposing interpretations of the past in Turkey in the days of political transformation, Kurdish films seek out ways to claim that their version of the past is the 'true version' among others. They deploy

strategies of anchoring representations to reality and films to life in order to convincingly depict the history of the conflict from the Kurdish perspective. The predominance of the documentary genre in Kurdish filmmaking can be seen as one of the responses of filmmakers to the difficulty of overcoming some of the deep-seated ideological prejudices ingrained in Turkish society. On the other hand, there is aremarkable convergence between fiction and non-fiction in the case of Kurdish films in terms of their relationship with the notion of reality, as the claim of 'truth-telling' is observable not only in Kurdish documentaries but in fiction films as well.

In this chapter, I approached Kurdish films as 'political films', which is an essential dimension of the overall exploration of the issue of 'film and politics' in this thesis. In the following chapter, I will discuss how these Kurdish films have been in the limelight in Turkey in recent years by taking up discourses which celebrate them as 'films for peace' and assign them major roles in the building up of communication between the east and the west of the country. Hence, the following chapter will demonstrate that the apparent political aspirations of Kurdish films discussed in this chapter are grounded in and in harmony with the ongoing political transformation in the background. Whether that means Kurdish films are likely to have a positive influence in Turkey for the peaceful solution of the Kurdish conflict is one of the main questions I tackle in the following chapter.

CHAPTER 6:

POLITICS OF CONTEXT

Introduction

In the previous chapter, I argued that the intense interplay between film and politics in the era of political transformation in Turkey produce convergences between 'past and present', 'reality and representation', and, 'personal and social' in the case of Kurdish films. In this chapter, I will add another convergence; the convergence between 'text and context' into my analysis of the political meaning of Kurdish films, which I argue is again a consequence of the over-determination of politics over Kurdish films in Turkey in the period of political transformation.

The meaning of a film does not come to a close when the production of the film is completed. As Toby Miller (2010) discusses, the meaning of a filmic text undergoes a constant transformation during its social circulation, as it encounters other social texts that operate around the same subject. As the themes of Kurdish films are the themes of current affairs in Turkey, the process Miller talks about is something more readily observable in the case of Kurdish films. Inasmuch as the Kurdish conflict continues to be an ongoing political issue with ever-shifting political dynamics, the dialogue between Kurdish films and other social texts is a constant, instant and intense one. For this reason, any discussion of the meaning of Kurdish films should involve the impact of the political dynamics of the Kurdish issue on this meaning.

In the previous chapter, I analysed some salient themes, patterns, discourses, and representations in Kurdish films that are explicitly deployed towards building certain political meanings, whereas, in this chapter I will ask what happens to those meanings once the films are out of the hands of their creators, once they start their social circulation and get into intertextual dialogues with other texts regarding the Kurdish issue. The previous chapter was mainly an analysis of Kurdish films in

Turkey as 'political films', whereas this chapter focuses on the issue of 'film and politics' in the case of Kurdish films. On the one hand, as Chapter 5 demonstrates, Kurdish films *intentionally* enter into dialogue with the web of discourses on the Kurdish issue and they deploy intertextuality to position themselves within the struggle of oppositional, socio-political texts the intention of which is to exert influence on the Kurdish conflict. However, the politics of Kurdish films, and the interplay between film and politics, is evident beyond the fact that Kurdish films are literally 'political films'. Thus what I find significant for this research is not only the *intentional* textual techniques these films exercise as a political strategy, but the *unintentional* encounters of diverse texts within the intertextual ground regarding the Kurdish issue in Turkey. These encounters render Kurdish films political not only in the sense that they are part of a political cinema movement, but by virtue of the way intertextuality functions.

Here I must note that while deploying the concept of intertextuality, I do not refer to the contact between diverse film texts only, because, as Tom O'Regan remarks, "the intertextuality of film-making is not only an accomplishment turning on relations with other films but also on relations with other social and textual entities outside film" (1996: 173). Of primary interest to me is the mediation between filmic text and the social within the case of Kurdish films. And, my aim in relation to the analysis of Kurdish films is to apply the question Fairclough raises – that is, how do texts "draw upon, incorporate, recontextualize and engage in dialogue with other texts" (2003: 17). The key question that shapes all other questions in this chapter is, "How exactly does the politics of the Kurdish issue in Turkey dominate the mediation between filmic text and the social in the case of Kurdish films?"

As I emphasised in the previous chapter, one of the key emphases shaping this study is that Kurdish films make Kurdish memories and the Kurdish perspective on truth *publicly available* for the first time in Turkey. They incorporate Kurdish memories into the public memory of the nation and they introduce the Kurdish perspective on truth into the public debates regarding the truth of the Kurdish conflict. Accordingly, this chapter's concern in a nutshell is how the Kurdish perspective on memory and truth represented in Kurdish films communicate to the society once they are public. The main issue I will be interrogating here is the way in which Kurdish films

incorporate with the political struggle over what is to be recognised as the truth of the history of the Kurdish issue, the way their meanings are affected by this struggle, and finally, how they might have an impact on this struggle. This interrogation is part of a much broader and crucial question on the potentiality of Kurdish films to play a role in a possible social peace in Turkey. For this inquiry, it is not adequate merely to analyse the textuality of Kurdish films; we also need to observe the power struggles between various social actors over how to contextualise these films in relation to the politics of truth and the politics of memory regarding the Kurdish conflict. In other words, we need to follow not only Kurdish films, but also the interaction between films and politics; not for suggesting definite answers perhaps, but for tracing the indicators of possible answers to the questions regarding the potential political influence of Kurdish films in Turkey.

For this investigation, I will closely observe how the meanings of Kurdish films were interpreted, contextualised, manipulated, and appropriated by diverse social actors in Turkey, from filmmakers to festival organisers and from columnists to politicians and audiences. In doing so, I will concentrate only on those discourses which have become public, as I attach significance to analysing the dominant contextualisations of these films that were made available to the general public. Because in this period the media has functioned as the main channel for disseminating various receptions of Kurdish films by diverse social agents, I will broadly refer to the media in my discussions on the public reception of these films. And, in order to demonstrate the fact that Kurdish films of the period garnered much interest not only among a marginal section of the media but among the majority of media outlets from a broad political spectrum, I chose my references from a variety of printed and online media in Turkey from a similarly broad political spectrum; for example, from the pro-Islamic *Zaman* to mainstream liberal *Radikal*, centre-right *Milliyet*, left-wing *Bianet* and also the Kurdish media that is available in Turkish such as the newspaper *Özgür Gündem* and the news agency *ANF*. However, I must clarify that I have not carried out a systematic media analysis for this research, but I do refer to the most pronounced and reiterated discourses and debates that can be widely found in the media coverage of Kurdish films. Likewise, I chose not to conduct an audience research myself, but I did take into account the prominent discourses and repeated patterns in audience reactions that arose during public screenings; those that were

repeatedly noted in the news and thus became publicly visible, extended beyond theatres, and were circulated (and constructed) as one of the potential dominant reactions to Kurdish films. What is significant for this research is the observation of the prominent discourses on Kurdish films that were widely circulated in Turkey in their immediate context of their release and the recognition of the predominant contextualisations of these films in relation to the politics of the Kurdish issue that were widely featured, highly visible, and publicly available not only to the actual audiences of these films but to the general public who had never seen them.

Reception Studies and the Issue of Political Impact

As discussed in the previous chapter, the main motivation behind Kurdish filmmaking in Turkey is a political one; to contribute to the peace-building process by participating in the public debates on the Kurdish conflict through the language of film. But how powerful are Kurdish films really in terms of challenging the nationalist and militarist sentiments fuelled in Turkish society for so many decades? To what extent do the historical facts narrated in these films have an impact on the public perception of the Kurdish issue in the present? How effective can they be in influencing the dominant public opinion on the Kurdish conflict, breaking down the deep-seated social polarisation, and repairing segregated interpretations of the conflict in Turkey? With their pervasive aspiration of playing a role in building social peace in Turkey and with their wide public promotion for their potential to influence public opinion in favour of a peaceful resolution of the Kurdish conflict, Kurdish films bring forth the more general and highly complicated question of the social influence of films. Although it is not possible to 'measure' the social influence of films, or to give definite answers to the questions articulated above, I find it highly significant to observe the interactions between films and politics, to examine the dialogues between cinema and society, with these questions in mind.

While general comments assuming the social significance of films are commonplace in academic and non-academic cinema writing, how to observe, study, and theorise this significance in a given society at a specific time is a thorny question. Audience

studies can be suggested as one viable method for addressing the questions raised above, as it focuses attention on the tangible and observable. Exploring the impact of certain films on their actual audiences can tell us something about the issue of social influence. And conducting audience research on Kurdish films in Turkey would no doubt be an interesting and valuable study. However, that is not the path I have chosen for my interrogation of the potential political influence of Kurdish films in Turkey. First of all, if we were to narrow down our understanding of social impact to the actual audiences, then all the optimistic comments emphasising the socio-political significance of Kurdish films would prove to be unfounded, firstly because the number of people in Turkey who have actually seen these films is remarkably limited[7]. Secondly, as I will later discuss further with reference to specific examples in this chapter, public screenings of the Kurdish films in question frequently meet with negative reactions from some Turkish audiences, who basically turn to some ingrained Turkish nationalist discourses and key Kemalist arguments in their furious criticisms of Kurdish films. As these reactions indicate, the immediate impact of films in general is usually not that powerful, or in other words, the influence of films on the opinions and beliefs of their audiences might not be that immediate or direct, especially when we are talking about films that embark upon breaking down some deep-seated opinions and conflict-driven sentiments, as Kurdish films do. And more importantly, the observation regarding the contribution of Kurdish films in the processes of social dialogue cannot be reduced to the concrete reactions of the actual audiences. In an article that particularly addresses the issue of the political impact of political documentary, David Whiteman observes:

> Investigations of the political impact of film have been almost entirely guided by an individualistic model of political impact, focusing on a *finished* film's effects on *individual* citizens within the *dominant* public discourse. Such a model may actually prove to direct our attention to the circumstances under which film is *least likely* to have an impact. (2004: 54)

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[7]The box office figures of some of the Kurdish films of the period were as follows: *On the Way to School*, 93,708; *The Children of Diyarbakır*, 23,748; *Press*, 25,832; *The Storm*, 56,854; *Voice of My Father*, 18,214; *Future Lasts Forever*, 38,589; and *Shawaks*, 6,859. Some of the Kurdish films addressed in this thesis circulated via the festival circuit and independent film screening organisations but were never released in theatres.

Consequently, he argues for the need to develop a "broader sense of impact" that takes into consideration "the importance of the context of the viewing, of the nature of interpersonal discussions surrounding the viewing, and of the media coverage of the film" (ibid: 53). In this research I am interested in certain dimensions of the relationships between film and society that cannot be measured through an audience study. What is far less observable yet more significant for this research is the way Kurdish films have become mediators for debating the Kurdish issue; the way their discourses have seeped into the dominant discourses on the conflict; the way they have influenced how the Kurdish issue is debated; the way they have provided the society with some topics and examples to discuss the Kurdish issue.

In tackling the issue of political influence, I will appeal to the general approach of 'reception studies', as it suggests directing attention to the contextual and intertextual analysis of film meaning. In Janet Staiger's description, "reception studies tries to explain an event (the interpretation of a film), while textual studies is working towards elucidating an object (the film). Both activities are useful in the process of knowledge, but they explore different aspects of hermeneutics of cultural studies" (1992: 9). She highlights that reception studies aims at analysing "the historical context of the event of interpretation" and "seeks to understand textual interpretations as they are produced historically" (ibid: 9). Barbara Klinger emphasises that reception studies "redefined the object of literary analysis from the text to the intertext – the network of discourses, social institutions and historical conditions surrounding a work", and states that "such contextual analysis hopes to reveal the intimate impact of discursive and social situations on cinematic meaning" (1997: 108). "Those pursuing issues of reception interrogate such contextual elements to understand how they helped negotiate the film's social meanings and public reception, attempting to pinpoint the meanings in circulation at a given historical moment" (ibid: 114), she further explains.

Tony Bennett talks about the interaction between "the culturally activated text and the culturally activated reader, an interaction structured by the material, social, ideological and institutional relationships in which both text and readers are inescapably inscribed"(1983: 12). Yet he admits that he is not altogether sure about the consequences of his argument that meanings embedded in texts can always be

"dis-embedded and re-embedded in alternative discursive formations through the ways in which texts are productively activated within different reading formations" (ibid: 14). He writes; "This question is troubling since, once the seductive facticity of the 'text itself' is challenged, there seems to be nothing to stop the total dissolution of the text into a potentially infinite series of different readings – in which case there seems to be nothing left for criticism to get hold of or to address" (ibid: 14). However, Staiger has no confusion regarding Bennett's argument. She clarifies that "although many observations in reception studies might logically imply that everyone reads in individual ways, as a research area, reception studies seeks generalisations which, while applying to the individual situation, provide knowledge about large-scale processes" (Staiger 1992: 10). She stresses that reception studies rejects "the proposition that apparent uniqueness among readings implies freedom for readers", as "controlling conventions, linked to ideologies, win out over our illusionary variety" (ibid: 10). So, as Roy Wagner remarks, meaning is not "a free-floating intangible, but a phenomenon that stands in a certain relation to the conventions of culture. (1986: ix), and convention in this sense is simply "social contextualization" (ibid: 30).

Here, we can also return to Willemen's concept of "cultural specificity", discussed in Chapter 2. Cultural specificity is a valuable concept not only for the textual analysis of films, perhaps more so in terms of the contextual and intertextual analysis of film meaning. Although the filmic text embodies various potential meanings, there are always socio-cultural contextualising powers over the text functioning for the closure of the text's meaning in a certain direction, by encouraging, foregrounding, highlighting certain meanings among many potential meanings. And these forces that operate towards manipulating the meaning of a film can be studied only with reference to the cultural specificity of the particular time and place in which films travel. This is, in Miriam Hansen's words, "the public dimension of cinematic representation"; "This public dimension is distinct from both textual and social determinations of spectatorship because it entails the very moment in which reception can gain a momentum of its own, can give rise to formations not necessarily anticipated in the context of production" (1991: 7). Hansen puts forward the notion of the "specific social horizon of understanding that shapes the viewer's interpretation", which can be read in line with our attempt to re-interpret cultural

specificity within the context of reception studies; she underlines that "that horizon is not a homogeneous storage of intertextual knowledge but a contested field of multiple positions and conflicting interests, defined (though not necessarily confined) in terms of the viewer's class and race, gender and sexual orientation" (ibid: 7). Like Hansen, Klinger also emphasises the importance of hearing the conflicting voices that interpret texts in multiple ways:

> A totalized view thus looks at the instabilities of the historical moment, its assembly of conflicting voices. At the same time, such a view considers the manner in which films are differently appropriated within the social formation by potentially contradictory ideological interests. A total history seeks to avoid reductively equating a text with an ideology (where the text is either reactionary or subversive). Researchers attempt instead to depict the many ideological interests that intersect with a film during its public circulation and to engage as fully as possible the range of its social meanings within its historical moment. (Klinger 1997: 122)

These theoretical arguments developed in the area of reception studies are of significant value for the study of Kurdish films in Turkey; for investigating the political contextualisations of their meaning, for observing how their discourses get into dialogue with contemporary dominant discourses that influence public opinion on the Kurdish issue, and for reflecting on their potential positive political impact in a conflict-driven society.

