

Cinemas of Conflict: A Framework of Cinematic Engagement With Violent Conflict, Illustrated With Kurdish Cinema

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In an age of mediated conflict, the fields of media and communication studies need to critically address the increasingly important relation between film and violent conflict. The number of films dealing with violent conflicts is expanding, but scholars still struggle to find suitable frameworks to study them. Instead, concepts such as “accented” and “exilic” filmmaking are often used. Seeking to advance the study of film and violent conflict, and based on interdisciplinary insights, this article proposes a framework of cinematic engagement that takes the level of involvement of filmmakers as a key element of differentiation. The proposed framework is illustrated with examples from Kurdish cinema, which is deeply rooted in one of the longest-standing conflicts in the Middle East.

Keywords: conflict, cinema, violence, war, Turkey, Middle East, Kurds

Introduction

Although the number of violent conflicts has declined worldwide since the end of the Cold War, it seems as if the contemporary world is on fire (Thussu & Freedman, 2003). Because of increased media density, we are ever more confronted with violent conflicts. They are reported *in real time* through a plethora of media technologies, which have become the key platform to mold public opinion and to mobilize aid, troops, and money. As Cottle (2006) aptly puts it: “The media have become a prized arena for the waging of conflict” (p. 2). Media have changed rapidly—and the realm of (international) politics, too, is constantly moving, and thus the relation between conflict, media, and culture has become particularly complex. Conflicts are not only gaining prominence in “traditional” news media; side by side with journalists, film directors are increasingly entering the media battlefield, “the surface upon which war is imagined and executed” (Thussu & Freedman, 2003, pp. 4–5). In cinema as well, there has been a growing attention on conflicts, and the voices of filmmakers from conflict areas are increasingly being heard. Often trying to come to terms with a traumatic past, they seek to raise understanding of the effects and dynamics of violent conflicts among a wider audience. This can result in impressive cinema, as some recent examples demonstrate—for instance, the documentary *The Return to Homs* (Talal Derki, 2013), which focuses on the civil war in Syria, and the short films *Land of the Heroes* (2011) and *Baghdad Messi*

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(2012) by Sahim Omar Kalifa, which deal with conflict in Iraq through the perspective of children. Another notable example is filmmaker Hany Abu-Assad, whose films *Paradise Now* (2005) and *Omar* (2013) about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict received Academy Award nominations.

Aiming for a richer understanding of the interactions between media and violent conflict, this article considers cinema as an overlooked part of media and cultural studies, particularly when conflicts are concerned. In examining the experiences of filmmakers from conflict areas, I develop a conceptual model in which the involvement of filmmakers is considered as central. This model is developed through and exemplified by the case of the Kurdish conflict, one of the most persisting issues in the Middle East. The proposed model consists of different spheres (culture of death, culture of violence, culture of negotiation, culture of indifference), each supposing a particular involvement of the filmmakers with the conflict. Each of these spheres corresponds with specific "conflict dynamics" (Galtung, 1969, 1996) and with particular *cinemas* or processes of filmmaking. To provide a clearer idea of the notion *cinemas of conflict*, I first consider the relation between media and conflicts.

Media and Conflict

The goals of journalists and filmmakers sometimes seem very similar—that is, bringing conflict and war into the public sphere. The expansion of conflicts into the public sphere is one of the most important developments in warfare and international politics since the 1960s and 1970s. This has resulted in an ever-growing number of studies devoted to the relation between media, war, and conflict. The bulk of this research is embedded in journalism studies and deals with various ways of reporting war and conflict and the politics of representation (Allan & Zelizer, 2004; Cottle, 2006; Hallin, 1986; Maltby & Keeble, 2007). Before concentrating on cinema, however, I will first reflect on the notion of conflict.

Conflicts may be defined simply as "the pursuit of incompatible goals by different groups" (Miall, Ramsbotham, & Woodhouse, 1998, pp. 19–20) or as "struggles between opposing interests and outlooks" (Cottle, 2006, p. 4). To account for the diversity and complexity of contemporary conflicts, these definitions need to be developed further. Thus, Thussu and Freedman (2003), for instance, prefer a threefold typology of post-Cold War conflicts: those mainly revolving around geostrategic and economic interests (e.g., 2003 Iraq War), those stemming from ethnic and nationalist politics (e.g., 1991–1999 Yugoslav wars), and the "invisible" conflicts (e.g., in Sudan and Congo). The latter cost thousands of lives and yet their coverage in international media is marginal and superficial. This typology, however, falls short in capturing the spatial dimensions of conflict in the globalized world. The involvement of diasporic groups in "homeland" conflicts should be taken into account (Başer, in press; Demmers, 2002). To do so, Demmers (2002) suggests using Galtung's (1969, 1996) influential model of conflict dynamics. This model approaches conflicts within the triangular relations between *contradiction* (the underlying conflict situation), *attitude* (the perceptions that different actors have of one another), and *behavior* (e.g., as collaboration, oppression, violence) (see also Demmers, 2012). This model is particularly interesting because it allows differentiating between those who are involved in conflicts at the front line and those involved from a distance.

