Cinema Turkey
New Times, New Tendencies

Edited by Gözde Onaran & Fırat Yücel

Cinema Turkey: New Times, New Tendencies

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Introduction

Gözde Onaran & Fırat Yücel

In *Cinema Turkey: New Times, New Tendencies* our aim is to map out the subjects, themes and directorial approaches that have been shaping films made in Turkey after the revival in the late 1990s. It's been more than a decade since filmmakers in Turkey got back on track to produce films that capture the attention of international cinema critics and jurors. We believe that now is the right moment to look into the films that paved the way for today's film production in Turkey, which now reaches nearly 70 films per year and, thanks to the new blockbusters, has about a 50% share in the local box office. On the other hand, with Nuri Bilge Ceylan's successes at Cannes and Semih Kaplanoğlu's Golden Bear win at Berlinale 2010 with *Honey* (*Bal*, 2010), it is also the right moment to draw attention to the younger generation of filmmakers and the new approaches to filmmaking emerging from Turkey.

We preferred to call this book 'Cinema Turkey' rather than 'Turkish Cinema', since the 2000s have become the first period in the country's history during which filmmaking became relatively democratic and much more representative than ever before. This title signals many things at once: the wave of independent films made with low budgets and digital cameras; the rise of new filmmakers based in cities other than İstanbul (which was almost the one and only place of film production during the classical Yeşilçam period, named after a district in İstanbul) and their productions that spread filmmaking practices to a wider geography; the increase in the visibility of films made by minorities reflecting their specific issues through their own voice and perspective, especially the emergence of Kurdish directors who just recently gained the relative freedom to shoot films in their own language; and last but not least, the new wave of documentary filmmaking, which directly and more or less spontaneously points to sociopolitical issues of the times, with cameras scanning a much wider scene (politically and geographically) than ever before.

The first four essays in this book are closely intertwined and when read together will give a general yet comprehensive impression of the themes, genres, issues, conditions and main forces behind this new cinema. Zeynep Dadak offers an overview of the conditions and precursors that paved the way for the revival, navigating through funding issues, the influence of international film festival circuits, audience responses and generic tendencies during this period. Yeşim Burul Seven surveys the commonalities among and favourite themes of the first generation of filmmakers who laid the aesthetic and thematic foundations of the new cinema in Turkey and are now being considered as its auteurs. Övgü Gökçe focuses on certain filmmakers who have been acting with specific political agendas, provoking heated debates and breaking taboos, even at times heavily influencing national political agendas. Necati Sönmez presents an outline of documentary filmmaking in Turkey, following it from its origins up to the most recent generation of filmmakers.

Aslı Özgen Tuncer and Serazer Pekerman look at two very different yet metaphorically overlapping spatial configurations: the province and the outskirts of the big city. Özgen Tuncer, explores the various portrayals of the province, which are alternatingly (and sometimes simultaneously) suffocating and inspirational, and always charged with nostalgia, while Pekerman writes about how the poor neighbourhoods of İstanbul are being portrayed as crime centres breading anger and violence. The films that Pekerman discusses explore the frustrations of poverty stricken manhood and the way in which the resultant anger is mainly directed towards women. Finally, Z. Tül Akbal Süalp takes this issue even further and delves deeper into issues of misogyny evident in most of the films being discussed in this book, problematising certain cultural as well as artistic tendencies.

As it may have become evident through this short summary of the essays presented here, this is not a book of praise, nor a complete map of the cinema of Turkey. Reading the lines above one can easily understand that such completeness cannot be achieved. We believe that the new cinema in Turkey is still in its infancy; it will grow and hopefully this growth will not be one that will be summarised by heroic achievements in awards, box office and commerce, but will rather be one that will enhance and strengthen cultural pluralism, freedom of expression and autonomous artistic creativity. Hence, this book will hopefully serve as a diary of the early times of the cinema of Turkey, trying to identify and point toward some of the tendencies from which it was born.

İstanbul, 2011

The Regenerating Cinema of Turkey

Zeynep Dadak

For over a decade now, a group of auteur filmmakers from Turkey have been cultivating an ever-growing audience of admirers and followers, both homegrown and from elsewhere around the world. Through their prolific filmographies, a significant turn in contemporary Turkish cinema may be observed beginning from the mid-'90s, where state funded co-productions with predominantly European funders have allowed for the emergence of individual styles of filmmaking. Derviş Zaim's *Somersault in a Coffin* (*Tabutta Rövaşata*, 1996), Yeşim Ustaoğlu's *Journey to the Sun* (*Güneşe Yolculuk*, 1998), Zeki Demirkubuz's *Confession* (*İtiraf*, 2001) and *Fate* (*Yazgı*, 2001), Tayfun Pirselimoğlu's *Nowhere Land* (*Hiçbiryerde*, 2001), Nuri Bilge Ceylan's *Distant* (*Uzak*, 2002), *Climates* (*İklimler*, 2006) and *Three Monkeys* (*Üç Maymun*, 2008), Reha Erdem's *Times and Winds* (*Beş Vakit*, 2006), Semih Kaplanoğlu's *Milk* (*Süt*, 2008) and *Honey* (*Bal*, 2010), all became global festival hits in recent years.

The independent filmmakers of the 1990s emerged at a time when Yeşilçam, the popular film industry in Turkey that had produced 250 films a year during its apex in the 1960s and '70s, ground to a halt in the 1980s. The revival, if not regeneration, of Turkey's cinema was characterised by two seemingly discrete approaches: one deriving from earlier filmmaking habits, themes and styles; and the other introducing new visions, aesthetic concerns, and a critical treatment of Yeşilçam. By the mid-'90s, directors such as Yavuz Turgul with *The Bandit* (*Eşkıya*, 1996) and Mustafa Altıoklar with *İstanbul Beneath My Wings* (*İstanbul Kanatlarımın Altında*, 1996) were working on reinventing certain Yeşilçam formulas, respectively, the melodrama and the historical drama. When Turgul's *The Bandit* became a box office success with over two and a half million tickets sold, it was heralded as the revival of Yeşilçam. The biggest hit after *The Bandit* was *Kahpe Bizans* (2000), a parody of the historical epic, with another two and a half million tickets sold. In 1999, prominent director-producer Sinan Çetin's *Propaganda*, a romantic border story, satisfied viewers with its multifarious cast. The re-emergence of these more popular genres in the

Somersault in a Coffin

second half of the '90s contributed, therefore, to the restoration of the 'director's influence' after a particularly fallow period of filmmaking in Turkey.

In the meantime, Derviş Zaim excelled in low-budget guerrilla filmmaking with his first film *Somersault in a Coffin* (*Tabutta Rövaşata*, 1996), encouraging newcomers particularly with its success in international film circles. In 1998, Zeki Demirkubuz's *Innocence* (*Masumiyet*) captured attention both within and beyond the festival circuit with its self-reflexive structure, looking back at Yeşilçam with a melodramatic gaze. Similarly managing a highly charged emotional range, Serdar Akar's film *Gemide* (*On Board*, 1998) featured a novel narration, single-location setting and a modest production, while referring back to earlier Yeşilçam films that relied on the binary opposition of good and evil. As can be observed in the auteur-oriented cinema of this period, the representations of 'the city' and the 'rest of the country' varied from the disenchanted realist portrayal of the cityscape (e.g. Zeki Demirkubuz, Tayfun Pirselimoğlu), to the stylised depictions of the province as the city's almost fantastical counterpart (e.g. Reha Erdem, Semih Kaplanoğlu). In Nuri Bilge Ceylan's *Distant* (*Uzak*, 2002), İstanbul is portrayed as an inhospitable in-between space that one can neither pass through nor inhabit.

The Bandit

A NEW GENERATION OF FILMMAKERS

In the mid-2000s, the scene was further invigorated by the continuing interest of international film festivals and a domestic production network, and a new generation of filmmakers emerged with a fresh set of aesthetic, political and thematic concerns and tendencies. Among them are first/second-time directors Özcan Alper, Seren Yüce, Mahmut Fazıl Coşkun, Pelin Esmer, Aslı Özge, Hüseyin Karabey and more. Influenced by the creative expressiveness of the previous generation of filmmakers, they came to occupy an already opened up space for auteurism, while developing new forms for interweaving self-consciousness with social consciousness. Despite certain affinities with the previous

The Breath

generation of filmmakers, Aslı Özge in her *Men on the Bridge* (*Köprüdekiler,* 2009), Pelin Esmer in *10 to 11* (*11'e 10 Kala*, 2009), and Mahmut Fazıl Coşkun with *The Wrong Rosary* (*Uzak İhtimal*, 2008) shifted the locale from the province back to the city, through personal stories set in today's İstanbul. Seeking to establish a link between 'individual/personal filmmaking' and 'socially concerned/political cinema', works such as *Autumn* (*Sonbahar*, 2008), *The Storm* (*Bahoz*, 2008), *On the Way to School* (*İki Dil Bir Bavul*, 2009), and *Majority* (*Çoğunluk*, 2010), delineated 'a cinema of confrontations' with stories set in contemporary Turkey. In addition to their common thematic concerns, these films come from similar production and funding circumstances: based in İstanbul, fiscally funded by, and often affiliated with, cultural centres or organisations.

Autumn, a debut film by Özcan Alper, is a meditation on the aftermath of hunger strikes following the violent state intervention in prisons in December 2000. Similar to *Autumn* in dealing with an important moment of the recent past, *The Storm* recounts the story of a group of mainly Kurdish students at İstanbul University in the beginning of the 1990s. A timely contribution that challenges the boundary between fiction and documentary came from filmmakers Özgür Doğan and Orhan Eskiköy. Their *On the Way to School* found a subtle yet effective way to address the question of education in native language, in time to coincide with the government's 'Kurdish initiative' as it became known in official state parlance. On the other hand, *Majority* dealt with ethnic and sexual identities through the harsh portrayal of a middle-class family, revealing that institution as a well-oiled machine that turns sons into mirror images of their fathers. Seyfi Teoman, in his second film *Our Grand Despair* (*Bizim Büyük Çaresizliğimiz*, 2011), takes the trope of masculinity in an unprecedented direction, placing its characters in a ménage-à-trois while deconstructing certain well-worn gender stereotypes. Yet, despite the aforementioned commonalities and a palpable collegiality among the independent filmmakers, it would be a hastily drawn conclusion to label the revival of cinema in Turkey as a new wave or cultural movement. What is true is that the past fifteen years have helped to amalgamate a certain film culture, and more importantly, to create a social sphere for dialogue.

This new environment has also led to the appropriation of marginalised characters, themes and unspoken histories into commercial films. From the melodramatic take on the looting of the properties of non-Muslims in Turkey on 6-7 September 1955 in *Pains of Autumn* (*Güz Sancısı*, 2009) to Mahsun Kırmızıgül's populist treatment of the Kurdish issue in *I Saw the Sun* (*Güneşi Gördüm*, 2009), such titles contribute to the cinema of confrontations. Another example is *The International* (*Beynelmilel*, 2006), an attempt to piece together an unofficial version of the 1980 coup d'état, taking a rare approach of intercutting a popular interpretation with a more nuanced perspective. While other cinematic representations of Turkey's history have traditionally depended on the narratives of nation-building as received from official Ottoman and Turkish histories, titles such as


10 to 11


Pains of Autumn


Wrong Rosary

The Road Home (*Eve Giden Yol 1914*, 2006) by Semir Aslanyürek and *120* (2008) by Murat Saraçoğlu and Özhan Eren attempt something different in their treatment of similar material. *The Breath* (*Nefes: Vatan Sağolsun*, 2009) by Levent Semerci, a big-budget, well-crafted war film that comments on the contemporary situation of the Turkish army and its long battle with the PKK, stirred a heated debate due to its seemingly ambivalent attitude towards its subject, which in turn increased the film's popularity.

NATIONAL BLOCKBUSTERS

Since taking a crucial turn in the late '90s, the local market has been able to compete with international blockbusters, eventually beating out its overseas challengers in the past several years. As everywhere, the formula for Turkish films' box office success has rested on producing tried and tested genre films, popular since Yeşilçam, yet there have also been some surprises. *My Father and My Son* (*Babam ve Oğlum*, 2005), Çağan Irmak's neo-melodrama, is an example of such an unusual box office success. Irmak, who became renowned for his genre-breaking television series that combined 'eastern' family rhetoric with modernised urban protagonists, proved once again that he had a gift for merging old and new genre codes into contemporary Turkish themes, when his *Alone* (*Issız Adam*) became a nation-wide phenomenon in 2008 and popularised the romantic comedy as a domestic genre for the first time in Turkey.

