



## Spatial Thresholds and Existential Dilemmas in New Turkish Cinema: A Reading of *Something Useful*

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### Abstract

Cinematic spaces are defined by their ability to create new spaces through reorganizing physical environments, a process facilitated by cinema. Directors use unique spaces in their films to convey specific themes and emotions. In Pelin Esmer's *İşe Yarar Bir Şey* (*Something Useful*, 2017), the train serves as the setting for the film's initial segment, offering views of external lives from within through the window. This prompts individuals to reflect, question their existence, and experience diverse emotional states. The objective of this study, which examines the 2017 film *Something Useful*, is to analyze the spaces utilized and the spatial experiences of the protagonists at the threshold by examining them through the lenses of Gaston Bachelard's (1994) concepts of home, Stavros Stavrides's (2010) notion of the threshold, and Michel Foucault's (2008) concept of heterotopia. The train, as an example of heterotopia, facilitates a transition to the protagonists' inner worlds while observing the external world. This space is characterized by a different experience of time, functioning as a transitional space that is both physical and metaphorical. It is marked by threshold elements, such as glass, which delineate and symbolize the space's function as a conduit between inner and outer realms. The house is an uncanny space for existential inquiries and suicide. It is a mix of cosmos and chaos.

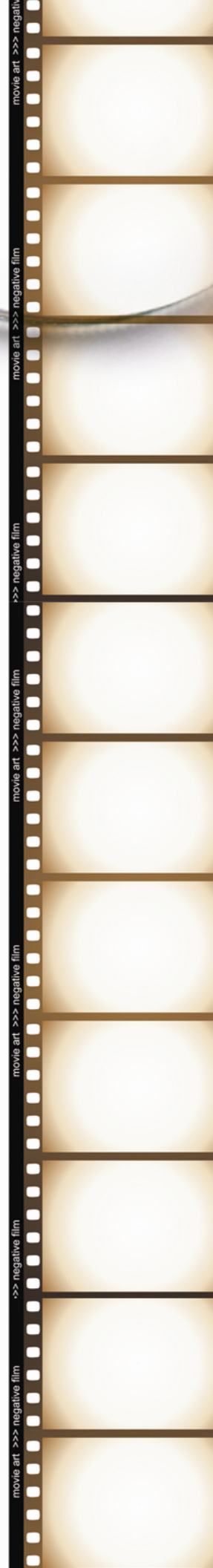
**Keywords:** Space; cinematic space; heterotopia; suicide; threshold; home; *Something Useful*



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# Spatial Thresholds and Existential Dilemmas in New Turkish Cinema: A Reading of *Something Useful*

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## Introduction

Space contains the fundamental elements of the lived world (Tuan, 2001). Stavrides (2010) asserts that individuals do not merely experience space in their daily lives, such as commuting to work, shopping, or socializing; they also conceptualize and dream through space. Consequently, space is not merely an understood and experienced form of the social world, but also a potential form of social worlds. The dialectical nature of space is evident in its role in conveying social relations, influencing the transformation of social interactions, and thereby enhancing or weakening these interactions (Öztürk, 2012). The production of social relations, as discussed by Süalp (2004), is in fact the creation of space. This process of space reproduction is intricately linked to the intricate web of human connections, daily life, and the perpetual cycle of transformation in which space undergoes changes over time, prompting people to adapt to these shifts. The concept of space is multifaceted, encompassing a broad spectrum of meanings. It encompasses the environment in which public relations are enacted, urban spaces, streets, and the setting for daily interactions. Architecture, in particular, plays a pivotal role in shaping

the very fabric of our social existence, interweaving it with the concepts of time and space. Consequently, social spaces function as platforms for individuals and groups to articulate their perspectives and experiences (Özçınar Eşli, 2012). Each space, therefore, serves as a unique medium for expression and potential transformation, impacting individuals' perceptions and behaviors (Cresswell, 2009).

In the domain of cinema, the portrayal of a location serves to determine the significance of an event, with each location contributing to the event's interpretation through its historical and symbolic connotations. Cinema exerts a profound influence on these physical spaces, manipulating time to accelerate, decelerate, or invert events, thereby reconfiguring the spatial dynamics. Each film utilizes space as an integral element, contributing to the narrative and thematic development. In this regard, cinematic events are intricately linked to the atmosphere, lighting, and spatial layout of a setting (Pallasma, 2012). Cinema, therefore, can be regarded as the art of creating filmic space and time, with its unique capacity to transform real space and time into cinematic dimensions forming the basis of cinematic creation (Onaran, 1986). According to Duman and Beşgen (2021), cinema creates different images by shaping the space in accordance with itself, and this universe of images gains meanings mentally. In this way, the messages of the movie are shown through space. As different levels of perception and

imagination, the stories of inside and outside spaces are doors to other worlds. Film locations, as unique spaces, facilitate the sharing of experiences and values, offering the audience a critical perspective (Aparicio, 2018). The spatial dimension, a fundamental component of cinematic narrative, occupies a central role in cinema. It provides crucial insights into the temporal context of the film's commencement, the director's personal experiences, the genre of the film, and the audience's anticipations (Özçınar Eşli, 2012). Benjamin's (1999) observations, individuals adopt the role of adventurers during the viewing experience. Cinema's capacity to transport viewers from one locale to another, as well as its manipulation of space and time, are significant factors in this transformation (Adiloğlu, 2005). For instance, Jameson, (1996) argues that films such as *North by Northwest* use rapid spatial transitions to articulate geopolitical movement. This offers a unique spatial experience for the viewer. Walter Benjamin (1999) also posits that watching a movie is akin to traversing buildings constructed in an environment. This notion is intricately tied to the concepts of attention, direction, symbols, and meaning, which are integral to the design and utilization of buildings (Bergfelder et al., 2007). Consequently, cinematic narratives can serve as effective conduits for presenting architectural structures to the audience. While spectators can enter the world of the film from alternative perspectives, this is not physically feasible. However, architecture offers a unique form of interaction that distinguishes it from other arts (Monaco, 2009). The insights of the renowned American filmmaker Alfred

Hitchcock further substantiate this assertion. As reflected in Gottlieb's (1995) compilation, Hitchcock emphasized that understanding the architectural construction of a scene is essential for appreciating the spatial dynamics of his films. He also highlighted that settings should reveal characteristics of the individuals who inhabit them. Cinematic spaces are produced through the reorganization and reinterpretation of physical environments by the art of cinema. Directors construct unique spatial configurations within their films, assigning each setting a narrative and symbolic function. In Pelin Esmer's *Something Useful* (2017), the train that dominates the first half of the film operates as a threshold space: a site from which external lives can be observed through the window, yet at the same time a confined interior that invites characters into introspection, existential questioning, and emotional negotiation.