Although these definitions take into account key aspects of conflicts—different actors, causes, and spatial dimensions—some elements are still missing, such as their length and intensity. Bar-Tal (2003) argues that there is a great difference between short and long conflicts; the latter imply that attempts to stop them have been fruitless, which makes them seem irreconcilable. In long conflicts, prejudice, hate, and mistrust grow. This has spurred Kriesberg (1993, 1998) and Bar-Tal (1998, 2003) to distinguish *tractable* and *intractable* conflicts. Bar-Tal (2003) sums up the main characteristics of intractable conflicts: (1) they persist for a long time—at least a generation; (2) they are violent, involving killings of military personnel and civilians; (3) the parties involved perceive their conflict as irreconcilable; (4) various sectors of participating parties have vested economic, military, and ideological interests in the continuation of the conflict; (5) the conflicts are perceived as zero sum in nature; (6) the issues in the conflicts concern basic needs that are perceived as essential for the parties' survival; and (7) the conflicts occupy a central place on the agenda of the parties involved.

One of the key issues that Bar-Tal (2003) discusses in relation to intractable conflicts is the way in which the length and intensity of conflicts have an obvious impact on collective memory among the different parties involved. Because of the conflict, certain beliefs are institutionalized and passed on through education and cultural production. Thus, collective identities are shaped which are permeated with the conflict. If these conflicts are violent, violence will become part of collective memory, and the basis is formed for a "culture of violence," that is, a cultural sphere consisting of three phases: first, "the formation of societal beliefs that concern intergroup violence," which is followed by "the appearance of rituals and ceremonies that commemorate the slain compatriots," and, ultimately, "the erection of monuments to honour the victims" (Bar-Tal, 2003, p. 84). In this article, I examine long conflicts—the Kurdish conflict in particular—following Bar-Tal's (2003) definition of intractable conflicts and Galtung's model of conflict dynamics.

Although the importance of media is (implicitly) recognized in the most common definitions of (violent) conflict, some important lacunae remain when it comes to studying their role in media studies. In their introduction to *Narrating Conflict in the Middle East*, Matar and Harb (2013) list them clearly, arguing that academics have mainly focused on the reporting and representation of conflict; the communication between different actors in a conflict; and issues such as ethics, objectivity, and bias. A quick view on some of the major edited collections in this field (e.g., Allan & Zelizer, 2004; Cottle, 2006; Seib, 2005; Thussu & Freedman, 2003) confirms this claim. Moreover, the predominant empirical focus has been on television broadcasting and press, although online journalism is becoming increasingly important as well (Allan, 2002; Matheson & Allan, 2009). As a result, conflict has been studied much less in other fields of media such as cinema. Furthermore, Matar and Harb (2013) write that "little attention has been paid to what conflicts mean for those involved in them, whether as agents or as subjects" (p. 3). Following Cottle's (2006) call to broaden the analytical and theoretical horizons of contemporary conflicts and their relations with media, I seek to understand how cinema and conflict interrelate and how conflict is narrated and imagined in cinema by those who are closely involved in it.

The model that is presented below is exemplified by taking Kurdish cinema as a case study. The reasons to do so are threefold. First, as a category, Kurdish cinema goes beyond classical nation-state conceptions of cinema and instead includes the transnational and diasporic practices of filmmaking that

characterize contemporary filmmaking in the Middle East. Indeed, many of the filmmakers discussed in this article work across the boundaries of different countries. Second, Kurdish media culture, and cinema in particular, has experienced remarkable growth in the last years. Censorship in several countries has become less explicit, and many Kurdish filmmakers have also improved their working conditions by moving to Europe. Moreover, several initiatives to support cinema have been established in Kurdish regions and cities—for example, by the pro-Kurdish municipality in Diyarbakır (the major Kurdish city in Turkey) and the Kurdish Regional Government in Northern Iraq. Third, studying Kurdish cinema allows adopting a broad perspective on conflicts rather than looking at one particular historical event, since Kurdish populations and different Kurdish political groups have been involved in some of the harshest and most complex conflicts in the contemporary Middle East, such as the conflict between the Turkish state and the PKK (Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan, or Kurdistan Workers' Party), the civil war in Iraq in the 1980s, and the recent Syrian civil war.

Cinema and Conflict

According to Thussu and Freedman (2003), research distinguishes three ways in which mainstream media communicate conflict: as critical observers, as publicists for war, and as battlegrounds, "the surface upon which war is imagined and executed," because "military and media networks have converged to the point where they are now virtually indistinguishable" (p. 7). Cinema may fulfill similar roles, yet these may be more difficult to pin down in comparison to mainstream media because of the complexity that the element of *fiction* adds to them. Writing about Palestinian cinema, for instance, Bresheeth (2007) states that it consists of "an exilic interstice between fact and fiction, between narrative and narration, between the story and its telling, between documentary and fiction, not to mention between Israel and Palestine, and between life and death" (cited in Abu-Remaileh, 2013, p. 86). The schizophrenic situation of Palestinian cinema also can be observed in the cinema of other conflicts—for instance, in the Balkan or in the Kurdish region. The *conflict over history* (fact versus fiction) and *narrative* (narrative versus narration) are of key importance for establishing a national identity. Conflict situations often involve a lack of a coherent, national narrative (or rather, a clash of different narratives) because of censorship or cultural repression. Consequently, cinema can be an important form of cultural resistance, a way to seek legitimacy in times of dispersion, oppression, or crisis. Abu-Remaileh (2013) takes the example of Elia Suleiman, a Palestinian filmmaker whose work focuses on the impact of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict on society, arguing that his films represent a process of "documenting and historicizing that is used to compensate for the failure of the chronological, linear narrative of history to account for the Palestinians' interstitial state of living between the cracks" (p. 86).

