

# From Aesthetics of Resistance to Aestheticization of Politics

## The Grotesque Mimicry of Joyful Dissent

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**ABSTRACT** In 2016, as the Turkish military's "security operations" targeting Kurdish towns in southeastern Turkey were in full swing, a series of disturbing photographs began to appear on social media. The photographs, which showed soldiers posing in front of derelict houses covered with graffiti written only a few moments before, had an almost "playful" quality to them whereby the act of killing was presented as an object of amusement. To achieve this effect, those who shot the photographs appropriated certain aesthetic practices of resistance, specifically the use of street art by protest movements in Turkey. This article calls the appropriation of these practices and their presentation in the photographs "the grotesque mimicry of joyful dissent." The photographs' mimicry seeks to serve multiple, and seemingly contradictory, purposes including the erasure of the memory of both the atrocities that were being committed at the time and the former struggles against the regime. What lies underneath this project of erasure and becomes visible in the photographs' display of power is the instability and fragility of the regime's violent rule, both within the region, which it treats as an internal colony, and beyond.

**KEYWORDS** photography, torture, aesthetic practices of resistance, politics of memory, mimicry of dissent

In 2017, Zehra Doğan, a Kurdish artist and journalist who reported from the Kurdish region of Turkey in 2015 and 2016, was found guilty of "terrorist propaganda" and given a prison sentence of two years, nine months, and twenty-two days by the Second High Criminal Court of Mardin Province for her news coverage and a painting of hers that she shared on social media. Over the last couple of years, the arrest and imprisonment of journalists, especially those who work in the Kurdish region, have become frequently used tactics in the Turkish government's efforts to control the media narrative. What makes Doğan's case unique is the court's criminalization of her painting, the image of which continues to be widely accessible on the internet (fig. 1).



FIGURE 1. Zehra Doğan's painting of destroyed Nusaybin. 2016.

The image that sent Doğan to prison is based on a photograph of a devastated Nusaybin (a district of Mardin, which is a predominantly Kurdish province located in southeastern Turkey) posted on social media by those who were associated with the Turkish security forces in the aftermath of the 137-day-long curfew imposed on the town by the Turkish state between March 14 and July 25, 2016. Shot from above, most likely with a drone, the photograph (fig. 2) shows five large, armored military vehicles parked in front of the utterly destroyed town, and a dozen uniformed military personnel leaving the area walking in formation; the walls of the few buildings that remain standing are covered by large Turkish flags. From the perspective of the security forces who took the photo, and for the accounts that shared it, the image, which announces the “successful” completion of security operations, must have been thought of as an indisputable proof of the awe-inspiring destructive force of the Turkish military in the face of its opponents. In this regard, the photograph in question, which glorifies death and destruction by transforming the image of the ruined town—now adorned with Turkish flags—into an object of “beauty,” brings to mind Walter Benjamin’s dire warning: “The logical outcome of fascism,” Benjamin writes, is “an aestheticizing of political life”; “all efforts to aestheticize politics culminate in . . . war” and in its “glorification”<sup>1</sup> through imagery characterized by, to adopt one of Martin Jay’s formulations of Benjamin’s notion of the aestheticization of politics, the grotesque application of aesthetic criteria to the destruction of human life.<sup>2</sup>

At first, Doğan’s painting appears to be a replica of the photograph. Indeed, more than anything else, it was this aspect of the painting that made Doğan’s almost three-year-long prison sentence so puzzling in the eyes of many. Banksy, the famous, anonymous Britain-based street artist, gave voice to this sentiment in



FIGURE 2. The photograph of Nusaybin taken shortly after the conclusion of the military operations.

his 2018 mural—done in collaboration with another street artist called Borf—on the Houston Bowery Wall in New York City. As Sarah Cascone puts it, the seventy-foot-long mural was placed “on a blank white wall and feature[d] a series of tally marks for each day of Doğan’s incarceration.” The work also displayed a portrait of Doğan behind the tally marks, made to resemble prison bars. Banksy, who projected an image of Doğan’s painting above the mural at night, shared the piece on his Instagram account with the comment: “One year ago Zehra Dogan was jailed for painting this watercolor of a photograph she saw in the newspaper. Protest against this injustice by re-gramming her painting, and tagging Turkey’s President Erdogan.” Asked about the motivation behind his protest over Doğan’s imprisonment, Banksy stated, “I really feel for her. I’ve painted things much more worthy of a custodial sentence.”<sup>3</sup>

But, of course, Doğan’s painting is not simply a copy of the photograph that she saw. When observed carefully, it becomes clear that the armored military vehicles in the painting have tentacles with claws that make them look like menacing creatures devouring their surroundings; one of these creatures has opened its monstrous jaws to welcome the soldiers filing in. Whereas the photograph shows nothing but a clear sky in the background, Doğan’s painting has an ominous dark cloud of smoke, leaving no doubt that the ruined town with bright red Turkish flags has just been destroyed by the very soldiers who are leaving the scene. Through her artistic representation of the image that she saw, in other words, Doğan unfetters the meaning that was originally imposed on the photograph by the regime<sup>4</sup> and turns it from a grotesque celebration where state violence is aestheticized into an expression of the atrocity committed by the Turkish Armed Forces (TSK). It is this conversion, which punctures the sovereign’s illusion of its ability to control the message of the photograph and lays bare the lie of the sovereign’s claim to absolute power, that transforms the painting into a threat to the regime’s stability and, consequently, renders it “worthy of a custodial sentence.”<sup>5</sup> The long prison

sentence delivered by the court serves as a warning as to how seriously such threats are taken by the regime. The court's absurd claim that the original photograph must have also been taken by Doğan for "terrorist propaganda" shows the lengths to which the regime is willing to go to retain its image of omnipotence. The disavowal of the photograph is also telling because it highlights the court's recognition that even a photograph such as this one, which is framed, shot, and disseminated for the purposes of the glorification of state violence, carries the potential for alternative readings. The court's ruling makes it clear that once such an alternative reading becomes public, the photograph in question does not simply lose its instrumental value for the regime; it also becomes a liability that needs to be neutralized at all costs. The ruling unwittingly affirms the ever-existing potential for, and significance of, alternative readings of photographs that are presented as the emblems of regime's power.

With this official, if inadvertent, acknowledgment of the subversive power of such readings in mind, this article focuses on another series of photographs that were posted on certain social media accounts by individual members of the security forces and disseminated by groups linked to the special operations units (specifically, Jandarma Özel Harekat [Gendarmerie Special Operations] and Polis Özel Harekat [Polis Special Operations], whose members use the acronyms *JÖH* and *PÖH*, respectively), around the same time that the Nusaybin photograph was shared on Twitter. I argue that these photographs are also a part of the aestheticization of politics, understood in the specific and narrow sense discussed above—that is, as the improper application of aesthetic criteria to the deaths of human beings. Surely, unlike the carefully choreographed promotional videos and images of the special operations units produced by professional photographers/film crews and officially distributed by the military, these photographs lack high production value. Still, they are crucial for the regime insofar as they too represent the annihilation of human life as an object of pleasure. In fact, shot by the soldiers themselves, the digital photographs, which show *JÖH/PÖH* operatives posing in front of derelict houses and inside empty buildings covered with graffiti that seems to have been sprayed only a few moments before, have an almost "innocent," mundane, even "playful" quality to them whereby the act of killing others is presented as a bloodless affair, a fun and carefree activity. To achieve this repulsive effect, those who shot the photographs turn to an unexpected source: aesthetic practices of resistance, specifically the use of street art by recent protest movements in Turkey.

