

New Turkish Documentaries: The Tools to Raise Public Awareness with Their Narrative Structures and Discourses

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The European Conference on Media, Communication and Film 2015
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

Undoubtedly, NGOs, different ethnic and religious groups, political dissidents, and sexual orientations and identities convey the unseen images, unheard voices and unknown stories or buried narratives to the public sphere in the face of the mainstream media. Documentaries about buried narratives remind and recall people's history against the conventional or the mainstream, and contribute to the social memory that seem to be realized only with their own narratives therefore act as an efficient tool to raise public awareness. Today, thanks to the digital technologies, cinema is no longer the privilege of certain people. Correspondingly, as for the documentaries, their narrative structures and discourses are changing accordingly, accompanying a big rise in production numbers. In Turkey, documentaries which are open to self-representation with a much more subjective style are being produced, addressing issues such as history, politics, women's issues, gender, identity and culture, urbanization, and environmental problems. Covering the aforementioned points and also considering the effect of political and social conjuncture, this paper assesses New Turkish Documentary and examines its effectiveness in raising public awareness with specific focus on the documentaries *Küçük Kara Balıklar* (*Little Black Fish*, A. H. Ünal, C. Terbiyeli, E. Akay, S. Güler, Ö. İnce, 2014) which deals with the 1990's Kurdish policy of Turkey through the testimony of children; *Yeryüzü Aşkın Yüzü Oluncaya Dek* (*Love Will Change The Earth*, R. Tuvi, 2014) which is related to Gezi Protests and *Komşu Komşu! HUUU!* (*Hey Neighbour!*, B. Elmas, 2014) which examines the process of urban transformation.

Keywords: documentary, public awareness, new Turkish documentaries

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Introduction

Ideologies are no less significant in this era of social movements which is characterised by power structures, struggles and constituent entities. Van Dijk (2003, 43) claims that our social praxis is commanded mainly by ideologies. Social communication, in that regard, should also be considered under the influence of ideology.

In *The Consequences of Modernity*, Giddens (2004, 62-64) defines the institutional dimensions of modernity as surveillance (control of information and social supervision), capitalism (“strongly competitive and expansionist nature of capitalist enterprise means that technological innovation tends to be constant and pervasive”; capital accumulation), industrialism (transformation of nature, development of the “created environment”) and military power (control of the means of violence in the context of the industrialisation of war). Mass communication plays a significant role in surveillance in the organization and reorganization of power via controlling information and society so that in his celebrated study *Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses*, Althusser (2006, 63) ranks communication and culture among the ideological apparatuses. Horkheimer and Adorno (1996, 7-62) considers cultural commodities, and thus cinema, as means that serve for the approval of power relations.

Public opinion is an aggregate of beliefs and opinions of the people. However beliefs and opinions are usually weak and changeable and beliefs and opinions that are rooted and profound happen to form the public opinion. To form an individual opinion about a particular issue, on the other hand, depends on one’s accessibility to information about social problems or matters (Sartori, 2004, 53). That accessibility is provided by mass communication via mainstream and alternative media. Mainstream media, and thus mainstream cinema, conveys narratives that approve the power structures while alternative and structurally independent media which employs criticism, opposition and alternative sources, has a more libertarian stance. At this point we may recall the notion of ‘expanded cinema’ by Gene Youngblood. According to Youngblood, cinema relates to the phenomenon of expanded consciousness and changing human relations with the environment, which is preconditioned by the gradual disappearance of boundaries of different disciplines, media and arts. And thus, expanded cinema could be perceived as a certain process of becoming something new. For the author, new image-making technologies extended man’s communicative capacities, created an alternative paradigm of film and media language (as cited in Šukaitytė, 2012, p. 130).

Documentaries, Digital Technology and the Public Sphere

As we will focus on documentaries particularly in this paper, it is also important to mention the characteristics of the genre through its subjects, aims, perspectives and approaches, structures, production process, and finally, what it presents to the audience. Documentary, as a genre, does not occupy the narrative territory of fiction films in terms of individual actions and relations, feelings and story-telling. In that regard, documentary records its subject so that it urges a certain stance and affects its audience in a certain manner. Documentaries, thus, bear social responsibility due to the fact that it does not fabricate its subject matter but it takes it as given. Principal properties of its production are real person-subjects, on-spot and real time filming, natural lighting, content preserving editing. Including getting in action as a result of

the film, documentary offers a social experience to the audience (Ellis, McLane, 2005, p.1-3).

