

Post-migration Representations of Istanbul in Turkey's Independent Cinema

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Abstract

This study aims to analyze the representation of Istanbul in the Independent Cinema of Turkey. My study focuses on Istanbul not only because Istanbul presents an opportunity for micro-scaled analysis for Turkey, but also because of the fact that the cinema of Turkey being Istanbul-oriented. I focus on the major political and sociological turning points of Turkey and how all these transformations have altered the presentation of Istanbul in the movies of the same period. The migration remained to be one of those main turning points in people's life and their conditions - in particular migration from rural to urban - on which this study is focused.

Keywords: Istanbul, representation, Independent cinema of Turkey, social changes, migration

Introduction

Istanbul, historically known as Constantinople and Byzantium, is an Eastern city which turned its face to the West since 18th century. Istanbul, as a transcontinental city in Eurasia, is a vital economic, cultural, and historical center in both Asia and Europe.

Istanbul began its life as an occidental city and was transformed into an oriental city. It therefore articulates both elements. During both the Byzantine and Ottoman Empires, Istanbul was undoubtedly a cosmopolitan city, home to diverse ethnic, religious, and language groups. After the birth of the Turkish Republic, Istanbul occupied an ambiguous position as a symbol of imperial power while Ankara became the symbol of republican order. Between the 1920s and 1980s, Istanbul was of secondary importance to the project of nation building and the formation of a national, Western, secular, Turkish identity. Since the 1980s, however, with economic globalization (liberalization and the transition from import substitution to export-led production in Turkey), Istanbul became the nation's center of globalized consumption, production, and exchange. (Isin, 2001; 351)

Istanbul became the main cinematic city in Turkey, and has been handled in different perspectives in Turkish cinema. The majority of films are Istanbul-based productions. Their narrative and space arrangements have been shaped around the city Istanbul. The importance of choosing setting place with combination and manipulation of film elements were not understood by the prominent directors in the first period of Turkish cinema. Istanbul was used just as a cinematographic element in that period: such as *Binnaz* (directed by Ahmet Fehim in 1919), *Bican Efendi Vekil Harç* (directed by Hüseyin Şadi Karagözoğlu in 1921), etc. Andrews (2014; 6) explains the extend which a city can be used in cinema - beyond being just a decor: *“Narrative space in films is an amalgamation of numerous aspects: physical, profilmic cityscapes, landscapes, and objects in the mise-en-scene; conceptual elements to be visualized and explored on the screen: technical methods of presenting these aspects to the audience, according to the codes of film language: philosophical and ideological notions on the part of the filmmaker to be conveyed to the spectator.”*

Yeşilçam (1950-1980, a general name of Turkish cinema industry, which also became the name of popular melodrama movies of that period) produced representations, prototypes, stereotypes about the city and urbanization - which became the main information source about Istanbul to audience. Istanbul is an object of desire in Yeşilçam. Urbanized community not only refers to the people living in the city, but also belonging to bourgeois. These productions were highlighted the tension between Istanbul being an object of desire and Istanbul belonging to bourgeois. The representation of Istanbul became more realistic with the post-Yesilcam cinema period. In this context, the study will analyze the representation of Istanbul in the Independent Cinema of Turkey, rather than Yesilcam cinema industry.

This paper surveys the representation of Istanbul from 60's to 2017. These films show the social, economic, cultural, political conflicts of people who come to Istanbul with big-raised hope. *“I will defeat you, Istanbul”* is a generic motto of those people. *“Defeating Istanbul”* refers to survival and going back to their villages by fighting against cruel economic conditions of Istanbul.

In 70's and 80's, *“defeating Istanbul”* turned to be *“not being defeated by Istanbul”*. This change in rhetoric reflects the new-emerging conflicts regarding traditional and modern values in the adaptation process to the city. This dilemma exacerbated the frustration of migrants due to social and economic problems. Some of those immigrants who disappointed in Istanbul returned to their town in the 90's. Istanbul began to be pictured as a claustrophobic, dangerous, cold, brutal, and sinister country for migrants.

The study surveys these periods with leading examples of movies.

I will defeat you, Istanbul!

