



## Revisiting History in Yeşilçam Cinema: An Analysis on Yeşilçam Heroes; Karaoğlan, Malkoçoğlu, Kara Murat and Battal Gazi

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### Abstract

History presented in films has always been problematic. This debate is generally categorized into two categories, if the historical movies are loyal to the historical fact or if they should be aesthetically considered an art form. Costume adventure films in Turkish Cinema, present mythological characters with fantasy elements raising nationalist sentiments. This authentic genre in Turkish Cinema takes history as a background motif presenting Karaoğlan, Malkoçoğlu, Kara Murat and Battal Gazi, yet combines real facts and people in history with fantasy world heroes and incidents. Hence, these films raise a query regarding the accuracy of their portrayal in relation to historical fact. This paper aims to uncover the fact beyond the fantasy, the conflict between the real people and their representations in the movies in a different perspective.

**Keywords:** Historical Film; Historical Representation; Turkish Cinema; Karaoğlan; Malkoçoğlu; Kara Murat; Battal Gazi



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# Revisiting History in Yeşilçam Cinema: An Analysis on Yeşilçam Heroes; Karaoğlan, Malkoçoğlu, Kara Murat and Battal Gazi

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### Introduction

Representing history in films is controversial throughout the film history since the first examples. As a visual-audial tool, movies are seen as a powerful device evoking excitement, arousing sentiments and paving the way to extreme narratives such as propaganda. Historical narratives are one of the oldest forms in Turkish Cinema like those in the international film history. Films, narrating historical content, fictional or realistic, are seen as an opportunity to appeal to national sentiment. Such debates on cinema, historiography and historical representations, the potential of films to evoke national sentiment or the idea that films present false representations, are reflected in the discussions on the first fictional films that history was represented (Paça Cengiz, 2009, p. 87).

Representation of history changes according to the political climate of the time, yet the accuracy of representation is still problematic. The authenticity of historical events and their representation leads us to think about affiliation between cinema and history.

Historians have traditionally been content to deal with printed sources and tend to work with sources that are usually found in archives. While most historians recognize the value of

the still and moving image, they still prefer to work with written historical documents because they convey their own historical interpretations. In his book *From Caligari to Hitler*, German film theorist Kracauer argued that popular or commercial films reflect the historical periods more accurately compared to art films (Pereboom, 2010, p.7).

Some information about the past is provided only by visual evidence (images). This visual evidence (especially photographic and cinematic) provides a more accurate basis of the reproduction of the scenes and atmosphere of past events than oral testimony alone. On the other hand, history (visual or oral) cannot “reflect” the entire series of events or majority of those events it narrates. Every written history is the product of processes of condensation, displacement, symbolization, and qualification, just like those used in the production of a filmed representation (White, 1988, p. 1194).

In this context, the claim that historical films are not accurate as historical novel is false. Filming of a historical event can be as analytical and realistic as a written account. Meanwhile, cinema has a special way of narration that no other art form possesses: the film style. According to Robert Rosenstone, narration that historical film conveys facts or arguments besides written history is not an accurate question. Questions should be like: What kind of historical worlds do films construct and how they do it? What type of relationship does the historical world on the silver screen establish with written history? (1995).

It should be emphasized that the relationship between history and its cinematic representation in Turkish cinema is very important to be researched in depth. As Hayden White emphasizes, cinema is more suitable compared to written history presenting real representations of historical phenomena of a particular kind (landscapes, views, atmospheres, and mixed events such as wars, battles, crowds, and emotions). Because the historical evidence produced today is often as much visual as verbal and written evidence in nature and historians often tend to view photographic and cinematic data in the same way they read written documents (1988, p. 1193).

The debate between cinema and reality is the problem of accuracy to facts and incidents. History is a very rich and inspiring resource for storytelling in various media. Presentation of reality in historical movies being controversial, this study aims to approach to this question from a different perspective within the framework of the relationship between cinema and reality.

In scope of the study, the representations of four real-world characters (Karaoğlu, Malkoçoğlu, Kara Murat\* and Battal Gazi) that taken place in Turkish Cinema and their actual lives will be compared and analyzed. Thus, through differences/similarities, the

relationship between the historical world on the silver screen and written history will be analyzed with the method of historical criticism.

## **Historical Narratives**

History itself is a different entity than the past. Historical research is based on archives and documents, yet the past is gone and cannot be held. This controversy brings forth a matter of reliability on historical research, which makes it an interpretation of the evidence extracted from the true past. Historical world, being interpreted, is nothing but a possible world. Same applies for the people. The area of fiction is even more flexible. Fiction knows no boundaries. Things that are real may coexist with those are not.

Incidents or figures of history are initially lifeless until an interpretation reanimates them, giving life to documents a perspective of the interpreter, making it a story based on evidence. According to Walsh, historians are interested in summarizing historical events as well as presenting them; they see it as one of their duties to offer interpretations in the hope of helping their readers put different facts into perspective; they feel the need to explain, not just describe (1977, p. 57).