Over the last decade, numerous protest movements challenged the authoritarianization of the government under the leadership of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan through practices such as the formulation of pithy and witty slogans, imaginative design and placement of graffiti and stencils, and creatively edited video clips. Following Jacques Rancière, I call these practices "aesthetic practices of resistance"

because they make it possible for those who are excluded from the existing order to find a way to catch the eyes of others, thereby disrupting the “distribution of the sensible” that renders them invisible and inaudible in the first place.<sup>6</sup> Thus, for instance, during the 2013 Gezi protests, which presented the most significant popular challenge to Erdoğan’s increasingly authoritarian rule, there was an outpouring of graffiti that made it possible for the protesters to force themselves into the realm of meaning and visibility. Making use of the privately owned public messaging system of the city, such as Istanbul’s Taksim-area billboards, storefronts, and ATM booths, protesters placed innovative graffiti whose disruptive content was articulated through the subversion of the ubiquitous language of advertising.<sup>7</sup> By imitating the language of others in this manner, the protesters did not simply make their criticisms of the government heard but, more importantly, made visible what had no business being seen—namely the lie of the invulnerability of Erdoğan’s rule to popular dissent.<sup>8</sup> As I demonstrate below, in 2015 and 2016, the regime sought to appropriate such resistance practices to erase their subversive impact and shore up the power of the regime by *re*-establishing the distribution of the sensible with all its hierarchies and exclusions. The attempted appropriation of the aesthetics of resistance by the Turkish regime, which is presented in the photographs, I suggest, is part and parcel of the regime’s aestheticization of politics, and can be best understood as the grotesque mimicry of joyful dissent.<sup>9</sup> Such mimicry is both an expression of what Nazlı Konya calls the regime’s “envy” of the *jouissance* that the protesters experienced in popular uprisings such as the Gezi protests,<sup>10</sup> and an attempt to erase the memory of such events by imitating the aesthetic practices of resistance so as to neutralize their disruptive power.

What are we to do with these photographs given the regime’s attempt to instrumentalize them by representing the destruction of people’s lives as an object of amusement to further injure those who are already on the receiving end of horrific violence? Posed in a vastly different context, Saidiya Hartman’s searing question concerning how to approach the archive of Atlantic slavery seems to have bearing here as well: “How does one revisit the scene of subjection without replicating the grammar of violence?”<sup>11</sup> Is it possible to look at these photographs and analyze them without furthering the harm that they seek to inflict? Or would it be better to simply avert our gaze? Such questions have ethical and political urgency since the photographs in question are not going away. “That is,” as Susan Sontag writes, “the nature of the digital world in which we live.”<sup>12</sup>

It is precisely because of their ongoing instrumentalization, and not in spite of it, that I believe it is important to pause over what these photographs show. For such images, as we have seen, carry the potential for alternative readings and can disclose what the regime seeks to erase and/or keep hidden. Such alternative readings, however, do not emerge out of nowhere; they require the difficult work of spectator-

ship, which Ariella Azoulay “anchor[s] . . . in civic duty toward the photographed persons who have not stopped being ‘there’”<sup>13</sup> even when their presence is marked by their conspicuous absence from the frame—as is the case in the photographs discussed in this essay. In Azoulay’s account, acting as “citizens of the citizenry of photography”<sup>14</sup> requires spectators to do more than merely look at the photographs; “the duty to resist injury to others who are governed”<sup>15</sup> demands “prolonged observation.”<sup>16</sup> For only prolonged observation makes it possible to discern in each of these photographs “through what is inscribed in it, the traces of an encounter surrounding the camera and of the power relations that allowed the photograph.”<sup>17</sup> For Azoulay, the responsibility of the spectator is to unfetter such photographs from the instrumental meaning that is imposed on them by powers that be. To do so, the spectator has to “reconstruct what was there from both what is visible and what is not immediately manifest, but what can—in principle—*become* visible in the exact same photograph.”<sup>18</sup> In this sense, “the act of prolonged observation by the observer as spectator,” Azoulay writes, “has the power to turn a still photograph into a theater stage on which what has been frozen in the photograph comes to life.”<sup>19</sup> I argue that when they are looked at with the intent to see the power relations that made them possible, what comes to life in the photographs disseminated by the special operations operatives in 2015 and 2016 is but a “compensatory drama” that reenacts what Elaine Scarry calls the “unconscious structure of torture.”<sup>20</sup>

Torture, Scarry argues, is a process whereby agonizing pain is first inflicted, and then objectified and rendered visible only to be “denied as pain and read as power.”<sup>21</sup> As I will demonstrate below, the disseminated photographs are part of a similar process whose purpose is “the production of a fantastic illusion of power” by an unstable regime whose legitimacy is in question. As such, the photographs that are analyzed here are “grotesque piece[s] of a compensatory drama.”<sup>22</sup> Acting as a citizen of the citizenry of photography and undertaking the challenging task of becoming a spectator of this repulsive drama both disclose the signs of the “illusory” nature of the deadly power that is exercised by the Turkish security forces and inscribed in the photographs, *and* demonstrate how the photographs’ mimicry of joyful dissent seeks to deny the pain the regime inflicts on its Kurdish citizens, hide the brutality of what was taking place in the region at the time, and, by intermingling violence and pleasure, stoke the colonial fantasies of its nationalist base. The photographs, in other words, are instrumentalized in the service of the erasure both of the atrocities being committed *and* of the former struggles against the regime through the falsification of what Benjamin describes as the “courage, humor, cunning, and fortitude” that is alive in each struggle of the oppressed and that “constantly call into question every victory, past and present, of the rulers.”<sup>23</sup> What lies underneath this project of erasure<sup>24</sup> and becomes visible in the photographs’ display of power, in other words, is the instability and fragility of the

regime's violent rule, both within the region, which it treats as an internal colony,<sup>25</sup> and beyond.

The first section of the article provides the political context that produced the images in question through a brief account of the urban warfare that erupted between the military wing of the Kurdish movement and the Turkish security forces in southeastern Turkey shortly after the collapse of the peace process in 2015. While there were military clashes and curfews all around the region during 2015 and 2016, my focus is on the gross human rights violations perpetrated by the state in Cizre (a district of Şırnak) and Sur (a historical district of Diyarbakır). The second section provides detailed analyses of the photographs that were disseminated during this period and challenges their ongoing instrumentalization as nationalist emblems that serve as celebratory tokens of the regime's victory. I conclude the article with a discussion on the political stakes of the intellectual work that goes into offering alternative readings of photographs such as these, which not only render visible the atrocities that the photographs themselves seek to deny but also highlight the instability and insecurity of the regime in the very moment that it claims omnipotence.

