

New Turkish Cinema – Some Remarks on the Homesickness of the Turkish Soul

Agnieszka Aysen KAIM, University of Lodz, apkaim@post.pl

Abstract

Contemporary cinematography reflects the dualism in modern Turkish society. The heart of every inhabitant of Anatolia is dominated by homesickness for his little homeland. This overpowering feeling affects common people migrating in search of work as well as intellectuals for whom Istanbul is a place for their artistic development but not the place of origin. The city and “the rest” have been considered in opposition to each other. The struggle between “the provincial” and “the urban” has even created its own film genre in Turkish cinematography described as “homeland movies”. They paint the portrait of a Turkish middle class intellectual on the horns of a dilemma, the search for a modern identity and a place to belong in a modern world where values are constantly shifting.

Special Issue: 1 (2011) | ISSN 2158-8724 (online) | DOI 10.5195/cinej.2011.23 |



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.



This journal is published by the [University Library System](#) of the [University of Pittsburgh](#) as part of its [D-Scribe Digital Publishing Program](#) and is cosponsored by the [University of Pittsburgh Press](#).

New Turkish Cinema – Some Remarks on the Homesickness of the Turkish Soul

For decades „It’s like a Turkish film” has been an expression with negative associations, being synonymous with kitch and banal. Over the last 10 years, Turkish cinematography has become recognised as the “New cinema of Turkey” thanks to appearances in festivals in Rotterdam, Linz, New York and Wrocław, Poland (“Era New Horizons”, 2010). What is this recent phenomenon? How can it be defined? How it is breaking out of the stereotype? What are the social dilemmas explored in this new filmmaking?

This phenomenon results from a combination of factors. Among these is a visual poetry that goes along with a focus on social content and a portrayal of the transformations of contemporary Turkey, especially the search for identity with regards to homeland, which is a powerful topic for the Turkish mentality. These are factors that influenced the directors we can call the pioneers of the new Turkish cinema: Nuri Bilge Ceylan, Zeki Demirkubuz, Yeşim Ustaoğlu, Semih Kaplanoğlu, Derviş Zaim and Reha Erdem.

Is it a New Wave in the French sense? In the new Turkish cinema of the last 10 years there are some evident similarities to *new wave* in terms of the dominance of the *auteur* and the *mise-en-scène*. Alongside the socially and ethnically focused low budget independent productions, there also emerged some masterpieces which were made primarily in the search for artistic and formal solutions. These were experimental approaches exploring the frontiers of aesthetics and the language of cinema.

Because of the “exotic” nature of Turkish culture, its cinema is often placed in the oriental cinema category, but is it really so Eastern? Its slow narration, use of minimalism, reduced dialogues, symbolism and poetical realism locate it close to Iranian cinema but it straddles an East-West threshold. The “young” Turkish directors, born in the 1960s, model themselves on European masters such as Rossellini, Bresson, Kieslowski and Tarkowski.

The discussion about the opposition of East and West in the context of Turkey’s global location is very fashionable in political discourse. But when it refers to the contemporary average Turk, this juxtaposition is transposed less grandiosely to the social dimension as an Anatolia-Europe dichotomy. More concretely, this is a provincial-urban opposition, and this struggle between the village and the city has even created its own film genre in Turkish cinematography which is defined in German as a *Heimatfilme* (which translates to “homeland movie”).

The heart of every inhabitant of Anatolia is dominated by homesickness for his little homeland. Common people migrating in search of work, as well as intellectuals for whom Istanbul is a place for their artistic development but not the place of origin, are affected by an overpowering feeling of homesickness.

Semih Kaplanoğlu’s native land is on the Aegean Coast. Also, Nuri Bilge Ceylan comes from Çanakkale and Yeşim Ustaoğlu is from near the Black Sea. In their films, they readily journey to their places of descent. Homesickness goes together with a feeling of displacement, or being uprooted with a sense of belonging somewhere else. We can see this spiritual dimension of homelessness in the films of Demirkubuz, and its physical dimension in Derviş Zaim’s *Sommersault in a coffin* which can be regarded as a manifesto of homelessness in Istanbul.