These perspectives of historians guide us towards Hayden White and the concept of Historiography, which argues that historical narratives, like “verbal fictions”, are designated

similar to forms in literature than scientific method. Historiography refers to the visualization and filming of history, i.e. visual historiography. White argues that cinema is better suited than written expression for the realistic representation of complex events, landscapes, scenes, atmosphere, battles, crowds and emotions, and that for the viewer, photography and cinema are more convincing than the written document (1988, p. 1193). According to White, historiography is “discourse and verbal presentation of history”, while visual historiography is “filmic discourse and visual presentation of history”.

Historian’s narrative is a composition of myth, society and culture because the patterns of incidents are derived from the historical experiences of the society according to White. The task of the historian, therefore, is to produce knowledge by applying these patterns to real events (1987, pp. 44-45).

Historical reality is a “described event”. In other words, instead of providing evidence, the historical text provides insight by pointing to things beyond what it directly expresses, as in allegory (Tezcan, 2018, p. 649). Historical events and narratives desire to expose such relationship with historical reality that they have established in various branches of art. Foremost among them is the art of cinema.

### **Depicting the Past: Historical Accuracy in Cinema**

Dramatic telling of historical events is history reconstructed in filmic language. Thus, historical movies make use of written history to reconstruct a historical perception through cinematic narration. According to Rosenstone (2018, pp. 169- 176) historical movies dramatize history and this process brings out a tale of triumph, sorrow, joy, despair, adventure, suffering and heroism crafting a story with a beginning, middle and end ensuring unity. Using film techniques such as close-ups, editing, music or color design, movies intensify emotions. Unlike history, film narratives don't project an exact staging of the events of the past. Historical narration of course, has to be based on what we know happened literally. But due to the demands of time and place, narration cannot replicate reality.

Keeping in mind as Rosenstone pointed out that cinema, specifically the dramatized stories, reinterprets the past and reconstructs memory with a new reality. In addition, as Ferro highlights, film is history, whether it is the image of reality or not, documentary or fiction, factual or purely imaginary intrigue. For him, film has been observed not as a work of art, but a product, an image-object producing meaning exceeding the limits of cinematography for it is valid not only of its projection but also its social-historical approach it presents (1988).

According to Ryan and Kellner, films encode the discourses (forms, figures and representations) of social life and transmit them in the form of cinematic narratives. Cinema

transposes information between different discursive planes, taking its place in the totality of the system of cultural representations that construct social reality (1988). Ryan and Kellner argue that the political interests underlying cinema are extremely powerful. Because films are a part of a larger system of cultural representations sustaining social institutions by manipulating the vaguely designated psychological stances and directing the common idea of how the world is perceived or should be (1997: 38).

An attractive field for filmmakers, history in films is presented through rich imagery, dramatic music and visual symbols, replacing the real facts with symbolic or metaphorical realities challenging traditional historical narratives. Stubbs argues that the success of a historical film is often judged by the perception of historical accuracy rather than aesthetic criteria. In many cases, he argues, press materials, related books and supplementary documentaries serve to defend the authenticity and thus the overall quality of the films in question (2013, p. 34). This debate, historical accuracy vs a film's aesthetic look, is based on the idea that film as a medium bears stunning power of conveying its message either through propaganda, manipulation or speculation.

Nonetheless, we should keep in mind that fictional films attract the attention of a wide audience thanks to the elements of dramatic structure such as narration, conflict and

identification with the protagonist. Therefore, it should be noted that historical films play an important role in the formation of images about a certain historical period, event or person in the memories of the audience. Moreover, in most of these historical films, fictional elements and real images are combined together, thus strengthening the sense of objective reality in the audience. In this respect, it can be easily stated that a major part of the imagery of historical events occupying the audience's memory are created through filmic narration.

Showing up bearing the legacy of Victorian Theater and modern novel, cinema is inspired by the dramatic plays and texts throughout the history. An attractive field plays and texts of old times draws attention of filmmakers tempting them to reinterpret and reshape them brings forth a dilemma of authenticity. The risk of losing historical accuracy for the sake of film aesthetics or conversely, minimizing the film technique to ensure fidelity to historical fact, this abundant field of history creates a jeopardy of limiting the creative power conveying a historical film.

The role of historical films in the formation of societies' collective consciousness about the past makes these debates even more understandable. However, it is important to note that historical films comment on the period in which they were made rather than the period they deal with. In terms of accuracy and responsibility, the extent to which a historical film does not contain real facts and events is important. The art of film, when dealing with history,

doesn't aim manipulating dramatic elements or a complete documentation of events. In fact, the filmmaker, like a historian, would seek a holistic meaning through the preferences she/he makes from historical data (Duruel Erkıılıç, 2005, p.81).

Reflecting the social and cultural aspects of their era, historical films may also document the social attitude of the time through realistic mode. Sorlin notes that historical films are often fictional and therefore, even if they are based on records, they reconstruct much of what is presented in a fictitious way (2001, p. 38). Therefore, according to him, most of historical films combine real events and fictional elements. According to Carrier, on the other hand, cinema recreates the past. Everything seen on the screen from people's clothes to their gestures or the language they speak are reshaped. (as cited in Makal, 2014, p. 15). Looking through this perspective, historical films produce a counter-history, an alternative point of view to historiography. A tool reshaping the past, cinema leads the audience to a different experience. The power of filmic narration convinces and forces the audience accept the narrative reality it represents.

