

Belit sağ's *Ayhan and me* or the storytelling of Artist Moving Image in Turkey

In the modern way of knowing, there have to be images for something to be real

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This essay engages with Walter Benjamin's concept of the storytelling in relation to a video work by artist belit sağ entitled *Ayhan and me* (2016). Arguing that narrative and fiction are inextricable components when representing real social 'truth' through Artist Moving Image, I picked up Walter Benjamin's text *The Storyteller* both as a methodology and method for this paper. As a methodology Benjamin's essay needs to argue that storytelling might embody a therapeutic effect on the author self, and as a method the text is an example of critical writing engagement with a likewise critical case of study coming from a non-western country. Furthermore, the role of images, and namely the digital ones, in the storytelling context appears as a necessary contemporary addition to Benjamin's reflections on the writer Nikolaj Leskov. I here finally argue that the moving image, and specifically the genre of the essay film, might be the most appropriate tool for a contemporary storytelling, which Benjamin considered as a failure in the modern era.

As a further note, I should claim that I am considering Turkey's cultural, social and political sphere as an essential framework for the concept of storytelling in relation to belit sağ's video work. However, I will not explore here the Turkish artist moving image practice, but this essay will be included in a more explicative project considering these points. Therefore, my use of the ethnographic terminologies 'Turkish' and 'Kurdish' are intended to clarify the work of artist, avoiding any political reference.

I

As Benjamin describes Nikolaj Leskov's social context in his essay, it seemed necessary to me to start providing the reader with few information regarding sağ's operational framework.

In the traditional Turkish culture, the storyteller, known as 'meddah', is a long established figure who used to perform at coffeehouses, palaces and markets. While entertain the audience his aim was also to create a story with a satirical and critical content.

In her fifteen minutes long video, sağ's uses her personal experience with the Turkish cultural institution 'Akbank Sanat' as a counterpart of her investigation on Ayhan Çarkın. The institutional censorship to which *Ayhan and me* is subjected affects deeply the final version of the video because the censorship's stages are clearly presented by the artist while merged to other story lines. Belit sağ shows still images of

three recent Turkish History's remarkable figures (Ayhan Çarkın, Hacı Lokman, Pakize Nayır), with whom she interacts by posing them open questions.

The main figure who titles the video, is Ayhan Çarkın was a policeman and member of Turkish special forces unit who admitted to had killed 1000 people at the height of the Kurdish–Turkish conflict in the 90's. He was subjected to sanctions by the Turkish government for his confession. Hacı Lokman was the brother-in-law of moderate Kurdish Party HDP (People's Democratic Party) deputy Leyla Birlik. He was killed in October 2015 and his body was tied to the back of an Turkish police's panzer and drug through the streets of the city of Sirnak. The inhumane images from the event has largely surfaced on social media. Pakize Nayır was a young female Kurdish activist killed together with other two female activists under mysterious circumstances in January 2016.

Ayhan and me (2016) was originally commissioned for a collective exhibition by a Dutch art institution. The exhibition was later winner of Aksanat Bank's 'International Curator Competition 2015' and supposed to take place in March 2016 in Istanbul. At first, the Turkish institution censored the artist's script, which was initially focused on the politically troublesome figure of Ayhan Çarkın. However, belit sađ did not accept the institution restriction on her work and she decided to play around it by publicly displaying the institutional forbiddance in the video and by using a still image of Ayhan instead of moving images. Even if sađ's script was accepted at this point, the whole exhibition was cancelled three days before its opening. However, *Ayhan and me* is now reproducible worldwide thanks to online video platforms.

II

The Storyteller by the German critique Walter Benjamin, first published in 1936, develops the concept of storytelling engaging with the Russian novelist and Journalist Nikolaj Leskov and with the concept experience in the modern world. According to Benjamin, the role of storyteller is incompatible with the modern world of information of the early twentieth century. He also connects the dramatic increase of information network to the diminished efficacy of the storyteller. However, sađ subverts Benjamin's theory by proposing a visual storytelling and distributing it through the internet.

Belit's position in the narration of the video fluctuates between her artist and activist's labour and a personal contemplative quest. Even if the pictures she uses are modern symbols of a recent past, her voice-over's storytelling seems to be rooted in a timeless stream of consciousness. The video appears thus as an investigation of the relationship between mind-reality, and in other words as a psychoanalytical tool for the author. Relating Walter Benjamin's essay *The Storyteller* as a methodology for belit sađ's *Ayhan and me* implies its subversion. In fact, although Benjamin claims that "that the art of storytelling is coming

to an end less and less frequently do we encounter people with the ability to tell a tale properly.(...) One reason for this phenomenon is obvious: experience has fallen in value. And it looks as if it is continuing to fall into bottomlessness.”