### **From Peace Process to Basements of Horror: Erdoğan's Deadly War Hawk Coalition**

Two years after the Gezi protests, which constituted the most significant popular challenge to Erdoğan's then twelve-year-long rule, his Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi, AKP) received another blow in the parliamentary elections of June 2015. To the surprise of many, the Peoples' Democratic Party (Halkların Demokrasi Partisi, HDP) became the first political party with a predominantly Kurdish base to pass the 10 percent electoral threshold, preventing the AKP from forming a single party government for the first time since it took power in 2002. The HDP's historic electoral success, however, did far more than simply hand the AKP's one-party rule its first electoral defeat. For Erdoğan, the 13 percent nationwide support that the HDP received made two points clear. First, the results confirmed that the government's reluctant participation in negotiations with the Kurdish Workers' Party (Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê, PKK) as a part of the peace process and the two-and-a-half-year-long ceasefire in the region would not automatically translate into a larger share of Kurdish votes in support of the AKP as long as the HDP remained in the political arena. Second, the unprecedented level of popular vote that the HDP gained showed that the alliance between the left and Kurds struck after the Gezi protests helped the party extend its electoral base beyond the Kurdish region of Turkey, opening the door to its possible transformation into a formidable opposition party on the left with a nationwide appeal. In response, and refusing to accept defeat, Erdoğan called for a repeat election in November and formed what Harun Ercan aptly calls "a new war hawk coalition

with the nationalist political-bureaucratic elites<sup>26</sup> to crush the political hopes of the HDP. For many Kurds, the AKP government's response to the elections raised questions about the feasibility of achieving a political solution to Turkey's Kurdish question, giving rise to an unacknowledged rift between the political and military wings of the Kurdish movement with regard to how to proceed.<sup>27</sup>

As these new political calculations and realignments were underway, a suicide bomber with ties to the Islamic State (ISIS) detonated a cluster bomb in Suruç (a district of Urfa) on July 20. The attack, which killed thirty-three people and injured many more, targeted young activists as they were preparing to embark on a trip across the border to Kobanî—a city under the control of the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG), which is considered a terrorist organization by the Turkish government—to help with the reconstruction efforts in the aftermath of the town's siege by the ISIS forces. Two days later, in another district of Urfa, Ceylanpınar, two police officers were killed. The government claimed that the murders were committed by a militant group affiliated with the PKK as an act of retaliation for the security forces' alleged complicity in the Suruç massacre. Although the PKK denied responsibility for the murders later on (to this day, the case remains unsolved), the event provided the government with the necessary pretext to launch a series of airstrikes targeting the PKK camps located in northern Iraq on July 24, ending the ongoing ceasefire.

With the official collapse of the peace process, the war that had been going on between the PKK and the TSK for more than thirty years resumed. This time, however, the intense military clashes would not be limited to the rural areas and mountainous regions. In August 2015, fifteen Kurdish towns and cities declared “self-governance” (*özyönetim*), announcing that they would no longer consider the public officials appointed by the government in the region legitimate. Soon after the declarations, the local militarized Kurdish youth, who were either members of or had links to YDG-H—an organization commissioned by the military wing of the Kurdish movement to “increase the vanguard control of the movement at the neighborhood level, fight against drug use, and prevent depoliticization of youth during the peace period, especially within the urban strongholds of the movement”<sup>28</sup>—began to dig trenches and set up barricades with the avowed intention of “self-defense.”

The ideas of democratic self-rule through the people's assemblies organized at the level of neighborhoods, and autonomy from the central government, inspired many young Kurds, who were energized by the political experiment going on in the Kurdish-controlled areas of Syria<sup>29</sup> and were losing patience with the constant setbacks experienced by the nonviolent political struggle in Turkey. Yet, as Ercan powerfully argues, while they were symbolically powerful, the implementation of these ideas was poorly coordinated by the military wing of the movement giving



the government a clear tactical advantage.<sup>30</sup> The digging of trenches by the youth helped the government, and its representatives in the mass media, to argue that the PKK was in the process of launching a full-scale military assault to “turn Turkey into another Syria.”<sup>31</sup> Mobilizing the support of large sections of the Turkish population in this manner, in August the government began to impose curfews in Kurdish towns as the TSK gradually surrounded these urban enclaves.

In early September, as the election campaign was in full swing, Cizre experienced its first long-term, round-the-clock curfew, which lasted eight days. During this period, the town was completely sealed off from the outside world. The security forces set up roadblocks around the town preventing anyone from leaving or entering the area; they also cut off the phone lines, the internet connection, and, at least in some parts of the town, electricity and water. It was reported that because emergency access to medical care was extremely limited, a number of civilians who were sick, or wounded in the crossfire, could not be taken to hospital. Nor could people bury their dead. The bodies of those who lost their lives, including ten-year-old Cemile Çağırğa, were kept in cold storage to prevent putrefaction.<sup>32</sup> A day after a group of HDP MPs, who were trying to draw attention to what was going on in Cizre, tried to enter the town but were denied access, the Turkish government lifted the curfew, stating that over thirty PKK militants were killed during the clashes. The HDP claimed that at least twenty of those who were killed were civilians.<sup>33</sup> While the government continued to deny that there were any civilian casualties, the investigations conducted by international news agencies and local rights groups supported the HDP’s claims, drawing a grim picture of what went on during those eight days for the civilian population of Cizre, with shattering stories of lost lives, including those of children, and destroyed families, whose lives were already marked by the violence that had been a defining feature of the region for decades.

Although the events that transpired in Cizre during those eight days were truly horrific, they turned out to be a mere dress rehearsal for what was to come later on. In the November elections, the AKP regained its parliamentary majority. Emboldened by the election results, which proved that unlike the peace process, the new alliance with the nationalist bloc, military clashes in the Kurdish region, and the security discourse against a presumed existential “terrorist” threat could easily garner popular support among the Turkish population—the AKP increased its vote by 9 percent in only four months—the government intensified its military operations in the urban areas. The civilians living in “self-defense” zones were forced to flee through outright intimidation and the imposition of repeated, open-ended curfews. Forced displacement of civilians was followed by full-scale military attacks, regardless of who remained in the area.<sup>34</sup> It was in the midst of this escalation of violence that the government imposed what would turn out to be the longest and

most devastating uninterrupted curfews, first in Sur on December 2, then in Cizre on December 14. While the curfew in Cizre lasted seventy-nine days,<sup>35</sup> the curfew in Sur lasted more than five years, making it the world's longest uninterrupted curfew in record.<sup>36</sup>

In many ways, these curfews were reenactments of the counterinsurgency tactics that were first tried out in Cizre in September 2015. Once again, the urban areas were completely closed off. The roadblocks put in place by the security forces prevented people, including journalists, international monitoring organizations, and even members of the Parliament, from entering the conflict zones. Electricity, phone lines, the internet, and water were cut off; food deliveries were stopped and access to emergency medical care was largely blocked. Unlike what transpired in September, however, most of the neighborhoods of these densely populated areas were “evacuated” through the forced expulsion of civilians. Once these areas were declared “free” of civilian population, they were shelled with heavy artillery.