On the other hand, the *Vizontele* series (2001, 2004), the hybrid-genre films of the star comedian Cem Yılmaz, such as *Everything's Gonna Be Great* (*Herşey Çok Güzel Olacak,* 1998), and his blockbusters *G.O.R.A* (2004) and *A.R.O.G* (2008), as well as Şahan Gökbakar's TV-based *Recep İvedik* series (2008, 2009, 2010) exemplify comedy as another popular genre at the box office. Yet, when *Recep İvedik* attracted over four million viewers, it also became a symbol of a rather unsophisticated filmmaking style that caters to the stereotyped male audience through aggression, homophobia, misogyny, and a hostility towards art house cinema and its supporters. It has been argued that *Recep İvedik*'s machismo found its unique voice in a blockbuster based on a character from the TV series *Valley of the Wolves* (*Kurtlar Vadisi*, 2006, 2007), yet with a difference. *Recep İvedik* was initially intended as a parody, which leaves room for an alternative reading, as any type of parody may be seen as an embedded critique of that which it imitates. *Valley of the Wolves*, however, resonated with an earlier title, *Wildheart: Hell of Boomerang* (*Deliyürek: Boomerang Cehennemi*, 2001) with its emphasis unmistakably on Turkish nationalism and chauvinism.

Within the consideration of the popular genres (comedy/parody, nationalist action film and neo-melodrama/romantic comedy), a pioneering film, *School* (*Okul*, 2004) by the Taylan brothers, initiated the thriller genre, followed by *The Spell* (*Büyü*, 2004) by Orhan Oğuz, and *Dabbe* (2005) by Hasan Karacadağ, among others. With their next thriller,

G.O.R.A

The Little Apocalypse (*Küçük Kıyamet*, 2006), the Taylan Brothers uniquely established themselves as auteurist directors within the genre film arena. Shortly thereafter however, they moved away from genre filmmaking, with *Vavien* (2009), a film set in a small city resonating with the visualisation of ordinary stories à la Ceylan, Kaplanoğlu, and others, though quite different in style.

Although popular titles outpace the so-called festival films in both number of screens

Two Girls

and box office receipts, they clearly benefit from the continuing interest in Turkish films locally and abroad. The revival of film-going habits and the renewed attention of young filmgoers to films produced in Turkey encourage filmmakers, albeit in different ways. Along with popular titles, Nuri Bilge Ceylan's growing reputation in art house cinema, Kazım Öz's esteemed position within Kurdish arts and politics, and Özcan Alper and his producer Serkan Acar's grassroots mobilisation during the distribution of *Autumn* can all be seen as vital in their films' box office achievements. On a final note, it is worth mentioning that the gray areas of filmmaking constitute a fertile ground to rethink the divide between art house and commercial films in the context of Turkey. Especially in recent years, thanks to the advance of digital technologies, filmmakers have begun to seek alternative production and distribution methods. Emre Akay's *A Film by Tuğra Kaftancıoğlu* (*Bir Tuğra Kaftancıoğlu Filmi*, 2008); *Feeling Blue and 31* (*Moral Bozukluğu ve 31*, 2010) by Ali Yorgancıoğlu, Gönenç Uyanık and Uluç Ali Kılıç; Alper and Caner Özyurtlu's *Ev* (2010), and Emre Yalgın's *Teslimiyet* (2009) are diverse examples of such tendencies. Along these lines, Kutluğ Ataman's (also a well-known video artist) *Lola and Bilidikid* (*Lola ve Bilidikid*, 1999) and *Two Girls* (*İki Genç Kız*, 2005), as well as Ümit Ünal's *9* (*Dokuz*, 2002) and *Ara* (2008) can be identified as the influential precursors of low budget-digital cinema concerned with situations, mannerisms and marginal characters.

Vavien

In Nuri Bilge Ceylan's Distant *(*Uzak*, 2002) İstanbul is portrayed as an in-between space that one can neither pass through nor inhabit.*

A.R.O.G *(Ali Taner Baltacı and Cem Yılmaz, 2008), an example of the hybrid-genre films of the star comedian Cem Yılmaz, fits the profile of the most popular films at the box-office.*

Majority (Çoğunluk, *Seren Yüce, 2010) deals with ethnic and sexual identities through the portrayal of the middle-class family, which is depicted as a well-oiled machine turning sons into mirror images of their fathers.*

Auteur Cinema In Turkey

Yeşim Burul Seven

Since entering the new millennium, Turkish cinema has been busy both at the domestic box-office and the international film festival circuit. While mainstream commercial cinema has been performing exemplarily without the aid of any quota practices or extra subsidies, the filmmakers who can be categorised as 'auteurs' have been the sweethearts of critics and audiences of film festivals from Cannes to Tribeca, Berlin to Haifa. Since 2000, many young filmmakers from Turkey have been internationally recognised with their debut films. The warm welcomes they received have unmistakably been encouraged by the significant works of more established auteurs from Turkey. In this respect, the forerunners of contemporary auteur cinema in Turkey, such as Nuri Bilge Ceylan, Zeki Demirkubuz, Reha Erdem, Semih Kaplanoğlu, Derviş Zaim, Yeşim Ustaoğlu and Tayfun Pirselimoğlu deserve a closer look into their works since 2000. Each of these filmmakers works within the auteur tradition, pursuing distinctive themes and stylistic choices. We can map out common sensibilities while exploring how they carve out a singular position for their cinemas by differentiating themselves from other filmmakers.

EARLY PRECURSORS

An early precursor to auteur cinema in Turkey was Reha Erdem's debut film *A Ay* (1988), an uncanny coming-of-age story shot in black and white. With its dreamlike atmosphere and odd characters, *A Ay* already promised the arrival of a new auteur. Yet most of the pioneering auteur work arrived in the 1990s. Zeki Demirkubuz, a self-taught filmmaker whose approach to cinema was shaped by Yeşilçam melodramas as well as auteurism, made his debut film *Block C* (*C-Blok*) in 1993. Four years later came his break-through film, *Innocence* (*Masumiyet*, 1997), which won numerous awards and established his unique style, composed of dramatic events, unfortunate characters, strong emotions exposed through a lens that insists on showing the ordinary in an unpolished manner. Derviş Zaim is another prominent filmmaker who has been one of the precursors of auteur cinema in Turkey with the exceptional low-budget film *Somersault in a Coffin* (*Tabutta Rövaşata*, 1996). Based on a real character, *Somersault* told the story of a homeless

Nuri Bilge Ceylan, Zeki Demirkubuz, Semih Kaplanoğlu
Derviş Zaim, Yeşim Ustaoğlu, Tayfun Pirselimoğlu
Reha Erdem

man who falls impossibly in love with a heroin addict. Shot in the guerrilla style, *Somersault* also showed the other filmmakers that it was possible to make a very good film with a very limited budget and a small crew. Not surprisingly, many of the auteurs mentioned above choose to work within these conventions, which ensure their independence and foster their creativity. One of the very few women directors in Turkey, Yeşim Ustaoğlu's debut feature *The Trace* (*İz*, 1994) was a psychological thriller. A rather Kafkaesque take on a detective story, *The Trace* seems to tie up the stylistic explorations that Ustaoğlu had been pursuing with her awarded short films. Four years after *The Trace*, she made *Journey to the Sun* (*Güneşe Yolculuk*, 1998), through which she opened up a new chapter in her cinema to examine the reflections of identity politics in her own unique manner. Narrating the coincidental friendship between the Turkish Mehmet and the Kurdish Berzan, she not only showed the repressive political and social environment of the early 90s, but also explored mechanisms of 'othering' and the fluidity of identities. *Journey to the Sun* is also important for inspiring a whole new generation of young filmmakers to make political and socio-culturally conscious films.

Innocence

TRILOGIES

One of the striking commonalities among some of the filmmakers mentioned above is their significant preference for trilogies. Five of the seven filmmakers have at some point in their filmographies completed trilogy projects. However, a close examination reveals that for each one of them the trilogy serves a different purpose in their filmmaking. Nuri Bilge Ceylan started out his career with the 'Provincial Trilogy', composed of *The Small Town* (*Kasaba*, 1997), *Clouds of May* (*Mayıs Sıkıntısı*, 1999) and *Distant* (*Uzak*, 2002), through which he conducts a self-reflexive examination of himself as an artist-in-progress. While for Zeki Demirkubuz, his 'Tales of Darkness' trilogy, *Confession* (*İtiraf*, 2001), *Fate* (*Yazgı*, 2001), and *Waiting Room* (*Bekleme Odası*, 2003), serves as an alcove, a breathing space fenced off but following on from his early films. Here he more profoundly examines his favourite themes through unvarnished small scale images with large emotions:

Distant

desperate love, jealousy and twists of fate in the lives of ordinary people, told with melodramatic overtones. After the trilogy, he made two exquisite films, *Destiny* (*Kader*, 2006) and *Envy* (*Kıskanmak*, 2009), in which he went on to deliberate the issues he had begun to tackle in his trilogy. Derviş Zaim, who started his trilogy in 2005, had a more thematic and academic approach. His films are composed of separate stories from different time periods with different characters, yet each one is based thematically and stylistically on a traditional Ottoman fine art: the miniature, Islamic calligraphy, and the shadow play, respectively. In each film he tries to employ the expressive potential of these art forms and apply them to the cinematic language while reverentially supporting this attempt in the storyline. Meanwhile Semih Kaplanoğlu won the Golden Bear Award at the 60th International Berlin Film Festival for *Honey* (*Bal*, 2010), the last instalment in his trilogy. His 'Yusuf Trilogy', comprised of *Egg* (*Yumurta*, 2007), *Milk* (*Süt*, 2008), and *Honey,* explores the life span of an individual character, Yusuf, backwards in three phases: middle-age, youth and childhood. Tayfun Pirselimoğlu, on the other hand, employs the trilogy to explore the lives of three different anti-heroes entangled with death, living in disturbingly real atmospheres: *Rıza* (2006), *Haze* (*Pus*, 2009), and *Hair* (*Saç*, 2010).

Hair

FAVOURITE THEMES

Among these established auteur filmmakers of contemporary Turkish cinema, Zeki Demirkubuz is the one who keeps the closest contact with the Yeşilçam tradition of popular Turkish cinema, especially the melodramas of the 1960s and the Arabesk films of the 1970s with their hyper-emotional tone and fatalistic storylines. Having started his career within the conventions of Yeşilçam, Demirkubuz's cinema is an existentialist take on the Arabesk lives of disenfranchised and silenced masses. His characters seem to have sprung out from the third page crime stories of daily Turkish newspapers, and he translates these messy lives on to the screen with neither contempt nor compassion. Following his 'Tales of Darkness' trilogy, his 2006 film *Destiny* revisited the characters from his 1997

Milk

masterpiece, *Innocence*. Set as a prequel to this earlier film, *Destiny* beckons us to observe our protagonists as destiny unfolds and creates the spirals of unhappiness and desperation from which there is no way out. The film turns us into helpless witnesses as young protagonists enslaved by their incurable emotions willingly submit to their unfortunate fates. Another powerful study of emotions and their implications by Demirkubuz came three years later with *Envy*. *Envy* is a literary adaptation from Nahid Sırrı Örik's novel of the same title. Set in the mid-1940s as a period piece, it is a further deliberation on the relationship between envy and malice.

One of the favourite topics of Turkish auteurs has been life in the province. A relatively uncharted terrain in cinema until the 1990s, directors such as Ceylan and Kaplanoğlu make it their focal point in their trilogies. Both dealt with the issue of migration from the province to the urban centres as well as life in the province itself. It may be this rather discomforting transition that the directors-as-artists are trying to come to terms with. Through his 'Provincial Trilogy' Ceylan, for example, forms a cycle of examination of the rural/urban tensions and identity troubles that have been keeping artists and social scientists busy in Turkey for some time. But the advent of the free market economy and the changes that have been brought to bear by urbanisation and consumerism have created new pressing issues to be dealt with. In *Distant*, Ceylan turns his camera self-reflexively on to a photographer from a rural background who built a life for himself in İstanbul, while trying deliberately to detach himself from his past and the relatives that he left behind. When his cousin from his small village shows up at his doorstep with the aim of finding a job in the big city, he is forced to face his past and all that he has been running away from. His cousin as his former self or alter ego makes him realise the futility of the life he is leading unless he comes to terms with who he really is. After the trilogy he takes his self-reflexivity a notch further with *Climates* (*İklimler*, 2006) and tackles the theme of a failing romantic relationship by casting himself and his wife in the lead roles. Spiced up with humour, but mostly sinking into bitterness and self-deprecation, he examines the superficiality of his lead character's approach to relationships and mocks his phoney intellectualism. In 2008, he made *Three Monkeys* (*Üç Maymun*), which appeared as a major change of track for Ceylan's cinema. Moving away from self-reflexivity, he explores the implications of lies and cover-ups in the lives of working-class family members. His choice of cinematography in *Three Monkeys* was one of the most surprising elements; set in a colour-corrected sepia tone, it retains a dystopian atmosphere to the very end. While it represents the first time that Ceylan tells the story of people unrelated to him, he is somehow more gentle and understanding in his approach to them than he has been towards himself (or his alter egos) on screen.

