

“Violence Muted women under scene of some glorified lumpen men” interviewed by Basak Senova in **New Feminism: worlds of feminism, queer and networking conditions** Marina Grzinic and Rosemarie Reitsamer (eds) Vienna: Löcker publishers, 2008.

## Violence

### *Muted women under scene of some glorified lumpen men*

Basak Senova interviews Zeynep Tul Akbal Sualp

*Violence is now ubiquitous. Normalized. Televised. Neutralized. Mechanically, it spreads everywhere and fuses into the various layers of social life. It operates with the social, economical, political, and cultural extremes; the rivalries of diverse and contradictory lifestyles, political agendas, economical systems and social segregations. Accepted. Legitimized. Violence is now “visibly” used as an accurate tool to transgress personal boundaries and to subordinate arbitrary regulations and control. Film critic and scholar Zeynep Tul Akbal Sualp traces how the “woman” has been muted and vanished in Turkey’s cinema through the representation modes of violence, along with blind acceptance.*

Basak Senova: There is a remarkable and even excessive demonstration of social violence in a number of independent post 90’s films produced in Turkey. How pervasive and encouraging is this violence, exposed on the screen?

Zeynep Tul Akbal Sualp: This is a much broader issue felt within all the layers of and relations in the society. Obviously it is readable in films and in some TV dramas.

BS: Could the causes of this social violence be regarded as a post-traumatic syndrome of economical erosions and social corruptions increased after the swift shift to neo-liberal economy in the 80’s?

ZTAS: There seems to be a strong relationship with long time social traumas in which no mourning and healing have never been experienced. This includes historical processes such as the fall of the Ottoman Empire, the transition period of the young Turkish Republic and the leftist turns and their brutal falls brought forth by coups, followed by deep silences. Naturally, the strong and consecutively developed economic crises resulting in high unemployment and gradually growing poverty, creating hopelessness and helplessness among the silent majorities, mainly male majorities, are all significant in this regard. I believe these bring strong discomfort and even hate toward “the others”, amongst whom women have received their share.

BS: In this respect, is there any common point of convergence or a representation mode addressing the “woman”, while processing and representing violence in the post 90’s films from Turkey?

**ZTAS:** Women have gradually faded away from the scenes as characters and have become backdrops in most of the dramas. No meaningful dialogues have been written for them. On screen, they have started to emerge as new types of femme fatale characters; but now from different backgrounds and classes. These women have appeared from the city skirts, from lower classes as morbid provocateurs and seducers who lead men to commit crime, violence and irrational actions and, of course, become the victims of these brutalities and violence. We have begun to witness more and more verbal and physical violence in the attitudes and tones of these male characters. The little man's shattering life is now full of drama and no women are included. They are either absent or weakly represented as cartooned and ill two-dimensional silhouettes. In *Gemide (On Board)* and *Laleli'de Bir Azize (A Madonna in Laleli)* (1998), which share the same script and characters, the directors Serdar Akar and Kudret Sabanci treat a bunch of male losers, 'lost in nowhere' in the city and hungry for everything, as heroes of the lumpen world. The stylization of both directors is built on glorifying this lumpen world. This gang of male losers pick up a foreign blond woman, also a victim of the same global system, who has left her own country and become a prostitute in this weird part of the city, with no language and no expression. They brutally victimize and rape her in their "blessed" lumpen attitudes. Free of self criticism and an analytical approach to society and the world system, the self-indulgence of the directors, with this stylistic and some sort of sanctified male lumpen life style, urges them to glorify and polish this wounded underclass male ego without any interest in their real problems and/or the meanings and experiences of unemployment, poverty and deprivation from life. In this glorified underclass world "specific to our directors", women have taken their part as the unknown, threatening other, and stand for all "Others". These "manufactured women are also the fantasies and, at the same time fears of the wounded male egos, and seemingly the directors. So they have either appeared as backdrops, mannequins, new fashion femme fatale characters converted into private space (home) and lower class community surroundings, or simply do not exist in the stories. (*İtiraf /the Confession, Yazgi /Fate* (2002) and *The Waiting Room* (2004) and *Kader / Fate* (2006) by Zeki Demirkubuz; and in some deep reading, *İklimler/ Climates* (2006) by Nuri Bilgi Ceylan.)

**BS:** How about these "femme fatale" characters; could their existence be utilized as "threats" to effect the development of the plot organization or the acceleration of the climax points within these films?

**ZTAS:** There are almost no dialogues written for these homemade "femme fatale" characters; their character developments are either extremely poor or do not exist at all. In the most recent example, *Barda / In the Bar* (2006), Serdar Akar reproduces this experience of violence even more strongly and brutally. This time we have a group of young middle class men and women, who are attacked by a bunch of lower class outsiders. We can even recognize them as underclass street dwellers, usually excluded from the "dissent places", making them the usual suspects. And the fear and fantasy are expectedly realized. They torture and rape them in a bar on an ordinary night without a reason and price to pay.

