

“The Glorified Lumpen ‘Nothingness’ vs. Night Navigations” Cinema and Politics Deniz Bayraktar (ed), Cambridge **Turkish Cinema Reader**, Cambridge 2009

### ***The Glorified Lumpen ‘Nothingness’ vs. Night Navigations***

Societies and the representation of “social” inhabit both trespasses and smooth transgresses in between actual, cognitive and virtual borders, “looks” are multiplied and even might seek out different looks. Yet there are borders, even cells with strongly built-up separations that are hard to transgress. The ‘*borderlessness*’ is a fabrication of the long narration of globalization and Postmodernism. However it seems that we all have accepted the global flows in which capital, labor, people, and places, images and symbols all flow; and “experiences” of rearrangements of international division of labor drastically shatter the life of the ordinary men and women on the street level. For them, globalization or the suffix of all “posts” mean squeezed lives at the corners, which are celled, bordered, vacuumed and sealed. So they carry their borders with their bodies. They dwell in the city and so do their borders. Hence I suggest people who survive the era the ones who are lucky enough to be saved from the casualties of war hunger, abundance and famine and/or the violence of all kinds from above have become **vacuumed and sealed image subjects**. That they are not living under the zones of war and deprivations does not keep them away from getting hunted by another trap in which they have become **out of focus and visually image made subjects**.

These precise experiences stand for the fractured urban practices, multicultural confrontations, distrust to unknown others, strong discomfort in material life caused by the rearrangement of the division of labor and the trouble in configuring the gender positions. These conditions produce and embrace specific chronotope in daily culture. This is a world

wide phenomenon after the 80s, yet within the context of brief comparative study of the films after 90s, I basically focus on the Turkey's cinema of this specific chronotope.

After mid 90's we have come across diverse and conflicting tracks in Turkey's cinema. Some of them seem to be significantly apolitical, individualistic, self oriented films. However we also observe some considerable amount of films that seek for some answers to the silent tension of loosened societal and mounted nationalistic, fascistic 'post' times. On the one hand it is the cinema of vacuumed and sealed image subjects of city with glorified, alienated, remote and lumpen 'Nothingness'. On the other hand it is a search for confrontations and encounters that I like to call night navigations and dream stalk.

After the 80s the new arrivals' cinema have been changing the screen persona of the cities, bringing about unfamiliar sounds and looks into the cinema around the world. Their camera detours and walkabouts at the street level. The well-known spectacles of the cities have been fading out and becoming far and distant. We now have different scenes and different mappings from alleys. The looks and sounds seem to belong to the ones with different gravity seeing the 'not shown' and speaking the 'untold'. These are the films that inhale and exhale the city of insignificants and speak softly of the minor histories. And there is another emergent course of films that are searching for new looks and poetics from this geography and history and creating their own way of telling and showing.

When we focus on the cinemas of 1990s and after, I think these new arrivals' cinema is based on the horizons of all diverse forms of survival, struggle, resistance and negotiation experiences of everyday life. They are coming from the experiences of the other side and telling the stories of morphing encounters and habitations, and of the passengers who do stand by for some time and/or coexist simultaneously.

The new arrivals' cinema is about the terminal chronotope of today. It is basically related to the new experiences under the re-organization and re-distribution of labor.<sup>1</sup> Tragic