Ceylan's explorations of both provincial and urban life underlie his attempt to understand and deconstruct the concepts of 'home' and 'belonging'. These two running themes play a major part in the films of another prominent auteur, Semih Kaplanoğlu. Kaplanoğlu's

Destiny

debut film *Away From Home* (*Herkes Kendi Evinde*, 2001) is a search for the idea of 'home' in times of ruthless capitalism, which destroys traditional forms of home in favour of high rise blocks and new construction units, not just physically but also metaphorically. In his second film, *Angel's Fall* (*Meleğin Düşüşü*, 2005) he opted for a more minimalist approach and a realist vision with real life settings, minimal lighting and amateur actors. As the lead character Zeynep, a victim of incest, transforms herself and reclaims her liveliness by wearing the clothes of a dead woman, 'home' retains its uncanny and painful place. Then came the 'Yusuf Trilogy', where the order of things is completed with the last instalment, as all of the pieces, given to us in reverse order, finally fall into place. The 'Yusuf Trilogy' (*Egg, Milk* and *Honey*), is the story of what makes up a man and a poet. The power of honey - symbolised by the father - is watered with milk, the natural productivity of the mother, to create the egg, which is eventually going to crack its shell to become the artist of life, the individual. With his trilogy, Kaplanoğlu has no doubt made some of the most eloquent contributions to contemporary cinema in Turkey.

The inescapable feeling of being stuck in the province - not just physically but also emotionally - is transferred to a marginal urban setting in the films of Tayfun Pirselimoğlu. Pirselimoğlu stands out among contemporary auteurs as a multi-talented artist; formally trained as a painter in Vienna, he is also a published novelist. His first film *Nowhere Land* (*Hiçbiryerde*, 2001) deals with the psychological drama of a mother whose son went missing under politically ambiguous circumstances. Well-received and awarded as a first film, *Nowhere Land* deals with the psychological impact of a politically poignant issue. Then came his trilogy, focusing on the lives of little people belonging to a marginalised underclass. While 'death' is the running theme throughout the trilogy, the particular choices of locale are what sets the tone and creates the atmosphere. Compared to Ceylan and Kaplanoğlu, his approach is more socio-politically oriented and his universe is self-consciously aware of the multiple levels of marginalisation and exclusion that exists in contemporary Turkey. While his protagonists can be described as anti-heroes, the real heroes of his films are Küçükpazar, Altınşehir and Tarlabaşı, generally ignored and disregarded neighbourhoods that create and shelter these individuals. Within the trilogy, he explores respectively the notions of 'conscience' (*Rıza*), 'desperation' (*Haze*) and 'obsession' (*Hair*) alongside 'death', which highlights the wounded selves of their protagonists.

In this landscape of auteurism in Turkey, Reha Erdem stands out with the range of films and stylistic choices he has made since 2000. With four films in ten years, he has been one of the most prolific filmmakers not just quantitatively but also qualitatively: *Mommy, I'm Scared* (*Korkuyorum Anne*, 2004), *Times and Winds* (*Beş Vakit*, 2006), *My Only Sunshine* (*Hayat Var*, 2008), and *Kosmos* (2009). As an auteur, Erdem favours a cinema of montage and composes his films with visually gripping shots and eloquent sound design. Most of his films appear to be based on coming-of-age stories, yet the obstacles

Waiting for Heaven

Rıza

his characters face growing up underline the impossibility of closure and resolution. His films take place in non-existent places: *Times and Winds* and *Kosmos* are set in the unnamed province; and both function as idealised versions of what province stands for in Erdem's cinematic universe. *Mommy, I'm Scared* and *My Only Sunshine* take place in İstanbul; or rather in a timeless city Erdem recreates through his selection of images. His cinematic universe does not attempt to appear natural; on the contrary his films highlight their constructedness. In the artificial settings he creates, he tackles maybe one of the most universal questions of mankind: Why do we have to grow up? In his last film *Kosmos*, he provides his answer in the form of Kosmos/Battal, an animalistic, childlike figure who emphasizes the transient existence of mankind.

Among Turkey's contemporary auteurs, Derviş Zaim and Yeşim Ustaoğlu distinguish themselves with more socially conscious films and political themes. In *Elephants and Grass* (*Filler ve Çimen*, 2000), Zaim sets sail for mainstream seas and through the interlocking stories of multiple characters explores the corrupt relationship between state and mafia in Turkey. With *Mud* (*Çamur*, 2002) he returns to his homeland, Cyprus, and uses the notion of 'disease/illness' to symbolically represent the political and social trauma of Turkish Cypriots. Next comes his trilogy, as mentioned previously, an extended exercise on traditional Ottoman art forms. *Waiting for Heaven* (*Cenneti Beklerken*, 2005), a historical drama set in the 17th century Ottoman Empire, tells the story of Eflatun, an Ottoman miniature artist who is ordered by the court to travel to a distant part of the Empire and make a Western style realistic portrait of an insurgent prince before his execution. Frequent transitions from miniature style visuals to film frames point out the transition from the universe of essence signified by the miniature, to the universe of substance, signified by Western style realistic painting. *Dot* (*Nokta*, 2008), based on Islamic calligraphy (*hat*), adopts the formal principle of *hat* and is conceived as the continuum of a single shot. Between cuts and flashbacks, the camera is lifted up towards the sky and that is how the feeling of continuous flow is achieved. The film follows two stories in parallel, one from the 13th century and the other contemporary. Despite the time difference, both events unfold in the Salt Lake in Konya, Middle Anatolia. The dried up lake serves as a blank sheet of paper for the calligraphy artists in visually stunning shots. The last part of his trilogy, *Shadows and Faces* (*Gölgeler ve Suretler*, 2010) takes up the traditional shadow play as its focal point and, once again, returns to Zaim's homeland Cyprus to tell a story inspired by a real-life incident that took place during the ethnic clashes between Turks and Greeks in 1963. In the film, traditional Turkish shadow play symbolises the tension between light and darkness and the cancerous potential of evil that lurks in that darkness.

Another auteur with more of a social perspective on issues of identity and individuality is Yeşim Ustaoğlu. Since *Journey to the Sun* she appears to be increasingly interested in

My Only Sunshine

the Turkish nation-state's 'Others'. In *Journey*, it was the Kurdish Other, whose mirror image reflected on our very selves as the film explored the painful fluidity of identity formation and transformation. It can also be considered a precursor to a new line of political films in Turkish cinema. Following in the same vein, for her next film she turned her attention to the way non-Muslim minorities were treated in the history of the Turkish Republic. In *Waiting for the Clouds* (*Bulutları Beklerken*, 2003), she posed the personal story of another Other, Ayşe/Eleni, an elderly Greek woman, against the repressive practices of the state apparatus. With *Pandora's Box* (*Pandora'nın Kutusu*, 2008), she turned her camera onto the Others within the middle-class bourgeois family. Through the figure of the elderly mother with Alzheimer's, the film explores the role of memory and the workings of remembering and forgetting as escape mechanisms. The haunting question, where is 'home', remains a persistent motif in Ustaoğlu's world. Following *Pandora's Box*, she completed the documentary *Three Seasons A Life Black Sea Highlands* (*Üç Mevsim Bir Hayat Karadeniz Yaylaları*, 2010) through which she continued to explore the Black Sea region, where she herself comes from, and the lives of its locals.

CONCLUSION

The variety of the cinematic worlds created by auteurs from Turkey is well-recognised and appreciated internationally. It is not only the awards from the most prestigious international film festivals that determine the value of these films, but also the increasing number of regular theatrical bookings in other countries. Such developments are very promising for the future of cinema from Turkey. The range and diversity of films made by contemporary Turkish auteurs act as guideposts to point out and indeed promise what is yet to come: the themes that will be further developed; the lives that have yet to be discovered; and the memories that will be unearthed.

Pandora's Box

In Waiting For the Clouds *(*Bulutları Beklerken, *Yeşim Ustaoğlu, 2003), Ayşe/Eleni waits as the pains of the past blend into the pains of the present.*

Dot (Nokta, *Derviş Zaim, 2008), with a single stroke of the camera as in the Islamic calligraphy, unites the past and the future and the fates of its characters.*

Kosmos *(Reha Erdem, 2010) appears to remind us of the other, untamed universe where miracles come from and that the miracles do not come unburdened.*

Cinema in Turkey: Disparities and Oppositions

Övgü Gökçe

In the past decade cinema in Turkey has witnessed many different tendencies that particularly deal with, point at, conform to, or break with the 'order'. The social, political, and cultural processes in the course of this current period have evolved in tandem with the contradictory nature of the liberal conservative government rule in Turkey. A retrospective look at this particular climate still operating at present suggests that it bears a paradoxical character: On the one hand, the liberal policies of authorities have created a relatively 'free' public sphere where the most prohibited topics of recent political history –foremost, the Kurdish problem– are discussed openly, also bringing forth a critical discourse encouraged by the government on historically restricted areas of the Turkish state, such as the supreme and untouchable power of the Turkish army. While, on the other hand, this same period has been marked by a highly charged political atmosphere, with unwieldy and unending mega-court cases, crimes of extreme nationalism and male chauvinism, contentious censorship trials, and eventually a constant public questioning of law, morals and the social order. Cinema in Turkey, as the most affective and the most prolific of local cultural production, mirrors this manifold character of the recent political and cultural climate of Turkey. In a way, disparities (even polarities) in the interpretations of contemporary life in Turkey, and oppositions emerging from a new generation of filmmakers introspectively probing into social and political issues, present fertile ground for understanding the dynamics of recent cinema in Turkey.

DISPARITIES: HISTORY AND ACTION

In the past several years, cinema in Turkey began to challenge the conventional and traditional genres of classical Turkish cinema, namely melodrama and comedy, and yielded to local interpretations of internationally successful genres such as horror and romantic comedy. Even more interestingly, politically charged action films and history

The International

films had a major influence on not only the financial state of the indigenous film industry, but also on the socio-cultural controversies reflected in the public sphere.

Enjoying great popularity in their television series precursors, the most successful box office hits of politically charged action films in the past decade were *Wildheart: Hell of Boomerang* (*Deli Yürek: Bumerang Cehennemi*, 2001) and the extremely popular phenomenon of the *Valley of the Wolves* (*Kurtlar Vadisi*) series with four films (2005, 2007, 2009, 2010). Both titles have interpreted the action film in relation to the complicated structures of the state and secret service agencies in a 'Turkish style'. In these films, the machismo inherent in the toughness of action heroes took on an added righteousness and patriotism where the protagonists' illegal deeds became legitimised for the good of the 'homeland'. The nationalistic and conservative discourses that are increasingly visible in the cultural realm meant that these films were well received, particularly popular among the youth. *Valley of the Wolves* agitated these nationalist sentiments even more by setting its plot in Iraq (2005) and Palestine (2010), and turning its interest to the Middle East, where in a larger context, the patriotic nationalism embedded in the story finds its justification in the juxtaposition of the 'alien' forces of American and Israeli origin. In this way, *Valley of the Wolves* utilised the national upheaval that defines itself against its local and international 'Others', along with the instantaneous regional and international political conflicts – and, naturally, with a pinch of Muslim vindication.

Valley of the Wolves: Iraq

Cinematic representations of history, on the other hand, have taken on a much more diverse and interesting character in the last decade. Starting with Mustafa Altıoklar's *İstanbul Beneath My Wings* (*İstanbul Kanatlarımın Altında*, 1996), many films delved into the epic aspects of Ottoman culture, exploring a wide range of themes and aesthetics. While Ziya Öztan's costume drama *The Fall of Abdulhamit* (*Abdülhamit Düşerken,* 2003) highlights the dramatic aspects of the demise of an empire and its ruling class, *The Last Ottoman: Yandım Ali* (*Son Osmanlı: Yandım Ali*, 2007) revisits the adventure classics that

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were set in the Ottoman Era in a spirited action film. The late-Ottoman period, the Independence War and the early Republican history has also received growing attention from various filmmakers, all dealing with the premises of official history and the independence myth. *The Road Home* (*Eve Giden Yol 1914*, 2006) by Semir Aslanyürek and *120* (Murat Saraçoğlu and Özhan Eren, 2008) examine the nation building myths in different ways. Tolga Örnek's *Cars of the Revolution* (*Devrim Arabaları*, 2008) is an interesting example in this respect. With a powerful cast and an exhilarating plot, the film presents a Sisyphean story that takes place in 1961, focusing on a group of idealist engineers stubbornly working under an impossible deadline to produce the prototypes of the first ever 'Turkish' car. The veteran TV documentary producer and director, and prominent journalist Can Dündar's docudrama *Mustafa* (2008), the first relatively unconventional portrait of the founder of the Turkish Republic, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, caused great controversy, manifesting once again the social intolerance for inquiries into the most unresolved and restricted topic of Turkish society. This hint of dissonance in reanalysing the core and founding figure of the present 'order' was immediately challenged by official accounts, most noteworthy among them, another feature documentary *Dersimiz Atatürk* (2009) scripted by Turgut Özakman, who also attacked Can Dündar's film in interviews with the press.

