

# An Introduction to Cinema in Rojava



The following story is part of a series written by Zanyar Omrani, a Kurdish filmmaker and human rights activist who visited **Rojava, or Western Kurdistan**, in the spring of 2015. You can watch his film **“Without Helmets”** [here](#).

## An Introduction to Cinema in Rojava by Zanyar Omrani

The history of cinema in the **Western Kurdistan, or Rojava** cannot be studied separately from the Syrian cinema. In fact, one can claim that a cinema with distinct features has not yet been developed in Rojava, and one cannot observe signs of intention

toward making film with different identities among the directors. What we have is the combination, or the pure imitation of Syrian cinema or to some extent Turkish cinema. Hence, we should begin with a short introduction on Syrian cinema.

In 1908, a café in Aleppo was the first place in Syria, where a movie was shown. Later, the Ottoman official system established the first movie theatre in Damascus, which was burned in less than a month.

There were some attempts for making people familiar with cinema, but the role of the French was more effective. They played a bilateral role; they imported the necessary facilities and knowledge of cinema into Syria and they were also the ones who established the censorship in the cinema industry in Syria.





## Filmmakers in Rojava

There was a significant relationship between the needs of the colonizer and the movies shown. Until the WWI, all the movies were German, and after the defeat of Germany, the victorious French movies replaced them.

In 1927, a group of cinema enthusiasts in Damascus, under the leadership of “Ahmad Ayyub” and “Badri Talo” made a black-and-white movie about robbery in Damascus. This silent movie was called “The Condemned Innocents”, and it took 8 months to make it. The presence of a Muslim woman in the movie infuriated the extremist Muslims of the city. Therefore, “Raashed Jalaal”, the screenwriter and one of the main producers of the movie, had no choice but to use a German girl living in Damascus for the role.

“Bahjat Al-Mansouri” was another talented young filmmaker, who made several short films and documentaries at that time.

After so many personal and collective efforts of the cinema lovers, and despite the many technical and content-wise problems, the Syrian cinema started to move forth. Among the ones who did their best to develop Syrian cinema, there was someone like “Noureddin Ramadan” whose hard work and efforts brought about improvements in Syrian cinema. He made many documentary movies.

Of the many problems and issues that impeded the development of Syrian cinema industry, one can mention the image processing problem, lacking a laboratory, shortage of raw materials, audio mixing issues, and the shortage of academic resources in Arabic. Later on, due to the lack of support from the state, the Syrian cinema suffered from a high depression which was so intense that between the decades 1930s to 1960s, less than 10 films were made.

At the same time that the official and political changes occurred in Syria, the state turned to invest in cinema.

The establishment of a state cinema organization and

consequently, founding the television station in the country, were the evidences that the state had realized the role of that pioneering industry in Syria. The content of most movies in that era was to show the developments made in the economic sections of Syria, which were often exaggerated.

## The Kurdish Cinema and Rojava

If we believe in a cinema called “Kurdish Cinema”, Rojava Kurds has had the least share in creating such a concept. Of course, the Kurdish cinema is itself an ambiguous concept. In Rojava, the strict policies of the Ba’ath regime against the Kurds and denying their identity for a half-century, besides the multitudes of political and economic reasons, has pushed the Kurds to the margins. Nevertheless, there are many Kurds like Abdul-Rahman Al-Rashi that have worked in different artistic fields, but within the limits of the centralized Syrian cinema

Lack of even one article about Kurdish cinema in Rojava, had made the research work, more difficult than one can imagine. Therefor I decided to go for the well-known people. After some questions and searching, I came across to names “Abbas Esmaeil”, “Abdolkarim Mohammad”, and “Shiru Hendeh”.

Abbas Esmaeil, a writer and historian from Qamishli, about the opening of the first cinema in Kurdish areas, says: “It was early 1940s that the French built the first cinema in Qamishli. It was called “Cinema Fo’aad” and now it has become a grocery market and there is almost no traces of the cinema left today.

He goes on to talk about the other four cinemas in that era: “the second one, was called “Cinema of Damascus” and Yusuf Haddad also built another cinema named after himself “Haddad Cinema”. However, there was also “Cinema Boghus” with limited facilities and less seats which hosted movies and moviegoers. Of course, if one can call them movies. There was also some

summer cinemas; like “Cinema Scheherazade” and “Fo’aad Seifi”, that played movies in vast areas of land in summer nights.”