**BS:** Do you think these "male" directors have made a conscious choice to raise issues around social "violence" and to question the endangered positions of the women in

society? Or do you think their approach is also sexist and serves to create the climate for social violence by normalizing its various processes and connotations?

**ZTAS:** Fear and the fantasy regenerate the forms of representation of specific genre and aesthetic whenever rearrangement and redefinition of labor divisions are necessary, and the new cognitive maps for industrialized and/or post-industrialized urban life's cramped space need to be sorted out; or when the male ego has to deal with unemployment and confront this new shared space; or when broken social wholeness and disabled publicness of everyday life become a heavy pain over the shoulders. Yet today, this fear and anxiety are much more layered, multicultural and over-spread. Anxieties become complicated by unsocialization of production and experience. Public life is fractured and fragmented, and so are its spaces. In this transformed "film nourish" chronotope of our time, it seems that the experience of city dwellers is forced to remap, reconfigure the conditions of coexistence, order, division of labor, and reconceptualize the survival qualities, definitions and experiences of the self and the other on the levels of class, gender and ethnicity.

This specific chronotope of film noir that mainly employs expressionist poetics and allegorizes the social conditions and survival strategies visualizes the experiences of city and inhabitants confused and desperately seeking for identity in order to feel the gravity and understand their reason for existence. We see that this genre does not only belong to the post war chronotope of certain geographies such as the Weimar Republic of the 20s and 30s.

**BS:** The independent post 90's films in Turkey are mostly obsessed with narration of mundane details and casual experiences of daily urban life with obscure political statements. Along with their overemphasis on violence, how do you define their genre?

**ZTAS:** Turkey's cinema has sounded like murmuring and mourning for some time. Since the 80's, films have mainly been about (self) censored personalized confessions with assaulted memories. However an inconsistent yet seemingly strong tendency worthy of study has appeared in films, TV series and even TV commercials. The public disclosure of the mafia – state relationship has been strongly influential; directors have become fascinated by Hollywood's retro-noir style and the big metropolises of the world have gradually turned into film noir studios. These factors have had significant influences on Turkey's cinema after 90's. We can observe diverse tendencies when we look into films. One tendency is to make films appropriate for the international entertainment and consciousness industry that veil the true sounds and looks of living streets, turning street experiences into raw material for mass media consumption via the reproduction of ideologies for these new forms of representation. Fictionalized experiences replacing daily life practices not only block possibilities for the forms of representations, but also become functional in the international market of globalizing fiction effect industry, -not as finished work, but to be recycled in the hands of bigger industries. *The Bandit*, (Y. Turgul, 1996) and *Cholera Street* (M. Altıoklar, 1997) are of that trend. The other track, being more silent, does not use the opportunities of public relations and conserves their uncritical approach to the genre, however they have not shown loyalty to it. It seems that some conditional and trendy influences might have played a role in their position. *Be Love Colder Than Death*, (C. Gerede, 1995), *The 80th Step*, (T. Giritlioglu, 1996),

*Everything's Gonna be Great*, (O. Vargi, 1998) are among such films. We can also observe another in-between group of films, such as *Mixed Pizza* (U. Turagay, 1997), *On Board* (S. Akar, 1998), *A Madonna in Laleli* (K. Sabanci, 1998), which take a reactionary look to stand towards the world they live in and draw a dark vision of Istanbul, work in chronotope of film noir, yet never come to the point of criticism. On the other hand some significant films, *Somersault in a Coffin* (D. Zaim, 1996), *Innocence* (Z. Demirkubuz, 1997), *Sawdust Tales* (B. Pirhasan, 1997), *Journey to the Sun* (Y. Ustaoglu, 1999) are compatible with their diverse and similar properties in their disclosural story telling that opens up a space for "inner film", memory, and our common cognitive maps of the world today.

BS: As the backdrop of their event sequence, urban experiences are always given through the dialogues and descriptions of the main characters. Therefore, the illustrations of the cities in these films are constructed through "oral narration", unlike the consistent notion of "the city" in which the resources, ideas, experiences and histories are converged and reserved through "written and documented" narrations. The city is also always absent and distant. In the same manner, we observe "women" only through the narration chain of the male characters. Is it possible to make an analogy between the notion of the "city" and the notion of the "woman" in terms of this distance?

ZTAS: This cold, glorifying attitude of lumpen culture in some specific films seems to reproduce hostile feelings for the city and women. This city is Istanbul, which is a chaotic metropolis carrying all uneven developments and its sharp conflicts; and the women of this city are their pointed enemy under these conditions. Yet, now this hate is even more so stressed because of unemployment. Women and the city stand for all fears and fantasies constantly produced by social, cultural, economic deprivations and poverty of the post prefixed era.

