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Kurdish Insurgents and Postgeneration: *Big Village* as an Interactive Memory Work

Abstract
The Kurdish people, lacking a sovereign state of their own, reside within the boundaries of Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Syria, where they are subjected to the rules and identities of these nations, often facing restrictions on their cultural expression. This situation has disabled their entry into the filmmaking, with documentaries becoming their preferred medium due to its cost-effectiveness and simpler technical demands. These documentaries typically delve into the Kurds' painful historical experiences. *Big Village* (2020), directed by Beri Shalmashi and Lyangelo Vazquez, stands out as the first Kurdish interactive web documentary (i-doc). It intricately weaves personal and social narratives, focusing on several families and a Kurdish insurgent group from Eastern Kurdistan. The i-doc explores the stories of the former residents of Gewredê, a village that has since vanished. It uniquely blends old photos and video clips to craft its narrative. This study aims to analyse *Big Village* through the lens of the insurgents' memories, the inherited memories of their children, and the use of archival materials, examining how an interactive documentary can effectively communicate historical traumas to modern viewers.

Introduction

Many articles addressing Kurds open with a statement akin to this: Kurds, one of the largest stateless nations in the world, reside within the borders of Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Syria. Even though this may sound clichéd, it is an apt starting point for this discussion. It is no overstatement to assert that themes of trauma, memory, and resistance occupy a pivotal role in Kurdish cultural and artistic production. The Kurds' challenging existence at geopolitical crossroads, their persistence in conflict zones, their unwavering quest for autonomy and human rights, the process of mourning losses, and their endeavour to document a history that is often silenced – all these facets manifest in Kurdish films, both fiction and documentary.

Big Village (2020), co-directed by Beri Shalmashi and Lyangelo Vazquez, introduces a narrative centred on trauma, memory, and resistance, potentially pioneering a new format in Kurdish cinema – an interactive web documentary. The project chronicles the tale of Gewredê, a modest village located in Başûrê Kurdistanê (Southern Kurdistan, in northern Iraq, hereafter Başûr), right on the frontier of Rojhilatê Kurdistanê (Eastern Kurdistan, in western Iran, hereafter Rojhilat). The village was inhabited by Kurdish insurgents from Rojhilat. Intriguingly, despite its size, Gewredê translates to 'big village.' The story of *Big Village* originates from Beri Shalmashi's personal history: she spent the first two years of her life in Gewredê, alongside her insurgent parents.

Big Village can be accessed at www.bigvillagestory.com. The site offers users the choice between Dutch and English languages. To begin the journey through *Big Village*, users must click the start button on a map, which highlights the four countries that house Kurdish populations. Gewredê is pinpointed at the confluence, notably on the Iraqi border. *Big Village* begins with the message *loading memories*, followed by a written dedication: *Many Iranian Kurds died during the events recounted here, as well as in the subsequent years. This story is dedicated to them*. A brief video provides the historical background of Rojhilat Kurds, helping viewers understand Gewredê and its residents. As depicted in the video, in 1979, Kurds in Iran participated in the revolt against Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi's regime, aspiring for a degree of independence. However, the revolution's shift toward the establishment of an Islamic Republic under Ayatollah Khomeini hindered Kurdish ambitions for autonomy. Shortly after Khomeini assumed power, a Kurdish uprising occurred. Despite initial control over urban centres, Kurdish rebels, facing aggressive onslaughts by the Islamic Republic, withdrew to the mountains. In the wake of these assaults, the Kurdistan Democratic Party of Iran (KDPI) chose to set up its headquarters in the remnants of the abandoned village of Gewredê in Başûr. *Big Village* traces the journey of these insurgents as they re-establish the village as their base, and delves into the narratives of their children, years after they had departed from Gewredê.

Rojhilatê Kurdistanê: The Kurdish struggle in Iran. The Kurds' struggle in Iran, recently underscored by the murder of Jîna Amînî in September 2022 and the subsequent widespread protests, has deep historical roots. This event, emblematic of broader systemic oppression and gender-based violence, brought renewed
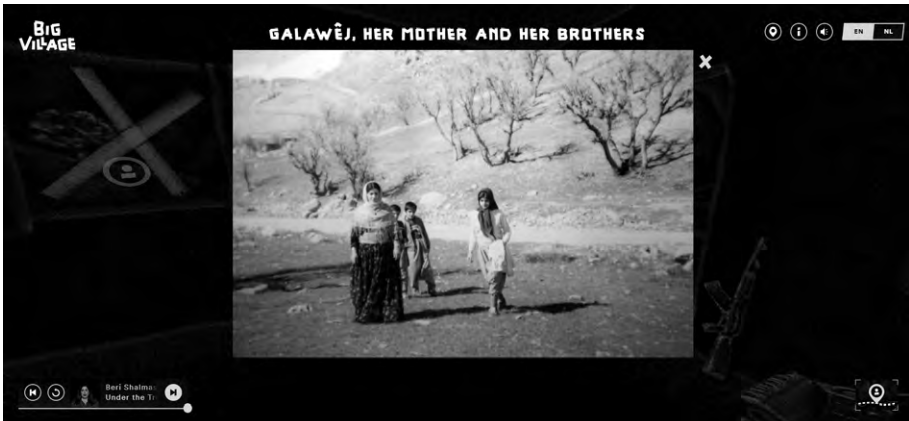
attention to the Kurdish women's movement in Rojhilat and the Kurdish quest for rights. Kurdish resistance in Iran, however, dates back to the early 20th century, and is marked by periods of both armed conflict and political activism.