experiences of gluttonous capitalism eating its children greedily are apparently witnessed in many films coming from different countries<sup>ii</sup>. The outcast of the city scenes and the human leftovers, as I prefer to call, try to survive and struggle within the experiences of inner city conflicts.<sup>iii</sup> Again “speech”, “human touch” and “meanings of being a part of the society” are all faded out, especially in Ponds’ films<sup>iv</sup> but also, with different components in Haneke and Demirkubuz films. The films mentioned above are just a few examples from the new arrivals’ cinema. We can call this new tendency the look of the *outsiderness*. Obviously this state of “*outsiderness*” does not come from national, ethnic or diasporic identity positions. It is more related to the situational stand in life experiences in these particular time and space relationships, which create an eye-level look of persons walking on the streets. These films belong to the “outsiderness” of deep insiders, whose origin of geography, nationality, region and/ or their ethnic and even religious identities or boundaries do not matter. These new arrivals’ directors are the aliens of the juncture and keep produce awkward looks from different point of views. Some of them are like night navigators; they walk in the darkness, show the dark and gloomy world of these cities.<sup>v</sup> In Turkey, some are not only filmnoirish but also attach themselves deeply to the violent lumpen world and glorify it.<sup>vi</sup> Some are the stubborn storytellers of nightmares in the age of dystopias such as Haneke, and Seidl’s films.<sup>vii</sup> We become widely awake and susceptible to our immunization to alienation when the cold, merciless, brutal capitalism and its bourgeois’ class manifest themselves. Demirkubuz’s films from Turkey murmur the alienation and never-ending boredom in daily dystopias of lower classes in the same picture. Interestingly both in Demirkubuz and Haneke films, TV is on as a background text almost all the time while all wild and uncanny things are happening. The main difference between Demirkubuz and Haneke is the blaze and stubbornly indifferent attitude of Demirkubuz to society, to class conflicts and to the political background of his stories and political consciousness of Haneke. However, some insist on the possibilities and

spaces of hopes. Godard always declares, in each of his films, where to look to see the hope. We can find some hope in Kechiche's, Guediguian's, Ulucay's Akay's, Akin's Aksu's and Özpetek's films<sup>viii</sup>.

So the narratives of culture, history and literature, both centrifugal and centripetal, have become present in these maps and, as Bakhtin renders: "behind each static multiformity, there is multitemporality" (1986:28). Dynamic and changeable space is interrelated with time and society in a dialectic relationship. We have the opportunity to comprehend the chronotopes of 90s and after, and follow up the differences and similarities. What is striking in the films of the 90s, and 2000s including the Turkey's cinema, is that this specific chronotope is now, widespread. When we look at the dark, crowded and poor streets of different parts of Europe, we sense whose territory is defined, who are excluded and how. Darkness and poverty encapsulate the invisible and through the veiled 'reality', we might see the off-screen spaces of different experiences holding the possibility for the dialogic encounter.

After the 80s but specifically from the 90s on, directors have adopted a style in which they have been able to capture the ongoing movement in the emergence and alterity of time in space. The unspoken or the empty text in heteroglossial, dialogical space is re-presented and re-produced as the off screen spaces in cinema: the vast zone of the social leftovers, untold/invisible experiences lay beyond screen stories. That becomes the most preferred approach for the last two decades of the Turkey's cinema as it becomes detectable in the cinema of a large and diverse geography, It is visible to see that it is not a nation base understanding of chronotope but it is a particular chronotope which is transnational, depending on certain histories of human experiences in capitalistic social formations, its material conditions and social forces that create multiformity and multitemporality.

The wholeness of the world system has made itself alive in the daily experiences of conflicts and co-existing struggle of binary oppositions. Altogether, it is a space, in which some need cognitive mapping to locate oneself in rapidly changing, cosmopolitan spatial oddness of shifting outsideness / insideness as it is questioned in Minh-ha's discussion (1989). For some others, it is the moment that we can not delay to question the writing and/or re-writing the history, while some, in shifted space and temporality, try to find a way to re-locate the 'self' in schizophrenic experiences in relation to 'self', 'spatial' and 'temporal' in order to produce something.

This altered film experience now has a larger geography and multi-layered temporality and there are many worlds in each, experienced and coded differently. Even in the same city diverse experiences flake and none of them is familiar to the other; they become foreign countries to each other. Yet the ones in different countries living under the same conditions capsulated and scattered in the vast horizons of the incomprehensible common experiences are the “citizens of the nobodies-land”.

Coming from different parts, having different looks and sound some directors intend to uncover the veils of the city and capture the visions of the division of labor, poverty, unemployment, and life of the underclass of the differently located but polarized cities all around. So, one city speaks for all, as Lefebvre would say (1991). We can see that the directors challenge the convention by capturing the atmosphere of the world smashing, scattering and disorienting the ordinary people, yet, pull out these ordinary heroes and center them in their stories. They tell us long and uneven struggle of ordinary people. Not only their camera lowers its eye level, gets into the heart of experiences and shows us that their characters are not alone but also we witness the different regimes of film making from the aesthetic to the mode of production, that create a horizon for film making in which gay and lesbians, feminist and the left-wing work together.

