

Film Festivals and the Diaspora: Impetus to the Development of Kurdish Cinema?¹

By Mustafa Gündoğdu

While existence in the diaspora has not had purely positive outcomes for the Kurds, it is possible to argue that they have minimised potential negativities, such as alienation, and that they have developed a harmonious space. One example is the Kurdish community in London and the London Kurdish Film Festival (LKFF, www.lkff.co.uk) in particular. It is a diasporic film festival that has beneficially impacted upon the development of Kurdish cinema. Kurds live in various parts of the UK, with the biggest concentration in London. Although life in the diaspora here has similarities with other prominent European cities, there are also some differences; the British-based community is internally diverse as well. For instance, the first Kurdish settlement in England was initiated in 1950 by individuals from Southern Kurdistan who came to study here and made substantial intellectual contributions in the following years. Most of the politicians, ministers and intellectuals who are in prominent positions in Southern Kurdistan (Kurdistan Iraq) today have spent time in the UK as part of this community. In this respect, it is possible to talk about the existence of a group of elites from Southern Kurdistan who have benefited from good education, who are in possession of intellectual and cultural capital, and who are interested in art. On the other hand, there are also large groups of people from Southern Kurdistan who migrated as refugees in later periods (in the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s) due to the repression and extermination policies of Saddam Hussein against the Kurds. As for the Northern Kurds (Kurdistan Turkey), although it is possible to trace people who migrated to England in the 1970s as workers, the biggest migration flow, which consisted mostly of political asylum seekers, occurred around the end of the 1980s. In addition, a considerable number of Kurds from Eastern Kurdistan (Kurdistan Iran) and a limited number of Kurds from Syria also live in England. The communication between Kurds who have settled in different places has, in time, led to the lessening of their

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communal links and to dispersal. It is important to understand that the fact that living in dispersed conditions in separate locations leads to a certain degree of disconnectedness, a feature which also defines Kurdish cinema. Within the framework of this dialectical development, which has positioned the West as the host, the Kurds started developing various cultural projects. This was, in part, due to the approach of the West, which disfavours the political recognition of immigrant people but promotes their cultural recognition and views immigrant groups as different facets within the host nation. The Kurds, no doubt, acted on developing their cultural activities not in order to meet the expectations of the West, but in order to consolidate the undeniable and inescapable aspects of their identity, especially as culture can be transformed into a highly influential medium for suppressed peoples and it can be frightening for those in power. One can claim that in comparison with other stateless groups, the Kurds have managed to engage in more and really effective activities. They have made significant efforts to change the crude stereotype of 'people with guns' that the outside world seemed to have adopted. A similar phenomenon is evident in Edward Said's argument that Palestinian cinema functions as an oppositionary stance against the mainstream media's reflecting and congealing of the Palestinians as a people who put on masks and throw stones, incapable to thinking of anything else but terrorism and violence (as discussed in Chan 2007)ⁱ.

The series of Kurdish film festivals that first started in some cities of Europe and then spread to locations in North America and Australia has helped the Kurds to work against this type of stereotypical perception and categorisation. The success of some Kurdish artists, like Bahman Ghobadi, at the prestigious film festivals since the beginning of the twenty-first century and the productions established by independent artists educated in cinema courses organised by the Mesopotamian Cultural Centre in Istanbul contributed significantly to the advent of these festivals. In addition, a number of socio-political factors contributed to the success of the Kurdish film festivals. For example, the transformation of the federal Kurdish administration in Southern Kurdistan (Iraq) into an administrative entity that fulfils partial state functions resulted in the provision of support to the field of cinema, particularly after the international success and recognition in this field. Secondly, the Kurds' passing into a more civil life after the unilateral ceasefire declared by the PKK in 1999 in Northern Kurdistan

(Turkey) and the retreat of the guerrilla forces to outside Turkey's state borders created an environment that is more conducive to cultural development. One reflection of the diverse cultural activities that Kurds have developed in the diaspora is the Kurdish film festival. The very first event was the Kurdish Film Days in Vienna in May 2000. The first LKFF took place in London in 2001 as a result of the discussions incited by a Kurdish youth group with the support of the biggest Kurdish association in the UK, Halkevi. The first and second editions of the festival (respectively taking place in 2001 and 2002) were dominated by film material originating from the Kurds of Turkish Kurdistan. As of the third edition, with the success that the festival gained, it was decided that people from other parts of Kurdistan, particularly the Southern Kurds, should also be actively involved in order to establish a more balanced representation. Mindful that the Kurds are sharply divided into factions and gathered under different organisations and institutions depending on their political views, the LKFF has aimed to stay above political divisions. Deciding to define itself in a framework that does not go into conflict with any of these political structures and movements, exclude them or remain outside of them, the LKFF operates with the aim of encouraging and fostering Kurdish cinema. In this respect, the third LKFF in 22 October-4 November 2004 represented a more diverse range of content, incorporating different films around various subjects from various parts of the Kurdistan and the diaspora. This variation has continued and increased with the fourth and fifth festivals (8-14 December 2006 and 30 November-6 December 2007 respectively). Thus, the LKFF has gradually become one of the most important film festivals in London, where over 60 film festivals are held every year.