In this part, I touch upon social changes in Turkey as a developing country and how these changes affected Turkish cinema. After World War II, the US Marshall Plan was

introduced in Turkey. There was a rapid urban industrialization, and a strong growth of the market economy in the rural areas. As a consequence of this rapid development farm mechanization (which displaced rural labor and encouraged urban migration) is observed in Anatolia. People started to migrate to big industrial cities to find jobs, and other opportunities. This idea became popular with another motto: *Istanbul, the Golden City*. Additionally, because of somewhat egalitarian bequest traditions (the land being shared among all children) caused every villager having only a tiny bit of agricultural field. This was an additional force which made immigration tempting. As a result, 50's were marked a huge migration wave from rural areas, like Yozgat, Erzurum, Sivas, etc. to urban areas, especially to Istanbul, squatting also increased, emigration to European countries started.

In the 1950's another important phenomenon is described by Romana (2014; googlebooks), *"The Democrat Party's electoral success and political agenda in the 1950s depended in part on challenging the Republic's strict secularism, rather than its mono-nationalism. (...) Referring to the DP's increasingly authoritarian actions, their anti-secular program, corruption and declining public order to justify their intervention, Turkey's generals instituted a coup d'état in the spring of 1960"*. Following the 1960 coup d'état, a constituent assembly was formed. After the 1961 constitution, film directors were allowed to show social problems in their films. During that time, the cinema was extremely sensitive to social and political issues. In the 60's, Turkish cinema represented the migration problem from urban to rural consistently. In the films, the common topic is a story a family which emigrates from suburb to metropolitan (Istanbul) to have a better life. Öztürk (2002; 24) states the dilemma of those immigrants: "Istanbul whose dynamics rhythm, carnivalesque chaos, poetic and fabular image, and with stories which commitment new happy live with contrast such as east/west, villager/town-dweller, rich/poor, beautiful/ugly, is an sample of the place of cinematic production."

Nearly all characters in the movies are from immigrant families. In this period, narrative of films generally starts at the same place, such as Harem or Topkapı bus terminal and especially Haydarpaşa Train Station: *"Haydarpaşa Train Station, constructed in 1908, has always been one of the significant landmarks of Istanbul. It has been frequently included in the opening scenes of Turkish movies, where characters arrive the first time in Istanbul and have the first glimpse of the city while standing on the stairs of Haydarpaşa Station. It has always been one of the "entrance" points to the city and an important part of the city silhouette"* (Kaymaz, 2013; 755). A family or a person who comes from a village, get off a train, carry their luggage, when they go out of the train station, they go down the stairs and look at Istanbul admiringly. When the main characters step into Istanbul, the family or the person get straight into the chaotic experience of Istanbul. Generally men want to be rich and to have beautiful girls and women want to live the freedom in Istanbul. In the pursuit of adaptation, for instance, women put on new clothes, very expensive jewelers, go to a night party. However, they end up not being able to adopt the city. This failure of adaptation is

narrated as being raped, having to work in a brothel or going back their hometown etc. This phenomenon repeatedly shown in movies which has an underlying message: Istanbul is not for them, Istanbul does not belong them - Istanbul is the city of those rich people.

For example, in the film of **Birds of Exile** (directed by Halit Refig in 1962), there is a six person family; two parents, three sons and a daughter. On the arrival in Istanbul, they dream to defeat the city and to reach a higher standard of living. Firstly audience sees them at the Haydarpaşa train station; they look at the Bosphorus Sea. The sea and the city look very nice. The sons look at the girls of Istanbul, the daughter looks at the sea, which means freedom to her. They experience a tragic event which ends with the death of their daughter. The film narrative ends when they decide to go back to their hometown. Only one of them stays in Istanbul - the one who goes to university. Interestingly, even himself, does not aim to stay in Istanbul, but rather go back to the rural areas of Turkey and educate those people. Again, Istanbul does not belong even to those people who educate themselves. When they get on the train, audience sees another family coming to Istanbul, maybe with the same hopes and wishes - immigration will continue. The other films with similar narrative from the same era are *Golden City*, and *Unfinished Road*.

