

Essays

I FLEW YOU STAYED AS AN EXAMPLE OF DOMESTIC ETHNOGRAPHY

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Abstract

In what ways does documentary camera with its unique capacity to disentangle reality penetrate and reconstruct history? At the intersections of history and memory and of family and self, how do documentary narratives crafted through the pursuit of personal life stories, longed family members, and childhood recollections contest hegemonic ideologies about identity? This article focuses on *I Flew You Stayed* (2012) by Mizgin Müjde Arslan as a reflexive narrative of tracing longed family members and occult life stories. As Arslan searches for her family history to fill out painful gaps in her life journey through documentary practice, she ends up uncovering a restless history construed by ideologies that silence counter-hegemonic voices in unique ways.

Key Terms

Documentary cinema, identity, memory, domestic ethnography.

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DOMESTİK ETNOGRAFI ÖRNEĞİ OLARAK *BEN UÇTUM SEN KALDIN*

Özet

Belgesel kameranın gerçekliği yeniden yaratmada ve tarihi yeniden yazmadaki özgün kapasitesi nedir? Tarih ve belleğin, aile ve bireyin kesişim noktalarında, kişisel hayat hikâyelerinin peşine düşen belgesel kamera egemen ideolojileri bükebilir mi? Bu makale, Mizgin Müjde Arslan'ın *Ben Uçtum Sen Kaldın* (*Ez Firişam Tu Mağı Li Cih*) filmine kendi-dönüşlü bir anlatı olarak odaklanmaktadır. *Ben Uçtum Sen Kaldın*'da Arslan aile tarihindeki boşlukları doldurmaya çalışırken karşıt sesleri bastıran huzursuz bir tarihi yeniden keşfetmektedir.

Anahtar Terimler

Belgesel sinema, kimlik, bellek, domestik etnografi.

Canonical documentary film is based on the epistemological separation between Self and Other. This detachment is highlighted by the technological medium of the camera. While the one behind the camera is associated with modernity, the one who is being documented by the camera is by default represented as lacking the immediate access to the medium, and is thus non-modern.

The documentary camera at the same time bears a unique capacity to penetrate reality. As Jean Rouch notes, the camera is a potent tool to disentangle the constructed boundaries between what is in front of and what is behind the medium. From Rouch's perspective, documentary practice is a platform for dialogue; it constitutes a space for a shared anthropology that is the co-produced knowledge about human beings. Film is not a tool for collecting data but "an area of inquiry." The camera is not a tool to capture reality; it "creates reality—or cine-reality—as set of images that evokes ideas and stimulates dialogue among observer, observed, and viewer" (quoted by Stoller, 1992, p. 193).

For subaltern groups who lack the means of history writing, documentary film functions as a productive site through which counter-histories and memories can

crystallize. In what ways does the documentary camera disentangle and reconstruct history? How do documentary narratives that are crafted through the pursuit of personal, life stories, longed-for family members, and childhood recollections contest hegemonic ideologies about identity? In this article, I focus on the documentary film, *I Flew You Stayed* (2012), by Mizgin Müjde Arslan as a reflexive narrative following the traces of a longed-for but absent family member and, in so doing, uncovering an obscure life story. In her film, Arslan is looking for her father, whom she has never seen. As she seeks her father's grave, in order to fill in painful gaps in her life journey, she winds up uncovering a restless history construed by ideologies that silence counter-hegemonic voices in unique ways. Based on Michael Renov's notion of domestic ethnography, I look at Arslan's ethnographic journey into her own family's past as an attempt to engender her identity in the shadow of history.

Domestic ethnography is a mode of documentary which is "a kind of supplementary autobiographical practice" (Renov, 1999, p. 141). In Renov's words, "it functions as a vehicle of self-examination, a means through which to construct self-knowledge through recourse to the familial other" (Renov, 1999, p. 141). Domestic ethnography is located "at the boundaries of inside and outside in a unique way" (Renov, 1999, p. 141). I argue that *I Flew You Stayed* entangles three distinct binary oppositions embedded in canonical documentary and ethnographic practice: the dichotomies between Self and Other, between fiction and reality, and between history and memory, whether political or personal. Through this praxis of domestic ethnography, the director of *I Flew You Stayed* is not only able to breach the historical and hegemonic constructions of her father and herself vis-à-vis her father, but she also generates an open, multi-accentual, and performative text about the effects of the war between the PKK forces and the Turkish army.

