



# THE USE OF EPISTOLARITY FOR DOCUMENTING THE PAST IN FILMS FROM TURKEY

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## Abstract

This article focuses on the epistolary form in unconventional films from Turkey preoccupied with a traumatic past. The formal approach to epistolarity depends on Hamid Naficy's (2001) description of accented style. The epistles in selected films are categorized according to medium and are analyzed as formal and as narrative elements. Epistolarity is discussed as one of the prominent strategies for engaging with the past, and its function as documentation of the past is understood in terms of Marianne Hirsh's (2008) conceptualization of postmemory.

**Anahtar Sözcükler:** Epistolarity, postmemory, Turkish cinema, archive, truth.

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## TÜRKİYE'DEN FİLMLERDE GEÇMİŞİ BELGELEMEK İÇİN MEKTUP FORMUNUN KULLANIMI

Öz

Bu makale, travmatik geçmişle ilgilenen, Türkiye'den konvansiyonel olmayan filmlerde kullanılan mektup formuna odaklanmaktadır. Mektup formuna biçimsel yaklaşım Hamid Naficy'nin (2001) aksanlı stil tanımına dayanmaktadır. Seçilen filmlerdeki mektup formları mecra özelliklerine göre kategorilendirilmiş, biçim ve anlatı ögesi olarak incelenmiştir. Mektup formu geçmişle ilişki kurmada temel strateji olarak tartışılmış ve geçmiş belgeleme işlevi Marianne Hirsh'ün (2008) hafıza sonrası kavramı ile anlamlandırılmıştır.

**Keywords:** Mektup formu, hafıza sonrası, Türkiye'de sinema, arşiv, hakikat.

## Introduction

In this article, I will discuss the use of epistolarity in the unconventional films made in Turkey after the late 90s that engage with the various traumatic events in the history of Turkey. The epistolarity appears in the selected films both as a formal and narrative element. I observe that the use of epistolarity is one of the prominent strategies in the unconventional films from Turkey, which are preoccupied with the traumatic past. This article refers to the epistolary medium used in *Journey to the Sun* (Güneşe Yolculuk, Yeşim Ustaoglu, 1999), *The Photograph* (Fotoğraf, Kazım Öz, 2001), *Waiting for the Clouds* (Bulutları Beklerken, Yeşim Ustaoglu, 2004), *Future Lasts Forever* (Gelecek Uzun Sürer, Özcan Alper, 2011), *Voice of My Father* (Dengê Bavê Min, Orhan Eskiköy & Zeynel Doğan, 2012), and *Song of My Mother* (Klama Dayîka Min, Erol Mintaş, 2014). These films are chosen for displaying interest for memory and employing unconventional film style. Epistolarity will be discussed as a constituent of their style, and I will further argue that they function to produce material for post-memory.

The films chosen to discuss in this article are independent productions made in Turkey between 1999 and 2014. The political atmosphere of this period is usually defined as a considerably liberal atmosphere due to a series of democratization efforts by the ruling party AKP. As the freedom of speech is relatively softened in this era, the repressed perspectives on the past atrocities gained public visibility. Dynamics and analysis of this period are beyond the scope of this article, but the fact that repressed subjects gained access to public debates is essential for understanding these films. Moreover, the changing atmosphere had an impact on the cinema in Turkey. Asuman Suner (2010) defines this period as a “new liberal atmosphere” and claims that during this period, politically charged issues could be addressed more easily than before (p. 51). Such issues addressed in these films are mostly about the Kurdish conflict—with the exception *Waiting for the Clouds* that refers to the forced displacement of Greeks. In 2009, AKP launched the “Kurdish Opening” with the promise of bringing a peaceful solution to the Kurdish conflict. This process failed to succeed and ended at the beginning of 2015; but during this period, the possibility of speech emerged.

According to Ayça Çiftçi (2016), the public debate generated by this process “gave voice to some long silenced realities of the conflict and gave public visibility to the previously suppressed historical context of

the conflict" (p. 88). Çiftçi articulates the concept of Kurdish films and further argues that these films made Kurdish memories visible to the general public in Turkey for the first time (p. 89). I will suggest considering these films within the memory activism in Turkey that struggles to confront the past by acknowledging the past atrocities and demand to start a public dialogue to prevent these atrocities from happening again. However, this article will mainly focus on understanding the use of epistolarity as a strategy to register the truth about the traumatic past within the limitations of a fictive representation.

### **Engaging with the Past**

As these films engage with the various traumatic events from the history of Turkey, none of them has a direct representation of the past. In some of them, the past is represented through sound flashbacks, but visual depictions are never used to engage with the past. The narrative occurs in the present, but the past occupies the present. Epistolarity is one of the prominent strategies of bringing the past into the present, however, the functions of the epistolary medium in cinema is discussed extensively by Hamid Naficy in the context of accented cinema. According to Naficy, accented cinema is an aesthetic response to displacement by exilic, diasporic, postcolonial ethnic, and identity filmmakers. Naficy's accented cinema initially proposes an understanding of the films of exilic and diasporic filmmakers. The filmmakers discussed in this article are neither diasporic nor exilic, but their critical position to dominant discourses in Turkey attribute them an accent. Accented filmmakers are subjects inhabiting interstitial spaces and sites of struggle, and thus, their film language reflects their subject positions. In a similar vein, Laura U. Marks (2000) coins the term intercultural and points out how the condition of living in between two or more regimes of knowledge leads to an experimental style (p. 1). The language is the potential to analyze these intermingling, juxtaposing, and clashing ways of understanding and interpreting the world. The language in cinema enables us to communicate the interstices holding the truth of the silenced and repressed past.

