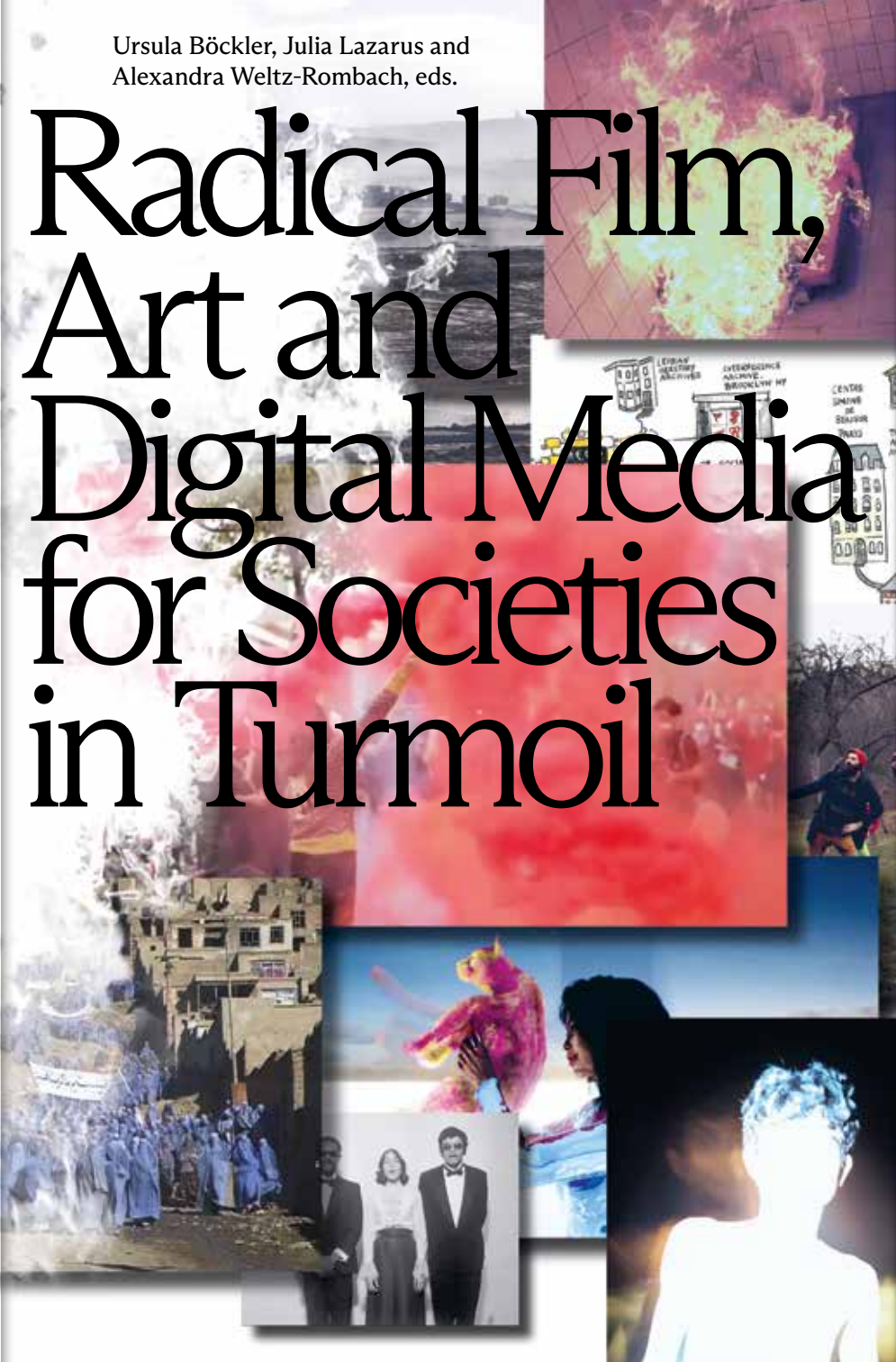


Ursula Böckler, Julia Lazarus and
Alexandra Weltz-Rombach, eds.