Martin van Bruinessen notes that Kurdish nationalism emerged from two main social groups: the urban educated class, influenced by Arab and Turkish nationalism, and the tribal communities, who resisted government encroachment. Despite their distinct perspectives, these groups were interconnected, with urban intellectuals often coming from tribal backgrounds and the tribes becoming increasingly politically savvy. This interconnection, vital for the success of urban-led political movements, has, however, led to internal divisions within the Kurdish movement, especially due to different ideological approaches, particularly between tribal factions and urban intellectuals. These differences often led to discord within the movement, with tribes typically opposing interference from both political parties and the state, and urban politicians sometimes deviating from the movement's core objectives.[1]

Kurds in Iran are not only seen as a national minority but also as a religious one. While the Iranian Revolution is based on Shiite Muslim identity, the majority of Kurds in Iran adhere to Sunni Muslim beliefs.[2] Although the Islamic Republic claimed to unify all Muslims, in reality, the dominance of Shiite beliefs and Persian identity persisted. However, the majority of the Kurdish movement is rooted in secular views, and, as van Bruinessen claims, *Sunni sentiment has been of minor importance in the Kurds' attitude towards the new Islamic Republic*.[3] The Kurdish movement in Iran also faced significant challenges under state policies, especially during the Pahlavi dynasty (1925-1979) and the Islamic Republic in post-1979. The post-World War I period saw the Kurdish separatist movement, led by Ismail Aga Simko, gain momentum, but it was eventually suppressed by Reza Khan's modernized army. Reza Shah Pahlavi's reign forced Kurds into the state's administrative and economic systems, dismantling traditional tribal structures.[4]

Established in 1945, the KDPI marked a significant evolution in Kurdish resistance. It formed among the emerging middle class aiming to counteract the Shah's Persianization policies.[5] The movement's history includes critical events such as the 1979 Iranian Revolution and subsequent Kurdish uprisings, highlighting the Kurds' persistent fight for cultural recognition, political representation, and autonomy within the Iranian state. A notable instance of Kurdish self-determination efforts occurred in Rojhilat, with the establishment of the short-lived Mahabad Republic in 1946. The Mahabad Republic collapsed when Soviet support was withdrawn, allowing Iranian forces to regain control. Following the republic's collapse and the execution of its leader, Qazi Muhammad, the KDPI went underground. This was seen as a show of strength rather than a defeat, and instead of ending the Kurdish struggle, the Mahabad Republic came to represent a symbolic power for Kurds both in Rojhilat and beyond.[6]

By the 1960s, many party members were imprisoned, and only released during the 1979 Iranian Revolution, after which the KDPI reorganized.[7] Following the revolution, Kurds insisted on autonomy, but their demands were ignored by Khomeini. Conflict ensued between the KDPI and Iranian revolutionary forces, leading to a period of Kurdish control over certain areas. The new regime viewed Kurdish demands

for autonomy as indications of separatism. Khomeini accused Kurds of undermining the revolution, banned the KDPI, and targeted its leader Dr Abdul Rahman Ghassemlou.[8] When Iraq invaded Iran in September 1980, the KDPI proposed a ceasefire to the Islamic Republic and offered to fight the invader. However, they received no response, and the Islamic Republic escalated military operations against the Kurds.[9] The Kurdish movement was then overshadowed by events in Iraq; the Kurds' circumstances varied throughout the post-Iran-Iraq war period, their hardships including the assassination of leaders in the late 1980s and early 1990s.[10]

Throughout the years, the political landscape for Kurds in the region reflected their divisions. The Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) in Başûr, dominant in the tribal north, often clashed with the KDPI, which initially had strong support in the area. In the early 1980s, with the Iranian army's backing, the KDP secured control over these regions, allowing tribes to maintain a degree of independence under Tehran's formal control. In 1983, the KDPI shifted its strategy, moving its headquarters to Iraq and maintaining mobile Peshmerga forces,[11] advocating for Kurdish autonomy within a democratized Iran.[12]

Besides the dominant visibility of the KDPI, there are other Kurdish parties fighting against the Islamic Republic with similar demands but different ideologies, such as the Organization of Revolutionary Toilers of Iranian Kurdistan (Komala) and the Kurdistan Free Life Party (PJAK). Despite the diverse political landscape, this article focuses on the memories of KDPI members and their children in the context of *Big Village*, providing a lens through which to understand the complex and enduring Kurdish struggle for self-determination in Iran through this interactive web documentary.

"Big Village" as a diasporic documentary. While *Big Village* is a pioneer of the i-doc format, it is linear documentaries that have a central role in Kurdish filmmaking. Even though Kurdish cinema began in the late 1970s with Yılmaz Güney's filmmaking in Turkey, consistent production of films started in the 1990s, particularly in Turkey, in the Bakurê Kurdistanê (Northern Kurdistan, in south-eastern Turkey, hereafter Bakur), the diaspora, and Başûr. The beginning of Kurdish film production during this period is linked to various socio-political and technological developments. A detailed discussion extends beyond the scope of this article, as the production of Kurdish films in the four regions and the diaspora is directly associated with the circumstances in these countries. For example, various changes brought about by Turkey's progress towards European Union membership, the lifting of the ban on the Kurdish language, the establishment of Kurdish cultural institutions based in Istanbul, the formation of the Kurdistan Regional Government in Iraq, and the smaller size of cameras, along with affordable and accessible technological advances in the region, have been factors facilitating Kurdish youth to embark on filmmaking.

Academic literature on Kurdish documentary cinema is limited, and the majority of these writings refer to documentaries produced in Turkey and Bakur. Kurdish documentary filmmaking is often centred around periods of conflict, collective traumas, and family narratives.[13] These films frequently incorporate narratives based on the personal and social experiences of the directors, making it apt

to categorize and discuss them as vessels of collective memory. Two prominent examples that combine these narratives are *I Flew, You Stayed* (*Ez Firiyam Tu Ma Li Cih*, dir. Mizgin Müjde Arslan, 2012) and *Dialogue* (*Diyalog*, dir. Selim Yıldız, 2019). *I Flew, You Stayed* portrays the director's journey to the Maxmur Refugee Camp in search of her insurgent father, and delves into challenges faced by the Kurdish people during times of war and loss. *Dialogue* also narrates a personal story that unfolds into a collective narrative as Yıldız travels with his mother from a Kurdish village in Bakur to Rojavayê Kurdistanê (Western Kurdistan, in north-eastern Syria, hereafter Rojava) to visit his insurgent brother.

It is essential to consider diasporic Kurdish cinema alongside *Big Village*. Filmmakers who began making films in the diaspora in the early 1990s share the experience of leaving their homelands at a young age and receiving education in their new countries. Such filmmakers as Hiner Saleem and Yüksel Yavuz represent the challenges of identity and migration in the diaspora through their films: *Long Live the Bride… and the Liberation of Kurdistan* (*Vive la mariée... et la libération du Kurdistan*, dir. Hiner Saleem, 1998), *My Father, The Guestworker* (*Mein Vater, der Gastarbeiter*, dir. Yüksel Yavuz, 1994), *April Children* (*Aprilkinder*, dir. Yüksel Yavuz, 1998), and *A Little Bit of Freedom* (*Kleine Freiheit*, dir. Yüksel Yavuz, 2003). The number of Kurdish filmmakers educated and continuing to produce films in the diaspora is noteworthy. Figures like Ayşe Polat, Mano Khalil, Soleen Yusef, and Reber Dosky are notable examples. *Big Village* illustrates the interconnection between documentary cinema and diasporic cinema through themes of family stories and the desire to return to one's homeland. The directors of *Big Village* choosing to reconstruct on digital media a time period that cannot be brought back accurately mirrors the dynamic evolution within Kurdish cinema.

