

**Disembodied Masses, Suffering Spirits: The Unbearable Weightiness Of
The “Being” In New Turkish Films**

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Abstract

As a source of inspiration for the modern cinema, existentialism provided a base for the triangulation of the relation between modern narration and space, time and body. As Turkish directors generally possessed totally contrasting/opposing perceptions of these concepts, they tended to maintain a distance between the modern cinematographic narration and their film making style, although some of them used the key concepts of emancipation, alienation and loneliness of the “subject” in some films, especially in the years following the 1980 military coup. The aim of this work is to conduct a survey of the Neo Islamic films which explore the suffering spirits of these two groups: Islamic intellectuals are wedged between living as part of a disembodied mass under the premises of Islamic Philosophy (Sufism) and necessarily being a prominent “subject” as a result of belonging to the new Islamic bourgeoisie; and secular intellectuals utilize Islamic symbols and philosophy both as an inspiration for their film language and to find the answers to their existential questions and pains.

Key Words: Turkish film industry, modern cinema, alienation and loneliness, modernization,

As a consequence of the economic, cultural, social and mental transformation in Western modernization, existentialism became a well-known and significant philosophical movement that placed the individual “subject” at its centre.

Representatives of Existentialism, a school of philosophy that emerged in France towards the end of the first half of the 20th century, are Martin Heidegger, Karl Jaspers, Jean-Paul Sartre, Gabriel Marcel and Maurice Merleau-Ponty. However, its philosophical basis was previously founded by philosophers such as Nietzsche and Sören Aabye Kierkegaard. Main features and characteristics defining Existentialism are as follows:

1) Existentialism suggests that existence is, above all, individual and partial, and always refers to my, your or his/her existence. Therefore, it refuses any doctrine that considers human

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beings as manifestations of an eternal or infinite essence, and Idealism which argues that the reality exists as Spirit, Mind, Intelligence, Consciousness, Idea or Soul.

2) The movement states that existence is primarily a problem of presence, that is, a problem of its very presence, and corresponds to a search for the meaning of existence. Within this context, strongly opposing any scientific, objective and analytical approach, Existentialism focuses especially on a doctrine of the general meaning of existence, a certain ontology through analyzing the temporal structure of existence.

(Der. Yıldırım. 2017)

As a source of inspiration for the modern cinema, existentialism provided a base for the triangulation of the relation between modern narration and space, time and body. The distinct feature of modernist films is that they not only problematize specific problems in the political, social and economic life in the 20th century but also present these problems with an individual style in the sense that Jameson once described. In modernist cinema narratives, cinematographic elements are based on existentialist philosophy in which the individual focuses on his/her own existence, influencing all the works of art of the time. Focusing on the individual, modern cinema narratives enable the directors to reflect on their own existential questions and the audience to question their own existences via its metacinematic attitude. Directors such as Tarkovsky, Antonioni, Bresson, Bergman and Pasolini who are considered to be the pioneers of the movement “present certain problems and questions essentially dealt within Existentialism such as contingency, freedom, pain, alienation, fate, responsibility, conscience and the conflict between thought and action, all of which also reflect the problems and questions of the directors themselves” (Savař, 2001, p.182). As for the audience who usually get lost within the illusion created for them via classical narrative codes, directors try to break the identification process and expect them to think about their own existences through long takes and ask similar questions by constantly reminding them the fact that they are watching a film. Bresson, for example, intentionally breaks the communication between the audience and the character. In *Au Hasard Balthazar*, he leads the audience to irrelevant details through the short takes. The characters are so pessimistic that the film can easily turn into a melodrama with a different filming and editing. However, Bresson completely distorts the melodramatic structure. He wants an active audience who are expected to make sense of the objects and the space in the short takes. And for that reason, *mise-en-scène* does not have a great significance in his films. “Getting people accustomed to make prophecies about the whole by just offering them a piece of it makes them prophets; or rather makes them desire to be prophets.” (as cited in Kolker, 1983: 219) Like all the directors of the New Wave, Bresson