Memory has been an organizing concept in various academic fields, and film studies is not an exception. As Susannah Radstone (2000a) points out, there has always been an interest in memory, but it is renewed since the 1970s. The consequences of modernity and the atrocities of two world wars are the prominently discussed justifications

for this renewed interest. Radstone describes memory as a site "within which modernity's equivocations found their most pressing expression" (p. 5) and claims that the radical value of memory resides at its capacity to hold these equivocations (pp. 8-9). Memory is also the main constituent of identity, and while capitalist economies, wars, poverty, and slavery forced people to leave their homelands, identity has become more critical than ever.

Throughout the 1990s and into the 2000s, the preoccupation with memory in Turkey gained momentum. The interest was not a recent phenomenon, as Nükhet Sirman (2006) emphasizes, the memoirs in the 1950s are indicators of the current interest. Anyhow, recent interest in memory deserves a specific look. Understanding the past is a *sine qua non* of interpreting and controlling the present. The citizens of Turkey are using memory to reinterpret and reconstruct their identities. The Turkish Republic was established on a modernist ideal that by erasing the Ottoman past and in contemporary Turkey, generations engage with memory to create alternative identities for themselves and their communities while "representations of the past have become metaphors through which individuals and groups define their cultural identity and political positions" (Özyürek, 2007, p. 2). Consequently, coming into terms with the past is a political struggle in Turkey. NGOs, political organizations, and informal groups initiate memory works about the traumatic events in the history of Turkey, aiming at contributing to Turkey's coming to terms with its past atrocities.

Memory is not innately a negative phenomenon, but the context of the discussion in this article leads me to focus on the negative implications. Consequently, what is remembered and reclaimed is the traumatic past. Although trauma theory offers a specific look into the subject, Radstone's criticism of trauma theory applies more appropriately to the context of this article. Radstone (2000b) borrows Laplanche's term 'afterwardness' to refer "a process of deferred revision" and reminds that "experiences, impressions, and memory traces may be revised at a later date to fit in with fresh experiences" (p. 85) while she criticizes trauma theorists for associating trauma "not with the effects of triggered associations but with the ontologically unbearable nature of the event itself" (p. 89). This approach is particularly significant for the films discussed in this article; hence, they are preoccupied with the effects of traumatic past in present contexts rather than the registration of the event.

The idea of past on screen should be constructed via a range of cinematic strategies. Because the general assumption about cinematic temporality is that spectators perceive the image in the present tense. Maureen Turim (1989) explains that sometimes spectators perceive the film as a story from the past when it is encouraged by filmic devices such as voice-over narration, a specific mise-en-scene and historical references (p. 16). Theorists indicate an existing relationship between memory and film language. Radstone (2000b) points out how editing transitions fade-in and fade-out bear similarities to mnemonic images of the past. Thus, they are usually motivated from "the narrative point of view of the protagonist's acts of memory" (p. 81). Similarly, flashbacks, that were developed as "a means of mimetic representation of memory, dreams, or confession" (Turim, 1989, p. 6), are editing strategies linking the present with the past, resembling the involuntary act of recalls.

Cinema is also a cultural medium and thus has a crucial role in memory transmission. Films would evoke memories, and they create an appeal to "non-visual knowledge" (Marks, 2000, p. 2) and emotional fullness. The trauma cinema theory underlines that the narrative and stylistic regimes of these films are characterized by "disturbance and characterizations" (Walker, 2005, p. 19), and they attempt to "embody and reproduce the trauma for the spectator" (Hirsh, 2004, p. xi). Transmitting memories is an affective process, and a film could construct its affective environment through its narration. Therefore, films could function to contribute to developing strategies to overcome silence, absence, and hesitation, all of which are hallmarks of traumatic memory as well as representing the collective memory.

If memory is transmittable, it means that one can have someone else's reminiscences. Marianne Hirsch (2008) coins the term 'postmemory' to describe this phenomenon and describes it as "the relationship that the generation after those who witnessed cultural or collective trauma bears to the experiences of those who came before, experiences that they 'remember' only by means of the stories, images, and behaviors among which they grew up" (p. 106). These experiences are transmitted so deeply and affectively so that they could form memories. Postmemory emphasizes how the effects of the past continue in the present. I argue that the films I discuss in this article could be articulated as the materials for the postmemory. Their unconventional form challenges the binary between fiction and non-fiction by creating alternative archival materials.

Against the void of representation on the non-hegemonic perspectives on the subjects referred to in these films, epistles fulfill the role of truth claiming and thus these films become the materials for postmemory.

