



## Zuhal: A Portrait of Urban Individuals Through Female Perspective

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**Abstract:** An apartment in the center of the metropolis, a woman living in this apartment and a cat sound that no one can hear, only the woman can hear. In the film *Zuhal*; the loneliness, burnout, fatigue and alienation of urban individuals are conveyed effectively with these few elements. In addition, each character in the film, which tells the stories of not only Zuhal but also her neighbors, offers an example of the metropolitan type personality. These exhausted and tired urban individuals live a life far from their inner world, alienated from themselves and their surroundings. This study focuses on the individual living in today's cities, using sociological and feminist analysis methods through the film *Zuhal* (2021). Present-day's individual lives in Bauman's "liquid modernity" which is quite different than Simmel's "the metropolitan individual". According to Han, an individual in present-day's "achievement society" that is dominated by speed and positivity in late modern era, grapples with psychological problems such as depression, attention deficit, hyperactivity and burnout syndrome. Furthermore, being a woman in this society brings additional challenges to the individual. The film's protagonist, Zuhal, is in such a psychological state; she is distant from herself, alienated from others including herself, worn, exhausted and tired. Through the study, it is emphasized that the psychological state that urban individual experiences is a consequence of the social structure rather than being an individual one.

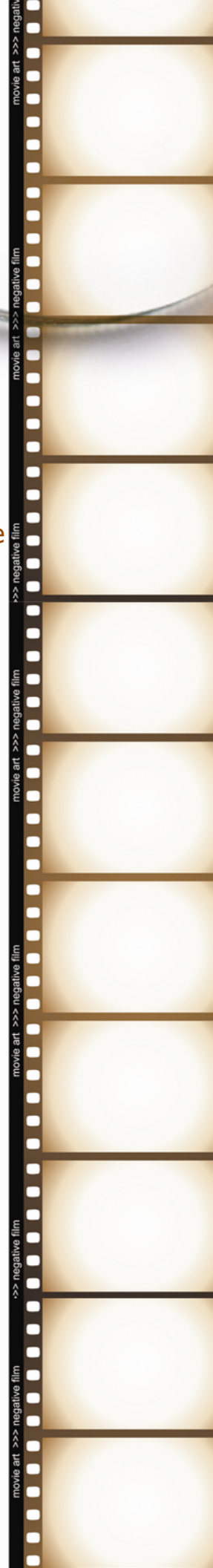
**Keywords:** Turkish cinema; feminist cinema; postmodern cinema; the metropolitan individual; achievement society; liquid modernity; gender



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# Zuhal: A Portrait of Urban Individuals Through Female Perspective

## Emel Uzun Yedekci

### Introduction

The issue of being an individual in modern society requires examination by considering the connections between social and individual elements. Because the individual is shaped by the society in which he/she grows up and is transformed by the relationship forms of that society. In addition to this situation, we have a historical and social heritage that for a long time perceived the person "male" when the word "individual" was mentioned. In this respect, being a woman in modern society requires being examined from different perspectives. Therefore, the differences between the individual and the female individual can be understood with a feminist perspective added to the sociological perspective.

In this respect, the film *Zuhal*<sup>1</sup> is also quite productive in terms of analyzing the female individual in the urban life. Because Zuhal, a metropolitan individual, shows her audience that she is a complete urban individual with her tired, exhausted and alien attitude towards herself and her surroundings. In order to closely examine the identity of a metropolitan individual that permeates Zuhal's personality, it is necessary to examine the connection between the urban and the individual from a social and historical perspective. For this reason, it would be appropriate to first examine the views of Simmel, one of the sociologists who first discussed the urban-individual relationship.

Simmel is one of the first sociologists of modernity, and his concept of "metropolitan individual" describes the individual of the 19th and 20th century modernity. If we are tracing back the roots of today's postmodern world to the modernity of these times, we need to look at Simmel's metropolitan individual to understand today's individual as well. In her works written at the beginning of the 20th century, in the early days of modernity, Simmel associates micro relationships between individuals with a social perspective, the macro level. With this perspective, which also influenced later thinkers, Simmel systematically analyzes the identity, psychology and social relations of the individual. Of course, this perspective will only constitute our basic idea. Because Simmel is a thinker who witnessed the beginning of modernity, he will be insufficient to understand today's urban individuals.

Because today, the individual is shaped by the fragmented structure of postmodern society. Bauman, one of the sociologists who says new things and analyzes today's society more thoroughly on the basis established by Simmel, states that the individual becomes the individual of "liquid modernity". Therefore, concepts such as individuality and freedom are redefined in this fragmented and liquid century. The development of technology and the spread of new media contents all over the world via the internet also affect the individual. At this point, Bauman will offer us new windows with a perspective that expands Simmel's perspective which explains the

mood of metropolitan individuals quite aptly. Because Simmel describes the individual in modern society. Today's postmodern society, on the other hand, has a completely different structure, and at this point Bauman reinterprets the concept of the individual, in the context of liquid modernity. According to Bauman, individualization, as a result of changing modernity in the current century, is not a choice but a destiny. When individuals achieve their goals within this individuality, they are no longer free. Because there is no such thing as achieving the goal anymore, there are endless options. And of course, this state of endless options benefits the capitalist system.

In such a world, it is necessary to get support from Han in order to delve deeper into Zuhail's psychology. Because Han states that the individual of the postmodern world not only loses his/her relationship with social ties but also disconnects with his/her own inner world. In this respect, today's individual does not only suffer from social pressures, he/she has now become a performance subject that exploits himself/herself. Han, from this perspective, states that the psychological turmoil, fatigue and exhaustion that we all experience is a result of the current social structure. Therefore, with this mindset, Han adds a complementary element to Bauman's analysis. In this regard, the theoretical basis of this study was created by taking historical and social changes into consideration and therefore it started with Simmel and continued with Bauman and Han in a step-by-step manner.

