



Article

# Media and violent conflict: Halil Dağ, Kurdish insurgency, and the hybridity of vernacular cinema of conflict

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## Abstract

This article analyses the life and work of Halil Dağ (1973–2008), a filmmaker who worked within the Kurdish insurgent movement, with two critical goals. First, the authors use Dağ's case to conceptualize vernacular cinema of conflict, defying traditional dichotomies between mainstream/vernacular, and fiction/non-fiction. Secondly, through Dağ's case they seek to better understand the role of vernacular cinema of conflict for the Kurdish culture of resistance and the PKK insurgent movement in particular. Empirically, the article discusses unique ethnographic records (interviews and personal correspondence with Dağ) and a qualitative content analysis of his major films. The authors argue that the concept of vernacular cinema of conflict can serve a better comprehension of the hybrid character and impact of filmmaking in conflict zones.

## Keywords

cinema, civil war, Kurds, media, PKK, vernacular

## Introduction

Up to this point, research on media and violent conflict has predominantly focused on questions concerning the reproduction and representation of conflicts through media. Tellingly, most authors have concentrated on war reporting and issues such as agenda

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setting, framing, photography and practices of war journalism. Far fewer studies have addressed the media production that takes place at the core of violent conflicts by people who are actively involved in them. If one reason for this is the relative scarcity of such productions, another is the fact that the study of the relation between international politics and media has been largely dominated by journalism studies, leaving less space for other disciplines such as critical and cultural studies or memory studies to contribute to this field.

All this has started to change in the last years, since we can now observe a rapid growth in media produced *within* violent conflicts. Andén-Papadopoulos (2009: 25) argues that, although the frames of media and military elites remain powerful, there is today an ‘explosion of vernacular imagery of international conflict’. Examples include videos and photos created by active duty soldiers or by citizens in war zones or during terrorist attacks. Social media are the main platforms to circulate and give meaning to this vernacular imagery of conflict. There is a distinct ‘visual turn’ in studies on war and conflict, and the visual aspects of warfare are becoming increasingly important in scholarship (Mirzoeff, 2005; Parry, 2010). New perspectives and methods have also emerged, including many studies that look beyond ‘media elites’ and instead focus on everyday life experiences and media production within conflicts. This aligns with a more general tendency today to analyse the affective qualities and the circulation of mediated content beyond traditional media producers and conduits (for instance, regarding the changed mediation of disasters through ‘raw’ and ‘autonomous’ disaster media, McCosker, 2013).

Inspired by the attention for vernacular imagery and non-elite media productions, we wish to develop the notion of ‘vernacular cinema of conflict’ as a hybrid form of filmmaking that defies traditional dichotomies of media (both as ‘channel’ and as ‘text’). The reason for focusing on vernacular cinema of conflict is twofold. Firstly, the current attention for the role of social media in violent conflicts may have resulted in an exaggerated focus on the novelty of productions circulated through new media and social networking sites (such as YouTube, Facebook and Twitter), overlooking some earlier forms of media production within conflicts, and filmmaking in particular. It has been recognized now that moving images play a central role in contemporary conflicts (Michalski and Gow, 2007). There are some interesting examples in the margins of mainstream film history that are particularly relevant for our discussion here, such as filmmakers who have been actively involved in war and who have used their experiences to contribute to the way in which particular conflicts are remembered and imagined (see Silberman, 1990, on East German director Konrad Wolf), amateur filmmakers during war (see Boyle, 2009, on films by Australian soldiers during the Vietnam war) and of course the various revolutionary movements that have mobilized filmmaking (for instance Buchsbaum, 2003, on filmmaking and revolution in Nicaragua). These various examples demonstrate that films produced at the heart of violent conflicts by actors not traditionally associated with political power offer distinct perspectives that alter societal understandings of those conflicts. Moreover, studies on political cinema, particularly the Third Cinema and militant cinema movements (Buchsbaum, 2001; Mestman, 2011) show that filmmaking can play a key role in conflicts when instrumentalized by actors in the conflict.

Secondly, we believe that focusing on vernacular cinema of conflict can provide greater insight not only into the filmmakers who are influenced by such imagery today

(for instance, in the realms of postcolonial or exilic filmmaking) but also in the appeal that such films may have for potential sympathizers of insurgent movements. Although this is an area that is still underresearched, it is observed that non-state actors involved in violent conflicts increasingly employ media productions, including films, to persuade followers (see, for instance, the international attention for *Flames of War*, a 2014 feature film produced by Islamic State as a propaganda tool). One of the few in-depth studies in this respect is Salem et al.'s (2008) analysis of video productions that support jihadi groups. These videos (mainly documentaries but also videos of speeches, beheadings or hostage takings) are used for purposes of learning, telling success stories, recruiting potential members and training sympathizers, and thus they have a great impact on the development of ongoing conflicts.

