

# Identifying Kurds in Bahman Ghobadi's Films: a Film Semiotic Study

Kurdai Bahmano Ghobadžio kino filmuose: kino filmo semiotinė analizė

SEMIOTICS / SEMIOTIKA

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Identifying Kurds since the beginning of the 20th century is challenging. Kurdistan has been separated between four different countries, the national identities of the Kurds have been re-shaped, and four different borders (Turkey, Iraq, Iran, and Syria) have become their life stories. One of the most famous Kurdish film directors Bahman Ghobadi depicts the Kurdish identity through these borders in his *A Time for Drunken Horses* (2000) and *Turtles Can Fly* (2004). The goal of the present study is to provide a brief insight into Kurdish culture and language and analyze the Kurdish identity through the borders of four different countries in Ghobadi's films by a Film Semiotic approach. The theoretical basis of the research relies on Umberto Eco's types of codes introduced in 'Articulation of Cinematic Code' (1967), Laura Mulvey's male and female gaze theory in *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* (1975), and syntagmatic types of shots introduced by French Film Semiotician Christian Metz in his analysis of *Adieu Philippine* (1962) in *A Semiotics of the Cinema* (1982). Thus, the present study aims to investigate the signified cultural aspects of Kurds through moving images in Ghobadi's selected films.

**Keywords:**

Identity, borders, Kurds, Ghobadi, Cinema.

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## Introduction

Kurdish people are thought to be one of the largest ethnic groups without a state of their own. The precise population of the Kurds is not known; however, it is thought to vary between 25-35 million spread over the territory of four countries. The latest estimates reveal that in Turkey there are 13.4 (Erdem, 2013) millions of Kurds; in Iran 8 million (Bozorgmehr, 2014); in Iraq; 5 million which comprises the 16 % of the population (Mohamed, 2014) and in Syria; 2.2 million. According to a report 'Kurds in Germany' by Birgit Amann the Kurds' population in Germany is around 600.000 (Amann, 2005), whereas Al Jazeera claims it to be around 800.000 (Al Jazeera, 2013). Meho Lokman claims that

*Kurdistan was first divided in 1514 between Ottoman and Persian Empires. Four centuries later, Britain and France further altered the political contours of Kurdistan by dividing the Ottoman Kurdistan into three main parts. Iranian Kurdistan stayed where it was. The area thus partitioned consisted of about 190.000 square miles divided as follows: Turkey (43 %), Iran (31 %), Iraq (18 %), Syria (6 %), and the former Soviet Union (2 %) (Lokman, 1997, p.1).*

Following WW1, Kurdistan has been divided into four parts between Turkey, Iraq, Syria and Iran. Since then these parts have been formed as different regions of Kurdistan and different dialects occurred between people of the same nation due to the lack of a unified language. These regions are named separately among Kurds as Bakur, Basur, Rojava and Rojhilat. Kurds living in Turkey (Bakure Kurdistan) use Latin and speak the Kurmanji dialect of the Kurdish, in Iraq (Basure Kurdistan) Kurds speak with Sorani dialect and use Arabic alphabet. Iraq is the only state where the Kurds gained autonomy by forming a federal state of Kurdistan.

Currently Kurds in Syria (Rojava) have also declared autonomy following the conflicts in Syria between President Assad and his opponents governing Aleppo. However, this autonomy is not officially recognized by any state in the world. Lastly, Kurds in Iran (Rojhilate Kurdistan) speak the Kermanshahi dialect. In addition to these basic four dialects, there is another one spoken by more than a million Zaza people in Turkey. Some of the Zazakis claim to be distinct from Kurds, but the majority consider themselves as ethnic Kurds.

Encyclopedia Britannica defines Kurds as follows:

*Kurd, member of an ethnic and linguistic group living in the Taurus Mountains of Eastern Anatolia, the Zagros Mountains of Western Iran, portions of Northern Iraq, Syria, and Armenia, and other adjacent areas. Most of the Kurds live in contiguous areas of Iran, Iraq and Turkey- a somewhat loosely defined geographic region generally referred to as Kurdistan ('Land of the Kurds') (Britannica, 2014).*

The stories of the Kurds have always been related to the motherland, free Kurdistan and borders since centuries. Cultural identities of the Kurds have been

shaped through these borders struggling to retain their language and culture in the countries they live in. However, in each country Kurds have faced oppressions and massacre since 1920s. They were forced to emigrate and were not allowed to speak their native language. The assimilation policies have serious impact on today's Kurdish identity.

*In their attempts to suppress Kurdish identity and revivalism, Turkey, Iran, Syria, and Iraq have used many forms of repression against Kurds with varying degrees of success. More effective than either political oppression or economic exploitation, cultural oppression has proven itself a weapon by which Kurds may be prevented from asserting their identity (Lokman, 1997, p.3).*

According to Aziz Mahir,

*They have suffered discrimination, marginalization and assimilation in each of the states in which they reside: Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Syria. In each of these countries, the nationalism of the sovereign dominant ethnic group has fed the official ideology and each national ideology has endeavored to establish a homogenous nation state (Aziz, 2011, p.4).*

Today it is difficult to say that there is a close relationship between the Kurds living in Turkey, Iran and Iraq due to the cultural changes related to geopolitical and linguistic factors.

*The Political changes that took place in Iraqi Kurdistan after 1991, the 19 May 1992 election and the existence of the de facto Kurdish state since 1992 coalesced to cause a sense of political and national cohesiveness among urban and literate Kurds in which a widely accepted identity as 'Kurdistanis' displaced the former self-designation of 'Iraqi Kurds' or 'Iraqis' (Aziz, 2011, p.5).*

Quil Lawrence broadly investigated the Kurdish problem in Iraq in his work *'Invisible Nation: How Kurds' Quest for Statehood is Shaping Iraq and the Middle East'*. According to Henri Barkey, Quil Lawrence

*describes the continuous and yet contradictory aspects of Kurdish politics as the burning desire for independence tempered by the pragmatic realization that as Kurds they stand a better chance of obtaining security and prosperity as part of a democratic and federal state of Iraq (Barkey, 2008, pp.525–526).*

Comparing Kurds in Iraq to those in Turkey, it is easy to see major differences that construct the Kurdish identity.