### **The Possibilities of Epistolarity**

The word epistle is derived from the Greek word 'epistellein' which means 'send news' and defined in English as 'a letter' in a formal and/or humorous use (Epistle, n.d.). Janet Gurkin Altman (1982) uses the concept of a work's epistolarity as a parameter for reading epistolary literature and defines it as "the use of the letter's formal properties to create meaning" (p. 4). Altman also emphasizes how the definition of epistolarity is charged with paradox and contradiction due to its polar dimensions (p. 187). Bridge/barrier, writer/reader, coherence/fragmentation, I/you, here/there, and now/then are some of these polar dimensions indicating the complexity of epistolarity. Epistles emphasize either the distance or the bridge and in both cases, the distance is inherent to epistles. The distance does not only signify the space between the two persons but also the temporal relationship between them. Altman's study on epistolary literature is adapted by Naficy and discussed as one of the constituents of accented style. Naficy focuses on the films made by exilic, diasporic, and postcolonial filmmakers in the West and illustrates how the experience of displacement is reflected through a particular style—which Naficy terms as accented. The interstitial and artisanal mode of production, collective mode of production, epistolarity and epistolary narratives, chronotopes of an imagined homeland, chronotopes of life in exile, and journeying, border crossing, and identity crossing are components of accented style which partake in accented films in different measures. Epistolarity as an inherent part of exile; hence, both are driven by distance, separation, absence, and loss and thus, epistolarity is a chief contributor to accented style. Epistolarity involves a series of acts such as reading, writing, smelling, sending, and institutions that facilitate, hinder, or prohibit these acts. However, the films discussed here are not exilic. Epistolarity is used as a strategy to engage with the traumatic past that is also driven by distance, separation, absence, and loss.

Epistolarity is not just a narrative intervention but also a narrational strategy. Through epistolary, the films are freed from linear narration as direct, indirect, and free indirect discourses are juxtaposed (Naficy, 2001, p. 103). The depth of knowledge is manipulated as mental

subjectivity is provided through epistolary. As a consequence, narrative ambiguity would be created by blurring the owners and motivations of the epistles that become an expression of the ambivalent subjectivity (p. 102). Addressor and addressee of an epistle might also be ambivalent. The epistolary form is dialogic, but the examples I will discuss mostly communicate loss, and thus the dialogue is broken. An epistle communicates loss through bringing the absent figure into a presence.

Naficy categorizes accented epistolary films as film-letters, telephonic epistles, and letter-films. Film-letters are consisted of acts of reading and writing letters, and telephonic epistles are the use of telephones by diegetic characters as the letter-films are a form of epistles themselves. This article discusses film-letters and telephonic epistles and proposes a medium-specific categorization for understanding their functions in the narration. As also emphasized by Naficy, the differences in the categories are not clear-cut, and classification only serves for clarity and convenience. Naficy proposes to alter the definition of epistolary mode to include the new communication means and brings out the category of telephonic epistles. If the function of an epistle is sending messages, the scope of the definition, as well as the devices to be included in this definition, are open to being extended. I will use a medium-specific approach for analyzing epistolarity in these films to be able to discuss the different meanings produced by the various mediums. Furthermore, various range of epistolary medium will be divided into two categories based on their target audience: interpersonal and mass communication epistles. Mode of address brings out the question of public and private into the discussion and serve as an analytic category to address conflicting narratives.

Within the categorization of the interpersonal and mass communication epistles, I describe the interpersonal epistles as the means of communication produced by and/or for a diegetic character such as letters, telephone, sound recording, and home movie and mass communication epistles as the means of communication produced for public such as radio, television and newspapers. Juxtaposing interpersonal and mass communication epistles bring out other binary oppositions into the discussion such as private/public, history/memory, and subjective/objective. These binaries reveal conflicting issues in the context of politics in Turkey. The personal epistles in the films analyzed in this article are in the forms of letters, telephone conversations, sound, and video record-



ings. Mass communication epistles are in the forms of newspaper, radio, and television; usually serving as the voice of the official discourse. There are also examples of photographic epistles that I prefer to discuss as a unique form of epistle for its similarity to the cinematic apparatus as well as for its ambiguity on the relation of the addressor and addressee.

### **Communicating Loss through Personal Epistles**

As Linda Kauffmann describes, an epistle is a “metonymic and a metaphoric displacement of desire” (as cited in Naficy) and Naficy points out that exile and epistolarity are constitutively linked because they are both “driven by distance, separation, absence, and loss and by the desire to bridge the multiple gaps” (p. 101). Epistles are diegetic; diegetic characters produce and address them to other diegetic characters. In the absence of the addressor or addressee, the epistle both transforms the absent person into a presence and indicates the absence. Though the character does not hold a physical presence, the loss gains a presence by haunting the present.

Loss is one of the repetitive themes in these films, hence, their narratives revolve around traumatic events in the past that caused the loss of a person and/or place. Loss becomes a subject of inquiry only when it leaves a material and/or affective trace. David L. Eng and David Kazanjian (2003) term these traces as ‘the remains’ and argue that the losses of the last century need to be “engaged from the perspective of what remains” and by doing so, an active, abundant, social and militant politics of mourning could be generated (p. 2). On the contrary to the negative associations of loss, it has a potential for hopeful politics. Avery Gordon (2008) approaches to loss with the concept of ‘haunting’, it is a way in which “abusive systems of power make themselves known, and their impacts felt in everyday life” (p. xvi) especially when they are supposedly left in the past or their oppression is denied. Epistles are ‘the remains’, the words, voice, and image of the lost ones. Hence their loss is not a personal tragedy but rather a collective one, the use of the epistolary form holds the potential to reveal the abusive systems of power and their impacts on the lives of ordinary people. Epistles haunt the fictive time in the films and serve as reminders of what has been lost through bearing witness to its presence.

