

Kurdistan – Under the sign of the future

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Upon her 1991 visit to Qala Diza in Northern Iraq, the U.S. documentary photographer **Susan Meiselas** noted that even though “today ‘Kurdistan’ does not exist on the map... as a place, Kurdistan exists in the minds of more than twenty million people”. To understand this remark it suffices to cast a glance at her pivotal archive project *Kurdistan: In the Shadow of History*, realised between 1991 and 2008.¹ Having had a chance to witness it first-hand in Autumn 2008 at the International Center of Photography in New York City, this exhibition turned out to be a groundbreaking experience that sparked my personal interest, for the first time ever, in the ‘Kurdish question’. As has been repeated many times, “Kurdistan was *erased* from world maps after World War I, when the victorious powers carved up the Middle East, leaving the Kurds without a homeland”. What is hereby implied by the notion of ‘erasure’ is associated with European modernity and the dark side of it, its consequences and incapacity to avoid colonial misconceptions in the aftermath of the First World War, with the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire and the ensuing resolutions of the 1920 Treaty of Sèvres. No matter how bright it had seemed at first, the promise of Kurdish independence given by the international community has never been realised. This, to a large extent, is the result of often brutal policies taking place on the re-designed map of the Middle East only one hundred years ago. To understand the effects of such policies, one needs to recall the ‘forefathers’ of Turkish modernity (primarily Mustafa Kemal Atatürk) and related historical figures in the region, who exercised their own sovereignty and military power while persistently negating and usurping the rights of one legitimate minor community to exist on its own. The direct early outcomes of this historical injustice (such as the 1937-38 Dersim massacre) are also being perpetuated in the twenty-first century (the 2011 Roboski Massacre, for instance, ordered by current Turkish leader Tayyip Erdogan). This keeps Kurdish people without basic human rights and partitioned among several countries, in the geographic area that I dare to recognise properly as *Kurdistan*.

¹ See *Susan Meiselas: Kurdistan \ Archive Projects (1991-2008)* at: <http://www.susanmeiselas.com/archive-projects/kurdistan/>

However, in *A Modern History of the Kurds* (1996), David McDowall suggests that things have been changing, slowly but inevitably, and “the Kurds have steadily grown in importance”. He argues, “it is difficult to imagine they will sink again into the relative obscurity of the middle years of this century. Today they have emerged, not quite yet as a coherent nation, nevertheless as an ethnic community that can no longer be ignored. For that reason alone, they deserve to be much better understood”. The earlier announced ‘Kurdish question’ is, therefore, twofold in this particular case of inquiry. First, is it still possible to achieve a proper *recognition* of what has been forcefully disregarded or ignored for decades in relation to the fact that “today the Kurds, who live on land that straddles the borders of Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Syria, are by far the largest ethnic group in the world without a state”. Second, how and by which means are we able to deal with the fact that our *knowledge* about the Kurds (as well as their knowledge about themselves) has been subject to a systematic and politically motivated destruction of sources of information concerning their centuries-long cultural and social existence in the Middle East – an exemplary form of epistemic violence unaccounted for at a global scale?

Tackling this old issue anew is as painful as engaging with politically sensitive and heavily charged problems that often bear the weight of inconsistency. They are not easily graspable and the conflicting interests circulating them make the situation worse. Another aggravating element relates to the scarcity of information: comprehensive historical accounts of recent Kurdish history still need to be articulated so that they can be discussed, written, and finally, presented to the indigenous and international audience in more adequate ways. However, I assume that existent narratives (in the form of concise handbooks or volumes dealing with particular minority groups as subgroups of a larger Kurdish community) remain insufficient in encompassing the complexity of the ‘Kurdish question’, implying the im-possibility to bridge the lack of information. To come out of ‘the shadow of history’ in order to overcome the existent knowledge gap about the Kurds could be vital for their *epistemic reconciliation* besides other (legal, moral, political, territorial, etc.) forms of reconciliation. The epistemic gap comes as a result of a particular type of violence (or epistemic violence, in a properly