Historical films in Turkish Cinema are generally set on dispute or struggle of Turks against their enemies, where individual heroism comes to the fore. Protagonists are claimed to be real characters. Following the views of filmmakers about the representation of reality

in historical films, questioning the reality of Turkish historical film characters appear to offer a promising field to study. Have these characters in the movies actually lived in history? If they did, what are their similarities and differences with the way they are represented in the movies? It would be useful to take a look at historical films and costume adventure<sup>1</sup> movies in Turkish Cinema to answer these questions.

### **Historical Films and Costume Adventures in Turkish Cinema**

Historical films take on the role of the genre's contemporary historical narrator by depicting a society's way of life, values, places and even the spirit of the time from the perspective of the creators who come from within that society. Cinema, a very powerful platform to transform reality into fiction, Akbaş states that two main factors are critical building up the identity and history in these films. First is to see through the lens of the people; the way they want to see their identity. Second is the political authority. Turkish Cinema stands in such a crossroad establishing a mutual interaction between the way the political authority desire to shape Turkish identity and history and the expectations of people. (2018a, pp.199-200).

Ignoring the historical era films are set in, they often emphasize nationalism. Antagonists are designated as evil and barbaric villains, presented as “enemies of Turks” from Vikings to Chinese or Byzantines. Causality is ignored, what is required is an obstacle that heroes can contend. Historical or geographical information are seen irrelevant, because the entire plot is established upon the battle between the good and evil (Scognamillo and Demirhan, 2005, pp.140-141).

As a very popular genre in Turkey, historical fantasy films are often named “costume adventure”. One of the original genres of Yeşilçam cinema, historical fantasy films are usually low-budget and hastily made. Many of them are unscripted or written during the production phase. They constitute one of the most commercially profitable and widespread forms of the fantasy genre. Historical fantasy cinema presents Turkish history from a mythological perspective (Yıldırım, 2011, pp. 71-72). The style of these films, whether or not their producers had a goal in this direction, has automatically brought about the construction of nationalist thought and the reproduction of history and national identity in cinema.

Costume adventure films are a genre where oddities naturally coexist with naturality. These films often have their subjects from epics and historical events. The main source of

costume adventure films is comic books, which led to the emergence of the genre thanks to its popularity. Costume adventure films, like historical comics, are built on a fictionalized history and a nationalist narrative. The history presented in these films not only creates an atmosphere that makes possible the fantastic adventures of the heroes, but also revitalizes various theses of Turkish nationalism based on its historical roots. These films reflect the political conflicts in real life and the tensions of daily life with different perspectives, especially under the influence of the political-social environment in which they attracted great attention in the 1960s and 1970s (Karadoğan, 2016, pp. 66-69).

Özgüç states that in costume adventure films, famous figures in Turkish history were portrayed in ridiculous and humiliating costumes, and they are produced without any research or documentation (2005, p. 30). Although these films, which are dominated by heroic stories, love affairs and revenge scenes, do not directly present a certain understanding of history, they create a certain historical perspective in the minds of the viewers. While this historical perspective is based on bravery, heroism and honesty of Turks, it is usually based on a shallow idea of nationalism (Duruel, 2002, p. 146).

These films depict heroes as characters fighting for justice, protectors of the weak and the oppressed. They are physically attractive and superior to their enemies. Main themes are fighting for justice, revenge, sacrificing own life for their beliefs and religious solidarity.

Heroes are personalities purified from all their weaknesses and flaws. The people, the audience, created exactly the heroes they desired to see in such qualities (Duru el, 2002, p. 142). Although the historical heroes of Ye il am are numerous, their adventures are usually shaped around unchanging patterns and embellished with coincidences and exaggerations. While some of those heroes take part in a series of films, others only appear in a single movie and then are forgotten (Scognamillo and Demirhan, 2005, p. 173).

Akba  states that films about the characters of Karao lan, Tarkan, Kara Murat, Malko o lu and Battal Gazi, as examples of the historical fantasy genre, are not a reflection of reality, but the reality of reflection. According to him, these films do not deal with historical reality, but only show a subject and the other in cinema, which is a symbolic art form (2018b, p. 60). However, the aim of this study is to prove that these characters are not only a reflection but are also real people from the past, unveiling their similarities or differences with the characters represented in the movies. Therefore, in light of the information provided so far, it would be useful to focus on the main characters presented in these historical and costume adventure films in Turkish Cinema and to see to what extent the historical reality is compatible with what is presented in the films.

## **Karao lan**

In the sixties there was a noticeable increase in the number of historical narratives such as comics and movies. Historical narratives became popular concurrently with military interventions changing the social order. Nationalism is the strongest factor that ensures the continuity of such narratives, and the political authority plays a major role in the popularization of historical narratives. Thus, the comic book-based iconic heroes of costume adventure films came to life in cinema as the embodiment of various manifestations of Turkish nationalism.

