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Authors	Fontini, Pinar
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Dream Workers: A Filmmaking Journey During the Pandemic (Video Essay)

Pinar Fontini

Abstract: *In February 2020, just before the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, I started the production stage of my documentary* Dream Workers *(Pinar Fontini, 2022). This constituted the practical component of my doctoral research. The project was originally envisioned to feature interviews with seven contemporary women filmmakers from Turkey at the Atlas Theatre (an old cinematheque in Istanbul) alongside travel across the country to visit key locations from their respective films. However, the intersection of ongoing cultural politics with the pandemic and subsequent lockdowns necessitated a shift in approach. To adapt to this new reality, cinematographer Nalan Abbasoğlu and I converted my home into a film studio, acquiring equipment such as a projector, smartphones, and a gimbal, and experimenting with Filmic Pro, a 4K video recording application for iOS mobile devices. After extensive testing, we established the optimal setup for lighting and camera placement for the interviews which needed to take place over Skype. While the final documentary* Dream Workers *explores what it means to be a woman filmmaker within the sociopolitical context of contemporary Turkey, this paper and accompanying video focus on how, confined at home during the pandemic, I developed a feature-length documentary by adopting "instability" as a filmmaking methodology.*



Figure 1: "*Dream Workers*: A Filmmaking Journey During the Pandemic" by Pinar Fontini. Screenshot and link to video essay.

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In February 2020, just before the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, I started the production stage of my documentary *Dream Workers* (Pinar Fontini, 2022). This constituted the practical component of my doctoral research. The project was originally envisioned to feature interviews with seven contemporary women filmmakers from Turkey at the Atlas Theatre (Beyoğlu Atlas Sineması)—one of the oldest movie theatres in Istanbul—alongside travel across the country to visit key locations from their respective films.

However, the intersection of ongoing cultural politics with the pandemic and subsequent lockdowns necessitated a shift in approach. To adapt to this new reality, cinematographer Nalan Abbasoğlu and I converted my home into a film studio, acquiring equipment such as a projector, smartphones, tripods, and a gimbal, and experimenting with Filmic Pro, a 4K video recording application for iOS mobile devices. After extensive testing, we established the optimal setup for lighting and camera placement for the interviews which needed to take place over Skype. This and other adaptations exemplified how queer practice-led research could operate under restrictive circumstances, a point to which I return below.

While the final documentary *Dream Workers* explores what it means to be a woman filmmaker within the sociopolitical context of contemporary Turkey, this paper and accompanying video focus on how, confined at home during the pandemic, I planned and developed a feature-length documentary by adopting "instability" as a filmmaking methodology.

When pandemic restrictions and the political and cultural upheaval disrupted our daily lives, we needed to repurpose objects and spaces to make them accommodate our creative feminist work. An abandoned bus stop, a soon-to-be-gentrified movie theatre, and a construction zone became locations in which we discussed our dissident feminist ideas. In reimagining these as critical sites of creativity, we subverted their original intended functions. This subversion, or, in Sara Ahmed's term, "queer use", formed the basis of our filmmaking methodology. As Ahmed explains in her lecture on the concept, to queer an object or space is to breach the boundaries set by its usual function. We accessed and repurposed spaces shaped by transit, consumption, gentrification, and the uninhabitability inherent to contemporary urban redevelopment. In doing so, we unsettled their limits and opened new possibilities for feminist expression and collaboration.

Building on this concept, in my doctoral project I engaged with what Dallas J. Baker describes as "[a] queered practice-led research (PLR)" (33). Engaging with this "rebellious methodology" (Fontini, "On" 72) allowed me to approach the research not simply as producing knowledge about queer identities and sexualities, but as a dynamic and performative process framed by queer subjectivities. Queered PLR has the potential to develop novel research methods, open new avenues of inquiry, and diversify the forms of output while also "increasing points of connection with creative artefacts or products" (Baker 33). This is possible precisely because queered PLR resists fixed outcomes and foregrounds the ethical and embodied dimensions of knowledge-making (Baker 35).