The objective of this study is to analyze these cinematic spaces by examining the threshold experiences of the film's protagonists. The spatial journeys of the two main characters, Canan and Leyla, are explored with a focus on how they encounter and cross various thresholds throughout the narrative. The analysis is grounded in Gaston Bachelard's (1994) concept of the home, Stavros Stavrides's (2010) notion of the threshold, and Michel Foucault's (2008) theory of heterotopia. Before presenting the findings, the study also provides an overview of the use of space in Turkish cinema.

## Cinematic Spaces in Turkish Films

From the advent of cinematography in the Ottoman lands until the advent of Turkish film in 1914, foreigners pioneered film production and screening processes. Images recorded in the Ottoman lands were screened both inside and outside the country, and the war environment was documented with these recorded images. Muhsin Ertuğrul produced films as a single man during the period of theaters. Rather than viewing cinema as a standalone medium with the potential to generate revenue for theater, Muhsin Ertuğrul regarded it as a supplementary source of income. Consequently, the cinematic language during this period remained underdeveloped. The 1939-1950 era can be considered a transitional phase. While theater maintained its dominance, it did not cease to exist. The evolution of the cinematic language and mise-en-scène in film led to the emergence of a cinematic narrative, a shift that was particularly pronounced during this period (Kuyucak Esen, 2016). According to Nijat Özön (2013), Turkish cinema during the Theatricalists and Transition Period (1914-1950) lacked a distinct cinematic language, instead relying on a theatricalized cinematic language. However, following the 1950s, a shift occurred in which filmmakers began to conceptualize cinema in terms of cinematic language. In contrast, during the Yeşilçam period, films did not construct their narratives around space. While space was never an active participant in the narrative, it is

evident that film locations were integrated with the narrative, meticulously arranged to reflect the primary theme and reinforce the overarching character of the film (Altun, 2022). Kirel (2005) also posits that these sites that serve as the foundation for the narrative are predominantly pavilions and casinos. Within the context of Yeşilçam films, these entertainment establishments are depicted as locales where respectable women are employed and music is performed. In contrast to the Yeşilçam films, directors such as Metin Erksan, Lütü Ömer Akad and Yılmaz Güney, who were among the pioneering directors of Turkish cinema and who produced films about social issues, made an effort to create differences in the use of space. Metin Erksan's 1962 film *Yılanların Öcü*, for instance, addresses the property issue in a village setting (Kuyucak Esen, 2016). Similarly, Lütü Ömer Akad's 1968 film *Vesikalı Yarım*, while employing conventional locations such as the Bosphorus and the pavilion, demonstrates an interest in the creation of space, as evidenced by the portrayal of a stadium as a prison. Yılmaz Güney attributes evil to a place, to the environments in which people live, to nature. This perspective aligns with Foucault's broader account of modern power in *Discipline and Punish* (1995), where he argues that capitalist societies regulate individuals by organizing their surroundings and structuring institutions such as schools, prisons, cities, and asylums. By integrating a series of narratives into a cohesive montage, Güney's cinematic works illustrate that the prison and the outside world are essentially one and the same space, and that the pervasive and unbearable

confinement experienced by the protagonists serves as an expression of a universal political truth. *Yol* (1982), the most conscious of the protagonists is imprisoned to death by his enemies at the beginning of the film, while another protagonist must kill because of feudal honor and must cross a vast glacial desert (Baker, 2020). Thus, the filmic space becomes dangerous and difficult to navigate. According to Kuyucak Esen (2020), who examines Ömer Kavur's cinema through the lens of geography, Ömer Kavur, regarded as one of the auteur directors of Turkish cinema, utilizes the province as a setting in all his films. It is imperative to consider his films from the perspectives of both the province as a geographical entity and the province as a sociocultural space. A notable example of this approach can be seen in his 1987 film *Anayurt Oteli* (1987), where the location and the main character, Zebercet, are intricately intertwined. In this film and in post-1980 Turkish films, space emerges as a symbolic narrative tool, underscoring the themes of loneliness and social alienation (Tüzün, 2008).

As the 1980s drew to a close, Turkish films began to feature outdoor spaces, such as streets and avenues, in a manner that was previously uncommon. This shift was concomitant with the replacement of the traditional neighborhood concept with communities formed by slums (Sarı, 2010). Within these films, space assumes a dual role, functioning as both a frame reflecting the inner worlds of individuals and a symbol of social structures. These films offer a lens to illuminate the socioeconomic transformations experienced during this period (Tüzün,



2008).

In the 1990s, Turkish films began to utilize space as a structural element, accentuating class-related conflicts (Tüzün, 2008). The films of prominent directors like Zeki Demirkubuz, Semih Kaplanoğlu, Nuri Bilge Ceylan, Derviş Zaim, and Yeşim Ustaoglu often take place on the outskirts of cities or in rural settings, with a strong emphasis on interiors. Spaces such as hotel rooms, apartments, and slums dominate these narratives, with windows and door frames delineating the settings and creating spatial tension (Suner, 2006).

In Zeki Demirkubuz's works, rural and domestic spaces evoke confinement and claustrophobia. For instance, *Masumiyet* (1997) unfolds in an old rural hotel room, and Yusuf's sister's basement becomes a site of violence. Similarly, *Üçüncü Sayfa* (2000) takes place across various floors of an old apartment, while *Yazgı* (2001) centers its narrative on an apartment's ground floor (Suner, 2006).