Politicisation of Film Culture in Turkey in the 2000s

Carole Sklan defines the notion of 'film culture' by highlighting its multi-faceted character:

> It's limited to talk about screen culture only in terms of the production and exhibition of commercial film and television. A country's film culture encompasses the whole environment in which films are made, distributed, seen and discussed, and in which they create meanings. There is a more extensive, rich and diverse screen culture that is circulated through a variety of ways, such as film festivals, film societies, film reviews, screen education, discussions and screenings which take place everywhere from rural halls and suburban cinemas to coffee shops and bus stops. […] There is a creative

interaction between the films and the vitality of the culture from which they emerge". (Sklan 1996: 229)

When we put this definition together with the arguments mapping the scope and the methodology of reception studies, we can say that reception studies examines the material found in a specific film culture for studying the contextual and intertextual forces operating on the meaning and the social operation of certain films that circulate in that society at a given time. And, this is the perspective I adhere to in this chapter when I refer to film culture in Turkey in the 2000s.

I argue that we can talk about 'the politicisation of film culture' in Turkey in the early 2000s, which is a result of the historical conjunction of two dynamics that took place in Turkey in this period: the political transformation addressed in Chapter 3 and the revival of cinema discussed in Chapter 4. At a time when the country witnessed radical shifts in politics films came out that focused on the very issues that were at the heart of this political transformation and that had observable consequences in film culture. And, as explained in the previous two chapters, one of the most significant aspects of the political transformation in question was the policy shift in the state's attitude towards the Kurdish conflict, while one of the most dynamic components of the new cinema in Turkey was the emergence of Kurdish films. This historical conjunction rendered Kurdish films a prominent means of debating the Kurdish conflict in Turkey. Kurdish films participated in the ongoing struggle over the future of the Kurdish conflict not only as a subject speaking out, but also an object spoken about; not only did they interrogate the Kurdish issue, but they also became an instrument for the public to interrogate the issue.

On the other hand, what further complicated the picture was the emergence of the first examples signalling the proliferation and diversification of discourses on the Kurdish conflict in cinema in Turkey. Once the ban over representing the Kurdish issue and Kurdish identity in cinema was broken, films representing the Kurdish issue from different political angles started to emerge as a result. *Breath*, which will be discussed later in this chapter, was the first film in Turkey that tackled the Kurdish issue without speaking from a pro-Kurdish perspective. A few other films followed that represented different political opinions on the Kurdish issue on screen.

As a result, the on-screen dialogue on the Kurdish issue became more complicated with the participation of various voices representing diverse political approaches to the Kurdish issue, and that widened, exhilarated and complicated the rising tendency of debating the Kurdish issue through films.

Tom O'Regan observes:

> Diverse agents take up film stories using them for their own purposes: audiences in their discussions of the films; critics in their reviews, talks and essays on the films and the incidents they depict; film-makers to plunder ideas to make new films; journalists as they attach a prominent film to some social issue of the day; special interest groups to further their own aims and those of their members; and governments in their various capacities. Films are vehicles of social exchange among agents and they define the social (cultural) bond among them by their circulation. (1996: 15)

Looking at Kurdish films and other Kurdish-issue-themed films in Turkey from this angle, and examining how different agents interpret, manipulate and contextualise film meaning in this case, is highly necessary. When we talk about diverse and sometimes conflicting interpretations of film meaning in a specific historical moment, here, 'interpretation' does not necessarily refer to what different viewers literally understand from a film, or how they make sense of the film meaning; it refers to how that meaning is contextualised, re-contextualised, manipulated, put into discourse and linked to other discourses by different social actors. It "provides a sense of what the historical prospects were for viewing at a given time by illuminating the meanings made available within that moment, [...] thus depicts how social forces invite viewers to assume positions, giving us a range of possible influences on spectatorship" (Klinger 1997: 114).

If we return to the reception studies approach discussed above, we can say that this methodology is in fact suitable, relevant and significant in varying degrees to the study of different films and cinemas. Given that this approach is mainly interested in what actually happens in the material world and favours a "context-activated theory of reception" (Staiger 1992: 75), the film(s) in question must have a certain public significance of some sort or another, and the context must be giving some observable and significant material regarding the public interpretation(s) of the film meaning for

this theoretical approach to be particularly favourable in the study of certain films. Thus, when the subject of research is films that specifically bring forth issues that dominate the present-day agenda of the society – issues that are highly subject to public controversy – as in the case of this research, then we can say that, directing our attention from text to context and focusing on "the elements that define its situation in a complex discursive and social milieu" (Klinger 1997: 110) is necessary, even compulsory. When public debates contextualising, interpreting and manipulating the meaning of the Kurdish-issue-themed films in diverse and conflicting ways are so wide and rich, it is not justifiable not to study this richness. This is where incorporating the political contextualisation of a film into the interrogation of its political effect becomes crucial. What seems to be of vital importance for the study of Kurdish films in Turkey is, instead of judging the potential political impact of these films merely on the ground of their textual features, examining the context of reception and observing the public interpretations and political uses of film meaning, as they stretch and enlarge, or compress and constrict, highlight and encourage or understate and discourage, the innate potentials inherent in films.

Films as a Means of Debating the Kurdish Issue

The majority of the Turkish mainstream media, which played a central role in disseminating the discourse of terrorism for decades and otherwise kept silent on the Kurdish issue, responded to the shifting balance of power between the old and the new power elites and dramatically changed its language and attitude in the AKP era. Debates on the Kurdish issue were everywhere in the media following the launch of the Kurdish Opening, as the media took on the task of the acclimatization of Turkish society in the new era in the Kurdish conflict, and Kurdish films started to enjoy wide media coverage in this period. When a number of Kurdish films emerged in 2009 to create the phenomenal boom in Kurdish cinema, their media coverage mainly contextualised them tightly within the context of the Kurdish Opening. As mentioned in Chapter 4, in those days, mainstream newspapers were in unison announcing the Kurdish films taking part in national film festivals with headlines

such as 'Kurdish Opening on Screen', or for instance, they were all referring to *The Children of Diyarbakır*'s screening at the Altın Portakal Film Festival as "Kurdish Language Opening at Altın Portakal". This contextualisation was something that served the advocacy of the AKP's Kurdish policy, as it turned the emergence of Kurdish films into one of the tangible evidences of democratisation.

It was not only film critics who carried this media interest in Kurdish films into effect, but also other journalists and columnists originally specialising in politics. It was quite common to see political columns starting with the mention of a Kurdish film and then continuing with the discussion of the issues tackled in that film with no further reference to the film itself. Films were providing a context for the media to address the Kurdish issue and they were functioning as a lead-in to political arguments. The predominant media discourse on Kurdish films in those days widely promoted these films as 'films for peace'. They were recommended to the society by prominent media figures as a way of understanding the Kurds and looking at the Kurdish issue from a different angle. For example, Asu Maro(2009) wrote: "To everyone commenting on the Kurdish Opening, to those supporting or protesting it for this or that reason, I will recommend a film. The name of the film is *On the Way to School*. You should definitely see it before you say one more word on the Kurdish Opening". Recommendations similar to this one, attaching high significance and a peace-building role to Kurdish films were everywhere in the media.

In 2012, the week *Voice of My Father* came out, Radikal[8] newspaper conducted an interactive coverage of the film with its readers through what they called "editorial office live". With a title saying 'Give Your Voice to *Voice of My Father*' (*Radikal* 30 October 2012), they invited readers who had experienced the Maraş Massacre that is addressed in the film to share their own experiences with Radikal via email. They announced that the directors of the film would be in the editorial office on a specified day to chat with them live about the film as well as about their experiences related to the story of the film. A statement from the directors was attached to this invitation:

> We realised that when we talk about the massacres that took place in this country, we always focus on the ones that were murdered. Yet, we believe

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[8]One of the major daily newspapers in Turkey that represents a mainstream liberal political view.

that we need to hear what the survivors of these events feel and what kind of a future they dream of. We are not only talking about the people who were directly exposed to the massacre either. The feelings of the ones who were affected from these massacres just because they are Kurdish or Alevi is important too. That is why we made this film. So that people who question their place in this society, when they see this film, would be able to find the courage and articulate their miseries.

The outcomes of the live conversations between the directors and the Radikal followers were also reported later with highlights from the conversations (*Radikal*, 2 November 2012). In this example, we see a newspaper going one step further from what the media had already been doing in this period and taking an active role in encouraging a public debate around Kurdish films, or, in fact, giving coverage to the already ongoing public debates around Kurdish films.

Broadly speaking, in this period, Kurdish films were widely employed as a key 'source of reference' on the subjects that they focus upon. When JITEM (the illegal counter-guerrilla organisation) came to the fore in current politics, *The Children of Diyarbakır* was immediately invoked, for example. Or, when the top current issue was Diyarbakır Prison, then it was *Prison No: 5* that was used as a key reference in the debates. Thus Kurdish films started to get actively involved in the political debates on the issues which they dealt with. In short, as various aspects of the Kurdish conflict came to the fore, they also brought the relevant Kurdish films to public attention, turning films into "discursive events" (Kaes, 1992: x).

There are some interesting examples which demonstrate how Kurdish films became the representatives of the issues they address. For instance, the title of one news report is 'The Press Regulation: One Step Forward Two Steps Back' (*Radikal*, 5 April 2011), and it is about the new draft press law which increased penalties and introduced new crime definitions. The report mentions the concern that this regulation would escalate the oppression of the press. The visual used for this news report is the poster of the Kurdish movie, *Press*,whichfocuses on state oppression targeting the Kurdish press in the 1990s. However, there is no mention of the film in the actual news. In another example the news headline is "The Elective Mother Tongue Courses are Ready" (*Radikal*, 13 September 2012). It reports that some ethnic languages, including Kurdish, will be available in schools as elective courses.

The visual for this piece of news is from *On the Way to School*, which addresses the issue of mother tongue education through the real story of primary school children in a Kurdish village. But again, there is no reference to the film elsewhere in the news report; the film takes part in this report only via the use of its visual. Another example: the newspaper reports that European Court of Human Rights had decided that "Demanding education in the mother tongue cannot be a reason for closing down a union", with regards to the Eğitim-Sen Union case. The headline is "On the Way to School Decision from ECHR" (*Radikal*, 28 September 2012). This time, the film *On the Way to School* gets involved in the news only in the headline. These examples are noteworthy in that they demonstrate the strength of Kurdish films as 'key source of reference' in debating the Kurdish issue. The way Kurdish films infiltrate into news just through a visual, or a shorthand reference in the title, suggests that Kurdish films become so intertwined with the issues they tackle that they become the 'emblem' of that issue.

On the other hand, in this period, Kurdish filmmakers started to be regarded as 'experts' on the issues they addressed in their films and on the Kurdish issue in general, and they were frequently given the floor to comment on current political debates. Thus filmmakers turned into public political figures in this period; the *auteurs* of cinema became the authorities in politics. In the interviews they gave, the conversation always digressed from their films and directly focused on their opinions on the politics of the Kurdish issue. In the Q&A sessions organised after the screenings of their films, more than cinema, they discussed politics with the audience, addressing the Kurdish issue in general and the latest political developments of the day in particular. In their festival speeches they always turned the festival stage into a political platform and took advantage of the opportunity to comment on some current political developments.

It was not only filmmakers who had the opportunity of communicating to the public through the channels opened up through Kurdish films. For instance, other than the festival circuit, *Prison No.5* was also screened in various places via independently organised events, and a group of former prisoners of the Diyarbakır prison accompanied many of these screenings; they directly shared their traumatic memories and discussed the present-day political meaning of the Diyarbakır prison

experience with the audience of the documentary. When *On the Way to School* came out, not only the filmmakers but also Emre, the inexperienced teacher in the documentary film, were interviewed by the media and he participated in some of the Q&A sessions about the film, discussing with the public his experiences portrayed in the documentary. In his interviews, Emre recounted that he was shocked and a bit scared when he learned that he was assigned to a remote Kurdish village to have his first professional experience as a newly graduated teacher (Aydın 2009a). He remarked that he had never been to 'eastern Turkey' before and no one had ever told him at university that he might be assigned somewhere where the students might not speak any Turkish at all. He said, "I was of course aware of the Kurdish population, but I never thought they would not know any Turkish". He further recounted that when the directors found him at the teacher's lodge in the Kurdish city of Urfa, whilst he was struggling to find the village as "it was not even shown on the map" and asking around how to find it, he accepted their proposal for the documentary project, as he found the idea of going to the village on his own scary and decided that having some company would be a good idea, because the Kurdish village was "like a different planet" for him" (Aydın 2009b). Other than Emre, for instance, one of the villagers in the documentary was also interviewed, and he commented on various current political debates from the issue of mother-tongue education to how Kurds perceived the government's Kurdish Opening (Melek 2009).With these examples, the true story represented in *On the Way to School* was expanding; the documentary film was not only communicating on the Kurdish issue itself; it was also giving the stage to ordinary people who had experienced different consequences of the issue; it was in a sense naming names of individuals who had relevant experiences to be shared with the wider public.

When *The Children of Diyarbakır* was released, the debates on this film interpenetrated with the issue of the Kurdish children who had been sent to prison on the basis of the Prevention of Terrorism Act. These children were named as 'stone-throwing children' in the Turkish media and it was one of the much debated cases of the time. Over four thousand Kurdish children were in prison as of 2010[9]. Although

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[9]A short amateur documentary film, *Taşlaşan Vicdanlar/Brutal Consciences* (2010, Cenk Örtülüand Zeynel Koç), which was produced and promoted by the established Kurdish filmmaker Hüseyin Karabey, tackled this issue. In the film, filmmakers interview some of the Kurdish kids who were sent

the story of *The Children of Diyarbakır* made no reference to this issue, just because its main characters were two little Kurdish kids who have witnessed the murder of their parents by the state forces, the film was discussed in relation to this hot topic of the day. The child actors of the film, both under the age of ten, shared their opinions on this issue with the media (Orak and Al 2010). Şenay Orak said; "The reason why children are involved in crimes in the region is that people are deprived of their rights. [...] Prison sentences drag children into another stalemate. The reason for throwing stones should be examined and a solution must be found. The second child actor of the film Muhammed Al said: "Like what Fırat experienced in the film, my family was badly affected by the conflicts in the region. Our village was burned down. [...] Children in Diyarbakir, in the region, face very harsh conditions. [...] To this end, the police should not apply violence to children. This is later translated into hatred and to stones".

