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Turkish Cinema and Modernity**

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ABSTRACT

When cinema was invented by Lumiere Brothers; cinema didn't simply take place in the modern city, it was *about* the modern city. As modern cities emerged around the new social conditions – such as occurrence of new social classes, new daily routines, the increasing speed etc. Cinema became a medium which reflected, refracted and commented on the modern city life. Since cinema describes the newly emerged city life, the essence of cinema-city relationship lies beneath the 'ordinary' stories of 'ordinary' people. The recurring cinematic motifs describe the subconscious of the societies, which allows a vivid analysis of the urban sociology. It is essential to perceive cities with their inhabitants, and cinema is a very powerful tool. One of the strongest examples of the cinema revealing the modern city life can be seen in Turkey. Turkey experienced a very sudden phenomenon of urbanisation/modernization during the mid-20th century. In this period, almost every single movie made is about the domestic migration from Anatolian villages to Istanbul, the struggles brought by industrialization, and the city expanding continuously. This paper aims to question the potentials of studying cinema as an input to urban studies; and as a case study, the cinematic visions of İstanbul in the mid-20th century will be examined. These visions will be associated with the modernization practices.

Keywords: Turkish Cinema, Mid-20th Century, Istanbul, Modernization.

Introduction

In the recent decades, film studies are commonly used in many interdisciplinary fields; such as cultural studies, history and sociology, “*and no doubt, gaining ground on other fields too*” (Lu and Penz, 2011: 6). No matter which methodology used, studies in these fields cannot be conducted without studying the human behavior. However, the dynamic and ambiguous nature of human behavior is very challenging to study. How can cinematic visions of cities contribute to this problem?

Many scholars claim that cinema is a mobile eye, gazing in the everyday of the cities.

For Vertov, camera is a mobile eye, traveling in time and space, recording every detail (Michelson, 1984) an eye which is perhaps more superior than human eye as it reveals the subconscious and the unseen aspects of space. However, this gaze is not limited to reflecting the spatial aspects of the cities. According to Bruno, cinema is named after the word “kinema” in Greek, which means both “motion” and “emotion”; therefore cinema is not only a visual transport, but also is a “emotional transport” (Bruno, 2008: 26). Accordingly, for Virillio the cinema screen became a city square since the beginning of the 20th century (Virillio, 1991: 25), since cinema was invented as a medium reflecting the everyday modern city life.

With this perspective, it can be claimed that film studies offer quantitative data upon the everyday urban life of the cities. For example, for the case of İstanbul, Erkaslan claimed that cinema recorded the unmeasurable aspects of the city (Erkaslan, 2003: 77) which no maps or any qualitative data could not document. This quantitative data emerges from the ordinary stories of ordinary people, as they tell the stories of the everyday life practices.

However, it is crucial to remember that cinematic spaces are mediated. Orr claims *designed world of the cinematic city thus refracts the designed world of the living city, and often adds its own signatures. It isolates the urban segment and transforms it into a scene* (Orr, 2003: 284). Therefore, any characteristics of any filmic space can be exaggerated, modified, described in a phantasmatic way, or be reframed to emphasize a specific point. Films do not only reflect the actualities of the cities, but generates its unique urban imageries; representing the dreams, visions, fears and desires upon the experienced everyday life of the cities.

Then, what are the benefits of studying how the city life is fictionalized? According to Mennel, the importance of studying cinema is to examine how cities are imagined, dealing with issues such as modernity, reproduction of power associated with gender, race, class, migration, and so on. However, analyzing the filmic representation of a city goes beyond perceiving the city as a representation of the social reality: the construction of the filmic space and the cinematic text, and the comments on the represented conditions should be taken into consideration. This requires an analysis of filmic elements such as cinematography, mise-en-scène, the editing, by intersecting the methods and resources of both urban studies and film studies (Mennel, 2008: 16). For Passolini,

The cinema is a language which expresses reality with reality. So the question is: What is the difference between the cinema and reality? Practically none. I realized that the cinema is a system of signs whose semiology corresponds to a possible semiology of the system of signs of reality itself (Passolini, 1969: 29).