*Needless to say, the status of the Kurds vis-à-vis the Turkish state is an integral component of the Kurdish question in Turkey. However, the problem with the discussions is that they have failed to comprehend some important new dimensions of the Kurdish question in recent decades (Saracoglu, 2011, p.3).*

There is a vast population of Kurds in Turkey living in big cities such as Istanbul, Izmir, Adana, Mersin and Konya. This creates a different ethnic identity for the Kurds in Turkey as all of the Kurds are not living on the same piece of land. Another important factor effecting Kurds ethnicity in Turkey, rather different than in Iraq, is Turkey's being a candidate country to join the EU. The process of gaining autonomy and the freedom of native language are still matters of debate in Turkey. The European Union plays an important role in these matters since Turkey's candidacy has been accepted.

Kurds in Iran have similar ways of structuring their identity and otherness. The awareness of national identity in Iranian Kurdistan is rather old. The Republic of Mahabad was founded for a short term in 1946 after the Soviet Union invasion of Iran. Kurds since then have been struggling to construct their otherness in Iran, as Abbas Vali affirms. Abbas Vali describes the Kurdish identity in Iran as follows:

*Modern nation's state and sovereign power have deprived Kurdistan of its territorial and political unity as a single contiguous province within Iran. In this sense, therefore, the sovereign identity is constitutive of the Kurdish community and the processes and practices which reproduce Kurdish otherness also at the same time define its unity and cohesion (Vali, 2011, p.2).*

*Kurdish national identity in Iran is fundamentally modern. Its genesis was the relationship of self and other established between Kurdish and Iranian national identity. The discursive primacy of difference in the theorization of the relationship of self and other means that genesis of Kurdish national identity does not signify uniform of origin; it only points to a beginning, an emergent identity which is divided by politics and culture inside and outside (Vali, 2011, p.114).*

Thus, Kurds structured their identities by revealing their otherness against the states which occupied them. This led to a different identity in each sovereign state where Kurds lived and fought for their freedom and ethnic identity as the struggle was against a different nation in each state: the Turks, Arabs and Persians.

However, it is a matter of debate how Kurds would form a unified Kurdistan by using four different languages. All these languages are believed to have the same roots. In majority of the cases people are able to communicate with each other. However, in the case Kurds gain autonomy in each region separately,

there seems to be less chance for a unified Kurdistan in near future.

These cultural differences have also shaped the stories of the families, and the same people have been separated in four countries and these differences have served as the major subjects of Kurdish stories, literature and cinema. In the present study I will focus on these cultural differences of Kurds separated in four countries through the analysis of Bahman Ghobadi's films.

Bahman Ghobadi, the most acclaimed Kurdish film director, depicts the stories of the Kurds through these borders. His narrative themes are mainly related to the mountains, protagonist crossing between the borders, immigrants in their own homeland and the questions of gender. After starting his career with short-films, Ghobadi has also filmed full length films and directed such widely acclaimed masterpieces as *A Time for Drunken Horses* (2001) and *Turtles Can Fly* (2004). The films depict the difficulties the Kurds are facing across the borders of Turkey, Syria, Iraq and Iran. The shot sequences and narration in Ghobadi's films aim to structuralize a national identity for Kurds. *A Time for Drunken Horses* (2001) depicts the difficulties of the Kurdish smugglers crossing the borders in harsh winter conditions in order to survive. The narration in not only reveals survival facts, but also pictures the cultural burdens of Kurdish people. It unleashes several new themes for a discussion related to the Kurdish identity such as gender issues, women's role in Kurdish society, language, culture and assimilation of a nation. On the other hand, *Turtles Can Fly* (2001) tells the story of a nation aspiring for freedom. The narration focuses on the 12 year-old Agrin, the main female character, signifying cultural burdens on Kurdish women and their identity search. Even though the movie ends with Agrin committing suicide, there is a happy ending for Kurds in Iraq as it is the end of Saddam Hussein's reign.

Thus, the **goal** of the present paper is to identify Kurds through the above mentioned films directed by Bahman Ghobadi. The research paper focuses on film semiotics in order to structuralize the signified concepts through the shot sequences and codes in Ghobadi's films. In order to reach this goal, I will primarily focus on Umberto Eco's article *Articulation of Cinematic Code* (1967) to explore the importance of the codes in cinema and how they help to create meanings through Eco's approach. I will also focus on Laura Mulvey's male and female gaze theory in *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* (1975) and syntagmatic types of shots introduced by French Film Semiotician Christian Metz in his analysis of *Adieu Phillipine* (1962) in *A Semiotics of the Cinema* (1982). Christian Metz wrote a major work for the understanding of the film language; however, his ideas have been challenged and criticized by the latter semioticians.

*Christian Metz' ideas were developed and expanded by Raymond Bellour in The Unattainable Text (1975), who largely supported Metz' views. On the other hand, Metz' ideas were controversial during 1970 and 1980s among Left Wing cultural theorists in Britain and the United states. (Mercer, 2009)*

*Stephen Heath challenged Metz' arguments in 'Questions of Cinema (1981)' suggesting that all cinema is concerned with representation and that representation itself is a form of language equivalent to Saussure's linguistic model of 'language' (Mercer, 2009).*

Umberto Eco has also criticized Christian Metz' theories in *Articulation of the Cinematic Code* (1967). Eco presented his work in Pesaro Film Festival in 1967 and replied to Metz' semiological contemplation of film in particular.

As part of the theoretical background the present paper explores a brief literature review into film semiotics, and the empirical part focuses on the images and the concepts created through these images by film semiotics methods in *A Time for drunken Horses* (2001) and *Turtles Can Fly* (2004), directed by Bahman Ghobadi and how these images identify Kurds across the borders of Turkey, Syria, Iraq and Iran.

## Literature Review

Film semiotics explores films through moving images, music and speech within the narrative structure. It is easy to understand a film; however it is difficult to interpret it. Film making process is a rather difficult task requiring a script, original film music score, editing and most important of all, a crew. Christian Metz writes of the cinema as one of the most popular contemporary art forms attracting more audience than other art forms.