In addition, it has mentioned that when the modern individual was mentioned, the person "male" was perceived for centuries. All these changes experienced by the individual have been analyzed with a male-centered approach by the thinkers discussed above. Because the individual pointed out by these thinkers, who addressed individualization in terms of "universality", is usually "male". In this respect, an individual perspective isolated from the gender dimension is dominant. Therefore, feminist analysis is essential to make women's identity visible and to reveal the inequalities they experience. At the same time, the lack of a feminist perspective will mean that the story of the film will be isolated from its social context and confined to the subject of individualization. Therefore, it is not possible to analyze Zuhale's loneliness, internal conflicts, and state of invisibility without a feminist perspective. One of the reasons why the film *Zuhale* (2021) was chosen for this study is that it tells a woman-centered story. Additionally, other women's stories in the film also support the narrative. Through the film *Zuhale* (2021), both being a woman in today's cities and the personality and inner world of the urban individual are revealed. Therefore, sociological and feminist analysis methods were used together in the study.

Zuhale, being a woman, faces different challenges within society as well. As Nihal Yalçın, the actress who brought Zuhale to life, stated in an interview, "If a man were to experience this, it wouldn't be a story; this story would not become one without a woman's grace" (izmir35haber,

2023). This is because women are more likely to be unheard, taken less seriously and dismissed compared to men. Therefore, it is significantly important to read the character of Zuhal through the perspective of women, the other in society compared to men and consequently look at the story from a feminist perspective.

### **Simmel and the Metropolitan Individual**

Simmel argues that the deepest problems of modern life roots from the individual's struggle to protect their existence and individuality in the face of oppressive social forces, historical legacies, external culture and life techniques. The developments of the 18th century provided individuals with the opportunity to free themselves from the bonds established by economy, state, religion and morality. The 19th century brought even greater freedom and specialization. This specialization would both make the individual unique and dependent on the activities of others. In such an atmosphere, the "metropolitan type of personality" emerges. The spiritual foundation of this type is formed by the intense stimulation of the nerves in response to continuous and intense stimuli (Simmel, 2013, pp.83-84).

To be able to better understand the state of mind of someone living in a metropolis, one must examine the structure of the metropolis itself. According to Simmel, the metropolis is the center of the monetary economy. The diversity and intensity of the economic structure also give

importance to means of exchange. Thus, the monetary economy and the sovereignty of the mind are deeply connected. Both treat people and things with a pure objectivity. Money is only concerned with exchange value and asks "What is its' price?" for everything. In this regard, Interpersonal emotional relationships are based on individuality. (Simmel, 2013, pp.85-86).

The metropolis has certain effects on human life. These are punctuality, calculability and precision. These qualities are both related to the metropolis' monetary economy and its intellectual nature and they eliminate irrational, instinctive and arbitrary characteristics. Such a form of life brings a feeling of "weariness" with it. About weariness, Simmel says, "Perhaps no other psychological phenomenon is so directly connected to the metropolis." The fundamental reason for weariness is the rapid change and concentrated, compressed state of the contrasting elements that stimulate the nerves. The metropolitan individual is exposed to stimuli for such a long time and is forced to react with all their strength that, in the end, they become incapable of reacting to anything. The longer a person remains in this environment, the less time they will have to regain their strength. At the same time, according to Simmel, the essence of weariness is this indifference to differences. For the weary individual, everything is the same shade as gray and they are distant from everything in the same coldness. Nothing is preferable. This psychological state is the subjective reflection of the monetary economy. Nerves that refuse to react to stimuli in the

environment try to adapt in this way to the contents and forms of metropolitan life. The entire objective world is devalued to protect oneself and eventually, the personality itself shares in the same devaluation (Simmel, 2013, pp.88-90).

The modern urban individual maintains a “distance” as a psychological attitude towards their environment. Encountering numerous people daily, the modern individual would risk being emotionally broken if they responded internally to everyone. In this sense, they are quite different from the village individuals. While the village individuals know everyone and maintain positive relationships with everyone, the urban individuals get by with superficial contacts and adopt a distance due to mistrust. Therefore, distance and indifference appear as reflections of the urban individual’s psychological state. This is one of the fundamental forms of socialization characteristic of metropolitan life. With this acquired distance, the individual gains a degree of personal freedom that is unparalleled in other ways. These boundaries, with the freedom of movement they provide, both increase the division of labor within the group and ensure a specific individuality. At the same time, because of their developed spirituality and taste, the metropolitan individual has “more freedom” than the village individuals. Because the village individual face the risk of exclusion when they want to be “free” within the narrow social framework of the feudal structure. The metropolitan individual gains a broad spirituality, thanks to the freedom of movement. However, physical proximity and spatial confinement make mental distance visible. In



the crowd of the metropolis, the individual feels both alone and lost. This loneliness is the other side of the metropolitan individual's freedom. This freedom does not mean peace in emotional life (Simmel, 2013, pp.91-94).

Having broken away from their historical ties and having “more freedom” than the village individual, metropolitan individuals want to be different from each other. According to Simmel, the 20th-century individual demands uniqueness. Human values, as in the past, are no longer things that every individual carries through a common nature; humans are qualitatively unique and irreplaceable (Simmel, 2013, p.100). So, as we move towards the present day, towards the 21st century, what is the world becoming? And what is the individual living in this world becoming?"

### **Bauman and Liquid Modernity**

With the approach to the present day, modernity transforms. The postmodern world of today presents itself with a new structure. Ferguson openly describes the postmodern world with the following words: "In the postmodern world, all distinctions become fluid, boundaries disappear, and everything can be seen as its exact opposite; the irony of everything seeming different but fundamentally or radically the same becomes the basic emotional state" (Ferguson, cited in Bauman, 2013). Within this ironic structure, the demand for difference and uniqueness that Simmel pointed out is transformed.

In this sense, modernity in today's world is quite different from the modernity described by Simmel. For the social structure is swiftly changing and transforming. Bauman explains that researchers describe the modernity of the past as "heavy, rigid, intense and systematic," while the modernity of our time is described as "light, fluid, loose and web-like" (Bauman, 2013).

To be modern means to be in a constant state of "self-transcendence." In this sense, individualization is not a choice but a fate. It is a result of modernity. The changing structure of modernity has not changed this nature of individualization. However, the difference between self-actualization in a practical and realistic way and being destined is increasing (Bauman, 2013).