Thanks to the digital technology it has never been easier to gather geographically diverse individuals around a common interest and to raise public awareness on a subject, and documentary exploits the digital age, as well. The fast improvement of digital technology along with people's demand to hear and see direct and independent stories from all around the world also affects the cinema. In this respect, it is possible to assert that contemporary documentary making drives from both technological developments and social expectations. Craigh Hight notes that the relation between documentary and digital technologies, "offers the potential for a far more extensive and permanent transformation of fundamental aspects of documentary culture," and namely, changes of materiality of the image, modes of representation and the role of the audience in the cinematic event (2008, p.3). Recently in Turkey, the audience whose access to information is secured due to digitalization and social media, protested the indifferent and negligent attitude of the mainstream media towards the Gezi events.¹ Video and audio streams and texts produced and recorded by the participants of Gezi events imply that the participants formed their own media and these footages constitute the main materials for the succeeding documentaries of the events. One such documentary, *Yeryüzü Aşkın Yüzü Oluncaya Dek (Love Will Change The Earth)*, R. Tuvî, 2014) is discussed in this paper.

Of course, not entirely new, John Grierson, one of the founding fathers of documentary, defined documentary as a socially educative vehicle and the role of the documentary filmmaker as an orator. According to him, documentaries should be designed to enter into the arena of social policy and orient or predispose public opinion to preferred solutions (1966, p.141-55). Dziga Vertov defines his own documentary theory, Kino-eye, "as the possibility of making the invisible visible, the unclear clear, the hidden manifest, the disguised overt, the acted nonacted, making falsehood into truth" (2007, p. 48). However, the instability of the 'truth' that the documentary reveals and the subjectivity of the documentary narrative imply that documentary genre should be considered as a narrative that arouses interest and leads to questions instead of a rigid source for information. In John Grierson's words, documentary "is not a mirror but a hammer" (as cited in Morris, 1987). Jill Godmillow also claims that a documentary "should question the poverty of children instead of displaying children in poverty"(Godmilow).

P. Rotha, on the other hand, emphasizes that the task of the documentary is depict one part of the population to the other part (2000, p.88). Agenda-setting theory, inspired by P. B. Cohen's earlier studies and developed by McCombe and Shaw, asserts that mass media communication filters the reality and determines about what the public thinks but not how the public considers these issue (Erdoğan, Alemdar, 2005, p.180). In other words, visibility is fundamental and ideas that are invisible cannot have existence for individual opinions. So documentaries also play an important role while seeking to bring to the attention of a larger public those whose voices are seldom heard in mainstream media discourse or those who are otherwise in danger of being socially or representationally excluded, as Kilborn emphasizes (2004, p.28).

¹ <http://www.milliyet.com.tr/ntv-binasi-onunde-protesto/gundem/detay/1717999/default.htm>
<http://www.dailydot.com/news/cnn-turk-istanbul-riots-penguin-doc-social-media/>

Documentary film creates a bonding experience in the society and allows its subject matter to be discussed from various standpoints. In this way, documentary film functions as a means of confrontation and dialogue-building. Considering the resolution process in Turkey, confrontations in documentary is essential for the dialogue among Turks and Kurds. This study discusses *Küçük Kara Balıklar (Little Black Fish)*, A. H. Ünal, C. Terbiyeli, E. Akay, S. Güler, Ö. İnce, 2014) as an example of a narrative that the story of the “other” is being heard.

Danacı notes that the quest for “history from below”, “history of the silenced masses”, “people’s history” emerges in the 60s when the notion of civil society came into prominence, the definition of society started to cover the marginalized groups and times were perceived as a product of a multifaceted process (as cited in Susam, 2015, p. 68). Documentary tries to capture the unseen aspects of the flow of events and records witnesses while it enables to (re-)write the history of events. James Harwey Robinson also asserts that “the world would be completely different if historical facts are known and approved and if they are allowed to affect our everyday life” (as cited in Rotha, 2000, p.35). Even while hoping that documentaries will enlighten and enrich, a contribution to the development of an ‘open-minded attitude’ toward new information is a great win. All through these, it is easier to understand why one of the most frequently proclaimed aims of documentary film-making is to raise public awareness (Nichols, 1991, p.79-80 & Corner, 1996, p.14-15), and it wouldn’t be wrong to say that public awareness rises the sense of community since shared values and beliefs are vital for a sense of community.

