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9 Bearing Witness to Authoritarianism and Commoning through Video Activism and Political Film-making after the Gezi Protests

Özge Özdişen

Abstract

This chapter examines the intersection of politics and the culture of visual media to delineate the ways in which activists/artists have coped with increasing authoritarianism in Turkey following the Gezi Park protests. The study relies on in-depth interviews and participant observation with video activists and film-makers as well as textual analysis of recent films and videos with an aim to capture the political voice and ongoing creative resistance in urban centres since 2013. By clustering recent videos and films together in the light of their aesthetics of protest against the Islamist and neoliberal authoritarianism of the AKP (Justice and Development Party), the chapter investigates how creative communities used ‘visual commons’ to engage in democracy, relate to politics in an increasingly authoritarian setting, and deal with urban issues.

Keywords: Gezi Park, creative resistance, authoritarianism, video activism, documentary activism, visual commons

Introduction

In the last decade, political image and alternative media outlets have set the visual scene of Turkey. Documentaphobia (Bernstein 1994; Sönmez 2015) and videophobia rely on audiences’ fears of direct visual exposure to social and political facts, especially based on ‘an expository mode of filming including the voice of God narration’ (Nichols 1983). Although such overarching phobias

provide a factual framework for the production and circulation of activist media in Turkey, creative resistance and spatial strategies are still common traits of political film-making and video activism. This chapter examines the intersection of politics and the culture of alternative visual media to delineate the ways in which activists/artists have coped with and bore witness to increasing authoritarianism in Turkey in the aftermath of the Gezi Park protests. The study, by focusing on the political voice in recent activist films and videos from Turkey, aims to portray the ongoing creative resistance of activist/artists since 2013. It gives a glimpse of how creative communities engage in democracy and deal with ecological and urban issues through videos and films. The chapter will further discuss how the AKP (Justice and Development Party) governments in power, their neoliberal and Islamist urban control (Akçalı and Korkut 2015; Ozduzen 2018, 2019) and media and Internet regulation (Yeşil 2018) have created a generation of visual activists foregrounding a new type of aesthetics of protests in which 'the visibility of protest is both a matter of direct visual experience and of images' (see Faulkner, this volume).

Recently, videos and political films became two 'commons' in authoritarian Turkey in that their makers and audiences engaged in ecological citizenship over spaces and visual material. Commoning is 'a way of pointing out that resources should be owned and managed collectively as shared/common goods. The concept of commons is not limited to urban commons (Bromley 2008; Harvey 2012), but extend to knowledge, social, intellectual, cultural or musical commons' (Bruun 2015: 154). Video activists and political film-makers in Turkey aim to witness, record and disseminate various social movements and resistances on social, economic, political and cultural injustices by producing and circulating visual commons. Butler (2015: 11) argues that 'only when bodies assemble on the street, in the square, or in other public (including virtual) space, they exercise a plural and performative right to appear and instate the body amid the political field, which delivers a bodily demand for a liveable set of economic, social and political conditions against induced forms of precarity'. In capturing the bodily demands of activists, the most important aspect of the aesthetics of videos and films in question is the camera's relation to the protest space, the position of the activists' bodies within the frame and the bodies of the recording video-makers/film-makers within the political field, thus constituting a public space between the digital and the material (McGarry et al., this volume).

The chapter rests on the argument borrowed from McGarry, and restate the quote that 'politics is not produced solely by the vocalised claims or

demands of protestors but by their action, and sometimes their inaction, thus the aesthetics of protest reveals how democracy is constituted through performance or images' (McGarry 2017: 2). For this, first, I will look at how video/film activists cope with direct state violence on streets or indirect forms of state violence, particularly censorship following the Gezi Park protests. Second, I will address how the videos and films capture and document visual and creative attempts to constitute democracy in contemporary Turkey such as the Occupy Gezi and No! campaigns against Tayyip Erdoğan's presidency¹ as well as the aspects of Kurdish struggle.² Within this framework, in this chapter, I will focus on the censored films and popular activist videos mostly relying on the testimonies of their makers through in-depth interviews. In my spatial ethnographic research in 2013-2014 and 2016-2017 within cultural spaces in Istanbul that mimicked the Gezi experience, I also followed the circulation contexts of videos/films and had access to their makers. The film-makers include Reyhan Tuvi (the director of *Love Will Change the Earth*, 2014), Ayşe Çetinbaş³ (the producer of *Bakur*, directed by Çayan Demirel and Ertuğrul Mavioglu, 2015) and Kazım Öz (the director of *Zer*, 2017), as well as the video activists Fatih Pınar, İmre Azem, Kazım Kızıl from Kamera Sokak, and Güliz Sağlam from Videocuppy and the Women for Peace Initiative. The censorship of *Love Will Change the Earth* at the International Antalya Film Festival (IAFF) in 2014 along with the censorship of *Bakur* a year later at the International Istanbul Film Festival (IIFF) signalled a new era for cultural and political regulation in Turkey. The chapter also captures a newer case of censorship, namely *Zer*, in 2017 at the IIFF.