According to Bauman, in the present day everything is reduced to the individual; at the highest level is self-actualization, determining the point of satisfaction of one's goals, deciding what one can and cannot do. At the same time, nothing must solidify so that all possibilities can remain infinite; this exists through the non-transformation of everything into an unchanging reality. In the fluid modernity of this century, the belief that one cannot be free if one achieves one's goals dominates. It makes one think that if you are ordinary, you cannot be yourself. For this reason, everything opens to a sea of infinite possibilities. The consumer's misery lies here, not in scarcity but in abundance. The most fundamental concern is whether the options are used to the best advantage. There is no answer to this. According to Bauman, the absence of the best is "both

a gift and a curse." For this, the state offers sellers a permanent market opportunity (Bauman, 2013).

For the individual of fluid modernity, privacy also transforms into something given with one's own consent. In other words, it is a price to be paid in exchange for all the wonders that is offered. Another dimension of this is "do it yourself" slavery (Bauman, 2013, pp.29-30). The "free" state encountered in Simmel was initially sacrificed with weariness, while in the fluid present it has transformed into the free provision of labor to the market in the name of pleasure and enjoyment. This also means the sacrifice of privacy.

The existence of developing technology of the internet and new media areas is also transforming our relationship patterns and individuality. Our perception of "intimacy" is also going through change. In Bauman's terminology, the friendships we acquire through social networks offer us a "network," not a "community,". The community monitors the individual closely but also provides security and trust. On the other hand, the network gives freedom to the individual without caring about what he or she might do or not. The main difference between network and community is that one offers security, the other freedom. Therefore, technology is seen as a remedy to protect against the insecurity and loss of privacy that relationships offer (Bauman, 2013, pp.45-46). However, this new technology also triggers a new state of psychology.

## Byung-Chul Han and "Achievement Society"

Simmel has touched on the connection between our relationship with objects and the monetary economy. Han follows a similar trajectory and adds that objects, losing their uniqueness, becomes transparent and are only expressed through their prices. According to Han, in this respect, “The society of transparency is an *inferno of the same*”. The state of transparency marginalizes the other, the stranger. The aim here is for the system to gain speed and stability. Because in “a chain reaction of likeness,” communication accelerates. This pressure to accelerate seeks to eliminate negativity (Han, 2015a, p.2). This rapid connection of capitalist societies to speed increases the orientation towards the positive. For societies can become faster through positivity and transparency.

Instead of stalling in the negative, the transparency society that accelerates in the positive, does not allow any negative emotions either. The exclusion of the negative means the loss of the ability to cope with pain and suffering. Nietzsche states that the depth, strength and greatness of the human soul roots in stalling in the negative. On the other hand, Han states that excessive positivity leads to mental problems such as exhaustion, fatigue and depression (Han, 2015a, p.5).

According to Han (2015b, p.1), “neurological illnesses such as depression, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), borderline personality disorder (BPD) and burnout syndrome

mark the landscape of pathology at the beginning of the twenty-first century. They are not infections, but infarctions; they do not follow from the negativity of what is immunologically foreign, but from an excess of positivity. Therefore, they elude all technologies and techniques that seek to combat what is alien”. In this age where difference disappears and the same dominates, depth also disappears. Strangeness takes on an exotic form, becoming touristic (Han, 2015b, pp.1-2).

Today's late modern society is also confronted with information bombardment. In this situation where access to information is very easy, the social order turns from trust to control. In this respect, according to Han, today's “transparency society” is not a society of trust but a society of control (Han, 2015a, p.VII). However, this control is quite different from the control society indicated by Foucault; it is no longer a disciplinary society. For Foucault's power analytics is far from describing psychological and topological changes. It also contains a great deal of negativity. In this respect, according to Han, the 21st-century society is a “achievement society.” Therefore, its inhabitants are not the “obedience-subjects” of the past, but achievement subjects. Negativity is eliminated in the achievement society. Its character is positive, and its motto is “Yes, we can.” Prohibition and command are no longer elements of this society; they have been replaced by initiative and motivation. As a result, while the negative character of the disciplinary society

creates madmen, the positive character of the achievement society creates depressives and losers (Han, 2015b, pp.8-9).

This emphasis on achievement by the transparency society also brings with it a new understanding of exploitation. In this new understanding of exploitation, there is no dominating authority. The individual is both their own master and their own entrepreneur. The absence of a dominating authority does not mean freedom and liberation from coercion. Because the achievement subject of the transparency society exploits itself. In this situation where the exploiter and the exploited are the same, the perpetrator and the victim are one, self-exploitation is much more efficient than other understandings of exploitation. The reason for this is that the feeling of freedom accompanies exploitation. For the achievement subject is within a compulsion created by themselves, freely. The basis of today's control society is this dialectic of freedom (Han, 2015a, p.48).

In late modern society, achievement subject is fundamentally forced to be themselves. The social order's compulsion to be oneself drives the individual into depression in case of failure. At the same time, the relationship fatigue created by the atomization and fragmentation of society also strengthens this depression. In addition, one of the reasons for depression is the incapacity that achievement pressure creates on the individual. In other words, it is fatigue from being able

and doing. In a society where everything is believed to be possible, the individual is at war with themselves. This internalized war takes place under the excess of positivity. As a result, burnout syndrome is not only the result of a tired self but also of a tired soul (Han, 2015b, pp.10-11).

For the achievement subject, “bare life and labour form two sides of the same coin”. It is important to optimize oneself within this working state, as the neoliberal system functions this way. In order to make work more efficient and increase achievement, mistakes, weaknesses and blockages should be treated and eliminated. Everything being measurable is preferred because it is more in line with market logic than the desire for a good life. This state of measurability also brings about total harmony. For the transparency society, suppressing deviations is part of its economy (Han, 2017, pp.2, 10 and 29). The achievement subject is disciplined. Thanks to this discipline, productivity increases and speed and production multiply. This is important for the continuity of productivity. At the same time, passivity is excluded in a working society; achievement and activity are the most fundamental elements. Work is made naked because naked work is compatible with life. This means pure work and pure life. Nothing is forced into continuity or permanence. For activity foresees change. In this case, nervous disorders and unrest arise (Han, 2015b, pp.9 and 17-18).