According to Christian Metz, it is because of the notion of reality in cinema.

*One of the most important of the many problems in film theory is that of the impression of reality experienced by the spectator. Films give us the feeling that we are witnessing an almost real spectacle to a much greater extent (Metz, 1968, p.4).*

Metz in his article *On the Impression of the Reality in the Cinema* (Metz, 1968) creates the argument that motion pictures in cinema creates more reality than in the previous art forms such as photography, iconography and theatre. According to Metz one is almost never bored by a movie and movies attract much more spectators than the other art forms by involving them in the sense that the unreality of the motion pictures creates the reality in the eye of the spectator. In the case of photography, the reality is present but it is in the past.

Warren Buckland also states the importance of reality in *The Cognitive Semiotics of Film* (2000) as follows;

*In analyzing film from a semiotic perspective, film scholars bring to film theory a new level of filmic reality. They successfully demonstrate that the impression of unity and continuity each spectator experiences at the cinema is based on a shared, non-perceptible underlying systems of code that constitutes the specificity of, lends structure to, and confers intelligibility on the perspective level of film (Buckland, 2000, p.10)*

The perceptible and non-perceptible hierarchy of the film is given primer consideration by Buckland in order to reveal the underlying concepts of the reality in the films.

According to Metz' model, similar to the grammar of language, film features a grammar as well. There are certain structures and basic understandings of the film grammar. Therefore, semiotics becomes significant while interpreting the film language. There have been various debates whether cinema language is *langue* or not and Pier Pablo Pasolini, Umberto Eco and Christian Metz discussed the cinema's language in various perceptions.

Umberto Eco's research *Articulations of The Cinematic Code* (1967) brings different perspectives to Metz and Pasolini's works.

*Metz' other reasons for rejecting cinema as langue are more substantial. Cinema is not a language-system, Metz argues, because it lacks the equivalent of the arbitrary linguistic sign. Produced through a process of mechanical reproduction, film installs a different relationship between signifier and signified. The perceptual similarity between the filmic image of a dog and the actual pro-filmic dog, or between the recorded sound of a dog's barking and the actual bark, suggests that the relation between signifier and signified is not arbitrary but motivated. (Stam, Burgoyne, & Lewis, 1992, p.36)*

According to Eco the task of semiology is important and radical.

*Semiology shows us the universe of ideologies, arranged in codes and sub-codes, within the universe of signs, and these ideologies are reflected in our preconstituted ways of using the language (Eco, 1974, p.594).*

He replies to Metz' semiological contemplation of film as follows;

*Metz, in contemplating a sociological investigation of film, recognizes a primal entity 3not otherwise analyzable, not reducible to discrete units which could compound it by articulation, and this primum is the image. What is meant here is a notion of the image as something non-arbitrary, and deeply motivated- a sort of analogue reality, which can't be bounded by the conventions of a 'langue'. Thus the semiology of cinema would be the semiology of a 'speech' without a language behind it, and the semiology of certain 'types of speech', that is of the great syntagmatic unities whose combination makes the filmic discourse a reality (Eco, 1957, p.591).*

Umberto Eco also assumed that the cinematic codes are the only ones using the triple articulations which are figures, signs and elements. A code with a triple articulation as to Eco is more dominating and the combination of these contextual varieties makes the “cinema a richer form of communication than speech” (Eco, 1967, p.597).

He further summarizes the type of codes. He divides the codes in ten. The first type of code is ‘Perspective codes’ which establish the conditions for effective perception (Eco, 1970, p.597).

The second type of code is ‘Codes of recognition’ which is rather related to the intelligence, memory and cultural background of the individual. They are the blocks of the signifieds (Eco, 1970, p.597).

The third type is ‘codes of transmission’.

*These construct the determining conditions for the perception of images- the dots of a newspaper photo for instance, or the lines which make up a TV image (Eco, 1970, p.597).*

Eco describes the fourth type of the codes as ‘Tonal codes’. These types of codes are already conventionalized particular intonations of the signs such as ‘strength’, ‘tension’.

The fifth type of code as to Eco is Iconic codes which are also divided into three; figures, signs and semes. Figures are conditions of perception. Signs denote semes of recognition. And semes are more commonly known as ‘images’ or ‘iconic signs’ (Eco, 1970, p.597).

Following the Iconic codes, Eco introduces the sixth type of code as ‘Iconographic codes’.

*These elevate to ‘signifier’ the ‘signifieds’ of iconic codes, in order to connote with more complex and culturalized semes (Eco, 1970, p.597).*

The seventh code is the code of taste and sensibility which creates the connotations provoked by semes of the preceding codes. Eco exemplify this type of code with the Greek temple; “A Greek temple could not connote ‘harmonious beauty’ as well as ‘Grecian ideal’. ‘Antiquity’”. (Eco, 1970, p.597).

The eighth type of code is Rhetoric code which is born as unuttered conventions but later acquired by the society to be used as general norms of communication. And these codes are divided into three; rhetorical figures, premises, and arguments. The last two codes that are introduced by Eco are Stylistic codes and Codes of the Unconscious. (Eco, 1970, p.597).

Stylistic codes are decisive original solutions codified by rhetoric or actualized once only. And Codes of Unconscious build up determinative configurations, either iconic or iconological or stylistic or rhetorical. (Eco, 1970, p.597).