Karaoğlan, a historical comic book created and drawn by Suat Yalaz, was published in 9 different series and more than 700 issues from 1963 to 2002. The adventures of Karaoğlan, first appeared in a weekly magazine in 1963, continued as a series of 17 issues, collected in five albums. Of the 86 Karaoğlan stories produced between 1962 and 1988, only 49 were created between 1964-1967. Published in weekly magazines and seven movies were made about it, Karaoğlan was considered highly valuable by famous columnists of the time (Cantek, 2003, pp. 13-14). Karaoğlan is generally accepted as the pioneer or the first example of historical comics.

Karaoğlan is a Turkish warrior who lived in the 13th century. This story agitating Central Asian nationalism, is distanced from the radical right due to its erotic content. Karaoğlan stands out as a historical fantasy. History is used here only as a background,

facilitating audience's intrigue in nationalism, middle class values and entertainment culture.

Ancient Turks are depicted in an imaginary universe with quasi-mystical characteristics in these films and they present the past as pure and marvelous. Karaoğlan is a synthesis that brings together different elements of various adventure corpuses ranging from westerns to historical novels (Cantek, 2003, pp. 243-244).

Karaoğlan in costume adventure cinema is an adventurous and brave figure who has won the admiration of the Turkish audience. Usually appearing in historical and epic themed films, Karaoğlan carries the characteristics of traditional Turkish heroes, but has also been reinterpreted from a modern perspective. Physically, Karaoğlan is usually depicted as tall and muscular with an athletic build. He typically has black hair and dark eyes. He may have a stern expression on his face, but at the same time, there is a deep wisdom and courage within him.

Karaoğlan is usually quite decisive, brave and is presented as a symbol of justice. He adheres to the principles of honesty and integrity, opposing injustice. He is also smart warrior with a strategic mind. While Karaoğlan is loyal and protective towards his friends, he adopts a tough and determined attitude towards his enemies. Karaoğlan's stories often deal with

universal themes such as love, friendship and loyalty and he is often seen as a symbol of Turkish national identity.

### **Malkoçoğlu**

The dramatization of history, together with cinematic narratives, allows events and characters to be placed in historical context. Benefitting the written history, these films reconstruct historical perception through images and cinematic narration.

Malkoçoğlu first appeared as a comic book hero drawn by Ayhan Başoğlu. The first story of the comic book series was published in Cumhuriyet newspaper in 1964 and was later published as a book. The comic book “Malkoçoğlu” was inspired by the Malkoçoğulları, an Ottoman raiding family that allegedly lived in the 15th century. Malkoçoğlu was adapted to the cinema as the character of Ali, an Ottoman raiding lord. His stories in the movies take place in Europe, the Balkans and Rumelia (Tülüce, 2019, p. 55).

Main characters in these stories, combining the themes of Turkism, Islamism and Ottomanism, reflect these three identities together. The aim is to revive nationalist sentiments. Rather than historical reality, the adventures of the hero are the point of attention. In this perspective the fact that Malkoçoğlu is a figure who lived in the past does not mean much for the audience (Pöstecki, 2019, pp. 11-12.).

The stories of Malkoçoğlu films are set in the 15th and 16th centuries, during the reigns of Mehmed II (Fatih Sultan Mehmed) and Süleyman I (Kanuni Sultan Süleyman). The opposing side is Byzantium. Malkoçoğlu is an honest, brave, intelligent, and emotional character in his twenties. He is a compassionate and taunting hero who stands on the side of the oppressed, is self-sacrificing for the Turkish homeland, and protects women. His Turkish and Muslim identity is constantly prioritized. He embodies all the values of the society with his agile, fearless, strong and fighter personality (Pöstecki, 2019, pp. 12-13).

Shot in 1966, the first Malkoçoğlu movie led to the emergence of a brave and fighter character becoming very popular in Turkish cinema, and later turned into a populist series. In both comics and cinema, like other heroes, Malkoçoğlu stands out with his identity as a warrior in the service of the state. Cyprus Emergency in the same period deeply affected Turkish people and led to an increase in the discourse on social and political unity and solidarity (Akbaş, 2018b, p. 67).

### **Kara Murat**

Historical characters depicted in cinema are sometimes equipped with purely imaginary elements. This offers the viewer a more captivating story, yet it also brings up query on historical

accuracy. The depiction of historical heroes in cinema is used to boost nationalist sentiments especially in countries where these sentiments are strongly felt.

The 1970s was a period in Turkish cinema when the impact of social and political changes was felt intensely. This period, known as Yeşilçam, was a time when both melodramas and action films were popular. Costume adventure films of the period are adorned with flamboyant costumes and scenes reflecting the atmosphere of the period. Focusing on different eras of the Ottoman Empire, these films deal with themes of nationalism and heroism, offering both entertainment and historical information to the audience.

Although costume adventure films are not entirely adapted from comic books, they have taken the basic qualities of the main characters, frequently repeated main stories and themes, and nearly all visual elements of comic books. Kara Murat is one of the iconic characters of such films that originated from comic books (Karadoğan, 2016, pp. 67-68).

