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Contributed Content / Visual and New Media Review

Shared Worlds

FROM THE SERIES: [In Whose Name?](#)



By [Lana Askari](#)

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Future Factory, 2018

It is like a wrecked ship that goes down. If you are too close to it, you will go down with it. You have to look towards the future, have alternatives, so that when something goes down, you don't go down with it. Shero, 27

Iraq, while amongst one of the most mediatized countries in the world, has anthropologically been one of the most understudied societies in the Middle East (Meiselas and van Bruinessen 1997; Dewachi 2017). For the Kurdistan Region in Iraq (KRI), this has meant decades of neglect and the hypervisibility of violence, war, and trauma, were traded with the romanticized resistance of Kurdish fighters and the continuation of conflict in fighting terrorism. Challenging

narratives about Kurdistan was one of the reasons I committed myself to visual anthropology and documentary filmmaking. My work aims to do this by focusing on *ordinary* life through the perspective of the future rather than through the prism of the past.

During my PhD fieldwork in Kurdistan, I came in contact with Shero, a student who wanted to develop a youth center, through his teacher Shirwan, who was turning an abandoned factory in the city of Silêmanî into a cultural space. I started visiting X-Line, the youth center on regular basis during fieldwork and was invited by Shero to contribute to the center in any form I could. The idea to create a short promotional documentary film was easily set up and a year later this resulted in *Future Factory* (2018). My idea was to not only to include the story of the factory, but also point out Shero's pedagogic framework within the X-Line project. I used documentary film here to explore how imaginative future horizons, areas of human life that are normally not visible in the public domain, shaped the protagonist's temporal understandings. Or in simpler terms "how the future acts on the present", by which the imagined futures of the cultural center and the city of Silêmanî could be imagined anew. *Future Factory* was intended to be a mix of reflective voice-overs with contextualized interviews addressing not only the locality of the story happening in Kurdistan, but also to point out the transcendency of time and future imaginations that is part of humanity at large. As Shero points out in the quotation and in the last scene of the film while the camera pulls out from the debris of the factory: we attune ourselves to alternative plans in case our future turns towards a different direction.

In terms of representation, I received critique on the privileged and Westernized views of people portrayed in the documentary. Of course, I was aware of the privileged and male-dominated space I chose to engage with, I consciously intended to show how these protagonists moved in the factory space and how their hopes and plans, within an uncertain context, influenced the development of the cultural center. Middle Eastern representation often demonstrates how a slippage of different forms of uncertainty are renegotiated every day. Whether we watch a film about Palestinian surfers, Iraqi women basketballers, or Iranian musicians trying to pursue their passions, conflict is always somewhere in the background, either in the past or in our future imaginary (Hermez 2017). Are we to look away from these forms of engagement merely because we see what we consider a mimicry of Western culture, or can we research these spaces on their own terms?

Some Middle Eastern youth cultures might not be interested in the Western gaze that dismisses them as “skateboarding wanna-bees”, but aim to position themselves within this international space through expectations and ambivalence (Schielke 2015), the quiet encroachment of the ordinary (Bayat 2013), or creating new acts of presence (Khosravi 2017). I saw these attempts in cultivating different types of citizenship through global means does not have to be read as a political form of resistance against political or religious norms, or excluding (certain parts of) Muslim identity. Rather, in my fieldwork they were laborious efforts to pursue expectations of progress and stability toward achieving an ordinary life within a restrictive and unstable environment. These stories could have taken place in any part of the world, but they did not. The forms of knowledge that are produced here cannot simply be dismissed, but deserve attention and space.

My own complicity in the structures of power inherent to filmmaking was being a female filmmaker from the Kurdish diaspora filming and collaborating in a male-dominated space. As Margot Weiss (2016) puts forward: “Collaboration as a method and a problem sheds light on the ethics of anthropological knowledge production—its potentials *and* its pitfalls, the hopes it reflects *and* the disappointments it yields.” My collaboration with the youth center and using a Kurdish Director of Photography in making the film were deliberate decisions to promote the youth space and create networks of Kurdish creatives in the homeland and the diaspora. On the other hand, I did not successfully manage to show through the audio-visual output the different structures of power and positionality, but had to contextualize this through writing. Dana-Aín Davis’ (2016) reflection on collaboration holds true, “starting with work we are connected to in some way might not be enough.” It is only through long term research and renegotiating our work and collaborations, which sometimes may come to an end, that we can reflect on our initial intentions and the outcomes of our work and our own positionality in it. The relationships shaped between the different people involved in the making of *Future Factory* and the youth center are perhaps where I find the strongest challenge: revisiting the fieldsite on a yearly basis, seeing the ups and downs in the development of the space, and finding the time where I can contribute again to their endeavor.

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