The films were at first silent and black-and-white, while most of them were shown privately. Charlie Chaplin’s movies were very popular. The first film viewers were the French soldiers, their families, their companions and a number of Armenians and Kurds who were close to the French.

Shiru Hendu, is a young filmmaker from Qamishli. He mostly makes documentaries, and at the moment directs music videos and clips related to the war.

Shiru regards the creation of cultural places such as cinemas, as the result of the far-reaching railway built by the French and Germans in the areas which is now the common borders of Syria and Turkey; which inevitably transferred the civilizational achievements into the Kurdish areas.

Abbas Esmail, thinks that the people in Qamishli and the villages around, welcomed cinema with open arms and says: “The people would come to watch the movies, good-looking and well-dressed as they had come to a wedding ceremony.” He adds: “They loved war films more, as they were mostly nomads.”

In Esmail’s opinion, even the lack of cinema in some cities of Rojava, did not prevent people from loving the industry and giving up their curiosity. For instance, the people in Afrin would go to Aleppo just for watching movies.

After ruling out the colonizers from Syria, the public cinemas became more common, in such a way that in the marginal and border city of Qamishli, there were 5 cinemas until 1960. The movie tickets were inexpensive and all the social classes could attend the theatre halls.

When I asked this historians and filmmakers to name the most popular films of that era, most of them mentioned films in which “Faten Hamama”, “Imad Hamdi”, and “Farid al-Atrash” starred and especially “Antar the Black Prince (1961)”, the movie about

“Antarah ibn Shaddad”- a pre-Islamic Arab hero and poet (525-608) famous for both his poetry and his adventurous life.

Abdolkarim Mohammad has interesting memories of those days.

“I remember sometimes people after watching the movie would say ‘today Antar [ibn Shaddad] was not like yesterday; maybe because he killed many people yesterday and today was exhausted.’”

Abdolkarim chuckles and goes on: “There were some peasants who sold their sheep and came to Qamishli with the money and bought tickets. If they did not like the film, they would say: “The bastards have swindled our money, now we have our sheep gone and the film was really rubbish.”

As the relationship between Syria and Egypt went wrong, the Egyptian films gradually faded out and the Indian ones become popular. 1970s was the time when the Indian films, reached the climax of popularity and fame in Syria. Abbas Esmail, thinks that the Indian films were more popular in Kurdish areas of Syria, and believes that the reason was the “language affinities and similar emotions of Kurds and Indians.”

The films shown on cinemas were changed from a ceremony and holiday to another; for instance, on Eid al-Adha, the day of Ba’ath Party establishment, or the advent of summer.

Abbas Esmail says that the nationalist Kurds in Syria were really concerned about the movies, as they thought the Syrian state used cinema as an instrument for assimilating the Kurds.

Shiru Hendeh thinks that after the collapse of the USSR, action, romance, and generally vulgar movies replaced the philosophical and artistic films and also by the coming of pornographic movies on the cinemas, people were dissuaded to go to cinemas, and the result was that the cinemas were closed down.

Shiru says: “one should not ignore that the prevalence of watching television and Syrian TV series and soap operas, the taking over of Hafiz Assad regime, and the political repression

were so effective.” The Syrian TV series were also popular in all Arabic countries, besides Syria. Also, for some while the effect of Turkish cinema was considerable.

## Cinema Amuda Fire

10 years after the establishment of cinema in Amuda, on the 13th of November 1960, in a controversial incident, more than 280 schoolchildren, from 8 to 14 years of age, caught up in the fire and burned in the cinema. The rumors say that in that particular day, an Egyptian horror movie in which the Egyptian actor Mahmoud El-Meliguy starred (some say the name of the movie was “The Midnight Murder”, and some others call it “Midnight Ghost”, though the evidence for both of them is not fully available), and which was not appropriate for the children was presented in three times [from 10 to 12, 14 to 16, and 17 to 19]. Algeria at that time was fighting for its independence from France and proceeds from the film were to be donated to the Algerians.



Amude Cinema fire

The blaze started in the last show time. The ceiling of the cinema was of clay held by some iron sticks. The seats were made of wood and the fire and the blaze, burned up the curtain and the seats in less than 20 minutes.

The children panicked and as they ran toward the small doors of the movie theatre, the doors fell inward and the clay ceiling collapsed and piled up against the doors. The back door of the cinema led to a water well. But the children were so frightened and panicked that most of them fell into the well as they wanted to



get out of that fire.