This article mainly has two aims. First, we want to approach critically the epistemological dichotomies of vernacular media production (as opposed to mainstream or elitist media production). In our conceptualization of vernacular cinema of conflict we argue that different seemingly opposed notions of mainstream/vernacular and fiction/non-fiction merge and form a hybrid category. Second, we want to analyse the role and impact of vernacular filmmaking in the Turkish–Kurdish conflict, particularly within the Kurdish insurgent movement and its practices of cultural resistance. Thus, we seek to approach examples of vernacular cinema of conflict not solely as resources or instances of ‘conflict-supporting narratives’ (Bar-Tal et al., 2014) but also to situate them within their wider historical context. And although there are some notable links with concepts such as Third Cinema or militant cinema (see above), we find that our arguments do not fit entirely within such categories (see also Smets, 2015, where it is argued that some commonly used concepts from cinema studies such as accented cinema or Third Cinema have their limits when applied to conflict contexts). The particular context we are interested in is the Kurdish insurgent movement, which has become known for its major media apparatus as well as its continued efforts to support the establishment of a Kurdish national identity through media culture. Our entry point to this discussion is the work of one filmmaker, Halil Dağ (born as Halil Uysal, Kurdish: Xelîl Uysal; hereafter referred to as Dağ), the only filmmaker who has worked within the Kurdish guerrilla movement for an extended period of time, but about whom only a few sources have written so far (mostly in Kurdish and Turkish). After a discussion of the literature on violent conflict and vernacular media, we expand on the Kurdish case and our methodology. Then we focus on Dağ’s life and work. In the final sections of the article, we provide a critical addition to the literature by conceptualizing vernacular cinema of conflict as a hybrid category that refines conceptualizations of vernacular media of conflict.

## **Violent conflict and vernacular media**

Vernacular discourses are traditionally seen as reactive, counter-hegemonic to dominant ideologies, and belonging to ‘specific’ or ‘local’ communities (Ono and Sloop, 1995), stemming from the traditional meaning of vernacular as ‘native’ speech. In the age of convergence culture and digital technologies, notions of the vernacular have become mainly associated with ‘vernacular creativity’, i.e. the ‘creative practices that emerge from highly particular and non-elite social contexts and communicative conventions’

(Burgess, 2006: 206; see also Smith and McDonald, 2011: 297). The production and circulation of vernacular media emerging from conflict contexts have become more intense (Andén-Papadopoulos, 2009). This intensification, which occurs through a variety of media technologies and platforms, makes vernacular media more complex. As we will argue towards the end of the article, the boundaries between the vernacular and the mainstream have blurred.

Recent literature on conflict and vernacular media can roughly be divided into two groups. On the one hand, there have been a number of studies that demonstrate the changed nature of media reporting on violent conflicts during the 'War on Terror', mainly by analysing soldier-produced media from the US wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Andén-Papadopoulos (2009), Christensen (2008), Kennedy (2009), Smith and McDonald (2011), among others, have examined videos, blog posts and photographs produced by (US) soldiers. These productions, mostly visual material, were often shared through YouTube or blogs. Scholars have not only studied the content of these vernacular productions of warfare, showing that such media support discourses of hegemonic masculinity, heteronormativity, control of the US military culture and orientalism (Smith and McDonald, 2011: 296), but also how soldier-produced media are re-mediated, circulated and given meaning within more traditional formats (e.g. television news).

On the other hand, scholars have been focusing on vernacular media production by citizens in conflict zones. This includes 'ordinary' people who are neither professional journalists nor military personnel, and who produce, for instance, videos or photographs while witnessing acts of collective violence such as attacks, terrorist acts or extended periods of violent conflict. Often gathered under the concept of 'citizen journalism', such citizen-produced media have come to play a significant role in conflicts and many studies have considered the democratic potential of such vernacular productions (Allan, 2013; Allan and Thorsen, 2009). Contrary to the literature on soldier-produced media, there are a number of studies on citizen-produced vernacular media that focus on conflicts beyond the West or that do not include Western armies as major actors in the conflict, such as the 2011 Egyptian revolution (Wall and El Zahed, 2011) or the Syrian civil war (Al-Ghazzi, 2014).

Although a number of authors have argued for more critical approaches to vernacular media and citizen media, as we will discuss below in more detail, it appears that a lot of research on and discourses about vernacular media and conflict depart from pre-set definitions. First of all, as indicated in the introduction, there is a clear emphasis on new media and online participatory media as the sole platforms for the distribution of vernacular media of conflict. Furthermore, and in line with traditional understandings of citizen media (e.g. Rodriguez, 2001), there seems to be a strong tendency to juxtapose vernacular media and mainstream, or elitist, media. While elitist media stand for professional productions that support the dominant societal narratives and obtain validation through institutions, vernacular media represent more amateurish productions that are authentic, creative, produced with 'immediacy', and formulate counter-hegemonic or resistant discourses. Distribution is also often seen as occurring either through controlled and formal channels (traditional media) or through 'democratic' and informal ones (vernacular media). Again, while not all studies on vernacular media and conflict approach matters in this binary way, this epistemological dichotomization will be our starting point to suggest a critical conceptualization of vernacular cinema of conflict. Another, partly linked, dichotomization that defines the