Therefore, although the nature of cinema is mediated, it is powerful in reflecting the actualities of the city.

However, while retrieving data from movies for urban studies, it is crucial to underline that studying a single movie as a part of an urban study by only using the methods of filmic studies may be misleading to understand a certain period's circumstances. Although studying a single movie through film studies' methods is very fruitful in terms of understanding the emotions, psychology, and the cinematic space; it is not sufficient to study a single movie to deduce conclusions in urban studies. Conducting such a study requires to identify many recurring motifs. According to Kracauer,

In order to investigate today's society, one must listen to the confessions of the products of its film industries. They are all blabbing a rude secret, without really wanting to. In the endless sequence of films, a limited number of typical themes recur again and again; they reveal how society wants to see itself (Kracauer, 1995: 294).

Therefore, the repeating motifs in movies should be studied in depth. When a theme or motif tends to repeat, it goes beyond being coincidental, but reflects some feelings experienced by many people in many different cases. Then, it would go beyond a singular data.

While seeking for recurring motifs, and making an argument about urban studies, it is essential to compare the data with other disciplines. In "Urban Revolution", Lefebvre claims that "fragmentary sciences" fail to describe urban cases with integrity (Lefebvre, 2003). Therefore, for many years, urban studies have been dealing with the problem of integrating a variety of disciplines in order to investigate an urban case comprehensively. Cinema, a medium of story-telling and mediating the actualities of cities, wandering in the everyday life of cities reflecting the spatial qualities, offers a potential to integrate many disciplines.

The aim of this paper is to conduct a study in many fragments: Not a single movie or a single theme will be analyzed, but instead, images and themes from various movies will be investigated. This will help to study the circumstances of a specific period by avoiding from being stuck into central cases, but instead, grasping the representation of Istanbul through movies in a more holistic way.

Case Study: Istanbul after 1950's

As a case study, the cinema of İstanbul after 1950's will be examined. This case study and period is chosen for a variety of reasons. Initially, this period is

characterized with critical transformations in the everyday life, such as fast economic growth due to industrialization and migration resulting in dense urbanization practices. These radical changes can be associated with 1950 elections: It leads to many economic and social changes which radically reshaped Istanbul's urban form (Gül, 2009: 127). In the following decades, until 1980's, although the political structure of Turkey had critical transformations, the influences of the radical changes which occurred during 1950's were clearly seen. Most of these changes were associated with the concept modernity, and they were mostly related to the outcomes of industrialization; such as massive migration and squatter housing.

The film industry accompanied these critical transformations: After the 1950's, a critical boom in the movie industry is seen. From 1950 to 1959, the yearly data claim that number of the domestic movies has increased from 23 to 95; the number of the foreign movies has increased from 229 to 246. Accordingly, the number of the movie theatres in İstanbul has increased from 92 to 170; and the total number of cinema audience has increased from 11,822,000 to 25,161,000 (Bozis, 1969: 4). Therefore, not only more movies were produced, but also the medium of cinema found the possibility to reach more people.

As more movies were produced and viewed, the context of these movies went under a critical transformation too. During this period, a very big percentage - almost exactly every one- of the movies pondered the theme "migrating from Anatolia to Istanbul". This was a critical topic for this period, as Istanbul received massive migration during this period: The population of Istanbul increased to reach 1.2 million in 1955, which was only 285,000 in 1950 (Gül 2009: 146). Although Istanbul wasn't the only city being urbanized and therefore receiving massive migration during these years, as Izmir and Ankara also had a similar process, they never became so dominant protagonists of migration movies. Istanbul was somehow more dominant, as it was reflected as a "spectacular" city to live in, seen as a door opening to the Western world, a city with lots of life opportunities. In these movies, many themes associated with modernization practices commonly tend to repeat. For the case of mid-century modernism in Istanbul, these themes are acquiring Western traditions and a spectacle culture, massive migration, emergence of shantytowns, industrialization, the generation of urban uncanny.