In **Oh Beautiful Istanbul** (directed by Atif Yılmaz in 1966) Ayşe comes to Istanbul from Izmir to be a famous actress or singer and to be rich. She meets a photographer whose name is Haşmet. Haşmet falls in love with her, and decides to help her. Haşmet is an Istanbulite who is a kind, helpful, intellectual, and well educated gentleman. He is represented as true "Istanbul Gentlemen". He helps her to become a famous singer. He doesn't want anything from her except her love. She uses him for her ambitions. At the end of the film, she realises her mistakes. She comes back to Hasmet to start again. At the final scene, they are in a ferry, we see Istanbul from their eyes. Hasmet looks into Ayşe's eyes and says "look at that beauty", and turns his head to the Bosphorus, we see Istanbul again, and then Hasmet goes on "*Do you know that there is no match to this beauty anywhere else in the world.*" Ayşe says "*for me there is only you*" Hasmet says "*yes, for me too*": Istanbul is like a love for lovers. Ayşe tries to be famous, but she finds an endless love in Istanbul. The underlying message is as follows: The only way for a woman from a rural area to be an Istanbul woman is being married to a man from Istanbul.

Time to Love (was directed, produced and written by Metin Erksan in 1965) is another important movie from this period. Halil is a traditional man from East side of Turkey. Meral is a modern woman from West side of Turkey. They fall in love each other in the city. Istanbul presents their identity and character. "*The use of the images of the city is also underlining the east-west dichotomy presented in the film. Halil is always seen in the older parts of the city or in nature whereas Meral lives in the newly built apartment blocks far away from the ancient city of Byzantium-Istanbul. But later as their love develops the lovers are forced to enter the other part of the city*" (Akser,

2013, 177). In the film Istanbul is like a dream city, it supports films atmosphere. So audience sees Istanbul between reality and dream, modern and traditional, and future and past.

2. I will not be defeated by Istanbul!

Istanbul reflected onto cinema especially with an immigration films, especially during the eras of the 70's and 80's, but at this time it was found a different plot from before. During those years, cultural duality, urban collapse, educational problems, housing/residential problems, jobs problems were all increased and these reflected onto cinema and all have could seen in the films. In the immigrant films of this era, people generally who tried to stay in Istanbul, adapt to the big city, they want to earn so much money and give a member of their family as a sacrifice. It is associated with the new capitalist mentality which was not adopted by these people yet. They live in dual life between tradition and modern life style.

In this era, some films emphasize migration and modernization of society and the city itself; some of the prominent examples of such movies are Ömer Lütfi Akad's trilogy **The Bride (1973), The Wedding (1974) and The Blood Money (1975)**. The narration of these three melodramatic films is about an Anatolian family, their traditions, and their conflict with modernity in the city. In the narration of the film *The Bride*, a young woman moves with her husband and their child to her husband's family living in Istanbul. Her son becomes ill and the doctor tells her that he will soon die if he doesn't get an operation. The family refuses to help her because they can't see anything wrong with the boy and all money is needed for a new shop they have just opened. The family is male dominated so they don't listen to her. When her son dies on the day of Muslim festival of sacrifice. This scene related with Prophet Ibrahim who offers his son to God as a sacrifice. *"Symbolically, the son dies on the day of Kurban Bayramı, the religious festival when a sheep is sacrificed by devout Muslims, Meryem leaves the family to work in a factory, defying patriarchal convention"* (Colin Dönmez; 2014, 60). In the films, emigrated people live in Istanbul, as if they were in their home city. They build up small ghettos in Istanbul, like little China towns in USA. They don't want to change or adapt the city's rules. This is not suitable for their cultural structure. They want to continue their traditional rules, but it is impossible for them. They learn to adapt to the city, giving some sacrifice.

"With the pressures of such numbers coupled with the phenomenal social, economic, and cultural transformations in Turkey after 1980, when the late President Turgut Özal opened up the country to global markets, Istanbul's macro form has changed dramatically. The proliferation of five-star hotels, supermarket chains, shopping malls, and office towers has transformed the fabric, the skyline, and the social panorama of the city in ways that would have been inconceivable before 1980. While these developments can be seen as manifestations of a worldwide trend in the postmodern era, the rise of political Islam parallel to globalization has given Istanbul a more complex and uniquely hybrid urban culture" (Bozdoğan, 2013; 127). These changes affected people who

emigrated from rural areas to urban areas and alter their daily life, morals, attitudes and behaviors.