In-depth interviews and participant observation for this research commenced in 2014 during the Documentarist film festival, followed by my participation in other politically engaged screenings and festivals from 2015 to 2017. I chose the research participants based on the reception contexts of their films and videos. The sample of video activists represents the well-known figures of the activist video scene in Turkey

1 Campaigns against the constitution change comprised of many political organizations, including the main opposition party CHP, the pro-Kurdish party HDP, and other left-wing groups, commenced in February 2017.

2 The conflict between the Turkish state and the PKK (Kurdistan Worker's Party) began in 1984, which resulted in the loss of over 100,000 people and had major social, political, and economic consequences. The PKK has been involved in armed conflict with the Turkish state to create a Kurdish state and later to build Kurdish autonomy. 'Amongst the legal parties, the HDP is the last to represent Kurds and compete under adverse circumstances' (Grigoriadis 2016: 40).

3 Cetinbas represents *Bakur* as the film's producer because one of the directors had a severe heart failure right before the censorship of *Bakur*.

and film-makers and producers, whose films on various rights movements were censored by RTÜK (Radio and Television Supreme Council) between 2014 and 2017. Following the Gezi protests, I also collected and downloaded popular activist videos on social movements in Turkey. I collected data on censorship and circulation of films through politically engaged cinema and media collectives and organizations that I took part, including SIYAD (Turkish Film Critics Association). The first part of the chapter delineates the specific authoritarianism of the AKP period (2001-present), while the following section investigates aspects of video and documentary activism between digital and physical activism. The ensuing two sections examine the voices of video/film-makers and protest aesthetics of videos and films.

Turkey's Slide towards Authoritarianism

Coming into power as a 'moderate Islamic' party following the financial crisis in 2001, the AKP governments have evolved into an authoritarian governing rule, especially since their second term in power in 2007. According to Korkut and Eslen-Ziya (2017: 2), 'the more moderate AKP government consolidated its power and merged with the state, the more authoritarian it became to reproduce the semi-democratic centre in a religious conservative form'. While relying on 'a high degree of political recentralization, operating in conjunction with a neoliberal macroeconomic programme' (Tansel 2019: 321), AKP erected a loyal business class along with its implications for regime change (Esen and Gümüüşcü 2018: 350). AKP's regime change has operated not only with the help of state institutions such as local authorities (Tan 2018), where the abovementioned aspiring class is a part, but also with the involvement of religious civil society (Islamist newspapers, communities, associations) and mainstream media.

AKP increasingly constructed a competitive authoritarian regime (İğsız 2015; Esen and Gümüüşcü 2016) following the Gezi protests, which has broader implications for the cultural fabric, including the production and circulation of media. 'Competitive authoritarian systems' (Levitsky and Way 2012) are 'ruled by democratically elected charismatic leaders, who resort to aggressive political discourses that mobilize 'genuine nations' against 'old elites' and divide the remaining world into friends and foes. Political parties create consent, service their clients and replace more independent institutions and state agencies' (Öktem and Akkoyunlu 2016: 470). Increasingly after the Gezi protests, the then Prime Minister Erdoğan's speeches and actions reinforced the existing divisions in society such as the Sunni and Alevi, Turk

and Kurd, *çapulcu* and non-*çapulcu*.⁴ In this context, society has become more polarised while many cultural institutions have been complicit in the top-down changes. For Eraydin and Taşan-Kok (2014: 123), the state has become less democratic over the years, especially regarding AKP's aggressive responses to any protest and social mobilization, exemplifying heightened police surveillance, the arrest of journalists, and the use of physical force, which instil fear and discourage organized social response.

DIY Visual Activism between Digital and Physical Activism

DIY and user-generated media circumvent mainstream news media, which generally either ignore or disseminate a distorted coverage of protest movements (Thorson et al. 2013: 425). The result is that 'ordinary people, including residents, tourists, soldiers, activists, insurgents and terrorists can bypass established editorial and censorial filters and turn their personal record of an event into a public testimony that disrupt "official" perspectives' (Andén-Papadopoulos 2014: 754). Additionally, 'unlike "traditional" forms of digital activism such as denial-of-service actions or online petitions' (Yang 2016: 14), video activism has a distinctly narrative character. The production of videos in public spaces opens discussions on the functions of activists' bodies as a source of narrative. Video activists' bodies and cameras transform into 'narrative tools', along with the produced photos and videos.