This state of being torn between two worlds and a deep feeling of displacement is even more symbolic when the space-time is Istanbul, a city itself torn physically between East and West. This metropolis is an ideal background to illustrate the problems of the heroes of contemporary Turkish cinematography. This city offers complex styles and aesthetics, constant diversity and never ending stories to tell. It has inspired such movies as *Anlat Istanbul (The Tales of Istanbul, 2005)*.¹ This movie mixes luxury and dirt at the same time, with contemporary Istanbul appearing as an overpopulated space settled by people who are spiritually emptied, morally

apathetic and almost eradicated psychologically. A precise sense of this “city of cities” was portrayed in Yeşim Ustaoglu’s *Pandora’nın kutusu* (*Pandora’s Box*, 2008), or Bilge Ceylan’s *Uzak* (*Distance*, 2002).

The transformation of the ordinary Turk shown in these films is not the sort of Shaban that was a stock character in traditional popular theatre. This Shaban was standard fare for many years in Turkish cinematography, performed on the screen by the famous Turkish actor Kemal Sunal. A Shaban was a “provincial” who immigrated to Istanbul, torn between being lost and fascinated by the opportunities of city life but thanks to his cunning, he manages to win hearts. Nor does the new immigrant character resemble the popular Middle Eastern folk character Hodja Nasreddin, ancestor of Shaban, a wise kind of fool represented in commercial cinema. Instead, they are cynical solitary types, deeply disappointed with themselves and with the world, tormented and even obsessed by their inability to find a sense of belonging.

In this way, Ceylan shows his Istanbul through the lens of a depressive melancholic trying to cure his loneliness. Istanbul, previously Constantinople – a symbol of the juncture of the European world and the Asian world – is unwelcoming and depressing. The land of dreams remains the homeland (in Turkish *memleket*). Similarly, Kaplanoğlu depicts this new kind of immigrant but in a less romantic way. Using his distinctive style called spiritual realism, he takes us on a journey to childhood and adolescence with his trilogy *Yumurta* (Egg, 2007), *Süt* (*Milk*, 2008) and *Bal* (*Honey*, 2010) about the life story of Yusuf and invites us to celebrate his *rites de passage*.

The setting for these experiences is the small town. This is the place where the old meets with the new, anachronism with modernity. The director constantly reveals the course of social and economic changes within Turkish provincial reality. The problem of belonging goes hand in hand with the question of provinciality. A province is not necessarily a concrete locality, rather mode of feeling. These directors deal with the concept of the provincial differently than a typical westernised Turk such as Orhan Pamuk who with an orientalist-like distance, described it as being far from the center of the Western world. Even in his Nobel lecture he underlined, “*What I feel now is the opposite of what I felt as a child and a young man: for me the centre of the world is Istanbul.*”² This perception of Turkey as being on the outskirts of Europe gives a totally different perspective of identity. But neither is the province in the films of Kaplanoğlu or Ceylan an image of the province as exhibited in Turkish nostalgia films, where it is a space of melancholy and joy, the space of childhood.³ Instead, for Ceylan, this is a space of growing up with painful and joyful experiences at the same time, and has more to do with the fact that one can never escape from their province since they carry it with them. According to Fatih Özgüven, it seems that a place like Istanbul is impossible to be defined as a city because of its unrepresentativeness. And if any attempt to describe this phenomenon would be successful, it would be possible only by its relation to province (tur. *taşra*).⁴ The city and “the rest” have been considered in opposition to each other.⁵ Different worlds evoke different moods. The state of melancholy differs in these two locations.