In the early 1970s, “Kara Murat”, a character similar to Malkoçoğlu, appears in costume adventure films. As “Malkoçoğlu” series come to an end in 1972, “Kara Murat” takes over the legacy of historical adventures in 1973. Kara Murat is the champion of Mehmed II and pursues a secret enemy with the Sultan's edict. He is at the forefront of the Ottoman struggle against both Byzantium and the Arabs. Kara Murat protects the state and the throne of Mehmed II using efforts that surpass the achievements of real historical figures. He contributes to the Ottoman victory with

his decisions. In this way, he is presented as a character capable of changing the course of history (Akbaş, 2018b, p. 71).

“Kara Murat”, written by Rahmi Turan (under the pseudonym Muratoğlu), was first published in *Günaydın* newspaper with drawings by Abdullah Turan. This character, which was very popular with readers, was adapted to the cinema as a series. The main feature of the series, based on cinema-history relation, is that it was set in the Ottoman period (Akbaş, 2018b, p.71).

Kara Murat series does not aim for a realistic historical narration. The theme of the series is based on history, love, adventure and revenge. Kara Murat, champion of Sultan Mehmed II, is presented as the symbol of the “ideal Turk, the heroic Turk” type and is equipped with the virtues required for heroism (Duruel Erkılıç, 2012, p. 110).

Kara Murat films are productions that reinforce nationalist feelings and emphasize the heroic qualities of the Turkish nation. Kara Murat's bravery and independence instills pride and morale to the viewers. Kara Murat has gained an important place in popular culture and gained the public admiration. This character reflects the ideals and expectations of the people fitting the social and political atmosphere of the period. Kara Murat stands out as a symbol of heroism and courage in Turkish cinema.

### **Battal Gazi**

Historical films not only offer narratives of the past, but also pushes the audience to question contemporary issues and ideals. Historical facts and characters deliver social messages to the audience drawing a correspondence with the values and struggles of modern society. Sometimes historical films are made for specific ideological purposes. Historical characters and events may be reinterpreted to convey nationalist, religious or political messages. This can also lead to the use of cinema as a powerful propaganda tool.

Films based on legends and mythological stories may sometimes better reflect the sensibilities and self-perception of society than films based on real events. Turkish Cinema, based on oral tradition could have an effective communication with Turkish citizens. Although his authenticity is disputed, Battal Gazi, was adapted to Turkish culture and was transformed into a hero that people could interiorized (Akbaş, 2018a, p.187).

Battal Gazi film series are one of the most important historical and mythological heroic stories of Turkish Cinema. This series draws attention as an example where historical reality and cinematic narrative are intertwined. The films both reflect the cinematic characteristics of the period and reinterpret historical events and personalities through the language of cinema.

Battal Gazi is presented in the movies as a symbol of justice and goodness, a hero who upholds both religious and national values. Such stories strengthen the audience's national and religious feelings offering a designated historical consciousness. Played by Cüneyt Arkın, the

protagonist of both Kara Murat and Malkoçoğlu series, Battal Gazi has become an icon in Turkish cinema as a strong, brave, just and loyal character. Battal Gazi's heroism and virtues reflect the values of the Turkish people reinforcing his success in cinema.

Battal Gazi is depicted as a strong and enduring warrior. A master of close combat, he fights enemies alone. Possessing skills of agility and speed, he intimidates his enemies. He fights against injustice and stands by the oppressed. A natural born leader, he protects and guides the people around him.

So, who are real Karaoğlan, Malkoçoğlu, Kara Murat and Battal Gazi, that were represented and shown as mentioned above in Turkish Cinema? What are their personality? When and where did they live?

## **Beyond the Heroes: Bridging Reality and Fiction**

### **Karaoğlan**

It is for certain that a historical warrior named *Karaoğlan* (Karaoglan) didn't exist, yet there are some historical figures bearing the name. The most important of them is mentioned in *Tevârih-i Âl-i Osman* written by Âşıkpaşazâde. The first scholarly publication of one of the oldest and most important texts of Ottoman historiography based on Turkish manuscripts. In this work,

Aşıkpaşazâde traces the ancestry of the Ottomans and Osman Gazi back to Prophet Noah. He also mentions the name “Kara(lu) Oğlan” as one of the first ancestors of the Ottomans (2013, p. 5). Aşıkpaşazâde does not provide any other information about the life and activities of “Kara Oğlan” in this work.

Lived in the 15th century, another important Ottoman historian, Hasan Mahmud Bayatî, also supports the information provided by Aşıkpaşazâde's in his work known as *Câm-ı Cem-âyîn*. He describes the genealogy of the Ottomans and summarizes the *Oghuznâme*. the name “Karalu Oğlan” is mentioned when describing the ancestors of Osman Gazi (2021, p. 31). However, it is interesting to note that Bayatî, referring to Mehmed Neşrî's *Kitâb-ı Cihânnümâ*, mentions the name “Kara-oğlan” for the first time as he traces the lineage of the Ottomans from Ertuğrul Gazi to Prophet Noah (2021, p. 41). It is clear that the person Bayatî refers to as “Kara-Oğlan” is the same person as Aşıkpaşazâde's “Karalu Oğlan”. However, the most interesting part here is Bayatî's description of Kara Oğlan in this work as follows: The part “*Vech-i tesmiye kara yağız olduğudur*” means “He was called brave the black”. When he became a *bey* (landlord, ruler), he collected taxes from Urus (Russia) and provided an army of 143 men with plenty of supplies, as well as giving them grants. He died at the age of 170 after a long reign” (2021, p. 77). It is not possible to know whether Karaoğlan lived for 170 years, yet it can be suggested he had a brave, courageous and combatant personality.