Big Village as an interactive documentary

Judith Aston and Sandra Gaudenzi give a broad definition of i-docs (interactive documentaries), stating that *any project that starts with an intention to document the 'real' and that uses digital interactive technology to realize this intention can be considered an interactive documentary*.[14] According to Aston and Gaudenzi, the notion of interactivity can be seen through the position of the viewer within the artifact, *demanding him, or her, to play an active role in the negotiation of the 'reality' being conveyed through the i-doc*.[15]

Gaudenzi also emphasizes that an interactive documentary must utilize digital support and allow users to engage with it beyond mere viewing. A documentary shot with digital technology and distributed online is simply a digital documentary unless it permits user-driven actions. In this context, mere interpretation is not considered interaction unless there is a feedback mechanism from the digital system.[16] This need for drawing a clear distinction between a linear documentary and an interactive documentary was previously mentioned by Dayna Galloway et al.: *The interactive documentary should not be viewed as a replacement for documentary but as a valid, additional creative form for allowing people to explore and contribute to our understanding of the world*.[17]

As Gaudenzi described, the key distinction between linear and interactive documentaries lies in their narrative approach, not the shift from analogue to digital. While both aim to engage with reality, linear documentaries require cognitive engagement, like interpretation, whereas interactive ones also demand physical actions like clicking or commenting. Unlike linear documentaries that primarily use video or film and are watched on screens, interactive documentaries utilize various media, can be explored on mobile platforms, and blur the lines between filming and editing roles.[18]

I find the perspectives suggested in Aston and Gaudenzi's article, *Interactive Documentary: Setting the Field*,[19] and in Gaudenzi's doctoral dissertation, *The Living Documentary: From Representing Reality to Co-creating Reality in Digital Interactive Documentary*,[20] particularly useful for analysing the type of interactive documentary *Big Village* represents. Gaudenzi proposes four interactive modes: conversational, hypertext, experiential, and participative.[21] The conversational mode uses digital reconstructions to provide users the illusion of freely navigating the work, resembling the dynamics of video games and 'docu-games,' creating an experience akin to a dialogue with the interface. The hypertext mode offers interactive documentaries that let users explore a video database via hyperlinks, emphasizing an exploratory 'click-and-go' experience within a self-contained archive. The participative mode, bolstered by the advent of Web 2.0, fosters a two-way interaction between creators and users, evolving into documentaries that not only allow but rely on active user contributions during both production and post-launch engagement. Lastly, the experiential mode leverages mobile media and GPS to merge digital narratives with physical exploration, blurring the lines between the virtual and the tangible and challenging users' sensory perceptions in real-world settings.[22]

Big Village starts by introducing itself to the viewer as an interactive documentary. In addition to this act of self-identification, the feature that allows the audience to navigate through the story/village using a map and directional signs emphasizes its interactive nature. This interactive documentary reconstructs Gewredê as a black-and-white virtual village. In online documentaries such as *Big Village*, which are typically designed with a 'click-here-and-go-there' logic for the web, the hypertext mode is most commonly encountered. As Aston and Gaudenzi note, *this type of i-doc lends itself to the Hypertext mode because it links assets within a closed video archive and gives the user an exploratory role, normally enacted by clicking on pre-existing options*.[23]

The viewer of *Big Village* follows a map of the Gewredê village. The i-doc consists of recently shot video interviews with the former residents, old family and village photos, and old videos of the village. In total, there are 28 locations/stories, 15 of which are in the main storyline and 13 in the additional stories. The viewer can decide to move freely from one place to another without the obligation to follow a formal storyline, which is the case in a linear documentary film. In each location/story, the viewer can see the face of that part's narrator and listen to them or hide their face and move around the space provided in that story. In each space, the viewer can click on photos or videos, and they can read additional information on these visual materials.

Perspectives on memory and trauma

Representation and mediation are central to theoretical discussions on memory and trauma. In their seminal work, Astrid Erll and Ann Rigney highlight the connection between cultural memory and the processes of mediation and re-mediation. They propose that cultural memories are dynamically reconstituted through contemporary media technologies and existing narratives. Erll and Rigney's suggestion that there can be no cultural memory before mediation and no mediation without remediation can be especially relevant in the context of Kurdish collective memory, which, lacking a centralized repository, finds expression through various media forms and individual efforts.[24]

Traumatic narratives also need to be told and formed to be remembered. As Jeffrey C. Alexander claims, events are not traumatic by themselves; rather, they become traumatic through narration and representation.[25] Besides cultural memory, the concept of cultural trauma is central to understanding the narratives of the former residents of Gewredê. This trauma, as defined by Ron Eyerman, results in a profound disruption within the social fabric, leading to a dramatic loss of meaning and identity for the community. Unlike psychological or physical trauma, which impacts individuals, cultural trauma affects entire groups, particularly those who share a harmonious existence. Eyerman emphasizes that this form of trauma has the power to deeply influence a collective, altering its core dynamics and sense of unity.[26] Expanding on this notion, Alexander offers a complementary perspective. He describes cultural trauma as an event so catastrophic that it leaves an unerasable imprint on a community's collective consciousness. This kind of trauma does more than just mark the group's memories; it fundamentally and irreversibly transforms their future identity. For the members of the community, this trauma is not just a moment in history; it is a pivotal point that reshapes their very essence and alters their path forward.[27]

Although cultural trauma is a significant concept in discussions about Kurds, the Kurdish struggle for recognition contains many celebratory elements beyond the trauma. Even though traumatic events are mentioned in *Big Village*, the perception of the events and the narration in the i-doc changes the approach towards them. As Ann Rigney suggests, a re-examination of the conventional narrative frameworks in memory studies, which typically centre on trauma and endings, advocates for a more inclusive approach that also acknowledges positive memories and diverse forms of recollection. Rigney highlights how the memory of the violently suppressed Paris Commune of 1871 has been perpetuated through celebratory and communal events, offering a contrast to the usual traumatic narratives in memory studies. This example demonstrates the possibility of sustaining and transmitting positive memories.[28]

Insurgent memory: Understanding and expanding the concept. Although adults and children lived in Gewredê together within the same time period, their memories differ. While the adults are political subjects and insurgents who were the reason for the village's reconstruction, the children are experiencing the consequences of their parents' decisions. As expected, the ways these two groups

perceive their past are significantly different, and the memories they recall are equally distinct. This distinction is grounds for discussing the narrations of the adults and the children (who are now adults) of Gewredê inhabitants separately.