Response to Cultural Colonialism

One important impact of the LKFF upon Kurdish cinema more generally is that it has highlighted the importance of culture and brought it into discussions relating to the national independence struggle of the Kurds. This debate occurs in various parts of the world and is by no means new. In this framework, the LKFF began, in response to the deployment of culture as a medium of domination, by adopting a revolutionary attitude with a focus on the transformation of culture into a medium of resistance. In this sense, the LKFF is not a festival organised merely to show films made by or about the Kurds;

from the beginning of the discussions initiated by the founders of the LKFF, there was consensus that the festival should be a response to cultural domination. The basis of this focus was the realisation that the struggle for Kurdish films to attain their own identity is part of the Kurds' more general struggle for recognition. As a result of this strategy, we observed that other film festivals which were audacious enough to show Kurdish films as their own products were circumvented and Kurdish films started to be presented with their Kurdish identity.

The Provision of Kurds' Representation

Another aim of the LKFF is to bring as many representations of Kurds as possible into the public sphere. Kurds in the UK are physically distanced from one another and have different exilic backgrounds. The LFKK aims to eradicate these differences and overcome their fragmentation as far as possible. In the fourth and fifth festivals the leadership of the festival committee was changed to introduce greater neutrality. In addition, practical action was taken to prioritise the alignment of the festival with prominent Kurdish organisations. Agreements were made with Kurdish satellite channels as media sponsors, such as Kurdistan TV, Kurdsat TV airing from South Kurdistan (Iraq), Roj TV broadcasting from Belgium and Denmark alongside THISK TV broadcasting from different locations in Europe and many other local channels broadcasting from South Kurdistan (Iraq). Each was approached with equal standing, regardless of broadcasting scale. Recognising that there is no functioning mail system in Southern Kurdistan, representatives were assigned in Suleymaniye, Hewler and Duhok to facilitate the collection of films produced in that region for screening at the festival. The same system of gathering material was established in Eastern Kurdistan (Iran). Print media and the internet were also utilised to great effect. Further representatives were sent to the festivals organised in the region, and at least twice a year representatives of the festival committee have visited the region. These liaisons allowed developing relations with institutions and individuals that are active in the sector. Efforts were also made to obtain continuous support from the Kurdistan Regional Government. Through these various actions and strategies, the LKFF has come to represent more closely the diversity of Kurdish peoples.

Contribution to the Development of Kurdish Cinema

In the five events that have taken place since 2001, the LKFF has shown almost 350 short and long feature and documentary films. This number points to an important achievement for a cinematic tradition that is said to be in its infancy, given the strict selection criteria. Although the Kurdish cinematic tradition is relatively young, there is a high level of engagement with film production among the Kurdish population. Famous Kurdish director Bahman Ghobadi wrote in the 2002 festival programme that in Kurdistan he has witnessed a strange change as families now desire their children to become filmmakers rather than doctors or engineers. Ghobadi said, 'A friend of mine, who was a taxi driver, has now sold his taxi, bought a film camera and is making a film'ⁱⁱ. In the street where he lives, he said, there are another 22 Kurdish filmmakers. Of course, Kurdish film festivals are organised in various parts of the world. Particularly those in Europe have had a significant impact on Kurdish filmmakers. Thanks to the festival culture, which is flourishing with approximately 10 Kurdish film festivals organised in the diaspora, Kurdish directors are encouraged by the fact that their films are likely to be shown outside Kurdistan. Now, even filmmakers living in the remote parts of Kurdistan are aware that there are Kurdish film festivals where their films can be appraised. With the support provided by the LKFF, the number of films has increased, and geographical barriers are no longer an obstacle for filmmakers based in different states. It is also significant that for most of the films shown at the LKFF, the screening in London represents a first outside Kurdish lands. It is a European (and sometimes world) première, which once again demonstrates the important role that festivals have in finding and showing the films. For the many competent young Kurdish directors, such as Kazim Öz, Huseyin Karabey, Jamil Rostami, Shirin Jehani, Hisham Zaman (residing in Norway) and Yüksel Yavuz (residing in Germany) who live and produce films in Kurdistan, the homeland, it is a great achievement to have their films shown in the very important cities of the West, such as London, Paris and Berlin. From 2009 the festival will be extending to New York, increasing its reach and rewards for participants. In this respect, diaspora festivals serve to create healthy competition among the Kurdish directors and to motivate them. With every passing year, the quality of films received by the LKFF improves substantially. In addition to the main LKFF, 2007 saw the inclusion of a short film contest open to Kurdish filmmakers in memory of