In capitalist society, everything is subject to the obligation to be exhibited. Things disappear under excessive light when they are exhibited. In this respect, “pornography destroys not just eros, but also sex”. Therefore, the state of being exhibited and exposed also leads to the alienation of the body. Moreover, according to Han, the exhibition of everything under visibility and communication, the pornographic exhibition of the soul and body, is obscene. The continuous state of exhibition, the compulsion to perform, threatens peace. This compulsion means the exploitation of the visible (Han, 2015a, pp.11-12).

The increase and intensity of showing and positivity also change the structure and economy of attention. The increase in workload due to efficiency also necessitates a new attention and time technique. Han thinks that “multitasking” means a regression for humanity. Because this state, which is common among animals in the wild, is indispensable for survival. Deep attention, on the other hand, contains development and has the ability to understand nature thoroughly. Nietzsche states that if we remove the elements that allow us to concentrate on life, a deadly hyperactivity will remain. Han states that hyperactivity is paradoxically a passive form of action. In this state, which does not lead to any free action, positivity is absolutized. In other words, only the state of positivity passivizes the relationship between us and objects (Han, 2015b, pp.12-14 and 24).



Within all these states described by Han, the achievement society takes in the form of a tiredness society. According to Han, tiredness has different forms. One of them is “I-tiredness,” the other is “we-tiredness.” In I-tiredness, there is a state of tiredness that is lonely, worldless and negates the world. In we-tiredness, on the other hand, there is a state of tiredness that trusts the world and reproduces “duality”. Duality is produced because in this state, people both see and are seen, touch and are touched. The tiredness of children playing in the street is such a tiredness. The individual of the achievement society, on the other hand, is driven into I-tiredness (Han, 2015b, pp.31-32).

### **Being Women in Achievement Society**

In the achievement society of the late modern era, individuals lead self-focused, unsatisfied and exhausted lives within a positive atmosphere. While this condition is viable for both genders, it affects individuals with different sexual identities in different ways. This is because the concept of gender brings inequalities with it.

The concept of gender was initially used by those who developed thoughts about femininity and masculinity. One of the most important figures among them is Simone de Beauvoir. According to de Beauvoir, “History has shown us that men, from the very beginning, have held all concrete power in their hands; since the dawn of patriarchy, they have believed it useful to keep women

dependent; they have made their laws to the detriment of women; thus woman has concretely become the Other, the being who is not-man” (Beauvoir, 1993, p.153).

Simone de Beauvoir argues that in a patriarchal society, the masculine or male identity is perceived as positive, while the feminine or female identity is perceived as negative and constructed as the Other. Women are defined in relation to men, not vice versa. Defined from the perspective of the masculine object, women are forced to adopt the other position assigned to them by men (Donovan, 2006, p.136).

Over time, this difference between genders is expressed through the concept of social gender. One of the most important figures who comprehensively addressed this concept is Judith Butler. According to Butler, the distinction between sex and gender was initially developed as a challenge to the notion that “biology is fate.” For many researchers, the concept of gender is seen as the cultural construction of sex. Therefore, Butler argues that if gender in social gender is seen as the cultural forms taken on by the body, then social gender does not originate from any particular sex. At the same time, when social gender is understood in terms of “construction” and “culture,” the notion of “biology is fate” gives way to the notion of “culture is fate.” For Butler, social gender is a social category and is produced performatively. What is meant here is that behind the expressions of social gender, there is no underlying social gender identity. The social gender

identity is performatively constituted by the “expressions” and “statements” of which it is said to be the result. In other words, it is forcibly brought into being through practices that regulate social gender (Butler, 2014, pp.50, 53 and 77).

The close relationship of social gender with the culture and its status as a constantly reproduced form brings it into close relation with what is social as well. In this respect, the female individual in achievement society includes the need to be constantly active and positive oriented to the burdens of the past. Women, who have been seen as the second sex throughout history and have been in the position of the Other, battles with the drive of self-realization in the century we are living in. Within a patriarchal system, which is inherently male-dominated, men find it easier to realize their full potential compared to women and LGBTQ+ individuals. For these individuals, who are marginalized by society, the process is much more challenging and the exhaustion and fatigue they experience are far more complex.

A close look at the film *Zuhal* (2021) through the lens of feminist film analysis will help us to make this complex structure visible. As Bell Hooks says, “feminism is for everybody.” Because feminism is a movement that seeks to end sexist exploitation and oppression, sexism. For some men, perhaps for the vast majority, being a patriarchal man is also difficult. Feminism is

necessary to eliminate the domination that patriarchal sexism imposes on all sexual identities (Hooks, 2000, pp.8-9).

At the same time, it is quite important how the narratives of womanhood produced within cultural texts are connected and how they shape the perception of being a woman. Because embodied, subjective and social experience is based on gender (Thornham, 2007, p.55). In this respect, a feminist analysis of a film centered around a female character will shape and reproduce the perception of womanhood.

Moreover, when we look at the history of our country, we often witness the silence and invisibility of women. "The Woman Has No Name", one of the most important works of feminist literature of the 80s, is important for making this situation visible. When Fatmagül Berktaş goes to the premiere of the film adapted from the book and tells us about what happened there. Berktaş states that the majority of film critics and the audience who watched the film stated that the women's stories told in the film were "special" and "marginal" and that they did not reflect the society in general. In response to these comments, Berktaş (1998, pp.49-51) responds with the following statements: "I do not know what kind of 'thing' a 'woman' is in Turkey because, as in the rest of the world, there are women one by one in Turkey from different classes, statuses, and positions. However, while these individual women have different experiences, they also share a

common experience solely because of their gender”. The film *Zuhal* (2021) narrates one of these common experiences, and it is very important to understand and see it from this perspective.