On the other hand, Christian Metz’ ideas of film language separates the film lan-



guage from verbal language which he calls 'langue'. He calls the early stages of 'montage' the syntagmatic mind and language disappears when the pictures talk. According to Metz, cinema is conventional, narrative space and time is organized and the film syntax is not pre-established, rather it is learned. Metz' further discussion is the syntagmatic units of the images in films. As to Metz, shots start to create chains of meanings which develop into syntagmas that are self-contained units of meaning. He describes these syntagms of meanings created through shots as follows;

*1) Autonomous Shot—a syntagma consisting of one shot, in turn subdivided into (a) the Single-Shot Sequence, and (b) four kinds of Inserts: Non-Diegetic Insert (a single shot which presents objects exterior to the fictional world of the action); the Displaced Diegetic Insert (“real” diegetic images but temporally or spatially out of context); the Subjective Insert (memories, fears) and the Explanatory Insert (single shots which clarify events for the spectator); (2) The Parallel Syntagma—two alternating motifs without clear spatial or temporal relationship, such as rich and poor, town and country; (3) The Bracket Syntagma—brief scenes given as typical examples of a certain order of reality but without temporal sequence, often organized around a “concept”; (4) The Descriptive Syntagma—objects shown successively suggesting spatial coexistence, used, for example, to situate the action; (5) The Alternating Syntagma—narrative cross-cutting implying temporal simultaneity such as a chase alternating pursuer and pursued; (6) The Scene—spatio-temporal continuity felt as being without flaws or breaks, in which the signified (the implied diegesis) is continuous, as in the theatrical scene, but where the signifier is fragmented into diverse shots; (7) The Episodic Sequence—a symbolic summary of stages in an implied chronological development, usually entailing a compression of time; (8) The Ordinary Sequence—action treated elliptically so as to eliminate “unimportant” (Stam, Burgoyne&Lewis, 1992, p.37).*

Following Metz' formulations of syntagmas and theories related to the film language prominent scholars have also contemplated theories of Film semiotics.

*Film viewing according to Boris Eikhenbaum, is accompanied by a constant process of internal speech, whereby images and sounds are projected onto a kind of verbal screen which functions as a constant ground for meaning, and the 'glue' between shots and sequences (Stam, Burgoyne, & Lewis, 1992, p.65).*

Following Eikhenbaum's inner speech theory related to the film,

*In the 1970s and 1980s, the journal Screen published a series of essays, both by and about Eikhenbaum's theories of inner speech. Paul Willemen saw the notion of inner speech as potentially filling a gap in Metz' theories by demonstrating the linguistic nature of meaning and consciousness, as well as the link to psychoanalysis since the condensations and distortions of inner speech were closely akin to the mechanisms explored by psychoanalysis (Stam, Burgoyne, & Lewis, 1992, p.65).*

Juri Lotman has also made significant contributions to the field of Film semiotics.

*In 'Semiotics of Cinema', Juri Lotman, the most active and representative of this school, discusses cinema both as language and as secondary modeling system, while trying to integrate the analysis of cinema into a broader cultural theory (Stam, Burgoyne, & Lewis, 1992, p.66).*

Some of the current film semiotics theories deconstruct the approach to film semiotics and some denies the existence of a film language.

*Every close examination of specific film problems reveals strong links of presupposition that answer, explicitly or not, crucial fundamental questions about meaning in cinema. The fact is that there is no methodology that is native to film in the same sense that linguistics is native to language (Ehrat, Johannes, 2005, p.4).*

Ehrat further clarifies the theories of Bazin, Pasolini and Eco as follows;

*Why and how can film represent the objects of another universe? The entire 'realism' debate (Bazin, Pasolini, Eco) had shifted to a seemingly more technical level of cinematic codes of representation; there, it finds itself stuck in the interminable number of codes and in the hopeless complexity of any theoretical attempt to pass from codes to actually perceived meaning (Johannes Ehrat, 2005, p.5).*

Johannes Ehrat constructs a questioning approach to the criticism of film semiotics by questioning narration, discovery and the question of truth.

*A semiotic theory, in contrast, treats cinema as a sign, which is a concept/ object- without difference (i.e., there are not no-Signs.). This 'object' can only be reflected on in secunda intentio, and whatever is said about cinema in a Semiotic context makes no claims about a physical state of affairs, but is about meaning (Johannes Ehrat, 2005, p.554).*

In her research, Anna Dymek claims that there is no semiotics of cinema.

*Almost simultaneously Metz, Eco and Pasolini launched a debate on the pedagogical dimensions of cinematic codes. The question was whether the filmic codes merely cover previously existing codes (Eco), or if they have a creative potential to produce new perspectives (Pasolini). The explicit and implicit responses to this important controversy expressed themselves either in line with semio-pragmatic studies of the image (Odin, Wuss, Peters) and semio-philosophical studies of film (Deleuze), or, on the other hand, within the scope of theories wanting themselves to be purely “cognitive” and explicitly demarcating themselves from “semiotics” (Dymek, 2014).*

Another criticism to Christian Metz’ formulation of cinematic language is its being representing his bourgeois ideology while analyzing the films. Constance Penley, unlike Dymek, does not deny the semiotics of the film. She states the importance of Metz’ Film Language and primarily suggests that

*Film Language is deeply imbedded in and informed by the dominant patriarchal/ bourgeois ideology and should be read with that in mind (Penley, 2004).*

She analyzes Metz’ work as follows;

*It is easy to take critical potshots at this book; it was a beginning book, opening a new field of inquiry. Cinéthique has already done an extensive analysis of the book and made many important criticisms concerning the relationship of Metz’ theory to his bourgeois ideology (Penley, 2004).*

*However, it might be more fruitful to try to see what kind of space the book opens up for us in terms of thinking about aesthetics/ ideology/ cinema and to look at its mistakes as theoretical pitfalls to be avoided. For, even though Metz’ notion of a cinesemiotics and of what constitutes a cinematic code is not yet fully formulated in this book and is there even very misleading, it can still be helpful as a beginning for thinking about films in terms of a culturally and ideologically determined heterogeneity of codes rather than as original and unique expressions of certain “human” themes” (Penley, 2004).*

My goal is not to prove whether Christian Metz’ theories are credible or not, I will rather focus on applying these theories to the construction of the narration in Ghobadi’s films. I will use Christian Metz’ formulation of syntagmatic units in

the same way they are described by Metz while reading the films without worrying about the bourgeois aspects within the narration. I will eventually analyze the ethnical struggles of a nation on the borders of four countries the theme of which is not interrelated to the any bourgeois film.