For example, **A Handful of Paradise** (directed by Muammer Özer in 1985), is about finding a house in Istanbul. A family migrates to Istanbul hoping to find a better life. Being unable to afford a place to stay in, they find shelter in an abandoned bus. They don't want to go back to their village. In a little time they make a garden with flowers which is their paradise. We could see a strong contrast between poor and rich. They have a girl and a boy and also another one soon to come. New child mean is a new hope. At the end of the film's narrative, government took the abandoned bus; their boy was arrested despite of his innocence. They don't trust government. So after taking their 'home', they decided to stay in the city.

The Horse (directed by Ali Özgentürk in 1979) is another film about emigration in the 80's. In the film, a family wants to defeat the city, like in early examples of migration cinema, but at the end of the film, they just want to be alive in the city. Unfortunately, their dreams change. The father wants his son to be well-educated; he can afford education for him. He makes a better life for his son, by making sure that his sons' life won't be like his. He can't find a job, but he always tries. Main character can't stay on Istanbul, he refuses to return to the town even Ferhat, his son requests "*father, let's go back to the town!*" It will mean to be defeated to go back to the town. In the end of movie, the father is killed as an unsuccessful character and he can't reach his dreams.

The Broke Landlord (directed by Nesli Çölgeçen in 1984) is a black comedy about the hardships of being village landlord with fading authority. The landlord migrates to the city but fails to suit himself to the city. The film is one of the first examples which focuses on a landlord rather than peasant. This film is a trilogy written by Yavuz Turgul and includes **Mr. Muhsin** (1987), **The Unforgettable Director of Love Films** (1992) directed by Yavuz Turgul. The village is called Haraptar - means ruinous in Turkish. His grocery store in Istanbul is also called Haraptar. It is shown that he tries to sell tomatoes as a once-upon-a-time, authoritarian landlord. In the end, we see that his boats, as a sign of his landlordship is sold in the city for food. (Dönmez-Colin, 2014, 236).

Mr. Muhsin is a tragi-comic social commentary of the economic and cultural transformation of Turkey during the post-coup years of the 1980's and the free market policies of President Turgut Özal, similar to the Thatcher-Reagan policies. The narrative's main idea is the cultural clash between Mr. Muhsin Kanadıkırık who is an Istanbulate, gentleman and has principles. Another character Ali Nazik comes from Anatolia with characteristic hopes like being a famous singer - arabesque. The arabesque culture associated with the migrant Anatolians, who are neither able to preserve their culture nor adapt the culture of Istanbul. He tries to transform the urban culture rather than to adjust. Mr. Muhsin and Ali Nazik represent different cultures of Turkey. So viewer could see by way of the contrasts between east/west,

rural/urban, old/new, value/money in their identities. The new one/arabesque culture affects everything and transformation of values. Director chooses old one to show viewers for getting empathy.

The type of migration in Turkey was opposite to the type of migration in Europe. In Europe, migration was a demand stemming from the cities themselves - like Germany and England. In the case of Turkey, villages pushed villagers out of their homes in Turkey, so they had no choice; they had to the big city for jobs. They were pushed out because the land wasn't enough on the farm anymore they become jobless and had no money. The cities were not prepared for this migration, they aren't industrialized or modernized enough to accommodate such demand - they were deceptively portrayed as a golden city.

3. Istanbul is a place to escape from!

Neoliberals deregulation, privatization, and market led reforms are as the developmental policy of Turkey have resulted in some problems. To Erkip (2000; 371) in 90's growing problems of metropolitan Istanbul are unemployment, housing problem, inequality and the problems of social justice and redistribution. For Isin (2001; 361) in the 90's there is a polarization between the rich and the poor depending on increasing foreign direct investment such as advertising, marketing, fashion, design, and entertainment. In cinema, after the middle of the 80's, the number of migration movies start to decrease. Istanbul now lost is identity of being a metropolitan and started to be defined as a giant rural town. Independent cinema, starting from 90's, portrayed Istanbul as a place to escape from. Istanbul represents a type of jail and we could see, people who live in Istanbul are unhappy and want to go to another country or city for new opportunities, unlike in the 60's migrant films. It is the complete opposite of the original films: first they wanted to come to Istanbul, now they are in a hurry to leave Istanbul. *"The regeneration and renovation of the historic core of the city for both the tourist industry and the new chic quarters of the wealthy continued as poverty was increasingly suburbanized further and further out from city"* (Isin, 2001, 361).