too considers cinema as an object of desire. He subdues romanticism by tearing down desire and expects the audience to complete the fragmented whole. “A director like Godard would surely include his characters, his audience and his very self in every single moment and phase of this quest, and search for a space where they can actively make certain connections. Bresson isolates himself from the work of art, and, instead, leaves the audience with a fragmented discourse full of looks demanding a gruesome sorrow and a feeling of failure and weakness, of blank faces and of rooms.” (Kolker, 1983: 219) Antonioni, on the other hand, uses time, in which he addresses themes such as alienation, loneliness, love, pain and passion without using any dramatic method, to let the audience express themselves and absorb all they have seen. “Antonioni gives his audience the time they need. Sequences are so long that filmic time and real time coincide. Audience wait in vain, because either nothing happens (the character falls victim to an accident or commits suicide) or a lot happens” (Büker, 1997: 29). At theaters, it is mostly common to hear audiences’ laughs, sobs and whistles as a reaction to what they see. However, during Antonioni’s *L’Avventura* at Cannes film festival in 1960, the audience screamed “Cut! Cut!” watching the extremely long sequence in which the female character runs in the hotel corridor. The reason was the fact that most of the sequences in the film was much longer than the eye was used to see, giving the impression as if they were hanged on the screen. Expecting to watch an “adventure” film, the audience was faced with a film featuring an unusual time and space which differed completely from the narrative structure of adventure films. That was because the director preferred to present the events in such a filmic time that ran almost parallel to real time without cutting any detail that seemed to be irrelevant.

Besides problematizing time, open disclosure of filmic elements normally hidden in classical cinema is another metacinematic technique, which enables modernist filmmakers to constantly remind the audience the fact that they are watching a film. In *La Chinoise* (Godard, 1967), Guillaume turns to the camera and says: “You believe that I’m playing the clown because I am in the process of making a film, or because there are technicians around me, but not at all. It’s because there’s a camera in front of me that I’m sincere.” (Kolker, 1983: 159) Bergman, for example, repeats the same scene twice in his movie *Persona*, thus preventing the audience to find out what is going on. A line between Bibi Andersson and Liv Ullman is repeated twice. In the first shot, we only see a close-up of Liv Ullmann. In the second shot, we see Bibi Anderson. The same thing is told twice with the same lines. In a classical film, this scene would be created by a shot-reverse shot, thus creating a present time illusion. In *Persona*, the same scene is repeated twice by different shots, emphasizing filmic techniques.

As Turkish directors generally possessed totally contrasting/opposing perceptions of these concepts, they tended to maintain a distance between the modern cinematographic narration and their film making style, although some of them used the key concepts of emancipation, alienation and loneliness of the “subject” in some films, especially in the years following the 1980 military coup. But, since modernization had not been experienced as an organic process in Turkey and the dominant power of collective consciousness disallows the emergence of “subject”, these films had no great impact on either the audience or the Turkish film industry.

From the Ottoman era to the present day, like an aching hollow tooth which looks unblemished, what has appeared to be Turkish Modernity actually has little substance and is problematic for both Islamic and secular intellectuals. The aim of this work is to conduct a survey of the New Turkish Films which explore the suffering spirits of these two groups: Islamic intellectuals are wedged between living as part of a disembodied mass under the premises of Islamic Philosophy (Sufism) and necessarily being a prominent “subject” as a result of belonging to the new Islamic bourgeoisie; and secular intellectuals utilize Islamic symbols and philosophy both as an inspiration for their film language and to find the answers to their existential questions and pains.

The New Turkish cinema is considered as art on both national and international platforms, religion has become an object of metaphorical expressions, full of mystical elements and references that enable philosophical examinations, rather than a clearly suggested case or issue in the movies of directors representing either viewpoint. The director of the movie *Anka Kuřu*, for example, which is considered to be the “native Matrix” states that the metaphysical journey in the movie aims to enable people to explore their own truths. (Maktav, 2010: 51) The main character Selman questions the meaning of life, asking philosophical questions such as “What is the truth?”, “Who is God?” and “Who am I?”. These questions lead him to believe that there might be another life, another dimension where anything is possible. This is a metaphysical and mystical world where the truth is hidden behind the things we imagine we have seen before. Unlike in previous years, Uçakan prefers opening the doors of Sufism for those who want to explain their own existence rather than giving direct religious messages. Although the movie is not based on a strong narrative due to the poor legacy of its genre, it is important in that it brings forward a different point of view of Islam and the relationship between religion and human beings. However, it is the young directors of the Turkish cinema who have made a great difference in this regard, a fact for which Islamic directors might envy them. These young directors have been in search of an