In most activist videos, audiences do not observe the video activists' body within the frame, but feel the shakiness of the camera, hence, their body movements. Also, their voices interact with other activists or the police, which determine their involvement in the virtual space of the video and the physical space of resistance. The proximity to protest violence makes these amateur recordings an extraordinary 'resource for understanding the subjective experience of ordinary people, who find themselves on the front line of revolutionary struggle' (Snowdon 2014: 401). While some of the videos and films in question are highly professional, especially in terms of editing, some of them like the videos of Videoccupy and Kazım Kızıl, represent amateur recordings. What makes their aesthetics similar is activists' spatial use of filmic spaces with their bodies in physical protest spaces such as eating, praying or listening to music altogether in parks during the protests (*Love Will Change the Earth*/the video of Videoccupy), cooking or playing

4 Erdoğan used the term *çapulcu* (marauders) to describe the Gezi protestors, which was deconstructed by the protestors, taking the meaning 'fighting for your rights'.

volleyball together in the 'guerrilla camps' (*Bakur*) or being collectively taken into custody on a random street (Kızıl's video).

Video activism did not start with the Gezi protests in Turkey, but the protests generated an unprecedented number of YouTube videos, recording events within the occupied Gezi Park and other public spaces and reinforcing the sense of sharing and solidarity, whilst consolidating activists' understanding of DIY citizenship. Activist communities created their DIY networks of offline media such as film festival communities (Ozduzen 2018) or online media networks such as Facebook groups of the park forums e.g. Resist Kadikoy and online bulletins such as 'The Parks Are Ours' (Akçalı 2018). These forms of media activism emerged out of a young, urban movement with a high ecological and environmental awareness to generate a more sustainable future and find creative ways of disseminating their discontent with the political regime.

While Istanbul transformed into a video city during the Gezi protests (Jenzen et al., this volume), it has long been a 'cinematic city' (Brundson 2012), a home for various film industries from Yeşilçam⁵ to New Turkish Cinema. Istanbul's 'film identity' has changed in the 2000s primarily due to the emergence of an international 'New Turkish Cinema'. Since 1996 (Erdoğan and Göktürk 2001; Suner 2010), it has entered an era defined by its 'artsy' stylistic and narrative features and its independent infrastructure of production and distribution. Economic liberalization was an important reason behind 'the revival in the film industry in the 1990s, which also transformed creative industries, including a booming art scene' (Öz and Özkaracalar 2017: 67). Increasing numbers and impact of film festivals and alternative exhibition avenues have also played fundamental roles in Istanbul's shifting film identity, particularly in comparison to the remnants from the historical film cluster in Beyoğlu (Öz and Özkaracalar 2017: 79-83). This could be related to top-down urban regeneration programmes, including the loss of large-format movie theatres.

In response to the authoritarianism of AKP, the influence of leftist and alternative outlets has increased in the 2000s and 2010s. Meanwhile many mainstream festivals and media platforms conformed to the silencing mechanisms of the regime by, for instance, shutting down their documentary sections as was the case with IAFF following their censoring of *Love Will Change the Earth*. It is important to note what counts as a political

5 The Yeşilçam film industry (mostly melodramas, comedy and action films) is the 'Turkish Hollywood' active from the 1950s to late 1980s, which was extremely popular across Turkey unlike any other era.

voice both as films and film festivals during periods when laws are suspended and reformulated according to official perceptions (see Viernes, this volume). While some mainstream avenues covertly complied with the ideologies of the state, Karaca (2011: 156) identifies how contemporary art from Turkey over the past fifteen years has largely centred on political works regardless. The explicitly political image dealing with the social and political predicaments has become a major currency in the circulation of art and 'the way silencing mechanisms work and are addressed leads to a high visibility of censorship and visible responses' (Karaca 2011: 179-180). Although censorship is not a new phenomenon as Kurdish films have been widely censored, the Gezi protests and the popularity of the pro-Kurdish party HDP amongst Kurdish and Turkish publics in the early 2010s have triggered a new wave of censorship.

Glimpses from Video Activism in Turkey

For years, Istanbul has been the centre of video and media activism, including Fatih Pınar, İmre Azem and Videoccupy. However, most existing collectives chose Izmir and Ankara as their headquarters, which accounts for the regional spread of media activism and shifting place-making practices of video and visual activists vis-à-vis the authoritarian urban politics in Istanbul. Azem's documentary *Ekümenopolis*,⁶ a landmark of activist film/documentary, portrays photographic images and footage from the construction projects such as the Third Bridge and the Marmaray in Istanbul that have massacred the last remaining forests, and focuses on not only experts' opinions but also people's resistance against the top-down urban renewal projects. Azem (interview by author, August 2017) talks about how he has dealt with authoritarianism:

I started making videos for Diken following the Gezi protests to capture ongoing social movements to give voice those people, whose voices were unheard, and portray what wasn't shown on mainstream media. My first video was on the anniversary meeting of Hrant Dink's assassination. I also made videos on [incursions into] labour rights in 'New Turkey'. For instance, when ten workers were killed at Torunlar Centre's construction site in Istanbul after an elevator carrying them plunged to the ground in 2014, I went there to record on-site resistance and violence. Furthermore, I

6 *Ekümenopolis: Ucu Olmayan Şehir* (video), YouTube, 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=maEcPKBXVoM&t=376s>, accessed 14.03.18.

travelled outside of Istanbul. For instance, I went to Soma in 2014 following the coal mine fire with a death toll of 301 miners to show the suffering and potential resistance.