Radical Film, Art and Digital Media for Societies in Turmoil



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‘Why Can’t I Walk in My Own Country?’: The LGBTI+ Community’s Visual Activism in Turkey

Şirin Fulya Erensoy

On 26 June 2021, the Pride March planned to take place on Istanbul’s Istiklal Avenue was once again banned by the city’s Governor’s Office. Several reasons were given for the ban, including the prevention of acts of violence and terrorism and the protection of public order, security, general health and general morality.¹

Despite this ban, LGBTI+ individuals and allies responded to the call made by Istanbul Pride – the organisers of the event – and hit the streets, knowing full well they would face the police. Indeed, confrontations ensued: one of these confrontations was recorded by journalist Fatoş Erdoğan. The one-minute recording was circulated on Twitter, viewed, liked and retweeted instantly.² In this video, a Pride marcher confronts

a barricade of police officers. The question posed in the outcry of the marcher is simple: ‘Why can’t I walk in my own country?’ This question pertains to the most basic of liberties, yet attempting to answer it involves delving into the specific homophobic and sexist policies of recent years, designed and adopted by Turkey’s ruling political party – the Justice and Development Party (AKP). More generally, AKP has demonstrated a complete lack of tolerance for those falling outside of its restricted understanding of gender, family and citizenship.

The question ‘Why can’t I walk in my own country?’ actually reveals much about the state of public demonstrations in Turkey, which are systematically and brutally stopped by police intervention. At the time of the video, the recording of such demonstrations and the subsequent outbreak of police violence was risky business for journalists, activists and citizens, since a government circular was published on 30 April 2020 banning all audio-visual recordings of citizens and police at protests, on the grounds that these recordings breached the privacy of individuals. The circular aimed to reduce police accountability to the public and prevent evidence collection, especially in cases where police committed violence against demonstrators. Moreover, as video activist Oktay İnce states, the ban on recording attempts to put in place the notion of ‘if you can’t see it, it doesn’t exist’;³ a fantasy-reality created by the AKP-owned media which video activists fight against through the recording and archiving of marginalised groups.⁴ This circular acted as a stamp of approval for police violence because the crimes committed by the police fell under ‘privacy of personal data’. Moreover, it engendered an apprehension with regards to pressing ‘record’ on the streets, thus potentially decreasing the cameras recording human rights abuses during protests. As a result, public space and social power relations have been transformed wherein the street becomes a space in which only one-way surveillance is created through laws.

In this context, Turkey’s LGBTI+ community seeks to further their visibility in light of the systematic injustice they face and the hate crimes committed against them, and to vocalise their demands. Especially in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, AKP’s discourse has turned into targeted hate speech as it has directly put the lives of LGBTI+ individuals under threat. Recent examples include Interior Minister Süleyman Soylu’s characterisation of Boğaziçi University students as ‘LGBT perverts’ in a tweet, on which Twitter

put a disclaimer for inciting hatred.⁵ Another top government official, the head of Turkey's Presidency of Religious Affairs Ali Erbaş, routinely targets LGBTI+ individuals. In April 2021, he claimed that '[h]omosexuality brings with it illnesses.'⁶

Despite the conservatism of the AKP – in a kind of emancipatory counter-reaction – queer groups have been organising at universities, in the areas of health and education, or on the job market. One can even say that the more visible the LGBTI+ movement becomes, the more strongly the AKP politicians react to it.

The possibilities opened up by social media have allowed the LGBTI+ movement to circulate counter-information which has, in turn, provided them with visibility and support. The conscious use of the moving image in the web environment to voice their demands, document their actions and create awareness about state violence has centralised these issues in this alternative space, allowing for new, affective relations to develop. This key strategic tool allows for the creation of an alternative history and the existence of a visual memory of the narrative of the LGBTI+ movement, where the microphones are finally in the hands of the subjects, allowing them to express their lived reality in the day-to-day. This is what the Seyri-Sokak collective has called *VideoAct*: the power of video to witness, and thus to write the history of social struggles through video.

