



Research article

Decentering *King Lear*. Feminist Reperformance, Rural Voices, and Deconstructive Aesthetics in *Queen Lear*

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Abstract

This study analyzes Pelin Esmer's 2019 documentary film "Queen Lear" in the context of feminist film theory and deconstructive narrative aesthetics. The documentary tells the story of an amateur theater group consisting of peasant women on a tour to the mountain villages of Turkey and their staging of Shakespeare's famous play *King Lear* as *Queen Lear* in their own interpretation. Based on a qualitative research design, we analyze the documentary on two levels. First, the experiences of women through theater are examined as a feminist practice of subjectivation and the director's approach to this process is questioned. Secondly, the way the director presents this process and the narrative elements she prefers are analyzed in terms of feminist documentary understanding. In summary, we find that Pelin Esmer approaches theater as one of the fields of self-realization for peasant women in her film; that theater functions as a means for them to be liberated to a certain extent from patriarchal codes and social conditions that limit them; and that she presents theatrical performance as a kind of cultural interaction, enrichment and border-crossing experience. Furthermore, we conclude that the deconstructive and original narrative created by using tools such as intertextual, observational, episodic, and layered narrative reinforces the critical attitude of the film. These formal choices reinforce feminist discourse by presenting women's transformation processes in a non-linear, fragmented, and polyphonic manner. In this way, it is shown how feminist politics can effectively combine with the narrative structures of documentary cinema.

Keywords: Feminist documentary, Deconstructive aesthetics, Feminist subjectivation, Rural women, Queen Lear.

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1. Introduction

Cinema is an aesthetic form of constructing political discourses and producing meaning and thought (Öztürk, 2018), in addition to being a means of representation. Documentary cinema, in which social and individual realities are negotiated through narrative (Rabiger, 1998), extends these qualities by adopting an ethical attitude and incorporating them as essential responsibilities. Feminist documentary practice, on the other hand, fulfills these responsibilities by putting women's experiences at the center. Most of the time, it not only makes women visible but also presents this visibility with a political discourse and an appropriate aesthetic attitude; it adopts narrative forms that question dominant presentation strategies (Waldman & Walker, 1999). Examples of this approach in the context of Turkish cinema, and documentary cinema in particular, are quite scarce and have received limited attention in academic studies.

This study focuses on Pelin Esmer's documentary *Queen Lear* (2019), which offers unique creative approaches through its subjects and cinematic choices. Esmer, who produces films in both fiction and documentary genres, is one of the most prominent directors in recent Turkish cinema, thanks to the debates she raises in her films and her unique cinematic style (Olgunsoy, 2021). In the documentary *Queen Lear*, she aimed to provoke thought on gender roles and boundaries by exploring the local projections of a global work and demonstrating this through the transformative power of art.

In her 2005 documentary *The Play (Oyun)*, Esmer explored the lives of women living in a village in Mersin through the plays they performed and the changes that theater brought to their lives. Fourteen years later, in her documentary *Queen Lear*, Esmer again focuses on the same women. These women, led by Ümmiye Koçak, who resides in Arslanköy and is passionate about theater, founded the Arslanköy Women's Theater Ensemble in 2001. The ensemble aimed to make the problems faced by women in the village visible and to create a space for them to express themselves. Focusing on the problems of rural women in their plays, the troupe saw theater not only as a branch of art, but also as a tool for women to empower themselves and make their voices heard. Initially, these women staged plays written by Ümmiye Koçak and Hüseyin Arslanköylü, who had pioneered the movement. Over time, they progressed to larger projects and performed in various cities. The documentary "*Queen Lear*" is about the troupe's 30-day tour of 30 mountain villages in 2017, with the support of the Mersin Metropolitan Municipality (Şahin, 2019). The documentary reveals these women's efforts to stage Shakespeare's *King Lear* by traveling to remote mountain villages where even water is scarce, and how their world and the world of the play intertwine during this journey.

In the film, Shakespeare's canonical text is localized and staged as *Queen Lear* by the women of Arslanköy, and this localization process paves the way for both individual and collective transformations of women. In this context, the experience offered by the documentary can be evaluated as the expression of a feminist practice of subjectivation established both on stage and on the movie screen (Çiçekoğlu & Nuhurat, 2021). Esmer's approach to this process through cinema is not limited to telling women's stories. The cinematic design of her documentary's narrative also raises the question of how documentary aesthetics relate to gender. In particular, the film's approach to reality, editing preferences, camera positioning, and the omission of a narrator suggest an alternative narrative strategy that falls outside classical documentary conventions

(Çelik, 2021). In the context of feminist film theory, the representation of the female subject is not only about becoming visible on the screen, but also about how and through which aesthetic means she tells her story (De Lauretis, 1987). In this context, *Queen Lear* opens a space of possibility where the documentary form can be politicized along with women's artistic production processes. Among the limited number of works that can be considered within the feminist documentary tradition in Turkey, Pelin Esmer's style has a unique place, especially in terms of its emphasis on the transitional nature of documentary narrative (Çiçekoğlu, 2019).