With all of this historical reappraisal, it was perhaps inevitable that the 1980 coup d'état, one of the least attended to and most agonising periods in contemporary Turkey, be addressed in cinema. Early attempts begin with Zeki Ökten's *Ses* (1986), the first film that referred to the post-coup traumas, though quite obliquely. Some time later, a few more films, including veteran Atıf Yılmaz's *After the Fall* (*Eylül Fırtınası*, 2000), touched on this delicate subject yet without much critical attention from audiences. In 2006, two films addressed the 1980 coup d'état more overtly, though in very diverse ways. Ömer Uğur's *Homecoming* (*Eve Dönüş*, 2006) depended heavily on the actors' performances and a few explicit torture scenes, though it was no great cinematic achievement. However, *The International* (*Beynelmilel*, Muharrem Gülmez and Sırrı Süreyya Önder, 2006), with its black humour, was a box office success as well as an original take on the repercussions of the coup. Written and co-directed by Sırrı Süreyya Önder, now an increasingly influential political commentator who brings a refreshing perspective to many contemporary political issues, *The International* exemplifies the possibility of imaginative storytelling in the face of a dark historical period.

In the case of the repressed issues of history, some films have chosen to focus on controversial characters, such as Ezel Akay's *Who Killed the Shadows?* (*Hacivat Karagöz Neden Öldürüldü?*, 2006), in which Akay's storytelling devices and stylistic approach creates a period-film with a rich folk tale texture and a completely original aesthetic universe. While questioning the death of the most renowned characters of the traditional performance arts, Hacivat

Mustafa

and Karagöz, *Who Killed the Shadows?* pointedly tells of the period's power plays and vitriolic political atmosphere that eventually cost these two great artists their lives. A more recent example of the 'controversial persona' film, is *Hür Adam: Bediüzzaman Said Nursi* (2010), focusing on the life of Said Nursi, an influential religious authority who faced extreme censure by the state. This historical drama represents a significant new tendency in contemporary culture where the once off-limits traditional Islamic discourses repressed by the modernising forces of the Turkish Republic, return with full force.

Who Killed the Shadows?

Finally, Derviş Zaim, one of the few auteurs emerging out of the new Turkish cinema of the '90s, is noteworthy for his effort and persistence in problematising untouched subjects in different historical periods of Turkey through questions of tradition, while experimenting with both form and style. In his second feature, *Elephants and Grass* (*Filler ve Çimen*, 2001), Zaim boldly directs his camera to the dark background of the first political outburst of 'deep-state' incidents in the early '90s, followed by *Mud* (*Çamur*, 2003), which deals with the traumatic heritage of Turkey's military invasion of Northern Cyprus. After two films looking at the long Ottoman past through traditional art forms, *Waiting for Heaven* (*Cenneti Beklerken*, 2006) and *Dot* (*Nokta*, 2008), Zaim's latest feature, *Shadows and Faces* (*Gölgeler ve Suretler,* 2010) returns to the Turkish-Greek tensions in Cyprus with a conventional story that nonetheless makes reference to traditional shadow play aesthetics and morality.

OPPOSITIONS: CRITICAL ENGAGEMENT WITH THE RECENT PAST

In this last decade of cinema in Turkey, with the emergence of a second generation of filmmakers, perhaps the most significant cinematic voices came to be heard, responding to the manifold character of contemporary politics and social traumas that had previously remained untreated in artistic production. One of the outstanding examples of these

Journey to the Sun

voices was Özcan Alper's 2007 first feature, *Autumn* (*Sonbahar*). Alper initially worked as an assistant to Yeşim Ustaoğlu, the most prominent woman filmmaker in Turkey, who received critical acclaim with her second feature *Journey to the Sun* (*Güneşe Yolculuk*, 1998), the first film to prominently and sympathetically treat the Kurdish question, shot in a perilous moment in Turkey's long history of official repression of the issue. Five years after the controversies caused by *Journey to the Sun*, Ustaoğlu made her third film, *Waiting for the Clouds* (*Bulutları Beklerken*, 2003), telling the story of assimilated Turkish Greek identity, and the subjective experience of dealing with repressed origins. In *Autumn*, Özcan Alper follows his mentor in some respects, and sheds light on the processes of loss and mourning by taking a particular unattended tragic incident from the recent past as his point of departure: The operation of the police forces on 19 December 2000 (ironically named 'Return to Life') which resulted in the state-sanctioned massacre of many hunger striking prisoners, who were protesting the introduction of solitary confinement and isolation through the atrocious new F-type prison system. *Autumn* approaches this difficult subject through its protagonist, Yusuf, sentenced to jail as a university student and released from prison after ten years on health grounds. In this impressive first feature, clearly influenced by Ustaoğlu's *Waiting for the Clouds*, the originality of Alper's style brings together the aesthetics of a vast landscape bracketed with archival footage from state records, opening a powerful alternative narrative into the accounts of official history.

The effort to document repressed political issues of the past and present has taken its sharpest form in films by Kurdish directors with stories that revolve around Kurdish identity and recent history. The renowned pioneering Kurdish filmmaker Kazım Öz's work best represents these efforts ranging from short films to documentary and feature films. Since his first short *Ax* (*Toprak*, 1999), Öz has incorporated a wide array of filmic modes in his powerful treatment of contemporary Kurdish history including his skilful documentaries *Far* (*Dûr*, 2005) and *The Last Season: Shawaks* (*Demsala Dawî: Şewaxan*, 2009), and his latest feature film *The Storm* (*Bahoz*, 2008). As cinema increasingly becomes a language by which to 'speak' Kurdish identity (and in the Kurdish language as well), strong documentary filmmakers such as Çayan Demirel (*Dersim 38*, 2006 and *5 No'lu Cezaevi*, 2009) and young talented Kurdish filmmakers producing short films such as Erol Mintaş's *Snow* (*Berf*, 2010), Serhat Karaaslan's *Bicycle* (*Bisqilet*, 2010) and Arin İnan Aslan's *Arpeggio Ante Lucem* (*Pera Berbangê*, 2010), have begun to receive critical attention and prizes in national and international festivals in the last two years – just to name a few in a growing group of Kurdish filmmakers. The highlight of this track has been *On the Way to School* (*İki Dil Bir Bavul*, 2008) co-directed by Orhan Eskiköy and Özgür Doğan. Imaginatively combining elements of documentary with fiction, the film focuses on the most evident but never discussed phenomenon of Kurdish children who have no previous knowledge of Turkish, unwittingly entering the Turkish educational system. *On*

Waiting for the Clouds

the Way to School coincided with the heated public discussions on education in native language with its documentary story focusing on the confrontation of a first-time teacher from Western Turkey travelling to a remote Kurdish village in the Southeast. In addition to its profound historical significance, the film was also a revelation with its humorous tone.

Finally, two years after *On the Way to School*, another film came onto the scene, once again resonating with the current political climate and displaying the power of filmmaking as a visible strategy of opposition. In *Press*, the first-time filmmaker Sedat Yılmaz, looks at a bleak moment in the history of the press in Turkey by telling the story of the daily newspaper *Özgür Gündem* in the mid-'90s. Despite a long history of repression of the media from the '80s onwards (censorship, closures, and even assassinations of particular journalists) *Özgür Gündem* has represented a collective endeavour of the Kurdish political movement. *Press* sheds light on the history of this most popular and most repressed Kurdish-run newspaper whose mission it was to publicise human rights violations in the Kurdish regions during the mo the military operations against the Kurdish movement.

The theatrical release of *Press* in the spring of 2011 coincided with a campaign against the illegitimate arrest of two journalists. This interpenetration of cinema and politics is ever more common in Turkey, reflecting the increasingly intimate and immediate relationship between contemporary cinema and the current social and political climate in the country. More than ever before in Turkey, this mutual influence between politics and art is taking its most visible and direct form in the present cinema of Turkey.

Press

Written and co-directed (with Muharrem Gülmez) by Sırrı Süreyya Önder, an increasingly prominent commentator on the current political climate in Turkey, The International *(*Beynelmilel, *2006) exemplifies the possibilities of imaginative storytelling in the face of a dark historical period.*

In Autumn *(*Sonbahar*, 2008), Özcan Alper meditates on the process of loss and mourning by opening up a powerful alternative narrative in the official accounts of history through an aesthetics of landscape.*

Press *(Sedat Yılmaz, 2010) sheds light on the history of the most popular and most censored Kurdish newspaper whose mission it was to publicise human rights violations during the heightened military offensive against the Kurdish movement.*

Documentary in Turkey: the 2000s

Necati Sönmez

THE BIRTH TRAUMA

A comprehensive history of documentary cinema in Turkey is yet to be written, but that it should begin with *The Demolition of the Russian Monument at St. Stephen* (*Ayastefanos'taki Rus Abidesinin Yıkılışı*, 1914) is more or less certain. Though its existence has been subject to debate, this short film shot by a soldier (Fuat Uzkınay) who had never before held a camera is not only considered to be 'the first Turkish film', but also referred to as the first documentary made in Turkey. Actually, the 150-metres of footage is neither a 'film' in the sense that we have come to think of it, nor a 'documentary', and would perhaps be more aptly described as a 'newsreel' or an 'actuality' film. Yet regardless of the exact designation, it has already been authorised as the first Turkish film, its date of production, 14 November, celebrated for the past many decades as Turkish Cinema Day.

The official destruction of the Russian monument was one of those events meant to rouse nationalist sentiment following the Ottoman Empire's decision to join in the First World War. Though professionals were brought from Vienna to film the event, it was decided at the last moment that it would be more meaningful for a Turk to undertake the task, hence the enlisting of Fuat Uzkınay, who was actually a machinist in the army. A product of war propaganda documenting what was clearly an act of vandalism (the intentional destruction of a magnificent historic monument which was known to house many valuable wall paintings), the film indeed marks an unfortunate beginning as Turkey's first documentary. Who knows, perhaps it is this birth trauma that underlies what has emerged as one of the strongest trends in Turkey's documentary cinema: the lament for 'that which is no more' (ancient civilisations, the last great masters, last remaining nomads, etc.).

Thus the history that began with the propaganda and 'education' oriented productions of the Central Military Office of Cinematography continued with epic stories of war and heroism. In the second half of the 20th century, the Centre for Educational Films produced

The Moustache

instructional and cultural documentaries, mostly about nature, folklore, history and archaeology. From the 1970s onwards, the Turkish Radio and Television Corporation (TRT) came to control documentary production in the country, though the range of topics hardly varied. Still a dominant force in the field, TRT's documentaries were marked for a long period by the peculiar irony of mostly focusing history and archaeology, while abiding by the prohibition to broadcast words such as 'Greek' or 'Byzantium'. Didactic voiceover was an essential element of these films, eventually becoming a documentary cliché, infecting even the few independent documentaries that were made.

The rupture in both the content and form of documentary production came only in the 2000s when digital technology freed it from the monopoly of a small clique, and allowed the production of human-oriented documentaries with contemporary social relevance and radical-political perspectives. As mentioned, a comprehensive history of documentary in Turkey has not been written yet, save for some notes here and there. Below you will find an inventory of the last ten years of documentary in Turkey, a reminder to those who will set out to write this detailed history in the future.

RADICAL CHANGES

The radical change that began in Turkish cinema in the 1990s came to fruition in the 2000s; and as independent fiction features by new directors began making the festival rounds, a new generation also emerged on the documentary scene. Lacking in mechanisms of support, the transformation in documentary was not as rapid as in fiction film. Nevertheless the new generation of documentary filmmakers managed to open up a space for themselves, and it has been a space that would expand in time. With the emergence of this generation, the shift from the knowledge-imposing 'lifeless history' documentaries to living human stories gained momentum. True, a similar transformation in documentary was effected worldwide due to a variety of factors, including cameras becoming increasingly compact so as to enter every nook and cranny of life, the omissions of an ever more monopolised and homogenised mainstream media triggering the search for alternative narratives, and the internet rendering information increasingly accessible. However, in Turkey's case, the transformation in documentary cinema may also be understood in terms of the 'return of the repressed' and the eventual recovery from the aforementioned birth trauma.

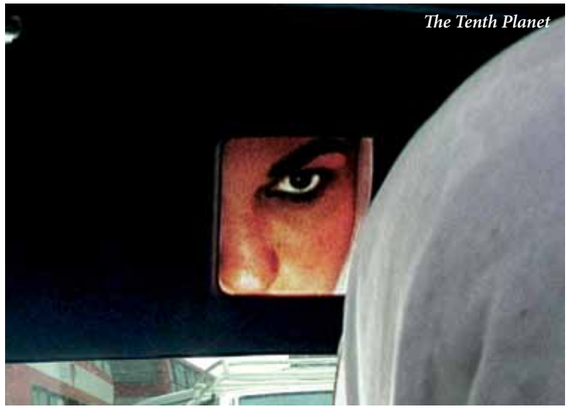
To give examples, Belmin Söylemez's short film *The Moustache* (*Bıyık*, 2000) was so unlike anything that had come to be known as documentary in Turkey until then that some were hesitant to identify it as such. The same director's *Waves* (*Dalgalar*, 2001) heralded a new documentary idiom with its unconventional aesthetic. *Each Dream Is a Shattered Mirror* (*Hayaller Birer Kırık Ayna*, 2001), the student film by Özgür Doğan and Orhan

On the Way to School

Eskiköy, who later became leading figures in this new generation, may also be seen as one of the benchmarks of this new era.

