2026
RESIDENCY PROGRAM ON KURDISH CINEMA

NEW YORK KURDISH CULTURAL CENTER



NY KCC

CONTENT

1 FOREWORD

2 PROGRAM

3 CURRICULUM

4 EXPERTS

5 SPONSORS

FOREWORD



For a decade, I have had the privilege of leading the New York Kurdish Film Festival. What I did not known ten years ago has gradually become a catalyst for the following edition: the empowerment of Kurdish cinematic language .

With every edition, Kurdish cinema has taken me to parts of Kurdistan I have never visited, introduced me to traditions I have never practiced, and allowed me to hear songs I had never heard before. Yet, they feel familiar. They feel like home. There is a recognition that precedes explanation, a sense of belonging that emerges through stories, images, memories, humor, rituals, and oral histories. Through these encounters, I have learned that Kurdish cinema does more than tell stories. It carries memory, preserves culture, challenges erasure, and allows Kurdish identity to be seen through its richness.

But this journey has never been mine alone. It has been built collectively. Filmmakers, programmers, distributors, social media teams, volunteers, board members, scholars, and audiences, coming from different parts of Kurdistan and now living across different countries and continents, have created something together. We may live far apart, but distance has rarely prevented collectiveness. A 4:30 a.m. message or a 6:00 a.m. incoming call from Kurdistan becomes a routine during the festival. We work, disagree, laugh, support one another, and keep going. Our collectiveness, dedication, warmth, humor, and even our disagreements make us stronger, not only as individuals and as a community, but also as contributors to a Kurdish cinema that can better reflect the richness of our shared experience.

The New York Kurdish Cinema Residency Program emerges from this journey. And through this residency, we hope to take a humble step toward institutionalizing and passing on some of that knowledge. By bringing filmmakers, scholars, and cultural workers together, and by documenting their conversations, questions, and ideas, we hope to create a foundation that can continue beyond this first gathering.

This booklet is part of that effort: a record of where we are, what we have learned, and what we hope to build together for Kurdish cinema and for the wider world of cinema.

Xeyal Qertel

PROGRAM

Dates	September 25	September 26	September 27	September 28	September 29	September 30
Venues	Maysles Documentary Center	NYU				
10 am – 12:30 pm	Orientation and Welcome Session Xeyal Qertel Bahar Şimşek	From the Birth of Storytelling to Cinema İlham Bakır	How Should We Approach Kurdish Cinema? Engin Sustam	From Idea to Film Ekrem Heydo	Turning Stories Into Impact Apo Bazidi	Roundable: Final Remarks & Future Projections
Lunch	*LUNCH*					
1:30 pm – 4 pm	The Art of Story Seeking Ilisa Barbash	Invisible Archives Shilan Saadi	Beyond Showcasing Salih Arif	Ecosystem, Culture, Incentives Beyan Salih		

CURRICULUM

September 25

,

Orientation and Welcome Session

Founded in 2017, the New York Kurdish Film Festival has been under the umbrella organization New York Kurdish Cultural Center. The center has been established as a non-profit organization since 2021 to cultivate and support events related to Kurdish history, cinema, language, music, traditions, culture, and life rooted in the Middle East, along the Zagros and Taurus mountains, covering parts of North, South, East and Western parts of Kurdistan.

Residency Program on Kurdish Cinema is NYKCC's first residency program bringing together professionals and academics on films and Kurdish cinema. In this opening session, we will hear Xeyal Qertel's talk on the years of experience with Kurdish cinema at NYKFF, and Bahar Şimşek will share the findings of the Making Kurdish Films: A Survey for the Workers of Kurdish Cinema with the participants.

September 25

Opening Lecture:

The Art of Story Seeking

Ilisa Barbash

As filmmakers, we tell stories, whether as simple as an adventure or as ambiguous as a series of structured shots—and everything in between and beyond. We bring our audiences from one mindset to another. In doing so, however, it is not always obvious what story to tell, what elements can help us tell it, or what drives it.

Even when we have an idea of what we want to say, filmmaking is a process of discovery, best approached with an open mind. The range of choices facing a filmmaker can be daunting: What do we want to film? How do we film it? Do we focus on characters, places, aesthetics, or something else—and how do we choose? What filmmaking styles might we employ: expository, impressionistic, sensory, observational, reflexive? (For info about these terms please see Barbash, Ilisa and Taylor, Lucien, Cross-Cultural Filmmaking: A Handbook for Making Documentary and Ethnographic Films and Videos, University of California Press, 1998.