Azem participated in the DIY ecologic citizenship by creating videos on various issues from labour rights to assassinations. Similar to other research participants, Gezi protests became a trademark moment in his understanding of visual activism. When I met him in 2017, he was coming out of a meeting of activists, architects and urban planners at the TMMOB (Union of Chambers of Turkish Engineers and Architects), which has been an active party to urban social movements. To capture the changes in his ways of combating the authoritarian state, I focus on two videos on Pride in Beyoglu in different years after the Gezi protests. Pride 2014⁷ was among the most crowded pride walks in the history of Turkey. The video highlights the colours, clothes, bands of the LGBTI+ communities on Taksim's streets in June 2014 by using close-ups of LGBTI+ activists, combined with long and medium-shots of marching and dancing crowds.

Following 2014, the pride walks have forcefully been prohibited, partly with an excuse that they coincided with Ramadan. Far-right groups, along with the government, threatened the LGBTI+ groups and recused to religious discourses, related to the holy month of Muslims in order to bolster public support for their violent attacks. Referring to ambiguously defined religious practices as an excuse has become a general authoritarian pattern to suppress left-leaning and liberal groups by the AKP government. While Pride was prohibited, LGBTI+ communities continued to go out in Taksim, which has been the original location of Pride since 2007. The video from 2014 shows this as resistance by mainly using long shots to capture the density of crowds, whereas the video from 2017⁸ mostly consists of an interview with an LGBTI+ activist as the walk could not take place due to heavy police intervention. On the recorded interview, audiences can discern that the police forces were on a witch hunt, constantly passing by and running after those alleged 'suspects' in front of the camera. Both videos unfold the ways that the bodies of protestors utilize public spaces in different ways when authoritarianism encroaches on everyday life in different levels, which radically transforms the costumes, objects and voices within the frame. The touchstone of the video from 2014 is the vivid use of colours, revealed through the LGBTI+ individuals' costumes. However, the camera

7 *Pride Taksim* (video), Vimeo, 30 June 2014, <https://vimeo.com/99517268>, accessed 14.03.18.

8 *Pride Taksim* (video), Vimeo, 26 June 2017, <https://vimeo.com/223111378>, accessed 14.03.18.

also captures greyness of concrete buildings and the dire blackness of police uniforms in 2017.

During my fieldwork in 2017, Azem introduced me to Fatih Pınar. Pınar's most recent and most popular videos on YouTube were made during the curfew in Turkey's Kurdish region in 2016, which represent some of the rare footage from the AKP's recent war in the region. One of these videos⁹ depicts Sur (a district of Diyarbakır) after the curfew, which lasted three months and destroyed the whole neighbourhood. It relies on the testimony and memories of witnesses, namely people who had first-hand knowledge of executions and torture carried out by the Turkish state during the curfew. Thus, it runs counter to the state-sanctioned 'truth' about terrorism in the region and represents the political voice of those who suffer from state violence. It features the testimony of a mother who lost her daughter due to police violence during curfew. The video does not treat residents of Sur 'as objects of political subjugation or victims but shows the ways in which they became voluntary subjects of knowledge and purposeful subjects aware of their own voices' (Spence and Avcı 2013: 299). Similar to other videos that came after the Gezi protests, this video does not capture crowds, but features individuals' stories and memories of state violence and therefore becomes the voice of agents who are not afraid to express their grief against the authoritarian practices of the state. Pınar (interview by the author, February 2018) recounted how he copes with increasing state violence as follows:

Following the Gezi protests, there has been a variety of processes of resistance from Soma¹⁰ to Validebağ.¹¹ I recorded the social movements and made videos during the curfews in Kurdish towns and neighbourhoods without self-censoring. If Ahmet Şık¹² is on trial and there is a protest, I record it even if I don't circulate it instantly. However, social movements on the streets are in decline. Yet, activism is not only about street movements. There is so much to do now as the impact of authoritarianism has

9 *Sur after the Curfew* (video), YouTube, 9 February 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VjsfBpvvUJY>, accessed 14.03.18.

10 In May 2014, 300 mine workers died in Soma (north Aegean Turkey) due to a mine explosion, leading to strike and protests.

