



CINEMA ON CINEMA : The Kinship between Cinema Paradiso and Zıkkımın Kökü, Karpuz Kabuğundan Gemiler Yapmak, Sinema Bir Mucizedir

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Abstract

This study consists of a comparative analysis of four films which fall under the category of "cinema on cinema". These films are Cinema Paradiso (Giuseppe Tornatore, 1988, Italy), Zıkkımın Kökü (Memduh Ün, 1993, Turkey), Karpuz Kabuğundan Gemiler Yapmak/ Boats out of Watermelon Rinds (Ahmet Uluçay, 2004, Turkey), Sinema Bir Mucizedir/ Cinema is a Miracle (Memduh Ün- Tunç Başaran, 2005, Turkey). It will be argued that these films have four main points of similarity. First, they are the instances of "cinema on cinema"; second, they are biographical films; third, their plots are constructed upon the rural lives of the past; fourth, they are about cinephilia.

Keywords: cinema on cinema, metafilm, micro-history, cinephilia, biographical film



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CINEMA ON CINEMA : The Kinship between Cinema Paradiso and Zıkkımın Kökü, Karpuz Kabuğundan Gemiler Yapmak, Sinema Bir Mucizedir

“Life is not like the movies” says Alfredo the projectionist, in Giuseppe Tornatore’s *Cinema Paradiso* (1988, Italy). On the contrary, ‘the movies’ including *Cinema Paradiso* and *Zıkkımın Kökü* (Memduh Ün, 1993, Turkey), *Karpuz Kabuğundan Gemiler Yapmak/ Boats out of Watermelon Rinds* (Ahmet Uluçay, 2004, Turkey), *Sinema Bir Mucizedir/ Cinema is a Miracle* (Memduh Ün- Tunç Başaran, 2005, Turkey) are like ‘the life’. For, they take their departures from biographies. In the following, I will elaborate their biographical aspect in following kinship subjects. It will be argued that even though the foregoing films differ from each other in some cases, they have a lot of common points.

The most basic common point of these four films is they are all the examples of what Tiziana Ferrero-Regis calls ‘cinema on cinema’- films that are using of cinema images of the past. (Tiziana Ferrero-Regis, 2002: 6). Shirley Law also describes this by the term ‘metafilm’, which means ‘a film about film’. (Shirley Law, 2003:7). Actually these four films are about films, about film-makings and about film showings by using the cinema images of the past. They construct their stories upon little boys who adore themselves to the cinema. The films deploy some scenes, frames, photographs of the stars, negatives of the film copies, posters etc. to create the cinematic world of the little boys.

In *Cinema Paradiso* (Giuseppe Tornatore, 1988), Toto is a 10 years old boy who “spends every available minute of his time at the cinema, assisting with projection, watching films many times over, and pocketing frames of discarded film, which he holds up to the light, quoting the lines he has memorized.” (Shirley Law, 2003: 4) As Vermilye rightly stated, “he badgers Alfredo, the projectionist, into giving him the footage excised from local showings- mostly kissing scenes rejected by the town’s self- appointed censor- priest.” (Jerry Vermilye, 1994: 249) When Alfredo is blinded in a nitrate fire which guts the cinema, Toto becomes the new projectionist, he works at the cinema, he grows up and starts to shoot his own short films. Then he becomes a famous director in Italy. When the time passes, from little boy to adolescent Toto, “the style of the films typical of the times, starting with neorealism, and progressing through American Films, la commedia all’italiana, and to erotic films.”(Giacomo Striuli, 2002) The director Giuseppe Tornatore uses images from some scenes in

“Jean Renoir’s *The Lower Depths* (1936), John Ford’s western *Stagecoach* (1939), slapstick of Fatty Arbuckle and Charlie Chaplin, Mario Mattoli’s *The Firemen of Viggiu*(1949) which causes to a fire that blinds Toto’s mentor, the projectionist Alfredo, Raffaele Matarazzo’s weepie *Chains* (1949), Dino Riszi’s pink neorealist *Poor but Beautiful* (1956), Federico Fellini’s *The Young and the Passionate* (1952)” (Carlo Celli, 2006:136,137)

Tornatore also makes Alfredo and Toto show all the process in filmic event from putting the reel into the projection machine, turning on its lights, starting it, paying attention not to cause to a fire, stopping it, removing the reel and putting the reel into its box. Also, Alfredo tells the story of old manuel projection machines to Toto. These films, images, filmic process, Toto’s short films, film posters, negatives and also the quotations from other films are all the elements of a ‘cinema on cinema’ or ‘metafilm’.