I will start my analysis with the narratives of the adults of Gewredê. I find that the notions of insurgent memory and stateless memory become particularly significant when exploring their stories. Cherilyn Elston examines the concept of insurgent memory in her article titled "Nunca Invisibles: Insurgent Memory and Self-Representation by Female Ex-Combatants in Colombia."[29] Her research investigates the development of this idea in Colombia, with a specific focus on the 2018 documentary *Nunca Invisibles: Mujeres Farianas, Adiós a la guerra* [*Never Invisible: Women of the FARC, Farewell to War*] (dir. Liliany Obando) which centres on former female members of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC). Elston analyses how the documentary, along with similar grassroots initiatives, challenges the typical depiction of female ex-combatants as mere victims, advocating instead for their recognition as dynamic political actors in peace-building, reconciliation, and the post-conflict reintegration process in Colombia.[30]

According to Elston, in addition to the emphasis on victims, former insurgents in Colombia have been advocating for the inclusion of their personal experiences and narratives of the conflict in public memory projects over recent decades.[31] She also notes that her article delves into the development of insurgent memory in Colombia in response to the evolving field of memory studies, which is moving away from solely focusing on past trauma to include activist memories. This is achieved through an in-depth analysis of the *Nunca Invisibles* documentary, as well as observations at memory workshops and reconciliation events involving female ex-combatants of the FARC.[32] The author states: *I show that the film mobilizes a more complex representation – using emotions such as happiness, grief and loss – to articulate how ex-combatant women narrated their experiences in the FARC, both during conflict and after laying down arms.*[33] In Elston's research, it can be seen that ex-FARC members talk about the beauty and happiness of their former life and the grief and loss they experienced, especially losing their loved ones in combat. I believe the concept of insurgent memory used by Elston in her analysis needs a more in-depth discussion and understanding.

In her later work, Elston prefers the concept of activist memory, influenced by Anna Reading and Tamar Katriel, who support a shift in memory studies from emphasizing violence and trauma to exploring varieties of human agency.[34] Reading and Katriel describe their research as *an attempt to call scholarly attention to cultural arenas in which human agency and moral vision find their expression in nonviolent action that transforms social landscapes and remakes human histories.*[35] While Reading and Katriel focus on memories associated with nonviolent activities, distinctly separate from military conflict, Elston's analysis delves into memories of activism that emerged in violent contexts, challenging the clear-cut division between violent and nonviolent struggles. Even though Elston successfully explains her aim to challenge this sharp division, I believe that in the context of ongoing violent struggles, a distinct insurgent memory emerges. The difference between non-violent and violent aspects in activist memory and insurgent memory has the potential to fundamentally affect the forms of organization and emotions of communi-

ties. The longing for fallen comrades, the celebration of revolutionary martyrdom, and other trends observed in Kurdish national movements, along with the stories I encountered while studying *Big Village*, reinforce my insistence on the concept of insurgent memory and its subjectivity.[36]

Another scholar commenting on insurgent memory, Neville Bolt, focuses on the general narration of insurgent movements rather than individual memories. Bolt states: *Insurgents challenge state for control of the past to legitimise their role in the present and lay claim to ownership of the future. To achieve this, they manipulate time, creating a narrative of collective identity, a popular group memory.*[37] I claim that insurgent memory encompasses a diversity of complex emotions and attitudes toward the past. In particular, individual insurgents' or former insurgents' understanding of the past can help them maintain an identity and uphold resistance against the dominant narratives surrounding them. Insurgent memory assists historically marginalized groups in remembering and commemorating their experiences and traumas. In fact, it often carries a celebratory tone and nostalgia for the days of combat and camaraderie.

Stateless memory. One of the defining aspects of Kurdish life is statelessness. The historical and current condition of the Kurdish people is largely shaped by this circumstance. Examining how Kurdish cinema can engage with such issues as statelessness, cultural trauma, and memory brings to mind Marianne Hirsch's concept of stateless memory. In her reflections, Hirsch recalls her own childhood memories of leaving post-WWII Romania for the United States with her family and how her experience of statelessness began. Even as a naturalized citizen, she still experiences moments of anxiety associated with statelessness. Hirsch refers to memories that lack a secure national context for their preservation and interpretation, often because of displacement. She underscores that stateless people are often excluded from memory institutions. However, Hirsch also argues that statelessness can be perceived as a domain of openness and potentiality.[38] From my perspective, the existence of Kurdish cultural productions such as *Big Village* can be seen through this lens. Not only the particular narratives in the i-doc but also *Big Village* itself is a product of being stateless.

Hirsch proposes that stateless memory, characterized by its dynamic and multidirectional nature, challenges conventional notions of time, space, identity, and community. It offers an alternative perspective on memory, relationships, and citizenship, fostering interconnected imaginaries that break from repetitive patterns. However, this aspirational view of stateless memory may seem disconnected from the harsh realities faced by stateless individuals within nation-states. To address this, Hirsch borrows Hannah Arendt's concept of "active patience," suggesting using collective artistic encounters to envision a sense of community that transcends traditional boundaries. This approach allows individuals to actively engage with stateless memory within the realm of political community, emphasizing the importance of imagination within the temporal framework of active patience inherent in artistic creation and engagement.[39]

Postgeneration and postmemory. Prior to stateless memory, in research rooted in her own autobiographical experience, Marianne Hirsch introduces the concepts of postgeneration and postmemory. She reflects on her recollections of childhood in Bucharest and how they intertwine with her family's collective memories. Hirsch characterizes individuals like herself as the postgeneration, individuals who bear the memories of their families, particularly those who survived the Holocaust.[40] In general terms, postgeneration refers to the generation born after a significant event or period, who can carry its impact in ways distinct from those who experienced it directly. This idea recognizes that the effect of major events can shape the identities of following generations, influencing their worldview and culture.