They also ask for our look, not the gaze, at the polarized city, in which unemployed, underclass, either quietly and with hesitations, survive the inconvenient at the deserted corners of the city or become the pushed away ones and reserved in the projects in which city keeps its myth for "beauty", and "civilization" for the older myths and powers. While they are challenging these old myths they also demystify the stylized city by the production of time and space in their films. The new protagonist is a non-hero; s/he looks for sharable street life, which might have been lost somewhere on the street or in the history, in this vast land where lives are something disposable. They find their utterance and look in non-spaces. These have been significant examples of making films on the border, on the thin line in between unity and dissension, altering our views about temporality and spatiality.

Although I keep stressing the common grounds of the latest chronotop in new arrivals cinema we also witness something specific to the some of the films in Turkey. We can say great majority of the directors who came after 90s have started to make their films with this street laved camera, telling the minor stories of small people who are squeezed and smashed by the system without getting into analysis or questioning of the system. Yet directors like Dervis Zaim, Yesim Ustaoglu, Handan İpekci, Reha Erdem have always stressed their social and political consciousness.

Yesim Usataoglu and Handan Ipekci have questioned the social conflicts and bravely dealt with the question of 'others' and nationalism.<sup>ix</sup> Recently new directors, Cagan Irmak, Omer Ugur, have committed to question the era of September the 12<sup>th</sup> which has been the strongest wound in society and told the stories from silently unremembered era which has been left behind as a far away world from another time, another place.<sup>x</sup> With the upheavals, student and workers' movement, strikes and demonstrations on the one hand and violent attacks of radical rightwing youth, imprisonments, detentions, tortures and alleged or ruled lost and deaths on the other hand that led to the brutal coup. 60s and 70s were a different

world in Turkey as it was for the rest of the world. The whole opposition movements and left were sized to end and sour and poisoning memories were postponed and put in the boxes. Then we jump to the era of 80's, 'to the winds of desire of liberal economy' as it is all around world. These now films try to recall those years of the late 70s.

In 2000s Dervis Zaim and Ezel Akay have both started searching for a new forms of looking and showing and different ways of story telling. Zaim has been studying the archeology of history, society, time and space in his specific film poetry as pronounced in his trilogy: paper marbling (*Elephants and Grass/ Filler ve Cimen*, 2000), miniature, (*Waiting For Heaven/ Cenneti Beklerken* 2006) and calligraphy (forthcoming: working title *Dot*) He has also been dealing with the problems of a film maker as a person and his responsibilities toward his personal and social history, the problems of looking and representing the source of the story, the reason of the story, story telling and framing (*Fango/ Mud/ Camur* 2003). Ezel Akay started with the grotesque work in his first film (*Where's Firuze? / Neredesin Firuze?* 2004) and went into the very innovative film *Killing the Shadow/ Who Killed Shadows (aka) / Hacivat Karagoz Neden Olduruldu?* (2006). *Killing the Shadow* is a saga about early folk version of stand up duo. He questions all official story telling and dominant narration of cultural history. Moreover he offers a different reading of establishment era of Ottoman Empire and its multicultural carnivalesque surroundings. Another remarkable pioneering example is Ahmet Ulucay's film, *Boats Out Of Watermelon Rinds / Karpuz Kabugundan Gemiler Yapmak* (2004) telling the down-to-earth relationships of a small town.

These films all actually talk about minor histories yet in a 'long shot' of the 'History'. Their search for the novel and genuine film making is, as I call, not only *night navigations* but also *dream stalk*, since they try to crystallize their analytical look in this dark and gloomy times of confusion and offer us that some different looks and comprehension are possible.