Almost the same things seen in *Sinema Bir Mucizedir/ Cinema is a Miracle* (Memduh Ün- Tunç Başaran, 2005). In this film, the directors Ün and Başaran, tell a story of a 12 years old boy named Ümit. He is a cinema lover boy like Toto. He spends all of his time at the cinema watching all kinds of movies. Also the projection room, the projection machine, frames of discarded films, film posters, playing cards of filmic heroes, attract his attention a lot. He sees John Wayne, Boris Karloff, Bela Lugosi, Errol Flynn, Tarzan, Humprey Bogart, Henry Fonda, Gary Cooper, Shazam etc. in his dreams. He wants to make his own film with these heroes. Thus, he badgers Gazel, the projectionist, into giving him some negative films excised from the showings of films including the heroes. Step by step when he gets some meters of negatives, he cuts and combines them. In this way he creates his own film. On a day when Gazel is absent at the cinema, Ümit makes the projection machine work and proves himself as the projectionist of the future. The difference between Toto and Ümit is that Ümit does not want to be a director. Rather he dreams of being a cinema owner. He has a strong relationship with the owner of the cinema, Nakip Ali, who is the idol of Ümit. Nakip Ali takes Ümit's advices about films before ordering them to the distributor. How Alfredo is like a father to Toto, Nakip Ali is the same to Ümit. Ün and Başaran use almost the same elements to create a 'cinema on cinema' movie with Tornatore. In *Sinema Bir Mucizedir/ Cinema is a Miracle* (Memduh Ün- Tunç Başaran, 2005), *Casablanca* (Michael Curtiz, 1942), John Wayne films, *Dracula* (Tod Browning, 1931), *Tarzan the Ape Man* (W. S. Van Dyke, 1932), Charlot films, Laurel&Hardy films, Rita Hayworth films, Turkish weepie *Onu Ben Öldürdüm* (Arşevir Alyanak, 1952), *The Lover of the Sheik Ahmet* (Irwing Pinchel, 1937) and *Hac Yolunda* are the films that are shown on Nakip Ali's cinema. Ümit watches these films sometimes having a seat in the theatre and sometimes from the window of the bio-box like Toto. Toto and Ümit's worlds are similar to each other. They watch whatever they find on the cinema screen, they are interested in the projection machine a lot and they collect the discarded films. Furthermore, Ümit quotes the lines from the films like Toto does.

Karpuz Kabuğundan Gemiler Yapmak/ Boats out of Watermelon Rinds (Ahmet Uluçay, 2004) differs in some ways. There are two cinema lover boys in this film, Recep and Mehmet. They do not spend their all the time at the cinema: "working with a watermelon vendor and a barber by day, and trying to build a film projector by night, Recep and Mehmet dream of changing their lives by becoming famous film directors." (Boston Turkish Film Festival/ Synopsis). They can go to the cinema when they earn money. Cinema is distant to them both economically and also physically. They live in a village but the cinema is in a town. They can go to the town in summers just for working. They are interested in projection machines a lot, like Toto and Ümit. At the cinema while other people are watching the film, they try to look inside the projection room and try to understand how the machine works. As Porton pointed out, "they build a makeshift projector out of household objects." (Richard Porton, 2004) They read a lot about cinema. They collect the discarded negative films. Their only purpose is to make the discarded films pass in front of the light in a correct speed to capture an image. They indeed succeeded in it thanks to their homemade projector. Then, they arrange showings for the other children in their neighborhood. This is also 'cinema on cinema'. They prove that it can be possible to make a homemade projector so as to show some reels in impossible conditions. They adore cinema and they look at the life behind the four-fingered frame as directors looking for the right angle to shoot. This film differs from others in a way that it does not show any other images from other movies except the one Yılmaz Atadeniz's *Zorro Kamçılı Süvari* (1969). In line with the fact that, *Karpuz Kabuğundan Gemiler Yapmak/ Boats out of Watermelon Rinds* (Ahmet Uluçay, 2004, Turkey) is a very low-budget film, Uluçay could probably not shoot much more cinema scenes for not paying copyright. Instead, he focuses on the trials of the projector making and the determination of the boys to make the films

‘gımlıdak’ (rolling). He uses film posters, film magazines, books, reels, negative films, cameras at a photography shop, homemade projectors, homemade screens and cinematic tricks to create a filmic world. Also Recep tells the new story he wrote about a miller to Mehmet in the final scene. In this way, he gives the signals that he would be an author - director in the future.