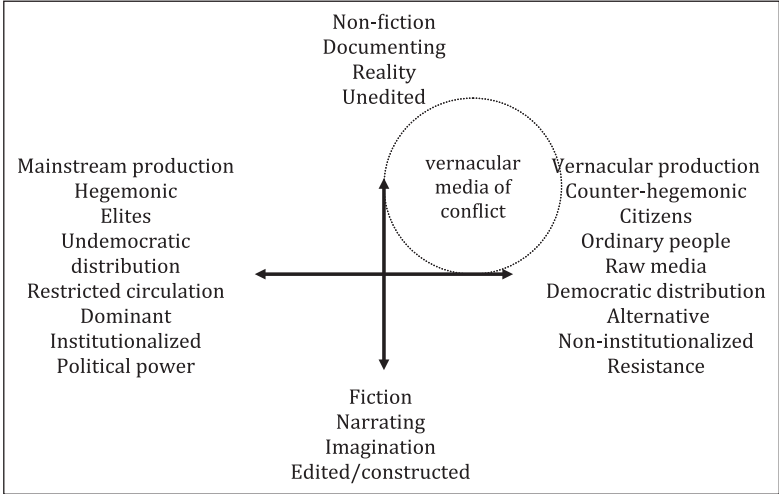


Figure 1. Epistemological dichotomies of vernacular media of conflict.

way in which vernacular media of conflict have become conceptualized is the one between fiction and non-fiction, or between media texts that report realities and media texts that construct particular ‘fictive realities’. While such categorizations have of course been investigated critically for a long time in film theory and philosophy, they have become particularly complicated in recent studies on ‘hybrid’ documentaries (Landesman, 2008). Such divisions seem to be particularly tenacious in the realm of vernacular media of conflict, where vernacular productions are usually seen as representing ‘raw’ reality, or at least edited/constructed versions of it. Also in broader research on the moving image and conflict, divisions between fiction and non-fiction are often the guiding principle (for instance, typology in Michalski and Gow, 2007: 17).

Figure 1 gives a schematic representation of the different dichotomies that characterize vernacular media of conflict. This scheme reflects the double meaning of media as ‘channels’ and as ‘content’. Following the more conventional conceptualizations, vernacular media of conflict are to be situated in the upper right area of the scheme. A number of studies beyond the field of media and conflict have problematized such dichotomies. Particularly effective examples include Lange (2011) on amateur versus professional online video productions, Burgess and Green (2009) on entrepreneurial ‘vloggers’, Hess (2009) on the limits of resistance in vernacular discourse, and Kenix (2011) and Hájek and Carpentier (2015) on the problematic alternative–mainstream media binary. Moreover, Howard (2012) shows that vernacular videos can take on vastly different forms as either authoritative or deliberative vernaculars, and that non-institutional production can still have authority. Elsewhere, Howard (2008) also argues that the vernacular web (i.e. on participatory media) defies conventional boundaries between institutional and non-institutional media. Specifically for ‘citizen journalism’ in conflict settings, Al-Ghazzi (2014) has also argued against universalistic conceptualizations of notions such as journalism, citizenship, or participation, especially beyond Western contexts.

Following these critical approaches, we will highlight the hybrid character of vernacular cinema of conflict. Our conceptualization will be guided by questions that arise from this hybrid character, such as: How do organizations or movements institutionalize vernacular productions? How can singular voices of producers be studied while acknowledging the wider structures that they may be part of? How do counter-hegemonic discourses become hegemonic discourses in different social, political and historical contexts? How is the distribution of vernacular media texts shaped across different platforms? As we will argue, using the case of Dağ, the blurring and mixing of the very elements that are traditionally regarded as opposites characterize vernacular cinema of conflict.

### **Kurdish conflict, cultural resistance, and media**

Writing about ‘the Kurdish conflict’ may be misleading, since there are in fact different (series of) conflicts in recent Middle Eastern history in which Kurds have played a key role. Here the main focus will be on the violent conflict between the Turkish state and army and the insurgent group PKK (Partiya Karkêren Kurdistan; Kurdistan Workers’ Party). Mainly spread across Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Syria, Kurdish nationalism has developed dialogically with the ‘nation building’ policies of those nation-states that emerged at the expense of Kurdish nationalist aspirations (Van Bruinessen, 2000) and the Kurds living in those states rebelled on many occasions against the physical and cultural oppressions to which they were subjected. The ongoing conflict between the Turkish state and the PKK has been regarded as the biggest challenge to the Turkish state in the 20th century, and has cost more than 30,000 lives since 1984. Having emerged from the revolutionary left in Turkey in the first half of the 1970s under the leadership of Abdullah Öcalan, the PKK has not just functioned as an insurgent movement. Since the 1970s, the movement has gone through different phases, evolving from a small, clandestine organization to a transnational social–political movement, containing an armed wing of thousands of guerrilla fighters, an extensive mass media complex. As such, since the 1990s Turkey has witnessed a very powerful Kurdish existence in social and political life on the basis of Kurdish identity politics for which the PKK has acted as the main agency. Since its inception, but especially after the beginning of the guerrilla warfare in 1984, many young men and women took part in the PKK, including many Kurds living in Europe where diaspora communities have been politically very active.