Actually under the uneven development of the long history there is an emerging need to find new ways to talk about experiences and to forget and remember for the future, as Huysen suggests (2003). Derrida describes this history as being a cut out from a larger photography that bleeds all the time. In Godard's latest film, *Our Music*, Goytisollo, appears as himself, underlines that nothing really pass by once you have experienced violence; the wounds are always alive and victims are altered on the way. Victims become victimizers.

Obviously some considerable films after the mid 90s have gradually distanced themselves from the conflicts around the class, society and gender issues and reproduced a kind of 'philosophizing' the culture of glorification of the lumpen attitudes toward life and sensations of pure 'nothingness'. I believe that the era of 80s' refusal and disregard of the criticism, disgraceful manner towards knowledge and production and socialization of knowledge, appreciation of apolitical, illiterate and prosaic daily demeanors, sublimation of nationalism and racism have all fed this phenomenon. Little man's shattering life is now full of drama and they are the aliens of urban space. No woman, no class conflict or social analysis is included in these 'male weepy' films, which are praising these growing tendencies of appropriation of dominating and official ideologies.

Long time traumas with no mourning and healing after each leftist turn or any opposition and their brutal falls by coups, followed by profound stillness are one of the main effects we even hesitate to question. Moreover, the strapping and economic crises one after another followed by high unemployment and rapidly mounting poverty, bringing about the feelings of hopelessness and helplessness among mainly male silent majorities, are all crucial when we focus on the Turkey's specific conditions. The migration from agricultural areas and particularly from South East crowding big cities with insecurity and desperation under the zones of industrialized and/or post-industrialized urban life that is shaped by rearrangement and redefinition of labor divisions create a turmoil in social life and class consciousness. I



think this conjuncture brings about not only strong discomfort and even hate toward “the others” among whom women have taken their part but also the silent denial of the whole society about the violent coups that results in uncomfortable and never confessed feelings of shame and disgrace. Broken social wholeness and disabled public of everyday life becomes an intense nuisance. New cognitive maps for crowded space need to be sorted out. Male ego has to deal with unemployment and confront this new-shared space by his others. Fear and the fantasy restore the forms of representation of specific genres and aesthetics.

Since the man’s crushing life on the street is now full of drama, brutality in attitudes and in tones of these male characters becomes dominating the stories. No woman is included. They are either not present or faintly represented as shadows or act as film noir dummies that bring in all the menacing things in life of male characters. Sharing the interrelated scripts in *On Board / Gemide* (Akar, 1998) and *A Madonna in Laleli / Laleli’de Bir Azize* (Sabanci, 1998), the directors, Serdar Akar and Kudret Sabanci, introduce us with the bewildered gang of lumpen heroes. They look for fight, beverage and women. Directors idolize this world. Bunch of hooligans with their “blessed” lumpen attitudes drink beverages, kidnap and rape a foreign prostitute who is also the victim of the same world system, with no language and no expression. Directors promote and polish this hurt and wounded underclass male ego without being critical to their real problems and/or the meanings and experiences of unemployment, poverty and deprivation from life. Standing for all “the Others”, the unknown, threatening women have taken their part to full fill the fear and fantasy.<sup>xi</sup>

The angst and dullness are not coming from not being able to be productive in a system like this but coming from not being successfully on the boat of lust and consumption. *The Bar / Barda* (2006) by Serdar Akar is the latest example of this track of films equaling consumption with corruption. He assaults and terminates everything around with ‘out off focus’ and ‘lost in the space’ camera eye. While Akar declares that he is willing to show faces

of violence, he actually reproduces violence with hostility. We, the spectators, are expected to enjoy this epidemically reproduced cruelty. Now, individual, who is the object of desire, learns and enjoys all torment and discomfort s/he experiences while s/he consumes passionately.

These particular directors, but above all Demirkubuz, claim existentialist references in their films to the major Existentialist writers; yet notwithstanding their references the stories' narration itself and the characters of their films become once anticipated nightmare of those writers they refer to. It seems that the main difference and/or the resemblance between the referrers and the referred ones are "*the existentialist nightmare came through*" characters, who are blowing in the dark and gloomy world of irresponsibility; and male whippy melodramas are also falling behind the reasoning of their state of "*indifferent, lost in space*" being. The reckless characters' acts are not about the angst which is originating from the individuals' responsible desperation and disturbance from the system and/or the state of the world they live in; above and beyond they have no will to chance anything. They do things just because they want to; no responsibility for their actions. They easily surrender themselves to the stream of fate without questioning. We do not understand why they are so angry, so lost. No spatiality, no temporality of diegesis tells us that. Since these films have very classical narrations and everything is woven in the course of continuous order, we cannot the put blame on the absurd or broken story line.