In late January and early February, a number of people from Cizre (mostly internally displaced people who had found refuge there as they were fleeing security operations elsewhere) managed to reach several NGOs and members of the Parliament by using their mobile phones to let them know that more than 150 civilians, including women and children, were trapped in the basements of several apartment buildings. Due to heavy shelling and snipers located on the rooftops of surrounding buildings, they claimed that they were unable to leave their locations and were waiting, without enough water, food, or medical supplies, to be rescued.<sup>37</sup> Most of these people lost their lives in those very basements from which they tried to reach the outside world. When the fact-finding missions of the HDP, the Republican People's Party (Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi, CHP), and local NGOs were finally allowed to enter the town on March 3—that is, almost twenty days after the government's announcement of the completion of security operations in Cizre—all they could find were partial mortal remains of an undetermined number of people in the ruins of destroyed buildings, which were either completely burned down in fires induced by shelling or razed to the ground after the end of military clashes, making it impossible to conduct an investigation. The fact-finding missions also reported that there were extensive offensive and insulting graffiti written, and in some cases signed by, members of the special operations units, throughout the town, either sprayed on the walls of heavily damaged buildings or inside people's apartments. The existence of graffiti, however, was hardly news for those who were following the events. For, starting in February 2016, Twitter accounts such as “*Terör Gerçekleri* (Terror Truths), *Özel Kuvvetler* (Special Forces), *Türk Özel Kuvvetleri* (Turkish Special Forces)”<sup>38</sup> had already started to circulate photographs of JÖH/PÖH operatives from various conflict zones, including Cizre and Sur, posing in front of similar graffiti.

## What Comes to Life? From Symbols of Omnipotence to Cruel Displays of Illegitimate, Illusory Power

In certain respects, there is nothing new in this recourse to photography within the context of war. Ever since the invention of the camera, warring parties have used photography to record their atrocities so as to preserve them as reminders of their military might, to garner popular support for the war, and intimidate their opponents.<sup>39</sup> The Turkish state, too, made extensive use of such photographic “proofs” of its supposed military success during the 1990s, especially through a “news” program called *Anadolu'dan Görünüm* (*Outlook from Anatolia*). Broadcast on state television every week, for fourteen years *Anadolu'dan Görünüm* brought to the comfort of people's living rooms news of the imminent total eradication of the terrorist threat, accompanied by professionally shot images of the TSK forces “deactivating” the PKK guerrilla in the mountainous terrain of the Kurdish region. In recent years, following the global trend of “digital militarism,”<sup>40</sup> such thinly veiled propaganda aired on national television gave way to public celebrations of military violence on social media. Within the Turkish context, digital militarism takes various forms, ranging from “hip” YouTube music videos<sup>41</sup> officially produced and disseminated by the TSK that showcase the military strength of the security forces to photographs shot and uploaded by individual soldiers, who share images of military paraphernalia or scenes of everyday life in military compounds. In all its various forms, Adi Kuntsman and Rebecca L. Stein argue, digital militarism enlists ordinary social media practices and users to the state's military project, thereby normalizing and minimizing state violence.<sup>42</sup>

I suggest that the photographs disseminated by the JÖH/PÖH operatives in 2016, which aestheticized war by transforming the destruction of human life into an object of pleasure and appropriated aesthetic practices of resistance developed in earlier protests, are different from the examples of digital militarism mentioned above as they serve multiple, and seemingly contradictory, purposes depending on the targeted audience. For the large segments of (mostly) Turkish citizens of Turkey, who observed the curfews imposed on the Kurdish towns, and the military operations that followed from afar, the photographs do minimize state violence, allowing it to be forgotten. In this regard, the camera operates the way John Berger suggests; that is to say, it “relieves” a significant section of the public, who may otherwise identify as the opponents of the current regime, “of the burden of memory”<sup>43</sup> of the atrocities committed in their name. For those who were living in the region and had to experience the ongoing violence firsthand, the photographs seek to further injure and harm, both by making light of people's pain and suffering and by serving as repositories of memory that link current destruction with specific traumatic events from previous waves of political violence.<sup>44</sup> Indeed, a 2017 report prepared by the Office of United Nations High Commissioner for Human

Rights (OHCHR), which documented the human rights violations that took place in the region during this period, stated that many in the region were deeply troubled by the photographs and interpreted their circulation “as an indication that soldiers had acted with deliberate intent to insult citizens of Kurdish origin.”<sup>45</sup> Finally, for the regime’s nationalist base, the seemingly quotidian images coming from the conflict zone that show soldiers having “fun” offer an opportunity to take part in, to adopt a phrase that Judith Butler uses to describe the torture photographs from Abu Ghraib, “a festive cruelty,”<sup>46</sup> where violence, desire, and colonial fantasies intermingle.

Needless to say, unlike the photographs that were taken in Abu Ghraib and leaked to the mass media in 2004, none of these photographs show torture. Nor do the PÖH/JÖH members pose in front of mutilated bodies.<sup>47</sup> The joy of the special forces operatives in the photos emanates from showcasing the graffiti they recently sprayed on bullet-riddled walls of emptied-out houses. It is this shameless display of pleasure taken in showing off the horrific outcome of the violence that one has exerted—in the ruins of at least three of those houses lay remains of the people who were burned alive as they were taking shelter—that makes these photographs, like the ones taken in Abu Ghraib, comparable to lynching photographs that were disseminated all around the United States in the form of postcards.<sup>48</sup> In this regard, what Sontag writes of the Abu Ghraib photographs extends to those that were disseminated from Cizre and Sur: “The horror of what is shown in the photographs cannot be separated from the horror that the photographs were taken.”<sup>49</sup> The very existence of the images and their public dissemination with impunity attest to the fact that neither the participants of these photographic encounters nor the regime found anything morally questionable in them. Thanks to this “moral stupidity,”<sup>50</sup> these photographs function as trophies, or souvenirs, which mark the chasm between those who are associated with the regime and those who are on the receiving end of violence, whose lives are rendered “‘destructible’ and ‘ungrievable.’”<sup>51</sup>

The photographs shot and circulated by the JÖH/PÖH units are similar to those from Abu Ghraib in another respect: even though they do not show torture, they too reenact its unconscious structure, whereby pain that is inflicted is first objectified and made visible only to be denied as pain later on and converted into an obscene and illusory display of absolute power.<sup>52</sup> One of the most transparent reenactments of this grotesque staging of fictional, yet deadly and cruel, power, can be observed in a photograph from Cizre (fig. 3).<sup>53</sup> Shot from an odd angle, the right-hand corner of the photograph shows a special operations unit operative wearing a black ski mask. The soldier’s right hand is lifted up, performing the salute of the ultranationalist Turkish Grey Wolves movement; his automatic rifle is placed on his right to ensure that it is in full view. In his left hand, he holds a Turkish flag as he is standing next to a large wall of what seems to be a residential building. It



FIGURE 3. This photo of a PÖH operative hailing from Cizre was widely shared on social media in February 2016.

is the graffiti sprayed on this shrapnel-scarred wall, and not the soldier, that is the focus of the photograph. Written in all capital letters, and followed by not one but two smiley faces, the graffiti reads: “AŞK BODRUMDA YAŞANIYOR GÜZELİM ☺ PÖH ☺.” Following a formula that was used to great effect in the street art during the Gezi protests, whereby products of popular culture were repurposed to ridicule the powers that be, and turning that formula into a grotesque celebration of state violence, the graffiti repurposes a phrase directly taken from a popular song, which can be translated as “Love is lived in Bodrum my beauty.” This perfectly trivial sentence acquires a sinister meaning when inscribed on a wall of an apartment building in Cizre, thanks to the fact that the word *bodrum* is a homonym. Used as a proper noun, as in the case of the song, it refers to a tourist town located in southwestern Turkey and known for its vibrant night life. Used as a noun, it means “basement.”