In times of conflict, cultural production may support the creation of an imagined community (Anderson, 1983). Ahmadzadeh (2013) describes how Kurdish fiction writers pursue an imagined community, having a desire "to prove a historical memory of the suffering of Kurdish people in the four nation-states" (p. 66). These writers oppose "the imposed national identities on the Kurds, by keeping the Kurdish memory, history and language alive" (ibid.). Cinema may function in a similar way by employing national metaphors. In Palestinian cinema, for instance, such metaphors are the family, a strong mother figure, and a weak father figure, whereas in Turkish cinema it is, rather, "the nostalgic remembrance of an idealized past" (Suner, 2009, p. 72). Moreover, the field of critical geopolitics increasingly recognizes the

relevance of cinema for the study of international politics, and thus, conflict (Carter & McCormack, 2006; Dodds & Carter, 2014). The commotion in diplomatic circles caused by popular movies such as *Valley of the Wolves: Iraq* (directed by Serdar Akar, 2006; see Smets, 2014) or, more recently, *The Interview* (directed by Seth Rogen and Evan Goldberg, 2014) illustrate critical role cinema may play.

Despite the key role that cinema plays in conflicts, there are still few detailed inquiries on the matter. Cinema and conflict is often referred to rather briefly in studies on national cinemas. Yet Virilio (1989) has demonstrated that cinema and conflict is a domain worth studying. He argued that war and cinema are deeply connected. According to Virilio, warfare changes parallel to technological developments in cinema: "There is no war, then, without representation, no sophisticated weaponry without psychological mystifications. Weapons are tools not just of destruction but also of perception" (ibid., p. 6). Next to the fact that victim and trauma cinema has been approached particularly through the lens of national cinemas, it is also a topic that has mainly been studied in relation to American and Western conflicts (e.g., Barret, 2009; Basinger, 2003; Chapman, 2009). Studies that deal with non-Western conflicts tend to focus on textual analyses and national identities. Conflicts are often reverse-engineered by studying tropes such as trauma, belonging, identity, memory, exile, home, and homelessness. One key reason for the strong emphasis on semiotic and textual studies of cinema and conflict is the influential work of Naficy on "accented" cinema. According to Naficy (2001), the concept refers to films that signify and signify upon exile and diaspora by expressing, allegorizing, commenting upon, and critiquing the home and host societies and cultures and the deterritorialized conditions of the filmmakers. They signify and signify upon cinematic traditions by means of their artisanal and collective production modes, their aesthetics and politics of smallness and imperfection, and their narrative strategies that cross generic boundaries and undermine cinematic realism.

Naficy's concept has gained currency in film and cultural studies, but this has not been entirely advantageous for the study of cinema and conflict. Accented cinema, as Naficy understands it, shares some core elements with cinemas of conflict, and it is therefore often used as a generic term to label these often-complex films and filmmakers. Suner (2006) states that "the cinematic styles and thematic preoccupations associated with exilic/diasporic films consistently appear also in wide-ranging examples of contemporary 'world' cinema" (p. 363). To illustrate this, she discusses three filmmakers who are not labeled as exilic/accented because they are rather resorting under the tradition of world cinema: Bahman Ghobadi, Wong Kar-Wai, and Nuri Bilge Ceylan. The interstitial mode of production as well as several thematic and stylistic characteristics of their films is similar to that of the "accented genre," yet this does not imply that "the cultural identities of these filmmakers are less complex nor is their relation to the places they occupy, their 'homeland,' less problematic" (Suner, 2006, p. 365).

Cinemas of Conflict

What exactly are cinemas of conflict? The concept draws from media studies and conflict studies but constitutes a field of its own. Cinemas of conflict play out at the national level while surpassing it. Thus, cinemas of conflict share some similarities with accented and exilic cinema while having a very different meaning. In its broadest sense, cinema of conflict is a collective name for films dealing with intractable conflicts, ranging from the main theme to the background story. These films may have some

resemblances in terms of style or production mode, yet they are not necessarily alike. Within this vast range of films, each film and filmmaker approaches particular conflicts from another perspective. Cinemas of conflict are best studied at the intersection of media studies, conflict studies, and cultural studies, because they are encapsulated in a model that takes into account production context, the nature of the conflict, the impact of the conflict on everyday life, the situation of the filmmaker and crew, and the position that they occupy vis-à-vis the conflict. As a concept, cinemas of conflict is much less concerned with geographical spaces (in contrast to "accented cinema"), yet it does not ignore the impact of physical displacement and the intricacies of transnational cultural production.

The ideas underpinning cinemas of conflict are not entirely new. Especially in diasporic and exilic cinema studies, related issues have been raised. Since the 1980s several terms have been suggested to label the growing corpus of films dealing with conflict, such as postcolonial, interstitial, intercultural, transnational, and accented cinema. The seeds of cinemas of conflict are found in a precursor of accented cinema—that is, the *Third Cinema* tradition (Naficy, 2001; Solanas & Getino, 1970). This cinema originated in the 1960s in Latin America and was later theorized by Gabriel (1982). According to Naficy, accented cinema is more "situated" and less polemic than Third Cinema, because the latter focuses on an armed struggle between classes. Accented cinema, in contrast, mainly revolves around a discursive and semiotic struggle. Nowadays, the concept of Third Cinema has become somewhat discarded, partly due to the popularity of the accented cinema framework. However, because of the violent character of the intractable conflicts that are studied here, I believe that Third Cinema offers a valuable starting point to reflect on the relation between conflict and cinema.