And when we edit, how do we structure the film to engage an audience? How much do we "tell," and how much do we imply? Where does our film begin, and how does it end? This dialogical talk will draw on my own experience as a filmmaker while engaging you, the resident filmmakers, in reflecting on how you make your own films—and how you may wish to make them in the future.

September 26

From the Birth of Storytelling to Cinema as a Modern Narrative Form: Construction and Representing Society

İlham Bakır

In this workshop, we approach storytelling not merely as a sequence of narrated events, but as one of the fundamental ways in which human beings make sense of the world, share their experiences, and learn to live together.
How did storytelling begin? Why have people, throughout history, felt compelled to recount their experiences and listen to the stories of others? We will explore the role of narrative in the process of socialization, examining how shared experiences, values, and collective identities are transmitted through stories.

We will then turn to the social function of narrative. How are moral systems, ideologies, cultural values, and the rules of communal life constructed, communicated, and legitimized through stories? We will consider how concepts such as the "good" and the "evil," the "hero" and the "traitor," the "self" and the "other" take shape within narrative traditions. Our journey will move through mythology, legends, epics, folktales, fables, and religious narratives, asking how different societies have used storytelling to organize, interpret, and give meaning to collective life.

Finally, we will turn to cinema as a modern form of storytelling. We will discuss how film inherits and transforms earlier narrative traditions, and how cinematic stories continue to shape contemporary values and social imaginaries through their characters, conflicts, heroes, fears, and desires.

Our central question will be: Do stories merely represent societies, or do they also play an active role in constructing

September 26

Invisible Archives: From Memory to Documentary

Shilan Saadi

Invisible Archives is a practice-based and research-oriented residency exploring the relationship between women, memory, lived experience, and documentary cinema. It focuses on how an experience, memory, or personal question can become a documentary idea and, eventually, a project that can be clearly presented to others. The residency begins with the close examination of a selected group of successful and influential documentaries from around the world. These films will provide case studies for exploring themes such as memory, women's experiences, migration and displacement, identity, loss, archives, and personal storytelling. The focus will extend beyond the content of these films to examine how their ideas emerged, how filmmakers developed relationships with their subjects, how research was conducted, how formal and visual choices were made, and how an initial idea evolved into a cinematic project.

The residency will then bring these approaches into the context of Kurdish documentary filmmaking and its particular production realities. Participants will be encouraged to identify an initial documentary idea rooted in their own experiences, memories, environments, or social concerns. Using the methods explored during the residency, they will consider the subject, perspective, characters or access, research direction, and visual approach of their idea. The final stage will introduce the pathway from development to pitching: logline, synopsis, director's approach, verbal presentation, and the use of photographs, archival materials, sound, or a short teaser to communicate a project's potential to producers, funders, and institutions. The goal is not to produce a completed film during the residency, but to create a practical framework for watching, analysing, developing, and pitching a documentary idea.

September 27

How Should We Approach Kurdish Cinema?: An Introduction to the Historical, Aesthetic, and Political Dimensions of Kurdish Cinema

Engin Sustam

One of the principal challenges confronting the study of Kurdish cinema today lies in the absence of a coherent institutional and methodological framework for writing its history. As a result, the historiography of Kurdish cinema has often been shaped by fragmented narratives, politically driven interpretations, or methodologically insufficient approaches. This course therefore seeks not only to provide a critical examination of the aesthetic language and visual regimes of Kurdish films, but also to question dominant historical narratives and historiographical assumptions surrounding Kurdish cinema. It argues that Kurdish cinema must be understood through the distinctive aesthetic and political conditions of a stateless people rather than through conventional national cinematic paradigms.

Situated within the political, cultural, and linguistic diversity of Kurdish societies, Kurdish cinema offers a complex visual archive that invites decolonial readings of history, memory, and identity. Any attempt to analyse its development inevitably requires engagement with the colonial and imperial contexts that have shaped Kurdish experiences across the Middle East. In this respect, Kurdish cinema resonates with Frantz Fanon's reflections in The Wretched of the Earth, where he argues that "the colonised intellectual develops a sensitivity and exceptional responsiveness" (2002, p. 209) as part of the process of reclaiming a history denied by colonial domination. Kurdish filmmaking similarly constitutes an ongoing effort to reconstruct a fragmented historical consciousness through cinematic practice.