On the other hand, *Press*, a fiction film narrating the brutal state oppression on the Kurdish media in the 1990s through the story of a group of journalists working for the Özgür Gündem newspaper, coincidentally came out exactly in the days when the freedom of the press was a hot topic, because two prominent left-wing journalists had been arrested within the controversial Ergenekon operations. There was great public support for the two journalists and a large demonstration was organised in İstanbul solidarity with the journalists. And the media commonly covered *Press* in relation to this incident. Yet Sedat Yılmaz, the director of the film, and some commentators on the film, used this coincidence to point at the fact that Kurdish journalists never enjoyed such wide public support when they were arrested, even murdered. Sedat Yılmaz said, "The ones who are protesting for the journalists now, what were they doing in the 1990s? They did very well know back then what was going on. Yet, the mainstream media was the accomplice of the state" (Yılmaz 2011c). One year later, in 2011, when dozens of Kurdish journalists were arrested within the KCK Operations targeting the Kurdish activists and politicians, *Press* was remembered again. Yılmaz's comments on the arrests of Kurdish journalists highlighted that actually there has not been a dramatic change in the state's attitude

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to prison to point at the unlawful treatment they have been subject to, while blurring the faces of the interviewees to protect them. *Brutal Consciences* was shown at the İstanbul Film Festival and the Ankara Film Festival in 2010.

towards Kurdish journalists from the 1990s to the present. New screenings of *Press* were organised, one year after its first release date, in solidarity with the Kurdish journalists. The money raised from the ticket sales of a screening was sent to the Kurdish journalists in jail (*Bianet*, 15 February 2012).

As manifested in these examples, the political debates which Kurdish films got closely linked with, and the way these films were politically contextualised, were highly dependent on the current political agenda of the time when the films were released. That is to say, when we talk about the interplay between text and context in the case of Kurdish films in Turkey, the term context here does not only refer to the general socio-political atmosphere of 2000s Turkey, but also to the very immediate context of the very days in which each film came to the fore. This is because, as previously emphasised, Kurdish films do not look back into the stories of an already resolved conflict. They emerged at a time when the issues they addressed became subject more than ever to power struggles between multiple actors; at a time when the political dynamics shifted almost daily with new events and developments.

To sum up, Kurdish films played a key role in the era of political transformation, providing the society with topics of discussion by narrating various aspects of the Kurdish issue. The stories they tell, the political messages they convey, the propositions they make towards peace-building, transcended the finished films and extended via the debates they triggered. Although the actual audience they found was limited, owing to the huge interest of the media, the reach and the sphere of influence of Kurdish films was always far beyond the actual audiences at their screenings. As they came forward within the context of the political debates that were highly crucial to Turkish society at large, in a way they had the opportunity to communicate with the general public, including people who actually never saw the films.

Kurdish Films and the New Kurdish Policy

In 2010, the government organised a meeting with a group of artists and filmmakers to ask for their support for the new Kurdish policy (*Milliyet*, 20 March 2010). At that meeting, Prime Minister Erdoğan remarked upon the impact of the films in raising social awareness. "Sometimes a scene, even a single frame can do more than a thousand pages when it comes to communicating with the people", he said. And he claimed that the government's aim is to produce concrete solutions to the problems represented in various movies made in Turkey: "It is thanks to you that those issues which were unspoken, invisible, dismissed, ignored, ostracised and marginalised took to the stage. You took notice of the pains, outcries, sorrows and demands first and showed them to the society before anyone else. What we are aiming at now is taking those social groups and those issues to the stage. [...] What have been in your frame for years are now in our frame, too". He also mentioned the name of Yılmaz Güney and said "If the authorities of this country had lent an ear to the films of Yılmaz Güney, believe me, Turkey would have been at a totally different place now".

This meeting and the sudden public exposure of Kurdish films following the meeting sparked debates and created tension amongst Kurdish filmmakers. Özkan Küçük (2010) from Mesopotamia Cinema wrote an article in those days where he emphasised that the AKP's Kurdish policy had been based on highlighting state atrocities in the past while drawing attention away from the present wrongdoings of the current government. Thus he claimed that recent Kurdish films have been in harmony with this attitude of the government, in that they only focused their attention on the past without commenting on the present. Some experiences of Mesopotamia Cinema filmmakers during the days of the boom of Kurdish films reinforced these controversial arguments. For instance, while the Altın Portakal Film Festival included two Kurdish films in the national competition programme for the first time in 2009, the same year, *The Last Season: Shawaks*, a documentary film made by Kazım Öz, the most established Kurdish filmmaker in Turkey, was rejected by the festival. Öz comments on this issue in an interview:

> This is a blatant censorship, which in fact targets not the film, but me as a filmmaker. It is because of my political identity, my Kurdish identity. Though, you might say, "How come? This year there was a 'Kurdish Opening' at the festival". We issued a press statement upon the rejection of our film, and there, I said "The state draws a distinction between the white Kurds and the dark Kurds", and I asked, "Does Altın Portakal implement the same differentiation?". Some Kurdish filmmakers who partook in the festival were offended at me because of this question. However, I think it is a valid question. (Öz 2010)

With these arguments 'film/filmmaker of the Opening' turned into an accusatory label, with some films and filmmakers denounced for benefiting from the Kurdish Opening and aligning with the government. For instance, in almost all interviews they gave, the directors of *On the Way to School* felt the need to distance themselves from the government and to free their film from the label of 'film of the Opening'. They said; "There are people who claim that the release date of our film was deliberately arranged to coincide with the government's Kurdish Opening. That is not what we aimed for. We have no intentions to gain favour from such processes. We would have done different films if we had that stance" (Doğan and Eskiköy 2009).

In a short period of time, these arguments became irrelevant in a sense, as the positive atmosphere of the early days of the Kurdish Opening was marred by many disappointing political events, as explained in Chapter 3, turning optimism into pessimism and generating growing distrust among the Kurds in AKP's new Kurdish policy. Thus, the government's attempt at bringing Kurdish films into play quickly collapsed. With the constantly changing political dynamics in the background, Kurdish films continued growing, despite the deteriorating political situation concerning the Kurdish issue. And Kurdish filmmakers started to deploy all channels of communication to the public that they acquired through their films, such as interviews or festival speeches, to criticise the government and pressurise it to take convincing action towards building peace. Their opinions on the government's new policy and the peace process was one of the fixed questions in all interviews and their responses always pointed at the ambiguity, instability, insincerity and implausibility of the government's attitudes. In 2010, a group of filmmakers naming themselves the New Cinema Movement (*Yeni Sinema Hareketi*), including Kurdish filmmakers and also other political filmmakers, sent an open letter addressing the

government to the media. In the letter, entitled "Weapons Shall Go Quiet, People Should Speak", the filmmakers stated that they used to follow the government's democratisation process with hope, yet just one year of the process destroyed their hopes, as despite the government's promises there had been no realistic steps taken towards confronting the Kurdish conflict. Expressing their concerns regarding escalating conflict and violence, they invited the Prime Minister to keep his promises.

Three years after the Kurdish Opening, the creative team of *On the Way to School* made a new film, *Voice of My Father*, and won the Best Film Award at the Altın Koza Film Festival in 2012, when the peace process was particularly at peril, as explained in Chapter 3. In his acceptance speech, director Orhan Eskiköy reminded the audience of the meeting organised by the government after the launch of the Kurdish Opening, where Tayyip Erdoğan had particularly named and favoured a group of films, including their film *On the Way to School*. Director Eskiköy said; "I would like to address the Prime Minister from here. Three years ago, you organised a meeting with the filmmakers, and there, you asked them, "How can you contribute to the peace?" As filmmakers, all we can do is make movies. And, we do our part. But, *you* should also do your duty and keep your promise. End this war!" (*Özgür Gündem*, 24 September 2012). This award speech was everywhere in the media the following day.

The conflict between the government and the Kurdish filmmakers was not only originating from the AKP's political performance. The instabilities and contradictions of the government's Kurdish policy manifested themselves in the government's attitude towards Kurdish films as well. On the one hand, the Ministry of Culture funded many of the Kurdish films of the period. Yet, ironically, censorship and oppression over these films continued in the AKP era. One of the most controversial censorship cases was *38,* Çayan Demirel's documentary on the Dersim massacre. The Ministry of Culture's inspection board refused to issue an official 'exhibition certificate' for *38* and thus officially censored the film. Some prominent film festivals flouted the ban and screened the film; it was even shown in the documentary film competition programme of the Altın Portakal Film Festival in 2007. However, the Ministry's decision was deployed as the basis for the arbitrarily

prohibition of other screenings of the film, especially in the Kurdish region. For example, in 2007, *38* was in the programme of the Munzur Nature and Culture Festival that takes place in Dersim; however, the police invited Çayan Demirel to the police station and told him that they would intervene in the film theatre, if they insisted on screening the film, and Demirel decided to withdraw his film from the festival to avoid causing a violent scene (Demirel 2014). Demirel and his lawyer filed a lawsuit against the ministry which to this date has not been concluded. The documentary film *Bir Başkaldırı Destanı: Bêrîvan/Berivan: A Legend of Revolution* (2009, Aydın Orak), which was about the bloody Newroz in Cizre in 1992 where seventeen Kurdish civilians were killed by state forces, was also banned by the Ministry of Culture, on the grounds that it allegedly "falsified historical truths, incited hatred among Turkish people and made propaganda for a terrorist organization" (Orak 2014). When the Yılmaz Güney Film Festival in the Kurdish city Batman wanted to screen *Berivan* in 2011 despite the ban, the police raided the film theatre and forcibly stopped the screening (*Hurriyet Daily News*, 16 December 2011).

The suppression of Kurdish films continued in the AKP era, not only through cases of legal banning, but through different forms of censorship. Siyah Bant, a research platform documenting censorship in Turkey, conceptualize censorship "not just as the banning of artistic expression through legal means"; they also include processes of "delegitimization, threats, pressure, targeting and hate speech directed at artists and arts institutions that foreclose or delimit the presentation and circulation of artworks" (Siyah Bant 2014). One interesting case of censorship in the AKP era is Hüseyin Karabey's project *My Marlon and Brando*. Karabey first received funding from the Ministry of Culture for the production of *My Marlon and Brando*. When the film was completed, it was selected for a festival in Sweden, one of whose sponsors was the Turkish Ministry of Culture. The festival was contacted by the Ministry and was warned that they would withdraw their sponsorship if the festival were to screen *My Marlon and Brando* (Karabey 2014).

On the other hand, Kurdish films faced more primitive forms of suppression as well. In 2012, the Mesopotamia film crew was in Batman in the Kurdish region to shoot a short film, but the film set was hindered by the police and the crew were arrested for

interrogation (*Etha*, 3 September 2012). Many filmmakers describe the difficulties they experience during the production of their films, even in the days of peace talks, despite promises of democratisation. For instance, Sedat Yılmaz (2010) remarks that whilst shooting *Press* in Diyarbakır, they were always under police surveillance and the police even once attempted to take them to the police station for interrogation. He says, "I am going to speak about the oppression over Özgür Gündem in the film, yet I cannot even put a Özgür Gündem newspaper in front of the camera in Diyarbakır" (Yılmaz 2011b). He explains that this was why they ended up changing the shooting plan, left Diyarbakır, and completed some scenes in İstanbul.

After travelling to the Mahmur Camp for her documentary film *I Flew You Stayed*,where she follow the traces of her father, director Müjde Arslan was arrested as part of the KCK operations, which targeted hundreds of Kurdish activists, whilst finalising the editing of the film for its premiere at the İstanbul Film Festival. While interrogating Arslan about her visit to the Mahmur Camp, the police also seized the film as evidence and examined it. Arslan sarcastically remarks that she ended up having the film's premiere at a police station. "All I told them in the interrogation to defend myself was the story of my film" (Arslan 2012b), she says.

As these incidents of censorship were widely reported, the issue of censorship in fact became one of the contextual frames in the cultural circulation of these films. Continuing oppression and censorship in the AKP era was one of the main issues addressed in the coverage of these films, and filmmakers always highlighted their suspicion and distrust towards the new Kurdish policy, finding justification in censorship attempts towards their films. While the government invoked the significance of Kurdish films in the early days of the Kurdish Opening, the relationship between Kurdish films and the AKP rapidly became strained, not only because of disappointing political developments, but also the censorship attempts that attested to the government's policy of selective remembering, and signalled the limits of democratisation envisaged by the AKP. Thus filmmakers defied the contextualisation of their films with reference to the new Kurdish policy and adopted a critical distance from the government. In this regard, even though Kurdish films commonly narrated the past, their contextualisation by the filmmakers pointed at the present as well. Although it may have suited the government to adopt these films to

support their discourse of blaming the Kemalist elites of the past and claiming to be a democratising force in the present, filmmakers tenaciously resisted this form of appropriation. Consequently, since the early days of their public exposure, Kurdish films have operated as a means of revealing the oppressive attitude not only of the 'old regime', but also the new one.

Political Camps and Films: Moviegoing as a Political Statement

It was not only the government who appealed to cinema for its potential of influencing the public opinion on the new Kurdish policy. The potential political power of cinema was acknowledged and utilised by political parties active in the period, representing different understandings of the issue and proposing conflicting approaches to the solution to the conflict. In fact, three films that came out in the same period, during the early days of the launch of the Kurdish Opening, were turned into the representatives of the three main political views of the period, struggling with each other over the destination of the Kurdish conflict. Accordingly, *Breath* represented the traditional Kemalist view, *I Saw the Sun* the new Kurdish policy of the AKP government, whereas *On the Way to School* represented the Kurdish perspective. Each film was debated with reference to and in comparison with the other two and they were recommended in opposition to each other. Of course, these films had particular political approaches in their representation of the Kurdish issue that corresponded to one of the three main political views of the day on the issue; yet, how turned into *direct representatives* of certain political positions in those days was via their appropriation by political actors. Different political figures manifestly embraced and favoured one of these films in a way that almost staked a claim on that film. The premieres of these films turned into political platforms where each camp showed their support for 'their film' and made use of that film as a means of commenting on the Kurdish issue.

When *Breath,* the first war film in Turkey to depict the conflict between the PKK (the Kurdish guerrilla movement) and the TSK (Turkish Army Forces), came out in the very early days of the Kurdish Opening, İlker Başbuğ, the Chief of the General

Staff of Turkey at the time, together with Deniz Baykal, the leader of the CHP (the main opposition party and the parliamentary representative of Kemalism), were amongst the audience who went to the theatre to see the film in its first week, in the company of the media. What Başbuğ thought about the film was top news in the media next day. On leaving the film theatre, Başbuğ expressed his appreciation of *Breath* to the media, and he commented on the film with reference to the actual war between the PKK and the TSK, or rather, he commented on the actual war *through* his comments on the film. "I congratulate those who have contributed to this film for giving us the opportunity to remember the 1990s [...] I remember those days when we experienced two or three military station attacks a day. Yet, they [the PKK] do not have that power today", he said (*Yeni Şafak*, 25 October 2009). However, these references to the past were actually comments on current affairs in the present. Thus, at the same time as commenting on the 'war on terrorism' in the past on the occasion of the screening of *Breath*, Başbuğ also directly addressed the political issues of the time, contextualising the film with reference to the government's newly launched Kurdish Opening. The Mahmur Camp incident described in Chapter 3 had happened a few days before *Breath* was released. And, the picture of some delegations of Kurdish militants returning to Turkey as 'peace groups' and being welcomed by a jubilant Kurdish crowd was amongst the highlights of General Başbuğ's comments following the screening of *Breath*: "No one could approve the latest events. It is indeed impossible that anyone in Turkey would approve what happened last week. I share the sorrow of our veterans and martyrs' families due to these events. [...] Though they should not forget that if it wasn't for those martyrs and veterans, one wonders, where Turkey would be at now, in terms of war on terrorism. We shall not forget this"[10].