the Kurdish filmmaker Yilmaz Güney, an undertaking that aims to support and encourage talent among the young generation. This contest, the second of which was held in 2009, has had a significant effect in terms of increasing the number and quality of films received by the LKFF. Festivals in the diaspora have also provided encouragement for the filmmakers to make better films in terms of technique, quality and story line. Over the years, many of the films shown at the LKFF have been invited for further screenings by larger and smaller festivals across Europe. Additionally, various film groups, schools and cinema societies at universities have contributed to the dissemination effort by showcasing these films to their audiences.

The LKFF is one of about 60 film festivals organised in a multicultural and multinational world capital like London. It is a proud moment for the Kurds to stand with their own colours in this environment. It is possible to say that the LKFF is an example of success, as it has become well known among film professionals in London. It has gained respect in other countries and cities as well. The LKFF may prove to be a good model for other Kurdish film festivals in the diaspora. It will also serve as a model for the Kurdish Film Festival which is to start in Northern Kurdistan in the near future.

Discovery and Protection of Cultural Heritage

Standing apart from other Kurdish film festivals, the LKFF also shows old archive films about Kurds and other classical films. The oldest known film made about the Kurds, *Zarê* (Amo Bek- Nazaryan, Amasi Martirosyan, *USSR, 1927*), an Armenian production, was shown at the fourth festival in 2006, 75 years after its creation and with the support of the National Film Archive of Armenia and the Yerevan International Film Festival. This special display, accompanied by harp played by Tara Jaff, represented the film's European gala, delayed by 75 years. This nice tradition was continued with screening at the fifth festival, in 2007, of *Krderezidner* (*Yezidi Kurds*, Amasi Martirosyan, *USSR, 1933*), shot in 1932 in Armenia. The LKFF and the National Film Archive of Armenia agreed to produce digital copies of these two classic films and add Kurdish and English subtitles. The LKFF aims to permanently protect the cultural heritage of the Kurds in this way. Another development at the fifth LKFF was to have a thematic section with a number of films focused on the Yezidis, who are one of the important groups in

Kurdistan. Hundreds of Yezidis were killed in an attack in the village of Sengal in Iraq in 2007. Thus, showing a film about this ethnic group served as a commemoration. It is of utmost importance to our cultural heritage for diaspora film festivals to show films of those Kurds who are in a way forgotten, particularly those living in various parts of Kurdistan such as Israel, Horasan (Iran) and Middle Asia.

Problems of Kurdish Film Festivals in Diaspora

As I stated above, Kurdish film festivals have been organised in various important cities, particularly in the UK, Germany, France, Austria, Australia, Canada, Sweden, Switzerland and the U.S. Some of these festivals, particularly those in Frankfurt and in Stockholm, are on hold and most are held periodically on the basis of an irregular system. This irregularity presents problems, as it prevents the feeling of continuity and interferes with the development of the festival's concept. This lack of regularity also impacts upon producers. My personal impression is that there is substantial lack of co-ordination and co-operation between the Kurdish film festivals in the diaspora. Within the organising committee of the LKFF, we try to play participative role and assist other festivals, as do the Berlin and Paris Kurdish film festivals. Efforts should be made for these activities and co-operations to become widespread. It should be a top priority for all Kurdish film festivals in the diaspora to come together without prejudice or anxiety and discuss common principles and opportunities. Such a gathering would help organisers to get to know one another and create co-ordination based on collaboration, sharing and co-operation. Apart from that, I also believe that organising a conference on Kurdish cinema would greatly benefit our cause and that all Kurdish film festivals in the diaspora should actively work to organise such an event. I believe it would be best to hold such a conference in Kurdistan. Apart from the problems of Kurdish cinema, a conference in which possibilities and opportunities can be evaluated will play an effective role in resolving some of the difficulties facing Kurdish cinema. The process of consolidation and identity growth of Kurdish cinema that I have described here would be enhanced by a conference. It could become the much needed platform where solutions could be brought forward for conceptual complexities, technical deficiencies, common terminology problems, effective co-operation, provision of just and equal funding, film skills training, and decent institutionalisation.

ⁱ Chan, Felicia (2007) 'What Dreams May Come: (Palestinian) Cinema / Nation / History', *Variant*, 30. Online. Available HTTP:

<http://www.variant.org.uk/30texts/PalestineC.html>.

ⁱⁱ Information on the second edition of the London Kurdish Film Festival (www.lkff.co.uk/lkff2006/english/second/introduction.htm).