Besides, when we consider Dostoevsky's little people, little losers, we grasp the heaviness of the world surrounding them and feel the squeezing life, which put them in the corner. There are many voices and utterances while the events and the stories get thicker around his 'simple' but multilayered characters. As Bakhtin stressed out Dostoevsky's writing is polyphonic and dialogic.

If we look at Omer Kavur's films, as the recent ones from the same culture and geography, we can see all the traces of society, history and individual incorporated in his filmic space and time delicately in such a way that space and time work independently and open up a space for us for our inner film where we can comprehend the alienation and anguish of his characters.<sup>xii</sup>

All bleeding cuts search for remedy. Who want to remember, to forget, to question, to survive, to hate and to put the blame on to "the others", to create and recreate "others" all exist together in the same boat in which people in Turkey and in the world in a larger scale experience very similar mixture of puzzlement, confusion, hope and comprehension about society, and history. Rendering options are also in our new arrival directors' hands as it is for the rest of the society. This depends on whether this task is going to be undertaken in analytical or reactionary lines.

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<sup>i</sup> As stated in *North Wind* (Oberli, Switzerland, 2004) *Berlin is in Germany* (Stöhr, Hannes; Germany, 2001), *Brassed Off* (Herman, UK, 1996) *Late Full Moon* (Zahariev, Bulgaria, 1996), *Maria* (Netzer, Romania-Germany- France, 2003), *Marius & Jeannette* (Guediguian, France, 1997), *My Name is Joe* (Loach, UK, Germany, 1998), *Struggle* (Mader, Austria, 2003), *Time Out* (Cantet, France, 2001) *Navigators* (Loach, UK, 2001) *Blame it on Voltaire* (Kechiche, 2000, France) *Berlin is in Germany* (Stöhr, 2001, Germany) *Life Kills Me* (Sinapi, 20002, France). I intent to use English translation title as original foreign title if it is not stated otherwise and I will use the same for Turkish films together with their Turkish titles.

<sup>ii</sup> *Hi Tereska* (Glinski, Poland, 2001), *Purely Belter* (Herman, UK, 2000), *Ratcatcher* (Ramsay, UK, 1999), *4Ever Lilya* (Moodysson, Sweden, 2002), *Child Murders* (Szabo, Hungary, 1993), *Engel & Joe* (Jopp,