I Saw the Sun, on the other hand, which came out at around the same time, was the film most acclaimed by the AKP. Although it was made by a Kurdish filmmaker, the film was widely and harshly criticised from the Kurdish perspective for representing the Kurdish conflict from a depoliticised angle with a hollow message of brotherhood and it was excluded from the category of 'Kurdish cinema' by Kurdish

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[10] Ironically, Başbuğ, who had advocated *Breath* and warned the government about its new Kurdish policy within his comments on the film in 2009, was arrested in 2012 for allegedly being a leading member of the Ergenekon terror organisation, and was sentenced to life imprisonment. But he was later released in 2014.

film circles, as discussed in Chapter 4. The film was widely regarded as propaganda for the AKP; the prominent Kurdish journalist İrfan Aktan even claimed that, "the Kurdish Opening of the government was initiated with *I Saw the Sun*" (Aktan 2009). In fact, director Mahsun Kırmızıgül had been in touch with the government during the process of making this film and even re-edited some parts to soften its message in the light of feedback he received from the Deputy Prime Minister (*ANF*, 6 November 2010). The premiere of the film was attended by a group of prominent AKP MPs who told the media that they recommended the film to everybody and that they wish to see more films like *I Saw the Sun* in the cause of peace.

Breath and *I Saw the Sun* were big budget films, both benefiting from major publicity campaigns and this was reflected in their commercial success[11]. *On the Way to School*, on the other hand, was a low budget independent production. Yet many prominent public figures tried to utilise their influential power to support this film against the other two. It was widely contextualised in comparison to *Breath* and *I Saw the Sun* and was recommended against them. Even the actor who played the main character Lieutenant Mete in *Breath* gave an interview (Horozoğlu 2009) where he stated that his personal approach to the Kurdish issue is in fact closer to that of *On the Way to School*. And he stressed that for a real 'opening', the millions of people who watched *Breath* must also see *On the Way to School*.

Since 2009, there have been no other films made which have narrated the Kurdish conflict from perspectives particularly in line with the official approach of the old or the new state elites. Yet Kurdish films representing the Kurdish issue from Kurdish perspectives have continued to grow in number. And the screenings of these films have always turned into political platforms. Kurdish politicians have frequently been invited to the stage to make a speech following the premieres. For example, the premiere of *Press* was held in Diyarbakır, where Kurdish politician Gülten Kışanak, who like the characters of the film worked for the Özgür Gündem newspaper in the 1990s, gave a speech after the screening. After the premiere of *Voice of My Father* in İstanbul, Selahattin Demirtaş from the Kurdish party BDP remarked on the

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[11] The box office figures of *Breath* and *I Saw the Sun* were, respectively, 2,436,780 and 2,566,435.

significance of representing the Kurdish issue through film art as an alternative to aggressive political rhetoric. He said:

> I wish everyone would watch this film, especially those who are prejudiced against the Kurdish and Alevi issues. Our political speeches have the risk of receiving biased reactions. Yet this film tells everything. If people can manage to leave their prejudices outside the film theatre, I'm sure their opinions would change after this film. And, it is important, because the state is able to leave this issue unsolved only because it relies on the fact that people do not know the issue; the society is uninformed" (*Haber Türk*, 24 October 2009)

In all these examples, we see dominant political voices of the day anchoring the film's meaning to certain political positions, which undoubtedly had an impact on the public interpretation of the films by other social actors and 'ordinary citizens'.

The media showing interest in certain political figures watching films that narrate the Kurdish issue and regarding their comments on the films as highly newsworthy is a significant issue for the overall quest of this thesis in interrogating the social role of the films in times of political transition. We can say that from 2009 onwards a new tendency emerged in the highly politicised film culture in Turkey, where we observed political figures 'making the scene' and publicly watching films related to the Kurdish issue as a political act; making political statements to the media through film comments; displaying their approval of certain films from a particular political perspective; recommending certain films to the public as a manifestation of preference amongst diverse political approaches and possible solutions to the Kurdish issue; and, assimilating certain films into their political position by expressing their appreciation, thus absorbing the film's propositions into the discourses of that political paradigm. Thus, in the new era of the Kurdish issue in Turkey, a new tradition began in Turkish film culture, where movie-going functions as a political act, film comments as political commentary and film recommendations as coded political messages to the public.

Direct Interactions between Parliamentary Politics and Kurdish Films

While various actors exerted a contextualising force on films that tackle the Kurdish issue and tried to anchor certain films to their political camp, some films started to get into a direct dialogue with the parliamentary debates of the day on the Kurdish issue. For example, in 2012, during the Constitutional Reconciliation Commission's meeting in parliament, where the constitutional article on education rights was discussed, the Kurdish MPs delivered DVD copies of the documentary film *On the Way to School* to all MPs from other parties to raise the issue of the Kurdish people's right to mother tongue education. The spokesman of the BDP delivered a speech where he suggested arranging a screening of this documentary to watch it together with the members of the parliamentary commission (*Akşam*, 4 October 2012).

The most noteworthy example of the direct dialogue between Kurdish films and parliamentary politics was the case of Çayan Demirel's *38*. The Dersim massacre, which is narrated in this documentary film, was one of the key historical issues in the Kurdish Opening debates, which provided the most vivid example of the political use of the past in the power struggles of the present day during the period of political transformation in Turkey. Demirel's documentary suddenly came to the fore in 2009, three years after it was made, following a debate in parliament regarding the Dersim Massacre. In response to the newly launched Kurdish Opening, Onur Öymen, an MP from the Kemalist opposition party CHP, gave a speech in parliament. Opposing the government's new Kurdish policy, Öymen made a reference to one of the main slogans of the Kurdish Opening; "Mothers shall not cry anymore". He said, "Did mothers not cry in the Independence War? No one said, "Let's keep mothers from crying and agree with the Greeks". Did mothers not cry in the Dersim uprising? No one stood up and said, "Let mothers not cry and stop this struggle"" (*Hurriyet Daily News*, 17 November 2009). With this speech, Öymen touched upon one of the most traumatic and symbolic events for the Kurds in the history of Turkey and repeated the traditional Kemalist approach to the issue. Following this speech, Çayan Demirel immediately organised a screening of his documentary *38* and the screening was advertised as a response to Onur Öymen. The film was widely mentioned in the newspaper articles and columns of the day that discussed Öymen's speech.

Moreover, numerous interviews with Çayan Demirel were held by different media with reference to the debates on the Dersim massacre. Thus, Demirel turned into one of the key authorities, who was widely given the floor to comment on the issue publicly.

In those days, the AKP also attacked Öymen for his Dersim speech and expanded on the Dersim massacre issue. Because, as Onur Bakıner (2013) also points out, the Dersim 38 incident supported the AKP's attitude towards the Kurdish issue, which was based on appropriating the Kurdish conflict as a ground for manoeuvre in its struggle against the Kemalist power elites. This historical event was particularly significant in terms of the conflict between the AKP and the Kemalists, because it had happened before the death of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the founder of the republic and the eponym of the Kemalist ideology, supposedly with his consent. Moreover, Sabiha Gökçen, Atatürk's adopted daughter and a symbolic figure in the Kemalist imagination of modern Turkey, representing the modern Turkish woman for being 'the first female combat pilot in the world', had participated in the bombing of Dersim in 1938. Therefore, the Dersim 38 debate was highly significant in the ideological battle between the old and the new state elites and it basically functioned in favour of the AKP. Moreover, it allowed the AKP to kill two birds with one stone, as acknowledging the state's crime in 1938 was a significant move towards gaining the confidence of the Kurds. Thus, two years later in 2011 Tayyip Erdoğan would even apologise for the Dersim massacre on behalf of the Turkish state. However, the way he put this apology into words was revealing:

> If there is need for an apology on behalf of the state, if there is such a practice in the books, I would apologise and I am apologising. [...] Dersim is among the most tragic events in recent history. It is a disaster that should now be questioned with courage. The party that should confront this incident is not the ruling Justice and Development Party [AKP]. It is the CHP, which is behind this bloody disaster, who should face up to this incident. (*BBC News Europe*, 23 November 2011)

However, the Dersim debate once again exposed the contradictions in the AKP's Kurdish policy. The government's Minister of Arts and Culture stated that Onur Öymen's speech was "fascistic", yet as discussed in the media, it was the same minister who had for years suppressed the documentary film *38*(Mavioğlu 2009).

Hence, in his interviews, Çayan Demirel not only harshly criticised the Kemalist elites and their traditional Kurdish policy, but notably, he always made a point of directing criticism towards the current government and its new policy. For example he said; "Even though the AKP government talks about a Kurdish Opening, the documentary film *38*, which tackles an issue that is at the heart of democratisation, has been banned for three years. Even when we leave aside all other problems, this censorship case is enough to demonstrate that the 'opening' is nothing but just a fairy tale" (Mavioğlu 2009). He also said; "A process called the Kurdish Initiative is on the table, but I am not persuaded because our memories are still constricted by red lines. Going beyond these lines is still dangerous in Turkey" (*Hurriyet Daily News*, 20 December 2009). Thus, although the documentary itself was in fact something that could perhaps be conveniently employed by the AKP government, the director used his contextualising power over his film towards to avoid this. Instead, as a key figure actively participating in this political debate, he used the space given to him to highlight the continuities between 'old Turkey' and 'new Turkey' in terms of their attitude towards the Kurdish issue.

Two Locks of Hair: The Missing Girls of Dersim was another documentary film focusing on the controversial Dersim massacre. Director Nezahat Gündoğan remarks that she believes it was the emergence of films narrating the Dersim Massacre that initiated the parliamentary debates on the issue and that were responsible for the Prime Minister using the term 'Dersim *massacre*' (Gündoğan 2010). Like *38*, *The Missing Girls of Dersim* also sparked a big debate. The impact of the documentary had been so powerful that it deepened the research undertaken for the making of the film. Kazım Gündoğan, the film's producer, remarks that after the film was released and received wide media coverage, the filmmakers were contacted by many women from Dersim who had been adopted back in 1938; they had reached seventy-two women when they completed the documentary, but within two years after the release of the film they had one hundred and fifty cases in hand (*T24*, 5 April 2012). In 2012, a parliamentary commission was established to investigate the events in Dersim in 1938. A report on the missing girls of Dersim was submitted to this commission and Kazım Gündoğan was invited to parliament to share the information gathered during the research that they had conducted for *The Missing Girls of Dersim*. Also, Huriye Arslan, one of the two sisters whose story is the focus of the

documentary, made an appeal to the commission to share her memories with them (*CNN Turk*, 26 March 2012). Thus we can say that *The Missing Girls of Dersim* was not the final outcome of a completed historical research project; it rather functioned as the first step of a wider interrogation of the issue.

Although it would be highly justifiable to suggest that these documentaries actually initiated the parliamentary debates regarding the Dersim massacre, as filmmaker Gündoğan does, we cannot conclusively claim that to be the case. Nevertheless, it is indisputable that these films were widely utilised as evidence in public debates, they infiltrated true human stories into the detached political arguments on a distant history, they brought the past to light through the testimonies of the survivors and personalised history. And they did influence the scope and the direction of the relevant debates amongst conflicting political parties.

Segregated Receptions of Kurdish Films

In Chapter 3, I explained how the history of the Kurdish issue engendered two segregated perceptions of the Kurdish conflict in Turkey, and in Chapter 5, I emphasised that one of the key political aspirations of Kurdish filmmakers, while bringing Kurdish memories to the screen and claiming to be telling 'the truth', is through their films to mend the segregation between Kurdish and Turkish memories, experiences, opinions, beliefs and emotions about the conflict. However, given the political atmosphere in Turkey as portrayed in Chapter 3, clearly this is not an easy task.

Vivian Sobchack emphasises that "our consciousness is neither disembodied nor impersonal nor "empty" when we go to the movies" (1999: 244). Similarly, Jill A. Eddy remarks that, "political officials, reporters, and eyewitnesses who are telling and retelling the stories of a well-known public past are not writing upon a blank slate. Members of the audience will have personal memories of the past being described" (2006: 13). And Jay Winter writes; "Collective memory may be understood as a set of signifying practices linking authorial encoding with audience

decoding of messages about the past inscribed in film or in other sources", and he continues, "the problem still remains as to how such messages, once imprinted on film and projected to a wide audience, are decoded by it" (2001: 864). This is a significant question, because as Lemke remarks, in highly polarized communities, where even a 'neutral' position may represent a special interest, we most clearly see "textual politics" in action:

> Every utterance, every text, represents a political act because it cannot ignore the polarization of the community. [...] Every text requires that we bring to it a knowledge of other texts (its intertexts) to create or interpret it, and members of different social groups (whether defined by gender, age, social class, religion, political affiliation, occupation, etc.) will in general bring different intertexts to bear, will speak with different discourse voices and listen with different discourse dispositions. (1995: 32)

What makes these arguments particularly notable for Kurdish films in Turkey is their belated arrival in the realm of representation. Before the emergence of these Kurdish films, throughout the decades of the ongoing political struggle, the symbolic system of the society had been highly politicised; all kinds of cultural entities – from language to music, from dresses to landscapes, from moustache styles to colours – had become representations of certain positions, certain historical events or certain ideologies[12]. So when Kurdish films emerged in the 2000s, the audio-visual elements these films deploy were already overloaded with many cultural and political references, which evoked specific forms of knowledge regarding the Kurdish issue and which connected with the cultural archive accrued throughout the history of the Kurdish issue.

So, while Kurdish films participate in the ongoing dialogue on the Kurdish issue, their words promptly draw upon and link with other codes, representations and discourses; they always have the potential of easily evoking memories and triggering

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[12] Here, I would like to note a few incidents that demonstrate the extremity of this point: in 2001, a restaurant owner in İstanbul was arrested because the salt cellars he had on the restaurant tables, that were shaped like an overweight man with a big dark moustache, resembled Abdullah Öcalan, the leader of the PKK (*Hürriyetim*, 30 March 2001); in 2009, a lawyer's office was raided by the police, who thought Öcalan's picture was hanging on the office wall, yet it was a photo of the lawyer's father (*Cumhuriyet*, 17 July 2009); the Governor of Batman changed the colours of traffic lights as the colours red-green-yellow represented the PKK flag (ETHA; 20 February 2012); in İzmir, the police stopped issuing licence plates with the letters KCK; as it is the abbreviation of Koma Civakên Kurdistan, an organisation founded by the PKK (*ETHA*; 21 May 2011).

emotions – but different memories and emotions in the east and the west of the country. When we think about the highly symbolic mountain-image discussed in the previous chapter, for instance, what this image represents for the general Turkish and the Kurdish audiences would inevitably and dramatically differ; likewise a Turkish flag, a soldier, a *poşu* (the Kurdish scarf also used by Kurdish guerrillas) or red-green-yellow colours (colours of the PKK flag). For instance, there is a short film entitled *Toros Canavarı/The Monster Toros* (2011, Fırat Yavuz) which is about the JITEM crimes and unidentified murders in the 1990s. In those years, white Toros cars with tinted windows were the official cars of illegal counter-guerrilla organisations and undercover 'anti-terror' police, so that in the eyes of the Kurdish people the image of this car turned into a symbol of state violence. Entirely based on this symbol, the short film *The Monster Toros* does not use any actors; all we see is a threatening white Toros portrayed like a living creature driving in the streets, kidnapping people, taking them to remote places to torture and kill them. Its doors open and close by themselves with no people seen to get in and out, while sounds guide the audience through what is happening. In this example, a simple car which has no referential value for the general Turkish audience assumes representational value for the Kurdish audience, so highly symbolic for the Kurds that it makes a short film subject.