Pelin Esmer's observational documentary about a group of women putting on a play in their village, *The Play* (*Oyun*, 2005), had a watershed impact on domestic viewership. This low-budget production was not only widely acclaimed by audiences in Turkey, but also screened at countless international festivals, winning many awards. Meanwhile the influence of women directors in documentary cinema was clearly felt, contrary to the gender divide in fiction film. One significant film of this period, *The Tenth Planet* (*Onuncu Gezegen*, 2004) was made by Melis Birder who managed to film in occupied Baghdad. In *In Transit* (2004), Berke Baş brought her camera to the backstreets of Tarlabaşı, to film undocumented refugees. Elmas Bingöl's *Cicadant* (*Ağustos Karıncası*, 2005), awarded the Golden Orange for Best Documentary in Antalya, broke with Turkish documentary conventions to focus on a single character. The following year's Golden Orange for Best Documentary was awarded to *Housekeeper* (*Gündelikçi*, 2006) by Emel Çelebi, who portrayed lives to which Turkish documentary filmmakers had never before turned their gaze. *Housekeeper* also won a best film award in South Korea, attesting to its universal appeal, its ability to speak to audiences across cultures. Çelebi's universal address was confirmed once again when her next film, *Sisters of Lilith* (*Lilit'in Kızkardeşleri*, 2008), won the Best Balkan Documentary Award. Another notable member of this generation of women documentary filmmakers, Rüya Arzu Köksal, who explored the ecological and social devastation caused by the construction of the new coastal highway on the Black Sea, in her carefully crafted film *The Shore* (*Son Kumsal*, 2008).

My own documentary about the history of the death penalty in Turkey, *To Make an Example of* (*İbret Olsun Diye*, 2007) was screened in over 20 countries and won various national and international awards, another testament to new generation Turkish documentary cinema's achievement of international standards. It should be emphasised here that around this time there was a visible proliferation of documentaries that tackled the political taboos of official history. Significant examples of this radical/political wave in documentary are Bahriye Kabadayı's portrayal of the spirit of the 1960s, *Revolutionary Youth Bridge* (*Devrimci Gençlik Köprüsü*, 2007), which reached thousands of viewers within Turkey; and an earlier production by Çayan Demirel, *Dersim 38* (2006), which was heavily censored due to its subject matter of the 1937-38 Kurdish massacre in Dersim. Demirel's greatest contribution to this wave came a few years later with *Prison Number 5: 1980-1984* (*5 No'lu Cezaevi: 1980-1984*, 2009), which confronted Turkey with one of the darkest chapters in its recent history by exposing the systemic torture of Kurds after the 1980 coup d'état. Nezahat Gündoğan's *Two Locks of Hair: The Missing Girls of Dersim* (*İki Tutam Saç: Dersim'in Kayıp Kızları*, 2010) again gave centre stage to the victims of the 1938 massacre and garnered considerable public attention. We must also note as part


The Tenth Planet


The Play


The Shore

of this political wave, the various activist documentaries produced and swiftly disseminated by Ethem Özgüven and Petra Holzer's crews, about the burning issues of the day, such as the Bergama villagers' struggle against cyanide gold mining, the atrocious labour conditions in Tuzla's shipyards, and the fatal labour of workers who stone wash jeans.

Kazım Öz's documentary about a nomadic community, *The Last Season: Shawaks* (*Son Mevsim: Şavaklar*, 2008), is among the prominent films made in the Kurdish region. It was followed by a film that ignited, like no other film, documentary or otherwise, has ever been able to do, the debate on one of the fundamental questions of the Kurdish problem: education in one's native tongue. *On the Way to School* (*İki Dil Bir Bavul*, 2009) by Özgür Doğan and Orhan Eskiköy has not only marked the decade, but also radically challenged the way documentary was conceived in Turkey. It is the only documentary made in Turkey that has proved a competitor to fiction features in terms of the number of viewers it reached on theatrical release, and the critical acclaim it has received in festivals around the world.


On The Way to School

POLITICAL ISSUES

It was around this time that we witness the emergence of several documentaries treading new political ground, such as sexual identity and gender discrimination: *Taboo* (*Tabu*, 2008) by Aylin Kuryel and Emrah Irzık, *Me and Nuri Bala* (*Ben ve Nuri Bala*, 2009) by Melisa Önel are among them. We must also note here the three music documentaries that have each garnered a significant fan-base. Two of these were directed by Ümit Kıvanç: *I Passed Through You with Songs* (*Şarkılarla Geçtim Aranızdan*, 2008) about singer-song writer Kazım Koyuncu who died before his time; and a film that reached hundreds of thousands of viewers online, *My Kite Got Caught in the Wires* (*Uçurtmam Tellere Takıldı*, 2010) about Ahmet Kaya who died in exile for openly expressing what he stood for. The


The Last Season: Shawaks

third music documentary in question is Nezih Ünen's *Lost Songs Of Anatolia* (*Anadolu'nun Kayıp Şarkıları*, 2008), in which the musician-director sets out on a journey across Anatolia to collect and rearrange traditional folk songs. Yüksel Aksu's *Last Nomads in Anatolia: Sarıkeçililer* (*Anadolu'nun Son Göçerleri: Sarıkeçililer*, 2010) won the Golden Orange for Best Documentary in Antalya, taking its place among the successful documentaries made by directors from a TV and fiction feature background, like Yeşim Ustaoğlu, Kutluğ Ataman and Derviş Zaim before him.

The documentaries noted here are only a selection from among the prominent ones. As there is no central database, we do not know the exact numbers, though a safe estimate would be that currently over 100 documentaries are produced in Turkey per year. This 'new generation' of films, some of which are named here, is already succeeded by an even newer wave: *Mezra Ezidiya* (*Mezra Ezidiya*, 2009) and *Hope* (*Miraz*, 2010) by Rodi Yüzbaşı, *Nasty Age* (*Kahpe Devran*, 2010) by Cahit Çeçen, *On the Coast* (*Bu Sahilde*, 2010) by Merve Kayan and Zeynep Dadak, *Resister* (*Direnişçi*, 2010) by Murat Utku, and *Offside* (*Ofsayt*, 2010) by Reyan Tuvi... The last milestone of this decade is İmre Azem's documentary *Ecumenopolis: City Without Limits* (*Ekümenopolis: Ucu Olmayan Şehir*, 2011), selected for official competition with feature films at İstanbul Film Festival, raising the stakes even higher for documentary in Turkey.

To sum up, documentary cinema in Turkey seems to have overcome its birth trauma, marked by the destruction of a historic monument, to finally begin to challenge official history, lend visibility to many issues ignored by mainstream media, and become the voice of the voiceless. Though still lacking in favourable conditions of production, a solid infrastructure and mechanisms of support, exhibition and distribution, Turkey's documentary cinema nevertheless embarks on the new decade with much hope and prospect.

(Translated from the Turkish by Başak Ertür)

Two Locks of Hair: The Missing Girls of Dersim

Testifying to the hitherto unspoken truth of the Diyarbakır Prison in the 1980s, Prison Number 5 *(*5 No'lu Cezaevi, *Çayan Demirel, 2009) has taken a prominent place among Turkey's impressive political documentaries.*

On the Way to School *(*İki Dil Bir Bavul*, 2009) by Orhan Eskiköy and Özgür Doğan is undoubtedly the most important documentary of the past decade, establishing the genre solidly within cinema from Turkey.*

Raising the stakes of Turkey's documentary cinema even higher, Ecumenopolis *(*Ekümenopolis*, İmre Azem, 2011) is the first documentary to be selected to İstanbul Film Festival's official competition.*

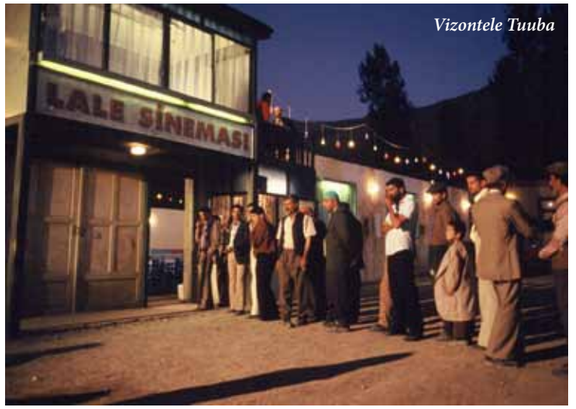
Probing (the) Province: New Landscapes of New Cinema From Turkey

Aslı Özgen Tuncer

explored in the blossoming new cinema from Turkey, a recurrent one seems to be the move away from the urban setting towards peripheral landscapes. The wide variety of films focusing on life in the province include internationally acclaimed art house films such as Semih Kaplanoğlu's *Honey* (*Bal*, 2010) and Nuri Bilge Ceylan's *Clouds of May* (*Mayıs Sıkıntısı*, 1999), as well as national blockbusters such as *My Father and My Son* (*Babam ve Oğlum*, 2005) and the *Vizontele* duology (Yılmaz Erdoğan and Ömer Faruk Sorak, 2001, 2004). The affects that are assigned to provincial landscapes by the directors of Turkey's new wave cinema are no less varied. While a good many of them construct the province as a space of restrictive becoming and suffocating dreariness, others portray a glorious nature that harbours healing powers and inspiration for new beginnings. For national blockbusters, on the other hand, the naïve simplicity of the province and provincials provides the very substance of hilarity in comedies targeting urban cinemagoers (e.g. *Dondurmam Gaymak*, *Vizontele*, and *Vizontele Tuuba*).

LOCATING THE PROVINCE: A SURVEY

It is possible to observe two main trends in the portrayal of the province in the new cinema from Turkey: it is either a site for healing and inspiration, or a dystopian space marked by claustrophobia. While the former can be highlighted as a new conceptualisation by the contemporary generation of directors, it is possible to trace the latter back to films and books produced from the early 20th century onwards. This coincides with the emergence of cities, whereby Westernisation efforts and the centralisation of government effected increased differentiation between developed and underdeveloped areas of settlement. While cities were seen as centres of intellectual production and modernity, the provinces were associated with ignorance and primitivism. Hence, the provinces figured as either



Vizontele Tuuba


Vizontele


Honey

spaces of exile for intellectuals (early 20th century), or backward places populated by people who must be educated, enlightened, and edified (e.g. *Vurun Kahpeye*, 1949; *Hakkari'de Bir Mevsim*, 1983). As the 1950s brought about a wave of migration from the provinces to the cities, mainly to İstanbul, books and films produced in the second half of the 20th century turned their focus mostly on the hardships of provincial life in the suburbs or the outskirts of İstanbul (e.g. *Gurbet Kuşları*, 1964; *Gelin*, 1973). This diversity in portrayals is reflected in the Turkish word for province, *taşra*, which is rather elusive and burdened with connotations.