"Third Cinema" refers to a cinema of cultural decolonization of the Third World, which was positioned against the "First Cinema" (Hollywood) and the "Second Cinema" (European auteur cinema). A more radical form of Third Cinema is *militant cinema*. According to Mestman (2011), the main hypothesis of militant cinema is, "on the one hand, the necessary involvement and integration of the cinema group with specific political organisations; on the other, the instrumentalisation of film in the process of liberation" (p. 29). For French film director Godard (1985), militant cinema is a twofold concept that includes "blackboard" films (providing certain theories on screen to be applied to reality) and "International films" (being the equivalent of chanting "The Internationale" during a demonstration). Militant cinema and Third Cinema clearly have a dual meaning as both an active (cf. Godard's International films and Mestman's films as an instrument of liberation) and a passive (blackboard films and Mestman's ideological films) connotation. Inspired by Bar-Tal's (2003) *culture of violence* and Galtung's *conflict dynamics*, the proposed concept of cinemas of conflict divides both aspects to arrive at a clearer understanding of conflict and cinema. The following quote by Sékou Touré (cited in Fanon, 1963), in which he discusses creative engagement with revolutions, captures the complexity that is enclosed in the concept of militant cinema:

To take part in the African revolution it is not enough to write a revolutionary song; you must fashion the revolution with the people. And if you fashion it with the people, the songs will come by themselves, and of themselves. (p. 206)

This reasoning can be extended to cinema. If we are to understand the relation between cinema and conflict, it should be clear that the *level of involvement* of filmmakers in conflicts is crucial. Do filmmakers operate from a distance, or do they participate? *Where* filmmakers are located vis-à-vis the core of the conflict—the position that Galtung calls *contradiction*—determines the way in which the conflict is imagined and what kind of film is made. Militants that are not directly involved in the conflict, too, can be deeply affected by it. As Galtung's (1969, 1996) *conflict dynamics* demonstrate, the specific place of actors in a conflict plays an important role. This affects the films that are made about the conflict, because filmmakers who are closely involved in the conflict tend to make films that seek to mobilize and document, while those who are further removed from the core of the conflict make films to reflect or inform.

The model regroups films and filmmakers around the core of specific intractable conflicts (see Figure 1). From the inside out, the level of engagement of filmmakers with the conflict becomes less explicit, tacit, and dominant. The model contains four cultural spheres, each corresponding with a different level of involvement as well as different cinematic language and production contexts: (1) culture of death/battle cinema; (2) culture of violence/victim cinema; (3) culture of negotiation/human rights cinema; (4) culture of indifference. Because each sphere has its own contradiction/attitude/behavior dynamics (Galtung, 1996), I discern a wide range of films that, each with their own accents, imagine conflicts differently. One conflict may be the overlapping factor in a series of films (indeed, the "background" is the same), but in each sphere, different aspects are highlighted. Therefore, this model seeks to bring some structure to the multitude of conflict films rather than lumping them together. The next sections describe each sphere, and then I illustrate them with examples from Kurdish cinema.

Culture of Death/Battle Cinema

Culture of death is the sphere closest to the violent core of the conflict, where we find filmmakers who are totally immersed in it. Their presence is a matter of life and death, as they are themselves the combatants. Some filmmakers have emerged among armed groups, mostly making documentaries (e.g., Talal Derki). They spend considerable time among these groups and often have an outspoken opinion on the particular conflict. However, I wish to describe here a more specific and unique type of filmmakers who actively join armed groups rather than trying to document them. I call this *battle cinema*. This kind of cinema has some similarities with other terms such as guerrilla filmmaking (designating practices of independent filmmaking, working with very low budgets or without official permits; see Jones and Jolliffe, 2006), rebel cinema or Cine Insurgente (an Argentine film collective and social movement; see Krichmar, 2011), and Cine Rebelde (revolutionary cinema in Cuba; see Stone, 2006). Although the revolutionary or rebellious character is present in these types of films, they do not differentiate between fighting and nonfighting filmmakers. By regarding battle cinema as cinema made by fighting parties, it is immediately clear who makes these films, and under which conditions. This means that the production context is often amateurish, upfront, and militaristic. In their influential Third Cinema manifesto, Solanas and Getino (1970) referred to this production mode, writing that "a revolutionary film group is in the same situation as a guerrilla unit: it cannot grow strong without military structures and command concepts" (p. 7). In recent years, this unique form of production and distribution has an increased potential to reach audiences worldwide through participatory and social media. Typically, the basic technical equipment used to

produce battle cinema (cameras, editing software) are of mediocre quality, yet these filmmakers often have privileged access to key locations, props, and casts.