In a small town the characters experience the blues, as it happens in Ceylan’s *Mayıs sıkıntısı* (*Clouds of May*), and it is about this special state of heaviness and boredom that accompanies life in the province every day. City people, on the other hand, might experience this once a week, maybe only on Sunday afternoons. Instead, the city melancholy in Istanbul – expressed by the Ottoman word *hüzün* – according to Pamuk’s interpretation, “is not only a spiritual state, but a state of mind that is ultimately as life affirming as it is negating.”⁶

Especially in his feature *Kasaba*, Nuri Bilge Ceylan shares with us the tranquil but claustrophobic atmosphere of his small town. This director freely borrows the metaphor of province from Anton Chekhov, bringing to homeland Chekhov-inspired questions of belonging and the impossibility of return. Boredom over a long distance can build up to suffering. Psychological pain from the inevitable transformation of provincial to urban life is the source of the perceptible deep tension between the protagonists, two cousins, Mahmut and Yusuf in

Uzak. Played out in an apartment in the centre of the city, this tension transforms into the conflict between urban and rural morality. Ceylan's own flat becomes a metaphor of privacy in anonymous urban society.

In his films Ceylan constantly draws on the experience of his own life, roots and background. But his problem of belonging is illustrated through his portrait of an antihero, a withdrawn type shut away in himself around his own ego. Using his characteristic style, called poetic realism – located on the threshold of documentary-style realism with a highly aestheticized visuality, in an egocentric way but also self-critical to the point of irony – the director ruthlessly reviews his own life.

The main character, Mahmut, is an alter ego of the director himself entangled in a clash of cultures. He is an individual, even an individualist, dealing with inner identity crisis called by German critic Daniela Sannwald *splendid isolation*,⁷ but shown in a wider social context of his relationships in his own environment. He is an opportunist, an urban, middle-aged intellectual, having chosen the shortcut of material gains rather than pursuing his artistic dreams. Similar to the child character of little Ali in *Kasaba*, he learned survival skills like cheating and left his naive dreams behind irretrievably. He is an example of a new type of bourgeois, forged in the 1980s by the social and economic changes and the hegemony of the neo-liberalist world-view.

He represents the generation that grew up in an atmosphere of political tension and oppression. Turkish society suffered from military coups on March 12th, 1971 and September 12th, 1980 which triggered extended traumas but left no option for mourning. The consequences include growing unemployment, social insecurity and desperation. In these conditions, individuals became indifferent and lost in time and space.

The psychological consequences of this experience forced people to accept a special lifestyle, which could be described as keeping one's distance. In *Uzak*, Mahmut has made a niche for himself in the big metropolis; in a sense, he is both inside and outside. Mahmut is distant to the women in his life – his ex-wife, his mistress, his mother and his sister. He is distant to his cousin who reminds him of the roots he thought he had severed while trying to build a new identity in the urban environment. He is distant to his work and commitment to people; he coerced his wife to have an abortion. He is also distant to his immediate environment; his bed is placed in the living room and he sleeps in a sleeping bag, like a traveller passing through.⁸ He is like the turtle figure (in the two previous films of Ceylan) that carries its home on its back, the symbol of Turkish nomadic life style. However, "what protects and comforts also captures and imprisons."⁹

Mahmut disillusions Yusuf, who desires to work on ships and travel the world, with his words "all places are alike." Yusuf finally leaves Mahmut's unwelcoming place, maybe to join the ranks of inhabitants of *gecekondu* or maybe to go back to his town. Mahmut will never understand the temporary "Istanbulite" who lives in illegal districts of slums like *gecekondu*. This social phenomenon is an inevitable effect of urban planning processes but has been neither comprehended nor accepted by Turkish middle class intellectuals, as was pointed out by Polish journalist and traveller Max Cegielski in his book, *The Eye of the World, From Constantinople to Istanbul*. Observing the metropolis from a tourist's perspective, they are instead obsessed with the historical glory of this city, expressing deep disappointment with its present social and urban structure and thus neglecting the present transformation.¹⁰ But there is a *tasra* (province) within Istanbul, a state that invokes a feeling being neither completely urban nor rural.

Another character who distances himself from the outside world is Musa in *Yazgı (Fate)* directed by Zeki Demirkubuz. Musa is unable to display any emotion or any reaction that society would expect from us, or would force us to act according to. In this oppressive world, according to Zeki Demirkubuz's own claim, Musa's attitude "seems to be the only possible one enabling us to cope with the burden of the images that do not belong to us."