Seçil Büker and Hasan Akbulut (2009) establish a correlation between the title of Semih Kaplanoğlu's film *Yumurta* (2007) and its setting, positing that the egg symbolizes the countryside, which serves as its natural environment. *Yumurta*, therefore, functions as a nurturing habitat for the chick. While it may not offer a sense of belonging for Yusuf, it serves as a metaphorical representation of his quest for a place to call home.

In Nuri Bilge Ceylan's films, spatial elements mirror the emotional states of his characters. In *Kasaba* (1997), Saffet's sense of entrapment within the town is vividly portrayed, while *Mayıs Sıkıntısı* (1999) uses the provincial landscape to craft an aesthetic narrative. *Uzak* (2002) masterfully employs Istanbul's snowbound settings to highlight themes of alienation and miscommunication (Diken Gilloch and Hammond, 2017). *İklimler* (2006) explores the dynamics of the female body within an agoraphobic environment, while *Kasaba* (2009) revisits Saffet's psychological struggle with confinement. Across these works, long, fixed shots depict characters as solitary figures in vast, beautiful yet disquieting spaces, reinforcing their inner turmoil (Pekerman, 2012).

In Derviş Zaim's films, space operates not only as a setting for events but also as a source of tension and meaning. By carefully selecting interior, exterior, and intermediate spaces, Zaim deepens the narrative's dramatic and thematic dimensions. Ambiguous intermediate spaces symbolize identity, belonging, and conflict, while the interaction between interior and exterior spaces shapes the narrative's structure. Beyond a backdrop for action, space becomes a narrative tool reflecting complex social and cultural contexts, reinforcing the story's thematic depth (Çam, 2018).

Tayfun Pirselimoglu's *Kerr* (2021) depicts a Kafkaesque town marked by cyclical

patterns, rabid dogs, and eccentric characters, blending reality with absurdity. Similarly, in *Yol Ayrımı* (2017), directed by Yavuz Turgul, real locations like houses and forests contribute to a surreal atmosphere with events such as the appearance of a mermaid and the waking dead. Both films highlight the use of space to reflect characters' entrapment and alienation.

In Emin Alper's *Kurak Günler* (2022), provincial spaces are transformed into an uncanny, criminal environment through a meticulous mise-en-scène. Wide exteriors and drone shots emphasize the vastness of the space, heightening a sense of foreboding. The malevolence of Şahin and Kemal is amplified by this ominous setting, which mirrors the town's intricate social dynamics and escalating tensions. The increasing peril faced by Emre and journalist Murat after the local elections underscores the town's sinister undertones, with the locations serving as metaphors for its underlying menace and amplifying the pervasive unease.

Özcan Alper's *Karanlık Gece* (2022) is set in an uncanny town. Violence is concentrated in wide open spaces and gloomy places. The protagonist is thrown into a sinkhole in the countryside and his friend descends into this dark place to retrieve his bones. In the film, murders in the countryside are not punished by the judiciary, and the space symbolizes injustice and remorse.

Tolga Karaçelik's *Sarmaşık* (2015) places space at the core of its narrative structure. As

Öztürk (2012) highlights, the freighter functions as a dialectical object symbolizing domination and hegemony. Its hierarchical structure and strict chain of command reflect the film's exploration of the "phases of power." Narrow corridors, ward-like cabins, and functional divisions render the ship a physical and metaphorical manifestation of control. Through Beybaba's authority, the ship becomes an instrument of power, turning *Sarmaşık* into a narrative that examines spatial and authority dynamics.

### Reflection of Pelin Esmer's Poetic Cinema Language on Spaces

Poetic bindings elicit an emotional response in the viewer, thereby engendering a state of receptivity to the cinematic experience. This receptivity fosters an engagement with the act of interpreting life's meaning. The poetic worldview, as articulated by Tarkovsky (1989), should not be constrained by overly simplistic or readily discernible facts. In the context of the film, Leyla's journey to dinner with her friends serves as a metaphorical conduit, as she approaches Yavuz's house on a ferry illuminated by the glow of the night. Her purpose, which is to write poetry, serves as the underlying motivation behind her request to Yavuz, which is to postpone his death wish for a day. This request allows her to observe Yavuz from a distance, engaging in fantasies about his life. As the illuminated ferry approaches the shore, Leyla's poem is heard with her inner speech: "She watches the illuminated ferry slowly approaching the shore from where she is lying, the cello teacher upstairs is finally alone, playing Yavuz his favorite piece.

The nanny will come in now and bring him his dinner. She'll tell him what she's been doing out today, he'll listen to her and watch people having a night out. This interaction serves as a catalyst for his recognition of her presence, prompting him to suggest that she "dress up" and accompany him to the graduation dinner. Following his shave, the woman applies lotion to his skin, infusing the atmosphere with the fragrance of lavender. He requests the mirror, and upon receiving it, she expresses surprise. She fixes her gaze on his countenance, contemplating his appearance, and poses the question, "Will they come tomorrow?" The language of poetic cinema is evident in the illuminated ferry, a heterotopia, and subsequently in the bustling street, an urban heterotopia. That is to say, the environment exerts an influence on the emotional states of the individual (see Figure 1).



*Figure 1: Leyla observing Yavuz.*

In the scene of Leyla's dinner with her friends, her friend remarks that she derives the meaning of life from her poetry, after which Leyla departs the dinner as poetry flows from her mouth. On the street, she gazes at the mirror on the wall, where an image resembling a crow's nose is visible. At this point, Leyla has transitioned to the role of the narrator. Concurrently, the poem conveys the sentiment, "We are looking for a reason to resent everyone," which evokes Schopenhauer's concept of the "hedgehog dilemma" (Schopenhauer, 2021). This notion posits that individuals are inherently averse to physical contact, as hedgehogs are known to experience discomfort from their thorns whenever they come into proximity during winter. This concept is analogous to the human condition, where individuals often find it challenging to approach and engage with others, leading to feelings of discomfort and resentment. (see Figure 2)



Figure 2: Leyla's friends at dinner and the mirror image.