Zıkkımın Kökü (Memduh Ün, 1993) has much more differences among these four films. It is a story of a 10 years old boy named Muzaffer (Muzo). “Muzo is a poor boy, and he goes from town to town, from village to village to earn money with his ‘magica lantern’ which is a wooden, manuel projector” (Fatoş Üstek, 2005: 213) However Muzo does not want to be a director or cinema owner like the others. He wants to be a teacher. Since he and his family needs money, he starts working at an open-air cinema as a soda pop seller. Then, he finds discarded negatives in the dustbin of the cinema. Thanks to the fact that he is a clever boy, he asks the projectionist man whether or not he can make a wooden projector for him. The prejectionist accepts the offer and then Muzo first arranges showings to the children in his neighborhood like Recep and Mehmet. While he does it for the sake of money at first, he both loves movies and the heroic characters of the movies. However, he really needs money. His ‘magica lantern’ does not reflect the image on a screen at the beginning. He makes the children watch the cowboys, indians, trains and Tarzan from the small hole of the wooden box for a little money. Then, Muzo grows up, he improves the wooden projector. This new machine succeeds in reflecting the image to the wall or to the screen. He starts to go to other towns and villages in order to earn money. He shows some American adventure films, some Turkish films with belly dancers, some Turkish wippies like Onu Ben Öldürdüm (Arşevir Alyanak, 1952), and some religious films like Hac Yolunda. In this film, we confront a new style of film showing during which Muzo narrates the story shot by shot. For example, while showing Onu Ben Öldürdüm, Muzo says “ while the young and handsome man, Muzaffer Tema, is kissing a girl, the other girl he really loves, Mine Coşkun, sees them”. That is because Muzo travels and his projector is primitive. He can not show the films with their own sounds. He plays music, narrates the story and at the same time uses the manuel projector. ‘Cinema on cinema’ may not be the correct description for Zıkkımın Kökü (Memduh Ün, 1993). Because this film does not completely tell a story about cinema and does not use the filmic elements from the beginning to the end of the film. In fact, the film is about the poor boy Muzo and his efforts to earn money. Cinema is just one of the ways to achieve it. At this point, it is inevitable to mention that Zıkkımın Kökü (1993) is an adaptation from Muzaffer İzgü’s novel titled Zıkkımın Kökü. Actually, this film is a biography of Turkish humourist author Muzaffer İzgü’s own life. Fatoş Üstek emphasizes the fact of ‘cinema on cinema’ in this film by noting that “ Memduh Ün makes sense of the phenomenon of cinema in the book, through the cinema itself by chosing to carry the novel Zıkkımın Kökü to the screen.” (Fatoş Üstek, 2005: 213) It is needed to discuss this question ‘Is Zıkkımın Kökü a ‘cinema on cinema’ movie or not?’ in details. This might be a subject of another study. However, in some cases, I accept this movie as a ‘cinema on cinema’ movie when it uses other movies and other filmic events for its narrative.

It may not be wrong to elaborate the other common point that these four films are all biographical. As I mentioned above Zıkkımın Kökü is a biographic story of a well-known Turkish author Muzaffer İzgü. İzgü lived in Adana as a poor boy. He worked at different jobs to earn money for school and for his family. He was a clever and hardworking boy. His only aim was to be a teacher. He attended to Diyarbakır Teachers School. He worked as a teacher for a while. Then, he went on his career as a writer. In the film, the story of the little Muzo is the same. The film ends with a voice-over that “ Muzaffer wins the exam to attend to the Teachers school in Diyarbakır and he becomes a teacher as he promised to Zihni Efendi (a man who works at Public House)”.

Sinema Bir Mucizedir/ Cinema is a Miracle (Memduh Ün- Tunç Başaran, 2005) is an adaptation from Ülkü Tamer's book 'Allaben Öyküleri'. Murat Erşahin says:

“One of the directors of the film, Tunç Başaran reads a story named 'Macı Hüseyin' in the book 'Allaben Öyküleri'. Then, he wants to adapt the story into a film script. He talks to Ülkü Tamer and learns that the little boy in the story 'Macı Hüseyin'- then Başaran names the boy 'Ümit'- is the little Ülkü Tamer. Tamer was a friend of a movie theatre owner in Gaziantep, named Macı Hüseyin- then Başaran names him as 'Nakip Ali'. And the script reflects the cinema lover Tamer's own childhood.” (Murat Erşahin, 2005: 68)