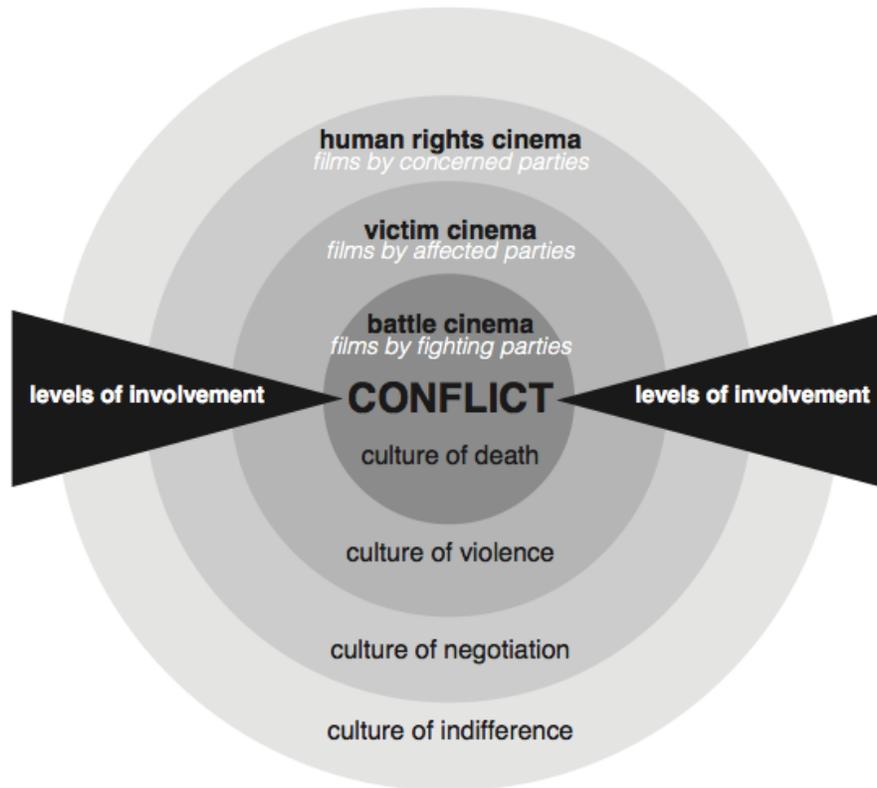


Figure 1. Cinemas of conflict.

Culture of Violence/Victim Cinema

The culture of death sphere and its battle cinema form only a fraction of the films dealing with conflict. The focal point of the proposed model is on the direct and indirect victims of conflicts, and the cinema that may originate from experiences of victimhood. Filmmakers in this sphere are involved in the conflict because of religious, political, or ethnic reasons, but they are not active at the violent front line. Their lives may have been in danger, too, but less so than the filmmakers in the previous category. This cultural sphere corresponds with what Bar-Tal (2003) calls the *culture of violence*. Because of continued confrontation with violence and experiences of trauma, the filmmakers can be said to share societal beliefs "about the victimisation of the own group of beliefs about patriotism" (Bar-Tal, 2003, p. 85). These beliefs

may surpass a single generation. The cinema that is thus created is called here *victim cinema* and is made by *affected parties*.² It can be both fictional and nonfictional. Unlike battle cinema, these films are not bound to the physical location or time period of the violent conflict.

Much more than battle cinema, these films depict an inner and cultural struggle. There are some parallels with Naficy's accented cinema, because the struggle is also imagined through tropes such as border crossings, journey narratives, trauma, and problems with fitting in the host country. Moreover, there is often an emphasis on everyday life, on rituals, and routines, because this "automatic knowledge" accommodates nostalgia (see Naficy, 2001, pp. 28, 117). An explanation can again be found in Galtung's conflict dynamics: Once the fear for one's own life has disappeared, frustration and estrangement become more dominant in the narrative. But whereas Naficy presumes a strict geographic situatedness (Suner, 2006), victim cinema instead emphasizes the problematic relation to and engagement with the conflict. This means that victim cinema can have a much wider geographical scope.

Culture of Negotiation/Human Rights Cinema

The third sphere is the *culture of negotiation*. Just like traditional news media, cinema has the potential to inform and engage its viewers. In the culture of negotiation, films are seen as critical observers that use the medium of cinema to negotiate and reflect on the living conditions of the different actors involved in conflict. More specifically, they often deal with human rights issues of people affected by violent conflicts. In contrast with the propagandist or deeply personal films of battle cinema and victim cinema, these films tend to have a more diplomatic and political character. Moreover, this *human rights cinema* is often supported by Western human rights organizations.

Since the late 1990s, human rights cinema has gained some scholarly attention (Basoli, 2002; Bronkhorst, 1997, 2004; Burres & Harding, 1997; Freitas, 2005). Research has particularly focused on definitions of these films as well as the organization of film festivals. Few studies have investigated the link between violent conflict, human rights, and filmmaking. Bronkhorst is probably the most influential writer on the topic. He states that human rights documentaries should be "sincere, truthful and accurate" (Bronkhorst, 1997, p. 348), offering enough space for interpretation, yet with a clear message. Many of these films are indeed documentaries, but increasingly feature-length fiction films are acting as human rights watchdogs, too. The distinction between human rights films and victim cinema is not always clear-cut, but the involvement of the actors forms a major difference. Whereas the latter is mainly the product of parties affected by the conflict, human rights films tend to be made by *concerned parties* who have gradually taken an interest in a particular conflict because of ideological reasons or a sentiment of

² To my knowledge, the term *victim cinema* has not been used elsewhere in the literature on cinema and conflict, except by Himka (2009) to describe the documentary film *Between Hitler and Stalin* (directed by Slavko Nowytski, 2003). For Himka (2013), the formula comes down to "talking heads + survivor testimony + documentary footage" (p. 416) and low-budget production modes. Although his definition of victim cinema is useful to discuss the relation between documentary cinema, victimhood, and memory, our use of the term deals with a much larger body of films and topics.

injustice. Victim cinema highlights the perspective of one particular side of the conflict (usually the side of the "oppressed"), and human rights films tend to adopt a wider, more nuanced perspective.

Culture of Indifference

In this last sphere, the involvement with the conflict and its actors is minimal. Films made within the *culture of indifference* use the conflict as a setting or plot element, often through the perspective of Western outsiders who have a professional reason to travel to a particular conflict area. Iordanova (2001) describes how conflicts in the Balkan are often described through the estrangement of foreigners such as young travelers, aid workers, or journalists. The conflict itself plays a secondary, interchangeable role in these mainstream action, romantic, or melodramatic films, and the standpoint of the filmmakers is of little importance (especially in comparison to the other cultural spheres). The films produced in the culture of indifference hardly constitute a consistent "cinema." For instance, some examples include *Welcome to Sarajevo* (directed by Michael Winterbottom, 1997) and *A Thousand Times Goodnight* (directed by Erik Poppe, 2013).