Loss is made known in these films mostly with off-screen sound. The conventional sound and image synchrony in cinema is disrupted in

favor of creating a sense of loss. Off-screen sounds in them are passive, they do not incite the audience to look at the source of the sound but rather function to create an atmosphere in which the image is stabilized (Chion, 1994, p. 85). Asynchrony between the image and sound is motivated by temporal differences in some examples where different temporalities converge and off-screen sound becomes a sound flashback.

In *Future Lasts Forever*, through the story of the main character, Sumru, we witness to personal and collective losses. The film starts on a train journey in which her boyfriend Harun gives her a letter to read later. After a silence, Harun, sitting across Sumru, fades to black. With an ellipsis, an unspecified amount of time passes. Sumru is seated at the same place, and Harun is gone. In his absence, the voice-over starts in his voice, reading the letter she gave to Sumru. During the voice-over, Sumru looks out of the window and as the train heads to Diyarbakır, the camera shows the landscape. The letter is a farewell to Sumru. Letters are conventionally read in voice-over by the addressor but usually accompanied by the images of the addressee reading it. In this example, Sumru read the letter before, so the voice-over functions to signify that her mind is preoccupied with his loss. The letter also informs the implicit motivation of her journey, finding out the whereabouts of Harun. Sumru plans to collect elegies in Diyarbakır, for which she constantly records sounds. During her stay in Diyarbakır, she meets Ahmet—a street vendor who archives the documents of the conflict. As they go through the archive and the testimonies of the witnesses, they confront their wounds of the past. In this film, collecting and producing different forms of epistles are narratively motivated and furthermore, they are used to disrupt the present time. As in the example of the letter from Harun, the voice of the past interferes with the present time that the image is perceived under the influence of the past.

The narrative power of personal epistles is not limited to their content but also the acts around them. The prohibition or control of the act is the most repetitive form of intervention to personal communication. In *Voice of My Father*, Basê is an elderly woman living by herself in the village and spending her days waiting for her eldest son Hasan to return home. Her younger son Mehmet finds a tape in his house, recorded by him and Basê to be sent to his father. Mehmet visits Basê to persuade her to live with him in the city and starts looking for the tapes sent by his father. Mehmet never finds the tapes but they are heard in the film

non-diegetically and inform about the family's past. The epistles cannot bridge the family members but rather signify the barriers among them. When Hasan sends a letter in Kurdish neither Mehmet nor Basê can read it because Mehmet does not know Kurdish and Basê is illiterate. In this example, the letter cannot be read via voice-over; hence, the voice of Hasan is suspended. The impossibility of communication is a reminder of the lack of education on their mother tongue. Hasan's specter haunts their present, reminding what they have lost: their identity, son/brother, and language.

Unlike letters, telephonic epistles are simultaneous. Subjects share the same temporality, although they are separated by distance. Letters have materiality; characters might keep, smell, kiss, touch, and hide letters contrary to the ephemerality of the telephonic epistles. Sound is an inherent component of telephonic epistles that even silence is perceived as the suspense of the speech. Just like letters, telephonic epistles are subject to prohibition and surveillance. In *Voice of My Father*, Basê frequently receives silent phone calls that she assumes to be from Hasan and replies to them by asking, "When are you coming back?". Hasan remains as an off-screen character in the film whose voice is suspended, but his loss haunts their present. Hasan remains as a character without a body, his image is not represented in the present time. However, through the silent calls, his existence somewhere else is brought to the screen space.

Similarly, in *Journey to the Sun*, telephonic epistle reflects the desire to be somewhere else as well as its impossibility by bringing an off-screen space into the present of the film. The film is about the story of two young men struggling to live in Istanbul. Mehmet and Berzan come from different regions of Turkey but share the same skin color and poverty. They bond together against the injustice and discrimination they receive in the city. Berzan, as a politically conscious Kurdish activist, takes part in the protests for the hunger strikes in the prison and beaten to death by the police. Mehmet embarks on a journey to take the body of Berzan to his hometown in Eastern Turkey and his journey chronicles the aspects of the Kurdish conflict. Berzan had to leave his village where his father was a victim of extrajudicial killing and his life was being threatened. In the only scene, which Berzan talks to his loved ones in the village, he uses a telephone booth. Their conversation is disrupted due to weak signals which metaphorically informs the broken connection between Berzan

and his loved ones against their will. The scene starts with a pan movement through different people using the telephones until the camera stops at Berzan. Among the noise of many other people, Berzan tries to connect to a faraway place. The scene communicates the longing of the character by disrupting the connection with an off-screen space.

Letters and telephonic epistles communicate with at least two persons, whereas audio and video records are personal epistles that are created for specific purposes that need to be motivated in the narrative. Usually, audio and video recordings are produced for exceptional conditions in which characters do not have access to communicate with each other at the moment of recording, or they are produced for archival purposes including documentary or TV footage. The examples of audio recording in the films should also be understood as reflections of oral culture in Turkey. Jan Assman (2008) argues that collective memory consists of cultural and communicative memory. Cultural memory is institutionalized memory, whereas communicative memory is bonded up with everyday communication and thus has a limited time span. Oral culture produces and reproduces itself with communicative memory. Folk tales and songs could be read as forms of resistance against erasure.