In addition to abovementioned theories about film semiotics, I will also include Laura Mulvey's approach to cinematic narration in her *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* (1975) in order to structuralize gender related notions in Ghobadi's films. Mulvey, emphasizes on woman's being looked at-ness in her article Going far beyond highlighting woman's to-be-looked-at-ness, cinema builds the way she is to be looked at into the spectacle itself (Mulvey, 1975, p.17).

According to Mulvey, "Cinematic codes create a gaze, a world, and an object, thereby producing an illusion cut to the measure of desire" (Mulvey, 1975, p.17). She further brings a Lacanian approach to her formulation as follows;

[ *Woman then stands in patriarchal culture as signifier for the male other, bound by a symbolic order in which men can live out his phantasies and obsessions through linguistic command by imposing them on the silent image of woman still tied to her place* (Mulvey, 1975, p.7). ]

In both films of Ghobadi, there are several gender related images of woman's being tied to her place. Rojin is being married off without her own will in *A Time for Drunken Horses* (2001) and Agrin is committing suicide after being raped by Iraqi soldiers which is the opening and closing scene of *Turtles Can Fly* (2004). The narrations of both films are centralized around these concepts. In *A Time for Drunken Horses* (2001), Madi's illness is the biggest problem of the family and the only way to treat Madi is to marry Rojin off in exchange of Madi's treatment. Alike, in *Turtles Can Fly* (2004), the mysterious center of the story is Agrin and her suicide attempts throughout the narration.

### ***A Time For Drunken Horses* (2000)**

The film is shot between Iranian and Iraqi borders of Kurdistan and depicts the story of a Kurdish family trying to survive after loosing their parents. Ayoup, being the oldest brother in the family, needs to take care of the household and family. The climax of the film is surrendered around these orphans' survival and their little brother's surgery that is necessary for his survival.

The climax of the film arises when Rojin is married off to a man without a dowry. The broom's family agrees to compensate Madi's medical treatment instead of paying a sum of money or goods. However, Madi is not cured and the film ends with an ambiguous metaphorical scene where we see Ayoup and Madi crossing the border with their mule.

Ghobadi usually uses animal metaphors to symbolize identity conflicts of Kurds. The titles of four full length movies directed Ghobadi, consist of animal names those are respectively: *A Time For Drunken Horses* (2000), *Turtles Can Fly* (2004), *No One Knows About the Persian Cats* (2009), *Rhino Season* (2012). In *A Time for Drunken Horses* (2000), mules take place a major part in the

narration of the film as the main source of income of the Kurdish people living in-between borders is smuggling.

The opening bracket syntagma describes Kurdish kids working in the market hall. In Metz formulation in Aideu Philippine, bracket syntagma is the movie set within the movie in order to situate the action and describe the working environment of the main character. Similarly, in Ghobadi's work we come across the main characters, most of whom are orphans and trying to make a living by working in the market hall. This scene is followed by one where kids are trying to be chosen to get on a truck for working purposes; if they get on the truck they are lucky enough to save the day.

The truck heads out and orphans are depicted in a descriptive syntagma in the truck travelling from Iraqi- Kurdistan to Iranian Kurdistan. The camera makes episodic shots respectively shooting the harsh winter in the mountainous area. Ghobadi's style of shooting in these scenes aims to dramatize and combine the sublime with the difficult living conditions of the nature.

*The cinematography in A Time for Drunken Horses is exceptional, especially for what must have been difficult shooting conditions in the Kurdish winter. There is certain use of short-focus photography (shooting images with a shallow depth-of-field) in these particular scenes which highlight his subjects from their situated backgrounds" (Film Sufi. 2008).*

Identity conflict through borders is revealed by several tonal codes (Eco) in this scene when the truck comes closer to Iranian border. The driver asks the Iraqi Kurds to jump out as they won't be able to cross the border legally. They need to walk through the hills and cross the border without Iranian soldiers notice. The significant description of identity problems through borders is revealed. Even though all these kids are friends and relatives they hold different states' citizenships and are forced to live under the pressure of having the ability to cross the border illegally. The risk is big though. They can be shot by the Iranian soldiers on the border and soldiers won't have any lawsuits against them afterwards that jeopardize their current situation.

In the following autonomous shot, Iranian border guards are searching kids and seizing their books. The scene is shot carefully to put an emphasis on the image of hidden books and orphans' desire to hide them. Ghobadi shoots the scene stressing on the hidden books. The state's fear against the freedom and opinions that criticize the current regime in Iran is signified through the hidden books. Eventually the books are seized by Iranian soldiers. Kurdish identity here is signified through the seized books. Kurds are willing to read and invest in their educations. However, oppressed under different states' power they are unable to maintain their cultural heritage.

In spite of the title of the movie, we don't see horses in the film; rather mules are in the center of narrative. First time we come across a mule is in the upcoming scene when we see Rojin being married off without Ayoup's approval.

The autonomous shot where the mule is dressed with accessories, arriving at the house of the girl, stands for the will of that particular person to marry her. This is a very peculiar iconic code (Eco) in Kurdish culture where the woman is in the center; however she is to be married off with the consent of older men in charge of the household. This scene could also be accounted for Eco's code of recognition as the audience with sufficient knowledge of the Kurdish traditions would guess what is due to happen in the scene seeing the mule arriving.

In the following scene, Ghobadi combines the sublime and dramatic again creating ambiguity and leaving it for audience's judgment. This scene, the ordinary sequence depicts Ayoup's responsibilities of household. As an orphan, he is chopping wood in sublime nature of Kurdistan and acting as a grown up who is quite obsessed with his family members. In this particular scene we see Madi's illness in center. This is the climax of the film as in the following scenes we will see Ayoup's struggle for labor and getting Madi operated. Ayoup's and Rojin's principle goals are to get Madi operated and the following scenes depict the will and unification of brothers and sisters to save Madi's life all together. The next scene opens with a descriptive syntagma where the mules are fed alcohol. In Ghobadi's film we are not introduced directly in which part of Kurdistan the film is shot, however using perspective and cultural codes (Eco) as such, he structuralizes Kurds' identity on cross roads. The camera makes a close-up to the mules. Ayoup is in serious need of work and tries to take some load to cross the border. Crossing the borders again becomes Ayoup's source of income. The music accompanies the smugglers followed by an alternating syntagma as if they would be pursued or ambushed. However, everything goes right and they cross the border. We infer it from the autonomous shot in the tea house where Ayoup is asked to pay with Dinars instead of Tomans. Currency is another element signifying the Kurdish troubles. As Kurds have lived in four countries, they had to adopt the currency, language and alphabet used in each country. For instance, Kurdish language has been written with Arabic, Latin, and Cyrillic alphabets. According to Dr. Dilan Roshani, today there are four existing Kurdish alphabets that are Yekgirtu (Unified Kurdish), North Kurdish (Latin Kurmanji), North Kurdish (Cyrillic Kurmanji) and Central Kurdish (Sorani-modified Arabic) (Roshani, 1998).

