Film Review

Aydil (Oh my Heart) Dir. Ziad Kalthoum.

Kalthoum, Z., Aydil (Oh my Heart), Kurdish (Kurmanci), 2011 (47 mins)

Screened as part of 7th London Kurdish Film Festival, 23 November 2011. For more information on the festival, see http://lkff.co.uk/oh-my-heart/

Thomas McGee

The virtue of Ziad Kalthoum’s short film, beyond its technical mastership, is the rarity of its cinematic subject. Not often does a Syrian director from Homs take the time (and risk) to film the country’s Kurdish minority. His film was also billed as 2011’s only entry from Syria in the London Kurdish Film Festival. Overcoming a double marginalization (in the fields of Kurdish and Syrian studies), Aydil – translated idiomatically as ‘Oh my Heart’ – gives voice to three women from the Kurdish community of Northern Syria.

As female dengbêj (Kurdish minstrels), Kalthoum’s subjects also constitute a neglected gender subgroup. Moreover, their character is far removed from the professional women singers whose amenagé music videos are broadcast on Kurdish satellite channels. Older and frumpier, the personalities of Aydil nonetheless participate in performing their Kurdish identity through iterative practices of everyday articulation.

Kalthoum’s lens shares the privileged experience of being audience to a usually solitary ‘performance’, sung by women working in the home or out in the fields. His work not only documents the everyday reality of these subjects, but also facilitates their production of moving self-narratives. By recording the women’s stories through two distinct modes – firstly song, performed naturalistically and captured by a seemingly unobtrusive presence; and secondly speech, delivered directly to the camera – Kalthoum presents a hybrid genre of ethno-documentary and art-piece. The two narrative modes produce complementary testimony of distinctively Kurdish experience. Speech gives contextual details that are absent in song, while the sung word brings greater emotional intensity to the stories. The much repeated, and eponymous, exasperation ‘Ay dil’ produces a thematic and emotional harmony (based here on female suffering). Such conventional rhetoric is filled out with the autobiographical specifics of each woman’s circumstances, creating a circularity of life, its suffering and song. The women articulate their suffering through song, while simultaneously experiencing and constructing sufferance through the canonic structures of song.

Aydil opens with a short commentary on Kurdish folklore and oral traditions, which highlights its function to create ‘unity between myth and reality.’ Kalthoum has evidently sought to capture this dualism – of the collectively imagined and the individually real – and adopts it as a dominant ordering principle of his film. The women sing according to conventions (the lament for the dead being an exclusively female genre, according to Christine Allison, 2001: p 183), escaping into a performed role. Stereotypes and figures of collective memory are referenced and willfully adopted. Traditional images and formulations are overlaid with personal experience and the current reality of each woman.

For example, the misery of entering the patri-local abode after an unhappy marriage is a motif with an
extensive stock of ‘ready-made,’ deployable expressions. Kalthoum shows the readiness to indulge in melodramatic performance of this canonic role, even if the woman then goes on to lament her husband’s absence. Similarly, the complaints of old-age, fatigue and financial hardship are tropes that express something of the universal Kurdish identity as well as the subjective self. The cry of ‘min wey min’ (woe is me) by the first woman of the film – who has struggled alone for the fifteen years her husband has spent in prison – at once questions ‘why me?’ and also strongly affirms her participation in the female Kurdish collectivity.

While Kalthoum’s narrators are all women, the protagonists of each episode are male. Though not present, they define the narrative. Each section of the film is introduced by a title, which characterizes the woman according to relational identity towards a male figure: ‘the husband,’ ‘the brother’ and finally ‘the home’ – metonym of male authority. While the first woman is left to raise three daughters alone (it is assumed her husband is in prison for political reasons), the second bemoans the loss of two brothers who died ‘in the mountains’ (as PKK fighters) and a third who was killed during military service with the Syrian army. The final woman sings of her – now deserted – ancestral village. Her spoken monologue is interrupted by the flow of tears, yet in song, this is incorporated as a functional element, as she repeats the word ‘malxerab’ (ruined home). Martyrs, memories and the missing are kept alive for each woman by the power of song.

In contrast to the women who appear locked to the land, both physically trapped in the village and symbolically associated with static nature, Kalthoum uses the character of a roaming male tambour player as a structural device. His musical interludes as he freely wanders open pastures unite the women in their various locations. They, on the other hand, interact with geography on a much more local level. A common element in the scene of each woman is a large tree – under which the mother sits to work and weep; which the sister decorates as a shrine to her lost brothers; and next to which the abandoned house stands. There is the symbolic significance of the ‘family tree’ since such – often illiterate – women become the constant bearers of tradition and family memory. Past experiences are attached to the physical landscape and the women’s dengbêj performances underline a musicological, spatial relationship prevalent in Kurdish identity.

While much of what has been discussed above pertains not exclusively to the Kurds of Syria, but to Kurds in all parts of their historic homeland, Kalthoum’s film makes an important contribution to filling the gap in work on this sub-population. For this, and his sympathetic representation of the everyday lament of these Kurdish women, he should be congratulated.

Some may criticise (as a number attending the London screening did) the lack of political polemic and direct engagement with relations towards the Syrian regime; allusions are made about absent family members and as such politics is kept at a distance. However, in light of limitations placed on a Syrian-based film-maker in this domain, it would be unfair to be overly critical here.

Rather, Kalthoum’s film should be appreciated for the informative value it holds towards Kurdish identity. Furthermore, through making their song the central vehicle of his narrative, at least one time will there be an audience to hear the everyday, solitary lament of these Kurdish women – ‘Ez bê tenê’ (I am all alone).

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