Musa's choice is Demirkubuz's understanding of being truthful, by rejecting the existence of constructed or assumed status and identity. Following this interpretation, the interior world of Musa is not different than many others in society since no one wants to suffer any more. "Pain arises out of expectations, from the image and identity we cut out for ourselves."¹¹

But what happens if someone who is disconnected from himself becomes psychologically homeless? This is a predominant issue for Demirkubuz, as we can see in his trilogy that he refers to as *Karanlık Üstüne Öyküler (Tales About Darkness)*. *Yazgı (Fate)* and *İtiraf (Confession)* were made in 2001. The trilogy is not yet complete since the last segment, titled *Hicran (Bitterness of heart)* has yet to be made. *Yazgı* is in part a loose adaptation of Albert Camus' *L'Etranger (The Stranger)*. While it explores the essence of the feeling of guilt, it turns the traditional values of society upside down. *İtiraf (Confession)* is a highly charged drama about a desperate jealousy. And the whole trilogy deals with malicious side of human nature. Demirkubuz describes also the media's social power. The crimes of passion or honour, the graphic images of daily traffic accidents or the ethnic oppression and violence have now penetrated into the familiar private space (such as one's living room) contributing to collective indifference.¹²

A similar atmosphere of homelessness is found in the most famous film of Demirkubuz, *Masumiyet (Innocence)*, which received several national and international awards. The homelessness of the main character, who is supposed to leave the prison but he refuses to do so because he has nothing to do and nowhere to go, is doubled by the choice of set space. In *Innocence*, the action takes place in decrepit hotels with impersonal rooms, where the stories on the TV screen in the hotel lobbies are repeated in the film itself with ironic references. However, as we watch them replayed they are stripped of their exploitative nature and exaggerated sensationalism with an effect that could be called "tragically realistic."

The plot is like a tabloid story: crimes of passion, desperate men who pimp the women they would like to marry, unbelievable coincidences and suicides over love. These are taken directly from the familiar themes of once popular Turkish Yeşilçam melodramas. The key elements of Demirkubuz's works are despair, impossible love, destruction, twists of fate, and marginalised characters. He also uses a minimalist cinematic style, avoiding any aesthetically pleasing design. The leading figures are ordinary people coming to Istanbul from the villages of Anatolia, caught up in extreme stories, thrown from one city to other. His distinctive approach is seen in *Üçüncü Sayfa (The Third Page, 1999)* which is a story about love, sex and murder.

This director takes his moral dilemmas from such sources as the Dostoevsky and the Bible. In this way, he is inspired by Western culture but behind this facade the picture is very Eastern. Thus begins a chain of events in the life of Yusuf in *The Third Page*, this Raskolnikov character is trapped in his Turkish mentality and emotionality, to the core. Demirkubuz underlines that what interests him mostly is the irrational side of the human psyche. As Turkish cinema critic Cüneyt Cebenoyan points out, in Demirkubuz's films we can meet two types of tragic characters – one who accepted the course of his fate and rationalises the impossibility of struggling with destiny, and the second type who constantly fights against his own destiny, in Turkish called *yazgı*. In Turkish, according to the Islam, there are two terms for fate: *kader* (destiny) and *yazgı* (fate) *Kader* is given by Allah as an inevitable path of life and one should accept it, obey it and follow it. *Kader* is the representation of Allah's power, will and divine appreciation of humankind. According to Heidegger's concept, *kader* seems to be a different form of our authentic existence. *Yazgı*, however, is more like a predestination that takes into consideration human choice; this is our cultural determination. Demirkubuz's characters, acting irrationally, are making a self-conscious choice to surrender themselves to destiny. As one of the most tragic and *arabesque* characters created by Demirkubuz, Bekir in the final scene of *Kader* says, addressing his beloved:

Everyone believes in something in this fucking life, and for me it is you...
I stopped at the door and thought. I said to myself: this is the door to the
other world, this is the bridge between heaven and hell (thin as a man's
hair). Once you cross it, you cannot go back. Think twice. I thought and
I thought but I couldn't go back. Then, I said to myself: there is no other way.
Don't resist. This is your destiny. The road is set, bow your head and walk.¹³

In many of the scenes of his films, we witness an effect almost like in a Greek tragedy. All key events are placed outside the frame and the main place of interaction, usually violent, is a threshold. The border of every house, the threshold is the connection between two worlds and it has even greater significance in a Muslim context.