The city moves in and out here and there. Habitants neither gain confidence over their cognitive maps, nor can they resist against the flow. No map is sustainable. Both the city and the habitants are like morphing organisms. There are indefinite and indefinable negotiations, conflicts and crashes. I wonder whether the living city space stands for the tower of Babylon or is a hope for the fourth look, heteroglossia and dialogic encounter, or only offers a terminal for passengers of nobody's lands to stand by for some time; or whether they all coexist simultaneously. I also would like to question whether what we broadly call today's culture might be a veiling shield in between those looks: producing an irresistible flow in-between the looks and dialogs, and contributing to the production of "*out-of-focus*", "*visually made image subjects*". "*out-of-focus*", "*visually made image subjects*", are vacuumed and sealed, look for off-screen spaces for cognitive maps in an emerged environment which is a simulated chronotope of an ideologically appropriated world of to the "excluded and self excluding ones". This particular way of looks in hybrid forms, and the aesthetic tendencies lay over the tension between the cognitive search and survival strategies under the shifts of imperialism, which is constantly re-mapping and rearranging the world.

BS: According to your point, in these films, neither the directors and nor male characters allow "character development" of the female characters/figures. The female characters/figures possess and at the same time lack whatever they are entitled

to have from beginning to end. These male characters have a prejudiced illusion concerning the image of the “woman”, thus, secure this illusion and fulfill their secret desire for the Other to remain as the “Other”: by freezing out the female characters/figure as speechless or imperfect dolls. Does it also mean that these directors do not allow any kind of identification development between the female audience and the female character/figure?

ZTAS: This is a complicated and multi-layered matter. The same conditions of the era, with all its aspects, are also valid for women. The class differences, unemployment, social values, which are further complicated by feudal and capitalistic clashes on both public and private spheres, all produce a diverge spectrum for women’s existence and experiences in society. But obviously, for most women audience, these films cannot easily create the common horizons for their experiences. They might see this male lumpen world as alien fantasies, which have nothing to do with them. Some discomfort and weirdness might correctly describe their distance to those female characters if they have not already been the part of the glorified lumpen male chauvinist world. However, under this misted world conditions it might be the possibility that you could identify yourself with your other or/and your other’s other depending on class, social strata and women’s specific conditions in the world system,- labour divisions and women’s consciousness gained in struggle against all these conditions.

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*The aforementioned films:*

***Be Love Colder Than Death*** (Canan Gerede, 1995)  
***The Bandit*** (Yavuz Turgul, 1996)  
***Somersault in a Coffin*** (Dervis Zaim, 1996)  
***Innocence*** (Zeki Demirkubuz, 1997)  
***Sawdust Tales*** (Baris Pirhasan, 1997)  
***The 80th Step*** (Tomris Giritlioglu, 1996)  
***Cholera Street*** (Mustafa Altıoklar, 1997)  
***Mixed Pizza*** (Umur Turagay, 1997)  
***Everything’s Gonna be Great*** (Omer Vargi, 1998)  
***On Board*** (Serdar Akar, 1998)  
***A Madonna in Laleli*** (Kudret Sabancı, 1998)  
***Journey to the Sun*** (Yesim Ustaoglu, 1999)  
***İtiraf /the Confession*** (Zeki Demirkubuz, 2002)  
***Yazgi / Fate*** (Zeki Demirkubuz, 2002)  
***The Waiting Room*** (Zeki Demirkubuz, 2004)  
***İklimler/ Climates*** (Nuri Bilge Ceylan, 2006)  
***Kader / Fate*** (Zeki Demirkubuz, 2006)  
***Barda / In the Bar*** (Serdar Akar, 2006)

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*Sources/readings in Turkish include research, books and articles by Fatmagul Berktaş, Berna Moran, Jale Parla, I. C. Schick & E. A. Tonak, Taner Timur, Murat Belge, Nilgun Abisel, Ayla Kanbur, Lutfu Akad, Nurdan Gurbilek, Serpil Kirel, Asli Daldal, Nigar Posteki, Semire Ruken Ozturk, Sukran Kuyucak Esen, Giovanni*

*Scognamillo, Nabi Avci, Fuat Keyman, Mahmut Mutman, Meyda Yegenoglu, Nikos Poulantzas, and Fusun Ustel.*

*Other sources/readings include articles and books by Anderson Benedict, Mikhail Mikhailovich Bakhtin, Etienne Balibar, Michael Bernard-Donalds, Homi K. Bhabha, D. B. Clarke, Richard Dyer, Gellner Ernest, Mett Hjort, Scott MacKenzie, Eric Hobsbawn, Oskar Negt, Alexander Kluge, Frank Krutnik, Trinh T. Min-Ha, Henri Lefebvre, Julian Murphet, Fred Pfeil, Jim Pines, Paul Willemen, Berry Sandywell, Michael Sorkin, Gayatri C. Spivak, Ella Shohat, Robert Stam, Tzvetan Todorov, Paul Willeman, and Peter Wollen.*

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