If we return to Paul Willemen's notion of 'cultural specificity' again, we can say that the two dominant and segregated perceptions of the Kurdish issue in Turkey can also be read as two diverse cultural specificities within one country. Some codes are recognisable and significant to both Kurds and Turks, yet they communicate to two different and conflicting cultural specificities, like the mountain image for example, whereas, some codes are not even 'readable' from the Turkish perspective while being highly significant within the Kurdish cultural specificity, like the Toros car, for instance. An example of this point can be found in Sedat Yılmaz's accounts on the filming process of *Press*. In the 1990s, in order to be able to deliver the Özgür Gündem newspaper despite constant prohibitions, little kids were employed to secretly deliver the newspaper and this historical fact was integrated into the authentic story of *Press*. And, director Yılmaz says:

Kurdish people have a very strong memory, they don't forget. I have witnessed this whilst making the film. First, I was researching about what those kids used as a bag whilst delivering the Gündem newspaper in those days. Everybody remembered and said, black plastic shopping bags. So I used those bags in the film. And, when we were filming that scene, when the child actors were walking around with black plastic bags in their hands, ordinary people who were watching the shooting kept saying, "Look, those are the kids who used to deliver the Gündem newspaper". We never told anyone even what the film was about. It was 2008 anyway; you wouldn't be able to make this film if you were to let it fly around that you are making a film about Gündem newspaper. Yet people could tell just because of those bags." (Yılmaz 2011b)

More generally speaking, as filmmakers point out, there is generally a marked contrast between the reception of Kurdish films by general Kurdish and Turkish audiences. The directors of *On the Way to School*, for example, share their observations of the premiere of their film in the Kurdish city of Diyarbakır: "People in Diyarbakır showed a great interest in the film. Everyone who has seen the film in Diyarbakır has been through the same thing as those students" (Sağlam, 2009). Miraz Bezar (2010c) also talks about Kurdish people crying at the screenings throughout his film *The Children of Diyarbakır* and he remarks that it is because they all have memories of similar experiences. Çayan Demirel (2011) accounts that at most screenings of *Prison No: 5* nearly half of the room leaves the theatre halfway through the documentary, as they cannot bear hearing about all the horrible techniques of torture and humiliation directly from the victims. Yet, he also notes that the survivors of the prison have found the film rather 'soft' compared to the brutal reality.

The segregation between two diverse memories of the past has expressed itself strongly in the reception of Kurdish films with reference to the notions of 'reality', 'realism' and 'truth'. In the previous chapter, I argued that we observe a convergence between 'reality and representation' in Kurdish films and discussed how Kurdish films seek ways of tightly anchoring the stories of their films to reality. Yet there is another dimension of the relationship between reality and representation in the case of Kurdish films that needs to be considered. It is the fact that the transitional nature of the relationships between reality and representation, and the convergence between fiction and nonfiction, do not only derive from the intentions of Kurdish filmmakers. Due to the political character of the stories they depict, these films are perceived with reference to reality, inevitably, beyond that intended by the filmmakers. "How real is

the story of this film?" is a question that arises from the political conflicts in the Kurdish issue, and that question dogs Kurdish films wherever they go; it comes up in every Q&A session with the directors and in every interview with the filmmakers. Because, "How real is the story of this film?", as a question, originates from other questions regarding 'truth' that the society has been actively debating. It actually articulates (or hides) another question: What is to be recognised as truth in relation to the Kurdish conflict? In this regard, investigating the superimpositions between 'reality in politics' and 'reality in film' in the case of Kurdish films in Turkey generates fruitful questions regarding the relationships between 'film and politics'.

The confusion *On the Way to School* elicited a few years ago is a good starting point for addressing this issue. In 2009, this documentary film was selected for competition at both the Adana Film Festival and the Antalya Film Festival, the two most important film festivals in Turkey. It won the Best Film Award in Adana and the Best First Film Award in Antalya. This was a remarkable success: first of all in a political sense insofar as a Kurdish film is shown and wins awards at the biggest national film festivals in Turkey; on the other hand, the film's success was remarkable also because it is extraordinary for a documentary film to be shown in the same programme as feature films at these festivals. In addition, *On the Way to School* was also distributed nation-wide in film theatres, which was again unusual for a documentary film, considering the place of documentaries in film culture in Turkey.

As remarked earlier, following this success, *On the Way to School* attracted considerable public interest and achieved wide media coverage. However, there was an observable confusion about the definition of this film. Film critic and documentary filmmaker Necati Sönmez (2009) wrote an article tackling this issue, where he worked through the media coverage of the film and gave various examples that demonstrate the confusion created by *On the Way to School*. Sönmez's article reveals that reviewers of the film had found many different ways to define the form of this film, such as a documentary mixed with fiction or a fiction film with some documentary elements, and, either way, almost all the reviews had regarded this documentary film as an example of a hybrid genre that mixes fiction and nonfiction. Sönmez also mentions many reviews talking about how powerful the 'acting' is in

the film, or how the story feels 'real', which sound absurd when the subject of discussion is a documentary film. Sönmez argues that *On the Way to School* is "a hundred per cent documentary film"; there is no trace of genre crossing in the film, and no elements that evoke concepts like docu-fiction. In conclusion, he approaches these misinterpretations with regards to the poor documentary film culture in Turkey.

Film scholar Özgür Çiçek (2011), on the other hand, interprets this confusion with reference to the politics of the Kurdish issue in Turkey. She argues that the presumption that *On the Way to School* must involve some degree of fiction should be interpreted in relation to the political denial of the realities of the Kurdish issue. She asks: "Does the tendency to regard this film as fiction have anything to do with the tendency to believe that in the eastern part of Turkey people speak Kurdish? Is regarding this nonfiction film as fiction a way of disavowing the Kurdish problem in Turkey?" (Çiçek 2011: 8). Although Çiçek's approach at first glance sounds like an over-interpretation, these questions are quite significant for our current discussion. In fact, they are meaningful questions to pose, regardless of the possible answers, because they invite us to draw attention to the way politics is at work in the reception of Kurdish films. They point at how the traditional audience perception of documentary and fiction film may become disrupted when it comes to Kurdish films, due to the political context in the background.

Vivian Sobchack talks about the ""charge of the real" to the film experience" (1999: 244). When we are addressing films that narrate stories of a yet unresolved conflict, and that circulate in a presently conflict-ridden society, we can especially talk about 'the charge of the real' to the film experience. Kurdish films communicate within a highly polarised society on a highly politicised issue, and this situation induces convergences between reality and representation, film and life, fiction and nonfiction, not only in the hands of the filmmakers, but also in the eyes of the viewers. Douglas M. Kellner and Meenakshi Gigi Durham suggest that "audiences could perform oppositional readings, reacting negatively to what they perceived as prejudiced representations of their own social groups, thus showing themselves to be active creators of meaning, and not just passive victims of manipulation" (2006: xxxii).

The segregated receptions of Kurdish films, that echo conflicting interpretations of the Kurdish conflict, have been evident and highly observable in the debates these films triggered at the public screenings of the films. For instance, following the screening of the documentary film *Close-up Kurdistan* at the If Istanbul Film Festival, some people from the audience argued with the director that his documentary distorts reality. "All peoples have equal rights in Turkey. There is no such thing as forbidden languages in Turkey", one woman said, for example. She was challenged and ridiculed by some other viewers. The heated debates on what is true and what is a lie, and what actually happened in the past, continued for a long time.

What is interesting is that fiction films also repeatedly received similar reactions from the audience. For example, the screening of *The Children of Diyarbakır* at the Antalya Film Festival in 2009 turned into a huge, tense event with great media interest. A group of people from the audience left the film theatre halfway through Bezar's film, only to come back for the Q&A session to attack the film. There were security guards standing on the stage, brought in specifically for this event. And director Bezar was accompanied by (and physically supported by) a large group of people on the stage standing by him, including local Kurdish politicians from Antalya, other Kurdish filmmakers Hüseyin Karabey, Özcan Alper, Orhan Eskiköy, Özgür Doğan and some film critics. The protestors attacked the film; some talked about 'foreign powers trying to divide Turkey'; some exclaimed, "You'll never get your Kurdistan!" They all argued that the film was not 'realistic', because "Turkish soldiers would never do such things". Hence, while Kurdish films are being questioned in terms of how realistic their stories are, a documentary film can get the reaction of "It is all fiction!", whereas a fiction film can get the reaction of "This is not *the* reality!"

What makes this issue more interesting is that Kurdish films have often been criticised harshly by the Kurdish audience, too, again with regards to how realistic their stories are. For example *The Children of Diyarbakır*, which was attacked by some viewers in Antalya, also received severe criticism from the Kurdish audience in Diyarbakır, on the same basis that it fails to represent the truth. However, the truth according to the Kurdish audience was of course completely different from the

Antalya audience's truth. This time, the main claim of the criticism was that the Kurdish political movement would not abandon the orphaned children whose parents were killed by the Turkish state forces, and therefore the film was not a realistic portrayal of the Kurdish issue. The co-scriptwriter of the film, Evrim Alataş (2010) wrote an emotional article responding to the reactions triggered by the film. After recounting the audience reactions in Antalya, Alataş also mentions the criticisms that they received in Diyarbakır (which she calls "the motherland"), and says, "We cannot tell anyone that the story is inspired from a real story". She complains that they could not manage to ingratiate themselves with anybody: "Two segregated societies and two utterly severed languages. Dare to intervene and see whether you are welcomed." *The Children of Diyarbakır* is not the only example of this instance. Many Kurdish films have been fiercely criticised by the Kurdish audience in terms of realism. The intensity of these criticisms appears as if the Kurdish audience either gives licence to the filmmakers to tell their own actual stories, or rejects them. And when deciding whether a film is worthy to be licensed, realism seems to be one of the main criteria.

It is a significant observation that these two disparate even conflicting audience reactions from the Turkish and the Kurdish dominant political perspectives are both centred on the notion of reality, or truth. These two conflicting receptions, both demanding '*the* reality' from Kurdish films, yet conflicting with each other in terms of what that reality is, are indicators of the way the politics of truth is evident in the public reception of Kurdish films. We can say that, these heated debates in film theatres demonstrate how both sides of the conflict have been over-conscious about the power of representation, as a result of the intensity of the Kurdish conflict and the intense politicisation of Turkish society.

From 2009 onwards, the film theatres in Turkey screening Kurdish films became an arena for debating the Kurdish issue, while the films turned into 'discussion material' for the general public to express their political opinions on the current political transformation and ventilate their disturbances, anxieties, angers and fears in an era of political turbulence. Panels on Kurdish films or Q&A sessions following the screenings were always occasions for heated political polemics amongst the audience. Arguments started with the films but quickly became direct political

arguments, to the point that moderators of these events would repeatedly invite the audience to focus back on the film, to comment on the film, ask questions related to the film. We can say that long before the 'committee of Wise People', which was established by the government to win the hearts and minds of Turkish society towards the Kurdish Opening, started to travel the country to discuss the Kurdish issue with Turkish citizens, the screenings of Kurdish films already functioned like the meetings organised by the 'Wise People, where ordinary citizens had the opportunity to express their opinions, hear other views and confront each other.

Inasmuch as this atmosphere in film theatres continued with each new Kurdish film, with similar arguments repeated in different theatres on the occasion of different films, this apparent dynamic within the politicised film culture in Turkey cannot be dismissed, while observing the indicators regarding the potential political influence of Kurdish films through their social circulation and public reception. On the other hand, audience reactions at public screenings of Kurdish films are also significant to address because these debates did not stay in the film theatres, behind closed doors, as they were widely reported in the media. In fact, the audience reactions these films received at national film festivals, for instance, have been deployed as a fixed feature of prime news within the festival coverage of the media since 2009. Thus, insofar as they were widely covered in the media, it meant that these audience reactions also contextualised the films; they represented one potential interpretation of the films; they utilised the films for debating the Kurdish issue, as politicians or media figures did.

Breath: The Political Manipulation of a Hesitation

Whether the picture of segregated receptions of Kurdish films in Turkey portrayed above is something that indicates that, despite their aspirations, it is actually unlikely for these films to escape ideological barriers and political prejudices and to be able to communicate their political messages to the wider public in Turkey, is a difficult question. But, with this question in mind, in the final part of this chapter I will specifically focus on the public reception of *Breath*, a film that directly focuses on

the Kurdish conflict but not from the Kurdish perspective, because the public debates on this film add different layers to the issues addressed in this chapter so far.

Breath is the first film in Turkey to portray the armed struggle between the PKK and the Turkish army using the war *genre* structure. The story is set in the Kurdish region in a remote Turkish military station in the highlands near the Iraqi border, in 1993; a time when the war between the Turkish army and the PKK was at its peak. *Breath* was released a few weeks after the launch of the Kurdish Opening. It became a box office hit with a total of 2,436,780 viewers, which is quite a high figure considering average box office figures in Turkey. Although *Breath*'shigh budget had an undeniable role in the film's popularity, it was also the film's political stance and the congruity of the film's political character with the political context that must be considered in understanding its success – not only its commercial success, but also its public reach; its operation as a means of stimulating a wide public debate with the participation of a great variety of political perspectives.

Previously in this Chapter I emphasised that, from the perspective of reception studies, talking about diverse interpretations of a film does not simply refer to different understandings of a film's meaning by different individual viewers. However, in the case of *Breath*, different viewers literally found different meanings in the film, deduced opposing political messages from the film, interpreted the political intentions of the film in conflicting ways. Whether it was a militarist and nationalist film, or an anti-militarist and anti-nationalist one, was the main thread of the discussions on *Breath*. The *Breath* debate provides an interesting case with reference to the main concerns of this chapter, for it brought forward certain questions regarding the cultural reception and political influence of films, which were different from those generated by Kurdish films that represent an unambiguous political stance, that address the Kurdish issue from the Kurdish political perspective in a non-contradictory manner, unlike *Breath*.

Fatih Özgüven (2009), a well-known Turkish film critic famously regarded *Breath* as "a film of hesitance". Özgüven argued that although *Breath* predominantly conformed to a Turkish nationalist discourse, there were many moments in the film where the film was "out of *breath*", where there was a "slip of the tongue", where it

failed to reproduce the nationalist discourse, and where it produced certain meanings that conflicted with its overall nationalist discourse. Özgüven certainly had a point while deducing a 'hesitation' within an otherwise nationalist film discourse. In order to make sense of the *Breath* debate and analyse it in the context of this chapter's key concerns, we need to first briefly look at some key representations in the film which generated the confused debates about the film in 2009, in the very early days of the Kurdish Opening. Heated political debates surrounding *Breath* were of course a consequence of the specific political context, but on the other hand, *Breath* was a particularly suitable film in those days for discussing the Kurdish issue from various political positions.