Mass media have played a crucial role in shaping Kurdish nationalism and most of the Kurdish media today can be regarded as being part of a culture of resistance against the hegemony of national states and the dominant historiography of Kurdish ethnicity from a Middle Eastern perspective. In 1994, members of the Kurdish diaspora in Europe developed a project with limited resources to launch a satellite TV channel. The world’s first Kurdish satellite channel, MED-TV, was launched in April 1995 under a British licence. MED-TV has gained a symbolic reputation for many Kurds (Hassanpour, 1998). Ever since, Kurdish media, and diasporic satellite TV in particular, have become a highly politicized issue among European and Turkish policymakers (Sinclair and Smets, 2014). In the realm of cinema, too, the Kurdish diaspora has played an equally important role. Recently, Koçer (2014) has demonstrated how the notion of Kurdish cinema has achieved ‘cinematic currency’ largely thanks to the transnational and diasporic efforts since the

early 2000s. As we will demonstrate, Dağ occupies a major position within this ongoing historiography of Kurdish cinema and Kurdish cultural resistance.

## A note on method

Besides the relevant case that Dağ offered to conceptualize vernacular cinema of conflict, we were also motivated to write this article by the fact that we had access to unique data. Ahmet Hamdi Akkaya, co-author of this article, has previously worked in Kurdistan as a journalist and editor for the first pro-Kurdish daily newspaper, *Özgür Gündem* (Free Agenda) and for the first Kurdish satellite TV, MED-TV. He met Dağ during a trip in 1995, closely followed his later works and kept in contact with him. Due to years of experience as a professional journalist and news editor as well as a researcher on the Kurdish movement, Ahmet Hamdi Akkaya has also acquired a unique perspective on the relation between activism, armed resistance and media. Our analysis of Dağ and vernacular imagery in violent conflict is thus nourished by auto-ethnographic experiences, which later have been reformulated and refined by our own discussions as well as by the confrontation with literature on Kurdish media, cultures of resistance and vernacular imagery. In doing so, we have aimed to fully benefit from the unique data and auto-ethnographic perspective while at the same time retaining a reflexive position that is in tune with recent academic writings on the matter.

Next to the correspondence with Dağ and the notes taken by Ahmet Hamdi Akkaya during his years as a journalist, this article relies on some additional resources. We draw from Dağ's (2009) memoir, including a collection of essays published in various Kurdish media outlets and containing his reflections on filmmaking and activism. Additionally, we have conducted a qualitative content analysis of Dağ's major films, primarily looking at narrative structure, the use of symbols and key visual elements such as landscape.

## Halil Dağ's life

Dağ (1973, Germany) completed his primary education in Germany and was sent to college in Izmir in western Turkey. On his return, he started working as a labourer while taking additional training as a photographer. Around that time, in the early 1990s, a politically engaged Kurdish diaspora was taking shape across Europe. Up until that point, as he later stated, he had no specific awareness of his Kurdish origin. However, through an uncle, Dağ was introduced to a local Kurdish association that sparked his interest in the Kurdish movement. Dağ's story echoes that of many migrants with Kurdish roots, who 'discovered' their Kurdishness as a politicized ethnic identity in Europe (see Başer, 2013: 9). When MED-TV was launched in Europe in the early 1990s, Dağ was among its handful of crew members. Due to his knowledge of photography and his newly emerging political affiliation with the Kurdish movement, Dağ was engaged as a cameraman for MED-TV.

The turning point came during his visit to the Syrian capital Damascus in March 1995. Damascus was then the political centre of the PKK, its leader Abdullah Öcalan having been stationed there since 1979. The PKK also ran an ideological training

centre in the outskirts of the city. Dağ travelled to Damascus as an assistant cameraman with the aim of recording programmes for the soon-to-be-launched Kurdish channel MED-TV, including an interview with Öcalan. However, he never returned to Europe. After having filmed Öcalan's interview and various programmes on the lives of Kurds in Syria, he decided to participate in the PKK as a full-time militant. After spending six months in the political–ideological training camp in Damascus, Dağ crossed the border between Syria and Iraq as a guerrilla fighter. From late 1995 onwards, he was part of the PKK guerrilla units stationed in Iraqi Kurdistan. Dağ was mostly active in the press unit of the organization, filming the guerrilla actions as well as producing programmes on different aspects of the guerrilla life. These were broadcast through MED-TV. His work became increasingly known among the audience of the channel, as one of the rare providers of visual information about guerrilla life and fights. In June 1997, he filmed the fall of a Turkish war helicopter after it had been hit by the first guided missile used by the PKK, and his images became a huge media event among militant Kurds. In this period, Dağ also wrote short articles for pro-Kurdish journals. These usually dealt with the personal histories of guerrilla fighters, a fascination that was also echoed in his future films. By capturing the personal lives and stories of these fighters, Dağ sought to make them immortal: 'I made a promise to myself when I went to the mountains for the first time: I will not change any words or faces that I grasp in the mountains with nothing' (Dağ, 2009: 21).

When PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan was captured in Kenya in February 1999 and subsequently brought to Turkey, the course of the Kurdish movement changed. The PKK experienced severe difficulties, but it managed to reinvigorate itself through a series of transformations (Jongerden and Akkaya, 2011). The period between 1999 and 2004 was a time of crisis and repositioning during which the guerrilla forces stationed in Iraqi Kurdistan sought opportunities to express themselves other than fighting. Besides the ideological transformation that this required, the movement also started focusing more on cultural activities, such as writing memoirs and shooting films. For this purpose, a specific school in the form of a guerrilla camp for cultural activities was set up, the Şehit Sefkan Kültür ve Sanat Okulu (Martyr Şefkan Culture and Arts School), named after one of the early PKK guerrilla fighters, Celal Ercan (*nom de guerre* 'Sefkan'). Dağ became a member of the school, increasingly showing interest in film-making. Between 2000 and 2005, he worked on several films, later recalling these years as follows: 'Those five years when I made the films were the best years of my life. They were the most beautiful and the most fruitful years. I was physically at ease and I was spiritually calm' (Dağ, 2009: 239).

After his last film made in Southern Kurdistan in 2006, Dağ was pursuing new projects, including a film on the Kurdish guerrilla commander Agit (personal correspondence, 13 August 2006). In 2007, he initiated another project in which he would film a very long journey of guerrillas travelling from Southern Kurdistan to the Dersim area (in Turkey), normally lasting almost two months. To cross the Turkish–Iraqi border, he had to stay in the area of Botan between Şırnak and Hakkari. When the clashes between the Turkish army and the Kurdish guerrillas escalated, Dağ did not manage to complete the journey as he was killed in a clash with the Turkish army on 1 April 2008 in Besta, near Şırnak.



## Dağ's cinema

### *Sources of inspiration*

According to Dağ, the medium of film enabled him to combine his interest in human stories with activism for the Kurdish movement. His ventures in filmmaking were very much inspired by his experiences in the mountains as a member of the guerrillas. 'I never thought that someday I would make a film. I never dreamed about it', Dağ (2009: 20) writes, adding that 'If I had not gone to the mountains to become a guerrilla, if I had not met guerrillas and witnessed their lives, I could not have made the films. The cinema is my journey in the mountains, which started with photography.' Dağ stated that, after a certain point, photography fell short of telling the stories he had accumulated until then. To him, filmmaking started to feel like an obligation. His friends, who were interviewed by Ahmet Hamdi Akkaya, recall that Dağ was trying to read everything on cinema that he could find. His favourite books were by the famous Soviet director and film theorist Sergei Eisenstein, especially *The Film Sense* and *Film Form*. Dağ had collected many stories and portraits among guerrilla fighters, and he saw these stories as the real capital behind his films: 'indeed, the stories on which my films are based are far greater than my films themselves' (Dağ, 2009: 27). He was part of these stories, having witnessed many of them. While initially it seemed that his experiences and stories were an advantage for him in making films, he later noticed that it turned out to be a huge burden because he felt responsible for reflecting what happened. This is particularly understandable because Dağ was one of the few 'insiders' with a camera and the skills to make a film.

I was timid for a long time since I was afraid of not working sufficiently on my stories ... However, I believed that I should start from somewhere and in time I would make the best of it. In this sense I had to give up my first stories. I still suffer from this. Therefore I want to revive my [debut] film *Tirej*. (Dağ, 2009: 28)

### *Overview of films*

We want to emphasize here the cohesiveness of Dağ's films. His work is founded on the overarching themes of conflict, resistance and the daily life of guerrilla fighters, and the same visual language and modes of production can be observed throughout his films. For some films, Dağ worked with a co-producer, but usually he was the main creator. In total, Dağ produced six films, varying in length between 29 and 162 minutes. In these films, Dağ's experiences as a guerrilla fighter are combined with the highly symbolic and allegoric cinematic language that he started to appreciate through his study of film theory. Some of these productions can be labelled as documentary films, such as *Kilamek ji Zagrosé* (One Ballad for Zagros) and *Di Jiyana Gerîla xweza û ajal* (The Nature and the Animal in the Life of a Guerrilla). They offer an inside perspective on the lives of guerrilla fighters, covering different aspects such as training, leisure time and living conditions. Guerrilla fighters from different ranks and backgrounds are interviewed. The natural environment, and how the fighters find harmony in it, is an essential part of these documentary films. Close-up shots of flowers and animals (particularly birds and

mountain goats) and wide panoramas of the Kurdish mountain landscapes are edited between scenes of fighters and their camps. His other films are more narrative, or rather docu-fiction, in style, such as *Tîrej* (Ray of Light, 2002, 52 minutes), *Eyna Bejnê* (Big Mirror, 2002), *Firmeskên Ava Zê* (The Tears of Zap, 2005) and *Berîtan* (Beritan, 2006). While partly built around a fictionalized narrative, there is still an important documentary aspect to these films since they are set in the same realistic settings of the guerrilla camps. Moreover, they are largely based on true stories or events. All actors are fellow guerrilla fighters who often acted for the very first time. For the productions, Dağ was able to use unique locations, sets and equipment provided by different PKK units. While there is a strong sense of immediacy, or improvisation, in the films, they were prepared with careful attention to detail. In that sense, Dağ's films complicate the commonly accepted definitions of vernacular films of conflict: they represent local and specific experiences of collective violence and their style is 'immediate', but the majority of the scenes are meticulously staged.