This raises a fundamental historiographical question: where should the history of Kurdish cinema begin? Should it be traced back to Zare (1926), directed by the Armenian filmmaker Hamo Beknazaryan, a silent black-and-white film depicting the lives of the Yazidi Kurds, or should it begin with the work of Yılmaz Güney, whose career bridged Turkish and Kurdish cinema, first as one of the most influential actors of Turkish cinema and later as a filmmaker whose work profoundly transformed the political aesthetics of Kurdish cinema? Rather than seeking a single point of origin, this course examines the multiple genealogies of Kurdish cinema while situating them within the broader colonial conditions that have shaped Kurdish history.

Moving beyond essentialist or ethnocentric understandings of Kurdish identity, the course proposes to approach Kurdish cinema through the concept of Kurdish political memory. By foregrounding cinema as a site of historical production, cultural resistance, and decolonial knowledge, it explores how Kurdish filmmakers have articulated alternative forms of memory, belonging, and political imagination that challenge dominant state-centred narratives of film history.

September 27

Beyond Showcasing: The Role of Kurdish Film Festivals in Shaping Kurdish Cinema

Salih Arif

Kurdish film festivals have become important platforms for bringing Kurdish films to audiences around the world. But can their role go beyond showcasing films? This workshop looks at Kurdish film festivals from both sides: the filmmaker who wants their work to be seen, and the festival programmer who must decide what to select, support, and present to an audience.

Through discussion and practical examples, participants will explore the responsibility that comes with curating Kurdish cinema and how programming decisions can influence its artistic direction, international representation, and cinematic identity. Participants will also be invited to think as festival programmers themselves: What makes a film stand out? How do we decide whether a film represents Kurdish cinema or not? A film should not be selected simply because it is a Kurdish film. Thoughtful programming means balancing support for emerging voices with artistic quality, originality, and the responsibility of representing Kurdish cinema.

The workshop will then move beyond selection to explore how festivals can help shape the future of Kurdish cinema. Rather than only screening films and giving awards, can festivals invest in the next generation through project development, mentorship, training, funding, and awards that support future projects? Through shared experiences and open discussion, participants will explore how filmmakers and festivals can work together, not only to showcase Kurdish cinema, but to strengthen its identity and help shape what comes next.

September 28

From Idea to Film: Developing Film Projects with Limited Resources

Ekrem Heydo

In this workshop on “Film Projects for Beginners”, I aim primarily at Kurdish emerging filmmakers and those working with beginners. Drawing on my experience as a film educator at the Cegerxwîn Academy, Aram Tigran Conservatory and, more recently, the Rojava Film Art Academy and Besê Sinema, I will focus on how to develop and realize film projects with limited resources and under challenging circumstances.

The workshop will address practical questions from the first idea and project development through production and editing. It will share concrete experiences, discuss challenges and solutions, and explore how emerging filmmakers can receive stronger mentoring and support.

A second component could take the form of a roundtable discussion on “Supporting Kurdish Cinema – Concrete Proposals.” The discussion would focus on developing sustainable structures for Kurdish filmmaking, particularly in the areas of funding, project development, mentoring and distribution. Topics could include stronger collaboration between Kurdish film festivals, broadcasters and filmmakers; funding schemes for student and first-time projects; dedicated platforms for project development within Kurdish film festivals; and creating opportunities for Kurdish films to reach audiences both in Kurdistan and internationally. The overall aim is to move from general discussion toward concrete, achievable proposals for strengthening the next generation of Kurdish cinema.

September 28

Ecosystem, Culture, Incentives: Bridging International Opportunities with Local Talent

Beyan Salah

I will focus on building the cultural and professional ecosystem around Kurdish cinema, while creating meaningful bridges between local filmmakers and international opportunities. Kurdish identity should be a creative strength, not a limitation.

Kurdish cinema can engage with history and struggle while also embracing contemporary life, relationships, humour, youth and new forms of storytelling. Professionalism—accountability, respect for time, ethical practice and production discipline—must become a norm. Practical templates and guidance can also help filmmakers develop projects more professionally, particularly in understanding the different responsibilities of narrative and documentary filmmaking.