The only recent work that mentions “Karaođlan” is by Vedat Turgut, who works on Ottoman History and its foundations. Turgut mentions another Karaođlan, drawing attention to an important *ulema-dervish* (religious warrior) character living during the reign of Sultan Orhan (Orhan Ghazi). A large foundation with rich assets was established in the name of Sinanüddin Yusuf ođlu Osman, who actually is Karaođlan. This scholarly figure, who is considered to have an affinity to Elvan Seydi, one of the grandsons of Haji Murad al-Wali, an acknowledged descendant of Veysel Karenî, also had close relations and affinity through marriage with the Ottoman dynasty (2021, pp. 36-37). It is conceivable that this first historical figure inspired the character of Karaođlan, that became the subject of movies due to his warrior personality.

### **Malkoçođlu and Kara Murad**

Although the open identity of the ghazi “raiding bey” (ghazi warrior) characterized as Malkoçođlu in Turkish cinema is not stated, it is known that Malkoçođlu family is one of the most important raiding families that played a very important role in the conquest of the Balkans during the Ottoman period. Leaving aside the claims that the Malkoçođulları descended from the Bosnian Malkoviç family (Başar, 2003, p. 537), the *Cihannüma* written by Mehmed Neşri in the late fifteenth century clearly indicates that the family descended from Malkoç Bey, the son of

Hamidoğlu Mustafa Bey, who served as the castle warden of Sivas during Timur's invasion of Anatolia and was martyred (2013, p. 124).

Providing a great support to Ottomans during their conquests and settling into the Balkan lands, Malkoçoğulları appeared in history during the reign of Bayezid I (Yıldırım Bayezid). The first known member of the family is Mustafa Bey, warden of Sivas castle in 1400 AD. A review of Ottoman archival records and studies reveals four of his sons. These are Bali Bey, Murad Bey, Mehmed Bey and Yahya Pasha. Malkoçoğlu Bali Bey, known as the 'Conqueror of Warsaw', and Yahya Pasha, a son-in-law of Sultan Bayezid, are the most popular among the family members (Turgut, 2015, p. 566; Kılıç, 2020, pp. 748-770).

Hamidoğulları's kinship with Baba İlyas and thus the Ottoman dynasty through Kır Bey/Kayır Han, son of Dede Garkın Sheikh Numan, was reinforced by marriages through Malkoçoğulları in later periods. Yahya Pasha married Sultan Bayezid's daughter Hüma Hatun and served as the Beylerbey of Anatolia and Rumelia and as a vizier. From this marriage with Hüma Hatun, he had sons named Koca Bali Pasha, Gazi Ahmed Bey and Mehmed Pasha and a daughter named Hani Hatun. Of these, Koca Bali Pasha commanded the vanguard forces in the Battle of Mohacs and rose to the position of Beylerbey of Budin during the reign of Süleyman I, his cousin. It is known that Bali Pasha married the daughter of Göde Ahmed, the grandson of Uzun Hasan of Akkoyunlu, born from his marriage to Aynîşah Hatun, the daughter of Sultan Bayezid. In other

words, he married the daughter of his aunt, and at the same time the daughter of Shah Ismail's uncle. His brothers Ahmed Bey and Mehmed Pasha also served as *sanjakbeys* (banner lord) in many places in Rumelia, especially in Budin after him. Yahya Pasha's daughter Hânî Hatun married Hasan Pasha, the son of the famous Gazi Ali Bey of Mihaloğulları lineage, and Süleyman Bey was born from this marriage. It is stated that the wife of the aforementioned Mihaloğlu Ali Bey was the daughter of the Hungarian King Matias or one of his relatives Mihaly, and according to another rumor she was the daughter of Radulek, brother of Vlad the Impaler (Turgut, 2015, pp. 566-589).

Malkoçoğulları, active in the Ottoman Empire especially in the XV.-XVI. centuries, provided important services in Anatolia and Rumelia during the foundation period of the Ottoman Empire, like other raiding families (Mihaloğulları, Evrenosoğulları and Turahanoğulları). Educated in Enderun (palace school) and served in the conquest of Constantinople (today Istanbul), Bali Bey achieved significant success during the raids to Albania, Dalmatia and Wallachia during the reigns of Mehmed II and Bayezid II (Turgut, 2015, p. 566). The lineage of the Ottomans and Malkoçoğulları, who considered themselves both Üveysî and Sayyid around the cult of Veysel Karenî, is merged in Dede Garkın and his son Kır Bey/Kayır Han. It is possible that Malkoçoğlu Murad Bey is the person who is rumored to be “Fatih's Fedai” (Mehmed the

Conqueror's champion) and it is certain that he was one of the raiders of Mehmed II's period. It is understood from the foundation records in Çirmen Sanjak that Malkoçoğlu Murad Bey had two sons, Bali Bey and İlyas Bey (Turgut, 2015, p. 571; Turgut, 2021, p. 44).