Zıkkımın Kökü and Sinema Bir Mucizedir/ Cinema is a Miracle are adaptations from a biographic novel and a biographic story. However Cinema Paradiso and Karpuz Kabuğundan Gemiler Yapmak/ Boats out of Watermelon Rinds are not adapted from someone's biography. They are constructed upon their directors' own biographies i.e. auto- biographies. Wendy Everett approaches auto-biographical films as a new film genre. He explains that:

“This genre, still largely unrecognised by the majority of film critics, is characterised by the fact that the director is- by definition- both the narrator and the narrated, both subject and object; as such it presents us with a uniquely subjective exploration of memory. Posing the deceptively simple question 'Who am I?', and attempting to answer it with an equally problematical 'Who was I?', auto-biographical films are inevitably ambiguous; they raise questions whilst recognising that no solutions can be provided. The apparent simplicity of their form is belied by inherent complexities such as the shifting and unstable gap between narrated past and narrating present, the fallible, selective and manipulative nature of memory, the subjective and relative status of the 'reality' of past experience, and the constant temporal and narrative slippage.”(Wendy Everett, 1996)

Of course auto- biographical films are ambiguous, because directors take their departures from the history which Tiziana Ferrero- Regis calls 'micro-history'- his/ her own subjective vision of the past. (Tiziana Ferrero- Regis, 2002: 7) Nobody even the director himself/herself has the objective perspective of the past. As Everett suggests, “auto- biographical memory is composed of endlessly shifting viewpoints and parameters; it is simultaneously emotional and analytical, a child's vision and an adult's understanding.”(Wendy Everett, 1996).

In Karpuz Kabuğundan Gemiler Yapmak/ Boats out of Watermelon Rinds, “Ahmet Uluçay captures the infinite joys of childhood and the magical hold of cinema on two young boys living in Tepecik, a small Anatolian village, where he still lives.” (Boston Turkish Film Festival/ Synopsis) He tells his 'micro-history' through a child's vision and an adult's understanding. Uluçay says:

“When I was 12, a mobile cinema came to the school and we went to watch the showing at night. I have not seen before that pictures can move on a wall. Everybody was watching the movie about a Turkish War- WWI or The Independence War- and Atatürk, but I was watching the images and the projector to understand how it works. I and my friend İsmail decided to make a projector at home. We went to the cinema in the town and collected the discarded films from the dustbin. We pasted them and tried to capture an image while moving them in speed. We read a lot of books about

cinema. We spent 2 years to make the machine. Everybody made fun of us. They said ‘as peasants we must work at a field or at a barn. We must be a farmer or a shepherd to live’. I seem to be an idiot to them, even to my wife. She said ‘what if you were a normal man, what if you work as a farmer and earn money’, I was tired of the thought ‘art is not the business of peasants’. I was determined and I have achieved my dreams.” (Elif Korap, 2004)

Therefore Uluçay makes Recep to articulate this sentence in the film ‘People who live in towns do not want the peasants use cameras. For them, peasants must work in agriculture or livestock, and only civics have the right to take pictures’. This is what Uluçay confronts in his whole life from his childhood. This is ‘the film is like the life’.

Cinema Paradiso is also like ‘the life’ of Giuseppe Tornatore. It is about “Tornatore’s own Sicilian boyhood, had been spent in admiration of the movies. And although there was apparently no ‘Alfredo’ in Tornatore’s youth, he, too left his town for Rome to study film when he reached adulthood.” (Jerry Vermilye, 1994: 250) However, on the contrary to Tornatore’s real life, Alfredo is the most important character in Toto’s life in the film. “He encourages Toto to leave Sicily and never come back, to go away and establish his own career, not to give into nostalgia and return.” (Shirley Law, 2003:6) Toto promises Alfredo not to come back and he keeps his promise for 30 years, until he is informed by a telephone call that ‘Alfredo is dead’. Tornatore tells two things with the death of Alfredo. One of them is, Alfredo’s funeral is in fact a funeral of the movie theatre of Toto’s town at the same time. Because the theatre is dynamited to make a way to a parking lot on the same day with Alfredo’s funeral. The other meaning of his death is that it represents the death of Italian Cinema because of the domination of the Tv in everyday life. Therefore, Toto (as a famous director his name is Salvatore) returns to his town because of the death of Alfredo. Similarly, Tornatore returns to his town for shooting Cinema Paradiso so as to give a breath to Italian Cinema, to protect it from the domination of Tv. Shortly, there is perhaps no real ‘Alfredo’ in director’s own life. However, if we suppose that ‘Alfredo’ means ‘cinema’ to the director, ‘Cinema’ is always in the life of Giuseppe Tornatore. Therefore the character ‘Alfredo’ does not weaken the impact of the story’s autobiographic aspect. On the contrary, it strengthens this aspect.