However, evaluations of this film in the existing literature mostly focus on the self-confidence women gain on stage, their transformation, or the potential of theater to make them visible (Çiçekoğlu & Nuhurat, 2021; Yavuz, 2023). A significant portion of these readings do not sufficiently address the narrative structure, temporal organization or formal layers of the documentary. However, feminist narrative strategies cannot be fully grasped without considering the relationship between representation and form. In particular, the relationship of cinematic narrative to the audience is established not only by content but also by form, and the political context of these formal choices is decisive for feminist cinema (Smelik, 2008).

In this context, the aim of this study is to analyze the documentary *Queen Lear* from a feminist perspective within the framework of deconstructive documentary aesthetics, and to reveal the story of rural women's emancipation through theatre, with a particular focus on the film's cinematic narrative. In doing so, it aims to contribute to the debates in this field by prompting the reader to consider how feminist filmmaking intersects with narrative forms.

In the study, the film is analyzed along two main axes. The first one is the analysis of how the processes of subjectification and public visibility that women realize through theater practice are presented in the documentary. In this framework, through thematic analysis, women's words spoken on stage, body language, spatial movements, the relationship they establish with everyday life and the narratives they reconstruct through theater are evaluated in the context of the feminist subjectivation process. In this context, theater is considered both as an individual space of expression and as a collective space of resistance against patriarchal norms.

In analyzing the narrative style of the documentary, the role of narrative style in establishing the documentary's critical perspective on the subject it addresses and the narrative strategies employed by the director within this framework were examined. It discussed how the deconstructive aesthetic strategies observed in the narrative structure of the documentary shape the discourse of the documentary and what kind of contributions they make to the production of thought through the film. In particular, elements such as editing structure, non-linear use of time, narrative techniques that separate sound and image, intuitive and non-invasive camera placement, and intertextual references are evaluated in line with the deconstructive aesthetic approach (Dillon, 2018; Punday, 2003). These formal choices break the classical causality and realism of the narrative, inviting the viewer into plural and open-ended fields of meaning instead of a singular truth.

2. Literature Review

Pelin Esmer's documentary *Queen Lear* stands out as a film that positions women as active subjects who construct and transform narrative. This multi-layered structure of the documentary,

which discusses women's subjectivation in the processes of artistic production, both at the level of representation and through cinematic narrative strategies, requires an academic discussion to have a similar multi-layered structure. In this context, this study has a conceptual approach that brings together feminist film theory, deconstructive narrative strategies and localized cultural production processes.

Feminist film theory, which critiques women's representations in visual narratives, focuses on the narrative construction practices that shape their portrayal, the positioning of their bodies and voices, and the transformation of story structure (De Lauretis, 1987; Smelik, 2008). Within the framework of this theory, the female subject is not passively subjected to representation but exhibits an active existence as a constitutive element of the narrative. This activism is possible at both the content and form levels. In documentary films based on feminist film theory's critique of traditional representations of women, methods and techniques that more strongly reflect female subjectivity are being explored. In this framework, elements such as the structure of the narrative, time, space, sound and the point of view of the documentary can take forms that go beyond the dominant patterns. For example, strategies such as the non-linear construction of the narrative, the subjective perception of time through fragmented narratives, and the organization of character development in a circular rather than hierarchical manner are feminist aesthetic approaches that question classical narrative norms (Minh-ha, 2014). In this sense, *Queen Lear* is an example that not only makes women visible but also opens the question of the aesthetic ways in which this visibility is constructed. The narrative form of the documentary deviates from linear time and establishes a structure that prioritizes memory, intuition and affect (Çelik, 2021).

Thus, another theoretical framework on which this study is based is the deconstructive narrative approach. Following in the footsteps of Jacques Derrida (2012), this approach highlights the unfixability of meaning in texts, the dissolvability of the center, and the slippery nature of representation (Punday, 2003; Dillon, 2018; Aker, 2022). The narrative structure in the documentary *Queen Lear* is not based on a fixed and authoritarian gaze; the camera is not an external eye, but an element that participates in the process and transforms in response to it.