11 Validebağ Volunteers (1995) were formed by neighbourhood residents against Validebağ Woods' commodification and organized petitions and demonstrations. Their widest social movement, called 'Validebag Resistance' and commonly referred to as 'Small Gezi', took place in 2014 when the government wanted to build a mosque in the woods.

12 A journalist who was jailed for a year in 2011-2012 and another year in 2017-2018. Now he is an MP of the pro-Kurdish party HDP.

increased. For instance, I made a short video for the first day of trials of Academics for Peace¹³ and circulated it. Now there is so much resistance around courts.

In the aftermath of making and circulating these videos, Pinar continued with recording cases such as Ahmet Şık's trial but has not been active in circulating them due to his feeling more 'unsafe' as he recounted to me. In 2018, he was looking into independent funds to facilitate his act of visual commoning as media outlets were not employing him anymore.

In addition to Pinar and Azem as more professional activists, during and following the Gezi many collectives, including 'ordinary' people, have transitioned into what Andén-Papadopoulos (2014: 754) calls 'citizen camera-witnesses', defined as 'camera-wielding political activists and dissidents that put their lives at risk to produce public testimony and mobilize global solidarity through the affective power of the visual'. These videos record activists' and police's practices, but the camera identifies with protestors during police interventions. Hence, audiences view events from the activists' perspective. One of the most well-known video collectives during the Gezi period was Videoccupy. Güliz Sağlam from Videoccupy (interview by the author, December 2018), who has also collectively produced and circulated videos as part of the Women for Peace Initiative to highlight the testimony of women in the Kurdish region, expressed the evolution of their 'citizen camera-witnessing' and the ways she resisted the authoritarian state:

Videoccupy met in Gezi Park and recorded everyday life in the park and street protests. Everyone in the collective took the initiative to record events and circulate them instantly. After the occupation was over, we didn't use the same name but some of us formed Vidyo Kolektif and mostly followed women's struggles. In May 2016, when I was recording the Gezi protests' anniversary, police took my camera and asked me to delete some footage, which put me off from recording, but I recently made a video of the 8th of March for the *Taz* newspaper, which is diasporic media based in Germany.

Like other film and media communities that used the park as a physical space of DIY media activism, such as film festival circuits (Ozdüzen 2018),

13 The Academics for Peace represent over 2,000 academics from Turkey who signed a petition in January 2016 to end AKP's violence in the Kurdish region. They have since been brought to court and been fired from their jobs. Some were taken into custody and four of them were imprisoned.

video activists encountered each other and organized into action by using protest camps as their base. Videoccupy created 'visual commons' and recorded everyday life in protest camps, such as concerts, gatherings, police interventions, communal dinners or Friday prayers. The most viewed video of the Videoccupy is the police intervention at Gezi Park on 22 June 2013.¹⁴ Like other videos on state violence, the shaky camera is the landmark of its aesthetics. Bolstering its shaky existence, the camera does not focus on an individual story but captures the movements and bodies of mass numbers of people. It showcases the ways crowds attempt to run away from persistent police violence and chaos on the streets. Rather than narrating individual stories, these videos benefit from the cacophony of voices, multiplicity of spaces, and consistent movement/action.

While Videoccupy is a single-event focused initiative and remained as a symbol of the Gezi protests, Camera Street prevailed in subsequent social movements, following a diversity of resistances around Izmir, including ecological movements, such as the anti-coal movement in Yırca.¹⁵ The chosen video of Camera Street¹⁶ shows the momentary instance of how video activists are taken into custody along with other activists. In these moments, the camera captures the ongoing, fast-pace dynamic on the streets, which exemplifies the everyday effects of authoritarianism. Abusive power of the police, implemented through threats and physical assaults, is a growing trend in that police forcefully ask activists to erase their recorded witnessing as it was the case with two of my participants, Sağlam and Kazım Kızıl (Camera Street). Video activists still utilize visible technological tools to record ongoing state violence even when they are increasingly subject to state violence, exemplified by the detention and arrest of Kızıl. In one of Kızıl's videos, the moment police violence target him and other activists are showcased.

While Kızıl was filming other people's detention at the boycott in Izmir, he ended up filming his own detention. During this incident, audiences see Kızıl's camera and hear his conversation with the police. The video originally intends to record other activists on site, but eventually the audience hears and sees the video activist, as the camera unintentionally captures his own body movements and personal experience of state violence. Kızıl

14 *Police Intervention at the Taksim Square 22.06.13* (video), YouTube, 23 June 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V4pyzFeIHJo>, accessed 14.03.18.