In *Future Lasts Forever*, the main character, Sumru, is researching the lost elegies. Her quest for the lost elegies is a substitute for her desire to find her long lost boyfriend, Harun. There is no possibility of searching for him, so collecting elegies, testimonies, and the sounds of the city become the means of engaging with the loss. The loss is not personal but rather political. The relation between Harun and Sumru is an outcome of the turbulent social and political history of Turkey. Their stories are significant as they engage with many other stories. Narrating a story is how communicative memory works and how postmemory is constituted. However, when these narratives are recorded, the perishable quality of the sound is transformed, and it gains an archival quality. Sumru's acts of recording are symbolic attempts of resisting against erasure and forgetting by materializing and keeping the past. The transition among narratives of different characters' attributes them anonymity. Their anonymity functions to indicate the shared traumatic experience and memory.

For this reason, the difference between personal and social memory is usually blurred. Even the research recordings of Sumru reflect this blurred notion. Her voice provides objective information about record-

ing but continues with her thoughts about Harun. Another recording is a personal collection. Antrinik, the keeper of the Armenian Church, finds a record of his mother singing an elegy about his brother who died during the deportation in 1915. The personal expression of pain reflected in the elegy becomes a historical narrative and gains an archival status. The elegy is a self-contained narrative form; hence it contains negative feelings. Its significance in the Armenian and Kurdish social history makes them essential materials in the films. Accordingly, many films about Kurdish experience in Turkey use sound and specifically elegies as a repetitive element. The tradition of oral culture leaks into the film and subverts the modern form. Free indirect speech is generated in the narration functioning to bring the past into the present. The past returns to remind itself, and the continuum of the violence in the present becomes visible.

In *Song of My Mother*, Nigar searches for a recording of a klam—the Kurdish rhyming prose—as they were moving out with her son to their new house on the outskirts of the city. Nigar believes all her relatives and friends returned to their village and she wants to join them. Ali tries to ease her insistence and tries to find the klam she is looking for. Despite all his efforts, the klam remains unfound. The narrative implicitly suggests that the klam only exists in Nigar’s head, signifying her desire to return their village which they were forced to leave. The klam is only audible in the film when Nigar dreams about her village. A friend of Nigar sings and records another klam for her which makes Nigar cry as she listens to it. The klam does not only reflect the trauma but also bonds the people with the shared history. The affective power of the klam transmits the atrocities of the past and the experiences of the past generations. The recording is the modern way of preserving this ancient method of storytelling.

In *The Voice of My Father*, the narrative function of the sound records is quite exceptional. These records were produced to sustain communication between Basê and her husband. Audio records substitute letters due to the illiteracy of Basê. The motivation of production for the audio records reveals the problem of the lack of education in the mother’s tongue, which is also one of the primary social problems addressed in the film. Nevertheless, the narrational function of these audio records addresses how the past haunts the present. Audio records are non-diegetic and unmotivated except the first recording that Mehmet found in his house. When the first recording is heard non-diegetically in the film, the camera slowly zooms into the wardrobe. The father’s voice in Kurdish is

heard as the camera moves as if a specter, usually with pan movements. The recordings do not provide information about the traumatic event referred to in the film; Basê has the privilege to narrate them. The spectrality of audio recordings creates an itch to reveal the past. Thus, Mehmet keeps searching for Basê's house for finding the recordings and learning about the past. Mehmet does not find audio records, but the film provides audience access to hear them. Similar cinematographic decisions accompany the repetitive use of audio recordings. Specifically, zooming slowly and panning throughout the rooms suggest an invisible presence in the house. The free indirect speech breaks the temporality and reveals interstices from which the past leaks into the present. These ordinary people's lives are devastated by the traumatic effects of the past, and the circle of silence prevents them from mourning and healing. The audio records create a collision of different temporalities. Present can no longer be perceived by its own, the image is controlled by the non-diegetic sound.

Classification of the epistles brought the challenge of blurring boundaries between different mediums. The classification applied in this article is not clear cut, but rather a production-based approach to understanding their possible meanings in the films. For this reason, I offer to classify audiovisual recordings into video records and archival footage. Video records are the materials recorded by diegetic characters whereas archival footage is recorded material from the past (before the diegetic time of the film). I argue that even the materials produced by diegetic characters have the archival value. For this reason, I highlight their methods of production in the films and classify them accordingly.

In *Future Lasts Forever*, video records are also used as part of Sumru's research as she both produces and watches these records. The scene in which the relatives of the disappeared narrate their stories is perceived as a testimonial. Each person straightly looks at the camera and testifies how their relatives were forcibly disappeared while the wall on the background covered with the photos of the disappeared and victims of the unresolved murders. The mise-en-scene is a reference to extra-diegetic information, the protests in which the relatives hold up the photograph of the forcibly disappeared. The faces of Sumru and Ahmet are in pain for what they hear, and these testimonials activate their pain. Eventually a vague flashback starts, a young boy runs after a white Toros car in an extreme long shot. Hence the flashback appears just after a shot of Ahmet's face; it is possible to perceive the scene as his remembrance on his father's extrajudicial killing. However, his later description on that day

does not match the scene. The vagueness of the scene makes it anonymous; it could be the reminiscences of any other person who witnesses an abduction—a common phenomenon during the 90s. Whether it is a flashback or not is very ambiguous because there is not an indicator regarding the temporal order of the image.