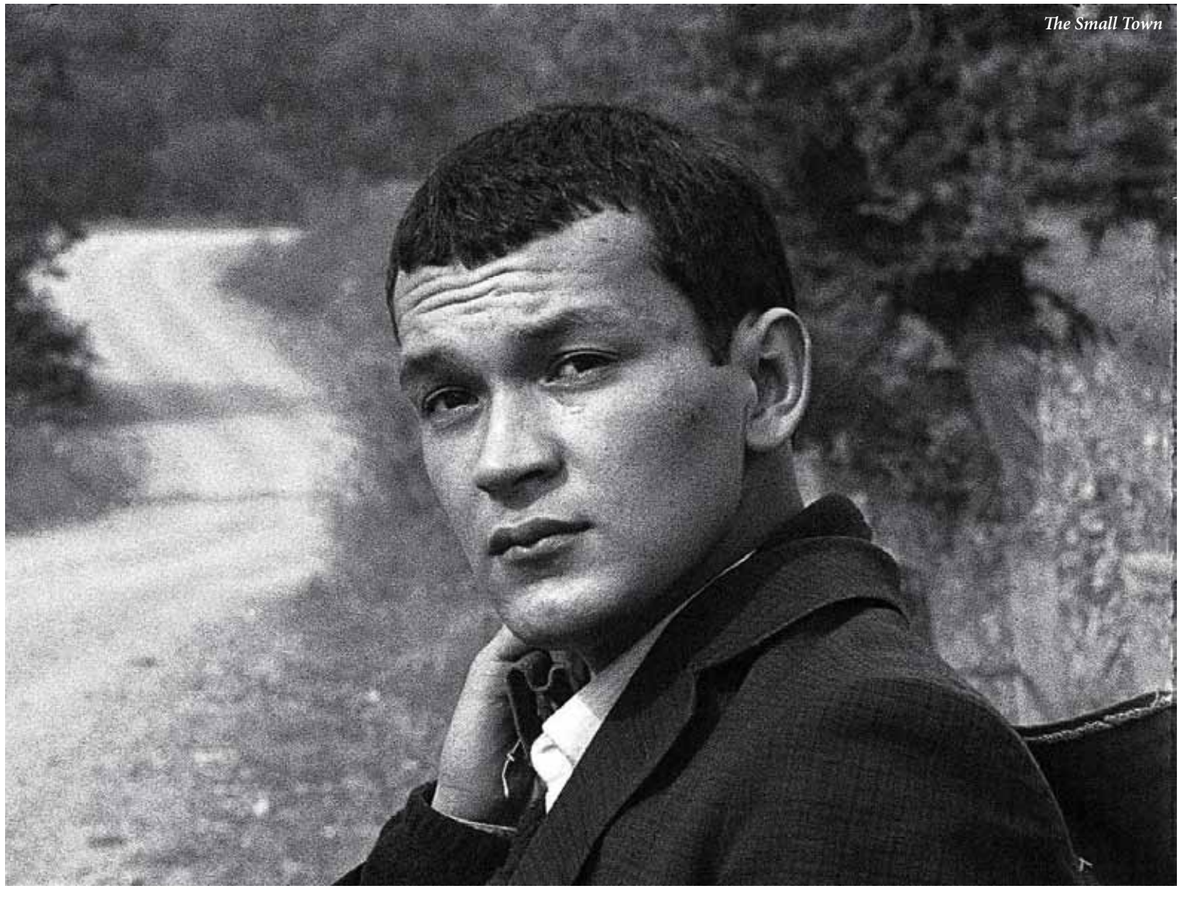
PROBING INTO THE PROVINCE

Taşra literally means 'outside', and was used to refer to faraway lands in the late Ottoman era. Interestingly, the Latin-origin of the English word *province* has a similar etymology and denotation. In the Roman Empire, *provincia* was used to refer to imperial territories outside of Italy and under the rule of a governor. In its contemporary meaning, the word denotes, especially in its plural form, 'the whole of a country outside of its capital'. Thus we can grasp the elusive nature of the word *taşra* and its English counterpart: They both refer to the periphery, which is defined only in relation, and often in opposition, to the centre. While the province can be a small town (as in *The Small Town*), a tiny village (as in *Summer Book*), or an empty sylvan landscape (as in *Times and Winds* or *Pandora's Box*), it can also be the suburbs of a metropolis (as in *Black Dogs Barking* or *Children of the Otherside*), outskirts of a city (as in *My Only Sunshine*), or even a smaller city (as in *Envy*).

What unites the various spaces mentioned above is their shared position as somewhere *outside* in relation to the *centre*. Drawing inspiration from this tension between the urban and the provincial, the new wave of directors from Turkey articulate pastoral scenes through a consciousness that complicates an attachment to the past. This attachment is most evident in the films of Nuri Bilge Ceylan (*The Small Town*, *Clouds of May*), Ahmet Uluçay (*Boats out of Watermelon Rinds*), Semih Kaplanoğlu (*Egg*, *Milk*, *Honey*), Seyfi Teoman (*Summer Book*), and Çağan Irmak (*My Father and My Son*), who revisit the spaces of their childhood in their films. One very common way of relating to the provincial past is through the figure of a child character.

RE-VISITING THE 'HUMAN PROVINCE'

The fact that more than a few of the new directors return to the spaces of their childhood to shoot their first films points to the inspirational aspect of nostalgic provincial landscapes. The child appears in almost all provincial films, and mostly as a figure through which the director relates to his past. The child in such films as *Clouds of May*, *Boats out of Watermelon Rinds* (*Karpuz Kabuğundan Gemiler Yapmak*, 2004), *My Father and My Son*,



The Small Town

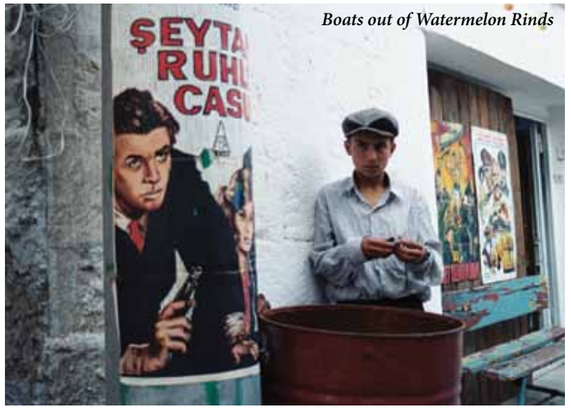
and *Egg* (*Yumurta*, 2007) seems to embody all possibilities that are now lost, dreams that are wasted, and an inner peace whose value has gone unrecognised. Through the figure of the child, the definition of the province is thus problematised and complicated. It becomes a peaceful home that nourishes the mind and soul, and a confinement that has to be overcome. This tension between creativity and dreariness is perhaps best conveyed in Ceylan's *Clouds of May* through the interaction of three characters: Saffet (Mehmet Emin Toprak), who aspires to a life in the 'big city', İstanbul; the protagonist Muzaffer (Muzaffer Özdemir), who returns to his native village to shoot his first film; and the young Ali (Muhammed Zımbaoğlu), who almost always accompanies Muzaffer, especially in his flâneries into the depths of nature. Given the heavily autobiographical references, it can be posited that the director distributes his inner tensions among these three characters. Muzaffer represents his intermediary position between the city and the province, while Saffet personifies his adolescent desire to leave the suffocating village, and Ali embodies his nostalgic attachment to his hometown. *Clouds of May* is crucial in understanding the tensions built around provincial cinema in this new wave of films from Turkey, since it constructs the province in all its multidimensionality: as a dreary confinement; a site of peaceful nostalgia; and a space for creativity and inspiration. Other films that have a similar take on the province are *My Father and My Son*, *Pandora's Box* (*Pandora'nın Kutusu*, Yeşim Ustaoğlu, 2008), and *Autumn* (*Sonbahar*, Özcan Alper, 2008), to name a few.

PROVINCIAL DYSTOPIAS

Apart from the rather lyrical appearances, the provinces are also constructed in the new cinema from Turkey as spaces of absolute monotony, depression, and restriction. In such representations, nature, which is usually conveyed as a glorious element so beautiful and mysterious yet so alien to the modern individual, becomes the very measure of an overwhelming and intractable monotony. The reason for provincial claustrophobia is not only the unchanging lifestyle, but also the ceaseless rhythmical repetitions of nature. While Seyfi Teoman's *Summer Book* (*Tatil Kitabı*, 2008) aptly relates the former, Reha Erdem's *Times and Winds* (*Beş Vakit*, 2006) is a perfect example of the latter. Though in Erdem's *Times and Winds*, the myth about the 'different' temporality of the province as opposed to the artificial urban temporality is severely questioned. The film relates the story of four children as they try to claim a space for their adolescent personalities in the world and order of the grown-up. The village is beautifully scenic but not absolutely peaceful or inspirational here, as it is interwoven with dangers of parental violence, whose depressing entrenchment is reflected in the rhythms of nature that define agrarian life.

Semih Kaplanoğlu's reversed bildungs-trilogy, crowned by the Golden Bear winning finale *Honey*, similarly splices a coming of age story and an effort to overcome the

My Father and My Son



Boats out of Watermelon Rinds

Pandora's Box

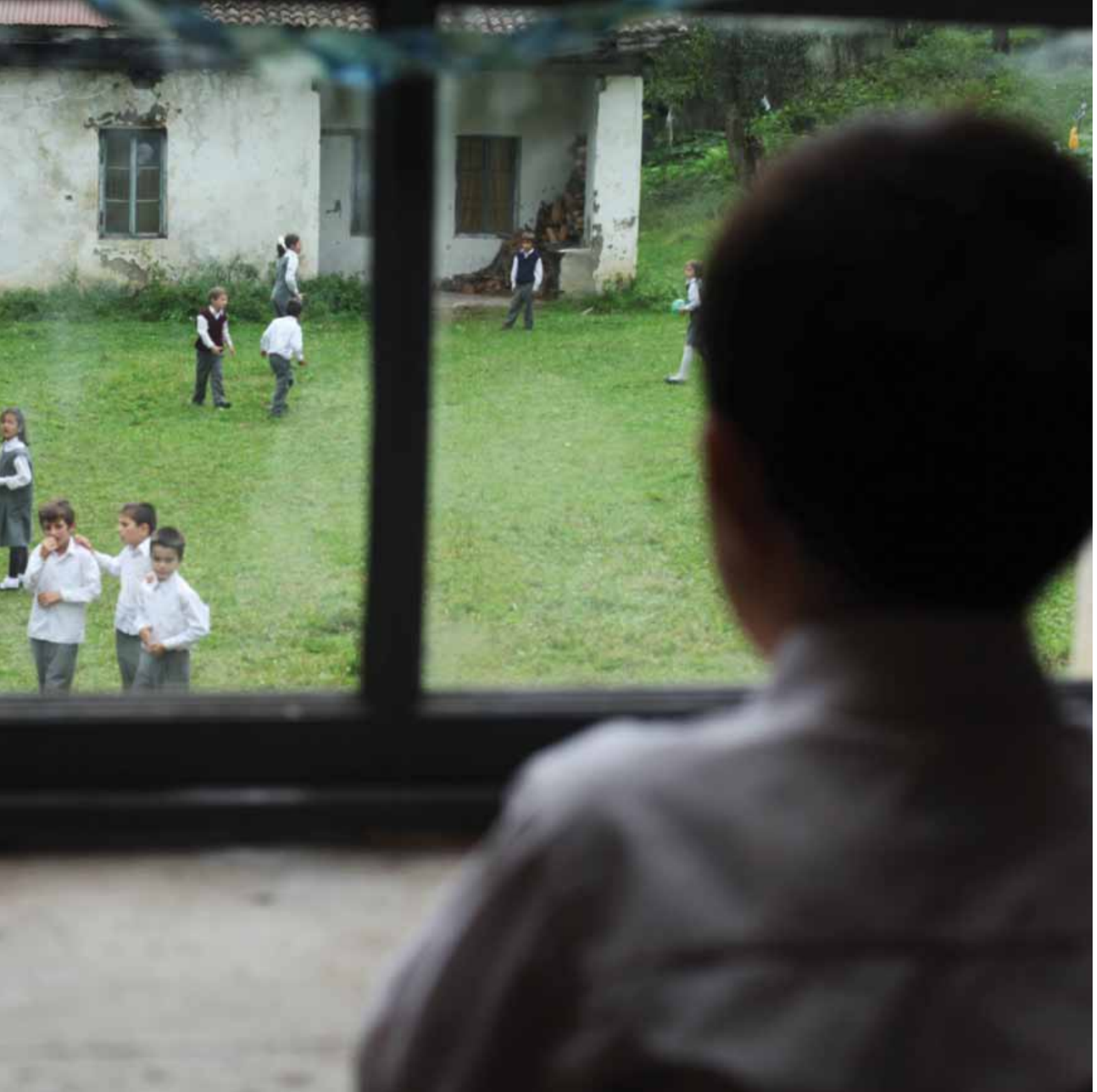
restrictive province. As in Erdem's *Times and Winds*, growing up in a confined, isolated province is a painful process in both *Milk* (*Süt*, 2008) and *Honey*. Yet Kaplanoğlu shrewdly portrays the latent attachment to the province as the cherished childhood abode in *Egg*. In that film, Yusuf, the protagonist, revisits upon the death of his mother the small village he left as a young man. Throughout the film, Yusuf expresses a desire to return to İstanbul; yet the perpetual deferment of his leave-taking reveals a sense of entrapment as well as attachment. This kind of latency is perhaps the best place to locate the tensions in the new generation of directors' articulation of the province. By cannily conveying in their films an interplay of ambivalently contrasting feelings with regard to it, they ultimately appear critical of their own perspective – a symptom of their own alienated selves marked by a crisis of belonging.

Egg

Times and Winds

Summer Book *(Tatil Kitabı, 2008) by Seyfi Teoman portrays the unchanging life in the province through the eyes of 10-year-old Ali, as the overbearing rule of his dying father is replaced by his uncle.*

Dondurmam Gaymak *(Yüksel Aksu, 2005) draws its comedic material from the 'provincial' reactions to the incoming devices of modernity.*



Honey (Bal, *2010) is the last chapter of Semih Kaplanoğlu's reversed bildungs-trilogy and portrays the pains of growing up in the isolated province.*

A Popular Genre: Crime-Action à la Turca

Serazer Pekerman

PORTRAYALS OF POVERTY-STRICKEN MANHOOD

The films I will focus on in this essay are all 'crime-action films' made in Turkey in the 2000s. Although some of these films have very different aesthetic styles and concerns, it is helpful to frame them together since they are all about a similar set of themes: love of power, symbolic wars between a cruel metropolis and its inhabitants, and an extreme violence ready to erupt with little or no provocation. What they have in common is their focus on male protagonists who try to attain power through violence, which seems to be the only option for them in a cruel and unfair world. The stories are typically set in and around İstanbul's centres of nightlife, such as the backstreets of Beyoğlu, and its poorer neighbourhoods, like Tarlabaşı, Laleli, or Surdibi. The agoraphobic and/or claustrophobic framing of the squats and ghettos portrayed gives them a hellish atmosphere. The main characters are uneducated, unemployed and agitated. There is no peace in their lives. They typically come from poverty-stricken traditional or religious families. The gang leaders function as father figures. The women, cast in minor roles, are often portrayed as mere obstacles, as reasons for some fatal mistake or as precious props that need protection. The events revolve around the power wars between tough guys and wannabes. These films draw on a rich variety of seemingly eclectic sources: Francis Ford Coppola, Martin Scorsese and David Mamet's stylish gangster/mafia films; Quentin Tarantino's cool albeit loser criminals; as well as individual films such as *Ghostdog: The Way of the Samurai* (Jim Jarmusch, 1999) or the *First Blood* series (Ted Kotcheff, 1982; George P. Cosmatos, 1985; Peter MacDonald, 1988); and contemporary popular Turkish films such as *The Bandit* (*Eşkıya*, Yavuz Turgul, 1996). They present a raw mixture of a wide variety of issues concerning the underground of İstanbul: poverty, ignorance, hopelessness, rage, drugs, guns and gangs. Also, explicitly or implicitly, they touch upon sensitive political issues such as the systematic violence and discrimination against women, Kurds, Alevis and other minorities.