Posted on social media shortly after the news of people who were trapped in the basements of several buildings became public and as the rumors of a massive explosion targeting a neighborhood where one of those buildings was located were spreading, the photograph is not only a visualization of a tasteless sexist “joke,” where passionate love (*aşk*) comes to stand for sexual violence<sup>54</sup> and the annihilation of human lives is presented as the sexual violation of others for pleasure. What is at stake is also a public confirmation of a massacre that the regime cannot but deny officially but wants to be known as an example of what its security forces

can do with impunity. The photograph, through the graffiti it displays, objectifies what would have otherwise remained unknown, namely the pain of those who were burned alive. But this pain that is made visible is not recognized as pain: the graffiti's cruel wordplay turns it into a (bad) joke; the photograph of the PÖH operative posing by the graffiti converts the pain, which was first externalized, and then denied, into "an emblem of the regime's strength,"<sup>55</sup> to be shared with the world.

But the photograph does more than announce the regime's claim to have absolute power over the minority population that it targets. By showing the graffiti placed on the wall of an apartment building, the photograph also seeks to become a reminder to those who are the objects of state violence that walls that are built to protect the individuals within can easily become their murder weapons. This display of how everything can be converted into an instrument of pain and made to participate in the annihilation of human beings—or to use Scarry's words, "this world unmaking, this uncreating of the created world"<sup>56</sup>—is also integral to the structure of torture. The world-destroying aspect of these photographs takes on an even more distressing and intimate quality when the camera that frames them leaves the outer façade of the buildings and moves inside.

In another photograph, taken inside a classroom, we see a special operations soldier—this time a member of JÖH rather than PÖH—sitting behind a machine gun placed on a teacher's table. The soldier's face, which is covered in a green bal-aclava, is turned toward the camera. His right hand is raised to give the ultranationalist salute; on the blackboard behind him it is written, once again in all capital letters, "KÜSECEKSEN OYNAMAYALIM JÖH" (If you are going to sulk, let's not play), a familiar refrain used by older siblings to make fun of their younger playmates who become visibly upset after losing a game, now used to send a rather sinister message to YDG-H militants, some of whom were as young as fourteen or fifteen years old at the time of the military operations. The photograph has a warm, soft, even dreamy quality, thanks to the photo filter that is used. Like the one discussed above, this photograph is also shot at an odd angle to make sure that the phallic image of the massive machine gun remains fully in the frame. The photographer is clearly sitting at one of the students' desks (both the height of the desks and where the blackboard is hung suggest that this is an elementary school), and in front of him, caught in the frame perhaps by a mistake, is an open juice box that looks as if it was just left behind by one of the kids who normally go to school there.

Once again what we observe in the photograph is the staging of a repulsive drama whereby both human artifacts and social institutions that form our shared world are destroyed through a series of conversions. Thus, while the school is converted into a military post (confirming the rumors that the school buildings were used by the military as firing positions, a clear violation of humanitarian law), "playing" (*oynamak*) attains the perverse meaning of wounding and killing one's oppo-

nents. In this photo too, the pain, which is externalized and shown to the world both through the display of the machine gun and the writing on the blackboard, is denied as pain, with the help of the cruel attempt at being humorous by referring to the death and destruction of others as “sulking.” By falsifying the reality of the very thing that it has objectified, the photograph, which operates in a nexus of cruelty, violence, and pleasure, transforms the human suffering it made visible into a spectacle of power.

Yet, these photographs do not only dramatize the conversion of pain into power; they also make it possible to see that far from being absolute, the deadly power that is displayed is highly contestable and contested. When carefully observed, it becomes clear that the repulsive drama that is staged in these photographs is a compensatory one whose purpose is the “production of a fantastic illusion of power.”<sup>57</sup> One of the clearest signs of the illusory nature of the power that is displayed in the photographs is the conspicuous absence of residents of these Kurdish towns. The photographs show that despite the absolute power that the regime seeks to project, it cannot but fail to stage a scene of popular consent. Lacking popular support of any kind, the security forces try to leave “permanent” marks of their presence in the region by converting schools into military posts, vandalizing people’s bedrooms, spraying graffiti on the walls, and memorializing these acts in photographs. Significantly, they can perform all these actions so easily and shamelessly because there are no civilians left in areas that they operate. To use Azoulay’s powerful description, as “the present absentees”<sup>58</sup> of these photographs the civilian population of Sur and Cizre continues to haunt these images, highlighting that the military success of the regime rests on the forced expulsion of its own citizens from their homes. Read in this light, the photographs evidence the transformation of Kurdish towns into internal colonies by a military that acts as an occupying force.

As in the case of any occupation, the soldiers’ awareness that they lack legitimate authority brings with it a great deal of insecurity. This insecurity, too, is inscribed in the photographs that the regime seeks to instrumentalize as emblems of its strength. For most people, Sontag writes, photography is “a social rite, a defense against anxiety, and a tool of power.”<sup>59</sup> Photographs do not only “give people an imaginary possession of the past that is unreal,” they also, as evidenced by tourists’ constant dependence on the camera, help them “to take possession of space in which they are insecure.”<sup>60</sup> Given people’s tendency to deal with the anxiety that they feel in an unfamiliar place by having recourse to the camera, it is not too surprising that many of the images shared by the security forces use tropes of tourist photography as they grotesquely mimic their carefree attitude.

A significant number of these photos show graffiti that spell out where the photograph was taken followed by a greeting sent by the soldiers in the photo to their loved ones back at “home.” Hence, for instance, in one of the photos posted

from Sur, we see a soldier smiling at the camera—this is one of the rare photographs where the soldier’s face is uncovered, possibly due to the relatively inoffensive nature of the graffiti—leaning on a wall on which it is written, in a manner similar to a tourist’s postcard greeting to friends and family from an exotic place: “SURdan KARABUK ÜNİVERSİTESİNE SELAMLAR” (Greetings to Karabük University from Sur). In a much more disturbing and carefully framed photo that was shared on social media on March 2016, the “greeting” of the special operations operative is written on a mirror hung in the bedroom of a Yüksekova (a district of Hakkari, which had its share of curfews during this period) apartment. The soldier who is posing by the mirror, which reflects the image of the bed of the owners of the apartment, must have used the lipstick he found in the room to write “Aşk Yüksekova’da başka yaşıyor” (Love is lived differently in Yüksekova). This stomach-turning citation of the graffiti first used in Cizre (“Love is lived in Bodrum my beauty”) is adorned with the star and crescent of the Turkish flag placed in a heart shape, and signed with the words “Gonyali/Beyşehir,” announcing to the world that the soldier who staged this sickening display is from Beyşehir district of Konya.

While they are different in many respects, both photos disclose the anxiety and insecurity that these soldiers feel in these far away Kurdish towns. It is as if, being fully aware of the transience and fragility of the power that they have as members of an occupying force, the soldiers have turned to the camera to offer “indisputable evidence”<sup>61</sup> of what they had done over “there” and to display the enormous power that they held in their hands while it lasted. There is no better evidence of the fraudulent nature of that cruel and deadly power, and its lack of legitimacy, than the photo from Yüksekova, in which the member of the security forces places himself in an unimaginative copy of a crime scene of a sexually motivated murder lifted from a cheap cop show, where he plays the role of the serial killer/rapist.