On the one hand, *Breath* is in fact by no means subtle in terms of the reproduction of nationalist and militarist discourses. It is full of overly emotional nationalist tirades, frequently accompanied by dramatic music in the background, vocalised by the main character Lieutenant Mete, who is also the voice-over narrator of the story and who at times directly addresses the audience, even reprimands them for not taking active responsibility to support the war against the PKK. In this war narrative, there is no doubt that *Breath* 'takes sides' with the Turkish army. The whole story is structured from their point of view, the audience is invited to identify with the Turkish soldiers, and the opposing camp is portrayed as the ultimate enemy. At no point in the film is there any sign of an interest in understanding the 'other side' of the conflict; in getting acquainted with the Kurdish militants. On the contrary, *Breath* adapts the conventional story-telling principles established in the Western, the war film and horror *genre*s, in terms of the representation of the 'other', the 'enemy' or the 'threat' as unrepresentable. The most obvious manifestation of this approach is the recurring representation of the Kurdish guerrillas as shadows, where the camera frames only their threatening shadows falling onto the rocks of the mountains surrounding the military station, and leaving their actual bodies/faces out of the frame. This 'dark' and 'blank' image of the Kurdish guerrillas reiterates the official discourse in Turkey referring to 'the enemies of national unity' as 'dark forces' and dehumanising PKK militants as threatening objects, impossible to understand, or even know.

On the other hand, *Breath* does not construct a heroic myth whilst portraying the struggle of the Turkish military against the PKK, and it certainly involves a degree of

criticism towards certain militarist practices and discourses that were deployed in the past decades of the war. And it was this aspect of the film that triggered a great deal of confusion and heated political debates regarding how to interpret the political message of the film. There are some apparent strategies utilised in *Breath* towards highlighting the weaknesses of the Turkish military, instead of drawing a heroic picture, starting from the visual representation of the Turkish military station, which is where the entire story takes place and which represents the Turkish state in the Kurdish region. In the establishing shots, where the station is seen from outside, the camera shows it in long shots from a high angle amidst the rugged landscape with tall, steep mountains surrounding the station. Positioned in such a composition, the station appears as a tiny, defenceless building engulfed by the menacing mountains (that stand for the PKK), and clearly, it does not represent power, or dominance in this picture. Though, contrastingly, the writing scrawled on the station's roof claims the opposite: "Strong, brave, on guard", it says in big letters. Thus, there is a visible contrast between the self-presentation of the station and its filmic representation. This pronounced contrast operates to highlight what this station is indeed not. Putting it simply, the visual discourse adds "not" to the beginning of "Strong, brave, on guard" in a way that is impossible to miss. The Turkish flag hanging on the post in front of the station is badly torn and the Atatürk bust standing outside is also damaged. Both shown repeatedly in close-ups, the two key symbols represent why that military station, standing on its own at the top of the mountains in the middle of nowhere, simply cannot function there – there in the Kurdish mountains.

Breath carefully differentiates the private soldiers from their commander, Lieutenant Mete, in terms of their nationalist attachment and militarist dedication to the fight against the PKK. The private soldiers are depicted in a way that foregrounds their ordinariness, rather than defining them as heroic warriors of the Turkish military. At no point do any of them comment on the war from one political perspective or another, or show any traces of nationalist or militarist dedication. We see them having fun, acting like adolescents sharing a dormitory; we witness their emotional phone conversations with their loved ones; and we see them struggling to fit into their role as 'soldiers'. Conforming to the conventions of Hollywood-style storytelling, *Breath* structures the combat plot as a personal power struggle between the two leaders; Lieutenant Mete and the leader of the guerrilla group with the code

name Doctor. It can be argued that by structuring a blood-revenge plot that positions individuals in the centre of the narrative, the film on the one hand renders the socio-political background of the war between the PKK and the Turkish army indistinct, and thus depoliticises its subject matter. However, on the other hand, as the two leaders of the Turkish Army and the PKK come to the fore as the only conscious and willing actors in this war, with certain ideological and political determination to their cause, the private soldiers of both sides are held exempt from any responsibility for war crimes, and only the two leaders are pointed out as taking full responsibility. Hence, one of the most overtly expressed political propositions of the film suggests that the actual conflict is in fact between the leading actors, and not between the ordinary soldiers of the war from either side.

The main character, Lieutenant Mete, is a determined yet weary and bitter professional soldier with strong but confused opinions about the war. Throughout the film, he keeps needling the private soldiers with his bitter comments. He articulates his awareness that the private soldiers have a 'real life' outside of military service and that they are in fact 'civilians' doing their *compulsory* military service with no actual or strong attachment to the ideals of the army and no regard for the necessity of this war. In one of his lengthy monologues, the indignation of the lieutenant reaches its peak and reveals more about the origins of his issues with an explicit reference to the current political context:

> As if I don't know that this is not the way to win the war. *I* know that, but what *you* don't know is that if I lose here, then you lose in İstanbul, in Ankara. [...] Don't worry; there is no war that doesn't have an end. This will end, too. Though when it does end, you will file charges against me. So be it. Yet I don't have anywhere else to go.

This is an overt reference to the Ergenekon trials that started in 2008 where high-ranking military officers were put on trial for allegedly being members of the Ergenekon terrorist organisation. Hence, these lines help the viewer understand the sarcasm of Mete better, as they put him forward as a lieutenant who is witnessing a political transformation that might lead to the end of the war. His bitterness is due to the anxiety of the emergent public disapproval of the war as a solution to the Kurdish conflict and of the main actors leading this war for decades; the anxiety of witnessing

the end of his era. In this sense, the Lieutenant is portrayed as a bitter ex-hero on his way out.

As for the representation of Kurds, *Breath* draws a bold distinction between 'militant Kurds' and 'ordinary Kurds'. In this regard, Kurds and Kurdishness appear in two carefully and overtly distinguished images in the film; one of them is the Kurds in the PKK forces, providing a negative image of the Kurds, and the other one is the positive image of an 'ordinary' Kurdish citizen who serves in the Turkish Army. The image of 'approved Kurdishness' comes forward through the depiction of a young Kurdish man doing his compulsory military service in the Turkish army and fighting against the PKK, just like his Turkish peers. However, the film is not interested in this Kurdish soldier as an individual, and his portrayal lacks any details to make him a rounded character in the story. He is rather just a figure functioning symbolically to convey one of the few incontestable political propositions of the film. The Kurdish soldier makes two appearances in the film. In the emotion-evoking montage-sequence where segments from the phone conversations of different private soldiers with their loved ones are edited together, we hear one soldier speaking to his mother in Kurdish, which is given with Turkish subtitles. The second scene with the Kurdish soldier is more expressive and in fact extremely symbolic. Here, together with another soldier, the Kurdish soldier raises the Turkish flag up the flagpole while singing a Kurdish folk song. Watching this scene, anyone who has read *Mythologies* by Roland Barthes (2009) would immediately recall his analysis of the image on the cover of Paris Match of the young black soldier saluting the French flag. A Kurdish soldier raising the Turkish flag is almost a direct adaptation of the image analysed by Barthes. This scene is so symbolic that it comes along as an 'inserted message' into the text and renders the film's political proposition unquestionably clear in terms of the issue of peace, suggesting 'living together in peace' under the same national flag. And, the loose insertion of the Kurdish soldier into the plot functions to break the equation of the Kurds with the PKK. While complying with the traditional state discourse in its portrayal of the Kurdish guerrillas as inhuman terrorists, *Breath* attempts to avoid racist understandings of the film through the involvement of the Kurdish soldier in the narrative.

Keeping in mind the socio-political context of the political transformation investigated in Chapter 3, we can interpret the political discourse of *Breath* as a Kemalist-nationalist-militarist discourse that attempts to accommodate itself to the new era; a liberalised Kemalist approach adjusting its fundamental principles to the shifting power dynamics and the prevailing political tendencies of the 'new Turkey'. In this sense, it can be said that *Breath* provides a filmic manifestation of traditional Kemalist nationalism's response to emergent power relationships, to the emergence of a new actor taking over as the new dominating power, to the new Kurdish policy introduced by this actor and its reverberations in Turkish society. So, on the one hand, *Breath* retains the key characteristics of the Kemalist nationalist ideology, but at the same time, it attempts to integrate emergent political tendencies into this declining ideology. The diagnosed 'hesitation' in *Breath*, in this sense, can be seen as a reflection of an impossibility – the impossibility of coming to terms with the past; with the military tutelage in Turkey, the dirty war and the Kurdish conflict, without any confrontation with the foundations of Kemalist-militarist ideology. However, it is important that some political propositions in *Breath*, conveyed through the representations addressed above, have never had a place within the strict ideological frame of the traditional Kemalist/militarist/nationalist discourses in the past; state ideology has never been open to any criticisms and it has never shown a tendency towards revising and liberalising itself. Thus, with its attempt at injecting some degree of self-criticism into the Kemalist interpretation of the Kurdish conflict, *Breath* caused great confusion.

Emre Aköz from Sabah newspaper found the difficulty of labelling *Breath* so extraordinary that he suggested it as an interesting case for academicians:

> [*Breath*] uses all the symbols of the dominant nationalist ideology in Turkey. [...] However, despite the deployment of all these symbols, the film still does not convey a nationalist/militarist message to its viewer. In other words, *Breath* is not the kind of film to be acclaimed by Turkish nationalists. Academicians studying the notion of ideology should see this film and then find an answer to the following question: How come this film, despite deploying all nationalist symbols, does not end up being a nationalist/militarist film? What is missing then? (Aköz 2009)

Aköz was slightly mistaken while claiming that "*Breath* is not the kind of film to be acclaimed by Turkish nationalists", since reactions to the film were rather complicated. When we talk about conflicting interpretations of *Breath*, the conflict here was not only and simply between the views of people from diverse political positions, but also between people who actually shared the same or similar political positions. It was quite peculiar that one and the same film engendered such a variety of opposing understandings and even provoked differences of opinion within groups that actually shared the same or a similar political stance. It is in fact this aspect which makes the public debate about the political character of *Breath* particularly interesting for this study.

One reception of *Breath* from a nationalist/militarist/anti-Kurdish movement/anti-Kurdish Opening political perspective considered the film a nationalist-militarist film with no suspicion of it being anything else, and embraced it as a film that supports the anti-PKK and anti-Kurdish Opening views, whereas others regarded it as a film that deprecates the Turkish army and deviously supports the pro-Kurdish movement view and the Kurdish Opening. Even though, İlker Başbuğ, the Chief of the General Staff of Turkey of the time, acclaimed and promoted *Breath*,as discussed earlier, the film was found infuriating by many Turkish viewers due to its weak portrayal of the Turkish army, the depiction of the private soldiers as naive, vulnerable and callow young men, the overall sense of defeat in the film, the tattered, broken and neglected images of the taboo symbols of the Turkish Republic, as well as the depiction of a soldier speaking the prohibited Kurdish language under the roof of the Turkish military. Film scholar Sevilay Çelenk writes;

> There are many statements on the Internet revealing that *Breath* has been received as a profanity by the viewers who take a nationalist-militarist position with regards to the war in southeast Turkey. It is understood from these statements that the mentioned group takes umbrage, because the "soldier heroes", especially the main character Lieutenant Mete Horozoğlu do not perform a determined heroism". (2010: 95)

Columnist Mehmet Ali Kışlalı, well-known for his columns discussing military strategies against the PKK and for his advocacy for the maintenance of the military tutelage, argued that the film "questions the legitimacy of the Turkish army" through its main character Lieutenant Mete (Kışlalı, 2009). He claimed that "although the

film is presented as an antithesis to the Kurdish Opening and to the pro-Kurdish films, on the contrary, it attempts to talk the nationalists into the Kurdish Opening". And he wrote: "The film paves the way for the PKK to achieve its objectives by breaking the resistance of the nationalists without making them feel depreciated".

Reactions towards *Breath* from the left-wing/pro-Kurdish/anti-nationalist/anti-militarist perspective were not homogeneous either. There were some voices thatharshly criticised the film by highlighting its nationalist, militarist and anti-Kurdish character. Yet on the other hand, there were also other voices from this perspective that foregrounded and valued some anti-militarist and anti-nationalist (or at least non-militarist and non-nationalist) elements in the film and argued against the categorisation of *Breath* simply as a nationalist and militarist film. Although sharing a similar political view and the same anti-nationalist concerns with those who disparaged the film, they placed emphasis on the potential of *Breath* to break down dominant nationalist public opinion in Turkish society and support a peaceful solution to the Kurdish conflict– not *despite* not being a coherently anti-nationalist film, but on the contrary *by virtue of* its incoherent political stance that conveyed some anti-nationalist messages *within* a nationalist discourse.

With reference to Özgüven's argument of *Breath* as 'a film of hesitation', film critic Enis Köstepen remarked that he was curious about the potential power of *Breath* to reveal the 'hesitations' in Turkish society, arguing that "a film does not need to be anti-militarist to be able do this" (2009c). Film scholar Umut Tümay Arslan (Arslan, et al. 2009) observed that "the nationalist ideology is no longer capable of sustaining itself as it is and the film makes this fact visible". She acknowledged the fact that *Breath* does not even touch upon the socio-historical realities of the Kurdish issue, but she argued that this might actually help the film to be able to communicate with the wider Turkish public, as the presumed audience of the film were ordinary Turkish citizens "that greatly believed in the righteousness of the war". Drawing attention to the importance of the political confusions in the film, she said, "We might not be able to identify the true intentions of the film, but what we need to observe is, how a Turkish nationalist gets less confident in which of his strong opinions after seeing this film". Another film scholar, Sevilay Çelenk, was also more interested in highlighting the anti-nationalist and anti-militarist elements in the film

than in criticising it for its nationalist and militarist discourses. In an article where she thoroughly analyses the film, she argued that, although *Breath* "does not have a radical criticism towards war, it is a significant film because of the ruptures it elicits" (Çelenk 2010: 97). She claimed that there was a "pro-peace voice" somewhere in the film, and, "in the conjuncture where the possibility of war has appeared, if through a thick fog, it is a responsibility to find that voice and bring it to surface" (ibid: 100). In an interview she elucidated her point:

> I cannot label this film as a militarist film. I feel a certain sense of responsibility whilst criticising this film. We are going through a very critical conjuncture. In this context, what would we gain from categorising this film as a militarist film and casting it aside? I cannot say it is an anti-militarist film, either. Though the commander's lines saying 'This is not the way to win a war', for example, is something that pushes those people who have strong opinions about the war to think twice. (Arslan, et al. 2009)

These interesting arguments touching upon the general issue of the potential political influence of film raise certain questions that are highly significant to my research. When we compare *Breath* with Kurdish films that speak from the Kurdish political perspective, it is clear that *Breath* reached as great an audience as a big budget popular film, and, moreover, as a politically 'confused' film it communicated to a politically more heterogeneous audience. The debates triggered by Kurdish films have in general been more straightforward, eliciting a bipolarisation between two dominant views: one accusing Kurdish films for 'distorting the facts' and for 'propagating the PKK ideology' and the opposite view supporting Kurdish films by highlighting the significance of understanding the Kurdish issue from the Kurdish perspective for a peaceful solution to the conflict. However, *Breath* brought out much more complicated dynamics of polarisation. While enabling conflicting interpretations of the film's meaning, *Breath* allowed different political voices to speak up and express their opinions on the key issues of political transformation in Turkey.