“I see you're the wind.  
I see you're straining at the clothesline.  
We all want to age well, darling  
I see you're turning the pages of a book.  
Put slippers on your feet, in the stone of things we know,  
You're barefoot.  
We're chess players, darling,  
A black stain on us  
We are chess players”.  
(Bir Kitabın Sayfaları, Barış Bıçakçı)

The poem that was initiated during dinner continues to unfold. Leyla departs from the dinner gathering and proceeds to the hotel. The following morning, she arrives at Yavuz's residence accompanied by Canan. Leyla and Canan are seated in front of an open window, observing as the curtains are carried by the wind. The dynamic interplay of life transpires beyond the window. The film is characterized by the prevalence of poetic language, with the wind serving as a conduit to the divine. The window symbolizes the gateway between the interior and the exterior world. This scene is a prime example of Pelin Esmer's poetic cinematic style, which is most evident in this segment. (see Figure 3)



Figure 3: Curtains blowing in the wind.

### The Relationship of Characters with Space in *Something Useful*

According to Lefebvre (1991), as the analysis and evaluation of spatial elements are conducted in relation to the integral structures of the body, the more effective the comprehension of the conflicts that operate within space becomes. These conflicts are oriented towards the fragmentation of space and the generation of alternate spatial dimensions. By invading space, the body imbues it with symbols, thereby indicating the direction and rotation of a movement that imbues it with direction. These symbols and images are critical in establishing the characters' relationship with space in the films.

The manner in which individuals establish relationships with physical spaces can profoundly alter the perception of these environments, thereby conferring upon them a distinct identity. Within the context of cinema, the concept of "identifying with the character" not only signifies an emotional connection with the narrative but also underscores the transformation of



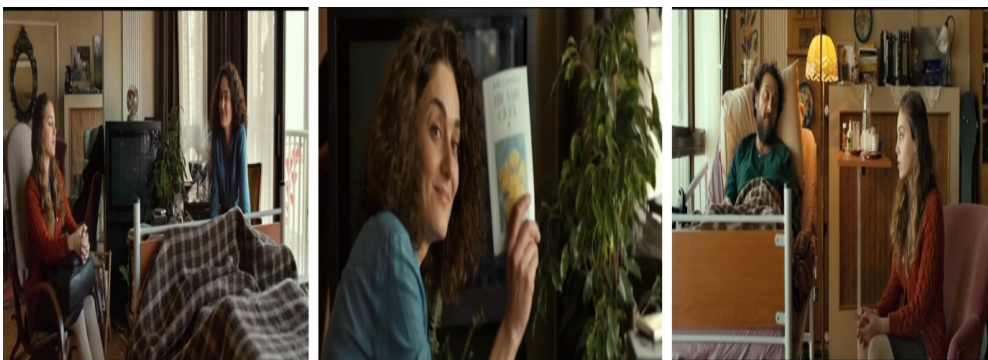
the cinematic space into a symbolic realm (Duman and Beşgen, 2021). This dynamic relationship between humans and their surroundings is characterized by a reciprocal interaction, wherein the interaction between individuals and the physical environment shapes the experience and identity of both. While the ruling class exerts its influence in shaping urban environments, the organization of domestic spaces enables individuals to exercise agency in designing their living spaces according to their preferences (İlkdoğan, 2020).

In this setting, all corners represent spaces where individuals opt to withdraw into their own solitude, thereby challenging the conventional notions of social interaction and engagement. These corners can be interpreted as a form of rebellion against the prevailing societal norms, as they impose restrictions on personal freedom and mobility. Consequently, the corner can be regarded as a manifestation of negation, representing an alternative to the conventional worldview. When one recollects the experience of spending time in these isolated spaces, the prevailing memory is that of silence, symbolizing introspection and contemplation. The individual who withdraws to the corner is divested of all external values, experiencing a sense of concealment. Consequently, the corner becomes a site of immobility (Bachelard, 1994). As illustrated in Figure 4, the character of Leyla is consistently depicted as a figure in the corner.



*Figure 4: Leyla in a Corner on a Train.*

A room in an apartment, a street corner, or a public place correspond to a space, and collectively, these spaces form a space code. These images facilitate the reading of space, and these special codes are established for spaces to facilitate the reading of space (Lefebvre, 1991). Yavuz's house has a modern appearance overlooking the crowded street, the blue sea, and the peaceful beach. The auditory experience is further enriched by the sound of a cello, emanating from the upper floor, and the visual reflection of the instrument's resonance on the ceiling. This auditory and visual symphony, depicted in Figures 5, serves as a testament to the interconnectedness of space and sound in shaping the environment.



*Figure 5: Yavuz's House Interior Design and Objects.*

## Heroes Walking the Thresholds

The street constitutes more than a mere space of movement and circulation; it is a site that facilitates social interaction, allowing individuals to convene and engage in social exchange without the constraints of formal contracts. These urban venues, such as streets, theaters, and cafés, contribute to the vibrancy and dynamism of the city. Streets, as places of learning and recreation, are a fundamental component of urban life (Lefebvre, 2003). As Lefebvre points out, streets represent a space for encountering the Other, for experiencing a sense of alienation from the familiar. Every act of walking in the city is an act of movement towards otherness, of stepping out of one's immediate environment and into the unknown. The act of walking in a modern city is characterized by this ambiguity, which connects different spaces and forms a physical basis for relating to otherness (Stavrides, 2010). In this instance, Leyla, en route to a social engagement with her acquaintances after a span of 25 years, finds herself arriving at Yavuz's residence via a light ferry. It is at this moment that she begins to compose a poem within her mind, a process that is initiated by the sight of the ferry and the residence. Following her disembarkation from the ferry, she navigates through a bustling city, making her way towards Yavuz's abode. Here, she pauses to cast a final glance at his life, meticulously analyzes and ponders the poem she is to compose. Concurrently, the boulevard traversed by Leyla functions as a nexus where individuals embark on disparate journeys to nocturnal destinations.