In this sense, public-building requires public spaces, and that is why arenas like, public broadcasting, cable access, public satellite TV channels, local communications networks, community media workshop spaces and internet are getting more and more affective each day. Media, and mostly alternative media, on these platforms are becoming tool of a democratic process, an open society, and a vital culture (Aufderheide, 2007, p.72). It reminds us of the rather normative notion of ‘public sphere’ (Habermas), a domain out of the state with the function of controlling and criticizing governmental policies. Habermas defines the public sphere as a public habitat where individuals come together to discuss public issues and problems, to reconcile about the values and criteria for the solution social and political problems (as cited in Mutlu, 2004, p.164). Digital technologies and recent developments that secure the accessibility of opportunities for the production and distribution of films enable an equal discussion and communication environment into which each individual or group would participate with their own productions. This can be considered as a modest step to realize Habermas’ notions of public sphere, democratic negotiation space and participation. Public sphere can now be considered as the whole world. Time, space and language are not constraints anymore. Political, cultural, economic and social issues are being discussed in burgeoning communication channels. Documentaries strongly contribute to the public sphere not only with almost no-budget, independent productions but also with alternative distribution strategies. It is not just the internet as an alternative screening medium, but also private screenings like those in festivals, meetings and assemblies, in parks and on the streets, by-pass the mainstream. This echoes the factory screenings of Getino and Solanas, authors of the *Towards Third Cinema* manifesto and *La hora de los hornos (Hour of the Furnaces)*, a revolutionary masterpiece of the 60s, which altered the role of the audience. The nature of such screenings is that they turn out to be places of discussion

or debate and also contribute to heighten the audience's involvement in the documentary's subject matter. This more focused community brings a more qualified feedback and carry this to the real life.

New Turkish Documentaries

Documentary film in Turkey, so far, tried to survive under severe censorship and without the support of commercial distribution and find itself a place in the history of the Turkish cinema. Due to the fact that digital technologies became widespread and because of the increasing number of film festivals and increasing availability of film productions and literature on film on internet, film literacy augmented and documentaries and other forms of narratives are preferred to be used as an effective means of expression. Therefore, documentaries in various languages that are more local, that can represent various identities, that derive from various ideological stances, that reflect various cultures varied and multiplied in number. Such a flourishing relies not only the particular properties of this cinema but also on the political, social, economic and cultural structure of Turkey in 2000s.

Rise of political Islam from 1990 in an accelerating rate during the AKP (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi, Justice and Development Party) regime; state intervention to the personal lives including issues like marriage, love, personal hygiene, eating habits on the one hand and EU harmonization process on the other; use of Islam as a means to divide and conquer Kurdish nationalism in the Eastern and Southeastern parts of Turkey on the one hand and the ongoing resolution process on the other; rural-urban migration reaching its climax in 90s; tensions among the settled and the newcomers in city and its social, economic and environmental consequences; economic policies of the AKP governments and the utilization of construction industry as an economic accelerator in particular; resulting awareness about environment... All these conflicts and contradictions nourished unrest and polarization and an accompanying uneasy tone in Turkish society. In similar vein, this emerging political, social, economic and cultural era affected arts and film-making. Classifying the films of this period as 'New Turkish Cinema', and 'New Turkish Documentaries' in particular, derives from the fact that films of this period were used and considered as a means to discuss, and even to propose solutions for, the issues at stake. Distinguishing features of these productions can be generalized as follows: narratives that deviate from mainstream and dominant ideology; critical towards power; unusual variety in subject matters; particularly preferring the documentary genre as a means of expression; self-funding; screenings organized out of mainstream distribution channels; productions with fresh new language, new representations and self-representations.

Little Black Fish, Love Will Change The Earth, Hey Neighbour!...

In this study, we focus on three recent, striking (especially in terms of their subject matters), independently produced, and alternatively distributed documentaries to portrait New Turkish Documentaries and its influence for raising public awareness.