As per Hirsch's perspective, postmemory characterizes the relationship of the 'generation after' with the personal, collective, and cultural trauma of their predecessors. Those individuals remember these experiences primarily through the stories, images, and behaviours that were part of their upbringing, and these experiences were transmitted to them so deeply and emotionally that they almost became their own memories.[41] Postmemory highlights the enduring impact of historical trauma on future generations, as they inherit not only the stories but also the emotional and psychological echoes of the past.

Big Villagers remember

Big Village establishes itself as a practice of memory and commemoration, with a self-awareness evident in the i-doc's brief description: *This interactive documentary recreates a time and place that only exists in the memories of Iranian Kurds who are forced to live in diaspora around the world. Many people died during the events recounted here, as well as in the years that followed. As recently as 2018, Iran's Revolutionary Guard launched a missile attack aimed at a meeting of KDP-I officials in Koya, Iraq. The attack killed at least 17 people, most of them former 'big villagers.' This webdocumentary* [sic] *was made in their loving memory.*[42]

The i-doc not only records and shares the memories of former villagers who are still alive but also commemorates the recently deceased insurgents. In *Big Village*, 13 people share their memories of Gewredê. One of them is a French doctor, Frédéric Tissot, who worked for Doctors Without Borders while living in the village. Five of the interviewees are former insurgents and members of the KDPI, who were adults at the time and have the most vivid memories of Gewredê. The remaining seven are children who were very young back then; I consider them the postgeneration of Gewredê.

Although *Big Village* has two directors and 13 narrators, it is an autobiographical act from Beri Shalmashi herself. After the introductory video about the Kurdish rebellion in Iran and its connection to the village, the i-doc offers an introduction by Shalmashi, accompanied by a photo of her and her father in Gewredê, and the i-doc transforms into a more intimate form that will continue to manifest in the following stories. Shalmashi begins: *Welcome to Gewredê, that's me with my father two years before we fled. All over the world, I speak to people I haven't seen since. "Big Village" is a reconstruction of a shattered past that was bombed into pieces.*

After the director's introduction, if the viewer stays in the main storyline without clicking in any direction, stories load one after another. In each story, which only takes a few minutes, the viewer has two options: They can watch the narrator telling their story or navigate within the virtual space of the story while listening to the narrator. These choices provided by the filmmakers can be interpreted as representing two aspects of the i-doc: informative and intimate. While the informative side is supported by archival footage and photographs from Gewredê with accompanying writings, the intimate aspect is represented through narratives established with medium close-up shots. The narrators share their individual memories and emotions through the camera, focusing on their personal experiences and feelings rather than the political and social conditions of the time.

While *Big Village* is not intended as a substitute for a linear documentary, viewers can allow the software to transition automatically from one narrator to another. However, the viewer is granted the option to explore various media forms. Additionally, the i-doc includes a map that provides an aerial view of the village. On the map, the viewer can see the main route to be followed, and when hovering over each location, they can see the name of the story and its content. It is also possible to see additional stories outside the main route on the map. This map represents the actual locations within Gewredê before it was abandoned.

It should be noted that not all the adults and children who speak in *Big Village* are related. Rather than focusing on selected families to tell generational stories, the i-doc approaches the adults and children living in Gewredê on an equal footing as villagers. In the first story, which is also the starting point of the route, viewers get to know director Beri Shalmashi. The story is titled "At the Picnic Field," referring to the actual location, seen in the background. In this story, she only says the introductory sentence quoted above. If the viewer chooses to stay in the story, they can see a childhood photo from her school in the Netherlands and a current portrait. In addition to getting to know the director, the story also includes a map of the divided Kurdistan and old footage from the Kurdish uprising in post-1979 Iran. Both of these visuals contain an explanatory paragraph to read. To navigate through the story, the viewer needs to perform a virtual 360-degree turn, thus gaining access to materials and information placed in the area covered by the story.

The next narrator is Beri Shalmashi's father, Mustafa Shalmashi, one of the KDPI officials. In the story titled "At the Edge of the Camp," Mustafa begins telling his story not to an unknown audience but to his daughter. He talks about Beri's childhood, their time in Gewredê, and the bombings they experienced. Between some of these stories, Beri interjects – not by narrating her memories of Gewredê but with her insights about the stories she is listening to – and reflects on the past that she is sharing through this i-doc.

Big Village narrates the intersecting stories of various cultural groups, each with their own unique yet interconnected experiences. The narrative skilfully transitions from a broad perspective to a more focused one, encapsulating the cultural traumas faced by distinct but interrelated communities. At a broader level, *Big Village* tells the story of the Kurdish people, historically marginalized and denied their cultural and human rights by the states in which they reside. This overarching theme of cultural oppression and struggle for identity forms a backdrop

for the more specific experiences of the Kurds from Rojhilat. Among these, the narrative further narrows down to highlight the Kurds from Rojhilat who actively resisted the Islamic Republic.

The most specific focus of *Big Village* is on the residents of Gewredê, particularly concentrating on two groups: the insurgents and their children. This community symbolizes the culmination of layered traumas, spanning from the broad Kurdish fight for cultural recognition and self-determination to their particular resistance against the Islamic Republic. In their stories, the connection between personal challenges and resilience goes beyond individual experiences. It symbolizes the broader cultural trauma that has affected their communities as a whole.

Through the lens of Gewredê's residents, *Big Village* portrays the multifaceted nature of cultural trauma. It delves into the interconnected personal experiences of insurgents and their children, weaving them into the larger collective histories and the ongoing struggle. These stories are not just individual accounts; they reflect a collective upheaval that has fundamentally transformed how the villagers perceive themselves and their community.

Mourning the unfinished struggle: Insurgent memories of Big Villagers. As mentioned above, the story "At the Edge of the Camp" starts with Beri's father, Mustafa Shalmashi, addressing her and talking about camp life. Mustafa lived in Gewredê with his family after the village became the KDPI headquarters. His older brother was a prominent figure in Kurdish resistance against the Shah regime in Iran and was publicly executed for his activities. Mustafa fled to Southern Kurdistan in Iraq with his other brother and, after graduating, actively joined the insurgency.