15 A Turkish village where 6,000 olive trees were destroyed to construct a coal-fired power plant.

16 *Kazım Kızıl's Detention* (video), Facebook, 13 February 2015, <https://www.facebook.com/kazimkizil/videos/10152762090042857/>, accessed: 14.03.18.

was taken into custody once more on 17 April 2017 along with six other activists. Although Kızıl, who was recording a protest related to plebiscite results, presented his press card to the police, he was taken into custody and arrested on 21 April 2017 on charges of ‘insulting the president’. Effectively operating as *lèse majesté*, the insult clause has become a ludicrous reason for journalists, activists and academics to be sacked, censored and arrested. Kızıl (interview by the author, March 2018) tells the story of Camera Street and his ongoing visual activism:

Camera Street started as the Izmir branch of Gezi’s DIY media. We have met each other once in every two weeks since then although we are not that active now. As the social movements on the streets lessened, our collective has also dispersed. To change this trend, we need to go beyond documenting state violence on the streets and focus on other issues, such as political prisoners, refugees, women’s or children’s issues or the economic crisis.

Increasing authoritarianism has also opened a room for a discussion on how to transcend formulas of Occupy activism. Rather than solely following street movements, video collectives capture the routes of refugees, labour rights and court cases. However, video activists could not follow political prisoners inside the court houses as cameras and phones were not allowed. To combat mechanisms of institutional exclusion, some activists drew sketches from the courthouses to visually narrate the situation, such as the drawing of Zeynep Özatalay from the courthouse where two hunger strikers, namely Nuriye Gülmen and Semih Özakça, were on trial in September 2017. There is a forceful passage from video activism to pre-digital activism even if visual activism is persistent.

Filmic Activism against Censorship

Similar to the forceful prohibition of activist videos, the complicity of film funds and mainstream film festivals have limited the production and circulation of politically engaged films. However, this also led to finding alternative locations and strategies. Similar to the police’s behaviour towards the video activists Sağlam and Kızıl, *Love Will Change the Earth* was forcefully censored at IAFF in 2014. Although it was scheduled to be screened upon the decision of the preliminary jury and was previously screened and awarded at the Documentarist film festival, it was excluded from the IAFF’s programme with an excuse that the subtitles included ‘a swear word’ targeting the president

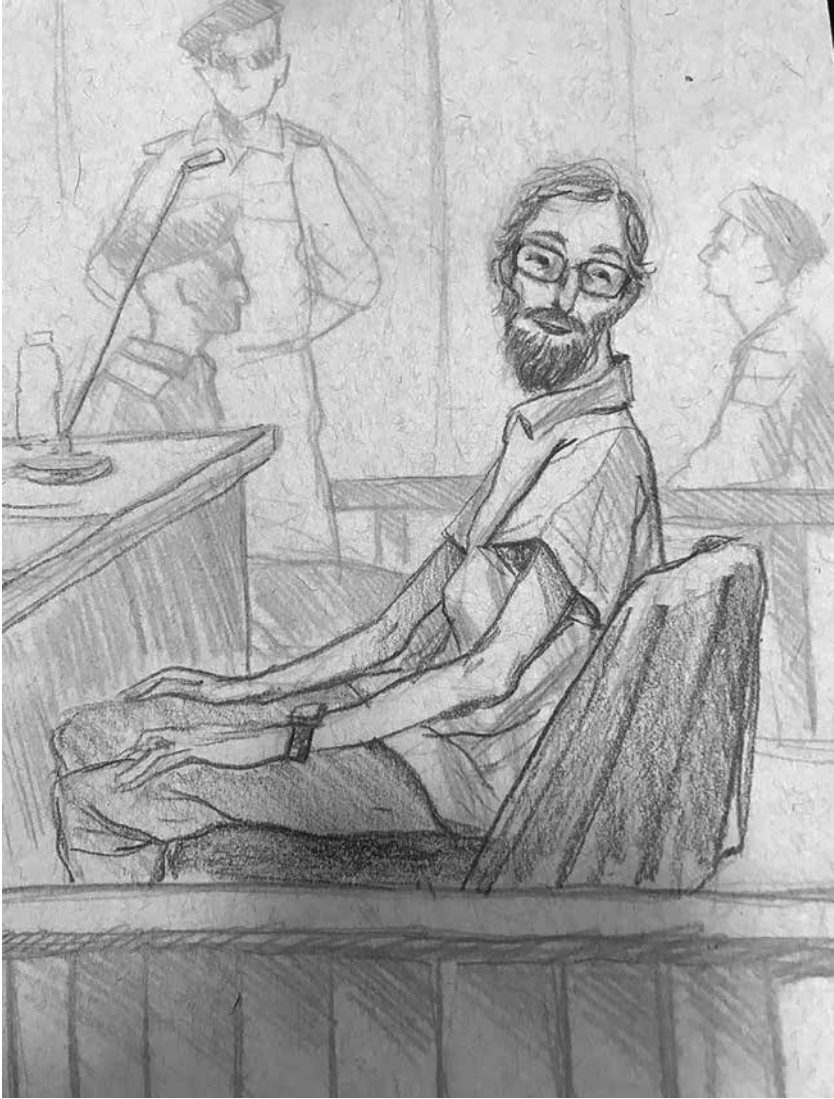


Figure 9.1. Özalay's drawing of Semih Özakça. This image became a touchstone of digitally shared posts on the hunger strike of Özakça and Gülmen.