For example **Somersault in a Coffin** is directed by Derviş Zaim in 1997. Mahsun is homeless and unemployed. He lives in Rumelihisarı as a car thief. His friend died during a cold winter night. He hasn't got anywhere to live. So he steals cars so that he has shelter from the cold winter nights - he does not sell them for profit. During the nights, he drives, and in the morning he leaves it very clean and in a safe place. He tries to work and survive with some help from some fishermen. One day he falls in love with Charlot who is a heroin addict and a prostitute. Some scenes show that Istanbul is an prison camp for low class people. In one scene, he looks at the Boğaziçi which is a very rich area. He tries to balance what is given to him and what is not acceptable by him. At the end of the film, Mahsun is in prison because of killing a peacock by cutting it and trying to eat it. The peacock represents plentifulness and wealth. He is shown on a news report where Mahsun says that 'I did it because I was

hungry'. After the news program, we see an advertisement for sausages, where a girl is saying 'I am eating you sausage, yummy yummy sausage'. So director starts to criticize the capitalism and marks Istanbul as the main place of injustice. This shows the contrast to Mahsun's life and makes the audience to think about the injustice of life in Istanbul. The films' atmosphere is very foggy and claustrophobic. The real prison is in the outside world, for example Istanbul is a prison for others like Mahsun, the poor, women, LGBT, gipsy, etc.

Istanbul Tales (directed by Ümit Ünal, Ömür Atay, Kudret Sabancı, Selim Demirdelen, Yücel Yolcu in 2004) is a story about 5 tales and a night in Istanbul. Those 5 tales are very different to each other but all of them look like old fairy tales such as, Cinderella, Sleeping Beauty, Little Red Riding Hood. Cinderella - just one of the parts of film - is directed by Ümit Ünal. Cinderella of Istanbul is a travestite prostitute who wants to run away with a man. We can see Haydar Paşa train station when she wants to go to Eskişehir - this time it is the place of departure, not arrival. Istanbul is a very big city but some who live inside it are unhappy. The social and economic problems cover everybody like a prison. In the 60's films, we could see people coming to Istanbul for new hopes, new life, or new love, but now people has crushed their dreams want to run away from it.

The Particle is written and directed by Erdem Tepegöz in 2012. The film is about 10 days of Zeynep's life. All her days are similar to with each other. The film starts in a textile factory. Zeynep is queuing for her lunch. We see a particle in the air. It is related to Sufizm which is all people women and men, rich and poor, etc are the same as each other like particles. Then Zeynep gets fired from her job. When she waits out of the factory, she looks like a prisoner in a prison. Director show that the prison is outside world. The camera records to Istanbul when she starts to walk along to Istanbul's streets - a documentarywise depiction is adopted. Istanbul looks very crowded, very ugly, harrowingly, unattractive and claustrophobic, especially the color of filmic narrative is just grey which is a cold color. Zeynep is just a metaphor for lower class inhabitants. She goes to Tarlabası - a canonical area of Istanbul mostly contains lower class people- within 5 minutes walking distance of Taksim, the heart of Istanbul. *"Tarlabası, the controversial face of an urban renewal project for seven years now. Tarlabası is the home to migrants with low incomes or no jobs, mostly coming from Eastern Turkey, as well as the marginalized communities like the Roma gypsies or the LGBT (...)* Tarlabası has become the epitome of what could go wrong with a metropolitan centre. It signifies overpopulation, migration, class differences, a rise in crime, gentrification, a disregard for historical architecture, and the tragic living conditions of the working class. Tarlabası is just an area of five acres (Güler, hurriyetaidailynews). She has a very old mother and a disabled daughter, but no money. Due to this situation, she needs to work to survive. Zeynep isn't Istanbulite, she sells her kidney to live in Istanbul - being an "other" living in Istanbul. The capitalist system alienate them and uses poor people for the cheap labor. On the other hand, it ignores them by pushing

them out of the city, marking as criminal figures, disrupter of urban structure, polluters and etc.