The threshold is the place, like the window, from which you can watch the outside world as if on a TV screen. Demirkubuz's connection to Yeşilçam studios where he received his film education, with strong attachment to melodramas, can be seen as he highlights the role of television in the life of ordinary people. This reflects a general phenomenon of the dominative role that media plays nowadays in everyday life in Turkey. This can be interpreted as a way of coping with loneliness in modern urban life. While the peasant economy changes directly into a capitalist industrial one, they somehow coexist with one another.¹⁴ The consolation and explanation of strangeness is provided by TV series.

This role is also carried out by Turkish commercial cinema, and this is a genre represented by the comedy star Cem Yılmaz. The main content of his films is Turkish social and political reality, based on the gags and word plays taken from traditional popular theatre and satirised with a typical Anatolian sense of humour. He appeals to the same masses whose taste historically was shaped by *arabesque* styled Yeşilçam melodramas and TV serials. Recently, popular Turkish films' repertoire is predominated by drama, TV series and family cinema. Its audiences feel alienated when confronted with art films, especially *auteur* cinema since as a *genre* it prefers psychodrama.

The dilemma of belonging is especially underlined in *Tabutta Rovaşata (Somersault in a coffin)*, 1996) where homelessness turns to interiority. Looking for safe places, Mahsun is a desperate homeless thief character in *Somersault*. He finds some comfort in stolen cars or in a teahouse, in a lavatory where he meets a girl addicted to heroin whom he falls in love with. These are semi-private spaces that he uses for short-time shelter. In this film, Istanbul fails totally to be even a shelter, not to mention a homeland. The metropolis turns into an agoraphobic and exterior space, where the main hero, an urban nomad, hopelessly struggles to be included.¹⁵

Kars is another city in Turkey, on the border with Russia, seen in *Kosmos* directed by Reha Erdem (2009). With the arrival of the character of Kosmos, a thief working miracles, this gives the same impression of a forgotten land but extends this concept with a magical touch. The face of the forgotten land is in the shape of a stylized city, almost impossible to recognise; Istanbul is again represented in Ceylan's *Üç maymun (Three Monkeys)*, 2008) as the location for the petit bourgeois family's drama beyond its time and space. The city that is taken over by other civilisations, cultures, adopted only for a while, not accustomed completely, with temporary homes, it is impossible to be a real one. The panacea for the social erosion of urban life, as proposed by Kaplanoğlu, could be the "holy light" of the province. The character's journey back to their province resembles a

return to their childhood, and in these circumstances the province remains a metaphor for childhood itself.¹⁶ The province is also the place of renaissance for real human relationships. The grandchild in *Pandora's Box* and Yusuf in *Egg* both journey to their ancestors' homeland and find there a peace, a cure for lost identity. This is a specific *voyage en Orient* from the westernised metropolis to the interior of Anatolia. As we can see in Yeşim Ustaoglu's film *Güneşe Yolculuk (Journey to the Sun, 1999)* or *Gitmek (My Marlon and Brando, 2008)* by Hüseyin Karabey, the characters' travel destination is from West to East. The utopian homeland is always to be conquered, is yet to be inhabited.

Turks, "old nomads, Islamic neophytes and self-appointed Europeans," always on their way, travelling, are still searching for their identity. If the society in general seems to approach a "comfortable" balance between Orient and Occident, the identity crisis of Turkish intellectuals reassembles a trap, being caught between the East and the West. But being at the crossroads is neither an impass nor a closure. It could be a beginning, a source of intellectual richness, which is interpreted by Ceylan as giving "the feeling of a consolation prize." But the specific Turkish habit of sinking into a melancholy that stems from the mystical *hüzün*, pushes the nomadic Turkish soul on its Sufi path through new experiments, like the dervish who completes his period of seclusion called in Turkish *çile* (in English *suffering*) and finally matures his soul spirituality.