### **The Film *Zuhal* (2021)**

*Zuhal* (2021) is a film about an ordinary woman whose life is transformed by a mysterious cat sound. As the story progresses, we get to know Zuhal better and see her progress of getting closer to her inner self. To find the source of the sound that she cannot tell where it is coming from, she starts talking to her neighbors which she did not have a relationship with before. These conversations lead us to witness the lives of each neighbor even closer. These background characters, each representing a different part of society, express a lot with their seemingly ordinary lives. Director Durlu shows these characters not just as background characters that serve the main character’s story, but as characters with their own lives. This effective choice makes the film more realistic and helps us see situations from a wider perspective.

If we take a closer look at Zuhal, the main character of the film, she is a middle-upper class lawyer living alone in one of Istanbul's central districts. In the following scenes, we learn that she has a boyfriend who is on a business trip to Dubai. Ahmet, her boyfriend whom we only see during their phone conversations, is both present and absent in a sense. Throughout the film, we realize Zuhal's loneliness, how everything in her seemingly ordinary life appears to be relatively complete,

but she is experiencing an inner emptiness. Just like the state that her boyfriend is in. Zuhall portrays herself as a woman who has a job and a boyfriend, is independent, lives in a stylishly furnished house in one of Istanbul's central districts and maintains harmonious relationships with the people around her. In this way, she is one of Simmel's metropolitan individuals. She has freedom within the crowds. She has a high degree of mobility and a broad spirituality, but at the same time, she is lonely, weary and involved in superficial relationships. She is an individual of Bauman's liquid modernity. Therefore, everything around her is fragmented, changeable and fluid. At the same time, she is also an individual of Han's achievement society and within the positivity society, her relationships are superficial and transparent. This entire atmosphere makes her experience a sense of positivity in its void form. The underlying reasons for her feelings of emptiness, fatigue, depression and weariness are the kinds of problems that every individual living in the late modern period may encounter. Let's take a closer look at Zuhall's situation, the step-by-step development of this situation and the solutions she seeks within the flow of the film.

The film begins with Zuhall and Yavuz, the apartment building superintendent, silently standing in a room. Zuhall tries to make Yavuz listen to the sound of a cat, and they wait silently and patiently, but this time they cannot hear the cat's sound. In the morning, Zuhall wakes up to a little girl stroking her head. This little girl is Aylin, the daughter of Yavuz, the apartment building

superintendent and Meltem, the cleaning lady. The affection of a little girl is like the touch of her own inner child in Zuhall's inner world.

Throughout the film, objects and people are often used with symbolic meanings. For example, the two men who bring the wardrobe, a gift from her boyfriend Ahmet, cannot move the wardrobe from the corridor into the room. This rather large wardrobe remains in the middle of the corridor. Ahmet, with whom Zuhall is video calling, is insistent and tries to explain to the men how to move it. In these scenes where we see the patriarchal oppression, Ahmet suppresses Zuhall's speech, does not listen to her and tries to talk to the men. He is not there; he is on the other side of the phone, sees the room and the wardrobe through the phone screen, but still tries to direct the men. The men also have an attitude of not taking Zuhall seriously and they do not really listen to Ahmet either, as Zuhall also tries to stop Ahmet. The men who brought the wardrobe say that they forgot their toolbox and that their other friends will come to disassemble and place the wardrobe. The woman is ignored and suppressed by all the men in the scene. The fact that one of the men is her boyfriend and the others are the men who brought the wardrobe does not change the situation; the woman is seen as someone who cannot solve this problem as well as a man. For most of the film, the wardrobe remains in the corridor of the house. In this respect, the wardrobe symbolizes the difficulties and obstacles in Zuhall's life. Zuhall must pass the wardrobe to be able to walk in

her house. Just as she needs to overcome patriarchal pressures and boundaries to be able to move forward in life. The fact that this wardrobe was bought by her boyfriend is significant. Zuhail is uncomfortable with the wardrobe, just as she is uncomfortable with the boundaries drawn by the male-dominated society. She does not feel at home with the presence of the wardrobe, just as she does not feel fully at home living in such a society. Therefore, the metaphor of the wardrobe strongly symbolizes the boundaries and lines imposed on her by the male-dominated society in which she lives and her feeling of not belonging to this society.

This scene is followed by the scene of Zuhail encountering her neighbors. The electricity of her neighbors across is being cut off by the workers. The woman argues with the worker and then she argues with her boyfriend who does nothing. She doesn't even hear Zuhail's "have a good day" and tries to turn the electricity back on. Meanwhile, Zuhail asks if they have cats, and the woman looks at her coldly and doesn't speak. They live in apartments across from each other and don't know each other. In fact, we feel that this is the first time they have communicated. When we look at the life of the opposite neighbor from afar, we see a woman trying to take responsibility for life and a man escaping responsibility. Clearly, the patriarchal societal structure has harmed both. This first encounter with the neighbors continues with the scene where Zuhail tries to hear the cat's sound through the apartment void.



In the dusk of the evening, we see the lights reflecting from the apartments. These lights illuminating the apartments make everyone's story visible. Zuhall watches these houses for a while. Her pursuit of the cat's sound, which only she can hear, and her witnessing of her neighbors' stories goes parallel with her watching the lights of other apartments. Zuhall opens herself up to stories and communication. Zuhall's observation is interrupted by car alarms. A woman hits each car one by one, setting off their alarms. This noise in the silence is also a noise within Zuhall. Her journey to her inner self is not quite or smooth. We feel that there are many women of different ages speaking within her. In an interview, director Nazlı Elif Durlu also states that the other women's stories in the film are characters that Zuhall could have become if she had made different choices (Antalya Altın Portakal Film Festivali, 2021). In this sense, we realize that women's stories have a common ground. Differences are the result of different choices. Any woman can very easily become another; the essence of their stories is the same. Every woman's inner self is layered and deep.

While Zuhall watches the lights of the apartments, after her observation is interrupted by the alarm, she takes one of the flowers from her balcony and places it in the middle of her house. As the film progresses, we watch this flower in the pot slowly lose its leaves. This flower symbolizes the gradual fading of Zuhall's vitality and hope. Initially, Zuhall patiently follows the

sound of the cat. However, as she is unable to convince anyone around her of the existence of this sound, her hope diminishes and is extinguished. The cat's sound, symbolizing the connection Zuhail tries to establish with her inner self, means that this connection cannot be established through relationships and that Zuhail becomes increasingly isolated, lonely, exhausted and ultimately leads an unsatisfying life. Her indifference to the alarm sounds, her ignoring of the problem experienced by her neighbors whose electricity is cut off and her lack of interest in the neighboring children are all indicators of Zuhail's indifference to life.