As discussed in Chapter 3, the dramatic political transformation in Turkey, which disturbed the established chart of political ideologies and blurred the very definitions of fundamental concepts regarding the nation, had its reverberations amongst the

highly confused and overtly politicised ordinary citizens. In this sense, we can say that while passionately discussing what the political character of *Breath* really was, people actually discussed what 'nationalism' or 'militarism' or 'racism' means to them, or what they should mean, in this confusing political era. While interpreting the representation of the Kurds in the film, they actually discussed which discourses are to be interpreted as anti-Kurdish, and which are not. As the political transformation unsettled the ideological frameworks of all the long-established political wings, a film like *Breath* provoked differences of opinion even amongst people sharing the same political positions; in a sense, debates on *Breath* were actually debates amongst diverse political groups on how to adjust to the new era in politics, on which opinions need to be left behind or revised, and on how to (re)define some key political concepts from certain political angles.

In final conclusion, does this picture imply that *Breath* was indeed more likely to have a positive political influence in peace-building than the Kurdish films addressed in this research were? While Kurdish films lost many potential audiences perhaps from the outset, as they touched on their political prejudices, or even simply because of their presentation as 'Kurdish films', could *Breath* manage to communicate to its audience 'more gently' and talk them into reconsidering their political views? Did the debates on Kurdish films create for and against camps and thus actually reinforce the existing social polarisation that they intended to break? It is not possible to give certain answers to these questions, yet there is something about this approach that conflicts with the approach developed in this research. As I discussed earlier, this research puts more emphasis on the more invisible and indirect dimensions regarding the political impact of Kurdish films; the way they legitimise Kurdish political identity; the way they influence the direction of current political debates; the way they make the Kurdish political perspective publicly available and accessible to the general public; and the way their discourses have an impact on the dominant discourses on the Kurdish issue. In this regard, it is important to remember a point made in Chapter 4: a film like *Breath* was made after, and only after, the emergence of films that tackled the issue from the Kurdish point of view. In other words, more generally, *Breath* can be seen as an outcome of the Kurdish political struggle that influenced the dominant discourses on the Kurdish issue and that obliged all

ideologies to revise their interpretation of the Kurdish conflict. Kurdish political discourses may have failed immediately to influence the general public opinion on the war and even provoked negative reactions, but in the long term they reconfigured the overall discursive domain in the country regarding the Kurdish issue.

While some film critics and scholars suggested not dismissing *Breath* and focusing on its positive political aspects, many other pro-Kurdish/anti-militarist/anti-nationalist public figures widely criticised *Breath* and they utilised it for debating the Kurdish issue through arguments highlighting why this film cannot be seen as pro-peace. For example, although the depiction of the Turkish private soldiers as naive and innocent men who had nothing to gain in this war has been regarded as one of the main indicators of *Breath*'s anti-militarism, from the Kurdish point of view, this depiction was criticised for misrepresenting the Turkish army's activities in the Kurdish region and distorting the realities of the war, especially when remembering that the film is set in 1993. Yücel Göktürk (2009), for example, criticised the unrealistic portrayal of the Turkish soldiers in the film as kind-hearted men, by recalling the actual soldiers making necklaces out of the ears of the Kurdish guerrillas they had killed, for example. And he draws attention to the specificity of the year 1993 in terms of atrocities towards the Kurdish people conducted by the TAF: "What kind of a year was 1993? [...] The days when the Kurdish MPs were put into prison and when the unidentified serial murders commenced. Days of the burning down of villages, evacuation of the villages, and forced migration. [...] The times when the notion of 'dirty war' emerged"; consequently, Göktürk remarks that "There is no mention of the 'dirty war' in *Breath*; on the contrary, the war in the film is 'whiter than white'". Kurdish politician Gülten Kışanak also argues against *Breath*'s reception as a pro-peace film, remembering the atmosphere in the Kurdish region in the 1990s, by recalling for example an infamous photo published by the Kurdish Özgür Gündem newspaper in those days, showing a group of Turkish soldiers posing proudly around the dead body of a female guerrilla shot to pieces (Arslan, et al. 2009).

In the famous muster scene of *Breath*, which was the most popular scene applauded in all nationalist comments on the film, Lieutenant Mete reprimands the private

soldiers for not being 'awake' and continues with his famous line that he shouts at the face of each soldier one by one; "*You die, if you sleep!*", and in the end he concludes with "*Everyone dies, if you sleep!*" Yet, in this challenging speech, the Lieutenant goes too far in threatening the private soldiers: "*If I catch any of you doing anything wrong, I will kill you with my own hands, and then I will simply put my signature under it, reporting it as a 'training casualty'*". Here, it is important to note that *Breath* came out at a time when the cases of the 'suspicious deaths' of private soldiers[13] had started to be questioned in public. In this context, Nermin Yıldırım for example participated in the *Breath* debate by pointing at these cases:

> [In the trailer] the commander was telling the young soldiers why they should not sleep. Because it was a war and they always had to be on full alert. Everyone was moved by this trailer. I wonder if the commander of the team in Elazığ, Lieutenant Mehmet Tümer, has also watched it and was moved by it, too. As, exactly in those days [when the trailer became popular], he punished one soldier, who fell asleep whilst standing guard, by commanding him to hold a hand grenade with its pin pulled, and four soldiers died as a result. In fact, after this incidence, there were comments on the Internet claiming that one should watch *Breath*'s trailer in order to understand the psychology of that lieutenant. (Yıldırım 2009)

Here, it is important to note that, in all these arguments on *Breath*, references to the historical facts and true events were deployed in inviting the audience to reconsider the film with the impact of these references to reality.

On the other hand, the *Breath* debate was also utilised for giving voice to people who were affected by war. As discussed earlier, the week *Breath* was released, İlker Başbuğ, the Chief of the General Staff of Turkey, had seen the film in the company of the media and appropriated *Breath* to criticise the government's new Kurdish policy. However, as the *Breath* debate evolved, left-wing/pro-Kurdish media figures with anti-nationalist and anti-militarist concerns counter-contextualised *Breath* by giving the stage to alternative Kurdish-issue-related names and by suggesting that

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[13] The Human Rights Foundation of Turkey's 2010 report reveals the number of suspicious soldier deaths, year by year, since the beginning of the 1990s and concludes that, in twenty years, the total number of suspicious soldier deaths amounts to "2 battalions, or 15-18 companies of soldiers". The report also points at the remarkable fact that the majority of the soldiers losing their lives suspiciously during their military service are Kurdish. (http://www.ihd.org.tr/index.php/raporlar-mainmenu-86/el-raporlar-mainmenu-90/2062-turk-silahli-kuvvetlerinde-meydana-gelen-supheli-asker-olumleri-raporu.html)

their followers interpret the film together with these people, instead of Başbuğ; to see the film through their eyes instead of the eyes of the state actors.

For instance, Pınar Öğünç conducted interviews on *Breath* with people "who cannot breathe"; a war veteran, a female ex-guerrilla, and a conscientious objector (Uçar et al. 2009). The war veteran, whose name is not revealed in the interview, had actually not even seen *Breath*, as he was scared that his traumatic war memories would flood back. As discussed in Chapter 3, the traumatic experiences of Turkish private soldiers had been completely silenced in Turkey throughout the decades of war and veterans were never given the opportunity to publicly recount their memories. In this regard, a war veteran being given the opportunity to speak out on the occasion of *Breath* is something highly notable. Thus, although not having seen the film, in the interview the veteran accounts atrocities towards Kurdish civilians committed by Turkish soldiers in the 1990s, and he recalls horrifying scenes he witnessed as a soldier, such as a military tank touring through a Kurdish village with the head of a murdered Kurdish guerrilla hanging on top of the vehicle, exhibited to the family and the villagers of the dead guerrilla. Gülten Uçar, the female ex-PKK guerrilla interviewed by Öğünç, comments on the scene where Lieutenant Mete tortures a wounded female guerrilla captured after a battle. In that scene, the Lieutenant throttles the female guerrilla while repeatedly and furiously asking her, "Doctor [The leader of the PKK group] fucks you, doesn't he?" Discussing this scene, Uçar explains what a female guerrilla's life is like in the mountains. Here, it is important to note how *Breath* was used to give voice to an ex-guerrilla in one of the top-selling mainstream newspapers, particularly because this was one of the first occasions where the public invisibility of the Kurdish guerrillas was broken and where for the first time they were given the means of directly communicating to the Turkish public.

We can say that the political criticisms of *Breath* re-contextualised the meaning of the film and manipulated the film's ambiguities, or 'hesitations'. While arguing that *Breath* cannot be seen as a pro-peace film because it excludes certain issues and realities, these criticisms actually incorporated those issues and realities into the public debate on the film. Thus, the political critique of *Breath* from pro-Kurdish,

anti-militarist and anti-nationalist angles, in a sense, operated towards extending the political meaning of the film and manipulating the direction of its political impact. Not only through film criticism, but also through interviews with various people who are in some way related to/affected by the Kurdish conflict. Although some film critics and scholars suggested focusing on the anti-nationalist and anti-militarist aspects of *Breath* for giving strength to its 'pro-peace voice', on the contrary, it was possibly the counter-criticisms of the film which pointed at the nationalist and militarist aspects of the film that in fact gave power to the film's potential positive political influence. Because they utilised *Breath* as a vehicle for debating the issues that the film does not, for giving voice to those whose voices are silenced in the film, and for giving public visibility to the realities that are invisible in the film.

Conclusions

After exploring the political character of Kurdish films in the previous chapter, in this chapter I investigated the interplay between film and politics in this particular case. In attempting to formulate a way of addressing the issue of political influence, I deployed a methodological approach based on 'reception studies' and explored the convergence between 'text and context' in the case of Kurdish films by focusing on the immediate and intense intertextual dialogues between these films and other social texts that comment on the Kurdish issue.

Although the immediate impact of Kurdish films on the opinions of their actual audiences might not be that powerful, immediate, or direct, these films nevertheless do have the potential to influence society through less observable mechanisms. Kurdish films emerged in Turkey in a context in which they were most likely to have an impact on politics; they were produced at a time when their determined aspirations to play a role in building social peace in Turkey were in harmony with the ongoing political transformation occurring in the background. In other words, at a time when the country was witnessing radical shifts in the politics of the Kurdish issue, these films focused on the very issues that were at the heart of this political transformation. Consequently, Kurdish films were situated at the centre of political

contestations as regards the future of the Kurdish conflict not only as a subject speaking out, but also as an object spoken about.

From 2009 onwards, the theatres in Turkey screening Kurdish films became an arena of debate for the Kurdish issue, and the films became 'discussion material' for the general public to express their political opinions on the current political transformation and air their unease, anxieties, anger and fears in an era of political turbulence. The potential political power of cinema was acknowledged and utilised by political parties active in the period and they utilised such films to publicly comment on recent developments regarding the Kurdish conflict. As a consequence, in this period movie-going started to function as a political act, film commentary became political commentary, and film recommendations served as coded political messages for the public. Furthermore, Kurdish films started to engage in direct dialogue with the parliamentary debates of the day on the Kurdish issue and filmmakers were transformed into public political figures who were regarded as 'experts' on the issues they addressed in their films and on the Kurdish issue in general.

In this atmosphere marked by a politicised film culture, the stories that Kurdish films tell, the political messages they convey, and the propositions they make regarding peace-building all transcended the finished films and were drawn out via the debates they triggered. Although the actual audience they found was limited because of the massive public debates they triggered, the reach and sphere of influence of Kurdish films always went far beyond the actual audiences attending the screenings.

CHAPTER 7:

CONCLUSION

This thesis has concentrated on Kurdish films in Turkey which emerged in the 2000s in a period of political transformation. The main thrust of the study has been to examine the interpenetration between Kurdish films and the politics of the Kurdish issue in contemporary Turkey by asking questions regarding the relationships between films and their immediate socio-political context, between socio-political conflicts and the films that engage those conflicts. Focusing on the mediation between filmic texts and the social, this thesis has investigated the way in which Kurdish films incorporate the political struggle over the future direction of the Kurdish conflict in Turkey, the way their meanings are affected by this struggle, and how they might have an impact on this struggle. I have approached this inquiry by deploying a contextual film analysis approach and designating three main axes to examine the relationships between film and politics.

Kurdish films emerged during a political transformation in Turkey which was launched and led by the pro-Islamic AKP which has been in government since 2002. The consequence of this transformation that concerned the very definition of the nation, national identity and national history was an unprecedented power struggle over who controlled the definition and narration of the nation. The long-standing Kurdish conflict in Turkey was one of the main issues which necessitated such a dramatic shift in the foundational state ideologies and policies and this was also one of the key areas of transformation. Emerging at a time when historical developments rendered the official policy of denial unsustainable and the war between the Turkish military and the PKK came to a deadlock, the AKP promised to develop a peaceful solution to the conflict. In 2009, the AKP government launched the Kurdish Opening which functioned as a manifestation of official recognition of the Kurdish conflict as an issue of democracy, official acknowledgement of the failures of earlier policies regarding the conflict, and an official declaration of the government's will to come up with a democratic solution to the long-standing conflict. From the very beginning

the Kurdish Opening triggered unrest among much of the Turkish public on the one hand and disappointment amongst Kurdish citizens on the other hand. Heated debates on the Kurdish Opening and the Kurdish issue at large occupied parliamentary discussions, as well as media coverage and daily conversations amongst citizens. That was in a sense the most significant aspect of the official launch of the Kurdish Opening: lifting the strict ban on speaking about the Kurdish issue, breaking that imposed silence, and encouraging unprecedented broad public debates on the issue.

The Kurdish films which emerged in those days of political turbulence in Turkey offer an abundance of intriguing material for a reflection on the complicated and recondite interactions between films and the political context as well as between films and the society to which they communicate. While engaging with this metarial, on the first axis of the thesis, before engaging with individual Kurdish films I explored the political operation and reception of Kurdish cinema as a concept specifically in Turkey in the context of the political transformation discussed above. My aim was to ask how the general questions, ambiguities and complexities surrounding Kurdish cinema at large translate into the context of Kurdish films in Turkey in a period of political transformation in which the (re)definition of national identity was already subject to power struggles and intense public debates as the result of the Kurdish conflict.