"All of old. Nothing else ever. Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better."¹⁷

¹ The literal translation of the film title is "Tell me, Istanbul"

² O. Pamuk (2006), *My Father's Suitcase*, Nobel Lecture, December 7.

- ³ A. Suner (2010), *New Turkish Cinema, Belonging, Identity and Memory*, New York: I. B. Tauris, p. 27.
- ⁴ Ö. Fatih (2010), Film Seyredenin Taşrası, in Z. Tül Akbal Süalp, Aslı Güneş, Çitlembik Yayınları (Eds.) (p. 186), *Taşrada Var Bir Zaman*, Ankara.
- ⁵ S. Aytaç and G. Onaran (2007), İstanbul and "the Rest, in: *New Prospects on Ambiguous Grounds, Turkish Cinema Now*, Altyazı, November, p. 18.
- ⁶ O. Pamuk (2006), *Istanbul. Memories and the City*, London: Faber and Faber, p. 82.
- ⁷ D. Sanwald (2010), Her yer memleket değildir – Mała ojczyzna nie jest wszędzie (Homeland is not everywhere), in: *Nowe kino Turcji*, Krakow: Fundacja Ha!art, p. 141.
- ⁸ G. Dönmez-Colin, A modern identity or identity in a modern world, in: *Nowe kino Turcji*, pp. 59-60.
- ⁹ A. Suner (2004), *Horror of a Different Kind: Dissonant Voices of the New Turkish Cinema*, Screen Winer, ILV/4, p. 314.
- ¹⁰ M. Cegielski (2009), *Oko świata. Od Konstantynopola do Stambułu*, Warsaw: WAB, p. 297.
- ¹¹ Nihal Bengisu Karaca, interview in S. R. Öztürk (Ed.) (2002), *Kader: Zeki Demirkubuz*, (Ankara 2006), pp. 48-49 (first published in *Yeni İnsan, Yeni Sinema*, XXII, (May – June 2002), pp. 24.
- ¹² G. Dönmez-Colin, A modern identity or identity in a modern world, in: *Nowe kino Turcji*, p. 52.
- ¹³ A. Suner (2010), *New Turkish Cinema, Belonging, Identity and Memory*, p. 137.
- ¹⁴ F. Jameson (2004), *A Note on the Specificity of Newer Turkish Cinema*, paper read at the conference *Arada/Between: Ten Contemporary Turkish Films*, Duke University (20 September 2004).
- ¹⁵ A. Suner, *New Turkish Cinema, Belonging, Identity and Memory*, p. 147
- ¹⁶ N. Gürbilek, Taşra Sıkıntısı, *Defter Dergisi*, pp. 42-65.
- ¹⁷ S. Beckett. *Worstward Ho*.

Agnieszka Ayşen Kaim (PhD) is a Polish turcologist, academic of Turkish descent, she graduated from University of Warsaw, Institute of Oriental Studies, Department of Turcology and Inner Asian Peoples, specialised in Turkish visual arts, culture and literature. The subject of the PhD thesis: *Turkish traditional storyteller as an example of the theatrical form of the oral literature*. She is a practising storyteller and professional translator of the Turkish language and a written translator of film dialogues, oral translator and lecturer of workshops during the 10. International Film Festival in Wrocław/ Poland in 2010, in the section of New Turkish Cinema, in cooperation with the Association "Era New Horizons". Her field of interest are: epic tradition, oral literature, popular theatre, contemporary cinematography and the storytelling art of the Middle and Near East. She is a lecturer in History of Turkish Literature, Practical Spoken Turkish, Literary and Film Criticism, Oriental Culture on the Balkans. Institution of affiliation: Poland/University of Lodz/ Department of South Slavic Philology.