Another scene that shows the traces of indifference is the virtual relationship she has with her boyfriend over the phone. In this relationship, which can be described as virtual sex, sex is more of a performative game played with words than a physical and spiritual togetherness experienced by a couple. Han's idea that porn destroys not only love but also sexuality can also be read through this relationship. Because in this game of verbal and symbolic arousal, display and exhibition are at the forefront. The relationship is singular and contains great alienation. The fact that Zuhail eventually quickly moves away from the subject and turns to the sound of the cat is clear evidence of this situation. Zuhail has experienced the moment when a woman and a man can be most intimate, singularly and alone, through a phone and her inner voice wants to convey this discomfort to her. The cat's sound is a symbol of this lost inner voice, a cry for Zuhail to try to hear her own inner self.

Zuhal wants to search for the cat's sound on the floor below and goes down there with the real estate agent and the building superintendent, Yavuz. While Yavuz and Zuhal focus on the sound, the real estate agent is constantly on the phone. When he hangs up, he talks about the cat they feed and his child. The real estate agent is a person of today's society, who never stops and is always performing. If he stops, he doesn't feel like he's living. Another supporting character from whom we can very clearly observe the pressure of achievement society is the young girl who works with Zuhal. She is constantly seeking approval from Zuhal. All her conversations are based on saying the right thing and they are superficial. Likewise, Zuhal has a superficial relationship with the young girl. The way she celebrates the young girl's birthday is cold and distant. Asking about her plans with her boyfriend is more about controlling the situation to avoid disrupting work rather than genuine curiosity. The efficiency of the work is above everything else. In the following scenes, we watch her trying to rush to a business meeting, experiencing anxiety and stress. The cat's sound keeps her awake. She takes medication to sleep and can't wake up, so she misses the meeting. They give her job to someone else. The capitalist system is not understanding and far from slow. The fast and punctual win. Because the important thing is to be productive and perform well. After one of the work-related scenes, a night view appears and another dry branch falls from the flower in the pot in the middle of the living room. This superficiality, the constant pursuit of

achievement, the focus on positivity and speed are drying up and withering Zuhail's inner world. Her soul, which desires vitality and enthusiasm, is gradually fading.

Another resident of the apartment building is the elderly couple, Mr. Berkay and his wife, Mrs. Fazilet. When Zuhail goes to the couple's house, Mr. Berkay warns her to close the apartment door, as he is annoyed by the cats entering the building. He complains that they make a mess in the building and surroundings. The cat's sound, which symbolizes the inner voice and the cats themselves are not accepted by the elderly couple, especially by the elderly man. Here, we see the older segments of society who are insensitive to people's inner voices and are tightly bound to social norms. These people communicate with Zuhail in a polite and respectful manner. Because Zuhail is relatively compliant with social norms. However, the woman who lives in apartment seven is not like that and she also feeds the cats. Her husband left home a month ago and she lives with her two children. The couple says that the plants in the garden are damaged because of the cats that this woman feeds. Mr. Berkay states that he told this situation to the landlord and the landlord said, "I don't interfere." Mrs. Fazilet says, "That's the famous saying of today," and Mr. Berkay adds, "We were different." This emphasis on the generational difference also contains a nostalgia. The past was harmonious, everyone controlled each other and themselves. We see traces of Foucault's disciplinary society in this past. However, in today's society, no one interferes with anyone, and the motto is "yes, we can." Motivation and initiative are encouraged. Therefore,

prohibitions and orders are removed, and negativity is excluded. Mrs. Fazilet criticizes woman who lives in apartment seven but then turns to Zuhale and adds, "You're different, don't get me wrong," and Mr. Berkay also adds, "Oh, of course, our lovely Mrs. Zuhale, is different." From this dialogue, we see that Zuhale's appearance, which conforms to social norms, is also positively received by people.

After the elderly couple's house, the camera turns its perspective to apartment seven, which was mentioned. In apartment seven, where we realized that she wasn't so far from her inner voice due to her dialogue with the cats, there are many cat figurines. Our frame first captures the young son of the house and then the older daughter. The young girl asks Zuhale for her phone, saying that her phone is broken, and she needs to call someone urgently. After the young girl leaves with Zuhale's phone, the woman living at apartment seven appears with two coffees in her hand. She greets Zuhale with a warm smile, saying, "Come on, it's good that you came, look how nice it is." While painting the wall of the house, the woman talks to Zuhale and paints the wall at the same time. The house, painted from gray to yellow, seems to represent the coloring of monotony. The woman complains about the loneliness of apartment life and the fact that they don't know each other. As it is understood from the cat symbol, the woman is sensitive to her inner self and is disturbed by people becoming so distant from each other. Zuhale asks if she has any cats, and the

woman complains about it being forbidden to keep cats in the apartment but adds that she loves cats. She asks Zuhale if she likes cats. Zuhale doesn't specify whether she likes or dislikes them. This answer is significant because in these scenes, her dialogue with her inner self is both present and absent. The woman's daughter and son are young people who have a close relationship with technology in the late modern period. Positivity and fun are their main motivations. The young boy has fun with Zuhale by making a cat sound from his phone. Although her mother had forbidden her to speak to him and took her phone; the young girl calls her boyfriend from Zuhale's phone. Lying is very natural for young people, and it is permissible to feel good. The woman states that she has difficulty dealing with her children and Zuhale listens indifferently. The woman who is painting the wall invites her to join, saying it will relax her. The two women paint the wall together.