alternative genre as opposed to popular cinema, and have sought the answers to questions regarding life and existence within the Islamic philosophy of Sufism, which they have cleared of formal rituals and superstitions. This provided not only a new perspective on the phenomenon of religion but also a rich cinematography that aestheticized the past and the future, new and old, the mystical and the truth, and the traditional and the modern together. Derviş Zaim, one of the successful representatives of the new Turkish cinema, transformed the conflict between the traditional and modern into reconciliation in cinema language. Hilmi Yavuz evaluates Zaim’s movie *Nokta* (Dot, 2008) as “a masterpiece uniting aesthetics and Sufism” and says “We follow a route from Islamic aesthetics to Islamic ontology based upon Islamic calligraphy.” (Akt. Topçu, 2010:194)The movie, as its name suggests, tells a 13th century story about the dot of the Arabic letter “nûn” which is left unwritten as the character runs out of ink. The calligrapher sends his apprentice to get ink in order to complete the dot. The story is a long one; however, the director is successful as he manages to combine calligraphy with the subtext telling that the universe completes its evolution by means of human beings. In order to give the feeling of a continuous and an uninterrupted time, the director tells the story through *Ihcam*, a calligraphy technique in Islam which means writing in one stroke without lifting your hand, in a long take of seventy five minutes. Choosing the immense Lake Tuz (salt/white) as the venue for shootings, the director shows the dead body of the apprentice, a little black dot on the lake, who dies at the end of the movie as the missing dot of the calligraphy at the beginning of the movie. According to Yavuz, “the death of the apprentice Ahmet ending the movie is actually the dot Gayb puts ending the calligraphy, which represents the human being as an innocent and decent creature” (2020: 193). Symbols and metaphors often used by Semih Kaplanoğlu, another successful representative of the new Turkish cinema, in his trilogy *Yumurta* (2007, Egg), *Süt* (2008, Milk) and *Bal* (2010, Honey) leave us between the reality of life and the metaphysical world. The director expresses his own in-between state-of-mind as an individual as follows “If we only care for the spiritual and ignore reality, that is the earthly, it would be most likely to become a fantasy, a danger for us. However, if we care for both reality and the spiritual, then we can consider both the earthly and the spiritual zones. We realize that the two cannot be separated from one another; therefore, the movie we make should also be aware of this fact, too.” (Kaplanoğlu, 2010)

The movie *Yumurta* (Egg) is also evaluated as “a movie which gives the first signs of an opportunity of a Sufi language that shows that life and objects are in fact the realm of the imaginary and brings into view the truth, i.e. what cannot be seen, through the main character Yusuf, attention to the name itself, and the well scene appearing as a dream – referring to the

revival of Joseph who is thrown in a well". (Gülřen, 2008) The darkness inside the unconsciousness of Yusuf is his hometown, represented with the image "well". Yusuf manages to get out of the well at the end of certain confrontations, conflicts and metaphysical events, and is reborn. Following the burial and the funeral, Yusuf walks into the forest near the cemetery. He sits there and falls asleep. In his dream, he sees himself getting out of a well. He holds an egg in his hand. When the egg is broken, he wakes up. The rebirth and transformation of Yusuf are symbolized with the metaphors of well and egg. This movie of the director alone includes intense symbols and metaphors, all enough to make a full story of a single book. It is possible to say that there are many elements similar to the ones argued in the present article within the movies of the new Turkish cinema.

From a sociological perspective, the present situation can be read as a complicated process during which people are caught between common traditional values and modernity, and both parties suffer existence and identity problems as a result of external factors such as advanced capitalism and globalization, as any belief system and ideology has been destroyed. As for the Turkish cinema, it is observed in the present article that religion is considered to be a philosophical phenomenon which is successfully aestheticized by auteur directors. This indicates that when cinema sincerely addresses any phenomenon regarding human beings, it continues to exist with the artistic power human beings still and always need despite advanced technological developments manipulating human perception and vicious capitalism transforming any form of ideology. This fact still offers researchers and people who want to make movies as works of art a unique opportunity.

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