Trans-ing: Eastern vs Western Culture

According to Arslan, the film industry in the mid-20th century reflects a stage of "trans-ing", which is 'transferring, translating or simply moving across or outside', between the westernized and cosmopolitan Western cultures and the more traditional Eastern culture. (Arslan, 2011: 63). In many movies in this period, a struggle of this transition, especially experienced by the incomers to Istanbul from Anatolia, is commonly seen. More interestingly, it is the will to transform, which drove many people to Istanbul. The traditional practices slowly faded to Western, and most commonly, to American culture. Many aspects of the daily life,

such as the increased use of individual cars, changes in the spectacle culture, consuming American products, watching American movies, were imitated.

Figure 1. *The Excitement of the First TV in the Neighborhood.* Movie: *Canım Kardeşim* (My Dear Brother, Ertem Eğilmes, 1973)



The Movie “My Dear Brother takes place in a neighborhood which struggles with poverty. As the first television enters to the neighborhood, everyone gathers to see it, with a big excitement. Television differs from any other commodity: television represents a door opening to the Western world, as it brings images from “terra incognitos”, therefore was very valuable.

Figure 2. *The Images of Mobility.* Movie: “*Kanun Namına*” (In the Name of the Law), Lütfü Akad, 1952



Similarly in the movie “In the Name of the Law”, camera recorded the increasing mobility in the city, and the increased use of personal cars. According to Hubbard, *film was used as a medium which allowed urban citizens to make sense of the city, as it captured the frenetic pace of the city in which other media could not* (Hubbard, 2006: 62). The increasing speed, especially the image of cars is highly associated with the image of modernity, as it is the epitome of modern cities, opening up previously inaccessible spaces and increasing the daily speed.

Figure 3. *Hilton Hotel. Movie: Gurbet Kuşları (Birds of Exile, Halit Refiğ, 1964)*



While two main characters of the movie discuss whether should they move to America to have a better life, as the female character is willing to move but the male character believes they can live a happier life in their own country, Hilton Hotel is placed in between them as a “barrier” (Türeli, 2014). The Hilton Hotel, built with the International style, is commonly used as a motif representing the western life style.

In the postwar period, the Turkish-American were intensified, stated commonly as “*Making Turkey a little America*”, accompanying another common political slogan of this period; “*Creating one millionaire per neighbourhood*” (Gül 2009: 129). With the combination of these mottos, American life style was reflected as a glamorous way to live, and commonly imposed to the Turkish society. This caused Istanbul being seen as an attractive city center.

However, while on one side a glamorous life style was imposed, as in the case of the movie “My Dear Brother”, many incomers faced severe poverty problems. Since the state was not capable of addressing the housing problem of migrants, the fringes of the city acquired its first “shantytowns” (*gecekondu* in Turkish, being translated as *built overnight*). This self-aided housing was an incremental process: Families settled as the first room was constructed, and more rooms were added as they gathered more resources or needed more space (Bozdoğan, 2013: 102-103). Besides the fringes, the neighborhoods close to factories also acquired their shantytown neighborhoods, due to the massive wave of migration for labor. This generated a big conflict: On one side, having wealthy life, while a different class struggled.

Figure 4. *The Duality of City Fringe and the City Center. Movie: Canım Kardeşim (My Dear Brother, Ertem Eğilmes, 1973)*



As the poorer classes dealt with access to primary needs, such as health care and education; the central spaces of Istanbul lived a very different life: The northern part of the city was covered with modern concrete apartment buildings and wide roads (Türeli, 2014: 149).