“The experience which is passed from mouth to mouth is the source from which the storytellers have drawn” (Benjamin, 1999). And indeed sađ tells the spectator a visual story related to the symbolic images that she shows to the viewer.

“People imagine the storyteller as somebody who has come from afar” writes Benjamin, and sađ is actually both local and foreigner to the Turkish audience that she addresses as she speaks in Turkish but she is based abroad.

Benjamin writes:

It is no longer intelligence coming from afar, but the information which supplies a handle for what is nearest that gets the readiest hearing. The intelligence that came from afar — whether the spatial kind from foreign countries or the temporal kind of tradition — possessed an authority which gave it validity, even when it was not subject to verification. Information, however, lays claim to prompt verifiability. The prime requirement is that it appear “understandable in itself.” Often it is no more exact than the intelligence of earlier centuries was. But while the latter was inclined to borrow from the miraculous, it is indispensable for information to sound plausible. Because of this it proves incompatible with the spirit of storytelling. (Benjamin, 1999)

Benjamin claims therefore that the end of storytelling, is both a result and an additional reason of the gap between wisdom and information. In *Ayhan and me* however, this gap is narrowed by the fact that the information provided are filtered through the artist personal point of view. Perhaps storytelling was dead in the age of information, but it has a chance to be reborn in the age of internet.

III

“The storyteller is the figure in which the righteous man encounter himself” (Benjamin, 1999)

The self-revelatory stories that sađ narrates, could be used by the author for their cathartic and therapeutic effect. Sađ states in fact in the video: ‘I try to cleanse myself with the production of this video’. The images serves as a sort of narrated representation of a diary/confession the artist.

As Leskov in Benjamin's text sađ directly addresses his audience by posing questions, but rather than being open to the public the questions ("Can Ayhan and Haci Lokman help me comprehend my coordinates? Do fictive images have tangible consequences? Can an image capture one's soul? "Can I control someone by capturing their image? Is censorship something that regards my practice as speech?") seems to be addressed to her inner artist self. In fact, she never states the external quotes that she uses, as if it was not necessary for the listener, as the first listener is perhaps intended to be herself. Sađ creates in this way an immaterial psychoanalytical interaction that is expressed through still images in the video.

We cannot thus discern if sađ is taking a subjective or objective perspective because of the presence of the artist inside the narration. As the story is related to her personal experience but the topic treated is national-related. The author's subjectivity can also be expressed perhaps with the identification with images. The picture of Ayhan that Sađ is printed and treated as a 'live' object. The author plays with it, hiding and showing Ayhan's face represented on 'The thin line between Subjectivity and Objectivity in the cultural context is underlined: The Turkish social situation seems not to allow space for identity and that is the reason for which storytelling comes to play a remarkable role.

"New forms of media are creating new ways for people to express and consume stories
Tools for asynchronous group communication can provide an environment for
individuals to reframe or recast individual stories into group stories"(Paulus, 1999)

A further point in Benjamin's essay and sađ's work is also the role of memory and the process of assimilation in storytelling:

There is nothing that commends a story to memory more effectively than that chaste compactness which precludes psychological analysis. And the more natural process by which the storyteller forgoes psychological shading, the greater becomes the story's claim to a place in the memory of the listener, the more completely is it integrated into his own experience, the greater will be his inclination to repeat to someone else sooner or later.
(Benjamin, 1999)

This process of assimilation that occurs to the storyteller's listener, or in the case of *Ayan and me* also to the viewer, takes place in depth according to Benjamin and it should be as detached as possible from a psychological interpretation of the story. Sađ subvert again this position by providing the viewer with a series of notions, or stories, but also questioning her position in regards to the story itself. She chooses therefore an emotional drive, which implies her position in regards of the story that she tells.

In Benjamin's text the role of memory in the storytelling practice of Leskov is that his epic writing contains the course of real events that he conciliates with the power of death by using a 'simple man of the people' as one of his novel's hero. The same relevant concept of memory could be applied to belit

sağ's work with the exception that Ayhan is not a 'simple man'. However, he's not even a fictional character, as Leskov's one. In this way, the audience of the video cannot be subjected to a direct personification with an imaginary character, but can empathetically be a witness of his image and story. Subverting Leskov hidden critique, sağ creates invisible links among apparently distant public figures and events, leaving to the spectator the task to make this connection visible through a personal research.

Reading Benjamin, Peter Brooks expands this concept defining the storyteller's narrative as a chaste compactness' that commends it to memory. According to Brooks, the reader, the listener or the viewer in sağ's case, reflects on her/his own experience through the narrative of the storytelling and she/he is thus invited to share it with others. Memory creates congregation, and in a social fragmented state such as Turkey, it makes no surprise if belit sağ adopts the storytelling technique with an activist aim.