decolonial sense), which refers to what contemporary decolonial theorist Eglá Martínez Salazar describes as the rationalized violence of coloniality, namely, “the many ways in which cruelty is rationalized and sanctioned through law, religion, education, and economics”. By this I also refer to the forceful destruction of knowledges about the people who had not emerged onto the world’s historical scene until the beginning of the twentieth century (when their pogrom became more prominent), but who have had a long and remarkable history dating back to their earliest dynasties in the tenth century. With this in mind, the notion of ‘Kurdistan’ is to be approached as the subject of potentiality (and not only of contention) because its significance stretches far beyond the concerns of one ethnic community, one nation, or its identity-building agenda. It challenges our own *ignorance* not only about what it means to be human under liminal existential conditions, but also what it means to be treated as a ‘subhuman property’ on-the-move, always in the shadow of history, and constantly exposed to forceful and systematic creation of epistemic misconceptions – the aim of which is the destruction of human knowledge (whether the Kurds, Palestinians, Romanis, global Muslims, or any underprivileged ethnic/racial/sexual group in our contemporary world). The relative scarcity of materials about Kurdistan (in Kurmanji, Sorani or Pehlewani, but also in major foreign languages) only prolongs the troublesome destiny of a nation that “numbers at least 25 million, yet there is only modest information available about them”. It is also impossible to forget the conditions of linguisticide in which, for decades, the Kurdish languages have been in imminent danger of being swept away for good (in Turkey, for example). If the language of one people is threatened by extinction, what is left to curious minds eager to find out more about that people and their significance to the world? Contemporary visual cultures are a tool with which to engage oneself with a difficult situation where images themselves may work together in order to re-create and re-invent the language of forcefully hidden knowledge anew: what had been doomed to disappear for good (through ignorance, lack of information, or the forceful imposition of disinformation) now seems to have found its most loyal accomplice – in visual memories.

The last years have seen a number of international cultural projects focus on Kurdistan. Those in the domain of visual arts are of

central importance to this essay. Many have shaped my impression about documentary photography, in particular, as a privileged medium through which the subject at hand has recently come to be articulated. For instance, *Les Amazones du PKK* (The Amazon Women of PKK) is a project in which a young Brussels-based photographer Colin Delfosse focuses on Kurdish female guerrilla fighters in the mountainous region of Qandil in Northern Iraq. Another is related to the publication entitled *Kurds: Through the Photographer's Lens*, commissioned in 2008 by the Delfina Foundation in London and co-produced with the Kurdish Human Rights Project (KHRP), bringing together “images by world-famous photographers to celebrate the life and times of the Kurdish people over the last two decades”.

Susan Meiselas's own project gives a good counter-example to the economy of knowledge-destruction and colonial epistemic violence in the same context: giving “form to the collective memory of the Kurds [while creating] from scattered fragments a *vital* national archive”. However, what turns out to be more important therein is not the creation of an ‘archive’ for a dispersed ‘nation’, but the counter-notion of vitality in regards to the hegemonic notion of erasure. This is crucial for understanding the dimension of the problem where despite violence, oppression and death the photographic re-creation of visual history is a life-giving event, in which imagery itself plays a fundamental role. It exposes the limits of global justice and sovereignty from another angle not only with regard to the people dispossessed of their land (and of the right to their own land), but with regard to ‘modern’ forms of living – in the conditions of dispossession and under permanent exposure to extermination, both physical and symbolic. Such an infelicitous condition has given Kurds a particular subaltern status, a *subhuman property* in the hands of more powerful oppressors, rather than allowing them to exist on the world's political stage as dignified *human beings*.

This forced deviation of relations does not only imply persistent divisions between ‘humanness’ and ‘inhumanness’; it becomes more of a struggle when the focus of attention shifts towards the passivity of the international community and its responsibility to depersonalisation and dehumanisation processes at large. Since these are century-old processes, taking place in the partitioned geo-cultural region of (Greater) Kurdistan and performed by different

sovereign powers with similar colonial appetites, one might claim then, that the question of Kurdistan is a lagging *colonial question* that will be resolved when *decolonization* arrives.