From my perspective, this "queering" centred on the instability of the filmmaking process and explored "when things are used for purposes other than the ones for which they were intended" (Ahmed, "Queer Use")—especially in the repurposing of objects and spaces by those for whom they were not primarily intended. This innovative methodological position provided us with

capacious alternatives for making a film under highly constrained circumstances. The live interviews conducted over Skype and projected onto a wall were simultaneously recorded by the cinematographer. Confined to the house due to lockdown curfews, I discovered that such constraints enriched the creative process: the footage capturing this experimental stage was ultimately integrated into the final documentary. In this way, the domestic space became a site of cinematic creation, a natural, intimate environment for collaboration and discussions on film, identity, femininity, and life.

I also began filming daily life in my home, turning limitations into a creative opportunity to explore a feminist visual language. I edited the footage to evoke the claustrophobic atmosphere imposed by quarantine conditions, using diegetic sound and audio to convey my critical stance against the suffocating sociopolitical atmosphere of contemporary Turkey. In counterpointing this claustrophobia, from my balcony I repeatedly captured the vastness of nature—the sea, the sky—alongside scenes of empty streets in Istanbul and the male-dominated public sphere.[1] These images were combined with playful melodies, creating a contrasting and ironic visuality that symbolised boundlessness and freedom. Rather than "diminish[ing]" the documentary to "the mechanical 'shapeless reproduction' of the newsreels" (Winston 27), a common feature of dominant media discourse during the pandemic, including in Turkey, I approached it as a form of creative exploration. The images expressed both an idealised, virus-free world and my vision for a feminist future: they challenged narratives of control and conformity while suggesting new possibilities for communal engagement.

However, *Dream Workers* is not only a vision of the future but also a gesture towards the past. In the context of Turkey, holding space for the present has the potential to preserve the past which is increasingly at risk of being forgotten. With its "stormy political history", Turkey has been experiencing "the recurrence of problems such as rising authoritarianism, democratic backsliding, and escalating nationalism and Islamism" (Dinç and Hünler 11).

These tensions are reflected in stark realities: every day, a woman is murdered; a presidential decree has withdrawn Turkey from the Istanbul Convention overnight; peaceful protests have been violently suppressed without legal justification; historic buildings have been demolished; and a beloved, long-established movie theatre, the Emek Theatre (or Emek Sineması), has been transformed into a shopping mall. When both the places we inhabit and the social realities we navigate are destroyed or transformed, our memories, laughter, conversations, and shared moments with friends are irreversibly altered. It is as if our histories (and us along with them) are being erased. The accompanying video foregrounds my focus on this erosion, which is a central feature of *Dream Workers*. I filmed another movie theatre, the Atlas Theatre, which was also set to be gentrified. I wandered around the suburbs to document the new concrete constructions devouring the grace of Istanbul—one of the oldest cities in the world.

Dream Workers can be understood then as a form of "memory work", a concept invoked by Michael Renov to describe the intertwining of public and private spheres in ways that enable new subjectivities linked to the social rather than to a potentially egocentric individualism (91). Theorised initially in 1995 by Annette Kuhn, "[m]emory work makes it possible to explore connections between 'public' historical events, structures of feeling, family dramas, relations of class, national identity and gender, and 'personal' memory. In these cases histories outer and inner,

social and personal, coalesce; and the web of interconnections that binds them together is made visible" (5). In the video, the dialogue between me and the cinematographer on dominant male discourse takes place inside the home, a distinctly personal space linked to our feminist memory. This intimate exchange is then juxtaposed with the overwhelming presence of giant construction sites and streets named after prominent male historical figures, underscoring how gendered power saturates the public landscape and situates our exchange within a layered conversation between personal memory and political history.

In an attempt to queer space and unsettle linear time, I also shaped a cyclical temporality in *Dream Workers* that emerges through the repeated filming of the view from my home. I edited images of the sea, the trees, and the passenger ferries that subtly mark the shifting boundaries of daily life under lockdown. Short sequences capturing the repetitive observations about the presence or absence of ferries, or about whether spring had arrived, are concentrated at the beginning of the video. This repetition of nearly identical scenes mimics the temporal disorientation of the pandemic, when each day felt indistinguishable from the next and even the year (April 2020 or 2021) seemed uncertain. Rather than moving through time in the straightforward, day-by-day way, the ferries and the landscape outside my window become part of a cyclical rhythm that queers time itself, echoing the ambiguity of felt time during the pandemic. I use the balcony and its view not for leisure but as a way to decipher the shifting realities of lockdown, reorienting the space from its intended purpose and transforming it into a site where my personal perception and the sociopolitical atmosphere continually fold into one another.