In the existing literature, most evaluations of the film *Queen Lear* highlight theater as a means of emancipation for women, discussing their relationship with the stage in terms of personal development, the acquisition of self-confidence, and access to the public sphere (Kırel, 2009; Ildır, 2020; Çiçekoğlu & Nuhurat, 2021; Yavuz, 2023). While these studies address the representation of women in the narrative, they overlook the aesthetic structure and narrative strategies of the documentary. Therefore, revealing how *Queen Lear* proposes a political narrative at both the content and form levels fills an important gap that will contribute to feminist documentary literature.

In this context, focusing not only on what the documentary conveys, but also on how it conveys it, and examining the political effects of cinematic narrative at the levels of both representation and form, can offer a new perspective on feminist aesthetic debates (De Lauretis, 2021: 118, 119). In the film, the process of women's subjectification is constructed not only through the words on the stage, but also through the editing, time and sound structures in the cinematic narrative. Therefore, analyzing both the theme and the form of the narrative together will facilitate a deeper understanding of feminist narrative politics.

In this context, the research will seek answers to the following fundamental questions:

RQ1. How does the film portray the process of adapting the universal King Lear text for a local audience?

RQ2. How does the film approach the relationship that women establish with theatre and the transformation that theatre brings to their lives?

RQ3. How do the narrative and cinematic elements employed shape the film's perspective?

3. Theater as a Tool to Liberate Women

3.1. *Queen Lear*: The Intersection of Shakespeare and Local Life

Queen Lear is a sequel to the director's earlier film *The Play*. It has been 14 years since *The Play*, and all the characters have aged a bit, and both their characters and their fates have changed. In the movie *The Play*, these women are portrayed as strong and self-confident. They are brave in doing something that has never been done before and breaking social taboos. However, when these two films are compared, it is seen that the women in *Queen Lear* are much more self-confident characters. They also took an active role in business life. Therefore, the film reveals that theater has become a means of individual and social transformation beyond being an art practice, especially for women living in rural areas. In this context, the primary purpose of the documentary is to explore the potential of theater to empower women to achieve their goals and to reveal the dynamics of this process.



Image 1: Scenes from the play *Queen Lear*.

The documentary *Queen Lear* demonstrates this approach through a theatre tour and the revival of Shakespeare's *King Lear* with an indigenous interpretation. In the documentary, we see a play that slowly takes shape through conversations in the mountain villages of Mersin, in the amphitheatres of the ancient cities of the region, on the seashores and in the gardens of the houses where they are guests; a play that starts with improvisations, turns into a Shakespeare adaptation, and then turns into a *Queen Lear* story in the process of local actress Fatma Fatih's portrayal of *King Lear*. This transformation is based on the director's idea, 'What if Shakespeare's sentences spontaneously transformed into their own sentences?' and was achieved through subtle intervention by the rural women's theatre group.

This transposition is not simply a change of location or gender, but a redefinition of genre and cultural framework. Shakespeare's classic English play has gained a new identity, a new language, and a fresh face in the depths of Turkey. Instead of imitating Anglophone dramatic traditions, the

theater troupe in the documentary blends them with local Turkish dramatic traditions, such as folk theater, and presents them to Turkish audiences (Öğütçü, 2023). Thus, the troupe's performance offers new perspectives on Shakespeare's universality. In this process, *King Lear* has emerged with all the nakedness of the social and spiritual conflicts it embodies and has evolved into a mosaic painting with intertwined cultural layers.

In the hands of these women, Shakespeare's magnificent play, set in royal palaces, takes center stage in village squares and conveys the realities of life. On the day the play is to be staged, the women and the villagers work together to prepare the sets, set up the chairs, and prepare the make-up and costumes. While the documentary reveals *Queen Lear's* efforts to reach the people in these places where even water can hardly reach, it also questions universal truths about the difficulties of life, injustices and inner conflicts of human beings. By adapting the story to the region, life, old age, death, the loneliness that awaits us when we grow old, the economic relations between children and fathers, the distribution of property, our greed for money, and our relationship with money suddenly evolve into a local story. Rural women adapt the play to their own lives, their language, and expectations. Just like that, *King Lear* ceases to be just a play and becomes a tool for women to reinterpret their own lives. As Çiçekoğlu and Nuhrat point out, the most interesting thing about the performance, in which they are inspired by a play written four hundred years ago for another geography and reenact property and power relations that resemble those of that period, is that they are able to imagine a matriarchal model instead of patriarchal power and present the characters convincingly within that framework (2021: 523, 524).