Black Dogs Barking


Three Monkeys


Children of the Otherside

According to various fan sites and forums, the genre offers 'Hollywood quality images, action and excitement' wrapped in recognisable and familiar concerns. While the popularity of these films has caused consternation among critics and scholars, who claim they promote an aggressive and morally ambiguous masculinity that replaces traditional, nationalist and religious values with nothing more than foul language and violence, it can also be argued that the films, like their male protagonists, seem to be searching for a way out: The genre continuously questions the ideologies it promotes via the dilemmas of the characters, the narration, and in some cases through emphasising the role of the filmmaker and the dynamics of the fictional storytelling. Especially in *In Bar* (*Barda*, Serdar Akar, 2007) and *Men on the Bridge* (*Köprüdekiler*, Aslı Özge, 2009) this search and self-reflexivity of the genre becomes more explicit as both directors attempt to develop a rather unconventional relationship with the spectator in order to highlight, and thus perhaps critique, the filmmaker's power.

ORIGINS OF THE GENRE: ON BOARD AND A SAINT IN LALELI

On Board (*Gemide*, Serdar Akar, 1998) and *A Saint in Laleli* (*Laleli'de bir Azize*, Kudret Sabancı, 1999) can be seen as twin films, both being directorial debuts, and both telling the story of a Romanian prostitute in İstanbul. Her pimps want to sell her as a virgin. She barely survives a hymenoplasty performed by an unqualified surgeon. On the way to her customer, accompanied by her pimps, four sailors kidnap her and bring her to their ship. *On Board* tells the story of the sailors, and *A Saint in Laleli* tells the story of the pimps. Neither tell her story. The portrayal of the prostitute in these films has triggered controversy, and despite high praise in national and international film festivals, both films have been criticised for their misogyny.

On Board carries the feeling of suffocation, agoraphobia and claustrophobia into a symbolic space: a ship that digs out sea sand in the Bosphorus. *A Saint in Laleli*, on the other hand, mostly takes place in the city, though in a subjective space created through unconventional camerawork evoking a similar feeling of hopelessness and imprisonment that the dark metropolis generates. These two films' visual styles and narration are closer to independent, art house and experimental cinema. Yet they managed to gain popularity and create convincing events, characters and a phobic story-world that seems to resonate with audiences. In fact, *On Board* attained something of a cult status in Turkey: whole swaths of the script can be recited by a considerable number of predominantly young male spectators.

Black Dogs Barking

Serdar Akar's later success as a mainstream filmmaker and TV director (e.g. *Valley of the Wolves* [*Kurtlar Vadisi*] TV series and movies) has an appreciable influence on aspiring young filmmakers. Stories of the poor, produced mostly by first time directors, are increasingly encountered in the last few years. These newer films have many common characteristics with their predecessors, using some of the same actors, formal styles and, of course, the fawningly favourable portrayal of violence and thuggery. In addition to this, the established art house director, Nuri Bilge Ceylan's *Three Monkeys* (*Üç Maymun*, 2008), will likely inspire many more young filmmakers by elevating the image of the

Toss-up

pitiable criminal into a 'golden statue'. The film is the story of an innocent man's corruption through the acquisition of money and power and has brought not only box office success, but also helped raise the profile of Turkish cinema worldwide when it won the prestigious Palm d'Or at Cannes.

Children of the Otherside (*Başka Semtin Çocukları*, Aydın Bulut, 2008) follows the path of another successful film, *Toss-up* (*Yazı Tura*, Uğur Yücel, 2004), in combining the trauma of a war-like military service with the traumas of home. The director Aydın Bulut focuses on the story of an Alevi family with two sons, Veysel (İsmail Hacıoğlu) and Semih (Mehmet Ali Nuroğlu), who are from the notorious Gazi (in Sultangazi) district of İstanbul, where most of the film is set. Veysel is found dead in the rubbish bin at the beginning of the film and Semih starts looking for his brother's murderers with the help of Veysel's friend, İsmail (Volga Sorgu). The story is told through flashbacks, using phobic spatial configurations, similarly influenced by the digital camera work of *Toss-up*.

The Jackal

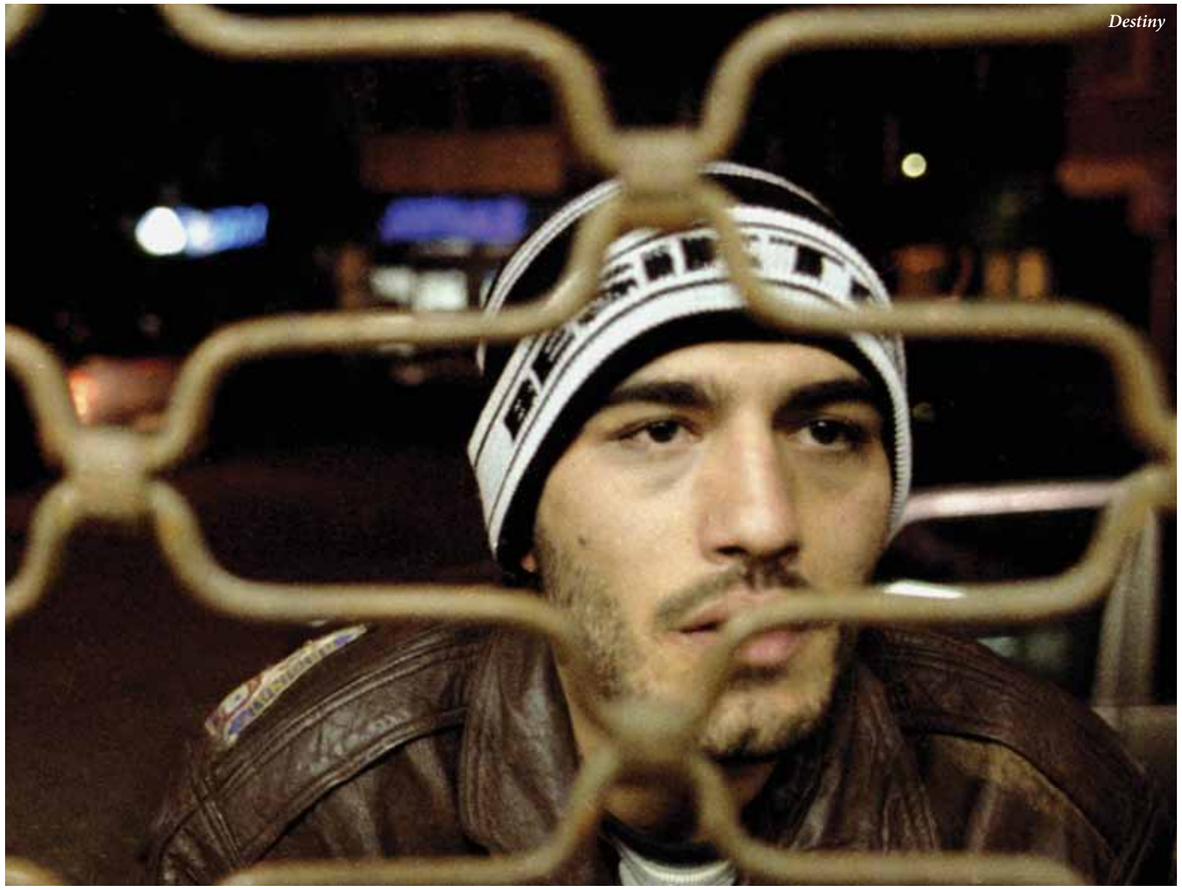
Black Dogs Barking (*Kara Köpekler Havlarken*, Mehmet Bahadır Er and Maryna Gorbach, 2009) revolves around two close friends Selim (Cemal Toktaş) and Çaça (Volga Sorgu) who try to 'grow up and be someone'. They are also from the Gazi district and similarly hang out on the rooftops, from which the city centre can only be seen in the distance. They apply for a serious security job at a big shopping mall. Their attempt does not please the current gang in charge and the two friends understand that they've made an irreversible mistake only when it is too late. The situation could be summarised as 'dog eat dog' as the title suggests, and the idiom turns into reality in the film's suffocating and cruel underground. It is interesting to see how the shopping mall, which is forbidden to all 'suspected criminals from ghettos' is configured as a phobic space in this film.

The Jackal (*Çakal*, Erhan Kozan, 2010) centres on Akın (İsmail Hacıoğlu), who loses his mother and blames his religious father for her death. The film uses the old city walls to make the obstacles İstanbul presents visible. His character is seen behind a cloud of mystery by the other characters in the story world: They claim that he is 'capable of many things ordinary people cannot dare'. He is a lonesome hero who reflects upon his actions and questions his own and other people's words and actions continuously. These thoughts are revealed to the spectator via his inner voice. Akın's explicit doubts about his actions turn into moral dilemmas as he starts questioning everything. We encounter a similar investigation underway both implicitly and explicitly in *In Bar* and *Men on the Bridge*, where these questions are explored in relation to the role of the filmmaker.

A GENRE QUESTIONING ITSELF: IN BAR AND MEN ON THE BRIDGE

Although these two films have different aesthetic concerns and narrative styles, they both make use of unconventional storytelling techniques in order to comment upon the role of the filmmaker. The directors approach the problem from two different perspectives.

Men on the Bridge



Destiny

In Bar tells the story of a football match between the rich kids of Etiler, an affluent district of the city, and the boys from the backstreets of Beyoğlu, transporting the violence to a symbolic space. The film ends with unexpected twists which aim to underline that this story is fictitious: characters take on unexpected roles, and the thugs who beat up a 'poor criminal' (who is in fact innocent) are played by filmmakers Serdar Akar, Çağan Irmak and Zeki Demirkubuz, adding another, metatextual, layer to the metaphor. The resonances here allude to the similarities between the poverty-stricken male characters of these films and the ones in some Demirkubuz films, such as *Innocence* (*Masumiyet*, 1998) and *Destiny* (*Kader*, 2006). Consequently, *In Bar* introduces a form of violence that is committed by the filmmakers, portraying the male protagonist as their victim. Especially coming from the director of *On Board*, the twists of *In Bar* are highly ironic since Akar is described as 'the only honest filmmaker in Turkey' by his fans.

Men on the Bridge, on the other hand, offers a very different perspective with its docudrama approach, searching for a similar 'honesty' that might expose the function of the filmmaker. The film portrays the real life stories of a minibus driver, a rose seller and a traffic policeman, all of whom spend most of their waking days on the Bosphorus Bridge. The bridge stands as a negative symbol, separating instead of bridging the gaps between people and cultures. The bridge also posits a metaphor for the attempt to question the border between reality and fiction, as well as the role of the filmmakers who bridge the expanse between the characters and the audience through their storytelling. This slow paced, open-ended film, where the characters play themselves in their own stories, leaves many questions unanswered, much like real life.

The main similarity that these crime films share is the intense fear and anger pervading the stories. The majority of the characters are suspicious of each other without needing a reason. The feeling of insecurity could be said to parallel the everyday problems of the weary people of a huge metropolis, who do not seem to have much tolerance for anybody but themselves.