Because Kurdish films in Turkey align with Kurdish films from elsewhere (and thus they are part of the construction and institutionalisation of Kurdish cinema as the national cinema of the Kurds), the emergence of Kurdish films touched a sensitive nerve regarding the Kurdish conflict in Turkey – a country where even the word 'Kurd' has been something that evoked fears of 'separatist terrorism'. Furthermore, the existence of Kurdish cinema put pressure on the definition of Turkish cinema. For that reason, I treated Kurdish cinema not only as a question but also as a questioner, and I drew attention to how the emergence of Kurdish cinema complicated and disconcerted the notion of 'Turkish cinema' to the extent that, as a consequence of debates triggered by the emergence of Kurdish films, a new concept known as *Türkiye sineması* (cinema in/of Turkey) was coined as a discursive means to oppose oppressive and exclusive connotations signalled in the concept of Turkish

cinema, for referring to films from Turkey without making references to Turkish ethnicity.

Taking up Tom O'Regan's suggestion that we analyse the national cinema of a country as 'an object of knowledge', I closely observed and interpreted such complicated theoretical questions as well as the politically-oriented public debates in Turkey on the concepts of Kurdish cinema, Turkish cinema and *Türkiye sineması*. I concluded that the intense dialogues that Kurdish films initiated with politics first started with the question of how to label these films, as this question coincided and converged with urgent issues in those times which bore witness to the recognition of Kurdish identity for the first time and that in turn sparked contestations about how to accommodate this identity in Turkey. Consequently, I argued that the newly emergent Kurdish films triggered wide public debates in Turkey not only on the basis of their topicality or their subject matter, which neatly overlapped with controversial issues occupying the political agenda, but that in fact prior to how they represented the Kurdish issue it was their emergence under the label of 'Kurdish cinema' that became subject to debate. And diverse reactions towards the concepts of Kurdish cinema, Turkish cinema and *Türkiye sineması*, either favouring or disfavouring them, mirrored public reactions regarding the policy change over the Kurdish conflict and the revision of national identity in Turkey.

The second axis of the thesis focused on understanding the political character of the Kurdish films of the period. The directors of these films have always expressed their desire to take an active part in contemporary political debates on the Kurdish issue via their films. Questioning how these filmmakers act out this political motivation in their films, and examining how this aspiration to contribute to social peace in Turkey structures Kurdish films, is a necessary dimension of exploring the interactions of these films with the politics of the Kurdish issue. For this inquiry, I conducted a context-specific analysis of the prominent themes, representations, discourses and political propositions that are apparent in Kurdish films. Rather than discovering new or hidden meanings in Kurdish films through close textual analysis, the purpose of this section of the thesis was to take up the politically significant meanings in Kurdish films that have been central to the public debates these films triggered and

interpret them with reference to the specificities of the political context in contemporary Turkey in which they circulate.

One of my propositions was that we can talk about convergences between 'past and present', 'reality and representation', and 'personal and social' in the case of Kurdish films in Turkey, and these concepts all originate from the politics of the Kurdish conflict and give the Kurdish films their political character. Bringing the dark history of the Kurdish issue in Turkey onto screen and into the present via Kurdish memories is the main aim of Kurdish films. In the days of memory wars in Turkey when the national past became a battleground, Kurdish films deployed Kurdish memories against the dominant historicisation of the Kurdish issue and they became one of the most significant means of rendering the Kurdish perspective on the national past visible and accessible to the general public in Turkey for the first time.

One of the most commonly treated issues in Kurdish films is the state atrocities that have been committed against the Kurds in Turkey. While some filmmakers prefer to make oral history films with the aim of leaving the stage to the victims and eyewitnesses of state brutality, others create fictional characters that represent those real victims. Thus in both fiction and non-fiction films Kurdish filmmakers have given priority to exposing Kurdish suffering under state oppression in the past in an attempt to empower Kurdish political demands for official mechanisms of social confrontation with the state's past wrongdoings. I have argued that, in effect, by screening state atrocities, Kurdish films actually took on that task by bringing these issues to the public agenda and thus utilised the medium of film as a mechanism of reconciliation and social justice without waiting for official mechanisms to be established.

Another commonly used strategy in peace-building efforts via film is the revising of the dominant image of the Kurdish region in Turkish public memory in an attempt to narrow the angle between Kurdish and Turkish memories of the conflict. When the first Kurdish films emerged, they provided the first visuals from the region that were not war footage disseminated by the Turkish military. With these images they (re)introduced the Kurdish region to the wider public in Turkey with an alternative image constructed through and within Kurdish memories to replace the prevailing

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negative public image disseminated through official discourses. In general, as much as the stories they narrate, taking the audience to the unknown Kurdish region through film was one of the initial motivations of many Kurdish filmmakers in that period. In order to break down dominant imaginings of the region in western Turkey as an arid, ugly and dark zone of terrorism, some of these films seek to capture Kurdish culture and geography in its most intact form and spectacularise the beauties of the Kurdish landscape, while others turn their cameras to Kurdish cities. In making familiar the unfamiliar, Kurdish films also embark upon humanising and fleshing out the Kurds, thereby constructing a counter-image that disavows the dominant negative representations of Kurdishness. All Kurdish films pay special attention to authentically introducing Kurdish culture to audiences within narratives that expose the price paid by the Kurds as they tried to maintain that culture. In fleshing out the Kurds, some Kurdish films also make efforts to touch upon the political aspect of Kurdish identity. Even though that is dangerous territory when the goal is to break down the dominant image of Kurds in Turkish society, these films take up the challenge and seek out appropriate strategies for portraying the political identity of the Kurds by showing the strong ties between the Kurdish political movement and the Kurdish people, introducing Kurdish guerrillas as human beings, and pointing to the socio-historical context that gave rise to the emergence of the Kurdish armed struggle.

While bringing forward a dark history, Kurdish films draw convergences between the personal and the social. Applying the representative power of personal stories to attest to the wide-scale social effects of the Kurdish conflict in Kurdish society, filmmakers usually direct their cameras to the nearest stories available and thus speak of the Kurdish issue through their own stories, or through the stories of their families and friends and villagers. As filmmakers often complain about the absence, paucity, or inaccessibility of relevant historical archives regarding the Kurdish conflict, they are left with what they can access: personal memories available to them through spoken words or private collections such as photographs, family albums, letters, personal diaries, and sound recordings. And while turning their cameras to the actual personal archives of ordinary Kurdish people, they demonstrate that the consequences of the Kurdish conflict are so prevalent in Kurdish society that a single

photograph, for example, or the diaries of one ordinary Kurdish individual, can be sufficient to draw a large-scale picture of the history of the Kurdish conflict.

Another element that brings out the political character of Kurdish films is their commitment to the idea of 'truth-telling' in film. Quite aware of the politics of truth in contemporary Turkey, the filmmakers seek out ways of saying 'This is *really* what happened in the past'. Thus, I argued that 'truth-telling' is one of the main motivations behind the making of Kurdish films, and that the 'claim of truth-telling' is one of the main characteristics of these films. Although the predominance of documentary is a reflection of this point, I have suggested that in the case of Kurdish films there is a remarkable convergence between fiction and non-fiction in terms of their claim to be representing *the* reality. This convergence starts with the pre-production stage, as Kurdish fiction films often set off with thorough historical research like a documentary project in order to truthfully represent every detail while fictionalising true events and real characters based on the past. In this regard, the directors treat their fiction films as 'drama-documentaries' or 're-enactments'. In order to retain the intrinsic link between the 'found real story' and their filmic story, Kurdish fiction films use real locations, perform authentic representations of Kurdish culture, employ non-professional Kurdish actors, and fictionalise true stories. They widely deploy archival footage within fictional stories, and photographs, videos, and newspaper pages are interspersed within the fictional narratives as *reminders of reality*, contextualising the fictional narrative with reference to socio-historical realities. And, all these elements function in the role of positioning the textual fiction within a contextual reality, reminding the viewer of the reality in relation to which the film claims to be based.

In my discussions about the centrality of the notions of 'memory' and 'truth' in Kurdish films, one important point of emphasis was that these films render hitherto silenced Kurdish memories publicly visible and publicly available; in other words, they functioned as one of the major mediums of publicising Kurdish interpretations of the truth regarding the history of the Kurdish conflict for the first time in Turkey. And once the Kurdish perspective on memory and truth represented in Kurdish films become public, they start to circulate in an overly politicised society and find themselves in the middle of ongoing power struggles over what is to be recognised as

truth in relation to the history of the Kurdish issue. This point led me to the third axis of this thesis. In the final stage of my exploration of the interplay between Kurdish films and the Kurdish conflict, I have focused on the convergence between text and context by concentrating on the intertextual dialogues between Kurdish films and other contemporary texts regarding the Kurdish conflict.

I have argued that the case of Kurdish films in Turkey necessitates directing attention from text to context, examining the context of reception and observing public interpretations and political usages of film meaning. For this inquiry, while adhering to the framework of reception studies, I also suggested that Paul Willemen's conceptualisation of 'cultural specificity' is a valuable concept not only for the textual analysis of films, but perhaps more so in terms of the contextual and intertextual analysis of film meaning. Although the filmic text embodies various potential meanings, there are always socio-cultural contextualising powers over the text that function for the closure of the text's meaning in a certain direction by encouraging, foregrounding, and highlighting certain meanings among many other potential meanings. And these forces that operate to manipulate the meaning of a film can be studied only with reference to the cultural specificity of the particular time and place in which films travel.

Through the analysis of specific cases, I demonstrated how Kurdish films became one of the major means of debating the Kurdish issue in Turkey at a time that witnessed a dramatic shift in the dynamics of the Kurdish conflict. Suggesting that we can talk about 'the politicisation of film culture' in Turkey in a period of political transformation, I discussed how the film theatres in Turkey screening Kurdish films became an arena for debating the Kurdish issue, while the films turned into 'discussion material' for the general public as a means for people to express their political opinions on the current political transformation and air their unease, anxieties, anger and fears in an era of political turbulence. On the other hand, I observed that the potential political power of cinema was acknowledged and utilised by political parties active in the period who utilised films to publicly comment on recent developments regarding the Kurdish conflict. As a consequence, in this period movie-going started to function as a political act, film commentary became political commentary and film recommendations became coded political messages to the

public. Furthermore, some of the Kurdish films started to engage in direct dialogue with the parliamentary debates of the day on the Kurdish issue and filmmakers became public political figures who were regarded as 'experts' on the issues they addressed in their films and on the Kurdish issue in general.

After investigating this rather extraordinary scenario, I concluded that Kurdish films have participated in the ongoing struggle in Turkey over the future of the Kurdish conflict not only as a subject speaking out, but also an object spoken about; not only did they interrogate the Kurdish issue, but they also became an instrument for the public to interrogate the issue. This is an argument that also touches upon the question of the potential political influence of Kurdish films in Turkey. Although it is not possible to 'measure' the social influence of films, with this question in mind I placed emphasis on the significance of observing the interactions between films and politics to examine the dialogues between cinema and society. Hence, based on my exploration of the instant dialogues and intense interpenetrations between Kurdish films and present-day politics, I proposed that the stories Kurdish films tell, the political messages they convey, and the suggestions they make regarding peace-building transcended the finished films and extended outwards via the debates they triggered. Thus although the actual audiences were limited in scope, because of the massive amount of public interest they inspired and the wide public debates they triggered the reach and sphere of influence of Kurdish films always extended far beyond the actual audiences at the screenings.

In the second chapter of this thesis, which revisited the national cinema debate, I argued that within the cinema of a nation we can explore not only how the nationalist myth of unity is imposed, but also how it cannot entirely be imposed; we can analyse how the imposition of homogeneity works, but also how it does not and cannot work. This study partly sought to contribute to the national cinema debate by treating the case of Kurdish films in Turkey as a new example which demonstrates that analysing films with regards to nationhood does not have to feed into myths of national unity or ignore the diversities and conflicts within the nation. On the contrary, as this thesis also demonstrates, the cinema of a nation is a territory of diversities and cleavages that bear the traces of the societal conflicts the nation embodies. In defending the continuing significance of the national context for film studies, I deployed Paul

Willemen's (2006) concept of 'cultural specificity' as a means of examining the filmic text within the web of its intertextual relationships with other cultural texts that contribute to the shared 'meaning system' (Lemke, 1995) within the national sphere. Thus, this study of Kurdish films in Turkey makes a contribution to the study of 'cinema and the national' by demonstrating how the cultural specificity of the nation is one of the contextual powers that significantly influence the meanings of filmic texts, as well as the social operation and reception of those meanings.

This thesis also contributes to the newly born field of Kurdish cinema studies, which at the time of writing consists of a very limited number of studies, not only by tackling questions regarding the definition of Kurdish cinema, but more importantly by illustrating the significance of focusing on specific localities, specific historicities, and specific questions that Kurdish films generate in different contexts. This also involves pointing to the significance of concentrating on the interactions of these politically oriented films with the politics of the Kurdish issue. On the other hand, the study of Kurdish films in Turkey also partly offers a contribution to the study of 'cinema in Turkey', inasmuch as the newly emergent Kurdish films constitute one of the most significant and dynamic components of cinema in Turkey today. While the newly coined concept of *Türkiye sineması* has started to be commonly deployed in order to include Kurdish films in the cinema of Turkey, there is an increased need for scholarly research to theorise cinema in Turkey after the emergence of Kurdish films.

Lastly, this thesis also makes a contribution to the general study of 'film and politics', and more specifically 'socio-political conflicts and film', as I have treated Kurdish films in Turkey as a case that generates various engaging questions regarding these broader fields of investigation. By developing a contextual film analysis approach on three different axes to understand the interplay between film and politics in the case of Kurdish films in Turkey, I sought to offer up a certain perspective that might be adopted in different studies that also examine how films that directly address contemporary social tensions and political cleavages in a certain society enter into dialogue with those areas of socio-political conflict in their immediate context.

The Kurdish films addressed in this thesis do not bring forward the history of a conflict that is already past and they do not circulate in a post-conflict society; they bring forward a past that has never become distanced from the present and they circulate in a society that is still driven by conflict at a time when intense power struggles are ensuing over the issues they address. This point has been central to all my key arguments in this study. Thus, on a final note, I would like to remark that as the politics of the Kurdish conflict are still subject to constant transformation, the socio-historical context depicted in this thesis will continue to evolve as rapidly as it has since the beginning of this period of political transformation. And consequently, the textual characteristics, the socio-political operation, and the reception of Kurdish films in Turkey will inevitably be influenced by significant political developments that will unfold in the future of this process. However, I believe that this does not mean that this thesis will become outdated or insignificant; on the contrary, it is my hope that it will offer a theoretical perspective for studying new Kurdish films with reference to the new context of the Kurdish conflict in Turkey because, at its core, the aim of this thesis was to develop a theoretical approach for an investigation of the immediate intertextual dialogues between films that tackle an ongoing conflict and the ever-shifting present-day politics regarding that conflict.

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The Storm (2008, Kazım Öz)

The Way (1982, Yılmaz Güney)

Toss Up (2004, Uğur Yücel)

Turkish A+ (2012, Murat Bayramoğlu)

Turtles Can Fly (2004, Bahman Ghobadi)

Two Locks of Hair: The Missing Girls of Dersim (2010, Nezahat Gündoğan)

Voice of My Father (2012, Zeynel Doğan andOrhan Eskiköy)

Where is My Mother Tongue? (2012, Veli Kahraman)

Zarê (1926, Amo Bek-Nazaryan)