3.2. Reinterpreting Patriarchal Codes

Arslanköy women's theater practice is not limited to stage performances but is based on a dynamic process involving direct social interaction. During their visits to different villages, they establish direct contact with individuals and communicate with the local community by going from street to street and house to house. During these interactions, they share their own artistic experiences and share information about theater production processes. At the same time, they aim to create a transformative space in the context of gender roles by encouraging women's participation in forms of artistic expression. This shows that theater is not only an aesthetic practice but also functions as a tool that supports social participation and cultural change.



Image 2: Rural women persuading local residents to attend the theater.

In the villages they visit, the cast and crew try to convince the people of their work. However, they mostly hear the word "kismet" from the villagers in return for the invitation. Fatalism and the continuity of order is acceptable for these people. However, the women of Arslanköy are

determined to change this fate (Çiçekoğlu, 2019). When Esmer's camera catches the women while the bus is traveling along the cliff, one of them explains that fate is changeable by giving an example of herself, while another expresses her skepticism about it. In the ongoing discussion between the women, the ontological and epistemological dimensions of fate are addressed, with an emphasis on the attitudes of individuals toward believing in fate and the phenomena that can be accepted as fate. In this context, the boundaries between structural determinants and individual agency are questioned. According to Zeynep, factors such as the place where an individual is born, her parents, the moment of birth and death can be considered as fate because the individual has no will or influence over them. However, all other circumstances should be excluded from the concept of fate as they depend on the choices and actions of the individual.

In a similar speech, Zeynep said, *"I would also like to have a mother in Europe, to be born there. But this is fate because I didn't have a chance. I don't have a choice, so this is it. I cannot determine the moment of my death. But I don't consider the events of my life as fate"* (Esmer, 2019), expressing how theater liberates and encourages women, and how it helps them change their fate. Thanks to the theater, Arslanköy women are able to express themselves and represent the realities of life and bring them to the audience. In doing so, they are also changing their own destiny. Through the theater, the women realize that fate is something that can be "turned" and that it does not bind the individual. Thanks to the space for wailing that the theater offers them, their evaluations of their own agency, their lives, and the field of action they inhabit are transformed (Çiçekoğlu & Nuhurat, 2021 p. 523). Director Esmer states that the female actors and the women in the villages have an incredible interaction, and she believes that women and children from those villages will not only continue this interaction but also take action (Şahin, 2019).

The effect the women create in the mountain villages where they take to the stage reveals surprise and enthusiasm at times, resistance at others, and the change that occurs in the aftermath. Taking advantage of the liberating movement of the theater, the film reveals the process of questioning and searching by allowing transitions between roles and real life; it makes clear the back and forth between life, documentary and fiction (Çelik, 2021: 842). In an interview, the director expresses the questioning in the story as follows: "...the property curiosities of the children who are after the death of the father, whose death is approaching. It's very familiar to them, actually to all of us. Therefore, our relationship with property became a question like "Would I do this?". The nice part was that Shakespeare's text made them ask their own questions (Şahin, 2019).



Image 3: The actress's persuasive speeches.

The videos featured in the performances, which reflect the real-life stories of the actresses themselves, encourage empathy between the audience and the actors and motivate women in the process of constructing their subjectivity. We hear Fatma's disappointment and regrets in the following words from the video:

"I always wanted to be a teacher. I said to my father, "Dad, will you send me to school?" "I will, my daughter. You study well. Pass the class. I'll send you to school." I passed the class. Fall came. Everyone was enrolling in middle school. I said, "Dad, are you going to enroll me?" He said, "Daughter, isn't it enough that you teach goats?" So that's how I ended up teaching goats for 16 years (Esmer, 2019). At this point, the staged show appears not only as a work of theater, but also as a deep-rooted social criticism and a means of social resistance. From time to time, Esmer's documentary critically examines women's traumatic experiences, the conditions that prevent them from constructing their own stories, and the patriarchal world that restricts them, while at the same time tracing the hopes that enable women to hold on to life despite everything.

In the *Play*, these women initiate change for themselves through theater; in *King Lear*, they become the carriers of change by sharing the experiences they undergo with women in other villages. This is why the director includes dialogues between the theater women and local people, especially little girls in other villages. According to Esmer, these women tell other women, *"Look, I am like you, I milked cows like you, I go to work for a daily wage like you, but look, I am doing something and something is happening"* (Esmer, 2019). Esmer says that instead of feeling pity, we desperately need to be able to see someone doing something through struggle, and that the main reason she made this film was the hope it gave her (Şahin, 2019).