First decade of 2000s witnessed an unseen dialogue platform among peoples about the Kurdish issue due to the government's updated policies, namely the resolution process. Films of this era also serve a function in building this dialogue. The directors of *Little Black Fish* express their will to contribute to the resolution process. Five directors of the documentary, one being Kurdish, others being Turkish, are inspired by

the book entitled *Bildiğin Gibi Değil*² by two young researchers, Funda Danışman and Rojin Canan Akin. The book brings together the interviews with Kurds who were children in the 90s living in the Southeastern region of Turkey. The directors describe the film as a documentary produced by Turks for Turks and state their aim as to introduce the violence faced by Kurdish children stuck in the middle of a war to the Turkish people.³ The production started in 2012. Kurds from Van, Hakkari, Batman, Mardin, Diyarbakır, Lice and Şırnak are interviewed and they tell their own stories and experiences about their childhoods. Since the interviewees are of different age groups, their childhood covers a period of 30 years from 1990s up to 2010s. The film was self funded and with the voluntary contribution of professionals.

The Occupation of Gezi Park started on May 28, 2013, protesting against the implementation of an urban management project, which would turn one of the last green area of Taksim, Istanbul into a shopping mall. When the police brutally intervened and used aggressive force, the Gezi movement gained momentum and massive support of different social sectors, and also spread to various cities other than Istanbul. *Love Will Change The Earth* is one of the documentaries comprehensively covering the incidents through the eyes of the witnesses which are also the participants of the protests. Director herself was also a protestor at the Gezi Park and she documented, gathered evidence, interviewed and recorded as well as shared film materials with other filming protesters. This was also one of the basic characteristics of Gezi, the use of social media and online sharings to capture and cover the whole process, and bypass the inadequate mainstream media.

As the result of economic policies of the recent AKP government and its employment of the construction industry as an economic catalyzer, urban renewal projects played a significant and destructive role for the last few years. These projects destroyed the historical traces in the neighbourhoods, promoted vertical housing, and attacked the last remnants of green spaces in order to replace old neighbourhoods with shopping malls (as in the case of Gezi) or new luxury housing. In such cases where the projects are not yet completed or when the current inhabitants are not totally evacuated, the old and the new, and the rich and the the poor become neighbours. The documentary *Komşu Komşu! HUUU! (Hey Neighbour!)*, B. Elmas, 2014) is about the relationship of a huge residence apartment building in Kurtulus district and a shanty in the old Pasa neighbourhood as neighbours. The whole story is narrated by the pink old house.⁴ In other words, the location itself becomes a defining character, voice of the film.

As we define the main characteristics of New Turkish Documentary as the voice of the cultures and histories that had remained ignored or oppressed under the dominant values and beliefs of society, *Hey Neighbour!*, standing in opposition to government policies, set a good example. The director asserts that the use of the pink old house as the narrator, gives chance to those whose voices are seldom heard to be heard.⁵ The conflict intensifies visually when we see the image of the huge crane, portrayed as if it is a juggernaut, a merciless and unstoppable destruction machine. Urban renewal not only destroys the buildings but also the lives of the householders and the local culture.

² R.C. Akin, F. Danışman. (2011). *Bildiğin Gibi Değil*. İstanbul: Metis.

³ For further reading about the film and interviews with the directors, see www.facebook.com/kucukkarabaliklar. The film is also available online, see vimeo.com/108880966

⁴ For detailed information, trailer and contacts see www.asminfilm.com/en/Film-detail.aspx?cid=30

⁵ For the interview with the director see, G. Aydemir, (2015). "Kentsel Dönüşüm İnsanların Kültürlerini Formatlıyor". *FilmArası*, 49, p. 60-62.

The screening of the film at various festivals and organizations played an important role on raising public awareness on the issue. The film also had chance to be promoted on Hayat TV⁶ whose motto is “to be the television of millions, not the millionaires.”

The fact that children telling their own stories about their own childhood in the *Little Black Fish* contributes to mutual empathy and its language being Turkish supports the idea that mutual dialogue is well possible. However, the film should not be considered to have an impact only for the Turkish people. Directors assert that Kurdish audiences also appreciate the film in the sense that it reveals what the Kurds, themselves, wanted to express but remained so far unvoiced. Thus, when the documentaries are being screened at its source, or when the subject of the documentary or those who can identify with the subject, watch himself/herself on the screen, as is in the case of *Little Black Fish*, this confrontation stimulates grassroots to be organized, raises awareness and provides a sense of self empowerment. Moreover the film not only screened at international festivals, but also televised on IMC TV⁷, a TV station that adopts an independent stance against the mainstream media, released for movie theaters through Başka Sinema⁸, and finally become available online, so that its reach extended even international circles. In a similar vein, the screenings of the other two documentaries at international festivals and events organized by various institutions turned Q&A sessions into forums with the participation of the directors. This enabled an in-depth interaction of the films with the audiences. We also witness the active participation of the audience in their comments on online screening sites and social media.