While following the main storyline, the viewer encounters Mustafa several times. He reacts to the past emotionally, mainly talking about family and friends. In his first appearance, when discussing their life in the village, he says: *And I realize very well: We had a normal and a revolutionary life at one and the same time. We also knew difficult times. We were also bombarded. A number of times we were assailed by bombs and missiles*. The heavy bombings of the village by the Islamic Republic are the main traumatic events recounted during the narrative. Those days shaped the future of the village/headquarters and led to its abandonment or partial defeat.

After Mustafa's brief introduction, in the next story, "In the Radio Room," the viewer meets another party member, Ahmed Sherbagui, who worked at the village radio station, the Voice of Kurdistan. Ahmed begins to talk about one of the heavy bombings they experienced – the same day is narrated by Mustafa in a later story, "The Way Down," and by Mardin Heja Baban, who was a child in the village, in "At the Babans and Hedayatis." The recurring narrative of that particular day and the bombing of the village shows the different effects and outcomes of that shared traumatic event. The bombings are described as the main traumatic memory that the villagers have, and, as the narrative continues, they mention them in several different ways and perspectives.

In "The Way Down," while Mustafa is talking about this particular day, as he shares this story with his daughter and not a stranger behind the camera, he says: *All I thought of at that moment was you. I wanted to go to you and see where you were and if you were unharmed. Make sure nothing had happened to you*. He later

mentions that Beri and her mother were fine, but another house was hit: *Heja's mother. She sustained an injury to her eyes*. Such descriptions give the impression of insurgents becoming neighbours and living a somewhat regular life. While listening to Mustafa's story in "The Way Down," the viewer can watch his face and emotions or choose to explore with 360-degree turns this particular part of the virtual village, which consists of two videos from that time. One of them shows the bombing, and the other shows wounded villagers. What the viewer sees in that particular story depends on their choice.

Towards the end of the main storyline, in "At the Shalmashis," Mustafa shares his emotions about leaving Gewredê. His story focuses on the difficulty of leaving the village, leaving his party, people, and comrades behind. Mustafa remembers the day they left as sad but beautiful, and shares his longing for his comrades. Nostalgia takes over, and the pain of leaving Gewredê behind can be seen in his gestures: *The only thing I regret in my life is that I had to take leave of the Party. That was very emotional too, but I'd made up my mind. Even so, some people had really done their best to keep our departure from being just sad. They'd really made an effort, and it became a beautiful, loving goodbye*. Mustafa constantly gives the names of his comrades who loved and helped him back then and the ones he felt bad to leave behind. By recalling their names and lives, Mustafa commemorates those days, the fallen insurgents, and the ones he was separated from: *It was a dreadful day. And I don't mind saying that I cried a lot. A lot. Taking leave of Dr Ghassemlou and other friends. Of Dr Said in particular. And of the communication boys. Taking leave of them made me really sad. Of Taha Atiqi, Ahmed Sherbagui, Khadija Mezuri and all others. It was hard for me to take leave of them and the other comrades. It wasn't a happy day if you ask me*.

In "At the Shalmashis," the viewer sees a virtual room from the Shalmashis' house in Gewredê. There are two photographs that the viewer can look at while listening to Mustafa. The first one, titled "Mustafa and His Wife Mastana with the Leadership," shows five people sitting at a table. This small and intimate gathering is a reference to Mustafa's story. It is not only a memento from Mustafa's past, a memory of a meeting with friends, but also a fragment of the history of Kurdish resistance, as the photograph shows KDPI members and leaders. The second picture, titled "Mustafa in Front of His House," shows Mustafa with his two comrades sitting outside a village house wearing Peshmerga clothing, looking at some books and documents. In the background, the laundry hanging to dry in front of the house interrupts this revolutionary activity with the ordinariness of daily life. As the party members not only continued the guerrilla fight but also lived their daily lives with their families, it made the story of *Big Village* reveal interconnected political and personal realities.

The theme of starting anew is explored prominently in the i-doc. Departing for an unfamiliar land in search of safety profoundly impacts the identity of the insurgents. It involves not only leaving behind their ideals and comrades but also relinquishing a part of their own identity. Although we do not see anyone who has changed their political position, differences in their lives, such as being in exile or still living in the region, result in a pattern emerging in the narratives. This complex dynamic is vividly depicted in the stories of both Mustafa Shalmashi and Ahmed Sherbagui.

In another story from the main storyline, "Inside Sherbagui's Room," Ahmed Sherbagui, a member of the radio crew at the Voice of Kurdistan, discusses his traumatic experience of exile. Although he was highly renowned in Rojhilat for his voice, he lost his sense of identity when he arrived in Switzerland. Sherbagui states: *The reputation I had in Kurdistan was gone when I came to Switzerland. It was as if I fell into a deep hole. Nobody knew me. Which wasn't odd, because why would anybody know me? Me, a Kurd? Who should have known me here? I don't even have a country that's on official maps. I don't have state, I don't have rights. Why should they know me? They know me as an Iranian. They see Kurds from Iraq as Iraqis. People without a national identity, their own passport, don't get acknowledged.*

Ahmed experiences the pain of having his identity negated. He fondly recalls his past as an insurgent and the vibrant days on the radio, but he also mourns the unfinished revolution. Similar reactions are evident not only in those who have been separated from Gewredê, but also in those who have been detached from the lands they fought for. The nostalgic feelings mentioned earlier become particularly noticeable in the memories of insurgents during these instances. Despite the traumatic experiences Ahmed lived through as an active insurgent in the village, he recalls them with longing and happiness. It was leaving the village that had inflicted wounds on his identity. As Ahmed mentions, he is not only excluded from memory institutions, as Hirsch pointed out, but also rendered identity-less in all existing nation-state institutions.[43]

Female party members have their own unique stories to share, often characterized by hope and a deep connection to their personal experiences. Take, for example, Kejal Abbasi-Sherbagui, who celebrated her first marriage in the village at "The Main Square." Kejal reminisces about 'Party weddings' with great enthusiasm, describing them as a delightful blend of simplicity and unity. These weddings required no fuss with the invitations nor the stress of gift shopping for the newlyweds. Questions about what to wear were non-existent. Life in those times was refreshingly uncomplicated. Kejal's own wedding took place in the heart of winter, with the village of Gewredê covered knee-deep in snow, its streets shrouded in white. The central square, the sole gathering place where they shared both joyous and sombre moments, served as the wedding venue. The festivities were marked by modesty, with the bride donning a dress and the groom typically wearing a Kurdish suit or, more frequently, Peshmerga attire. Even though the viewer learns from the storyline that Kejal lost her first husband, Fattah Abdoli, who was assassinated in Berlin on September 17, 1992, she does not talk about this loss. Instead, she prefers to focus on the joyful moments they shared in Gewredê.