*Tîrej*, Dağ's first film, is based on the life of a fellow guerrilla fighter whose name literally means 'tall'. According to Dağ in his writings, the fighter was a medical student who decided to participate in the guerrilla war. Dağ met Tîrej on a pathway in the mountains during the last moments of his life. Tîrej had shortly before been wounded in a clash with the Turkish army. Dağ reportedly witnessed his last words to his comrades in another camp, as he saluted them through the walkie-talkie: '... salute to all comrades. My condolences to all Kurdish people'. These last words became Dağ's inspiration for his first film in 2002. The film is a heroic portrait of young fighters, showing them as humane and vulnerable individuals caught up in an intense and ever-lasting conflict.

In the same year, Dağ produced another film, *Eyna Bejnê*. This film is about a young female guerrilla fighter named Sakine and shows different aspects of the guerrilla life, as well as Sakine's life story. Dağ had already written about Sakine's family in one of his articles. The family had to flee from the oppression of the Turkish state in the early 1990s and took shelter in the area controlled by PKK in northern Iraq.

In his next production, *Firmeskên Ava Zê*, a short film from 2005, Dağ again focused on an individual guerrilla fighter, but this time the story is more allegoric and loaded with symbolism. The film tells the story of Gabar, a fighter who gets separated from his unit and is wounded during a clash with the Turkish army. In what is seemingly a long dream sequence, he follows a mountain goat through caves in the mountains, eventually reaching a large underground cave where he meets a goddess, supposedly Ishtar. The goddess saves Gabar, and helps him to get rid of his stammer. Although the film is rather short in comparison to Dağ's other films, *Firmeskên Ava Zê* contains a rich assemblage of symbols and references. The film also marks his move towards more advanced editing and the inclusion of more complex narration, and can thus be seen as an important step towards his development as a filmmaker. While, in his other films, impressive mountains dominate the scenery, here another aspect of the mountainous Kurdish landscape is shown: the refuge and safe haven that the mountain caves offer for (wounded) guerrilla fighters during their operations. The mountain goat that helps Gabar find his way through the caves is a key motif in the film, and clearly refers to the Kurdish mountain goat that is an often-used symbol in Kurdish folklore, referring to power and strength. The goddess of Gabar's dream, then, refers to Ishtar, the goddess of love, war, fertility and

sexuality in Neolithic (northern) Mesopotamia. Ishtar is a symbol sometimes used in Kurdish nationalist imageries. Öcalan has referred to Ishtar in his writings at different occasions, presenting her as a heroic role model. By employing such references, they aim to legitimize and historicize their struggle within a historical context. Indeed as Çağlayan (2012: 6) writes in a study about ideological and political discourses of the Kurdish movement, myths, like that of Ishtar, ‘emphasize the historical continuity from the pre-historic peoples of Mesopotamia ... and thereby allow the construction of a continuous identity of Kurdishness’. Moreover, the role of goddesses and heroines is evoked in order to emphasize the important place of women in the Kurdish national movement.

Finally, Dağ’s last and best-known film, *Berîtan*, was made in 2006. Dağ considered it to be his ‘first real film’ (personal correspondence, 12 May 2006). The film is a tribute to female fighter Berîtan (*nom de guerre* of Gülnaz Karataş), who has become a well-known martyr in the Kurdish movement. Karataş joined the PKK in 1990 and died in October 1992, throwing herself off a cliff in order not to surrender to fighters of KDP (the Kurdistan Democratic Party in Iraq, with whom PKK has been in conflict in Iraq). KDP had attacked PKK guerrilla troops, in collaboration with the Turkish army. Like Dağ’s previous films, the film is almost entirely set in natural locations and in actual guerrilla camps. There is no life outside that of the guerrilla, and there is no reference to Berîtan’s life before joining the PKK. Instead, the film shows training, fights and daily activities of guerrilla fighters, all of which serve to demonstrate their determination, courage and solidarity. Moreover, the focus on the female character Berîtan and her female comrades underlines the PKK’s rhetoric in which women are a powerful symbol of power and resistance. The film’s dramatic finale, showing Berîtan’s death, is followed by scenes of a death procession during which comrades pay tribute to Berîtan, as well as pictures of the actual Gülnaz Karataş.

## Production and distribution of ‘mountain cinema’

As Dağ was an autodidact with limited resources, the technical qualities of his work remained modest. In various writings, Dağ recognized these difficulties, explaining them as challenges and ‘exercises’. Some technical progress can be perceived in his successive films. As his reputation grew, Dağ also managed to assemble a larger team with better equipment. Some of his friends in Europe carried out parts of the post-production of his first films on the basis of his instructions. For his later work, particularly *Berîtan*, the post-production was entirely done by Dağ in the mountains after his family sent him a computer from Germany as a gift (personal correspondence, 13 August 2006). Categorizing Dağ as either amateur or professional is difficult as, in many contexts, his working conditions and output would be considered as amateurish. However, within the context of the guerrilla movement, Dağ worked at a level that surpassed that of amateurs.