Another contribution of *Little Black Fish* and *Love Will Change the Earth* to the public awareness is their narrative style. These documentaries contain examples of direct, firsthand evidences of alleged crimes or violations, recorded based on the method of oral history. Thus the effects of the incidents can be traced back easily. According to Sancar, dialogue in the resolution process is only possible under social reconciliation. This is mainly guaranteed by the political arena but not restricted to that. Indeed political will and action is necessary but not sufficient for a thorough discussion about peaceful coexistence especially when there is a nationwide trauma of this scale. Policies of recollection with various communication channels is crucial to realize the politics of democratic recollection and confrontation instead of top-down designed, directed and carefully controlled recollection policy (Sancar, 2010, p. 56). *Little Black Fish* should be considered in this framework. *Love Will Change the Earth* does not rely on the dominant ideology in the sense that it challenges the collective memory by employing oral histories. The film presents its material in such a way so that the Gezi incident can be recollected and comprehended in a human-centered framework via presenting the witnesses of the same event through their different experiences, feelings and reflections. The fact that the collective memory, i.e. what the society recollects and what it forgets, is conditioned by the power and the dominant ideology should not be underestimated. Huysen points out that to forget is a strategy of the memory under the pressure of the power and thus recollection is political. In that respect collective memory can be formatted, rebuilt, directed and, in a

⁶ www.youtube.com/watch?list=PLJHMLVS9bmNoXw67YrJN8mo-FTIKWVSmN&t=4872&v=dNFC9bYwhro

⁷ For further information about IMC TV see, www.imc-tv.com and gokhanbicici.com/?page_id=18

⁸ *Başka Sinema* is an initiative for the theatrical release of independent productions or festival films which are otherwise not distributed nationwide. For further information see, www.baskasinema.com/

way, fictional. Recollection of the past is not unilateral and past can only be conceived if it is represented with the use of language (Huysen, 1999, p. 13). These documentaries function not only as a source of this representation, but also as the means through which this representation is realized.

Conclusion

Undoubtedly, NGOs, different ethnic and religious groups, political dissidents, and sexual orientations and identities convey the unseen images, unheard voices and unknown stories or buried narratives to the public sphere as opposed to the mainstream media. They have to challenge official ideology, promote an alternative history to the official one and contribute to the social memory with their own narratives. Being a noncommercial genre, built upon the real stories of real people, claiming to be the source of truth, and with its narrative characteristics (such as real time footage and on location shooting), documentaries deviate from other cinematic genres and act as an efficient tool to raise public awareness. Today, thanks to the digital technologies, cinema is no longer the privilege of certain people. Correspondingly, as for the documentaries, their narrative structures and discourses are changing accordingly, accompanying a big rise in production numbers.

Nichols emphasizes that some documentaries set out to explain certain aspects of the world. They analyze problems and propose solutions. They reflect about the certain aspects of the historical world by means of their representations. They seek to mobilize our support for one position instead of another. But on the other hand some documentaries invite us to understand aspects of the world more fully. They observe, describe, or poetically evoke situations and interactions. They try to enrich our understanding of aspects of the historical world by means of their representations. They complicate our adherence to positions by undercutting certainty with complexity or doubt (Nichols, 2001, p.165).

We may easily say that New Turkish Documentaries set examples for the latter with their structures and discourses. These documentaries have narratives that deviate from mainstream and dominant ideology; they are critical towards power; they present unusual variety in subject matters; they particularly prefer the documentary genre as a means of expression; they are self-funded; their screenings are organized out of mainstream distribution channels; they are produced with a fresh new language, new representations and self-representations; they exploit technological opportunities of the digital age; they function as active means of expression in raising public awareness in parallel to the struggles and the gains of the leftist, feminist, pro-LGBT, Kurdish freedom movements, including Gezi Events.

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