In order to build a culture of trust, collaboration and constructive criticism, emergent Kurdish filmmakers feel safe sharing unfinished ideas, failures and experimentation. In a small industry, collaboration should not be confused with competition. Peer exchange, mentorship, screenings and critical discussions can encourage collective growth and develop a shared cinematic vocabulary.

This session will propose Kurdish cinema as a system connecting local talent to producers, festivals, funds, labs, markets and other international opportunities.

September 29

Turning Stories Into Impact: Building a Sustainable Future in Kurdish Cinema

Apo Bazidi

In this session, we will look into how storytelling can connect filmmakers with communities, NGOs, foundations, cultural institutions, universities, brands, and other partners to create social impact and new professional opportunities.

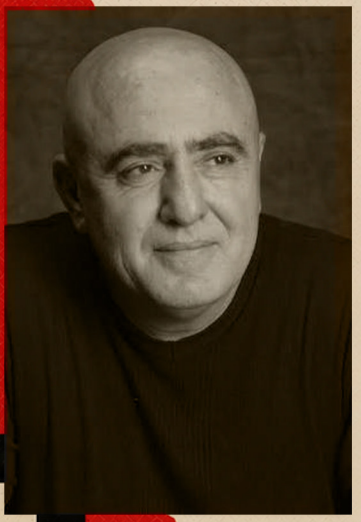
Through practical examples, the workshop explores alternative funding models, relationship building, audience engagement, impact campaigns, and ways filmmakers can diversify their work while staying connected to their artistic purpose.

Experts



Salih Arif

Salih Arif is a Kurdish film producer and festival director, originally from Duhok and now based in Vancouver. He holds a Bachelor's degree in English Literature from the University of Duhok. Since beginning his career in cinema in 2006, he has worked in a wide range of roles, including producer, line producer, actor, assistant director, casting director, and festival programmer, contributing to several international co-productions between Kurdistan and Europe. Salih is a co-founder of the Duhok International Film Festival and served as its Vice President, helping shape one of the region's leading film festivals. He also served as Director of the Duhok Cinema Directorate for three years, leading initiatives to support and promote Kurdish cinema. He is currently the Co-founder and Festival Director of the Vancouver Kurdish Film Festival, the first Kurdish film festival in Canada.



Ilham Bakir

Ilham Bakir is a writer, screenwriter, and filmmaker. He holds undergraduate degrees in literature, cinema, and drama. He has written short stories, screenplays, and plays, with his stories published in various literary journals and anthologies. He has also made numerous documentary films and narrative short films, working as a director, screenwriter, and film educator. Bakir sees literature and cinema as two interconnected forms of storytelling that continually inform and enrich one another. For many years, he wrote extensively on art and cinema for newspapers and magazines. Following a prison sentence resulting from his newspaper articles, he was forced to leave Turkey. He now lives and works in London, where he continues his literary and cinematic practice, alongside his work in writing, screenwriting, and film education.



Ilisa Barbash

Ilisa Barbash is Curator of Visual Anthropology at Harvard's Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology where she makes films, writes books and curates exhibitions about photography. With Lucien Castaing-Taylor she made the films In and Out of Africa (1992), about authenticity and taste in the transnational African art trade, and Sweetgrass (2009), a sensory ethnographic film about the American West. She was Executive Producer of Hale Sopia Schatz's film Daughters of Anatolia (2015) which documented the journey of a Sarıkeçili Yörük a nomadic goat herding in central Turkey. From 2015-2017 she was Co-Director and Co-Producer on Girl Talk (2022,) a film about high school girl debaters. Her book, Where the Roads All End (Peabody Museum Press 2015) about western representation of the Ju/'hoansi (San) in 1950s Namibia, was awarded the John Collier, Jr. Award for Visual Excellence in the Use of Still Photography by the Society for Visual Anthropology. She co-edited the To Make Their Own Way in the World: The Enduring Legacy of the Zealy Daguerreotypes (Aperture/Peabody Museum Press 2020), which won the 2020 Rencontres d'Arles, Best Historical Photographic Book Award. Her most recent book is The Forgotten Home Front: Roger Marshutz's Photographs of Pusan, 1952-54 (with Sean C. Kim, Peabody Museum Press, 2026.) Her most recent exhibition is From Iran: A Visual Testimony (2026,) an exhibition of photographs by Azadeh Akhlaghi at the Peabody Museum.