Another insurgent woman featured in the i-doc is Khadija Mezuri, described as *the longest active female Peshmerga ever*, offering a different perspective. Khadija currently resides in Kurdistan, though not in Rojhilat or Gewredê but in Başûr, specifically in Koya. She has never been separated from her insurgent life. In the story "The Communication Centre," which is outside of the main storyline, Khadija discusses her past role as a radio presenter in Gewredê and how they managed to bring in and watch Oscar-winning films in the village. Despite smiling occasionally, Khadija's narration is less emotional compared to others, as if she recalls and recounts events without allowing herself to dwell on emotions such as

longing. Khadija was one of the few female insurgents of her time. In another story, also outside the main storyline, titled "At the Mountain Lookout," she reflects on her female identity and wearing Peshmerga clothing. As an active insurgent, Khadija still maintains a sense of pride and confidence in her role. Her image also differs from both those who moved far away and those who continued to live in the region. In considering Rigney's suggestion of going beyond trauma,[44] there is a juxtaposition of sadness and celebration in relation to Gewredê, even though the place no longer exists. The narrative presented by the women insurgents of Gewredê leans towards celebration rather than dwelling on traumatic experiences.

The need for the concept of insurgent memory becomes apparent when examining the narratives in the i-doc. Memories of the insurgents are closely linked to violent events. While the *Big Village* narrators may only discuss the bombing of the Islamic Republic, the viewer is presented with hyperlinked archival footage showing insurgents fighting back. An example can be found in "Between the Houses," where the footage titled *Living with the Bombs and Air-Raid Shelters* shows scared children running and adult insurgents firing their weapons at aircraft. Violence is not only something to be exposed to and traumatized by but also something to be used in response. This response can be honoured and longed for. The longing for fallen comrades or the emotional overwhelm leading to them not being mentioned highlights the significance of insurgent memories. One can see the insurgents' nostalgia for the past and the mourning of the lost in Mustafa Shalmashi's efforts to remember his comrades one by one.

The children of the living martyrs: The "Big Village" postgeneration. When examining the concept of postmemory within the context of the relationship between film and memory, numerous films, particularly those centred around social events, memory, and trauma, serve as vehicles for conveying the narratives of earlier generations. These films not only bear the memories of preceding generations but also significantly impact how future generations will recollect past events. I believe that *Big Village* itself is an act of remembrance and creation by a member of the Kurdish postgeneration from that specific time in Gewredê. Beri Shalmashi endeavours to recollect moments she is unable to remember herself as she was under two years old at the time. Her aim is to foster a sense of solidarity among those who, like her, spent their childhood in Gewredê.

In the i-doc, inaccessible childhood memories come to life through a pencil-drawn interface. The interface aims to help recognize the fragmentation characteristic of the attempts to remember the village's past by children who grew up in diaspora. In "At the Babans and Hedayatis," Mardin Heja Baban narrates the story of the bombing that wounded his mother, causing them to relocate from Kurdistan to Sweden. The viewer can walk through a room in Heja's house in Gewredê, which allows them to explore various details such as the kitchen, the carpets, the radio, the crib, and the pacifier on the floor, in captivating 360-degree rotation. In each story, the viewer is invited to explore the area on their own. While observing the spatial arrangement of Heja's home through the rotations, the viewer is also privy to glimpses of Heja's infancy and his parents through the two photographs partially hidden in the room. Heja's poignant recollection un-

derscores the profound impact this event had on his family's life, shaping his own existence as well. The pain visible in his facial expressions as he recalls these memories serves as a testament to the enduring emotional resonance of these events, illustrating the transmission of memories.

While the parents in the documentary discuss both facts and emotions, the children focus on their feelings and attempt to recall memories they may not actually possess. Most of these children either have no recollection of their lives in Gewredê or possess very limited memories. Their efforts to remember focus mainly on attempts to understand their family's traumas. Beri gives her insights between the stories, and in one of those insights in "The Road up to the Mountain," she says: *We are the children of warriors who died, even though they're still alive. That's what Galawêj tells me. She says they are martyrs. In their heads, there is a room where they wander around in that era until the end of times. I can feel that in their gaze. How it must be to first go into battle like lions and lionesses and then be forced to leave. In their stories, sorrow and bliss dance hand in hand*. This sentence emerges as significant evidence of how children are affected by the insurgent memories of their families. Galawêj Ebrahimi, another former Gewredê child, chooses to use the concept of martyrdom, another insurgent cultural marker, to describe the feelings of the families. This happens not because she directly experiences the insurgent memory but because it becomes entrenched in her own memory as a member of the postgeneration.

"The Road up to the Mountain" is an interjection by Beri Shalmashi to switch from a painful narrative to a celebratory one. During these interjections, the viewer does not see Beri; they can only hear her voice and turn around to explore another part of the village. This time, it is a space between houses with a photograph from a KDPI gathering and some footage from a celebration. After this part, Beri, a former child of Gewredê, leaves the floor to Kejal Abbasi-Sherbagui to tell the story of her wedding.

In one of Beri's very early insights in the main storyline, "Between the Houses," she reveals a detail about her early childhood, stating: *My first word was "bombing."* It is very prominent that children do not share the same memories as their families, although they do not position themselves against their parents. They are not insurgents but children of insurgents. In their early memories, bombings are more prevalent than other things. The majority of the former Gewredê children, now adults, talk about bombings – but not exclusively as traumatic memories. Sometimes they find humour in the recollections, like calling some jets "crazy Fatma" and recalling other funny memories of survival.

In "At the Heart of the Village," Galawêj Ebrahimi delves into the emotional complexity of leaving Gewredê. While the specifics of their departure elude her memory, the profound sadness associated with leaving her homeland remains vivid. Initially, the prospect of moving to Europe or Australia held hope for a peaceful life and better education. However, as time passed, the longing for their homeland intensified despite the awareness of the hardships awaiting them back in Kurdistan. Galawêj's narrative evokes the experience of the postgeneration, where individuals inherit the collective memory and emotions tied to their homeland and the experience of migration.