Right before the final scenes where the ambush happens and Rojin is married off; several scenes are shot for the transmission. Ayoup brings a poster of a muscular man from Iraq for Madi and with a parallel syntagma shot the camera makes several shots between Madi and the poster and no matter what circumstances Madi is in, his image is happy. The identity of the Kurds in this scene is constructed rather liberal. The Kurds are not depicted as a reserved and conservative people. In the film, Kurds are eager for power as signified through the poster of the muscular man on the wall. The oppression leads to a movement of nationalism and cultural awareness grieving for their own powerful state. The scene is followed with a bracket syntagma or Eco's code of recognition in a classroom. Similar to majority of the scenes in the film, in the classroom the problems and drama is narrated in a humorous way. We see a tutor eating pumpkin seeds and a student reading the book without any exclamation marks,

commas and dots. Eating pumpkin seeds is a very common aspect in Kurdish tribes to spend time in the evenings while sharing folk stories and songs with each other. In this context, shooting this scene in the classroom is deliberately structured to reveal this type of common habit of Kurds. The context of what the student reads is significant though that aims to signify Kurds will of freedom and power. It is about contemporary world's technology and traveling by planes overseas, which these people living in such circumstances would have never dreamt of.

The next scene is depicting Rojin married off to a man from Iraqi Kurdistan. Male gaze is particularly at work in this scene when she brings tea and serves it to the men in the room. As to Laura Mulvey's theory, the scene signifies the woman's being tied at her place and the phantasies and obsessions of male. In general terms the narration of the film reveals gender notions.

*While Western film studies has theorized genre largely in terms of Hollywood, media and globalization and postcolonial thinking raise questions about the trans-migration of genres between national cultures and the intersections of gender with race, nationality, and class (Gledhill, 2012, p.2).*

Likewise, Ghobadi's depiction of male and female characters in the film suggests gender being a social construction and both male and female characters are happy committing to their gender duties. She is happy to marry the man for the sake of saving her brother's life and Ayoup as a dominant male responsible for the household is furious that this is happening out of his consent. The intersection of the gender with the race and class is studied through Ghobadi's film where both male and female characters are committed to their constructed gender roles.

In the next scene, the deal is closed and the scene opens with a descriptive syntagma where the bride is on the mule being sent off to the other family. The unexpected thing in the scene is when they refuse to take Madi with them and in exchange they offer Ayoup a mule. Ayoup's life is once again around the circle of mule and his sick brother. In the next scene we see Ayoup and his mule in another attempt to cross the border for smuggling which is unsuccessful again. There is another ambush and the sequence opens with a parallel syntagma Ayoup and the mule in a close-up and he is trying to unload the mule to be able to escape.

Eventually, the ending is ambiguous where we see Ayoup crossing the border with the mule and Madi in an autonomous shot. We are not informed if Madi is cured. Madi's treatment depends on the sale of the mule. The only thing we assume from the single shot ending the film is that the problems stay unresolved. Ayoup is anxious not knowing which direction to go. Kurdish troubles continue to exist in this particular scene. Ayoup is confused. He doesn't know what to do and where to go. The only option is to cross the border and sell the mule to save Madi's life. The final shot of the film depicts Ayoup, Madi and the mule

exiting the screen and camera still shoots the border and the fence which stand for the unresolved Kurdish problems and signifies the Kurds' unresolved identity conflicts on the borders of four different states.

### ***Turtles Can Fly (2004)***

Similar to *A Time for Drunken Horses* (2001), *Turtles Can Fly* (2004) shares common themes and motifs such as orphans in the center of the film and survival of Kurds on the Iraqi-Turkish border. Soran and his crew are cleaning mine fields in order to make a living.

*Ghobadi's mission to tell the story of the suffering of Kurdistan and the Kurds is still his primary motivation. As in A Time for Drunken Horses, he is willing to explicitly portray children's suffering to make his point and Turtles Can Fly contains several over determined scenes where the world's indifference towards the children is hammered home (Hamid, 2005, p.42).*

The major difference in this film compared to *A Time for Drunken Horses* (2000) is Orphan's being more actively involved in the plot and they never lose their charm. The film depicts a cheerful and hopeful Kurdish nation that is suggested by the title and as Ghobadi also mentions slowly but successful. There is a mysterious center with Agrin, Riga, Hengov and Satellite (Soran) and trading mines and weapons is the only way of income. The world of adults is told from children's perspective. Soran is responsible to find mine collecting jobs for the kids in the village and finds himself involved in the mysterious center with the armless boy (Hengov), Agrin and Riga. The mystery is not revealed very clearly by the director till we get to see Rojin's attempt to commit suicide. Her brother is a fortune teller and the reason he has this supernatural powers is also not clarified which creates a mysterious narration and climax. The title of the story is metaphoric and stands as a signifier for the Kurdish nation's slow improvement. Ghobadi explains the reason for using this title as follows:

*Turtles have a very long life. In that long life, they live partly on water and partly on land. This is symbolic for me of the joy and anguish and migration of the Kurds. The slow moving turtle is like the Kurds: With all of our problems, we have managed to move forward, and we always end up upright. (Garcia, 2005)*

In addition to the title, there are certain metaphors signifying United States of America's invasion of Iraq such as the red fish, antenna and broken arm of Saddam Hussein. Red fish is the hope and will for freedom of Kurdistan. When Kurds are liberated from Saddam Hussein's reign, the main character Soran finds the red fish in the ending scene that he had been searching for in the lake previously. Shirkooh pays all his money to get Saddam Hussein's arm for Soran whereas Hengov's being armless is not a big matter of issue and no one pays attention to his disability. However, Saddam Hussein is armless now and it is quite a big issue vis a vis Hengov's being armless. The ending is quite metaphorical in a



sense that it reveals ambiguity and raises the question whether this is liberation or occupation? The protagonist Soran, in the end loses his feet stepping on an American mine after eagerly willing Americans arrival to occupy Iraq.