"All personal narratives are seen as ideological because they evolve from a structure or power relations and simultaneously produce, maintain and reproduce that power structure" (Langellier, 1989). In the artist's work storytelling might therefore be the ability to transform private meaning to public meaning.

The power of the knowledge transmitted with storytelling lies in between the act of the narrative's performance and the act of the audience receiving it. Sağ's storyteller activism through the moving image seems thus a response to social and political issue. She makes reference to her self because she wants to speak for others negotiating her position. In the first image she indeed affirms herself as an artist and the manipulation is clearly stated after. The moving image gives her the power of embody the audience and give resemblance of truth. Sağ's emotional drive strikes with the objectivity of images, with which she has a bodily and psychological relationship.

I therefore argue that sağ's video could be read as an investigation of the relationship between mind-reality of the author, and as an un-material psychoanalytic set, which witness the storytelling of the author herself.

IV

Ayhan and me does not have any image-movements, but only a series of still images alternated with intertitles. The first image used in the video is "The fate of the evil tongue", a putto's lithography, 'combination of innocence, violence and morals, described from the author as a fascinating yet mysterious image. Moreover, when sağ describes the un-happened exhibition process she utilizes her voice-over and clear intertitles on a famous computer programme 'offline' screen. What Benjamin describes as incapable to communicate, which is the function of his contemporary storytelling, seems to be translated here into the image functions. The storytelling of the sağ gains value because the images

lose it. As a sort of conceptual scale, the indexical value of images and the voice over of the author balance the absence of real 'movement' by creating a new narrative which is proper of the storyteller.

“(Ayhan) partially reveals how *now* function through the past. Neither evil or a hero. He's an image stuck in between, looking for purgation” states belit sağ in her work. In fact, images “create a mediation of Objectivity” (Krauss, 1976), and the picture that sağ holds in her hand in the video seems to be extrapolated by a video still, or downloaded from internet, but then printed on paper. A specular 'mediation' occurs also when the storyteller of Benjamin, Leskov, engages with real historical events and filter them through his authorship to create his peculiar type of novel. Again, sağ's work operates in the subtle line between documentation and personal narrative.

The images of the storytelling are 'lived' by the author. It might be worthy here to make a reference to Jaques Lacan's Mirror stage, a psychoanalysis theory based on the belief that infants recognize themselves in a mirror or other symbolic contraption which induces apperception, the turning of oneself into an object that can be viewed from outside themselves. In this specific case, the Images in the video are objects and the video is an object for the artist. In the *Language of the Self*, Jaques Lacan argues that the void created by the silence of the analyst creates the space for the monologue of the patient, using this monologue to explain himself to the silent listener. This finds an analogy in belit sağ's video, which creates the space for her author monologue thanks to the silent images of Ayhan and of the viewer. Although this monologue tries to be as objective as possible, it is difficult to separate it from the subjective sphere of the self, from the autobiographic storytelling.

Image and social reality appear to be on the same layer, but as the image is a representation of reality it inevitably creates a storytelling related to the author point of view. In fact

All great storytellers have in common the freedom with which they move up and down the rungs of their experience as on a ladder. A ladder extending downward to the interior of the earth and disappearing into the clouds is the image for a collective experience to which even the deepest shock of every individual experience, death, constitutes no impediment of barrier. (Benjamin, 1999)

Furthermore, sağ's use of voice-over is a privileged instrument to express her author's subjectivity and thought strengthen the reference to a textual practice. The fact that she chooses the Turkish language might be seen also as an indication of the type of audience that she, as a visual storyteller is willing to address- The value of storytelling according to Benjamin, is in fact his ability to communicate a story and allow the audience member to integrate this story into their own experience.

V

“Storytellers tend to begin their stories with a presentation of the circumstances in which they themselves have learnt what is to follow, unless they simply pass it off as their own experience” (Benjamin, 1999)

Typical of the essay film style, *belit sađ* does not use any direct quotes creating a disparity between what the viewer can see and what it is told by the voiceover. The spectator is not able to discern what it is her voice or others authors voices, in order to generate a new unique author’s voice. “Human beings are political because they possess the power of speech that put into the common use issues of justice and injustice while animals only have voice to express pleasure or pain” she affirms in the video.

If Benjamin juxtaposes the ‘narrative’, which continuously produces new stories, to the ‘epic’, which is undifferentiated by the story itself, *sađ* situates her work in between the fiction of the reported event and the truth of real events. In this gap the essay film takes place. *Sađ* invites thus the viewer to engage with her personal experience but also with a wider ‘group experience’. It seems thus not by chance that the language that she speaks as a voiceover is Turkish, recalling a national audience but also stating her position as storyteller internal to the story.