I Flew You Stayed was produced between 2009 and 2011, and was released in 2012. It is an 80 minute long film. In the film, Arslan documents her journey from

Istanbul, where she was then living, to Mardin, where she had been raised, and to the Makhmur Refugee camp in Arbil Province, in the predominately Kurdish region of Iraq, where her father died. She completes the circle by ending the journey, and the film, back in Istanbul. The overarching drive of her journey is to learn about her father in order to fill the painful gap in her life story caused by her father's absence. Arslan's father, Ahmet, had left to join the PKK (Partiya Karkeran Kurdistan- Workers Party of Kurdistan) short after she was born in 1980. Harassed by the security forces after her husband left, Arslan's mother, Hissa, decided to leave Mardin as well. However, Hissa was able to take with her only one of her children, Arslan's brother Bawer. Arslan was traumatized by this double abandonment. Her grandparents, whom she came to call mother and father, raised her in the village of Göllü in Mardin. Arslan had a rocky relationship with her birth-mother after her departure and, with the exception of a few photographs, had never seen her father. The only time she ever heard his voice was a recording on a cassette tape he had sent from the mountains. When she was seventeen, news of her father's death arrived. It was as though Arslan had lost the father she never had.

In her film, Arslan picks up the trail her father left on his journey to join the PKK. On the way between Mardin and Makhmur, she meets with her father's friends, relatives, and other people who knew him. In all of her encounters, she asks what kind of a man her father was.



To Ahmet's father, he was a blond, handsome, young man; for his mother he was a tall, sturdy kid. For his friend with whom he discussed joining the PKK, he was a determined and loyal person; for the driver who drove Arslan around Arbil Province, Ahmet was one more Kurdish martyr. On reaching Makhmur, she learns that, for his adopted daughter, Ahmet was a perfect, caring father. For Arslan, on the other hand, he was simply nonexistent.

Michael Renov writes that "Domestic ethnographies tend to be highly charged investigations brimming with a curious brand of epistophilia, a brew of affection, resentment, even self-loathing" (Renov, 1999, p. 142). In *I Flew You Stayed*, Arslan is not merely on a journey from Istanbul to Makhmur; she also travels back and forth in time, to her childhood; she moves also between feelings of self-pity, pride, nostalgia, and prudence. Her state of being is on a pendulum between her subjective experiences and the "objective" voice of history. While she asks her grandmother about her childhood in the village of Göllü, Mizgin remembers how she was an outcast at school. She was often referred to as "the terrorist's daughter" by her schoolmates, which paralleled the ways in which official ideology constructed her father's story. At home, on the other hand, there existed a deep silence about Ahmet. Arslan (2012) discusses this silence in the voice over which opens the film: "I spoke privately with my grandmother about my father. My grandfather prohibited us from speaking about him at home. It was as if he no longer existed." Years later, Arslan challenges her grandfather with her camera, asking why Ahmet's photograph on the wall has been covered. She discovers that her grandfather's emotional struggle mirrors her own trauma, which recurs on the pendulum between experience and ideology. Looking at his son's photograph is just too painful for Ahmet's father, though he cannot bear to take down the photograph. Blaming Ahmet for his loss is his consolation; it is merely the way to overcome the pain of his son's loss. Arslan, on the other hand, is not silent anymore. She asks questions to her grandfather about his son. The grandfather asks back, "Why did he have to go? He

could still be Kurdish if he stayed here with us, with his family. Why did he have to go?"

When her grandfather finally opens up in front of the camera, the documentary encounter breaks a silence that had overarched the entirety of Arslan's childhood memories. A coincidence, on the other hand, had broken that silence for Arslan herself. She notes in the opening voice over how her silent acceptance of her father's nonexistence was suddenly disrupted years later when she met a woman in Yerevan, the capital of neighboring Armenia: "One day I travelled to Armenia for a forum. I met someone who grew up in an Iraqi refugee camp. I asked them about my father. One of them replied excitedly, 'I know him. He is my father'" (Arslan, 2012). Shocked to hear an unknown woman call her nonexistent father as *father*, Mizgin learns that Ahmet had taken a new name, Kızıl Kemal, and had lots of adopted children in the Makhmur refugee camp where he lived the last decade of his life.