Returning to the question asked by the marcher in the video: 'Why can't I walk in my own country?' A naïve question perhaps – I do not know the identity of this protestor, but clearly as a member of the LGBTI+ community, and a voice of the opposition, this protestor is no doubt aware of the brutal repression to alternative voices in public spaces. Yet he pushes and seeks to understand why his identity is so wrong, why his identity should prevent him from having the most basic of rights.

The affective quality of this video and the question posed goes beyond the rhetorical and the narrative. A political problem is linked with strong emotions. The brave act of asking this symbolic question to police officers is no doubt recognisable to anyone out on the streets for a just cause. While not being allowed to be present in that public space, the protestor's outcry reverberates with many across civil society and oppositional voices in Turkey. It is the outcry of all the individuals in attendance at the Pride March that day who found themselves confronted with the same harsh restrictions; the outcry of transgender women being detained and tortured by the police for simply being present

in the city's spaces; the outcry of Kurds being attacked and murdered for not speaking Turkish; of the journalists who are chased through the streets by men with sticks; of women 'provoking' men by wearing 'revealing' outfits... The face of the protestor is only visible once, from behind his mask. As if to underline the universality of this question, the camera records from behind – we are the subjects that speak these words, that resist the oppressive structures that render the question redundant. The camera goes beyond simply witnessing the events; the very act of recording is done through the perspective of the demonstrator, the camera thus becoming the eye of the demonstrator, positioning the audience in that space, facing that brutality and thus enforcing allegiance with the demonstrator.

In conclusion, video becomes a vital act to counter the stigmatising narratives that criminalise all the colours under the rainbow. The video shows a self-conscious act of an LGBTI+ individual to reclaim public spaces from which he is being forcefully removed, through a confrontational moment with the police to voice a demand as an equal citizen and subject of the country. Any protestor at this point in Turkey knows that when a protest or march is not permitted, police will intervene in the harshest manner. Yet individuals still hit the streets, not recognising the prohibition, asserting their right to be there. Moreover, the spread of such videos in the web environment creates further awareness with regards to the demands of protesting communities as well affective responses in the face of harsh police brutality – in essence fulfilling the goals of the video activist.

- 1 For the tweet in which the Governor's Office decision go to: twitter.com/istanbulpride/status/1408026945581899780
- 2 For the original tweet go to: twitter.com/puleragama/status/1408841732914040837. At the time of writing in April 2022, the video has 12,600 likes; 2,382 retweets; and 728 quoted retweets.
- 3 Oktay İnce is a video activist and part of the video activist collective Seyr-i Sokak, an Ankara-based collective that emerged during the Gezi Park protests in 2013. Since 2013, they have been the camera-eyes of the streets of Ankara, documenting the demands and struggles taken up by various factions of society against systematic injustice. On 18 October 2018, the police raided İnce's house and confiscated his video archive, which consists of eighteen hard disks and forty-one DVDs. His ongoing fight demanding the return of his archive ended in success on 9 December 2021.
- 4 *Sokaktayız, Eylemdeyiz, Kayıttayız!*, streamed on 8 May 2021 via İşçi Filmleri, youtube.com/watch?v=kJaCnBvsv-o&list=PLviWRFXT6t9jrC51KEx6-Xri-ykIO_cb4&index=2
- 5 For Süleyman Soyulu's tweet and Twitter disclaimer go to: twitter.com/suleymansoylu/status/1355260314904879108?lang=en
- 6 'Turkey's top religious official once again targets LGBT individuals', from *Duvar English*, 25 April 2020, duvarenglish.com/domestic/2020/04/25/turkeys-top-religious-official-once-again-targets-lgbt-individuals

Can radical film practices help to understand a disintegrating world? Can they have a healing effect? How can we maintain structures of solidarity in the field of radical media production for societies in turmoil and transition? And what does radical cultural practice look like in times such as ours, when everywhere we turn there seem to lurk even more acute challenges?

Edited by members of the Berlin chapter of the International Radical Film Network, this collection investigates practices of audio-visual production that act on and struggle with the conditions of our time. The contributions were created by film practitioners, artists, activists, as well as academics and critics, who all share a commitment to experimentation and insist on a pluriversal rethinking of the image in radical film, art and digital media.

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