Meiselas's work on the visual history of the Kurds is but a single contribution to answering this question. One could theorise about it through the prism of this photographer's resistance to oblivion and epistemic violence, a sort of resistance that comes about in claiming her own *right to look* together with those whose memories, even if only visual (i.e. from personal family albums of photographs), have been doomed to disappear forever, by force. Hence, to look at and against the “fascist visuality's ordering and enforced invisibility” means to cut through the epistemic wall that violates and usurps one's *right to know* and to situate (on the world map of indigenous people and knowledges) the current status of the colonised Kurds—together, as members of a common humanity under the threat of dehumanisation. Thus, if the *right to look* is the *right to know*, then the very process of image-making could open up the horizons of thought against the forced erasure of information, knowledges, facts, visual memories and people. By ‘imagery’ I refer to pictures inasmuch as to written/spoken languages. The latter belong to the realm of imagery insofar as they are visible enough to emphasise and add depth to the narratives through which public consciousness may be galvanised to redirect us from the ‘sacrosanct’ *status quo* (for instance, to shake our state of ignorance about knowledges and histories overshadowed by master narratives, thus previously unseen or unheard of). If consciousness is to be reformed under the conditions of colonial occupation and unfreedom, it could mobilise new political imaginaries towards more symmetric social and political relationships. For an image-maker, this opens a possibility to work *under the sign of the future* and to produce a *vital* visual contribution to the struggle against systematic processes of epistemic erasure and in favour of epistemic justice.

This is the case with **Behjat Omar Abdulla** and **Shwan Dler Qaradaki** in *Human Condition*: their first joint exhibition in Europe where, through a body of work from their activity in Scandinavia (2014-2015) – a series of drawings and video-installation, respectively – they argue that the road to (epistemic) justice is not without violence. When the notion of violence is understood as

a category of visual knowledge, it is not necessarily meant to be negative or entirely destructive; rather, it bears the potentiality of a productive and reconstructive force. Thus conceived, the counter-visibility of the oppressed is endowed with the power of counter-violence against oppression. What makes its strength remarkable in the hands of an image-maker is that it eventually leads to the decolonization of being, a coming back onto the world stage through the re-emergence of a 'new being' from the shadows of history. If conditions of oppression interfere with Kurdish image-making at large, they also allow their image-makers to shape another politics of vision (or *politics of counter-visibility*) through which they can claim their right to look out of the shadow of history and contribute to another world of knowledge, which is otherwise denied.

Abdulla and Qaradaki's joint struggle emerges onto the scene of visual culture as their own form of resistance, paving the way towards understanding which role epistemic violence plays in the current order of things. Unsurprisingly, their personal and professional trajectories have had much in common ever since their childhood. Having grown up together in the 1980s and 1990s in Sulaymaniyah (Iraqi Kurdistan), under the rule of Saddam Hussein, they shared the same desire to move in order to experience a better life elsewhere – and so they did. A series of adventures and obstacles marked their journeys since the late 1990s until they reached their desired destinations in the North of Europe (Norway for Qaradaki, and the United Kingdom and then Sweden, for Abdulla). This was not the end of trouble but a turning point where their struggles (for new citizenship, acceptance and formal recognition by their host countries, and for adaptation within unfamiliar systems of values) continued in a no less bureaucratically complicated and demanding sense. As a result, Abdulla and Qaradaki's concerns about the 'human condition' have been profoundly influenced by their experiences.

The very *experience of living a violent life exposed to death-power on a daily basis* forces human beings to pose questions about their humanness from a perspective that is radically different from contemplating humankind within a comfortable zone of academic debates, for instance. Such an experience is to be regarded as a

lynchpin of the exhibition project at hand and a guideline to its multi-layered installation structure. In an endeavour to combine the conceptual points of their mutual convergence and divergence, Abdulla and Qaradaki do not pretend to have an entirely unison approach to the issues presented above: what is involved in their complementary narratives (i.e., two vernaculars of the same *visual text*) may also concern the double-bind logic through which their two respective practices mutually 'disobey' each other while maintaining a constructive dialogue. However, their visions circulate around one common axis. The central tenet of this show may relate to Fanon's vision developed in *Black Skin White Masks*. As put by Lewis R. Gordon, "Fanon views oppression fundamentally as an activity against human beings. So, when he says 'human dignity', for Fanon oppression is 'dehumanization'." He continues:

Fanon was particularly concerned with the complexity involved in trying to understand human beings. And, as a consequence, he rejected the idea that you could simply give a sort of straightforward, descriptive analysis of the human condition. Because the human condition is also *one in which the human being questions his or her condition*. And so for Fanon, in *Black Skin White Masks*, this meant working through the ironic ways in which human beings will actually assert what a human being is. This led Fanon then to write a double text. On the one hand, there is the human being in the text, who is trying to question the problems faced by the human condition. On the other hand, there is the meta-critique: the other human being who raises the question about what's involved in the follies of the human being in the text.

In this line of thought, Abdulla and Qaradaki's practices encompass two central elements: the notion of *dehumanisation* (or formlessness, which is imminent to the actual or mediated disfiguration of 'human matter', of "what's involved in the follies of the human being") and the role played by *counter-violent imagery* in reconstructing (through memories) the formless, dehumanised and depersonalised figures of their own history into dignified human beings, 'new figures' now able to assert their humanness in a proper form. Abdulla and Qaradaki also draw upon Meiselas's views,

yet on very different grounds. Their 'mission' consists neither in *documenting* the forms of life and death proper to Kurdish people, nor in *constructing* a visual archive out of such documents, and certainly not from an outsider's perspective. Their working logic has been grounded in the phenomenon of *original trauma* proper to one's collectivity and then individually internalised (in the sense of one's awareness about the probability of being assimilated by the colonizer and/or being exterminated). This perspective provides a basic framework for their image-making through which to look at the generations of Kurdish people who have never recovered from the experience of original trauma as a collective event. Their logic of *re-creating* this trauma into visual ensembles (which can also stand on their own, without being instantly associated with something distinctively 'Kurdish') results from the desire to encounter their own experience of living through violence by putting it on public display *in their own way, as survivors* (not as external photojournalists, cultural workers or artist-researchers on a site-specific assignment abroad).

Their approach is very different, for example, from what **Emin Özmen**, the author of a series of photographs documenting the execution of a man near Aleppo, in the context of the recent Syrian war, says: "As a human being I would never have wished to see what I saw. But as a journalist I have a camera and a responsibility. I have a responsibility to share what I saw that day. That's why I am making this statement and that's why I took the images". Abdulla and Qaradaki *do not make pictures of violence*. They engage in creative and strategic acts of resistance against an excessively abundant stream of media images that saturate our perception with scenes of violence. When considering Özmen's photographs of a brutal execution, for example, Abdulla accepts the existence of this image in the public domain. Unlike Özmen, he approaches the violence inherent to it in a very different way: he 'violates' the violent content of the original photographic work and 'dissects' it in order to study the internal structures that bring violence and images together (*31st of August 2013 in the town of Keferghan*, 2014). By blowing it up and then multiplying it to the point of the content's extinction, Abdulla strips this image of something important: the sense of order – the sacred order, the authority of violence or, metaphorically speaking,

of the author/creator on behalf of whom such violence allegedly comes into being (*In the name of*, 99 intaglio prints on paper, 2014). For him, the *materiality of images* is not innocent – it correlates with misleadingly re-contextualised crimes (homicides, genocides, or any other type of macro-violence) that are often undertaken for the sake of some 'sacred order' and under the pretext of a 'sacred cause' in the service of media, politics and/or religion. In other words, Abdulla assumes the *disordered* nature of execution rituals by which the unacceptable *execution* of a human being intertwines with the unacceptable *execution* of related images.