While these memories are recounted today through the voices of adults, many of them have fragmented recollections because they were quite young at the time. The primary reason I view *Big Village* as a product of postgeneration – beyond these narratives – is Beri Shalmashi's effort to access this period and the memories she cannot remember herself through her family, their comrades, and her childhood friends.

Conclusion

Big Village stands as a prominent interactive web documentary, offering a unique window into the lives and memories of Kurdish insurgents and their families. Through its innovative format, the i-doc brings to life the village of Gewredê, painting a vivid picture of the struggles and resilience of the Kurdish people from Rojhilat. By skilfully blending personal stories with archival footage and photographs, *Big Village* not only preserves the memories of those who lived through the turbulent times of the 1980s in Gewredê but also serves as an important educational tool for audiences unfamiliar with the Kurdish experience.

In *Big Village,* narrators are detached from the present and transported into Gewredê's realm of memories through close-up and medium close-up shots, with the narrator's image detached and placed onto the interface. The interactive nature of the documentary, where the viewer can intervene with their preferences, allows for a personalized experience, fostering emotional proximity with the narrators and entering a highly intimate space. The viewer's active use of interactivity breaks the predetermined nature of sound-image coherence found in linear documentaries, enabling them to navigate through archival footage and interface as they wish. This means that with each viewing, the i-doc can embody different narrative forms through various choices.

The i-doc's focus on both the insurgents and the postgeneration – the children who inherited these memories – adds depth to our understanding of the ongoing Kurdish struggle. The personal accounts of individuals such as Beri Shalmashi and others provide insight into the impact of these historical events on successive generations. The return to family narratives, commonly observed in diasporic filmmakers, is also evident here. This is because the relationship established with identity in the diaspora places greater importance on the family compared to the homeland. The family and the diasporic community become carriers of culture and history. *Big Village* thus emerges as a significant contribution to the field of memory work, demonstrating the power of interactive media to capture and convey complex historical narratives. Its exploration of such themes as statelessness, insurgent memory, and cultural trauma underscores the importance of preserving these stories, not just for the Kurdish community but for the global audience, as a poignant reminder of the enduring human spirit in the face of adversity.

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[1] M. van Bruinessen, "The Kurds Between Iran and Iraq", *MERIP Middle East Report* 1986, no. 141, pp. 14-27.

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[4] J. Bocheńska, R. Kurpiewska-Korbut, K. Kaczorowski, M. Rzepka, K. Lalik, A. Rodziewicz, "Introduction", in: *Rediscovering Kurdistan's Cultures and Identities: The Call of the Cricket*, eds. J. Bocheńska, Palgrave Macmillan, Cham 2018, pp. 21-22.

[5] S. Akbarzadeh et al., op. cit.

[6] Ibidem.

[7] M. van Bruinessen, op. cit., p. 17.

[8] S. Akbarzadeh et al., op. cit.

[9] Ibidem, p. 21.

[10] J. Bocheńska et al., op. cit., p. 23.

[11] *Peshmerga* literally translates to 'those who face death' or 'front-line soldiers' in Kurdish. It refers to Kurdish guerrilla forces in Iran. However, the Peshmerga is also known as the name of the military organization of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in Iraq.

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[15] Ibidem, p. 126.

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[18] S. Gaudenzi, op. cit., p. 32.

[19] J. Aston, S. Gaudenzi, op. cit.

[20] S. Gaudenzi, op. cit.

[21] J. Aston, S. Gaudenzi, op. cit., p. 126.

[22] Ibidem, pp. 126-128.

[23] Ibidem, p. 127.

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[26] R. Eyerman, *Cultural Trauma: Slavery and the Formation of African American Identity*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2003, p. 2.

[27] J. C. Alexander, op. cit., p. 1.

[28] A. Rigney, "Remembering Hope: Transnational Activism Beyond the Traumatic", *Memory Studies* 2018, vol. 11, no. 3, pp. 368-380.

[29] C. Elston, "Nunca Invisibles: Insurgent Memory and Self-Representation by Female Ex-Combatants in Colombia", *Wasafiri* 2020, vol. 35, no. 4, pp. 70-78.

[30] Ibidem.

[31] Ibidem, p. 70.

[32] Ibidem, pp. 70-71.

[33] Ibidem, p. 71.

[34] C. Elston, "Left-Wing Melancholia and Activist Memories of the Colombian Conflict in Fabiola Calvo Ocampo's *Hablarán de mí, Memory Studies* 2022, vol. 16, no. 5, pp. 1113-1126.

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[40] M. Hirsch, "The Generation of Postmemory", *Poetics Today* 2008, vol. 29, no. 1, pp. 103-128.

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[42] B. Shalmashi, L. Vazquez, "About the Project", *Big Village*, https://www.bigvillagestory.com/en/about (accessed: 1.11.2023).

[43] M. Hirsch, "Stateless Memory", op. cit.

[44] A. Rigney, op. cit.

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Słowa kluczowe:
kino kurdyjskie;
i-doc;
pamięć powstańcza;
postpamięć;
pamięć
bezpaństwowa;
archiwum

Abstrakt

Fatma Edemen

Kurdyjscy powstańcy i postpokolenie. *Big Village* jako interaktywne dzieło pamięci

Naród kurdyjski, niemający własnego suwerennego państwa, zamieszkuje w granicach Turcji, Iranu, Iraku i Syrii, często napotykając ograniczenia w zakresie ekspresji kulturowej. Sytuacja ta uniemożliwiła Kurdom wejście do branży filmowej, a filmy dokumentalne stały się ich preferowanym medium ze względu na opłacalność i prostsze wymagania techniczne. Autorzy tych dokumentów zwykle zagłębiają się w bolesne doświadczenia historyczne Kurdów. *Big Village* (2020) Beri Shalmashi i Lyangelo Vazqueza, wyróżnia się jako pierwszy kurdyjski interaktywny dokument internetowy (i-doc). Misternie splata osobiste i społeczne narracje, koncentrując się na kilku rodzinach i kurdyjskiej grupie powstańczej ze wschodniego Kurdystanu. Dokument przedstawia historie mieszkańców Gewredê, wioski, która w międzyczasie przestała istnieć. Autorka analizuje *Big Village* przez pryzmat wspomnień powstańców, odziedziczonej pamięci ich dzieci oraz wykorzystania materiałów archiwalnych. Bada też, w jaki sposób i-doc może skutecznie opowiadać współczesnym widzom o traumach historycznych.