Figure 5. *The Duality of City Fringe and the City Center. Movie: Gurbet Kuşları (Birds of Exile, Halit Refiğ, 1964)*



Influences of Industrialization

According to Maktav, the movie “Karanlıkta Uyananlar” (*Those Awakening in the Dark*, Ertem Göreç, 1964) which reflects the struggles of the working class, is “the description and the spatial correspondence of the labour-capital relationship in the city”: It takes place in neighborhood of workers, established in the periphery of a factory. The script of the film was based on a real protest (The Kavel Protest), the movie was shot in an actual neighborhood of workers, and some of the actors were real actors from the union (Maktav, 2013: 278-279). In the later years, other films told the stories of the working class and vividly showed their struggles: such as the movie *Diyet (Blood Money)*, Lütfü Akad, 1973) told the story of Hasan, a worker who lost his arm to the “monstrous machine” in an accident.

Figure 6. *The View of the Industrialized City.* Movie: “Karanlıkta Uyananlar” (Those Awakening in the Dark, Ertem Göreç, 1964)



Figure 7. *The Protest.* Movie: “Karanlıkta Uyananlar” (Those Awakening in the Dark, Ertem Göreç, 1964)



The feudal relations in the factory lead to a protest, which was once again inspired from an actual protest. According to Maktav, the protest was celebrated as a festival, as the entire neighborhood joined the protests whether they work in the factory or not. Protesters carried their furniture to the protest area, generating their own habitat in there (Maktav, 2013: 279).

The Urban Uncanny

The term “uncanny” is commonly associated with the emergence of modernity/ modern cities: Defined by Freud and Jenks, uncanny is space-bound concept of feeling unsafe, threatened and alienated. According to Vidler, “first in the house, (...) that pretends to afford the utmost security while opening itself to the secret intrusion of terror, and then the city, where what was once walled and intimate, the conformation of community (...) has been rendered strange by the spatial incursions of modernity” (Vidler, 1992: 119) Uncanny is not a property of space, but a representation of a mental state provoking a disturbing ambiguity. Although Istanbul was reflected as a glamorous city; due to the fast-paced life and

the crowd, the new incomers faced a big fear upon the city. Migration plays a key role in the emergence of the “Uncanny”: According to Mcquire, home is not a dwelling space inextricably bound to a particular place anymore, as the demands of the social mobility transformed the definition to home to a relation of coping with *wherever one finds oneself amongst a crowd of others* (Mcquire, 1997: 6).

Figure 8. *Fear upon the City, with the City in the Background.* Movie: *Gurbet Kuşları* (Birds of Exile, Halit Refiğ, 1964)



Figure 9. *Sexual Harassment during Entertainment.* Movie: *Ah Güzel İstanbul* (O Beautiful Istanbul, Atıf Yılmaz, 1966)



Not only the plots, mise-en-scenes and themes of the movies, but also the names of movies are very powerful in reflecting the fear upon the city: “The Nights of İstanbul (İstanbul Geceleri, Mehmet Muhtar, 1950)”; “Bitter Life (Acı Hayat, Metin Erksan, 1962)”; “Murderous City (Öldüren Şehir, Lütfi Akad, 1953)”.

Conclusions

As a method, studying the city through its cinematic visions sheds light to the unseen spots of urban studies. It helps to gather the quantitative data within the conventional methods. One can write many historical texts about conditions in a

specific period, however how would these data utilized if human behavior and response is omitted? One of the ways to learn from the cities is to study how the societies responded to these conditions. Therefore, the ways the city was perceived, the human responses and emotions to a city's everyday life should be studied within the urban studies.

Studying Istanbul through its cinematic visions provides to analyze the human responses to the modernization proves that Turkey witnessed during 1950s. In these years, as a city which represented the "modernization", was both feared and desired by its citizens. Thus, Istanbul had some other dualities: Such as the conflicts within the Eastern and Western cultures, the centers and the fringes of the city, class conflicts, the benevolent and malevolent aspects of the urban life, and so on.

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