Amuda is a small city, so it is not wrong if we claim in that incident, each house and each family, had one of their children dead or wounded. "Amsha Sheikmous", a 68-year-old woman remembers this incident with every detail: "the smoke covered everywhere, and the people ran to save their children. I remember that the regime soldiers did not let the people save the children."

Amsha adds: "That was their own plan. The government had done heavy advertising about the movie and repeatedly announced that the movie would be very interesting."

I asked her "why didn't you go?" She answered: "they did not allow girls. Only the boys went. They wanted to exterminate the Kurdish generation."

An old man called "Hassan Ahmad Esmaeil", rejects this claim and thinks that incident was just a "technical mistake". He claims that some Assyrians, Christians and Arabs were killed too.

However that was the first cinema in Syria which was burned in fire; in 1929 an extensive blaze occurred in Damascus which spread to the neighboring streets. It is said that the extinguishing the fire, took three days.

The cause was the high temperature of the projector lamp.

Mohammad Ebrahim was one of the witnesses of the fire in Amuda Cinema. He was 25 years old then and was one of the first people who arrived at the incident to help the children. He describes the situation as follows:

"It was early in the evening that we suddenly heard yells and cries. We immediately went on to the place. The motor had been exploded. There was smoke all over; wails and cries were all we could hear. "Saeed Agha" was also there. We managed to save some of the children, and then we took the dead bodies to the mosque. It was such a gloomy night."

Saeed Agha but died in this incident. "Fahad", his son says: "I was 7 when my father died. I had returned home from the cinema;

we were scheduled for the second time and had some friend who died in the last time.

My father was in the city teahouse, and when the cries and shouts fills the air, he and some friends run toward the cinema. On the way to cinema, my father was told that Fahad was at home, and there was no reason to worry. But he hand answered ‘all of them are like Fahad for me.’”

It is said that the cinema had just 200 seats, but at that day, 500 children were present at the movie hall. At that time, “Molla Ahmad Nami” wrote a book in Arabic in which he states: “Bawi Shergu, the cinema owner, who lost his son in the fire, had asked the director of the district of Amuda to stop the movie as the temperature of the motor had gone high. But the district director disagreed and had made the owner to continue projecting the film.”

One of the important points that Molla Ahmad Nami has mentioned in his book was that none of the high rank officials’ sons were present at the cinema and also this fact that none of the children’s teachers and school staff accompanied the students into the cinema.

Now at that same location, a park is built as a memorial for the martyrs of the Amuda cinema. This incident caused the Kurds to somehow avoid going to cinemas. The rumors which spread later also increased the people’s hesitance and avoidance of going to cinema. For example, in 1993 it was rumored that ” on a certain day Ba’ath regime wanted to put the cinema of the city on fire, so that, this time the Kurdish youth be burned,.”