The function of video records is tantamount to archival footage in this films due to its testimonial quality. Moreover, archival footage is also used in the film and juxtaposing them attribute the archival quality to the video records. The archive is the place where public and historical records are kept. However, rather than a mere place for storage, it is a tool for establishing power. As famously discussed by Jacques Derrida (1995), archives are at the core of political power that “there is no political power without control of the archive, if not of memory” (p. 11). Controlling is the power to decide what to include and exclude. For the historical issues addressed in these films, the lack of archives is a significant problem. Therefore, the epistles are used in these films to function as archives, to fulfill the duty of registering truth. The archival footage in *Future Lasts Forever* is from Newroz of Cizre, in which soldiers attack people who gathered for celebrations in 1992. Characters encounter this footage as they research at a memory center and play the footage on the television. The footage becomes full-screen, as soldiers brutally attack a man the sounds of screaming and women ululating fades out. The footage provides the only visual depiction of violence in the film. The insert of the footage into the filmic time substitutes a flashback. The transition from the television monitor to a full-screen image creates a form that reflects collective remembering and fictive time is disrupted with a non-fiction image of the past.

Epistles provide a depth of information to the text and thus the subjectivity of the characters becomes accessible to enable the transference of memory. Memories function to reveal how the turbulent history in Turkey affected the lives of individuals, and concurrently their personal stories become documents for untold histories. While the epistles have different functions within their narratives, they gain archival value to different extends. Özgür Çiçek (2016) discusses the archival potential of Kurdish films and reminds how the Kurds do not have a national archive due to being a nation without a state, and the Turkish Republic constitutes existing ones. In these circumstances, Çiçek argues, “Kurdish films reveal certain “histories” of Kurdish and Turkish people and car-

ry an archival potential that shapes the memories of both Kurdish and non-Kurdish people" (p. 75). Even the interpersonal epistles, produced by diegetic characters, carry an archival potential for conveying the silenced memories. Mass communication epistles have a quite different status and function in the narration; hence, they are produced for the public audience and deliver the voice of the official discourse.

### **Mass Communication Epistles: The Voice of the State**

Mass communication epistles are public materials and usually function to disseminate the official discourse. In these films, they appear in the forms of newspapers, radio, and television. As Marks states, they compose a sort of official history on the contrary to the unpreserved present, and challenging the official history with private memories is "to dig between discursive strata—in the process, perhaps finding trace images of unofficial or private memories" (p. 41). These films challenge the official discourse through the juxtaposition of personal and mass communication epistles. The news either conflicts with the reality and experience of the characters or motivate their actions by providing information about the political climate. The information intervenes in their ordinary flow of life. Moreover, unlike most of the interpersonal epistles, mostly they are not fictive. When they are used with fictive elements of diegesis, historical claims and personal memories are intermingled.

Radio epistle in *Future Lasts Forever* is about the ongoing conflict in the region. This epistle informs about the present, unlike the other epistles in the film that are about the past. Their juxtaposition informs that the issues addressed in the film have not passed, but there is a continuum of violence. In *Journey to the Sun*, as three fellows rest after a hard day, they change through different radio stations. In the first station, there is a talk show program in which two men talk about women and relationships; the next is news about the ongoing hunger strikes followed by the news about traffic accidents. The irrelevancy of content is a sign of different agendas and different realities of Turks and Kurds in the society. Radio epistles function similar to audio records in terms of the use and effects of the sound. Sound occupies the screen space and image is perceived with sound.

Television epistles are very distinctive in *Journey to the Sun*. Characters not only watch television but also appear on it. Moreover, the distinction between film and television frames are blurred via manipulating



transitivity between mediums. The repetitive use of television epistles is strongly associated with the impact of political on everyday life. The first television epistle has a narrative function. The screening of the national football match leads to a chain of events that motivates the main characters' first encounter. In the second one, as Mehmet tries to repair the broken television in his shared tiny room, Berzan appears on the news about hunger strikes where he is among the protestors detained by the police. With this epistle, a character is not only linked to a social event but becomes an actor of it while a television epistle is created to place a fictive character into a historical event. The third television epistle screens the death of Berzan. During a protest for hunger strikes, the texture, and color of the scene change. A hand-held camera captures the characters in the protest. When the soldiers catch Berzan, the image of Berzan is in extreme close-up and blurred, as the sound is off. Right after the capture, the footage of prison is inserted. The footage shows the state officers entering prison cells and dead bodies on stretchers. The change in the texture and the insert are motivated by television in the next scene. Mehmet watches television about the protest in and out of prison. The difference between television and real life in the film is ambiguous. This ambiguity attributes an archival quality to the film as narratively it reclaims the subjectivity of people in the news. The last television epistle in the film appears during a curfew in a town. When Mehmet looks out of the window from his hotel room, the view on the street becomes full screen, and the images of military vehicles and soldiers pointing guns from the vehicle are archival footage inserts. Unlike the previous example, this time the footage is not motivated, and the window frame functions as a television screen. The images of curfew, tanks on the streets and soldiers pointing guns were only distant realities for Mehmet before, who might only encounter this imagery through television. The television epistles challenge the official representations of the conflict that infamously dehumanize people and instead represent them as ordinary people whose lives are torn apart by the issues addressed in the films. Moreover, the transitions and ambiguity between television and filmic image suggest the truth value of the story.