While women's turning to theater as a space for self-realization, producing their own words and voicing their own stories, opens up space for them to break free from their own shells, they are at the same time monitored by the patriarchal network in which they exist. In the videos projected on the screen as part of the performances in the mountain villages, the negative comments reflected from time to time on the words of the women's husbands point to the masculine network that surrounds them, while at the same time expressing their discontent with the violation of their own sphere of power. In this context, theater emerges as a form of existential construction and resistance for women, extending beyond mere performance.

3.3. The Reconstruction of Women's Presence in the Public Sphere

In the documentary and in the staged play-meets-reality performances, the life experiences and invisible emotional labor of the individual are made visible through the stage (Çiçekoğlu & Nuhrat, 2021, p. 520). The stage opens space not only for the expression of emotions but also for the recognition of socially repressed or ignored experiences. In this respect, *Queen Lear* shows both the rural women and their audience the power and courage to stage their own stories, their own voices and their own lives. In this respect, it represents a cultural transformation, a calling out and an awakening.

The theater makes visible the emotions and emotional labor of the women of Arslanköy, and from this perspective, it provides catharsis. According to Esmer, witnessing those women transmit their achievements to other women in other villages and serve as role models for them and their children is profoundly exciting (Şahin, 2019). Living in rural areas, these women perform invisible

labor in various practices of daily life; they work in the fields, take care of children, run household chores and shepherd. However, the act of "making theater" by the women of Mersin Arslanköy takes them out of these routines and into a different experience. This process is not only an artistic production practice, but also an opportunity to question gender roles and break existing stereotypes. Theater becomes a tool that enables women to transcend the boundaries of the private sphere and to exist in the public sphere. Thus, the transformative power of theater emerges as a dynamic element that contributes to emancipation processes at the individual and social level. Thus, the film reveals how the notions of "visibility," "representation," and "recognition" that we often encounter in everyday life and academia are experienced; it fills these concepts with stories of labor. Labor stories gain voice, become active, emerge from their suppression and become free. Theater becomes the "translator-interpreter" of labor, so to speak. (Çiçekoğlu & Nuhurat, 2021: 523).

The Arslanköy women's challenge to social norms through art, and more specifically through Shakespeare's work, demonstrates the universality of art and how it can be reproduced across different geographies and social contexts. In this context, beyond being a form of aesthetic expression, theatre functions as a space where individuals and communities can exist and transform themselves.

4. Deconstructive Narrative

4.1. Observer Style and Beyond

The documentary *Queen Lear* continues the critical discourse it fosters through its subject matter and approach, utilizing a unique narrative style. The documentary essentially corresponds to the observational mode, one of the documentary film narrative styles defined by Bill Nichols as poetic, expository, observational, participatory, reflexive, and performative (2001: 134). According to Nichols' classification, observational documentaries represent a narrative form that claims to be less interventionist and became widespread with the development of portable and small-sized recording devices. In this style, the director assumes the role of a mediator, conveying the flow of events to the viewer. Small, easily portable, and unobtrusive cameras are used, allowing the director to record people without drawing attention. In this way, the natural behaviors of the characters are foregrounded (1991: 33). However, scholars such as Bruzzi (2002) and Ward (2005) point out that these modes can be reductive, and that some documentaries may be too experimental and "heterogeneous" to be confined to a single mode.

In *Queen Lear*, although Esmer occasionally incorporates participatory elements by engaging in direct dialogues with her characters, she generally adopts the observational style and documents the women's theatrical and personal journeys without direct intervention. The technical possibilities provided by the digital camera also support this structure. As Çiçekoğlu and Nuhurat (2021) emphasize, Esmer's camera is small, practical and inconspicuous. This makes it easier for the director to conceal her presence, which reinforces the sense of "naturalness". Esmer's camera softly intervenes in the daily lives of the women; it does not alienate them but helps them participate in the scene. At this point, the camera goes beyond being merely a tool of observation and becomes a witness and facilitator of the transformation in which the women exist. In this respect, the director's choice goes beyond bearing witness. Behind the invisibility of the camera lies a strong ethical and political orientation. Beyond promising the viewer a more "authentic"

representation, the director's non-intrusive attitude becomes a strategy that underlines the feminist documentary tradition.



Image 4: Philosophical reflections during the journey.