Zuhale's search for the cat's sound does not end; sometimes her curiosity leads her to listen at other apartment's doors or even to examine her neighbors' trash. At the apartment meeting, we see most of the neighbors together and the topic is Zuhale listening at doors. The apartment building manager, Mr. Berkay, informs everyone that this is the first time Zuhale has attended an apartment meeting. The meeting is urgent, and the reason is the door-listening incident. The elderly couple, Mr. Berkay and Mrs. Fazilet, apartment seven and her children, the young couple Handan and Erhan and apartment nine, Ozan, attend the meeting. They all watch the footage of Zuhale listening at Handan and Erhan's door. Erhan says that he is responsible for the safety of his family. This

reaction, given with his body straightened, shows the roles imposed on men by the masculine world. Erhan, who displays a very patriarchal attitude, is accusatory with this attitude. In response to this reaction, Zuhall tries to explain in a calm tone that she heard a cat's sound and that's why she was listening to the door. The cat's sound has kept her awake for days. Everyone looks at her disbelievingly. Mr. Berkay says she might be tired. Zuhall states that she wants to leave the meeting since her issue is over and leaves the house. Ozan follows Zuhall and starts flirting with her. He says he heard the cat's sound too and they could talk over a coffee. Zuhall asks Ozan why he didn't say this inside. Ozan dismisses it by saying he wasn't sure. With this attitude, Ozan presents a portrait of men who believe they can easily influence women and focus on seducing them rather than understanding them.

Zuhall's search for the cat's sound continues. She goes to the apartment void again and has an accident and falls. Aylin, the daughter of the apartment superintendent, finds her and they take Zuhall to their home as a family. Meltem tends to Zuhall's wounds. Meanwhile, Zuhall's eyes are drawn to the pictures drawn by Aylin. There is also a picture of a cat among them. They bring Zuhall to her home. Zuhall asks Meltem to stay with her a little longer and they sit in silence. Zuhall's search for affection is clearly visible in this scene. These are the people who are closest to her in the apartment building and who are most supportive of her regarding the cat's sound. This family,

symbolizing the lower classes of society and less affected by capitalist values, seems to be less influenced by the fragmented, disconnected communication world of the neoliberal system and its superficial relationships. The flower in the pot inside the house continues to shed its leaves one by one and wither. Zuhail's loneliness is increasing, and her spirit is withering.

In the morning, the door suddenly opens, and Zuhail's mother arrives unexpectedly. We sense that their relationship is not a very healthy mother-daughter relationship. Her mother tells Zuhail that she lives alone and therefore should get along with her neighbors. Zuhail reacts by saying, "Nonsense." Her mother makes cookies and hands them to Zuhail to take to her neighbors. Although Zuhail reacts negatively, she gives up and finally takes the cookies. The young woman Handan opens the door, holding one of the children in her arms. Zuhail apologizes for the inconvenience and hands over the cookies. During this, the other child wakes up, they all go inside together, and they put the children to sleep. During this time, Handan doesn't speak, and Zuhail looks at the photos and awards around. Handan poses smiling for the camera in her ski clothes with her friends. These pictures are very far from the image of a tired mother trying to put her two children to sleep. Handan hugs Zuhail and then Zuhail leaves the house. This silent dialogue effectively conveys the difficulties women experience with motherhood. Because being a single mother caring for children is quite exhausting. Another woman can best understand and feel this difficulty. Besides, this dialogue also gives the message that we are all alone. Zuhail, who pretends



to be going to work so that her mother will leave the house the next day, is also one of these lonely people. This distance from her mother reveals the magnitude of the wounds in her soul. She hides her weaknesses; as an individual of the achievement society, she must be strong, healthy and good.

Zuhal asks the taxi driver, which her mom accompanied her until she gets in, to take her back after one street. The man grumbles about the short distance, but Zuhal insists on paying him. When she gets out of the taxi, she starts cursing at the taxi driver. At that moment, the woman who sets off car alarms comes up and joins Zuhal. The woman is feeding the street cats and says to Zuhal, "Why don't you join me?" Zuhal declines, saying she's a lawyer. The woman replies that they are colleagues, a retired administrative judge. This crazy woman, who gets angry at cars parked at the end of the road and sets off their alarms, says and does whatever she wants. When Zuhal doesn't want to join her, she protests. "You don't understand anything. You say things just to say them, speak thoughtfully." she says. She adds that the biggest evil done to society was done by the person who invented the word "please," saying that people think they can do anything as long as they say "please." Then, she says, "If I want, I'll pee here" and pees; Zuhal is shocked and runs away from there. The unconscious behavior of this crazy woman is rooted in Freud's "id." She doesn't want to conform to social norms and can behave arbitrarily. She wants to protest the

order in the most absurd way and is able to do so. She is also a representation of the "id" within Zuhul.

When Zuhul returns home, she hears noises from the neighbor's apartment across and knocks on the door. No one opens the door for a long time. Finally, the door opens, and Zuhul finds the young woman trying to turn on the electricity, crying alone in bed. She just watches her, and another leaf falls from the pot. Zuhul is determined to move the wardrobe that is in the middle of the apartment but fails. She goes inside of the wardrobe and cries. Then she talks to her boyfriend from inside the wardrobe. She tries not to show her sadness and lies that she doesn't hear the cat. Behind the reality she has built around her with lies, Zuhul has begun to turn inward. There is a knock at the door and the apartment superintendent Yavuz comes and says that his daughter Aylin heard the cat. He says he heard it too. The sound is coming from the empty apartment. They go to the empty apartment and try to hear the sound. But the real estate agent is still talking non-stop and it's impossible to hear the sound. Aylin suggests staying silent for five minutes. This request of the little girl is also the voice of Zuhul's inner child. They silence the real estate agent and hear the cat's sound. They call the fire department. At that moment, Mr. Berkay, Erhan and Handan also come to the empty apartment. The firefighters say that they have had many similar cases and that they need to break the wall to rescue the cat. The real estate agent says they can't do that without the landlord's permission. Erhan still doesn't believe that there is a cat and Mr. Berkay

agrees with him saying he didn't hear it either. Yavuz and Zuhall say they heard it. Handan worries that it might be a kitten. Mr. Berkay prolongs the matter by saying that a field survey needs to be done to break the wall. He adds that if you break this wall, the upper floor drain will be damaged. When the young firefighter says that it is hollow behind, Berkay Bey belittles him by asking if he's an architect or an engineer. Erhan also belittles the situation by saying, "With all the other problems that people have, this is yours? " He continues to belittle them by saying, "How sensitive people we have in this country." His wife Handan reacts to Erhan by saying, "So you want the cat to die?" The men argue about whether to break the wall or not and this argument escalates into a physical fight. This scene is an example of the working practices of the male-dominated world. It is a reflection of a system where everyone believes they are right and ignores the other side in order to maintain their own power. Women are silenced. Erhan silences Handan, no one listens to Zuhall and Aylin watches everything silently. Everyone goes home.