In *The Photograph*, *Waiting for the Clouds*, and *The Voice of My Father*, television functions as the voice of the official discourse. *The Photograph* is the story of two strangers sharing a bus journey. Faruk is on his way to do his military service while Ali is on the way to join the Kurdish guerilla. Unaware of each other's' reasons for the journey, they become

friends. Months later, they meet again on the mountain as different sides of armed conflict. Television epistle in this film places their story into a social context. Characters watch television during a stopover and the first news is a patriotic piece about the "success" of the Turkish military in the fight against terrorism. The other news is about the police attacking civilians in the Gazi neighborhood, and the epistle ends with the man shouting in the news, "We want justice." Characters watch the news without any expression on their faces. *Mise-en-scene* suggests an indifference to the violent content on the news. However, the political situation will affect both characters' lives devastatingly. Both share the risk of being counted as one of the numbers on the news. In *Waiting for the Clouds*, television news inform that language, religion, and gender data will be collected for the first time in the census. Meanwhile, census officers arrive, they ask to turn off the television and start asking demographic questions. The role of television terminates when the state representatives arrive. Their questions that might be a threat to reveal Ayşe/Eleni's hidden identity as an Islamized and Turkified Greek are interrupted by Selma coughing. In *Voice of My Father*, television broadcast prime minister's speech on the Turkish community in Germany, saying "they should be able to have education in their native language." The lack of education in Kurdish is a repetitive theme in the film, embodied in the Basé's illiteracy. Television epistle is used to criticize the reality of Kurdish cultural rights in Turkey. Television epistles deliver the voice of the authority and what they represent a conflict with the everyday experiences of the characters. Moreover, television epistles are considered to be historical records. Their archival status blends with the fiction which transforms the truth claiming of the films.

Similarly, newspaper epistles in these films function to provide a historical context into the narrative events. Unlike television and radio epistles, newspaper epistles are old dated. In *Future Lasts Forever*, as Ahmet scans old newspapers, an article attracts his attention. It reads, "one more civilian was murdered in Silvan." It is unclear whether the article is about Ahmet's father, who was also murdered in Silvan or not, but it activates his pain. Ahmet's story gains anonymity and is placed into a historical background. In *Voice of My Father*, newspaper articles about the Maraş Massacre reveal the secret in the family. The newspapers are part of a personal archive, objects of the silenced collective memory. In this example, a mass communication epistle reveals how social amnesia surrounds the once publicized historical event. Mass communication epis-

bles are the representation of hegemonic discourse and they expand the range of information in the narration. Hence the nonfiction information is diegetic, it proposes to perceive the story as 'truth' rather than fiction.

### **The Photographic Epistles: An Indexical Memory**

Photographic epistles are distinctive for their ontological similarity to moving images. Unlike the previously discussed epistles, they are not produced to convey a message in the first place but rather to freeze/immortalize the moment. André Bazin (1960) argues that photographic image is the object itself, it is freed from "the conditions that of time and space that govern it" (p. 8) whereas Roland Barthes (1981) points out the truth of photographic referent by claiming "the thing has been there" (p. 76). Photography is an essential medium for memory; hence, it is an index of the past. As Susan Sontag (1977) states, photography provides us with the sense that "we can hold the whole world in our heads—as an anthology of images" (p. 3). The value of memory worked with photographs is emphasized both by Annette Kuhn (2007) and Marianne Hirsch (1997) pointing out the function of personal and family photographs in the cultural and social production of memory.

On the other hand, photographic images of traumatic events are not always available. Perpetrators might prohibit the production of any visual image as part of their systematic violence, and when there are not any public images available, the truth about the event is put into question. Marie-Aude Baronian (2010) argues that on the lack of photographic images of the traumatic events, the fictional images are crucial to fulfilling this lack because they have potential to represent the different ways the event has been experienced and they reveal the lack of visual means that should have been available (p. 209).

Photographs used in these films are not necessarily traumatic images. Some of them are ordinary family photos and portraits, but all of them communicates the loss of a person and reminds a painful memory. In *Waiting for the Clouds*, a photograph appears in the film repetitively but kept away from the camera until the very end. When Ayşe/Eleni finally meets her brother Niko, he introduces her his life via photographs and tells her:

*These photos represent my life. You aren't in any of them. You say you're my sister. You ask for forgiveness. There is nothing to forgive. If you*

*were really my sister, you would be in these photos.*

This dialogue reveals the value of the photograph in everyday life as visual documents of a person's life. In Sontag's words, family photographs are ghostly traces (p. 9). In the following of this scene, after a brief silence, Ayşe/Eleni passes Niko the photograph that repetitively appeared in the film. This time camera in on the photograph which shows a family. The family photo becomes proof for Ayşe/Eleni's story as well as for the life they had before the deportation. The photograph challenges the official narrative of the Turkishness of the village, by indexing the people once lived there. In this sense, the photograph communicates the loss of their family as well as the erasure of the Greek community from the village.

As mentioned before, in *Future Lasts Forever*, the relatives of forcibly disappeared stand in front of a wall covered with the photographs of the forcibly disappeared and victims of the unresolved murders. In *Song of My Mother*, Nigar has an affective relationship with the photographs on the wall as she kisses them, cleans regularly and packs them when she attempts to leave the house. Although characters never talk about it, the photographs inform the audience that someone is missing in the family that might be an extrajudicial killing. The photographs are evidence that someone had existed and for this reason, they are used for political purposes. The struggles against the forced disappearances are well-known for their use of photographs of the disappeared as a form of protest. Similarly, in the Saturday people protests in Turkey, the relatives of the disappeared hold their photographs to demand justice. Hatice Bozkurt and Özlem Kaya (2014) assert that with the act of holding the photographs, "the disappeared is virtually brought back into existence there" (p. 61). In both *Future Lasts Forever* and *Song of My Mother*, the photographs function to document the loss and existence concurrently. Their presence is a reminder of the loss and unresolved past.