In this context, in both *The Play* and *King Lear, Esmer*, by positioning herself behind an actual camera that captures the spontaneous flow of everyday life in all its aspects, attempts to present women's experiences to the audience in an authentic manner. Here, the director's aim is to narrate the transformation processes of women without suppressing their voices, by creating space for them to tell their stories in their own words. As Kirel (2009) points out, this preference also reflects the director's effort to establish a film language outside patriarchal narrative structures. At this point, it is very important to avoid the external voice narration commonly used in documentary cinema. Instead of an external narrator, the director gives the floor directly to the women who experience the process, allowing them to tell their stories in their own voices.

Pelin Esmer's camera follows the traditions of observational documentary while simultaneously constructing a structure that exposes the power relations embedded in those traditions. The director's style also assumes a deconstructive function in terms of the relationship documentary cinema establishes with its object. The narrative strategies Esmer employs reveal an approach that questions the claim of documentary cinema to "reflect reality" (Cowie, 2011: 1) and constructs reality. This attitude redefines Esmer's position as a director and prevents the viewer from remaining in a passive position. Beyond witnessing the narrated experiences, Esmer attempts to encourage the audience to reinterpret them from their own perspective. In this respect, *Queen Lear* can be considered as a cinematic text that transforms, deconstructs and politicizes the observational documentary style.

4.2. Intertextuality and Indigenization of Interpretation

Pelin Esmer constructs the documentary *Queen Lear* as an intertextual structure that references various narratives, historical and cultural contexts. Intertextuality, one of the defining characteristics of postmodern narratives, refers to a text gaining meaning through its relation to other texts. In bringing Shakespeare's *King Lear* together with the experiences of the women of Arslanköy, Pelin Esmer, beyond an adaptation, realizes a reinterpretation that transcends cultural, spatial and temporal boundaries and reinterprets its meaning. As Öğütçü (2023) states, *Queen Lear* offers a new perspective by blending Shakespeare's universality with local narratives. The women's daily conversations, improvised lines, conversations with children and villagers are used as elements of this new narrative. Elements such as the place where the women live, their familial

relationships, the language they use, the bodies they carry, and their inner worlds also add new meanings to Shakespeare's dramatic universe.

Pelin Esmer's intertextual design in the documentary is not limited to Shakespeare's text. Ancient theater performances, the documentary *The Play*, and the interviews and images she shot during that period are also used as part of the narrative of *Queen Lear*. There are quite natural transitions and interactions between these different narratives and layers of reality. The director creates a multi-layered narrative by weaving together different periods and narratives that belong to these periods. This choice of director is an effective way of conveying the hybrid nature of the culture, with ancient roots, to the audience. The scenes in which these intertextual and inter-temporal connections are most evident are the rehearsals in the ancient city of Anemurium, which also constitute the film's opening scene, and the staging of the women's relationship with the ancient city. Çelik (2021) emphasizes that the scenes showing women rehearsing among the ruins of the ancient theater represent different dimensions of time simultaneously. In this scene, the historical memory of the place is positioned together with the voices of women in the present. Thus, the boundaries between past and present, classical and modern, universal and local are eliminated and the relation between them is emphasized.



Image 5: Rehearsals of the actresses in the ancient theater.

The documentary also shows local people watching the rehearsals in the ancient theater through the ruins of these old buildings. The director, who opens the play, calls out "my dear people", a reference to the fact that the people living here are the carriers of historical continuity. On the other hand, while Shakespeare's narrative is set in ancient times with today's local people, and different layers of time are combined on the same plane, the team excavating the ancient theater is also included in the same frame. A similar interaction and relationship established between memory and the present through the theater is also maintained through the inclusion of the excavation works on the stage. Thus, the director portrays the show that is the subject of his film as an archaeological excavation, a time travel that reveals the layers of time and relates these layers to one another.

This relationship that the documentary establishes with time and memory reflects a Henri Bergsonian approach. Bergson conceives memory and time as interrelated and argues that both are in a state of indivisible continuity. In this uninterrupted flow of time, which the author expresses with the concept of "durée" (Bergson, 2017, p. 70), the past, present and future are intertwined. According to Bergson (2007; 2017), every moment includes all the moments that have come before and carries potential for the future. As time progresses, the past, a process of

construction associated with consciousness, grows and is constantly reshaped in relation to the present moment. Bergson conceives memory as an accumulation that takes place within the continuity of time and always maintains its connection with the present. The consciousness of the present is grounded in the past, and the past constantly shapes us in the present (2017: 79). In this framework, Pelin Esmer's emphasis on memory and cultural continuity through intertextual connections is particularly meaningful in the context of her attempt to understand contemporary consciousness. Like Bergson, Esmer makes sense of consciousness within the relationship she establishes with memory and again resorts to a state of consciousness related to these roots in order to stretch the boundaries of the cultural universe built on the accumulations of the past and limiting the main characters, the women. She "translates", localizes and reconstructs ancient narratives and representations with a feminist perspective in order to produce an alternative discourse.