Dağ’s films have circulated largely outside the traditional channels of film distribution. As the PKK is listed as a terrorist organization not only by the Turkish state but also by the EU and the US, there was a severe limit on the distribution options for Dağ’s work. This not only concerns Dağ’s films as censorship has been a common challenge for Kurdish filmmakers (see Koçer, 2013). Even during the current ‘solution process’ (*çözüm*

*süreci*) intended to end the conflict between the Turkish state and the PKK, vernacular films from within the guerrilla movement are problematic in Turkey. The most recent example is Çayan Demirel and Ertuğrul Mavioglu's documentary on the life of guerrilla fighters, *Bakur* (2015), which was infamously censored by authorities when it was supposed to be screened at the 2015 Istanbul Film Festival. Unlike this documentary, Dağ's films were not up to the required technical standards in order to be screened at conventional film festivals and, to our knowledge, there were no attempts on Dağ's part to do so. Another factor is the relative recent professionalization of the Kurdish film production and distribution, with companies that mainly focus on independent social realist films. Instead, Dağ's films have mainly circulated via the satellite broadcasts of MED-TV and ROJ-TV, two diasporic Kurdish channels, and through illegal copying and streaming. Dağ's films can easily be found online through platforms such as YouTube. Moreover, copied DVDs, particularly of *Berîtan*, have circulated through informal networks in Kurdish community centres and Kurdish shops, both in Turkey and among the Kurdish diaspora. These practices were very much welcomed by Dağ. As he put it, referring to the widespread pirating of his last film:

Piracy and *Berîtan* match well. The state banned the film and this way it did circulate. Besides, we were not hoping to make money from it. We wanted to reach people. If it [pirating] was done, that was OK for us. (Dağ, 2009: 259)

Since his death, Dağ's name and films have become appropriated both within the Kurdish culture of resistance (for instance, his pictures can be found amongst those of other 'martyrs' within Kurdish activist circles) as well as in the ongoing historiography of Kurdish cinema. The emergence of the discourse of 'Kurdish cinema' is very recent (see Koçer, 2014) and it has developed through events dealing with Kurdish filmmaking (workshops, festivals), publications sketching the 'history' of Kurdish cinema (Arslan, 2009) and online portals (such as [Kurdishcinema.com](http://Kurdishcinema.com)). Within this ongoing historiography of Kurdish cinema, Dağ's films form a very specific niche of 'mountain cinema', referring not only to the iconography of mountain landscapes in his films, but also to their embeddedness in the guerrilla activities in the Kurdish mountains. A number of young Kurdish filmmakers have indicated that this 'mountain cinema' inspires them and thus Dağ's cinema plays an important role in recent cinematic acts of resistance among Kurds (see also Smets and Akkaya, forthcoming, where we develop this aspect in more detail). Further attesting to Dağ's status is the growing number of tribute videos (containing interviews with Dağ, footage from his own films, photographs and Kurdish music) shared through social networking sites, particularly YouTube. The distribution and circulation of his films is thus characterized by a hybrid form between informal and pirated distribution (see the previous paragraph) and increasingly formalized modes of circulation linked with the historiography of Kurdish cinema.

## Conceptualizing vernacular cinema of conflict

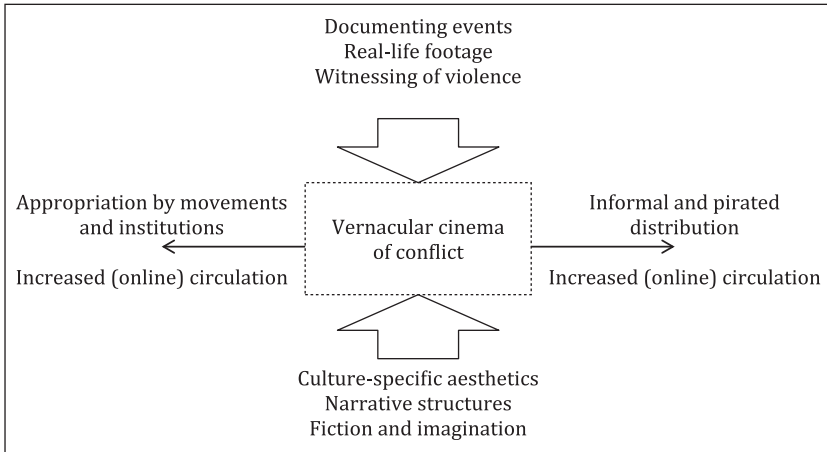
Again zooming out, we now want to use Dağ's cinema to develop the concept of vernacular cinema of conflict. We argue that Dağ's cinema – his films, way of working, their distribution and circulation – complicate traditional conceptions of vernacular media (of