We have witness the evolution of the ‘short story’, which has removed itself from oral tradition and no longer permits that slow piling on the top of the other of thin, transparent layers which constitutes the most appropriate picture of the way in which the perfect narrative is revealed through a variety of retelling. (Benjamin, 1999)

Sađ subvert again, by creating different a short work of just fifteen minutes which however includes different layers of storytelling, using different sources and filtering them through her author self. This creates a new narrative, half way between the pure documentation and the fiction, proper of the essay film. In addition to that, as Benjamin argues the story does not have a definitive end, the same applies to the essay video of *belit sađ*, in which the end is not a real final of the story but an on ongoing ‘to be continued’.

If the novel described by Benjamin can be compared to the fictional film, I argue that the essay film could be the storytelling visual counter-part. The essay film is a “critical practice (...) with an increasingly complex nonfictional landscape, in which both documentary and fictional impulses come to merge in challenging way, and in which the source of communication is ever more visible” and it is part of all those non fictional works that are “films with a thesis” (Rascaroli, 2009). This definition of the essay film genre, which contains subcategories such as the diary film or the notebook film, comes therefore to be really close to Benjamin’s idea of storytelling as a narrative practice that shapes values and meanings of human experience starting from factual reality. This process is precisely what happens in *Ayhan and me* where

belit sağ selects some external Human experience related to the Turkey's social situation, and let them interview them in order to find a deeper meaning to share with the viewer, or the listener.

The fact that the artist does not position herself in the video, but shows just her hands, marks her role as Author-Narrator, which is the storyteller, and only implicitly protagonist. This might be seen a political act, considering that the essay film is often dealing with the identification and production of ethnographic minority, such as the Kurdish one taken into consideration by sağ.). "To speak as 'I' is after all, firstly a political act of self-awareness and self-affirmation' (Rascaroli, 2009) and to share this public but also private experience is one of the knot of the storytelling.

Furthermore, the use of sağ voice-over is a privileged instrument to express her author's subjectivity and thought strengthen the reference to a textual practice. The value of storytelling according to Benjamin, is in fact his ability to communicate a story and allow the audience's members to integrate this story into their own experience

VI

The concept of death comes to be fundamental in the storytelling context. "The idea of eternity has ever had his strongest source in death", Benjamin argues, and adds that 'in the general consciousness the thought of death has declined in omnipresence'. For him this process is specular to the decline of storytelling in modern era and rise of the novel: the audience turns to the novel to explore death in order to find 'the meaning of life' in a society which hides death. Sağ's context is completely different however: in the era of social media, death is no longer hidden, but on the contrary it is overexposed through images and the Media. The images that she uses in the video are the eternal representation of her mortal 'real' characters.

In fact, Benjamin explores the concept of death and its role in the rise of the novel by underlining how death could be seen as the trigger for life's scope, especially in storytelling.

"The storyteller has borrows his authority from death' (Benjamin, 1999). The concept of authority through death, and the concept of 'life meaning' revealed only through death is thus familiar to Benjamin but to Sağ as well. As a storyteller, she in fact juxtaposes two dead characters to a living one, and she conceptually claims 'the death' of her artistic freedom because of institution censorship.

Benjamin's interpretation of death is also explored by Peter Brooks, who states that the novel is also an effort to deal with the most intangible experience.

“one reads a novel in order to know death, that death that we will never know in our own lives, that which, through the figuration of a fictive life, gives us an image of what might constitute meaning” (Brooks, 84).

Sağ's work however, gives the viewer a different alternative: instead of fictionalizing and hiding death she shows its opposite life, but using still images of it in order to simultaneously take a distance. She speaks about a 'death', which is social and political because of the Turkish contemporary situation, but she never pronounces the word 'death'. Her visual storytelling takes a similar approach to Leskov's one described by Benjamin: it constitutes new moral values without infringe the popular belief.

VII

In conclusion, as much as sağ's subvert the position of Ayhan in the Turkish common imaginary, by showing a sort of empathic and emotional engagement with him, and by posing him as a pillar of her work, she also subverts the modern storyteller's position, described by Benjamin as decadent and fading, by giving back importance to 'experience'. Specifically, her personal experience as an artist censored by Turkish cultural institutions, might be seen as a counter part of a specific historical, social and political milieu.

Following these reflection on the role of storytelling, belit sağ's appears to be a storyteller who embodies the artist, the political activist and the historian. What she does eventually is facilitating the construction of the Turkish social identity through moving image, as much as Nikolaj Leskov, according to Benjamin, “joins the ranks of the teachers” in the pre-soviet Russia. Did Leskov succeed? A well-rooted yes is the answer of Walter Benjamin. Did sağ succeed as well using a different medium? A humble yes is my answer.

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