The encounter in Yerevan changed Arslan's life forever. She decided to go to Makhmur to find, at the very least, her father's grave. The camera provided her with the language and courage she needs. She wanted to make a dramatic narrative film first. Yet when she sat down to write the script, Arslan understood that this story did not lend itself to a narrative film. It did not lend itself to a documentary film either. Her story, she decided, was as fictive as a dramatic narrative, and therefore could not be a documentary; it was at the same time as real and could not be a fiction too. In our interview she explained this as such: "I quitted writing the script because everything about this story was like a script in and of itself but all of them were real. But if I had written it as a script nobody would have believed it."

As uncanny as it sounds, to Arslan, her experience feels all-too-familiar rather than exotic. Lending itself to a camera, whether as a narrative or documentary film, provided Arslan with the encouragement she wanted more than anything else, her "desire for knowing about her father is embroiled with the question of self-knowledge" (Renov, 1999, p. 142). As in all instances of domestic ethnography, as Renov (1999, p. 142) notes, "the familial other helps to flesh out the very contours of the enunciating self, offering itself as a precursor, alter ego, double, instigator, spiritual guide, or perpetuator of trauma." Renov (1999, p. 152) continues: "Because the lives of artist and subject are interlaced through communal and blood ties, the documentation of the one tends to implicate the other in complicated ways." To Renov, consanguinity and co(i)mplication are domestic ethnography's defining features. And here co(i)mplication is the symbiotic relationship between subject/object identities.

This co(i)mplication plays itself out in unique ways not only within the film's text but also during and after the making of *I Flew You Stayed*. The arrest of Arslan and her camerawoman, Özey Şahin, for allegedly being members of the KCK (Kurdistan Communities Union) organization illustrates this complex interpenetration and co(i)mplication between the subject and object of domestic ethnography. After Arslan

and Şahin returned from the shooting in Makhmur, they were taken into custody by the Turkish security forces in February 2012. They were alleged to be terrorists, working as auxiliaries to KCK operations. Arslan noted in our interview that when she was taken into custody, her direct experience of the constructedness of the category of terror brought her closer to her father. In mirroring her father's struggle, her own life story became less fragmented and more cohesive after the experience of the arrest.

“With domestic ethnography, authorial subjectivity is explicitly in question or on display. The Desire of the domestic ethnographer is for the Other self” (Renov, 1999, p. 143). In our interview before the documentary's premier at the 2012 Istanbul Film Festival, Arslan spoke of this urge to find her Self mirrored in the image of her familial Other, saying,

...it was me who hit the road, who shot the road trip, and who transformed on the road. When I sat down for editing I was watching that changed woman which was me three years ago. I think I am still on the road. I think I will watch the end of the story on the screen with the viewers in the movie theatre. I am really curious about if that woman will find her father.

In this article, I focused on *I Flew You Stayed* as a reflexive narrative following the traces of a longed-for but absent family member and, in so doing, uncovering an obscure life story. Based on Michael Renov's notion of domestic ethnography, I looked at Mizgin Müjde Arslan's ethnographic journey into her own family as an attempt to engender her identity in the shadow of history. *I Flew You Stayed* entangles three distinct binary oppositions embedded in canonical documentary and ethnographic practice: the dichotomies between Self and Other, between fiction and reality, and between history and memory, whether political or personal. Through domestic ethnography, the director of *I Flew You Stayed* generates an open, multi-accentual, and performative text about the effects of the war between the PKK forces and the Turkish army.

I Flew You Stayed is not unique as a documentary in the mode of domestic ethnography as so many stories silenced by official ideologies wait to be narrated. Other examples are *Diyar* by Devrim Akkaya and *Grandma's Tattoos* by Susanne Khardalian. An analysis of these other examples promises to outline a map of the conventions of an emergent genre. This remains to be the task for a future article.

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