Kurdish Cinema and Conflict

Having set out a general framework for cinemas of conflict, I will now provide a more applied discussion by taking examples from Kurdish cinema. Kurdish media culture is characterized by a long history of censorship, oppression, dispersion, and many political, economic, and technological barriers (Hassanpour, 1996). In the last decades, activist Kurdish media have flourished in the diaspora, particularly in Western Europe (Ayata, 2011; Sinclair & Smets, 2014). Kurdish cinema, too, has been largely constructed in the diaspora, as Koçer (2014) notes, arguing that Kurdish cinema has emerged as a national cinema in transnational space. Because transnationalism, dispersion, and issues of censorship are an essential aspect of Kurdish cinema, it seems fitting to bring more depth to a theorization of cinemas of conflict. The chronology of Kurdish cinema usually starts with iconic filmmaker Yılmaz Güney in the 1970s and 1980s, followed by the advent of several initiatives (film festivals, workshops, support from Kurdish satellite television) and young Kurdish filmmakers in the 1990s and early 2000s (Arslan, 2009). Conflict and its effects on everyday lives and culture are a key aspect of Kurdish cinema, and thus it offers good examples to illustrate the different spheres of the cinemas of conflict model. Several Kurdish filmmakers, including some discussed below, have worked in a transnational context or have faced many problems in their filmmaking endeavors (shooting permissions, budgets, different forms of censorship), which is why the involvement of filmmakers and their physical proximity to conflicts is a tricky issue.

Culture of Death/Battle Cinema: Halil Dağ's Bêrîtan (2006)

Halil Dağ's films offer some of the clearest examples of battle cinema. Born as Halil Uysal, he became named Dağ ("mountain"), an important symbol in Kurdish national iconography. Dağ was a European Kurd living in Germany, but after working as an interpreter in a training camp, he decided to join the PKK guerrillas. Fascinated by the life of the guerrillas and having a background in photography, he decided to shoot films about them. Although having no formal training as a film director, he made several films among and with the Kurdish guerrilla, such as *Eyna Bejne (Tall Mirror, 2002)*, *Tirej (Ray of Light,*

2002), and his most famous film *Bêrîtan* (2006), all set in the mythical Kurdish mountain landscape (see Figure 2). His films have sometimes been described as "mountain cinema." Typically for battle cinema, Dağ's work is popular among Kurdish activists but largely unknown to the general public. Very little information can be found about him beyond (activist) Kurdish media, and academic literature about Kurdish cinema is scarce (Horat, 2011, for instance, does not discuss Dağ). Still, whenever Dağ is discussed, his unique position in Kurdish cinema is recognized (Arslan, 2009; Gündoğdu, 2010). On his position as both a guerrilla fighter and a filmmaker, Dağ stated, "I am a guerrilla fighter but I will be director until somebody else makes films about the guerrillas" (quoted in Gündoğdu, 2010, p. 9). In April 2008, Dağ died during a fight between PKK and the Turkish army. Dağ's tragic end illustrates that, for the filmmakers of battle cinema, a lot more than filmmaking is at stake.



Figure 2. Still from the film *Bêrîtan* by Halil Dağ (2006), copyright Halil Dağ.

True to the Third Cinema mode of production (Solanas & Getino, 1970), Dağ and his small crew managed to run his revolutionary film group as a guerrilla unit. This is best reflected in his last and best-known film, *Bêrîtan* (2006). The film deals tells the story of Bêrîtan, nom de guerre of Gülnaz Karataş, a legendary PKK guerrilla fighter who died in 1992. The film was produced without particular budgets, studio infrastructure, or professional actors. Instead, Dağ engaged guerrilla fighters to play in his films. Moreover, the film was distributed outside traditional and formal distribution channels. His film was forbidden in Turkey, but managed to find an audience among Kurdish communities through pirated DVDs and online sharing on YouTube and other video platforms. Diasporic Kurdish activists in Europe played a major role in circulating the film in this way. Giving a face to the struggle of the PKK, *Bêrîtan* is imagined as a key historical figure for the Kurdish struggle.

***Culture of Violence/Victim Cinema:
Özgür Doğan and Orhan Eskiköy's İki Dil Bir Bavul (2008)***

Most of what has become labeled Kurdish cinema can be situated in the culture of violence sphere. Many of the Kurdish directors have been brought up with the conflict (not necessarily *within* the conflict) and started making films in the 1990s and early 21st century. Some notable examples include Bahman Ghobadi, Kazim Öz, Jano Rosebiani, Özgür Doğan, and, more recently, Erol Mintaş. In the Kurdish diaspora in Europe too, Kurdish victim cinema has emerged with directors such as Hiner Saleem, Sahim Omar Kalifa, Bülent Öztürk, and Hisham Zaman. Perhaps the best-known director in this sphere is Yılmaz Güney, who is often seen as one of the founding figures of Kurdish cinema (Horat, 2011) and an example for cinema's struggle against oppression for "engaged" filmmakers (Dönmez-Colin, 2008). However, here I want to focus on some of the directors who represent the young generation of Kurdish filmmakers in Turkey: Özgür Doğan and Orhan Eskiköy and their documentary film *İki Dil Bir Bavul* (official English title: *On the Way to School*, 2008).