This perambulation not only occurs in a single locale but also facilitates introspective crossings, allowing Leyla to intersect with various aspects of her inner self. In the context of contemporary urban studies, the flâneur has been a recurring subject in the social and literary analyses of 19th-century Paris, particularly as articulated by figures such as Baudelaire and Walter Benjamin. This figure has been employed to represent modernity and contemporary urbanity. The Flâneur has been utilized as a critical theoretical framework, focusing on various relationships within the urban environment and contemporary communities (Ferguson, 2015). The flâneur is a specific type of Parisian figure with a deep connection to the city. As Conlin (2014) notes, drawing on Benjamin's work, the flâneur can be understood as fundamentally shaped by the urban experience of Paris. When the characters Leyla and Canan arrive in Izmir, they are depicted as wandering its crowded streets like flâneurs. When the characters Leyla and Canan arrive in Izmir, they are depicted as wandering its crowded streets like flâneurs (see Figure 6).



*Figure 6:* Leyla and Canan in the metropolitan city of Izmir.

## Journey of the Hero on the Threshold

The character's travels are often driven by curiosity rather than a specific goal (Kovács, 2007). Historically, urban centers were the main places where people met each other, but now, encounters with others are a key part of daily life (Gehl, 2007). For Leyla and Canan, their first encounter starts a chain of events that leads to their adventures, but the reasons for these journeys are different (see Figure 7).



*Figure 7: Leyla and Canan's first encounter.*

In the first journey of the protagonist, which is set as a call to adventure, an unknown region can be shown in various ways: A distant land, a forest, a kingdom, a foggy mountain peak, these are all places of beings in different forms, of things that are impossible. If the hero refuses this call, he loses his power of action and his life becomes meaningless. For the hero who does not reject the call, the first conflict is overcome with someone who will help him against a being stronger than himself (Campbell, 2003). In the movie, when Canan receives an

offer from Hüseyin to help in Yavuz's death in exchange for money, it is a call to adventure for her. What calls Leyla to adventure is the friends' dinner organized after 25 years.

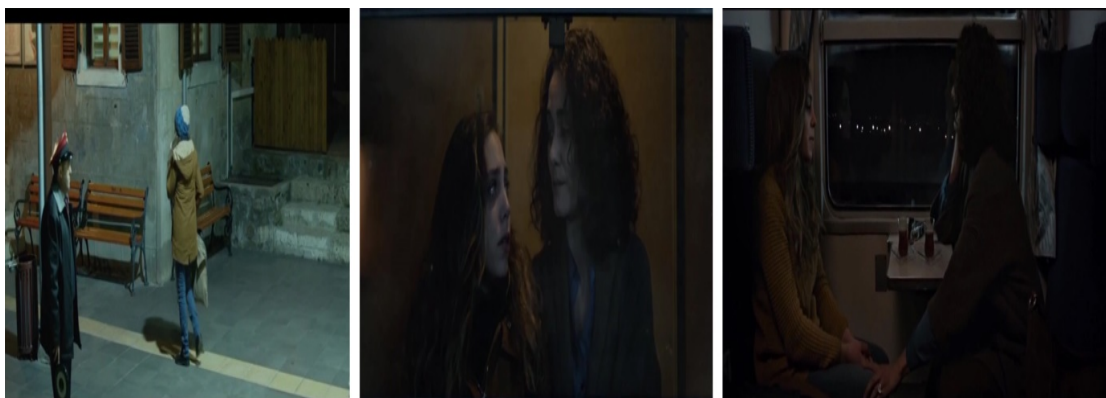


Figure 8: Canan tells Leyla everything on the train.

In certain instances, the protagonist may elect to decline the summons, a decision that can lead to a negative outcome in the narrative. According to Campbell (2003), the refusal in myths and fairy tales can be interpreted as a refusal to relinquish what is in one's own best interest. During the train journey, Canan repeatedly engages in telephone conversations with Hüseyin, the messenger, attempting to relinquish her involvement in the adventure. She disembarks at a station, endeavors to depart, yet ultimately returns (see Figure 8).

Subsequently, while engaged in her professional duties at the hospital, she discloses that Hüseyin approached her, apprising her of Yavuz's circumstances and soliciting her assistance (see Figure 12 and Figure 13). The concept of being on the threshold carries the hope of entering, and the thoughts that bring a person to the threshold, some expectations about what



lies beyond the threshold, and the thought of regret that will arise if they do not cross the threshold can encourage the person to cross the threshold. In this sense, the threshold is one of the important spaces of daily life (Gökçen, 2019). These threshold areas serve not only a physical function but also a social function, thereby functioning as a medium for social interaction. They ensure that the act of entering or leaving a space carries a social meaning, and entering a space also affects the social structure of that space because entry signifies the cultural and social meaning of that space. Therefore, threshold spaces not only provide passage but also shape the social meaning of a space (Boettger, 2014). For those who do not reject adventure but accept it, the first encounter on the hero's journey is the protector who will provide the hero with the support he needs to cross the threshold. Although the adventurer experiences difficulties in crossing the threshold, he is under the assurance of the protective power (Campbell, 2003). Leyla is the supernatural helper of Canan, who does not know what she will encounter at the end of the road and sets off. Leyla helps Canan along the way.



*Figure 9: Canan and Leyla at the final threshold.*

The act of crossing the threshold signifies a transition towards otherness, which is conceptualized as both spatial and temporal otherness. Spatial otherness is defined as the departure from a place and entry into the external environment, while temporal otherness is characterized as the deviation from the present in pursuit of an uncertain future (Stavrides, 2010). The protagonist is accompanied by a guide until he arrives at the threshold, where he is met by a guard. The unknown dangers that lurk behind them are a cause for concern. There are specific reasons for her to fear the previously undiscovered (Campbell, 2003). Canan arrives at Yavuz's house, the final threshold for her, with Leyla's support, by navigating certain dangers (the information she shares with the two women who approach them on the train, these women may become suspicious and alert the authorities, Hüseyin may confess everything). The caretaker of the house, a potential threat, is a case in point, as her unanticipated return could pose a threat to Canan and Leyla (see Figure 9).