The movie, **My Only Sunshine** (directed by Reha Erdem in 2008) focuses to the story of Hayat (it means "life" in English) growing in a ghetto of Istanbul under bitter conditions. Hayat has got a bedridden godfather who hardly breathes because of his asthma, and a father who does all kinds of illegal work. She goes to a school where she is seeking for acceptance by her friends and teachers. Just like asthma; Hayat is also suffocated by major problems. She wants to successfully complete high school but she can't, because of her inadequate life conditions. She childishly wants to get married with her father's friend to escape from her poor life. She is raped by a neighborhood grocery who often abuses her- she takes chocolates when she is abused by him, and gives them to her friends to be loved by them. She lives in a river-side shack which is opposite of luxury housings the rich people live in. Bosphorus divides the country into two; one side is a poor place where Hayat lives and the other side where rich people live. Hayat escapes to open sea from Istanbul and her restricted conditions. When she's escaping, an arabesque music, in the background, which is the symbol of migration is played. Hayat and her friend travel against large waves in a small boat. The camera circles and focuses to the running waves and her happy smiling face till the movie ends.

The Present Tense, which was directed by Belmin Söylemez in 2012. The film's narrative is about a woman, Mina who is bored of patriarchal order. At the beginning, we observe that her appearance is blocked by the the famous man figures. Meanwhile, we hear some orders, such as, look straight ahead, move a little bit right, don't smile, etc. She dreams of finding job in USA, and in order to do so she needs to find a job In turkey to save some money. She lives in Istanbul at an apartment which will be renovated and hence her landlord wants to evicts her. So she doesn't have any job or any place to live in. The viewer can feel the boredom of the city. During the movie, we observe how Mina loses her grip to her hopes.

There are many other examples which is based on escaping from Istanbul such as Tayfun Pirselimoğlu movies, *Hiçbir yerde/Nowhere* (2002), *Rıza* (2007), *Pus/Misty*(2009), *Saç/Hair* (2010) and *Ben O Değilim/I Am Not Him* (2014), *Abluka/Blockade* (2015) directed by Emin Alper, *Yozgat Blues* (2013) directed by Mahmut Fazıl Çoşkun, *Güneşe Yolculuk/The Journey of Sun* (1999) directed by Yeşim Ustaoğlu, etc. All people in these films want to run away from Istanbul to another city or a country.

Conclusion

Istanbul is a metaphor of total problems in Turkish Society. Independent cinema of Turkey gives a chance to see social and cultural transformations. People immigrate for different causes to Istanbul. Istanbul started its appearance in movies as a setting and later on it became an element for the movie, like a character or a sound. Different phases of the city of Istanbul in the independent cinema of Turkey is surveyed. In the

first phase, Istanbul is a golden city in early examples, and then it is seen rural people who cannot adapt to the city. In the second phase, we observe Istanbul under urban and class-based conflicts were increasing during the process of Istanbul's post-80's global capitalism-oriented reconstruction. In the third phase, Istanbul became a prison camp for the alienated people who lost their access to the city during urban transformation projects. These people's deprivations, a feeling of no-way-out, desperations, systematic alienation, and dispossession of their habitat have been represented in many different ways in the cinema of Turkey. The common theme on these movies is the fact that Istanbul belongs to bourgeois - it does not accept other people; if it accepts some it needs sacrifice; even it accepts them they keep them in an open prison.

Istanbul has a soul with history, metropolitan structure, and its famous beauty. In the future, independent cinema will apparently start to make movies regarding Gezi/ Occupy Park Resistance. This movement can be conveyed as a resistance, driven by young people, against newly rising political structure as a result of 2000's new conservative movement. This resistance shown that, new young Istanbulites, on the contrary of what older people thought about them, they are not apolitic or unresponsive. This important event, combined with 2016's political and diplomatic atmosphere might bring about a new understanding of Istanbul for cinema.

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