In victim cinema, direct violence is usually moved to the background in order to fully concentrate on the consequences of intractable conflicts on communities. In Kurdish victim cinema, the focus is often on the effects of oppression and on narrating or "archiving" Kurdish life (Çiçek, 2011). Doğan and Eskiköy's documentary *İki Dil Bir Bavul* focuses on the effects of the Kurdish conflict in Eastern Turkey on language, and on the issue of mother tongue education. Despite Kurdish being the mother tongue of millions of Turkish citizens, education in Kurdish has been one of the greatest taboos in the political history of the country. Only recently, education in Kurdish has become allowed in some cases. The documentary shows Turkish teacher Emre Aydın, who is just graduated and sent to teach at an elementary school in the Kurdish city Şanlıurfa (see Figure 3). Obligated to teach in Turkish only, he is soon confronted with the many faults in the system that deny mother tongue education. He also encounters poverty and lack of infrastructure in the Kurdish village as an effect of the long conflict. According to Çiçek (2011), the film is a form of political art that contributes to the "invention" of the Kurdish people in Eastern Turkey. In Doğan and Eskiköy's case, however, this invention is subtle, and is an invitation to reconsider the differences between Turks and Kurds and the underlying causes for those differences.

***Culture of Negotiation/Human Rights Cinema:
Yüksel Yavuz's Close-up Kurdistan (2007) and Mano Khalil's The Beekeeper (2013)***

Human rights films are on the rise. Bronkhorst (2004) notes that the list of human rights (feature) films is growing. Human rights films mainly intend to broaden "the consumer's understanding (both in the intellectual and emotional meaning of the word) of human rights issues. Understanding—no more" (Bronkhorst, 2004, para. 28). The aim is to give a truthful representation of a situation. This often requires a less involved perspective—that is, one that is less contaminated by the societal beliefs of the conflict. Examples of this type of film include *Close-up Kurdistan* (2007) by Yüksel Yavuz and *The Beekeeper* (2013) by Mano Khalil. In *Close-up Kurdistan*, Yavuz tells a deeply personal story about the Turkish-Kurdish conflict. In search of his own family history, he visits old friends and family members, connecting the story of migration to Europe with the conflict in the homeland (see Figure 4). Although

himself a Kurd and affected by the conflict, Yavuz attempts to draw attention to both Turkish and Kurdish perspectives, thus aiming for a truthful representation. The documentary is a trip through Europe in search of former fighters, refugees, and victims of the conflict, joined with traveling shots, images of stations, and public life. Throughout the testimonies, the message prevails that both sides will have to compromise to resolve the conflict. The conflict is examined critically, but not necessarily by attributing responsibility to a particular party.



Figure 3. Still from the film *İki Dil Bir Bavul* by *Özgür Doğan* and *Orhan Eskiköy's* (2008), copyright *Perişan Film*.

Another, more recent, documentary, *The Beekeeper* by Mano Khalil, also can be seen as a human rights film. It tells the story of a Kurdish beekeeper from southeast Turkey who is deeply affected by the clashes between the Kurdish guerrilla movement and the Turkish army (see Figure 5). He loses his wife, two children, and his bee colonies. Fleeing Turkey, he settles for a new life in Switzerland. On the website of the Human Rights Watch Film Festival, a clear link was made with the "evacuation" of thousands of villages in southeast Turkey in the 1990s. The description of the documentary in the festival program clearly demonstrates how human rights films are employed to support a human rights agenda of international nongovernmental organizations:

For many years there was no justice for these crimes in Turkey, although over the past few years there have been a few prosecutions of the military in a few of the thousands of cases. Human Rights Watch continues to press for accountability for past abuses as a key element in a peace process and to uphold the human rights of Kurds in Turkey. (Human Rights Watch Film Festival, 2014, para. 2)

Despite the emotional involvement of these filmmakers in the conflict, they attempt to approach it in a balanced way. This results in an interesting and necessary addition to the more insider perspectives of battle cinema and victim cinema.



Figure 4. Still from Close-up Kurdistan, Yüksel Yavuz (2007), copyright mitosfilm.



Figure 5. Still from *The Beekeeper*, Mano Khalil (2013), copyright Frame Film.

Culture of Indifference: Danis Tanovic's Triage (2009)

The culture of indifference is characterized by the interchangeable nature of the conflict. Films produced in this sphere of indifference do not constitute a consistent "cinema." An interesting example for the Kurdish conflict is *Triage* (2009) by Danis Tanovic. Whereas Tanovic's earlier film *No Man's Land* (2001) focused on the effects of conflict, Kurdistan and the Kurdish conflict are mere décor for a Western drama in *Triage*. The film, based on the eponymous 1998 novel by Scott Anderson, deals with the psychological effects of war on a photojournalist, Mark Walsh (played by Colin Farrell). The story could easily have been set against the background of another conflict. The war in Kurdistan (the 1988 Anfal genocide in Iraq in particular) provides a dramatic background for the inner struggles of the main character. The technique is often used to make "exotic" conflicts more palpable. In *Triage*, it is the Western journalist who has to battle his demons, not those who are directly affected by the conflict. Indeed, the film leans more toward a portrayal of post-traumatic stress disorder than of conflict.