The documentary's relationship with the past and memory also encompasses the connections that the characters establish with their own pasts. The film's narrative builds dynamic relationships between the characters' past moments and their present. For example, the thoughtful expression on the Queen's face in close-up as she waits for her turn backstage to take the stage set up in the square of a mountain village is followed by a flashback to an interview she gave 14 years ago, in which her expectations from life and hopes for the future are voiced. Thus, while giving an impression of the path she has traveled in life in the time that has passed since then, the trace left by this journey in her inner world is expressed. In this context, a Bergsonian approach emerges, and it is emphasized that the present is built on layers of memory, while consciousness is positioned as a form of memory interaction in an uninterrupted flow towards the future. Within these interactions with memory, the documentary acquires a dynamic structure that emphasizes the relationality between different layers of space and time.

4.3. Episodic Flow and Dispersion of Time

In the documentary *Queen Lear*, the narrative diverges from the conventional cause-and-effect dramatic structure of classical cinema, instead adopting an episodic structure within the framework established by the dialogue, which explores different layers of memory and time. Episodic narrative consists of fragmented, non-linear and transitional scenes. Thanks to this structure, the documentary is not content with presenting a sequential order of events and invites the viewer to experience the complexity and uncertainty of life. As Yavuz (2023) points out, the film transcends the traditional dramatic narrative and conventional documentary film aesthetics, employing free editing. This approach makes it possible to intertwine theater scenes, details of daily life and memory.

Instead of building her story around a fixed center, Esmer creates a narrative of "becoming" by bringing together fragmented scenes. Becoming, which Deleuze (2017) describes as a continuous and immanent differentiation, refers to the comprehension of existence and thought in a continuous movement and change. Becoming, which expresses a kind of liberation from totalities and fixed subjectivity states, is a process in which the individual continues to be herself/himself and is open to other becomings (coexisting with other existences, hybrid but not identical), and thought is opened to different states of existence (Deleuze, 2013: 9, 10). With a similar approach, Esmer follows an ongoing movement and becoming in her documentary, rather than fixed

identities, definite outcomes or absolute transformation (Çelik, 2021 p. 826). This state of becoming emerges as a continuous flow and uninterrupted transformation both in the narrative and in the consciousness of the characters. The film progresses in an uninterrupted flow of theater rehearsals, women's personal memories, encounters, conversations and journeys. Thus, the director invites the viewer to experience this uninterrupted flow with an intuitive grasp and to participate in the narrative of becoming.

Within the aforementioned state of becoming, the film does not point to a specific beginning or end. Time, beyond being a calendrical progression, becomes the space of memory and intuition, of the changes the women experience in their inner worlds. Scenes are constructed intuitively rather than in chronological order. For example, when Fatma recounts a memory of the past, the image suddenly shifts to a scene from the movie *Oyun*. This temporal and spatial jump is actually a mental transition. As Çelik (2021) points out, through such choices, the film constructs both an individual and collective memory in the minds of the audience by bringing together moments in which past, present and future are intertwined.

The dispersal of time in the film brings with it the decentering of the narrative. No character is moved to the absolute center. Each woman's scenes continue the story from a different angle. This ensures the democratization of the narrative. This multifaceted structure of the narrative allows the audience to share different times, characters and experiences at the same time.

Esmer's choice of montage also supports this episodic structure. Chance encounters, spontaneous conversations, long shots and discontinuity in transitions between scenes evoke a kind of rhythm of life. Çelik defines this structure as "a cinematic journey that makes us feel the volatility of life" (2021: 839). In this way, the viewer is offered the opportunity to get lost in this story and transform with it.

This spontaneity-like flow of *Queen Lear* is based on a multi-layered journey through time, space and the worlds of the characters. The main location of the documentary is constantly changing roads and villages. The film deals with the theme of "journey", on both literal and metaphorical levels; the theme of the road is not limited to physical movement. While the women of Arslanköy physically travel through the mountain villages of Mersin, they also experience inner journeys into their own lives, pasts, desires and limitations. In this context, the journey in *Queen Lear* inverts the "hero's journey" (Campbell, 2003) motif of classical narratives. The protagonists here are ordinary rural women, and their journey leads to a universal search, visibility and transformation.