of Turkey. The censorship was implemented, citing Articles of 125 and 299 of the Turkish Criminal Code, which prohibit 'insulting' the unity of Turkey and its president, namely, Erdoğan. However, the documentary focuses on the practices of Turkey's disconnected populace, including a plethora of activists, such as youth, nurses, Alevites, and Kemalists, who fought to reclaim Gezi Park and thereby challenged the authoritarian politics of the government.

In contrast to the film's tone of coexistence and presentation of multiplicity of political voices, its censorship at the IAFF brought stigmatization of and isolation on the part of the director and the documentary selection committee. Likewise, the initial festival screening of *Bakur* also took place at the Documentarist film festival in the following year (June 2015). These two screenings reflected ongoing right struggles, whilst initiating intersectional bonds between audience members against the re-homogenizing agenda of the government. Three months prior to being censored at the IAFF, the screening of *Love Will Change the Earth* in Documentarist film festival in June 2014 was filled with symbolic slogans and discussions of Gezi protests. Despite the indirect forms of violence, Reyhan Tuvi (interview by the author, March 2018) continued producing media: 'I bypass wider mechanisms of censorship by participating in News Watch in Diyarbakir or by making another film. Doing what you can do is the best way to defeat censorship.' The fact that Tuvi has become part of News Watch in the Kurdish region in the aftermath of the arbitrary detention and imprisonment of Kurdish journalists accounts for the increasing convergence of media and cinematic activism in Turkey.

Upon the imprisonment of Kurdish journalists, Kurdish newspapers had to almost shut down in 2016. In order to reinvigorate Kurdish-language journalism, News Watch hosted voluntary activists. These kinds of vernacular alliances were a direct outcome of the Gezi protests, as with Tuvi, who told me that she took the uprising as a point of departure in her subsequent political action. In 2017, she completed her new film *No Place for Tears*, which is an observational documentary portraying local people's everyday life practices in Maheser village. The village lies at the border between Turkey and Syria, facing the Kurdish town Kobane, which was then under the siege of the Islamic State. The documentary provides glimpses of how residents sheltered their neighbours whilst watching the war happening in front of their eyes. Tuvi's engagement with the resistance during the war in the Kurdish regions of Syria and Turkey for her documentary and participation in News Watch foregrounded her visual activism and stance against mainstream festivals and media amidst the ongoing state violence.

While the screening of *Love Will Change the Earth* took place prior to its censorship at the IAFF, the first screening of *Bakur* at the Documentarist film festival followed its censorship at the IIFF. The screening on 15 June in 2015 in Şişli municipality's Cultural Centre started with '*Biji berxwedana Kobane*'¹⁷ slogans by the audience members, representing solidarity with

17 'Long live the Kobane resistance' in Kurdish.

the ongoing Kurdish resistance against the Islamic State in Kobane in Northern Syria. This screening took place when Kurdish guerrillas ceased using guns and pulled back to cross-border zones; therefore, it was yet again a 'special' moment for the Kurdish 'problem' in Turkey. The documentary is based on the first-hand testimony of lower- and higher-ranked guerrillas during the 'peace process'¹⁸ when it was possible for the film crew to enter guerrilla camps in south-eastern Turkey. *Bakur* illustrates instances of how guerrillas resisted the state, such as their daily exercises or community gatherings and felt strange having to leave behind their camps during the peace process. Its tone relies on an account of the 'human' aspect of the Kurdish armed forces in a bid to challenge the demonising discourse of the mainstream media.

Once the film was censored at the IIFF, audiences established their own meeting venues at parks in Istanbul and Ankara, especially at Abbasaga Park. The structure of the 'censorship forum' at Abbasaga Park allowed various actors to speak out about censorship to counter the official view. Film critics, audiences, intellectuals, and film industry workers, including one of the directors of *Bakur*, Ertuğrul Mavioğlu, spoke about the need to create a network of solidarity and initiate new alliances. The producer Ayşe Çetinbaş (interview by the author, July 2017) expanded on the connections and functions of the Abbasaga censorship forum as a place where communities defied and defeated censorship:

On the day the censorship happened, we invited film-makers to a restaurant and initiated the email group 'Against Censorship'. Simultaneous with our film's screening, Nadir Öperli's film was to be screened at the IIFF. They were waiting for our sign and upon the censorship of *Bakur*, they withdrew their films and boycotted the IIFF. Then the IIFF fell apart – the juries withdrew, ceremonies were cancelled, and the films were not screened. What we gained were the censorship march and the forum at Abbasaga Park, which were at the intersection of the Gezi protests and Kurdish resistance.