### Elements Opening to Thresholds: Door, Window, Glass

The interaction of individuals with threshold spaces is not solely associated with thresholds; it is also related to the locations at the threshold of a space, including doors, door curtains, curtains, glass, and windows (Boettger, 2014). These threshold spaces, along with their peripheries, serve as pivotal architectural components within a given space, thereby offering creative possibilities for film directors to devise diverse frames, compositions, and reflections



(Stavrides, 2010). Glass, in particular, plays a crucial role in establishing a virtual threshold between the interior and exterior realms, thereby separating and uniting the public and private spheres, as well as the inside and outside. The presence of glass in train carriages serves to delineate the distinction between the interior and exterior of the train, thus underscoring the concept of threshold spaces. The glass serves as a metaphorical boundary between the exterior environment and the dynamic flux within the train (Öztürk, 2018).

The door, as a metaphorical entity, represents a threshold between two states or dimensions, often characterized as ajar, a term denoting a state of partial openness or closure. This door functions as a portal, a passageway between the known and the unknown, the familiar and the unfamiliar. The door serves as the origin of a reverie, a phenomenon that gathers the desire for that which is forbidden, the tendency to explore that which exists by going deepest, and the desire to discover beings whose voices are not heard (Bachelard, 1994). The doors that open sometimes describe hidden situations and sometimes show dramatic events. The door, situated at the threshold of various spaces, contributes to the film's mobility (Adiloğlu, 2005).

### *Heterotopias and Heterochrony in *Something Useful**

In his discourse on heterotopias, Foucault (2008) describes these spaces as real sites that juxtapose several incompatible spaces and functions within a single location. He distinguishes between heterotopias of crisis and heterotopias of deviation, exemplified by institutions such as

hospitals or sacred, prohibited places. Rather than following a linear order, heterotopias operate according to their own specific logics of time and space, often creating discontinuities within the social fabric. Expanding this perspective, Stavrides (2010) conceptualizes heterotopic and threshold spaces as zones of transition and encounter—gateways to otherness in which movement, passage, and spatial crossings become possible. These spaces, characterized by ambiguity and flux, gather fragments of time and space that produce new modes of social relationality. Öztürk (2012) further notes that heterotopias amalgamate multiple spatial dimensions within a single, tangible location, exhibiting temporal features such as accumulation and fragmentation.

In the 2017 film *Something Useful*, the train functions as a heterotopic space. The character Canan experiences a moment of catharsis when she reveals her motivations for traveling to İzmir to Leyla, a revelation underscored by Pelin Esmer's use of close-up shots. According to Deleuze (2013), the face itself is a close-up—an affect-image capable of conveying emotional intensities. Throughout her filmography, Pelin Esmer employs close-up shots to accentuate the emotional and psychological interplay between Leyla and Canan. The film's narrative is intricately woven with close-up sequences of Leyla's face, often juxtaposed against reflections in various surfaces, such as train windows, which underscore the emotional depth and subtle complexities of the characters' relationship.

## Train as a Heterotopia

In approximately 1895, the advent of cinema coincided with the emergence of two distinct cinematic approaches, as articulated by the Lumière brothers and Georges Méliès, respectively. The former regarded cinema as a reflection of reality, while the latter conceptualized it as a medium for illusion and fantasy. Nonetheless, this dichotomy fails to encapsulate the true essence of cinema, which emerged as a form of curiosity and excitement. The arrival of the train in *The Arrival of a Train at La Ciotat Station* (*l'arrivée d'un train à la ciotat*, Louis Lumière, Auguste Lumière, 1896), for instance, prompted the crowd to perceive the train as an imminent threat, leading to a collective outcry. This event, as Sontag (1996) has noted, marked the genesis of cinema. The train, therefore, occupies a pivotal role in the evolution of cinema. A notable example is the film *Something Useful* (2017), which commences at the train station and continues within the train itself. This train, functioning as a transitional and intermediate space, serves as a vantage point from which to observe the outside world, with the presence of side characters contributing to the creation of a distinct environment. The interior of the train offers a view of diverse spaces and lives from a distance, observed through the window. As the narrative reaches its conclusion in an apartment, the viewer is presented with a view of bustling streets in Izmir. The film's depiction of the train as a transformative space, albeit one that

observes rather than actively contributes to the creative process, can be interpreted—drawing on Bachelard's (1994) reflections on reverie and dwelling—as resonating with the idea of the train journey as a metaphor for inhabiting a dream house. In this context, the imagined houses metamorphose into a cinematic strip, underscoring the transformative nature of the journey. The unique experience of standing in front of a house while traveling by automobile contrasts with the limitations of doing so on a train, highlighting the difference between the passive observation of a train journey and the active engagement afforded by automobile travel. However, the imagination can bridge this gap, allowing for a more intimate encounter with these architectural representations. Intermediate spaces, as defined by Stavrides (2016), are those that are "to be overcome," implying a journey through these spaces that is both physical and metaphorical. The existence of intermediate spaces is contingent upon their actual or perceived travel, underscoring the dynamic and multifaceted nature of spatial experience. The train serves as a pivotal location for Leyla and Canan to convene, given the limited number of public spaces conducive to such interactions. Consequently, their encounters on the train are more probable. The train can be conceptualized as a transient and nomadic space, traversing various routes on steel wheels (Öztürk, 2018).



*Figure 10: Canan and Leyla in the Train's Dining Car.*

In the interview conducted by Özsoy and Öztürk (2017), Pelin Esmer the director of the film, described the train not only as a means of transportation but also as a storytelling space. Esmer asserts that the train distinguishes itself as a creative space, primarily due to the presence of various spatial configurations that facilitate the development of the characters' narratives. Additionally, she notes that the train offers a unique vantage point, enabling the observation of both the interior and exterior worlds simultaneously through its expansive windows (see Figure 10 and Figure 11).