The opening autonomous shot depicts Agrin's attempt to commit suicide initiating a traumatic start of the story. It is actually the final scene of the film and all the following scenes are describing the scenes coming to that end. The following bracket syntagma situates the action in the village of refugees with several transitions of shots. Villagers are trying to set up antennas to catch signal for watching the news of American-Iraqi war on TV. The troubles of the villagers are told through one of the old men's omniscient point of view walking towards the frame and complaining about Saddam Hussein. The respected old man in this scene informs the audience and helps to situate the setting and living conditions of Kurds in the area. The antenna is another tool of hope that will bring the good news to people. Kurds in the village are described hopeful of USA's invasion. They know that it will happen; they reveal their excitement and charm through the symbol of antenna that is to reach outer worlds and express their will to freedom.

The following introductory scenes start with an autonomous shot in the mine field with several kids in the frame collecting mines and it is followed by the episodic sequence in the truck. Soran and his friends are travelling to Erbil for buying a satellite dish where Soran pretends to be speaking English to look prestigious. Speaking a foreign language, a western foreign language in particular, is regarded as a sign of prestige by Kurds. Soran, in order to gain respect of the kids in the village to lead them, lies to them that he negotiates the mine prices with American mine collectors by speaking English. Right before that scene, we see Agrin again in the frame, there is a parallel syntagma or Eco's code of transmission upon arriving from Erbil; TV image is within the screen and older men of the village are expecting Soran to translate the news for them. Unlike *A Time For Drunken Horses* (2000), here, there is a charm on the face of kids and acting as grown-ups, Soran in this particular scene, doesn't lose temper and explains the situation to the older men that he needs to go and get back to work.

Following these introductory scenes we return to the mysterious center with an alternating syntagma where we see Riga cries alone next to the fences on the Iraqi-Turkish border. Even though the film begins with Agrin in the center in the opening shot, her role in the film becomes rather distinct from the other characters. It seems to be Ghobadi's intention to keep her distant in the narration as she is afraid that people get to know about her being raped by Iraqi soldiers and having a kid. In this particular scene, Ghobadi depicts the attitude of the Turkish soldiers. Soldiers do not hesitate to open fire on Kurdish kids when kids hold their feet in the shape of a gun and pointed it to the control tower. The kids always have a charm and they simply make fun of the situation in which they could have been shot. Ghobadi's style is quite clear in inserting images that refers to political and cultural issues of Kurds. Riga loses his way and finds out that he is facing the Turkish soldier on a tower on Iraqi-Turkish border. The message delivered is, the trapped identities of the Kurds in their own homeland. Kurdish identity is again constructed through the borders reflecting the difficulties and oppression Kurds go through.

The following episodic sequence connotes the refugee camp in the night and switches to a new day where the pre-war preparations are carried out under Soran's leadership. For the first time the mysterious center is revealed where Hengov makes a prediction and saves many orphans' lives. These sequences are leading to the climax of the film. The camera makes a single autonomous shot, Soran is searching for the red fish in the lake. The red fish becomes the rhetoric code of Kurds' identity. Soran says that he saw it in his dream and the fish lives in the lake. However, each time he tries to look for the fish in the lake he fails. Right after this scene, there is a parallel syntagma shot where Agrin attempts to commit suicide. Up to that scene, the audience is not aware of what might have caused Agrin to commit suicide. Instead of depicting the rape scene in the beginning of the film, Ghobadi inserts this scene with a flashback. The scene only intends to dramatize. This scene also reveals the gender notions in Kurdistan and how cruel these notions are constructed. Agrin is the only kid in the village who doesn't have a charm in her face. Even though Agrin is a kid, she has no option but to hide what has happened to her before. If villagers know that Agrin has been raped and gave birth to a child, the act will be considered as illegitimate and she would be forced to leave the village. Ghobadi doesn't hesitate to dramatize and show the incidents with all their brutality. The only way towards freedom for Agrin will eventually be taking her own life.

The upcoming scenes following Agrin's suicide attempt brings the narration closer to a resolution. Hengov's dream is shot in an alternating syntagma foreshadowing the upcoming scenes. A turtle swims upwards in the water followed by the sound and image of a helicopter. The symbols in the dream signify the freedom of Kurds. The move of the turtle in the water swimming upwards is Kurds long journey to retain their freedom. Following Hengov's dream, Soran organizes villagers warning them to gather on the hill and expect American helicopters. People gather on the hill in an autonomous shot where helicopters fly through the frame dropping letters for villagers. The questions of liberation or occupation arise from the letters dropped from the helicopters. The letter is as follows;

[ *It is the end of the injustice, misfortune and hardship. We are your best friends and brothers. Those against us are our enemies. We will make this country a paradise. We are here to take away your sorrows. We are the best in the world. (Turtles Can Fly, 1:02:10).* ]

These scenes are shot in details. What aims to be signified by Ghobadi is not in a short scene which is replaced by another shot instantly. Ghobadi rather depicts the story with autonomous shots which therefore lead to various numbers of signified images such as people unified on the hill, message delivered through the helicopter, power of colonizer and the question of whether it is colonization or freedom?.

In the following autonomous shot, Agrin is again attempting to commit suicide tying Riga to a tree in a foggy scene on a high cliff. Agrin is the only kid with no charm and the settings of the scenes where she appears are also dark, misty

and foggy. However, Riga manages to untie himself and survives, making his way through a mine field.