conflict), particularly the dichotomies presented in Figure 1. We want to discuss a number of elements that all point to a degree of hybridity that we believe is characteristic of vernacular cinema of conflict. While vernacular media are by definition seen as non-institutional, we argue that particular actors in the conflict can gradually institutionalize films produced within conflict zones, even when they are not necessarily intended as propaganda. The concept of vernacular cinema of conflict highlights the potential of conflict actors to appropriate vernacular productions within their media outlets and cultural circuits. It is therefore also difficult to pinpoint whether vernacular cinema of conflict conveys hegemonic or counter-hegemonic discourses, as it may become part of the powerful narratives of particular movements (like the discourses of Kurdish resistance, in Dağ's case). The boundaries between hegemonic and counter-hegemonic thus fade. Furthermore, while much of the literature on vernacular media of conflict seems to differentiate between either soldier-produced or citizen-produced texts, we argue that vernacular cinema of conflict blurs those distinctions. The producers of vernacular cinema of conflict may be fighters of some sort, but they may at the same time develop their cinema from a strong civic and individualistic perspective. In Dağ's case, he is part of a paramilitary structure, but at the same time he maintains a singular voice as a citizen who experiences and witnesses acts of collective violence. Moreover, vernacular cinema combines aspects from different genres (documentary, narrative fiction, reportage) in order to serve a variety of purposes such as documenting, commemorating and educating. Elements of fiction and non-fiction are combined with distinct aesthetics that are situated within a broader cultural tradition, thus potentially also including elements of mythology or religion. As we demonstrated in our discussion of Dağ's films, a number of elements were blended such as documentary/reportage, fiction, mythology, national symbolism and naturalism.

Given these multiple challenges to traditional dichotomies of vernacular versus mainstream media channels, and fiction versus non-fiction media texts, we propose the concept of vernacular cinema of conflict as an essentially hybrid category of cinema. It combines different types of production, narration and distribution. It provides unique imagery of a particular conflict, but also constitutes an independent aesthetic visual language. It is derived from civic concerns but may be appropriated and institutionalized by conflict actors. Figure 2 shows the key aspects of vernacular cinema of conflict, in which different opposed elements are now combined and hybridized.

## Conclusions

To conclude, we want to discuss the two major points of this article: the conceptualization of vernacular cinema of conflict, and the role of such media for the Kurdish insurgent movement. Firstly, while there is a rapid growth of vernacular media of conflict, research so far has mainly concentrated on the democratic possibilities that such productions offer to non-elite producers to construct counter-hegemonic narratives, outside traditional media platforms and institutions. Moreover, studies have explored how vernacular media of conflict represent 'raw' depictions of how collective violence is experienced by 'ordinary' people. While this is certainly true in many cases, we have argued here that there are some exciting but underresearched empirical areas such as



**Figure 2.** Conceptualizing vernacular cinema of conflict.

vernacular productions from the pre-digital age, or fiction films by (former) soldiers. Our own study of Dağ's vernacular films of conflict defies some of the traditional conceptions of vernacular media of conflict. Dağ filmed scenes of violence and conflict 'as they happened' and from an ordinary perspective, but they were mixed with elements of fiction, mythology, national symbolism, thus creating a distinct aesthetic language. He operated as an independent, 'creative' and 'vernacular' producer, whose productions were gradually absorbed and institutionalized by the Kurdish insurgent movement. Having juxtaposed these traits of Dağ's work with the traditional conceptions of vernacular media of conflict, we propose that future studies on such media productions look more into matters of institutionalization, hybridization and aesthetics. We need to focus more on the hybrids between fixed categories and how they take shape in conflict situations.

Secondly, this article demonstrates that vernacular cinema plays an important role in the Kurdish culture of resistance. The Kurdish movement has an elaborate media infrastructure and vernacular films have been a key part of it. However, this has been the result not so much of strategies within the PKK but rather of the diligence of Dağ, who gained respect within the movement for the unique footage that he managed to shoot while staying with the guerrillas. His films were approved – and to a certain extent used – by the movement, but they originated from his individual experiences and his urge to share stories. Moreover, his films occupy a key place in contemporary Kurdish cultural circuits as 'mountain cinema' as a key part of the historiography of Kurdish cinema. It is important to note, however, that Dağ's films constitute a particular media culture that is targeted at sympathizers, not as a tool for recruitment, as is the case for some current examples of vernacular videos of conflict. Some similar dynamics could be observed recently with Çayan Demirel and Ertuğrul Mavioğlu's censored documentary *Bakur* which also shows unique footage of the life of guerrilla fighters and which also attracted significant interest among Kurdish activists.

With filmmaking technologies democratizing (e.g. mobile phone cameras, freeware film editing software) and violent conflicts being globalized through communication technologies (exemplified by the growing importance of mediated communication for conflict actors such as Islamic State), such hybrid practices of filmmaking within conflicts are likely to occur more frequently. The impact of such films beyond the conflict zone will also increase in, for instance, the legal sphere. At a moment when such vernacular imagery is increasing and diversifying, we argue that vernacular cinema of conflict can contribute to an enriched comprehension of the complex relation between media and conflict.

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