*Figure 11: Leyla at the Threshold of a Train.*

## The Home as a Representation of Different Spaces: Safe, Uncanny, or Cosmos?

Asuman Suner's (2006) discussion of the concept of "ghost house" in Turkish cinema, encompassing both popular and art cinema, elucidates the multifaceted meanings of this concept. She expounds on the eerie narratives prevalent in "haunted houses," where the horror lurks beneath the facade of normalcy. Conversely, the "dream-home" is a house that is dreamed of, imbued with nostalgia, and transforms into an emotional image. Bachelard's (1994) conception of the home as the universe signifies its paramount significance in human existence. The initial universe for human beings is the cosmos, which fosters dreaming and safeguards the dreamer from natural disasters and life's vicissitudes. The inaugural universe of human existence is the inaugural home of the individual who is born into the world. The house confers value on memories. The specific spatial dimensions of the house, including corners, corridors, and attics, contribute to the formation of memories, which acquire distinct qualities.

According to Bachelard (1994), the dialectic of parts encompasses the concepts of inside and outside. This notion is further elaborated through the examination of a line from the French poet Henri Michaux: "Space, but you cannot even conceive the horrible inside-outside that real space..." Michaux's assertion here suggests that space is challenging to comprehend, thereby instilling a sense of fear. This fear, according to Michaux, does not stem from external sources

or recollections. Rather, it is an inherent aspect of the space itself. Consequently, Michaux poses the question, "Where can one find shelter in this space?" and concludes that space is, in essence, "nothing but a horrible outside-inside". Within the framework of Bachelard's (1994) conception of exteriority and interiority, Leyla engages in fantasies about Yavuz's activities at home while she is aboard a ferry en route to a social gathering with her acquaintances. Upon her approach to the residence, she imagines the caretaker informing her that the woman is departing to engage in leisure activities with her companions and will apprise Yavuz of her activities outside. This scenario represents an intriguing dynamic where Leyla, from her external vantage point, forms hypotheses about the domestic activities of Yavuz, despite the absence of direct observation. In contrast, Yavuz experiences a profound sense of disconnection between his internal and external realms. His inability to venture outside, a situation he finds intolerable, engenders a desire for self-destruction, further exacerbating his sense of alienation.

The exterior of Yavuz's house evokes the aesthetic of a landscape painting, with elements such as passing ships, the sea, and the sun contributing to an external environment reminiscent of a landscape. The interior of the house, from the perspective of an external observer, appears to be a manifestation of imagination. The images within the room, the tulle curtain that billows in the wind and opens to the exterior, and the shadow of the cello reflected on the ceiling and

its accompanying sound all serve to reinforce the sense of interiority. However, Yavuz's position within this environment evokes a desire to vanish into his own being.



*Figure 12: Yavuz's house.*

Yavuz's house can be regarded as an illustration of a heterochrony, a concept often associated with the concept of slicing time. According to Foucault (2008), heterotopias frequently emerge as a consequence of this slicing of time, thereby facilitating the emergence of heterochronies characterized by a certain harmony. The phenomenon of heterotopias, as observed by Foucault (2008), commences when an individual relinquishes their conventional sense of time. Foucault offers the cemetery as an example of such a heterochrony, arguing that it marks the transition from life to death. In this context, Yavuz's house functions as a heterochrony, representing a departure from the real time dimension. The act of contemplating suicide, as experienced by Yavuz, leads to a gradual dissolution of his identity. The concept of home, within this framework, signifies an absolute disengagement from the world (see Figure 12).



## A Spatial Deadlock: The Home as an Actional Space of Conscience and Suicide

Suicide is a phenomenon that is often contemplated in moments of profound existential crisis, particularly when individuals find themselves at odds with the meaning of life. Certain environments have been shown to be particularly conducive to suicidal ideation, particularly in individuals grappling with feelings of despair. In the philosophy of Camus (2013), a renowned proponent of the concept of suicide, the fundamental philosophical question that matters is the question of whether life is worth living. Addressing this question, according to Cioran (1992), is pivotal to comprehending the fundamental quandary of philosophy. Cioran posits that disappointment, stemming from the dissonance between one's desired life and the actuality of life, serves as a catalyst for suicide. In the film, the character Yavuz, paralyzed, is confined to his bed, observing life from a distance through the window of his house overlooking the sea. This situation engenders resentment, leading him to voluntarily end his own life. According to Schopenhauer, Yavuz's renunciation of life is regarded as a desire for life. According to Schopenhauer (2020), the act of eliminating the singular effect of wanting is distinct from the act of not accepting the will to live. An individual who commits suicide desires life and is discontent with the conditions it offers. However, the complexity of circumstances hinders this

desire. According to Schopenhauer's (2020) perspective, the essence of human existence lies in the endeavor to endure within a challenging and repetitive existence. Yavuz, whose physical limitations were imposed by an accident, did not acquiesce to Schopenhauer's concept of the will to live.



*Figure 13: End of adventure.*

In the film, the line "Can we come back tomorrow?" uttered by Leyla to Yavuz engenders a state of ambiguity. This scenario, wherein time is bought, bears resemblance to the arduous journey of the prophet Abraham to Mount Moriah, where he refrained from sacrificing Isaac and instead procured time. Kierkegaard (2024) conceptualizes this phenomenon in four distinct ways. Abraham prepares his horse in the early morning hours, accompanied by Isaac, and reaches Mount Moriah on the fourth day. He takes Isaac by the hand and ascends the mountain, believing that God will not take Isaac from him. In the days that followed, Abraham traveled to Mount Moriah, and upon returning home each time, he fell to the ground, exhausted. Abraham's

actions are indicative of a waiting period, anticipating a new command from God that would affirm the absence of the need to sacrifice Isaac. Leyla, following Ibrahim's example, attempts to delay the inevitable by posing a question to Yavuz, "Shall we return tomorrow?" She awaits a new directive from Yavuz, though the true nature of her intentions remains ambiguous. It is unclear whether she is using this delay to compose poetry or whether she genuinely hopes that Yavuz will abandon his suicidal intent, thereby creating a paradox.