Germany, 2001), *Stolen Childhood* (Frazzi, A & A, Italy, 2004), *2:37* (Thalluri, Avustralya, 2006), *A Children's Story* (A & A Frazzi Italy, 2004), *The Year After* (İsabelle Czajka, Fransa 2006), *The Invisible Children* (Chef, Kustrica, Lee, Lund, Scotslar & Woo, 2005), *This is England* (Meadows UK, 2006), *Nobody Knows / Daremo Shiranai* (Original Foreign title) (Hirokazu, Japan 2004), *The Tracey Fragments* (McDonald, Canada, 2007)<sup>iii</sup> as in *Blame it on Voltaire* (Kechiche, France, 2000), *Journey to the Sun* (Ustaoglu, 1999, Turkiye) *Color Turkish* (Çadırcı, Turkiye, 2000), *Elephants and Grass* (Zaim, Turkiye, 2000), *Fat World* (Schütte, Germany, 1998), *Hate* (Kassovitz, France, 1995), *Head-On* (Akin, Germany 2004), *Hejar* (İpekçi, Turkiye, 2001), *Lovers on the Bridge* (Carax, France, 1991) *Paths in the Night* (Kleinert, Germany, 1999), *Perfect Circle* (Kenovic, Bosnia, 1997), *Purely Belter* (Herman, UK, 2000), *Raining Stones* (Loach, UK, 1993), *Riff- Raff* (Loach, UK, 1991) *Short Sharp Shock* (Akin, Germany, 1998), *Somersault in a Coffin* (Dervis, Turkiye, 1996), *Struggle* (Mader, Austria, 2003), *The Third Page* (Demirkubuz, Turkiye, 1999), *Town is Quiet* (Guédiguian, France, 2000)<sup>iv</sup> *Caresse* (Spain, 1997), *Anita Takes the Chance* (Spain, 2001) *To Die or not* (Spain, 2000)<sup>v</sup> *Naked* (Leigh, Mike; UK, 1993), *Fat World* (Schütte, Germany, 1998,) *Frankfurt – Millennium* (Karmakar, Germany, 1998,) *Night Shapes* (Dresen, Germany, 1998,) *Paths in the Night* (Kleinert, Germany, 1999,) <sup>vi</sup> *Mixed Pizza* (Turagay, 1997), *On Board*, (Akar, 1998), *A Madonna in Laleli*, (Sabancı, 1998) *Destiny* (Demirkubuz, 2006), *In the Pub* (Akar, 2007) are just a few to mention <sup>vii</sup> *The Seventh Continent* (1989), *Benny's Video* (1992), and *71 Fragments of Chronology of Chance* (1994) *Code Unknown* (2000,) and Seidl's film *Dog Days* (2001)<sup>viii</sup> Some of them are *L'esquive* (Kachiche, 2003, France), *Marius & Jeannette* (Guediguian, France, 1997), *The First Night of my Life*, (M. Albaladejo, 1998, Spain), *Brassed Off* (M. Herman, 1996, UK), *Where are you, Firuze? / Neredesin Firuze?* (Akay, Turkiye, 2004), *Boats Out Of Watermelon Rinds / Karpuz Kabugundan Gemiler Yapmak* (Ulucay Turkiye, 2004), *Ice Cream, I Scream / Dondurmam Gaymak* (Aksu Turkiye, 2006), *His Secret Life* (Ferzan Ozpetek, Italy 2001), *In July* (Fatih Akin, Germany, 2000), *Vizontele* (Erdogan, Turkiye, 2001)<sup>ix</sup> Yesim Ustaoglu with: *Waiting for Clouds / Bulutları Beklerken* 2004, *Journey to the Sun/Gunesi beklerken*, 1999, *İz / Traces* 1994 and Handan İpekçi with: *Hejar / Buyuk Adam Kuçuk Ask* 2001.<sup>x</sup> *After the Fall / Eylul Firtinasi* (Atif Yılmaz from the 60s generation of directors; 1999), *Vizontele Tuuba* (Yılmaz Erdoğan, 2003), *My Father And Son / Babam Ve Oglum* (Çagan Irmak, 2005) *Home Cming / Eve Dunus* (Omer Ugur, 2006) *International/ Beynelmilel*, (S. S. Onder & M. Gulmez, 2006), *Fikret Bey* (to some extent related wit September the 12th; Selma Koksall, Turkiye, 2007)<sup>xi</sup> *Confession the / İtiraf*, (2002) *Fate / Yazgi* (2002) *Waiting Room the/ Bekleme Odası* (2004) and *Fate / Kader* (2006) by Zeki Demirkubuz; *Mixed Pizza/ Karisik Piza* (Umur Turagay, 1997), *Fall of the Angel / Melegin Dususu* (Semih Kaplanoğlu, 2004), *Balance and Maneuver / Balans Ve Manevra* (Teoman, 2005) and *On Board / Gemide*, (1998), *Offside / Dar Alanda Kisa Paslasmalar* (2000), *In the Bar / Barda*(2006) by Serdar Akar and in some deep reading *Climates / İklimler* (2006) by Nuri Bilgi Ceylan.<sup>xii</sup> His most famous, most related one to our discussion is *Motherland Hotel / Anayurt Oteli* (1987) but if we talk about same examples from 90's we should also mention: *The Secret Face / Gizli Yuz*, (1991), *Journey Of The Clock-Hand/ Akrebin Yolculugu* (1997)