Gezi brought together different actors on the streets. Demirel and Mavioğlu decided to make *Bakur* in the occupied protest camp of Gezi Park. The park became an avenue connecting a journalist (Mavioğlu) and a film-maker

18 The peace process between the PKK and the Turkish state started in 2009. However, after the pro-Kurdish party HDP got 13% of the votes in the elections on 7 June 2015, the AKP restarted the war in the Kurdish region of Turkey as Kurdish forces impeded their potential victory.

(Demirel) to make the film on guerrilla camps in the Kurdish region. As Çetinbaş's comment also shows, Gezi was not only a romantic reference, but it also functioned as a point of departure for activists and audience members to continue to use its practices, such as the forum structure employed in Abbasağa Park.

More recently, Kazım Öz also had to deal with censorship in creative ways. On 11 April 2017 the government rescinded the screening license for his fictional film *Zer*, which narrates the story of a diasporic Kurdish young man, Jan, on a journey from New York (his home) to Turkey (his ancestors' home), following the passing away of his grandmother. Through the story of Jan and his grandmother, the film recalls the 1938 massacre of Kurds in Dersim and the eradication of the event from Turkey's official history. At the film's premiere, Öz showed black screens in place of the censored scenes that depicted the history and culture of Dersim. Written on each of these blackened scenes were the words: 'You cannot watch this scene because the General Directorate of Cinema of the Turkish Ministry of Culture and Tourism deemed it inconvenient.' Öz (interview by the author, November 2017) addressed the whole process of censorship and his way of dealing with authoritarianism in the culture and politics of Turkey in this way:

When the ministers initially saw the film, they authorized it with the black scenes, but they had no clue that I was going to disclose their censorship of those scenes. The film finally got to an audience at the IIFF with the ministry's name all over it, which led them to censor the whole film. Even with this difficulty, however, the film continued its journey.

When I went to the screening on 11 April 2017, the biggest room of the Atlas movie theatre was full of a crowd that clapped and cheered during each scene with the disclosed name of the censoring body. In the aftermath of this radical screening, the film was re-censored and had to continue its journey through Turkey and Europe under the strict surveillance of the Turkish state. Thus, both the text and context of the film run as a counternarrative to the state-sanctioned truth about struggles in the region in the past and today.

Concluding Remarks

In combining textual and contextual analysis, the chapter presents a unique case study by clustering recent videos and films together in the

light of their aesthetics of protest and creative resistance against AKP's Islamist and neoliberal authoritarianism. These videos and films bring along the subjective experience of activist bodies in public spaces during and following the Gezi protests and they point to the creativity and resilience in activists' resistance against state violence in an increasingly authoritarian setting. Following the physical violence or censorship, rising audience attention to these videos and films also turned them into visual commons, whilst their directors and producers were at the forefront of dissident publics. In this chapter, I define these acts of resistance as creative because the visual material and their makers (1) do not engage in conventional forms of protest, such as marching, but employ their visual presence and voice to come into prominence, and (2) use the bodies of video activists and other activists as a source of narrative. Furthermore, these acts of resistance are not just creative in their nature; they are also aesthetic, especially because they constantly find new digital or bodily ways to question the politics of the state and conventional Occupy activism.

While the early videos and films in 2013 and 2014 present crowds of dissident voices and bodies, recent ones since 2015 rely more on prescheduled interviews with activists and the presence of the police is much more increased within the frame. In the increasingly videophobic and documentaphobic state ideology relying on their fears of the visual versions of facts going viral in our digital era, my informants used fewer vivid colours and followed more dangerous routes to produce and circulate videos and films while utilizing alternative avenues such as Documentarist film festival or the Labour Film Festival or Kurdish media. These ongoing strategies at times fall short as they cannot prevent media censorship and regulation, but the testimonies here account for the willingness of creative communities to resist and fight back with their cameras and bodies, even if the outcomes are not yet 'successful'. While the interview material may seem to have captured a sense of optimism, authoritarianism continues to dominate Turkish politics. Authoritarianism, however, does not block, but, in fact, it encourages visual and creative resistance to diversify by using international platforms such as diasporic media or by turning to pre-digital activism, such as drawing from within courthouses, which broaden the horizons for the future of social and political change. Based on this framework, the chapter points out that 'protest by videos, films and visuals' bears witness to the atrocities committed by authoritarian regimes, which also feed our understanding of repertoires of protests and their aesthetics in similar regimes during the Arab Spring and beyond.

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