But perhaps the most immediately visible sign of the illegitimacy of the power that is inscribed in the photographs is the presence of the graffiti itself. For indeed, graffiti is by definition an “unauthorized” act that unsettles “the regulation of visibility in public spaces.”<sup>62</sup> In densely populated urban areas, governments communicate with their citizens through the legal messaging system (such as billboards, signs, etc.) that they themselves place and regulate. The very presence of graffiti in the photographs shared by the security forces, then, shows either that the regime lacks access to the messaging system of the city, which highlights its lack of authority in the region, or that it is willingly acting as an occupying force by disrupting the legally organized urban visual space to assert its lawless power, which underscores its lack of legitimacy. For indeed, while the Turkish state did use methods of intimidation against its Kurdish population in the 1990s, which were in certain respects similar to graffiti, these methods always took official forms such as the massive visual displays of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk’s saying “Ne Mutlu Türküm Diyene” (Happy is the



one who says “I am a Turk”) placed by the military on the hillsides surrounding the Kurdish region. In this regard, the adoption of graffiti by the members of security forces and the regime’s implicit consent to the unobstructed circulation of their photographs on social media can be seen as tactical choices that seem to serve two different but closely related goals.

First, as the protesters’ savvy use of various forms of street art during the Gezi protests made painfully clear to Erdoğan, innovative and humorous appropriations and re-placements of the products of popular culture for the purposes of political messaging can be an extremely effective means of appealing to the general public and gaining its support.<sup>63</sup> And indeed, unlike the institutional expressions of state power, the graffiti of the soldiers could be presented as “authentic” expressions of the young and brave men in uniform letting off steam after intense battles where they not only risked their lives but also lost some of their brothers in arms. Such authenticity is precisely what Erdoğan tried to enact when, in a public speech delivered on February 9, 2016, he claimed that he got “very emotional” after receiving a photograph from two special operations operatives posing with a Turkish flag in front of graffiti that reads: “SENİ SEVİYORUZ UZUN ADAM/R.T.E” (We love you tall man/R.T.E.—which stands for Recep Tayyip Erdoğan).<sup>64</sup> This public acknowledgment of the photograph helped Erdoğan to drive a wedge between the “destructive” and spoiled youth who took to the streets during Gezi and the courageous young soldiers, who can be as playful as the Gezi youth while fighting for the survival (*bekâ*) of their nation and in support of its living embodiment in its leader.<sup>65</sup>

Second, the graffiti and the photographs that showcased them had another tactical value for the regime because their appropriation of the Gezi resistance practices was, and continues to be, a part of the regime’s attack on collective memory on two fronts. By mimicking the joyful dissent of protesters, those who are associated with the regime mimic the humor that was originally used to undermine the power of the sovereign to ridicule the oppressed minority and deny the pain that is inflicted on them. Such uses of humor, which deny human suffering and minimize state violence, make it easier for large sections of the population to “disremember”<sup>66</sup> the atrocities in question. In an essay on Abu Ghraib, Anne McClintock piercingly asks her readers to think about “what the photos conceal, what they allow us to forget.”<sup>67</sup> In this particular case, for the majority of the Turkish public, the answer to that question seems to be the cruelty of the deadly power used by the regime against its own citizens. The imitation of the aesthetic practices of resistance to glorify the regime’s rule of violence and to ridicule its opponents—that is to say, this particular way of aestheticizing the destruction of human lives—also seeks to produce two closely related effects: to neutralize the disruptive aspects of those resistance practices for the purposes of *re*-establishing the distribution of the sensible that renders the protesters invisible and inaudible, *and* to erase the

memory of the events of which they were a part. Such erasure is necessary because, as Benjamin suggests, even after being crushed, the humor, cunning, courage, and perseverance that characterize the struggles of the oppressed carry the potential to inspire new struggles, and, as such, continue to threaten the powers that be.

One of the most transparent examples of this project of reappropriation through mimicry, which is at the same time a project of the erasure of the collective memory of resistance, is a highly stylized photo of a special operations unit operative posing next to a wall marked by graffiti that reads: “NERDESİN AŞKIM/SUR'DAYIM AŞKIM! . . .” The phrase, which can be translated as “Where are you my love? I am in Sur my love!” is adopted from a popular song, which quotes the famous slogan “Nerdesin Aşkım? Buradayım Aşkım” (Where are you my love? I am here my love!) that was first used in the Pride parade of 2013 that was held shortly after the end of the Gezi protests. Within the context of the protests, the slogan was used as a powerful and humorous statement that despite the government’s refusal to acknowledge them as a community, LGBTQ people are present in all sections of the Turkish society. The roaring answer “I am here my love!” that came as a response to the question “Where are you my love?” rendered visible and audible a minority whose existence had been consistently denied by an oppressive society. The appropriation of the phrase by the security forces during the curfews sought to convert the subversive slogan into an expression of state oppression in a blatant attempt to rewrite its disruptive potential by putting it in service of a masculinist display of power. It is hard not to detect the signs of the regime’s ongoing attack on the memory of the life-affirming resistance of those who showed the courage to stand up against the authoritarian, oppressive, and discriminatory policies of an increasingly autocratic populist regime.

The regime’s attack on collective memory is not limited to the imitation of the aesthetics of resistance and the attempt to ridicule, minimize, or normalize the atrocities committed in the Kurdish region; it also involves the physical destruction of whole neighborhoods in the area. Cizre’s neighborhoods, which were completely destroyed soon after the end of operations to prevent human rights investigations, are now uniformly built and easily surveilled apartment complexes. What became the longest uninterrupted curfew in the world ended in Sur in April 2021 only after the completion of the five-year-long state-sponsored “urban renewal project.” The project largely destroyed the social and cultural fabric of the district—a district listed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site—by replacing historic buildings with apartment complexes likened to prisons by many of the displaced residents.<sup>68</sup> In both cases, the destruction of people’s houses also implies the erasure of vibrant communities with rich histories marked by past struggles. In the face of this deliberate erasure, it is more urgent than ever to carefully observe and reconstruct the power relations that made possible the photographs shot and disseminated by the

JÖH/PÖH operatives. For only by becoming spectators of this grotesque drama can we transform the photographs from emblems of power into evidence of the atrocities committed by an unstable regime that seeks to compensate for its lack of legitimacy by projecting an image of omnipotence.

### Conclusion

In “Vision’s Unseen: On Sovereignty, Race, and the Optical Unconscious,” Mark Reinhardt comments on Azoulay’s rereading of a series of daguerreotypes, which suggest that even in this photographic encounter, where the photographed subjects are enslaved men and women, the control of the photographer is “disrupted by the different looks in the eyes of each subject.”<sup>69</sup> “In such claims about the thoughts and feelings conveyed by the looks of people,” Reinhardt rightly detects a “risk of a kind of ventriloquism (born perhaps of a feeling that respecting the dignity of the enslaved requires us to find ocular proof of their humanity or courage).”<sup>70</sup> While the photographs analyzed in this article do not have the oppressed as their subjects—on the contrary, it is their conspicuous absence that marks these images—rereading them as expressions of the regime’s instability rather than as proof of its deadly power over the Kurdish minority may strike some as an equally unconvincing, if well-intentioned, practice. After all, the regime’s lack of legitimacy, at least within the Kurdish region, did not make it any less deadly.