Implementing and Refining the Framework

Having outlined the premises of the cinemas of conflict framework and having illustrated its different spheres with Kurdish films, I now take a step back and consider how the framework can be employed and further refined in research. For the true challenge of this typology is an empirical one. The categorization presented here is mainly intended to move beyond existing concepts, to reveal distinctions within the realm of cinema and violent conflict, and to propose films and filmmakers that have been

neglected in scholarly studies in this field rather than to represent a fixed reality of Kurdish filmmaking practices. Thus, I want to acknowledge that not all films or filmmakers fall neatly within one of the four spheres and that there is great diversity *within* them as well. For example, Doğan and Eskiköy's documentary film *İki Dil Bir Bavul* was discussed as an instance of victim cinema because of the way it has contributed to constructing an image of the Kurdish people and its cultural and linguistic suppression, also within Turkey (see, for instance, the piece on feature documentaries by Çiçek, 2011; Raw, 2011), rather than human rights cinema, although it does have some elements of human rights cinema (particularly the attempt to broaden viewers' intellectual and emotional understanding of a human rights issue). Moreover, because I argued that the culture of violence is so powerful in the Kurdish cultural field, the sphere of victim cinema is the most diverse and populous one. It is crucial to note that the filmmakers mentioned in this category represent a diverse group. Particularly, some directors have been more explicitly engaged with pro-Kurdish activism than others (Kazım Öz, for instance, is a prominent activist in the Kurdish cinema scene in Turkey, working closely with Kurdish cultural centers in Turkey).

I also wish to provide some clues as to how to employ the framework empirically. First, it is clear that the specificity of conflicts and the role of media in them matter greatly. As mentioned, some conflicts are not only more mediagenic than others, there are also vast differences in the media apparatuses and technologies that particular conflict groups have at their disposal (Mackinlay, 2002; Matusitz, 2013; Pierskalla & Hollenbach, 2013). Second, to be able to categorize a set of filmmakers and films within the framework, several questions and variables can be considered. In this case, the categorization was mainly for the sake of the theoretical claims I wished to make, and I thus primarily focused on motivations underlying production practices, ideological and political attachments (expressed in filmmakers' writings, interviews with them, press releases, and so on) as well as film-textual elements (mainly narrative and, to a lesser extent, aesthetic/stylistic aspects of the films). In line with this, I suggest that future research takes into account both contextual/production aspects as well as textual elements of particular cinemas, especially in contexts where identities, cultural production, and politics are very much intertwined. This should also help to differentiate between practical and political/ideological motivations to produce (or not to produce) particular films, film in particular locations, and so on. Some suggested methodologies to implement and refine the framework include in-depth interviews with key crewmembers such as directors and producers; analysis of press releases, interviews, manifestos, and memoirs; and qualitative content analyses of films. Moreover, I assume that future research involving audience perspectives as well may help develop the cinemas of conflict framework. Third, my study reveals some pitfalls when it comes to comparing and classifying cinemas of conflict. The social and political dynamics of conflicts (its intensity, its impact on populations) change over time, and it is a challenge to compare filmmakers and films across different historical contexts (for instance, one could identify different generations of filmmakers, different phases of cultural policies, etc.). Finally, a study on cinemas of conflict also should provide a space to acknowledge the tension between the agency of particular filmmakers on the one hand and the institutionalized identity politics of cinema of diverse political and civil society movements on the other (e.g., human rights organizations, activist groups). There is a risk of emphasizing the first while ignoring the latter, so I would argue that a thorough analysis of cinema's institutionalized identity politics is an essential aspect of studying cinemas of conflict.

Conclusion

Due to the growing mediation of international politics and conflicts, there is an increased interest in cinema's role in the representation and imagination of conflicts. The study of cinema and international politics, especially geopolitics, is gaining attention. Nevertheless, some important gaps remain, particularly at the intersection of conflict studies and film studies—an intersection that deserves the full attention of media studies scholars. Mobilizing frameworks that are traditionally not used in film and cultural studies, such as Bar-Tal's (2003) definitions of "culture of violence" and the formation of "societal beliefs" in times of conflict and Galtung's (1969) conflict dynamics, I seek to add new understanding to the relation between cinema and conflict. The proposed framework is also a way to provide alternative and more flexible ways to think of filmmakers and their homelands beyond Naficy's (2001) concept of accented cinema. To demonstrate the characteristics of the different spheres, I have taken examples from one particular conflict, the Kurdish conflict in southeastern Turkey. In recent years, Kurdish cinema has expanded, nourished by the transnational nature of the conflict. This framework now adds new differentiations and nuances to the field of Kurdish cinema. Such nuanced understandings will remain necessary as Kurdish cultural production, including cinema, will develop rapidly in the coming years due to ongoing conflicts such as the one between Syrian Kurds and Islamists of Islamic State (ISIS), and the fragile peace process between PKK and the Turkish government.

Although Kurdish cinema has been used to illustrate the framework, it was not conceived specifically with the Kurdish conflict in mind. Like all frameworks, it cannot grasp the intricacies of any kind of intractable conflict, for they are, by definition, complex and multifaceted. The framework *does* offer a simplified version of what can be observed in different intractable conflicts: These conflicts are being tackled in film by filmmakers with various levels of engagement. By differentiating these spheres, it becomes possible to distinguish the expanding corpus of films dealing with conflict without necessarily having to approach them as "accented," militant, or propagandistic. Some films and filmmakers can now be recognized and studied more easily, because they can be compared to their engagement with and proximity to core of conflicts. The case of Kurdish cinema, however, also demonstrates the complexity of cinemas of conflict, because it is a distinctively transnational and cross-border cinema for which distance, proximity, home, and homelessness are vital notions. In this context, several new questions come to the fore. How does battle cinema differ between Syria, Palestine, and Kurdistan? Which societal beliefs transfer best to the big screen? Who benefits from which kind of cinema, and who finances it? How is physical distance to conflicts related to, and overcome by, ideological and political attachments and involvement? And perhaps most important: How is the relation between cinema and conflict experienced among viewers, especially when bearing in mind current concerns about diaspora communities' active involvement in Middle Eastern conflicts? Recognizing that much work remains to be done in this terrain, I hope this framework is an invitation to further explore the relations between cinema and conflict.

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