In conclusion, Malkoçoğlu Büyük Bali Bey and his brothers Damat Yahya Pasha and Murad Bey were the ones who owned estates in the Balkans. Murad Bey is the least known Malkoçoğlu until today (Turgut, 2015, p. 573).

Although, it is possible to say that Kara Murad (Murad the Black), who has a very important place in historical Turkish films, might be Murad Bey of Malkoçoğulları. Kara Murad takes his name from the cult of Veysel Karenî. Among the members of the Ottoman dynasty, Murad was the most common name after Mehmed. It is understood that Malkoçoğlu Murad Bey lived during the reign of Mehmed II. From the foundations he established in the Sanjak of Çirmen, it is realized that Murad Bey had two sons, Bali Bey and İlyas Bey. The foundation records established in the Sanjak of Vize show that Murad Bey had two more sons, Mahmud and Üveys. Murad Bey's lineage continued in the following periods (Turgut, 2015, pp. 566-589). Therefore, it can be said that Malkoçoğlu and Kara Murat, who are represented as the main characters in these films, are both from the same family or are the same people.

### **Battal Gazi**

Battal Gazi, with his historical and legendary personality, motivated Turks and Muslims with the spirit of gaza in both Arab-Byzantine, Seljuk-Byzantine and Ottoman-Byzantine conflicts, and instilled faith, courage, hope and confidence in their conquest movements. Byzantines also adopted and produced legends and epics about him (Say, 2009). Interesting to mention that his personality and stories were adopted differently in various lands and cultures.

The fact that classical Christian writers such as Taberî, Ibn-i Asakîr, İbn-i Kesîr, İbn-i Esîr, Theophanes of Byzantium and the Syriac writer Denys of Tell Mahre mention Battal Ghazi in their works, showing that he was a real historical figure. Starting from Ya'kûbî and Taberî who mention Battal Ghazi until Evliya Çelebi, history and legend/myth are intertwined in many sources such as Mes'ûdî, İbn Asâkir, İbnü'l-Esîr, Sibt İbnü'l-Cevzî, İbn Şâkir el-Kütübî, İbn Fazlullah el-Ömerî, Zehebî, İbn Kesîr, Mustafa Âlî of Gallipoli. According to the Arab chronicles, he was a warrior much feared by Christians. Mothers frightened their misbehaving children through him and keep his portrait in their churches to teach their children about him. Battal Ghazi often attacked churches and monasteries and he was also in contact with priests. He captures the castles and cities either by sword and sometimes by intelligence. This perspective is also appropriate for the Turkish *Battalnâme*. *Battalnâme* reflects the epic life of Battal Gazi, who is undoubtedly a historical figure, through the eyes of Muslim Turks who settled in Anatolia. Rumors that Sayyid Battal was a

companion of Hızır, receiving his help in times of distress, which provide clues that he was an Üveysî character. The superhero, who is believed to be endowed with extraordinary powers, exhibits a “semi-saintly” character, which is similar to Melik Dânişmend Gazi and Sarı Saltuk (Ocak, 1992, pp. 204-207; Özçelik, 2009, pp. 9-10; Bars, 2015, s. 467; Arak, 2010, p. 39; Demir&Erdem, 2006, pp. 22-47).

In the epic of Battal Gazi (Battal-nâme) his father in a dream, was gifted with his birth with artifacts from the prophet and prophesied that he will convert the whole of Rum (Roman Anatolia) to Islam. He was nicknamed Battal after defeating a famous Christian opponent and converting him to Islam. Later he ran many difficult campaigns and emerged victorious. Battal Gazi was martyred accidentally by a stone hit him in the chest and thrown by the daughter of Kaiser Kanatos who actually fell in love with him and tried to warn him against the enemies while Battal was fighting the Kharijites (Demir & Erdem, 2006).

Sayyid Battal Gazi is mentioned among the first conquerors of the lands belonging to the Byzantine Empire. Sayyid Battal, whose real name was Hüseyin oğlu Cafer and with a lineage goes back to that of Prophet's, was the first conqueror of Malatya. He also participated during the siege of Constantinople during the Umayyad period (Evliya Çelebi, 2003, pp. 48-50). Köprülü states that Battal Gazi lived during the Abbasid reigns of Mutasim and Vâsık Billâh and that he was not a historical Arab warrior, but one of the Turkish ghazi who fought for the cause of Islam

in the Anatolian frontiers (Köprülü, 2004, pp. 277-278; Ocak, 1992, p. 205). Almost all sources state that “Battal” was not his real name but nickname, indicating his heroism and that his real name was Abdullah. On the other hand, the same sources record different names such as Ebû Yahyâ, Ebû Hüseyin or Ebû Muhammed, and Hüseyin, Ömer or Amr for his father. Sayyid Battal Gazi, who was among the pioneers of the campaigns against the Byzantines during the time when Sakarya river in Eskişehir was a Byzantine frontier, was martyred in one of these campaigns (H. 113-123/M. 730-740). He was buried in his mausoleum in Seyyidgazi district, Akroinon in the ancient times, and is now known by his own name. It is known that the structure that forms the basis of this tomb was built upon a dream of the mother of the Seljuk Sultan Alauddin Keykubad I (Ocak, 1992, p. 204). Sayyid Battal Gazi is accepted as an ancestor especially by the Danishmends. It is rumored that Danishmend Gazi's ancestor Sayyid Taylu Ali was one of the sages who served as an advisor to the Seljuk sultans. It is also known that the Karesioğulları, descendants of the Danishmends, associate their ancestry with Battal Gazi (Turgut, 2016, pp. 177-184).