Pelin Esmer (Özsoy & Öztürk, 2017, p. 168) also states that the journey is linked to the feeling of "not belonging" and that this state offers a fertile field in cinema. The journeys depicted in the documentaries *The Play* and *King Lear*, which show women's transformation of the social context that limits them and their transition into the realm of individual freedom, exemplify the kind of productivity Esmer refers to.

In *Queen Lear*, the journey is also a metaphorical element of change and transformation. The change in the lives of the women performing the play and in the production processes of the cinema is also intertwined with the theme of the journey. The methods and techniques the director employs while constructing the narrative reveal a narrative that is not static, fluid, and emphasizes the process rather than the end. A process-oriented narrative also invites the audience to an

intellectual journey. In this respect, documentary differs from the narrative structure of classical cinema narrative, which is situated in linear time, has static rules, and emphasizes the cause-and-effect relationship.

4.4. Multilayered Narrative and the Limits of Representation

Queen Lear has a multi-layered structure composed of multiple narratives that complement each other and push the narrative possibilities of documentary cinema to its limits. The first of these layers is the dramatic narrative of the play staged by the women; the second is the individual life stories intertwined with this play; and the third is the cinematic reality recorded and edited by the documentary. Each of these narrative planes multiplies the meaning of the other. The permeability between these layers reaches its peak, especially in the scenes where the line between performance and reality blurs.



Image 6: Actresses as spectators looking at their own stories from the outside.

Within this layered structure that runs parallel to each other and intersects from time to time, women are sometimes actors, subjects of the documentary and sometimes narrators. Sometimes they even become spectators, looking at their own stories from the outside. So much so that the women of Arslanköy, who watch the documentary *"The Play"* on screens set up in village squares, together with the people of that village, comment on their world as reflected on the screen. As the boundaries between reality and representation blur, the women watching themselves on the screen look at their lives of years ago from the outside, through the eyes of a spectator. Similarly, the viewers of these performances occasionally become the agents of the narrative enacted on stage. In this framework, the boundaries between life and representation, fiction and reality, actor and audience disappear.

On the other hand, the fact that the women blend the roles they play with their own stories, transform them with improvised lyrics, local idioms, folk songs, and in a sense rewrite the narrative in their way makes these boundaries invisible. The actors play themselves and their characters; they often touch on the same subjects both on stage and in real life. In this way, the film establishes a network between theater and cinema, reality and representation, individual experience and collective story.

This narrative structure aligns with the fundamental principles of feminist cinema. Women cease to be the objects of the masculine cinematic narrative and become active narrators of their own stories. Esmer's camera is both a witness and an instrument of this transformation. The director's preference for a multilayered and permeable narrative structure, along with a deconstructive

cinematic approach, stretches the boundaries of documentary aesthetics and embraces the transformation that defines the women's experience as the essence of an original artistic approach.

5. Conclusion

In this study, Pelin Esmer's documentary *Queen Lear* is analyzed in the context of feminist film theory and deconstructive narrative aesthetics. The fact that women living in rural areas of Mersin reinterpreted Shakespeare's *King Lear* as *Queen Lear* and staged it reveals that women experience a feminist subjectivation through theater practice. Women use the theatre to make their voices heard and emancipate themselves in a male-dominated society and traditional village life. The localised reproduction of Shakespeare's universal text is documented in an artistic language.

The formal characteristics of the documentary play a supportive role in this process of feminist transformation. The episodic narrative structure adopted by Esmer moves the narrative away from the classical dramatic structure, allowing time and memory to be presented in a non-linear, fragmented manner. This preference coincides with the deconstructionist aesthetics' principles of decentering and the constant postponement of meaning. In the documentary, the seamless transitions between past, present and future allow the narrative to take shape in a polyphonic and dynamic structure instead of producing a fixed meaning. Thus, women's journeys through different experiences are conveyed through an open-ended and flexible narrative and aesthetic choices.

Esmer's narration also blurs the boundaries between the women's performances on stage and their real lives, turning the viewer of the documentary into an active participant. While witnessing the feminist transformation of women, the viewer simultaneously takes part in the process of making sense of their experiences. In this way, the documentary demonstrates that feminist subjectification and social transformation can be achieved through a dialogical relationship established with the audience.

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