The photographic epistles in *The Photograph* involve graphic violence though it is not shown by camera explicitly. The images of war in the east of Turkey is brought to the indifferent reality of people in the west. The photographs are produced after a violent conflict in the mountains by Turkish military soldiers with the murdered bodies. The photographs are sent to Istanbul, and when a child opens the envelope, they appear on-screen, but the camera does not focus on them. The graphic violence is not exposed to the audience, but their powerful imagery dis-

rupts life. The shock of the images is represented through freezing life. In this example, the photographs bear witness to a silenced reality and unveil the different realities in the east and west of Turkey. The photographic epistles communicate the loss and silenced past through their referents. Either a family portrait or traumatic imagery, these epistles function to provide visual imagery for the existence of their referents. Furthermore, considering the lack of any visual depiction of the past in these films, these epistles function to provide visual imagery.

### **Conclusion: Registering the truth**

In this article, I have explored the use and functions of epistolarity in the films made in an arguably liberal atmosphere in Turkey. These films address various traumatic events in the history of Turkey by suggesting how their effects persist in the present. Most of the films address the Kurdish conflict which suffered from a lack of representation from a pro-Kurdish perspective, and all of them challenge the official perspective on the issue they address. To do so, they investigate the ways of registering the truth against the lack of representation. As Baronian suggests, fiction has a potential for revealing the lack of imagery as well as representing the different experiences on the event. Both interpersonal and mass communication epistles function as the documents of the past and gain archival status. Moreover, as the truth is registered in these films, films also become archival materials for constructing postmemory.

These films are preoccupied with the past though none of them include a direct representation. Similar to Radstone's (2000b) emphasis on the afterwardness in memory, these films are preoccupied with the effects of triggered associations rather than the ontology of the event. Thus, flashbacks, as direct representations, are not used in these films. Sound flashbacks are used in some of them, as in *Journey to the Sun* and *Waiting for the Clouds*. However, they function as a specter of the past, just like the epistolary medium. Flashbacks often refer to a historical past (shared and recorded) and imply a logic of inevitability by presenting the result before the cause (Turim, 1989, p. 17). These ideological implications of flashback contradict with the standpoint of these films. First, these films suggest confronting the past as a strategy to prevent similar atrocities. In that sense, they challenge the historical fatalism. Secondly, the traumatic events they address are not confronted and hence, there are a public silence and repression on them, which means they do not rep-

resent a shared and, in many cases, recorded past. Moreover, instead of impoverished discussions on the ontology of the event, its effects on the present are represented. Because the past has not passed yet, the present is haunted by its specter.

Naficy discusses epistolary form as a constituent of accented style which partakes in each film in different measures. As I argued before, the films discussed here are neither exilic nor diasporic but they produce counterhegemonic discourses. I propose that the constituents of accented style would be used to understand the narrative and formal strategies of non-exilic and non-diasporic counterhegemonic film practices. According to Naficy, the epistolary form is political, critical and counterhegemonic, not just for their content but also for challenging the cinematic conventions. These challenges are achieved through "fragmented, juxtaposed, nonlinear, self-reflexive, repetitive, multivocal, multiauthorial structures and narratives" (p. 151) that questions dominant ideologies and blurs the boundaries. In the context of the films discussed in this study, engaging with the traumatic past requires revealing that they have been long silenced and repressed. While these films focus on the present-day image, through epistles the off-screen past images are made known. However, the information upon the past images is always very limited and fragmentary.

Engaging with a traumatic event is not necessarily a counter-hegemonic practice, but in this context, it is. Fragmentary structure and distorted temporality are emblematic for trauma films hence traumatic event could never fully be comprehended and thus represented. As Julia Kristeva (1989) puts it, "those monstrous and painful sights do damage to are our systems of perception and representation" (p. 223). Epistles create fragmentary structure and distort temporality which creates an itch to look at the past. Moreover, trauma is an ongoing phenomenon in these films that needs to be documented, hence the epistolary form is used as a strategy to represent the presence of the past in the present, communicate the loss and document the silenced and repressed atrocities. With their different content and medium-specific meanings, each epistle challenge the clear cut assumed distinctions between public/private, history/memory, and documentary/fiction. These challenges also manifest themselves in the film form. The conventional sound and image synchrony, the clear cut difference between fiction and nonfiction, and expectations on the fictive time are violated in favor of making the hegemonic forms and

narratives visible. The lack of representation and archival material is addressed by their fictive form that attributes private materials public and documental value. The epistolary form reflects the desire to inscribe and transmit the past and carries the potential to dismantle grand historical narratives. Through the personal recollections and materials, an alternative and counter-official history of Turkey is proposed. As these films gain archival potential, they become the materials for the postmemory. Specifically, the history written by the official discourse might be challenged with these materials. As Hirsch (2008) indicates, postmemory is not identical to memory; "it is "post," but at the same time, it approximates memory in its affective force" (p. 109). And only with this affective force, the efforts on confronting with the past could be achieved.

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