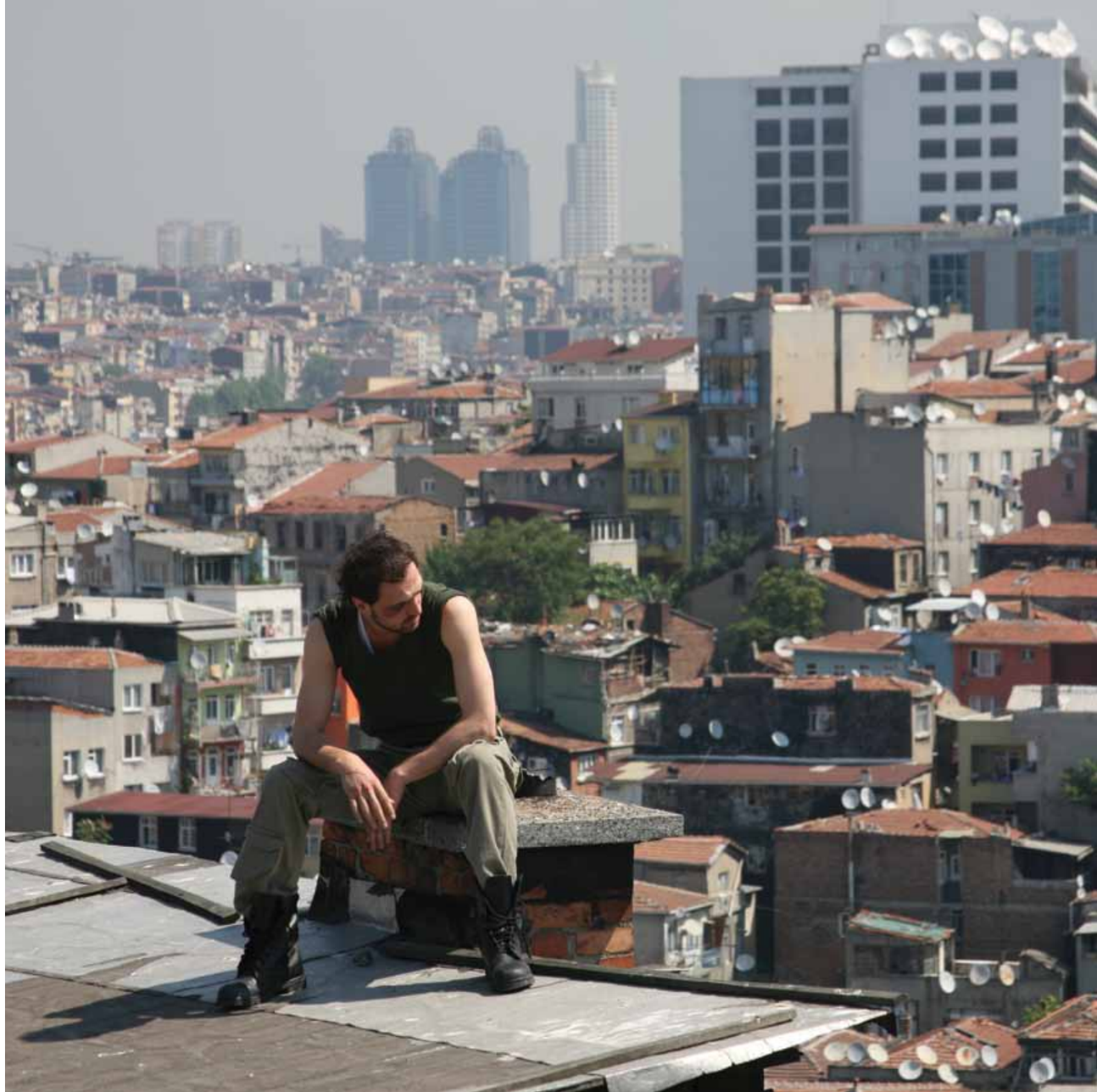

In Bar


Men on the Bridge

Captain İdris (Erkan Can) holds the wheel, ironically, while coming to the realization that he has lost control over himself, his crew, and his ship, as he remembers the night out at Laleli in On Board *(*Gemide*, Serdar Akar, 1998). With this character Erkan Can has become a cult figure representing a certain underground national identity.*

Nuri Bilge Ceylan turns his protagonist into a small black dot that is stuck between the prospect of a storm (dark clouds) and hopeless poverty (the black wall of the apartment building) in this poetic and agoraphobic portrayal of İstanbul from Three Monkeys *(*Üç Maymun*, 2008).*

The angry yet desperate characters of Children of the Otherside *(*Başka Semtin Çocukları*, Aydın Bulut, 2008) hang out on the rooftops of the infamous Gazi district from where the centre of İstanbul can only be seen in the distance.*



Arabesk-Noir and the Silence of Women

Z. Tül Akbal Süalp

Contemporary Turkish Cinema, considered to have entered a new era since the mid-1990s (variously defined), displays several general tendencies and affinities. Among them, perhaps the most salient phenomenon is the rage against and a problematic relation to the city, especially İstanbul, and its women. The distant, angry and resentful attitude towards the city tends to romanticise both the province and a lumpen culture of masculinity. The man behind the camera, and the men in front of it as protagonists of the narrative, seem to be people who do not and cannot ever understand, or analyse, social tensions by which they are infuriated and increasingly aggravated. They long to go back to the provinces, which they deem to belong to another time. Rather than questioning the reasons behind these social tensions, in expressing their discontent, they opt for self-pity and melancholy, drifting towards nihilism. This produces a very stylised cinema, adorned with motifs from both film noir and arabesk: hence my designation of these films as arabesk-noir. The perception and portrayal of women in this genre of the arabesk-noir is a significant problematic in its own right.

This problematic is embedded within a tradition of denial and disavowal that is reproduced in these films and stems from the country's history, woven as it is with a persistent inability to face up to the truth. The post-1980 traumas caused by economic upheavals, unemployment, political transformations, migrations both voluntary and forced, rapid urbanisation, the coup d'états' eradication of practices of solidarity and opposition have begotten a society that is apolitical, repressed, apathetic and in throes of an existential crisis. It seems that this milieu has propelled men with their wounded pride and battered masculinity to take recourse to anger in the face of problems they are unable to solve. Finding its filmic expression in noir and arabesk styles, this wave of independent cinema draws on a mystical existentialism and nihilism, resorting in the final instance to rage and violence against women.

Innocence

Women characters are not only superficial and underdeveloped in these films but at times also evil, just like film noir's *femmes fatales*. Men who are already battered, distressed and tormented by existential crises are further derailed and even led into catastrophe by these women. In turn, as if in vengeance, the women are given neither voice nor words (dialogues). And when they do or can speak, they do so in the language of evil, or in a masculine idiom with macho affect, as if the men crafting their words did not, and could not ever relate to them. The average individual, incapable of analysing the state of the world, does not know to seek the reasons of what has befallen him, or those who are responsible for his victimisation. And yet, it is wars and economic depressions, the distribution and reorganisation of labour that leave people unemployed and dislocated. The accompanying effect of depoliticisation, and the resulting environment of fear and anxiety produces nationalisms and chauvinist attitudes in return. The ordinary individual ends up directing his fury against those who are the nearest to him, to the closest other with whom he is forced to share the bread he is barely able to earn.

Haze

It could be asserted, without much exaggeration, that this is the image presented to us in the filmographies of contemporary filmmakers such as Nuri Bilge Ceylan and Zeki Demirkubuz, in some films by Tayfun Pirselimoğlu and Semih Kaplanoğlu, and by others who opt for a more violent cinema such as Serdar Akar. The main question to be considered here is: What is the source of the gloom, and why is there such intense misogyny in the worlds depicted by contemporary Turkish films – from *Innocence* (*Masumiyet*, Zeki Demirkubuz, 1997) to *Destiny* (*Kader,* Zeki Demirkubuz, 2005); from *Clouds of May* (*Mayıs Sıkıntısı*, N. B. Ceylan, 1999) to *Egg* (*Yumurta*, Semih Kaplanoğlu, 2007), *Milk* (*Süt*, Semih Kaplanoğlu, 2008), and *Honey* (*Bal*, Semih Kaplanoğlu, 2010); *Angel's Fall* (*Meleğin Düşüşü*, Semih Kaplanoğlu, 2004), *Rıza* (Tayfun Pirselimoğlu 2007), and *Haze* (*Pus*, Tayfun Pirselimoğlu, 2009)? Among these, *Innocence* has influenced the others by developing and portraying a certain affective atmosphere most clearly. In *Innocence,* the lead character, just out of prison, moves to a shabby provincial hotel. Here he encounters

Angel's Fall

a prostitute who follows her troublesome lover wherever he goes, her love-struck admirer who in turn drifts along with her, and a mute little girl. We watch the woman jettisoning the people around her, blinded by love. Just as *Innocence* set the tone for a generation of filmmaking with its mood and atmosphere, *Clouds of May* exercised a similar influence with its visual narrative style. It is the cinema of a calm, minimalist, observant gaze. Here we can think of the eye of the camera as the exact opposite of Benjamin's *flâneur*. That is, instead of the awed and amazed spectatorship of the man standing on the edge of the city and of the petite bourgeoisie at the end of the 19th century, we have the cinema of a retrospective, melancholic gaze at the threshold of the province and of a new bourgeoisie in the 21st century. This seems to be the crux of Nuri Bilge Ceylan's influence on his contemporaries.

WOMAN AS PITCH-BLACK SHADOW

Let us consider contemporary noir films such as *Cholera Street* (*Ağır Roman*, Mustafa Altıoklar, 1997), *On Board* (*Gemide*, Serdar Akar, 1998), *Offside* (*Dar Alanda Kısa Paslaşmalar*, Serdar Akar, 2000) and *In Bar* (*Barda*, Serdar Akar, 2006). The film noir aesthetic is deployed in an almost exaggeratedly formal and stylised manner in these films, which sanctify the lumpen lifestyles of battered male characters, offering their victimisation as the explanation or excuse for violence. *On Board* and *In Bar* go further than other films in explicitly depicting violence against women as something ordinary, something that requires no ground or cause. In *On Board* we watch a group of illegal sand dredgers detain a foreign woman, whom they are certain is a prostitute, and gang rape her. This foreign woman is not only mute (in this case because she doesn't speak their language), but also expressionless. She seems to surrender, and even consent, to whatever befalls her. In *In Bar*, the depiction of intense and brute violence incorporates the question of class, but in a way that doesn't make much sense. In a bar, a group of macho men, supposedly representing the lower class (though we do not know why they're there exactly) take hostage, torture and rape a group of young men and women who are identified as middle class, though perhaps would be better defined as urban petite bourgeois youth. This seems to be all there is to the film formally as well, confined as it is to the visual pleasure of violence. Thus in the works of Serdar Akar and other similar filmmakers, the issue discussed here is presented in a straightforward manner, there for all to see.

However, it takes more complicated forms in films such as *Innocence*, *The Third Page* (*Üçüncü Sayfa*, Zeki Demirkubuz, 1999), *Confession* (*İtiraf*, Zeki Demirkubuz, 2001), *Fate* (*Yazgı*, Zeki Demirkubuz, 2001), *The Waiting Room* (*Bekleme Odası*, Zeki Demirkubuz, 2003), *Angel's Fall*, *Rıza*, and *Haze*. The valorisation of the lumpen is something we encounter often in Zeki Demirkubuz's films, though they are not as stylised as Serdar

Third Page

Offside

Akar's. In these (specifically male) melodramatic narratives of mystical existentialism, we encounter the film noir style as the inevitable background of the sensitivities and destinies of the depressed, distressed male protagonists. In both films of Tayfun Pirselimoğlu, the problematic is similar to Demirkubuz's but portrayed more naïvely, with less hostility, and less of a mystical inclination. Then again, it could be said that the pervasive background of a much darker, more passive-aggressive misogyny, and the absolute despair of the male characters is revealed cinematically in Pirselimoğlu's films.

The formalism and stylism in Nuri Bilge Ceylan's cinema, beginning with *Climates* (*İklimler*, 2006) and perfected in *Three Monkeys* (*Üç Maymun*, 2008), differs from the aesthetics of films hitherto discussed. In any case, film noir is more a tone than an aesthetic in Ceylan's films, their similarities to the other films in terms of the problematic relations between men and women seems to have more to do with a common social juncture and zeitgeist. We can say that he creates a cinema that conjoins his own strong visual style with Demirkubuz's filmic world.

These are films that depict a certain gloom and discontent, be they trapped in the city, or, having fled the city, stuck in the province. As I discuss elsewhere, rather than filming the city and the urban social texture, they focus on a tiny corner of the city as the urban space, with a gaze that is introverted and external. In this cinema of little men's existential problems, the woman comes to assume the position of a pitch-black shadow, the origin of all darkness. She becomes the recurring, fundamental substance of these films as the silent and wordless source of evil.

(Translated from the Turkish by Başak Ertür)

Three Monkeys

In the melodramatic narratives of Zeki Demirkubuz, such as Fate *(*Yazgı*, 2001), we encounter the film noir style as the inevitable background of the sensitivities and destinies of the depressed and distressed male protagonists.*

In Bar (Barda, *Serdar Akar, 2006) depicts intense and brute violence - especially against women - almost as something ordinary, something that requires no ground or cause.*

Climates (İklimler, *Nuri Bilge Ceylan, 2006) - in which the director casts himself and his wife in the two lead roles - takes a self-reflexive look at its male protagonist's problematic relationship with women.*

THE ALTYAZI PROJECT OFFICE

Altyazı Monthly Cinema Magazine began in October 2001 with the motto 'a magazine that thinks film' and has since become one of the leading arts and culture periodicals in Turkey with its coterie of young writers and an original and critical approach. Operating from within the Mithat Alam Film Center of Boğaziçi University, Altyazı has also been involved since 2006 in projects promoting new cinema from Turkey, collaborating with various prestigious film organisations around the world from the International Film Festival Rotterdam to New York's Lincoln Center and Abu Dhabi's Middle East Film Festival. The *Altyazı Project Office* has been established by the *Altyazı* team to give structure to and facilitate their continued engagement in projects that stimulate film culture in Turkey and promote cinema from Turkey internationally.