Although Leyla and Canan are not as tragically destined as Prophet Ibrahim, they too have faced a tragic event. Just as Abraham's tragedy lies in his transformation into a murderer when his faith is removed, Yavuz faces a similar transformation if he surrenders at the final moment when his heart is about to cease, and Canan is culpable for manipulating the realities in her mind and rationalizing the discourse of "I am doing Yavuz a favor" for her own benefit. From a Hegelian perspective, Canan's intention is irrelevant to Yavuz's death. Her actions are considered criminal.

According to Kierkegaard (1989), the desire to witness the story of the Prophet Abraham and Isaac, a tale he heard during his childhood, overwhelms him. The source of his disquiet is not imagination, but the chilling sensation of climbing Mount Moriah with Abraham and Isaac. In the film, when Leyla learns why Canan went to Izmir, her desire to witness this event may

stem not only from a sense of curiosity but also from the eerie resonance such a story might awaken in her.

Another issue at the heart of Yavuz's death is the problem of conscience. Dostoyevsky's novels are unified by a persistent preoccupation with the problem of conscience, which he approaches through different characters and narrative structures. In *The Idiot* (2001), Lebedeff's comments about his nephew Burdovsky reveal how easily moral judgment can be distorted by social and economic pressures, illustrating Dostoyevsky's view of conscience as a fragile and situational phenomenon rather than a stable moral guide. A similar crisis of conscience is explored with even greater philosophical depth in *The Brothers Karamazov*. Ivan Karamazov's reflections on human cruelty and the moral paradoxes of suffering foreground the idea that even the most heinous acts may be rationalized within a twisted moral framework (Dostoyevsky, 2009). Likewise, Mitya Karamazov's oscillation between guilt, desire, and responsibility demonstrates how conscience can become a source of both torment and moral awakening. Taken together, these works show how Dostoyevsky depicts conscience not as a singular ethical compass but as a conflicted terrain shaped by desperation, social deprivation, and existential struggle. Viewed in this light, Yavuz's crisis of conscience resonates strongly with the ethical dilemmas articulated across Dostoyevsky's literary universe. The character Canan assists Yavuz in ending his life for monetary gain, claiming a need for the funds. By doing so, she

effectively bypasses any ethical considerations, even suggesting that her actions are in Yavuz's best interest. In contrast, Leyla's actions and motivations are driven by self-interest, as evidenced by her question to Yavuz, "Shall we come back tomorrow?" This suggests that for Leyla, the opportunity to engage in poetic composition, derived from the events in question, holds greater significance than the mere extension of Yavuz's life by a day.

This contrast further illustrates how the film's ethical tensions parallel the conflicted moral landscapes found in Dostoyevsky's works. In this context, Yavuz's response to Leyla's suggestion of returning the following day "Today wasn't enough; you want to do Something Useful again tomorrow, is that it?" reveals his awareness of Leyla's genuine desire to transform



*Figure 14: Yavuz Looks at His Own Face for the Last Time.*

the experience into poetic creation. After this, Yavuz gazes at his reflection in the mirror for the final time, confronting his imminent demise and expressing a desire to depart before being caught in the rain. This interaction marks a transformation in the perceived space, which transcends the notion of pure geometric space and assumes a meaningful dimension as it

interacts with Yavuz's internal processes. While the confining elements of the space are depicted on a geometric plane, they ultimately metamorphose into a structure that reflects individual existential experiences (Boettger, 2014). Yavuz's self-observation in the mirror serves as a form of confrontation with death, thereby linking the space to time and meaning. The house transcends its physical location and becomes a space for Yavuz's preparation for death and his internal reckonings. Consequently, Yavuz's process of confronting death serves to demonstrate that space functions as a plane where individual existence takes shape.

### Conclusion and Recommendations

Pelin Esmer's *Something Useful* (2017) is a cinematic work that stands out for its exploration of the characters' internal journeys and existential inquiries. The film employs space as a cinematic tool to deepen these themes. Spaces such as the train and the house function not merely as physical locations but as metaphorical structures that facilitate the characters' psychological transformations and philosophical explorations.

The train, when examined through the lens of Michel Foucault's (2008) concept of "heterotopia," functions as a threshold space between the external world and the individual's inner self. In this context, Leyla's reflections during her journey, as she observes the lives unfolding outside the window while engaging in internal dialogues, illustrate how space acts as a catalyst for personal thought and sensation. The train's function as such a catalyst is further

emphasized by its role as a nexus where time and space intertwine, facilitating a reevaluation of the characters' relationships with the past, present, and future within the framework of "heterochrony."

In contrast, the house finds resonance with Gaston Bachelard's (1994) concept of the "home" and Stavros Stavrides's (2010) notion of the "threshold," metamorphosing from a safe haven into an uncanny space where moral reckonings and existential conflicts unfold. Yavuz's scenes in the house, as he confronts his own resignation toward life, reveal the multilayered nature of this space, which serves as a site for the characters' existential transformations. Furthermore, the house becomes a representation of both cosmos and chaos, embodying the internal struggles of individuals.

This analysis demonstrates how Pelin Esmer constructs a dialectical relationship between the characters' emotional and intellectual journeys and the multilayered spaces in the film. The interactions of Leyla, Canan, and Yavuz with these spaces not only depict individual transformations but also provoke a broader societal inquiry into themes of life, death, and conscience. In conclusion, *Something Useful* can be regarded as a compelling cinematic exemplar in which spatial elements transcend their physical form, delving into the limits of

individual existence and profoundly engaging the audience on both emotional and intellectual levels.

This study explores how space in *Something Useful* is intertwined with threshold experiences, heterotopia, and existential inquiry within the context of New Turkish Art Cinema. While popular cinema often approaches these themes superficially, art cinema achieves greater depth by intertwining internal and external journeys. By highlighting space as a poetic and intellectual carrier of meaning, this original analysis contributes to contemporary discourse on cinema and spatiality. Future research examining similar themes through comparative analyses of different films could further enrich the framework presented in this study.

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