Developing this experimental approach to space and time further, I embraced a nonhierarchical approach to my filmmaking at every stage of the production process, including editing. I involved the women filmmakers throughout because, as Bill Nichols notes, in the encounter between the director and the participant, "something is at risk" (*Introduction* 112). By entering the historical world, usually through overt actions such as interviewing or prompting, the filmmaker "has the power to alter [that] world" (*Introduction* 112). This is why all participants reviewed the proposed edits of the documentary and collaboratively negotiated which interview segments to include, with their input directly shaping the final structure of the film. Once consensus was reached, I locked the picture and began postproduction. This process ensured that individuals retained agency and control over their own representation.

The enhanced focus on agency and consent reinforced an ethical stance grounded in practices of care. Rather than allowing one person to set the terms of representation, thereby risking participants "[being] circulated, commodified and consumed without regard to their subject status" (Godmilow 15), we cocreated the meaning of the final film through collective decision making. This collaborative approach disrupted the viewer's role as passive consumer, instead inviting them into the narrative as a companion and witness. As outlined earlier, a queered PLR can foster deeper engagement with creative activities (Baker 35). In my case, prioritising agency and the continued agreement of the filmmakers enabled this level of engagement, shaping the viewing experience as participatory, relational, and queered.

Foregrounding the instability that shaped the filmmaking process from the very outset, this video essay documents the journey of uncertainty, improvisation, and adaptation. It traces how the constraints of domestic confinement, the unpredictability of lockdown, and the need to repurpose

spaces and objects collectively informed creative decisions. By emphasising cyclical time, repeated visual motifs, and the oscillation between personal and public spheres, the video essay makes visible the processual, exploratory nature of *Dream Workers*. In doing so, it not only documents the emergence of the final film but also embodies the methodological and affective journey of its production. This process reveals how navigating instability became a generative force and opened space for new feminist approaches to cinematic creation and collaborative inquiry.

Final Words

Reflexivity, interactivity and collaboration are the creative methodologies evident in *Dream Workers*. By recording the workings of the filmmaking process and engaging with the emerging rhythm of the film, rather than attempting to control it, the result was a reflexive documentary instead of a polished or flawless one. In formative modes, the presence of the documentary filmmaker is generally minimised to "elicit highly naturalistic performances" and "the vivid impression of people 'being themselves'" (Nichols, *Representing* 13). These documentaries focus primarily on recording the filmmaker's observations or documenting the life of another individual (Nichols, *Representing* 39). I deliberately sought to avoid giving the impression of "observing" someone living in a "far-away" context, as if presenting them for the consumption of a Western audience. In collaborating with the cinematographer, sound designer, colourist, and postproduction supervisor—and by involving the participant filmmakers at every stage of production—we were able to navigate the challenges of making a documentary during the pandemic. This collective process resulted in a powerful cocreated discourse. This reflexivity, interactivity, and collaboration enabled us simultaneously to become subjective and collective and to turn *Dream Workers* into a "first-person plural" documentary (Lebow 3).

Note

[1] The language spoken in the video is Turkish. For non-Turkish speakers to understand that all these street names refer to men, "Mr." has been added in the subtitles. This adaptation reflects the director's emphasis rather than a literal translation.

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Pinar Fontini is a queer feminist filmmaker and scholar from Istanbul. She lectures in Media program at RMIT University, Australia. Her work focuses on Middle Eastern cinema and feminist film informed by Black feminist epistemology. Her research approaches women's filmmaking practices, especially in the Middle East, as communication, solidarity, and radical possibility. Her monograph, *Women's New Cinema in Contemporary Turkey: As if We Were Free, As If A Beautiful Life Were Possible*, was published by Edinburgh University Press in 2025. Her feature-length documentary films, *Dream Workers* (2022) and *What's the Name of the Film?* (2022) received numerous accolades worldwide.