Counter-violent gestures of this kind may appear to be strange or unnecessary if perceived from a perspective in which people's ability to produce and reproduce visual evidences has nowadays reached an unprecedented level. Being aware of his ethnic community's similar fate, Abdulla understands his mission (transforming oblivion into visual memories) as a professional duty that, simultaneously, challenges his patriotic feelings. For him it is crucial to reflect upon the very notion of historicity and how history (both personal and collective) is constructed and deconstructed: he *gives another life* to marginalised or eradicated traces of previous existence by reconsidering the remaining 'historical' artifacts so as to revive, again and again, what had been doomed to disappear forever. Abdulla's work indicates that the process of reliance on one's own capacity to preserve images from fading into oblivion does not and cannot escape the faith of abstraction, a certain kind of formlessness, through which memory related to personal (family) history implies perhaps the last remnants of communal history, related to an entire nation under extinction. This is where tragedy combines with the opportunity to have that elusive history reconstructed anew and given a 'new life', whatever pain it requires (*Greenland*, 2015). And the way to have it *reborn* from the ashes, through the bits and pieces of mental images, makes Abdulla's work as risky as it is socially responsible.

The idea of a *violent rebirth in the minds of the people* is further enhanced in **Qaradaki's** work. It is clearly demarcated by its symbolic tricolour walls, evocative of Alaya Kurdistanê – the national flag of Kurdistan. This is neither a sentimental nor naive gesture. Connoting their struggle for freedom and independence

from colonial domination, the usage of this particular flag has been stigmatised and banned in countries with a considerable *indigenous* Kurdish population (such as Turkey, Iran and Syria). As pointed out by Mehrdad R. Izady, besides “the golden sun emblem at the center”, its aesthetic aspects conceive of “three horizontal bands: the upper stripe is red, the middle one white and the bottom band green”. Each colour conveys meaning that introduces three types of ideas: sacrifice and death (the red blood of Kurdish martyrs, shed throughout their ongoing history of freedom-struggle), longing for peace, dignity and freedom (the white colour), and life itself (for which Kurdistan’s nature – its green landscape in particular – remains a romantic reminiscence). In this setting, Qaradaki’s eighteen-minute video-piece *Heaven Before a Battle* (2015) coexists with ten ink drawings on paper featuring a number of portraits. The division between them is clear and revolves around the life/ death axis: those on the red wall invoke the ideas of sacrifice and martyrdom and depict the members of Peshmarge (Kurdish military forces) who have been killed in the battles against Saddam Hussein; those on the green wall depict people who have somehow escaped death and to whom the artist is closely related. Now incorporated into a setting that functions in a seemingly ‘autonomous’ way from the rest of the show, the triple nature of Qaradaki’s installation combines the coded language of the room’s walls with the programmatic arrangements invoking the idea of his homeland, the human costs of freedom, and the announcement of a brighter future to come. The video itself follows the triple logic of the room-design as it unfolds the narrative of a middle-aged man (Qaradaki’s brother) in front of three different types of audiences in three distinctive public venues in Suleymaniah: the Institute of Fine Arts, the Art Academy, and a military legion of female soldiers. While challenging normative media representations and discourses around dramatic events through which the ongoing ‘question of Kurdistan’ has re-emerged onto the world political and media stage not long ago (most notably with the siege of Kobani during the ongoing Syrian civil war), Abdulla and Qaradaki reveal a multilayered perception of violence so that its neglected (transformative and positive) aspects could also come to the fore. For them, *true violence* is imminent to the very ontology of image-making, in the sense of exposing the imposed aggression and

infusing the image of mankind with the power to re-construct itself from the ashes of external destruction. Hence, *Human Condition* unravels the threads around a ‘man re-creating himself’ from the formlessness of unfreedom. Through memories and narratives their work comes in response to the images of macro-violence (involving war, resistance, and death, but also sacrifice and re-birth). By stripping the notion of violence of its preconceived sense, they cut open the wound of a body to remind us of the role it plays in the order of power and propose another solution in terms of counter-violent visibility.

If “decolonization is always a violent phenomenon”, and if there is “the need of a complete calling in question of the colonial situation”, *Human Condition* rephrases the Fanonian argument about the necessity of mobilising violence into creative strategies of insurrection, as a positive, constructive, and liberating force wherever a life-worth-living has been obscured by the persistence of forceful assimilation, unfreedom and extermination. This is what it means for an image-maker to address Kurdistan nowadays, not only as a potentially *reconstructed or integrated* national territory belonging to a certain ethnic group, but also as a place of mankind’s *reinvention at large*, filtered through imagery.

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