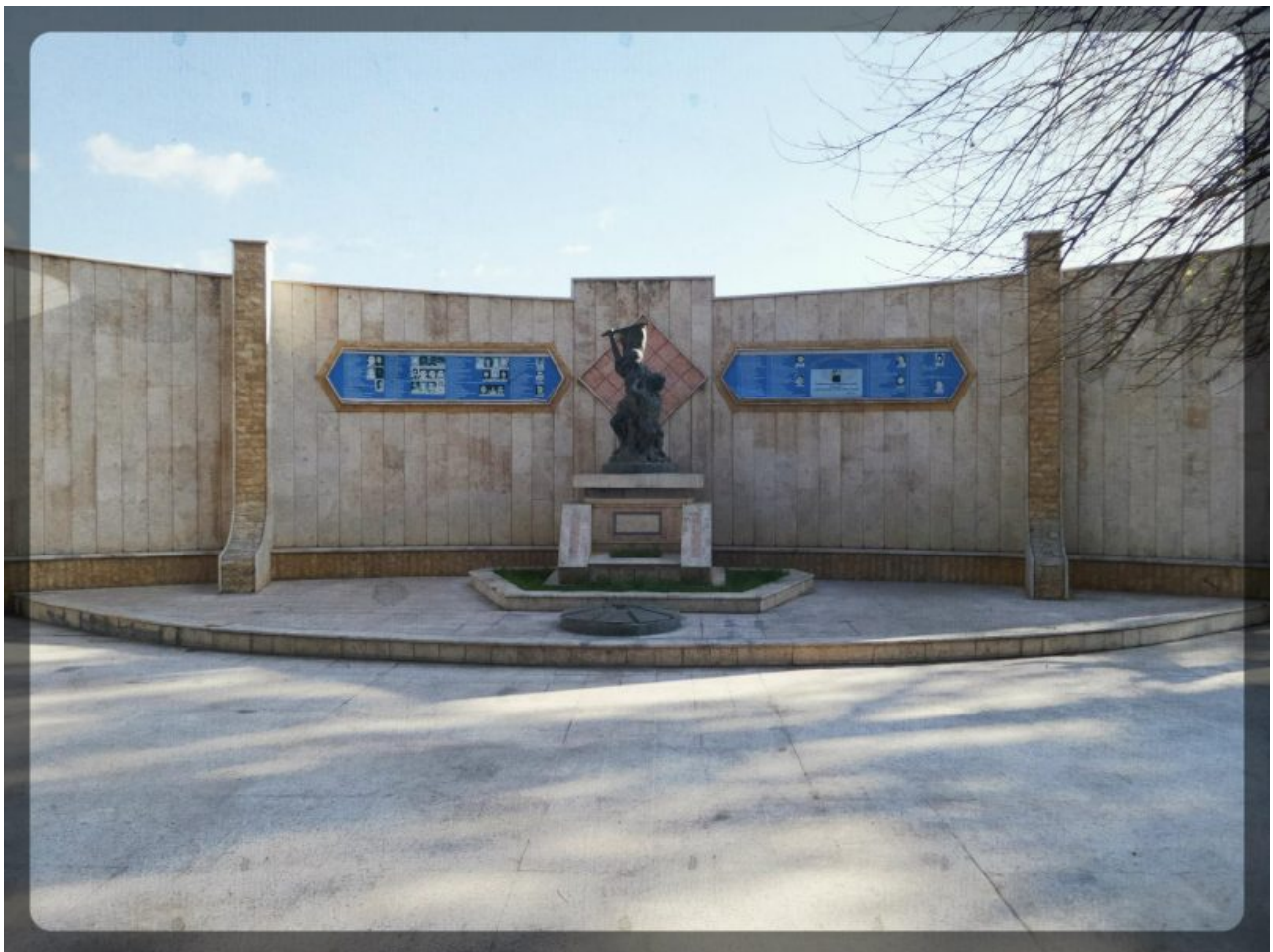
## One Last Remark

Rojava is undergoing dangerous days of war against the ISIS and regional powers and is far from full establishment of its autonomous system. Therefore if any artistic developments occur, they are mostly individual or collective efforts nor in the form of a

consolidate structure. Also, the filmmakers of this area have learned cinema, experimentally.

“Manu Khelil”, “Akram Heidou” and “Teimur Abdi” are the young talents who have made short films and documentaries in Kurdish about Kurdistan, in the recent years. The effect of the Syrian cinema and the other neighbor countries on their works is obvious. These filmmakers say that they hate the “touristic view of the foreign media” upon the incidents in Rojava, and what they need is an inside view which is more reliable.

In addition to cinemas, there are also some cinema clubs which are active in Rojava cities. Qamishli Cinema Club is one of them. This club showed the movie “A Separation” by Asghar Farhadi, on 19th December 2014.



Some of the artists from Qamishli, have visited the war fronts with their video projectors and curtains on their shoulders. “Shwan Ali”,

is a filmmaker from Northern Kurdistan who is in Rojava in order to help restoring the bases of cinema in Rojava. In a lengthy talk that I had with him, he said: “at the moment our cinematic activities are shut down. Here, there are good potentials and we should organize the dispersed and sporadic activities.”

He asked the states and the filmmakers of the area, especially the Kurds, to fully decide to restore the cinema industry in Rojava, and import the global intellectual and facilities achievement to the area. They are now making the arrangements for the Cinema Academy project, at Mesopotamia Cultural and Artistic Center, which is built last year.

The Kurdish cinema concepts in Rojava, have been “war”, “homelessness and wandering”, “memories of the genocide”, “obligatory emigration” and all the other calamities happened to Kurds. If Rojava’s cinema wants to record a gist of the mentioned concepts and concerns, we must wait for the movies about the resistance of the people in Kobane, arabization process and the Kurds without ID cards in the future.

Now, the main question here is that whether the establishment of autonomy in western Kurdistan, prepares the ground for developing cinema in this area or not. We should wait and see...