Still, I believe in the necessity of offering such alternative readings even when they may come with the risk of being dismissed as being too naive. For it is important to emphasize that as acts of representation, the meaning of the photographs resists monopolization by the powers that be. It is the indeterminacy of their meaning that makes it possible for those who are willing to act as citizens of photography and take on the difficult task of spectatorship to puncture the sovereign’s illusion of complete control and transform the photographs into unwitting witnesses to the recent past so that we can begin to keep a record of the past struggles by honoring the courage and resilience of those who lost their lives and their loved ones. A remembrance of this kind is politically significant because, in its refusal to sign onto an account of history told from the perspective of the victors, it carries the hope and the possibility of a reconstruction of a shared world in the future. Today, as the attacks on the opposition are intensifying in Turkey, offering such a record of the past that bears witness to recent atrocities while underscoring the instability and illegitimacy of the regime that committed them is the least that we as citizens of photography can do in support of those who stand up against oppression by risking their lives to claim their right to full citizenship and resisting, with fortitude and perseverance, the violent repression of any public protest against Erdoğan’s autocratic rule and the unlawful imprisonment of the HDP politicians, journalists, and activists.

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### Notes

1. Benjamin, “Work of Art,” 41.
2. As Martin Jay argues, “Any discussion of the aestheticization of politics must begin by identifying the normative notion of the aesthetic it presupposes” and explain “why its extension to the realm of the political is seen as problematic” (Jay, “‘Aesthetic Ideology’ as Ideology,” 43). Of the three alternative uses of the term that Jay identifies, the first one refers to the grotesquely improper application of the “criteria of beauty to the deaths of human beings . . . and the chilling way in which nonaesthetic criteria are deliberately and provocatively excluded from consideration” (Jay, “‘Aesthetic Ideology’ as Ideology,” 44). The photograph discussed above is a clear example of aestheticization of politics in this specific and narrow sense. Needless to say, there is a rich and diverse literature on Benjamin’s complex notion of the aestheticization of politics, which he introduces in the final section of his “The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility” essay (Benjamin, “Work of Art,” 41). Many of these accounts point to Benjamin’s stark and deceptively simple differentiation between the “aestheticizing of politics” and the counteracting practice of “politicizing art” (Benjamin, “Work of Art,” 42). Thus, for instance, Miriam Hansen argues that the programmatic tenor of the essay and its “one-sided and reductive gesture . . . cannot be taken at its face value” (Hansen, “Benjamin, Cinema, and Experience,” 180). In a similar manner, Susan Buck-Morss suggests that while Benjamin does call for communism to respond to fascism’s aestheticization of politics by politicizing art, he certainly “must mean more than merely to make culture a vehicle for Communist propaganda” (Buck-Morss, “Aesthetics and Anaesthetics,” 4–5). For both commentators the issue at stake is less about countering efforts to aestheticize politics with political art and more about a demand

for art to transform human experience to address the “sensory alienation” that fascism “manages” so effectively (Buck-Morss, “Aesthetics and Anaesthetics,” 4). From Ariella Azoulay’s perspective, Benjamin’s formulation is “misleading” due to an “ungrounded shift” in his discussion: “the aestheticization is of the political, while the politicization at hand is of art, not of the aesthetics.” This “almost invisible jump,” has had a decisive impact in the artworld, resulting in the creation of a sharp, and to Azoulay unproductive, division between the artistic and the political as “mutually exclusive opposites and represent two directions in the practice of art” (Azoulay, “Getting Rid of the Distinction,” 245). My goal in this essay is not to intervene in this interpretive debate. Instead, in what follows, I try to demonstrate how the aestheticization of politics, understood in the narrow sense discussed above, can involve the appropriation of the aesthetic practices of resistance, such as the formulation of pithy political slogans, placement of graffiti, compilations of images, and composition of musical pieces, with the goal of erasing their subversive impact and shoring up the power of the sovereign.

3. Cascone, “Banksy Returns.”
4. Throughout the article, following Elaine Scarry’s choice of words in her discussion of torture (Scarry, *Body in Pain*), I will use the term “regime” to refer to both the formal and informal organization of political power and to the norms and principles that sustain the organizational structure in question (for the conceptualization of the term “regime” in political science literature see, among others, Lawson, “Conceptual Issues,” 184–86; Krasner, *International Regimes*, 1).
5. Cascone, “Banksy Returns.”
6. Rancière, *Politics of Aesthetics*, 7.
7. Thus, for instance, during the early days of the protests, the shutter of a MAC Cosmetics store became the setting for the expression of protesters’ cheerful defiance in the face of excessive use of tear gas by the police. The graffiti, which read “Biber Gazı Cildi Güzelleştirir ☺” (Pepper Spray Makes Your Skin Beautiful) took the generic and sanitized commercial language of the global brand and used it both to highlight what was being officially denied, namely the police’s excessive use of force, and to show that, contrary to the government’s efforts to render them mute by calling them “a couple of vandals,” the protesters were the ones who insisted on standing up against the senseless violence of the police with intelligence, cutting humor, courage, and perseverance (Çıdam, “Public Space,” 423–24).
8. I fully develop this argument and offer different examples of the protesters’ aesthetic practices of resistance in the Gezi protests in Çıdam, *In the Street*, 151–87; for an account of imaginative use of video art during the 2013 protests, see also Konya, “Breaking Billboards.”
9. In his essay “Of Mimicry and Man,” Homi Bhabha uses the term *mimicry* to theorize how former colonized people feel compelled to act like their colonizers. In this essay, I look at a different and equally complex dynamic whereby it is the oppressor who strives to imitate the resistance practices of those who are oppressed. Why would those who are in power mimic the behavior of the powerless? The answer to this question can be found in the different meanings of the word. For mimicry does not simply refer to the act of imitating or producing a copy; it is an act of imitation of the other “to entertain or ridicule” (*Oxford English Dictionary Online*, 3rd ed., s.v. “mimicry,” 1.a, <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/118659?redirectedFrom=mimicry>, accessed January 15, 2022). But this is not all. Mimicry is also a biological term that refers to the “superficial resemblance of two or more organisms,” whereby mimicry, like camouflage, “confers an advantage” to the organism that mimics

another, most frequently, by providing “protection from predation” (*Encyclopedia Britannica Online*, s.v. “mimicry (biology),” <https://www.britannica.com/science/mimicry>, accessed January 15, 2022). I suggest that both meanings of mimicry are at play in what I call “the grotesque mimicry of joyful dissent,” for, as I will demonstrate in the rest of the essay, the act of imitating the resistance practices for the purposes of ridicule betrays a degree of insecurity and lack of control that the regime seeks to hide at all costs.