In conclusion, Battal Gazi appears as a warrior who lived in a certain era, in a certain geography with almost accurately known birth and death dates, has taken his place in history through his adventures.

## Conclusion

Discussions on cinema and reality often center how historical events and figures are depicted as well as the accuracy of these representations. History, a rich and dynamic source, provides a tapestry of events, figures, heroes and villains. Historical movies, however, also reflect the values, ideologies and social conditions of the era in which they were produced. These films can document societal concerns, anxieties, and expectations, or they may offer symbolic interpretations of their time. Shaped by their beliefs and ideologies, filmmakers' subjective perspectives influence the presentation of historical fact making the relationship between cinematic portrayal and factual history complex. The portrayal of historical figures frequently prompts inquiries regarding authenticity, indicating that such films should be seen as interpretations intensively influenced by particular perspectives rather than as accurate records of the past.

In the context of Turkish Cinema, historical films frequently highlight the themes of Turkish heroism and struggle against enemies. “*Kostüme avantür*” (costumed adventure) is a popular genre, blending historical fantasy with nationalist narratives. These films draw on Turkish nationalist thought creating a fictitious yet culturally relevant version of history.

This study aims to explore the relationship between the film and the fact through the analysis of four heroic characters' representation in Turkish Cinema: Karaoğlan, Malkoçoğlu,

Kara Murat and Battal Gazi. Comparing their cinematic portrayals to their historical identities, the study features similarities and differences between reality and fiction, supplying new insights into how these characters are reimagined on screen.

Created in the mid-1960s, Karaoğlan was adapted from Suat Yalaz's popular comic books, embodies traits such as decisiveness, bravery and justice. While the character is fictional, Turgut mentions another Karaoğlan, an important ulema-derviş (religious warrior), lived during the reign of Sultan Orhan. It is likely that Karaoğlan in the films was inspired from this historical figure, whose combatant personality made him a poignant subject for film.

The Malkoçoğlu films, set in the 15th and 16th centuries during the reigns of Mehmed II and Suleyman the Magnificent, utilizes history as a narrative motif rather than a factual account. History mentioned in comic books and films are unreal, fictitious. Malkoçoğlu, in the films, is depicted a brave, intelligent and a compassionate young man. He stands by the oppressed embodying Turkish and Islamic values. His athletic and unyielding character reflects the values of the societal ideals of the time.

Following the *Malkoçoğlu* series, *Kara Murat* emerged in 1973 as a champion of Mehmed II, fighting against Byzantines and Arabs. Like *Malkoçoğlu*, *Kara Murat* symbolizes heroism and bravery. Historical records suggest that *Kara Murat* may have been inspired by Murad Bey of the *Malkoçoğlu* family, indicating a possible connection between the two characters. It appears that the protagonists represented as *Malkoçolu* and *Kara Murat* are either from the same family or they are the same person.

*Battal Gazi* films, produced during 1960s and 1970s, present the historical figure as a mythological hero, a symbol of justice. As a real historical figure, *Battal Gazi* inspired people during Arab-Byzantine, Seljuk-Byzantine and Ottoman-Byzantine conflicts, embodying courage and faith. In cinema, he is depicted as a powerful warrior defending religious and national values, standing against oppressors and protecting the weak.

In summary, *Karaoğlan*, *Malkoçoğlu*, *Kara Murat*, and *Battal Gazi*—four iconic protagonists of Turkish historical cinema—are rooted in real historical figures. However, their cinematic portrayals are largely shaped by fantasy and nationalist narratives, adapted from comic books and popular legends. Historical records confirm that these characters were indeed brave and warrior-like, but their on-screen personas are amplified to reflect the cultural and ideological values of the time. This study demonstrates the intricate interplay between historical reality and

cinematic imagination, providing a more profound comprehension of how Turkish cinema constructs and reinterprets the past.

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## ENDNOTES:

<sup>1</sup> Kara Murat in films named as Murat with a “t” in the end while historical studies showed that his name is written Murad – ending with “d”. In the text, movie character is written as Kara Murat while the real person is written as Kara Murad. [Editor’s Note: Recent Netflix parody series *Life and Times of Ersan Kumeri* continues this tradition; see Akser (2025)].

<sup>2</sup> Written “Kostüme Avantür” in Turkish language, Costume Adventure films refer to a subgenre of historical fantasy specifically produced in Turkey. This subgenre features extravagant use of wardrobe and setting ignoring the reality of the historical period in order to create an exciting and flowing plotline. The term has no equivalent in other languages yet have different terms such as history-adventure or history film. For more details see: Abisel (1984), Özgüç (1998), Özgüç (1995), Scognamillo (1990), Karadoğan (2001).