Apo W. Bazidi

Apo W. Bazidi is an award-winning filmmaker and the founder of Burn A Light Studios, a social impact production company based in San Francisco. Apo was born in Eastern Turkey to Kurdish parents. He grew up amid the social injustices and inequality that beset his community. These experiences drove his desire to become a storyteller so he could shed light on these important issues. Apo's films primarily explore social issues and the importance of global cultural exchange. His first feature film, Resistance is Life, won eight international awards, including six for Best Documentary Feature. Apo believes in making a positive change through visual storytelling. His lifelong motto is to "be creative and inspire".



Ekrem Heydo

Ekrem Heydo was born in 1973 in Serêkaniyê, Northern Syria. He moved to Germany in 1995 for political reasons. After completing his training in cinematography and editing in Hannover in 2003, he studied directing at Ruhrakademie für Künste in Dortmund, graduating in 2010. Since 2006, Heydo has lived and worked in Berlin as a filmmaker, cinematographer and director. His first documentary, Halabja – The Lost Children (2011), received several international awards, including Best Documentary and Best Direction at the Gulf Film Festival and the Special Jury Prize at the Dubai International Film Festival.



Engin Sustam

Engin Sustam, a sociologist, curator and art critic, is currently a Assoc. Prof. at Paris 8 University at the LiAgE laboratory (Laboratory for Interculturalities, Learning, Margins and Experiences). His research and publications focus on Kurdish spaces, art theory, cultural production, contemporary art, cinema, decolonial perspectives, new forms of global uprisings, political ecology and self-management initiatives. Sustam is the author of several articles on Kurdish cinema and contemporary Kurdish art in English and French, as well as several books, such as 'Art and Kurdish Subalternity: The Emergence of a Space for Subjective and Creative Production between Violence and Resistance in Turkey', published by L'Harmattan in Paris, and a second book in Arabic, 'Kurdish Cinema and a Decolonial Perspective', translated and published by Ramina Publishing House, London, 2025, in Arabic. He has organised several exhibitions in Istanbul, Berlin and Paris: his most recent group exhibition of contemporary art in Berlin, at the NGBK gallery, was entitled 'Bê Welat – The Unexpected Storytellers'.



Shilan Saadi

Shilan Saadi is a Kurdish director, documentary filmmaker, producer, and educator from Mahabad, Iran, currently based in Toronto, Canada. She holds a B.A. (Hons.) in Fine Arts (Cinema) from Soore University in Tehran. Her professional training includes Berlinale Talents, the Greenhouse Documentary Development Program, and a documentary filmmaking workshop at the Danish Film School in Copenhagen on "Personal Language in Documentary Film," under the supervision of Arne Bro. Saadi has directed and produced documentary and narrative works exploring identity, memory, culture, resilience, displacement, and women's lived experiences.

Her films have received international recognition and screened at festivals in Canada, Europe, the United States, and elsewhere. For many years, she has taught cinema and filmmaking in Kurdistan and Tehran, working with students and emerging filmmakers through film courses and creative workshops. She is also the host of Kurdish Frame, a podcast focused on Kurdish cinema and filmmakers. She currently lives and works in Toronto, developing documentary and narrative projects.



Beyan Salah

Beyan Salah is an award-winning Iraqi-Kurdish filmmaker, producer and director based in London from Hawler. Her work spans feature documentaries, shorts, commercials and branded content, with a focus on identity, resilience, women and social justice. She produced the award-winning feature documentary Name Me Lawand, which premiered at London Film Festival and won the Special Jury Prize for International Feature Documentary at Hot Docs, as well as being shortlisted for a Grierson Award.

Beyan is currently directing and producing her debut feature documentary, Jinwar – Land of Women, set in a women-only village in Northeast Syria. The project won Best Pitch at Edinburgh Pitch, was selected for Sheffield MeetMarket and Cannes Docs' Spotlighted Projects. A BAFTA member and BIFA voter, Beyan is passionate about bringing underrepresented voices and untold stories to international audiences.

Sponsors


ROSA LUXEMBURG
STIFTUNG
NEW YORK OFFICE
JFK
JUSTICE FOR KURDS