In the next scene, setting changes from a dark and foggy atmosphere to a sunny day in the mine field. Soran is depicted in the mine field in an autonomous shot, trying to save Riga, and he steps on an American mine losing his feet. Mines in Kurdistan are reflections of post-colonialism. Most of the mines that are collected by kids are American mines and eventually Soran loses his feet stepping on one of them. On the other hand Americans are the savors of the Kurdistan. Nevertheless, the film truly intends to depict that Americans are good people who willingly intend to help the Kurds. Ghobadi's intention is not to criticize colonial powers. He simply depicts every scene independently and leaves it for the audience's judgment. Kurdish people's identity search and will to survive is much more of Ghobadi's concern.

The resolution scenes follow; after Soran's mine accident, the camp is scattered. Agrin commits suicide together with Riga. There is no happy ending even though Kurds are liberated from a dictator. Some things really goes well and Kurds leave the refugee camps moving to Kurdish cities to start a living whereas the main characters of the film have no where to go. Hengov sees illusions and Agrin's image appears on the tanks. Kurds are liberated but had to sacrifice a lot. Agrin's suicide in this sense signifies the sorrows and struggles of the Kurds grieving for independence.

The last two single shots reveal the means of main struggle of Kurds. Shirkooh brings the red fish to Soran. However, the red fish is purchased from Americans. Eventually Soran is left disable due to an American mine but possesses the red fish and the broken arm of Saddam Hussein's statue.

In the ending scene the camera focuses on Soran standing with a crutch and American soldiers enter and exit the frame while Soran is crying. Soran expected Americans for a very long time. However, not being able to save Agrin from committing suicide is a more important context for Soran than the liberation of the Kurds in the end of the film. There is no doubt, elder people were all celebrating the freedom of Kurds, however this particular story being told from children's perspectives stands for the difficulties of being a grown up kid in a culturally gender oriented society, where living conditions are geographically harsh and economically insufficient. Rahul Hamid in his analysis of the *Turtles Can Fly* (2004) summarizes these dynamic concepts of the film as follows;

*Turtles Can Fly is built around semiautonomous vignettes, such as Agrin's suicidal moments at the edge of a cliff or the comical, absurdist scene of a satellite dish being dragged into a town, which appears to have no electricity. The visual sophistication of scenes like this and the film's brisk pacing add a nuance, lightness and complexity to what might have been an overly preachy and depressing film. While Turtles Can Fly is not an indictment of any specific political policy, it offers an opportunity for Western viewers see what is left behind by foreign wars and the impact they have on ordinary people (Hamid, 2005, p.42).*

## Conclusions

The goal of the present paper was to reflect the Kurdish identity through the borders of the four countries where Kurdistan lies in Bahman Ghobadi's award winning films *A Time for Drunken Horses* (2001) and *Turtles Can fly* (2004). Throughout the history Kurds have lived under many different nations' sovereignty. The separation of Kurdistan following World War 1 led to different cultural aspects, and dialects of Kurdish language appeared. In their own homeland, many Kurds needed to cross the borders in order to cultivate their farms or visit their families on the other side of the border.

Bahman Ghobadi in the analyzed films studied such notions as being an immigrant in your own homeland, search for identity, and struggle for survival by working in minefields and engaging in smuggling activities. The aim of this study was to reflect these notions through film semiotics methods in Ghobadi's films. Christian Metz' types of syntagmatic units, Umberto Eco's types of codes and Laura Mulvey's female gaze theory were used to analyze the selected scenes in the Ghobadi's films.

There are certain debates whether Christian Metz' syntagmatic units are credible or not. These ideas were developed and expanded by a range of theorists including Raymond Bellour in *The unattainable Text* (1975), who largely supported Metz's views. However Metz' views were controversial among Left Wing cultural theorists in Britain and United States. Regardless of the contradictions, Metz is considered to be a significant contributor to the film semiotics who published some key articles on the semiotics of the cinema in his *Film Language: A semiotics of Cinema* (1974). His writings inspired many other literary theorists that were also mentioned in the literature review of the present study. Cinema is a contemporary tool of communication and is one of the most popular art form that attracts more audience than other contemporary art forms. It is crucial to communicate the cultural aspects and human identities through moving images. Through various methods and theories film semiotics helps to structuralize this type of communication and understanding. The basic methods of reaching to these concepts were applied to the relationship between the signifier and the signified in the moving images. The results of the scene by scene analysis, it may be concluded that the codes and syntagmatic units played the major role for a better understanding of identification of Kurds in Ghobadi's films. Ghobadi's style of shooting in these particular films refers to socio-cultural and gender related notions in the Kurdish society struggling to retain their freedom and cultural identities.

Both of the films have dramatic endings and share similar contexts. Orphans are in the center of the stories and their gender roles structuralize the narration. In *A Time for Drunken Horses* (2000) the major struggle is to cure Madi; to put him through this struggle, Rojin needed to be married off in exchange for dowry. In *Turtles Can Fly* (2014), Agrin is the mysterious center of the film and no one knows what she has been through. The events are inter-related with Agrin's being raped which leads her to commit suicide. The chain of tragic flow events leads to a chaotic and ambiguous ending of the film.

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### Sedat Yildirim. Kurđai Bahmano Ghobadžio kino filmuose: kino filmo semiotinė analizė

Kurđų tapatybės įvardijimas nuo pat XX amžiaus pradžios yra nelengvas. Kurdistanas apima keturias skirtingas teritorijas; kurđų nacionalinis identitetas formuojasi iš naujo ir šį identitetą atspindi keturios skirtingos besiribojančios šalys (Turkija, Irakas, Iranas ir Sirija). Vienas geriausių kurđų kino filmų režisierius Bahmanas Ghobadis bando apibrėžti kurđų identitetą pagal šias teritorijas savo filmuose *A Time for Drunken Horses* (2000) ir *Turtles Can Fly* (2014). Šio tyrimo tikslas yra trumpai apžvelgti kurđų kultūrą, kalbą ir paanalizuoti kurđų identitetą kino filmo semiotikos požiūriu, kaip tai atspindi šiuose Ghobadžio filmuose.

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