The men who brought the wardrobe are waiting for Zuhall at the door. They place the wardrobe in the room. Then we find Zuhall giving a speech for her job; we learn that she will be returning to her job. At night, Zuhall can't stand it anymore, enters the empty apartment from outside and breaks the wall with a hammer. Zuhall rescues the cat, takes it in her hands and strokes it and the film ends with this scene. Zuhall has begun to hear her inner voice. We understand this

from her moving the wardrobe to its place, returning to her job and finding the cat. She will now listen to the voice of the child within her. The film ends, but it hints to us that nothing will be the same anymore. Zuhail's weary soul has decided to listen to her inner voice.

## Conclusion

The Film *Zuhal* (2021) very effectively reflects the loneliness of the city, weariness, indifference, coldness and distant state of the metropolitan individual. Zuhal is a clear example of the metropolitan type of personality that Simmel pointed out. The other residents of the apartment also exhibit similar metropolitan type personalities. However, the psychological state of both Zuhal and the other apartment residents cannot be explained solely by the metropolitan type of personality. Because the late modern period, fluid modernity, has its own unique psychological structure. Here we see the individuals of liquid modernity that Bauman points out. These people are people who swim in a sea of endless options and have no other options than individuality. Han's concepts of achievement society, tiredness society and transparency society accurately describe this contemporary social structure. In this respect, it is possible to analyze more deeply the reasons behind the indifference, dullness and weariness of Simmel's metropolitan individual through Han's descriptions. Because today's cities paint a picture where positivity reigns, achievement pressure is felt and consequently, the resulting exhaustion, fatigue and depression

take over human psychology. In their personal lives, people tend to reduce this condition they experience to their individuality. Because the neoliberal system forces performance subjects to be themselves on a liquid. A person who focuses on self-realization is driven to depression if they cannot do so and often finds the reason within themselves. However, it is the neoliberal system itself that constantly puts the achievement subjects of the transparency society into choices and drags them into a world of positivity. The economy encourages constant achievement for the sake of efficiency, speed, punctuality and variability.

Within the narrative structure of the film, we see that each story is fragmented, broken and superficial. The director, who shifts our perspective to situational stories, gives the audience clues to read the psychological state beneath the apparent superficiality of each situation. We perceive these clues at the point where the stories of the apartment residents are parallel to Zuhul's life story. The story of the girl working with her and Zuhul's work story; the neighbors' sex sounds and Zuhul's virtual sex with her boyfriend; Handan's story with her children and Zuhul's story with her mother; the crying neighbor and Zuhul crying in the closet. This rhythm adds vitality to the film. The film's music accompanying this also effectively contributes to keeping the narrative alive. Another element that creates vitality is the presence of the cat's sound. The audience is left in doubt about the cat's sound. Because sometimes the sound is quite clear, sometimes it is indistinct. In

fact, the audience doubts whether they heard it, just like Zuhall does. In this sense, the issue of hearing the cat's sound has also added vitality to the tempo of the film. This vitality is also in harmony with the fragmented and fragmented nature of the stories with the active, fluid and fragmented nature of postmodern society.

Another thing that gives strength to the narrative is the symbolic elements. The cat's sound, which is identified with Zuhall's inner self; the closet associated with the patriarchal world; and the flower in the pot, which is an indicator of Zuhall's spiritual exhaustion. All these metaphors effectively reflect what it means to be a woman in a postmodern society where male dominance is still strongly felt. Being a successful female lawyer requires constant work, activity, objectivity and superficiality. Being forced to perform positively, the desire to multitask forces people to hyperactivity. This state keeps people in a constant reflex to stay alive and forces them into passivity. However, humans develop and become active through the negative. At the same time, people should be able to share their exhaustion and tiredness. The scene where Zuhall tries to put her children to sleep with Handan shows such sharing. What they experience is Han's "we-tiredness." However, the business world drags Zuhall into "I-tiredness." Zuhall's desire to stay with Meltem, who brings her home when she falls into the apartment void, is a sign of longing for "we-tiredness". As seen, tiredness society drives individuals to exhaustion, indifference and depression. The film asks us the question of whether it is possible to escape from this. The solution suggested

by the film is to approach one's inner voice with compassion. This is the call for the feminine side of our inner self.

In conclusion, Zuhall, who is a perfect example of Simmel's indifferent and weariness metropolitan individual, is free in liquid modernity, where everything is reduced to the individual. As Bauman articulates, this freedom offers her endless options. But in this world of endless options, Zuhall is too worn and weariness to focus on anything. She has lost touch with her inner voice, and just as Han expressed, she has become indifferent and apathetic towards both herself and her surroundings. Zuhall is not happy in her active life, which is constantly based on performance and oriented towards the positive. Added to this exhaustion and fatigue is the invisibility of being a woman in a patriarchal society. Thus, her unhappiness deepens and her fatigue increases. But besides all this, the cat's sound is the voice of hope inside Zuhall, her inner voice that does not give up. And the moment when Zuhall encounters the cat is a sign that hope may come true. Moreover, although the film takes place in Istanbul, Turkey, it is a universal women's story. The story, which can be experienced anywhere in the world, asks important questions about being an individual and a woman in today's cities. Thinking about the answers to these questions will bring us closer to hearing our inner voice.

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## ENDNOTES:

<sup>1</sup> [Editor's Note]: There has been recent studies on feminist Turkish cinema that take alternative perspectives along with the authors' analysis. See Uğur Tanrıöver (2016), Cemiloğlu (2021) and Fortini (2025).