10. Konya, “Making a People.”
11. Hartman, “Venus in Two Acts,” 4.
12. Sontag, “Regarding the Torture of Others.” And indeed, more than six years after the government’s announcement of the completion of security operations during which they were taken, the photographs continue to circulate in various corners of the internet as music photo collages posted on YouTube—a simple search of “Jöh Pöh Duvar Yazıları” (“Jöh Pöh Grafitti”) on YouTube gives access to tens of such videos from 2016–17—or pinned on Pinterest boards alongside stylized photos of military gear/personnel.
13. Azoulay, *Civil Contract of Photography*, 16.
14. Azoulay, *Civil Contract of Photography*, 192.
15. Azoulay, *Civil Contract of Photography*, 343.
16. Azoulay, *Civil Contract of Photography*, 168.
17. Azoulay, *Civil Contract of Photography*, 423.
18. Azoulay, *Civil Contract of Photography*, 159.
19. Azoulay, *Civil Contract of Photography*, 169.
20. Scarry, *Body in Pain*, 28.
21. Scarry, *Body in Pain*, 45.
22. Scarry, *Body in Pain*, 28.
23. Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” 255.
24. This project of erasure is, no doubt, complex. On the one hand, what is at stake is the continuation of what Paul Connerton calls the “repressive erasure” (Connerton, “Seven Types of Forgetting,” 60–61) used ever since the early nineteenth century by the state in its effort to create a unified Turkish identity—a project that involved not only the liquidation of minorities but also a concerted effort to erase the traces of their physical and cultural presence (see Üngör, *Making of Modern Turkey*). On the other hand, especially for the Turkish majority, the regime’s characterizations of the past and present atrocities as simple “security operations” or “unintended accidents,” have the effect of creating an experience best described as, to use Ann Laura Stoler’s word, “aphasia.” For indeed, the issue is not “a matter of ignorance or absence” of knowledge but one of “dismembering . . . a difficulty generating a vocabulary that associates appropriate words and concepts with appropriate things” (Stoler, “Colonial Aphasia,” 125). I argue that both kinds of forgetting are a part of the project of erasure that is discussed in this essay. I am grateful to the anonymous reviewer for helping me clarify this point.
25. I am not alone in making this claim. For an account that fully makes this argument and offers an excellent discussion on the notion of “internal colony,” see Kurt, “My Muslim Kurdish Brother.”
26. Ercan, “Is Hope More Precious,” 115.
27. Ercan, “Is Hope More Precious,” 119.
28. Ercan, “Is Hope More Precious,” 117.
29. For the democratic experiment in question, see Küçük and Özselçuk, “Rojava Experience.”

30. Ercan, "Is Hope More Precious," 117.
31. Kaplan, "Türkiye'yi Suriye'ye çevirmek." Unless otherwise stated, all translations are my own.
32. Kamer, "Cemile Çağırğa'nın annesi."
33. Girit, "Turkey Kurds."
34. OHCHR, *Report on the Human Rights Situation*, 5.
35. HDP Cizre Working Committee, *HDP's Cizre raporu*.
36. Polat, "Dünyanın en uzun süreli sokağa çıkma." The curfew in Sur was finally lifted in April 2021.
37. OHCHR, *Report on the Human Rights Situation*, 8.
38. Protner, "Reading and Feeling Gender," 67.
39. Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, 66–67. For the centrality of image-making in war and the contemporary debates on to what extent images of war and political violence can be nonexploitative, see, among others, Alter, "One, Two, Three Montages"; Karaca, "Visual Literacy"; Skoller, "War."
40. Kuntsman and Stein, *Digital Militarism*.
41. See, for instance, Jandarm GNK, "Jandarma Özel Harekat klibi." One of the many appalling lyrics of the rap song reveals that in the eyes of security forces, predominantly Kurdish towns such as Diyarbakir are perceived as hostile territory by stating, "The rockets in duty dispel every worry, turning all over Diyarbakir to red and white."
42. Kuntsman and Stein, *Digital Militarism*, 8.
43. Berger, "Uses of Photography," 59.
44. After all, both JÖH and PÖH units are linked to the well-documented human rights abuses in the Kurdish region ever since the 1990s. I thank the anonymous reviewer for this point.
45. OHCHR, *Report on the Human Rights Situation*, 21.
46. Butler, "Torture and the Ethics of Photography," 83.
47. This is not to say that no such photos exist. In August 2015, a photo of the stripped naked dead body of a young guerilla fighter surrounded by the security forces was circulated online with the clear intent to humiliate the "enemy" through the desecration of her remains. The photo, however, carefully excluded the perpetrators of this, what Protner aptly calls "masculinist performance of sexualized domination" ("Reading and Feeling Gender," 72), making it possible for the state to deny responsibility.
48. Sontag argues that if there is anything comparable to the leaked photographs from Abu Ghraib, "it would be some of the photographs of black victims of lynching taken between the 1880s and 1930s, which show Americans grinning beneath the naked mutilated body of a black man or woman hanging behind them from a tree" (Sontag, "Regarding the Torture of Others"). For a detailed account of widely disseminated postcards of lynching photographs from this period, see Apel, *Imagery of Lynching*, 7–45. For a fascinating discussion on the antilynching movement's efforts to counter these images by cultivating a critical way of viewing them, see Medina, "Resisting Racist Propaganda," 59–66.
49. Sontag, "Regarding the Torture of Others."
50. Scarry, *Body in Pain*, 28.
51. Butler, "Precarious Life, Grievable Life," 31.
52. Following Scarry, I call the power in question illusory and/or fictional, not to suggest that the violence inflicted on the Kurdish minority in Turkey is not "real" but to highlight that the display of power in the disseminated photographs are occasioned by the regime's lack of legitimate forms of authority. It is in this sense that what we are observing is a

- “compensatory drama,” which uses violence to project an image of omnipotence so as to make up for the regime’s lack of power (for this point see, Scarry, *Body in Pain*, 332). Scarry’s point here is in line with Hannah Arendt’s important distinction between violence and power, according to which “it is the people’s support that lends power to the institutions of a country” (*On Violence*, 41) and the loss of power frequently becomes “a temptation to substitute violence for power” (internet, 54).
53. Of the photographs shot and circulated by JÖH/PÖH, this will be the only one that will be reproduced in the essay. While I believe it is important to share one of these photographs to illustrate what is involved in the difficult task of spectatorship, I decided that I do not want to contribute to further dissemination of these images, which can easily be found on the internet through a simple Google search, by reproducing them and/or by providing citations to them on the internet.
  54. Protner, “Reading and Feeling Gender,” 77.
  55. Scarry, *Body in Pain*, 56.
  56. Scarry, *Body in Pain*, 45.
  57. Scarry, *Body in Pain*, 28.
  58. Azoulay, *Civil Contract of Photography*, 141.
  59. Sontag, *On Photography*, 8.
  60. Sontag, *On Photography*, 9.
  61. Sontag, *On Photography*, 9.
  62. Irvine, “Work on the Street,” 236.
  63. Perhaps one of the most memorable examples of such appropriations was a stencil of a penguin that was placed all over the city during the protests. When the protests first started, rather than reporting on the ongoing events, one of the news channels broadcasted a documentary on the lives of penguins. In response, and taking inspiration from a popular cartoon character, protesters created a gas mask-wearing, defiant penguin figure and stenciled the image on buildings in various corners of the city to counter, with great humor, media’s blatant attempt to ignore the protests, acting as if there was nothing to see.
  64. *Diken*, “Erdoğan’i duygulandıran ‘özel’ fotoğraf.”
  65. As Konya shows, Erdoğan continued to make use of this contrast following the failed coup attempt on July 15, 2016 (“Making a People,” 2–3).
  66. Stoler, “Colonial Aphasia,” 125.
  67. McClintock, “Paranoid Empire,” 58.
  68. For a brief history of the curfew, see Baysal, “Diyarbakır’s Sur”; for an account of the horrific impact of the destruction on the residents of Sur, see Baysal, “War and Destruction”; for a critical discussion on the newly constructed apartment complexes see Aslan, “Sur evleri.”
  69. Reinhardt, “Vision’s Unseen,” 212.
  70. Reinhardt, “Vision’s Unseen,” 212.

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