It is similar in Karpuz Kabuğundan Gemiler Yapmak/ Boats out of Watermelon Rinds. Ahmet Uluçay says “ I was the idiot of the village. The others were looking at me as I was an idiot because from their perspectives, I was a married, with children but I had no job and I was running after my empty dreams.” (Elif Korap, 2004). Therefore, the character ‘idiot Ömer’ somehow represents the director himself.

Beside the fact that they are ‘cinema on cinema’ and they are biographic, these four films are all reflecting rural lives. Boys all have poor families. Except Muzo, the other three ones do not have a father, and their mothers do not want them to spend their times at cinema. In addition to the love of cinema, boys also fall in love with girls but they all can not get a response to their loves. In these four films, all boys get the advice that they should attend to the school and finish it. Boys also are nearly at the same ages. Except Recep and Mehmet, the three others live in late 40’s and early 50’s. Karpuz Kabuğundan Gemiler Yapmak/ Boats out of Watermelon Rinds reflects the late 60’s. But they all reflect the domination of national cinemas by Hollywood in Turkey and in Italy at the same time. In these years there was an incredible interest to the cinema. Pierre Sorlin points out that “It

is often claimed that, when faced with a dramatic situation, an economic crisis, a war, a foreign occupation, people want to forget, be it only for a few hours, and try to have as much fun as possible.”(Pierre Sorlin, 1996: 72) Shirley Law explains the reason of this interest in Italy that;

“Following the fall of fascism, liberation by the Allied forces and the period of reconstruction in the late 40’s and early 50’s, Italy moved rapidly from being a largely agrarian society to a modern consumer society. Brunetta in his book *The Italian Metamorphosis* argues that the cinema was ‘the leading art of the cultural and social processes of post-war Italian life.’” (Shirley Law, 2003: 1)

In Turkey after the one-party rule, “Democratic Party which came to power in 1950 paid more attention to popular desires, traditions and voices.” (Savaş Arslan: 24) As Kaya states, “during the reign of the Democratic Party (1950-1960) that the Americanist foreign policy of Turkey reached its peak. Parallel to the developments taking place in political arena, ‘Americanism’ was becoming fashionable in the everyday life of Turkey, too” (Erdoğan, Kaya, 2002: 49) In such a political condition, the import of Hollywood films increased and these films attracted Turkish people’s attention a lot. In rural areas, people were poor, they had nothing to do except going to the movie theaters or open-air cinemas with all the members of their families. Therefore, cinema became the most popular entertainment in everyday lives. For example in *Sinema Bir Mucizedir/ Cinema is a Miracle*, Ümit’s grandmother watches all kinds of films with Ümit. She does not select any of them.

I will end this study with another common point of these four films. It is ‘cinephilia’. As Dimitris Eleftheriotis says there are two kinds of cinephilia in these movies. First, the cinephilia of the little boys. The other one is cinephilia of the audiences seen in these four films. (Dimitris Eleftheriotis, 2001: 197) Cinephile audiences from different ages, different genders, different classes and different education ranges come and see all the movies without selecting. Movie theaters are sometimes like their homes. They are sometimes the center of their social lives. While watching a film, a woman breastfeeds her baby, boys masturbate, couples make love, men fight, shout, a man spits, a dwarf man and a fat, tall woman fall in love, a man sleeps, a man dies, a little boy pees into a bottle, men drink tea, men drink Turkish Raki, some have a sex in the aisles, a man buys one pop soda and his 3 children drinks it one by one because of the poverty, some come and see *Hac Yolunda* to become Hacı, some cry, some laugh etc. In these four films it is impossible to see all these things. In words of Eleftheriotis, “Within this kind of cinephilia the presence of the audience in their messy interaction is a rich source of pleasure and as important as the film itself.” (Dimitris Eleftheriotis, 2001: 198)

In conclusion, the kinship between *Cinema Paradiso* and *Zıkkımın Kökü* (Memduh Ün, 1993) *Karpuz Kabuğundan Gemiler Yapmak/ Boats out of Watermelon Rinds* (Ahmet Uluçay, 2004) *Sinema Bir Mucizedir/ Cinema is a Miracle* (Memduh Ün- Tunç Başaran, 2005) reveals itself in the biographical stories of the rural cinephile boys who are the main characters of these “cinema on cinema” movies.

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