

The Taste of Pudding: European co-productions and national audiences

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Last year, I was interviewing film critic and historian Giovanni Scognamillo who was preparing a new edition of his canonical *History of Turkish Cinema*.¹ Scognamillo, a member of a levanten family from Italy, has been working as a film critic, assistant producer and actor since the late 1950s. Curious about his classification of Turkish cinema in the last decade, I asked Scognamillo what he thought of *Hamam: The Turkish Bath* (Ferzan Ozpetek, 1997), an Italian, Turkish and Spanish co-production. “Can we call it a Turkish movie?” came the reply. He agreed me on the inappropriateness of such labels, “nevertheless national filmographies and histories needed clear definitions” as he stressed.

Scognamillo’s recent edition covers *Hamam* with a number of other co-produced movies. But the question of ‘What makes a movie Turkish?’ remains on the agenda of many film critics, especially when they are reviewing a co-production. Here I am specifically referring to those movies supported by European Commission’s Euroimages scheme and labeled as ‘Europuddings’ elsewhere. Recently, many critics questioned ‘Turkishness’ of these movies or criticized their allegedly bleak portrayal of Turkey. Barı_ Pirhasan’s *Sawdust Tales* (Usta Beni Öldürsen e) is one of these movies. One of the common criticisms about this particular movie was that “it almost looked like a European movie, rather than a Turkish one.”² I will return to *Sawdust Tales* and its criticism later, but first more about national filmographies. Defining the national origin of a particular movie is in fact a challenging task in today’s global movie industry. Here in Britain, one of the methods aiming to solve this problem is the point system introduced by the Department of Culture, Media and Sports. In this system, a particular movie’s producers, crew and

¹ *Türk Sinema Tarihi* (Istanbul: Kabalıcı, 1998).

² Nebahat Akgün Çomak, “Son Dönem Türk Filmleri ‘Masumiyet’, ‘Hamam’, ‘Usta Beni Öldürsene’ Bir Anlatı,” 25. *Kare*, no. 23 (1998), p.

main cast were given specific points in order to determine the percentage of its national origin.

Lacking such an official guideline, the *Turkish Filmography* published by the Turkish Producer's Association (SESAM) brings even more confusion over the national origin of co-productions. For example, the Filmography includes movies that are shot by non-Turkish directors but partly financed by Turkish companies, such as Gyula Maar's *Balkan Balkan* (1993) and Vincente Aranda's *La Pasion Turco* (1994). There also entries for the films shot by directors of Turkish origin, but that doesn't involve any Turkish production companies, such as *Germany 40 m2 (Deutschland 40 m2)* (Tevfik Ba_er, 1986), or international films by foreign directors but starring Turkish actors like *Journey to the Hope* (Xavier Köller, 1990).³

In this paper, I would like to examine how discourses of national and cultural specificity formed through various forms of film criticism in Turkey. In this respect, I would like to compare recent discussions on European co-productions with the film criticism of 1930s and 1940s during the emergence of a national movie industry. I believe, such a comparison could give new insights into redefinition of national and transnational cinema.

Jazz, Bars and Beer

Searching for its audience and some government support, the film industry of 1930s was quite weak. An average of 1,6 movies were shot each year, mostly by the director of Istanbul Municipality Theatre, Muhsin Ertu_rul. His prolific oeuvre covers some 28 movies including comedies, musicals and melodramas. Ertu_rul is considered as a pioneering filmamaker, a character each national cinema history emphasizes. He has been described as the director of first talkie, first colour movie as well as some of the first genre movies.

Among those, the case of the *In the Streets of Istanbul (Istanbul Sokakları'nda)* (1931), the first talkie, is an interesting one. Dubbed in Epinay Studios in Paris, the movie was an instant success in Balkan countries and Egypt.⁴ This was partly due to film's international cast including Aziza Amir of Egypt and Perikles Gavrilides from Greece. The movie with its scenes of Acropolis and the pyramids reminds us of the early travelogues. This 'cinema of attractions' with an multinational cast was probably a Balkan and Arab answer to Film Europe alliance which was formed against Film America in the 1920s. However, what is more striking about this movie is the way it had been promoted. *In the Streets of Istanbul*, a truly multinational film, was labeled as "the golden masterpiece of Turkish investment, Turkish artists, Turkish mind, Turkish intelligence, Turkish acts and Turkish musicians." "The production which introduced Turkish to all around the world is a must seen for every Turk" reads one of the captions in the publicity material.

However, Muhsin Ertu_rul's films were not always praised as the prime examples of indigenous filmmaking. His movies are often criticized for overacting, obscenity, being mere imitations or not being nationally specific. For example, reviewing Ertu_rul's *Nasrettin Hoca at the Weeding (Nasrettin Hoca Dü_ünde)* (1940) and Adolf Körner's *Kerem ile Aslı* (1942), the Kemalist journal *Ülkü* comments:

"Since the early days, when technique of film-making was introduced in our country, many Turkish films has been shot. However, I want to stress that ninety percent of these movies are Turkish in name only. The other ten percent is also far from being completely national. Obviously, there are many reasons behind this, the most important of all being the determinacy of economic factors over art."

The author of the review Kemal Or believes that these movies do not deserve to be defined as Turkish movies, since they do not represent distinctive Turkish character or life style:

"In almost half of our movies, we can observe parallels with the upper class life-style of western films, including bars, jazz music, dance, music halls, balls and beer. After seeing this envy for and imitation of western life, one can not stop wandering whether every street in this country have bars and dance halls. Could

³ The movie won the 1990 Academy Awards in Best Foreign Film category. Although it is critical about human rights violations in Turkey and refugee problem, this international success made the movie

⁴ In Athens 6,000 people went to see the movie in its first week. *Ak_am*, March 7, 1932 qtd in Alim_erif Onaran, *Muhsin Ertu_rul Sineması*, p. 190.

the social life of this country be represented by only a cosmopolitan minority? Isn't there any other values, themes, problems or a private life that is worth filming? (...) When we'll be able to see an original Turkish film with its theme, people, setting and problems? How long do we have to wait for Turkish film which doesn't include jazz, dance, bar, ball or vodka."⁵

On the one hand, we have an multinationally cast and marketed movie promoted as an indigenous Turkish film, and, on the other hand, the movies of the very same director that are criticized for being cosmopolitan and nationally non-specific. So what makes a movie genuinely Turkish in the 1930s and 1940s? First of all, the lack of authenticity in these latter movies is linked with setting, and theme. Secondly, there are concerns about cultural and moral values, and movie's verisimilitude to existing conditions in Turkey.

In relation to these, the critics and the government alike are engaged with films' representability of Turkey and Turkish character abroad. One such example is the case of *The Judge of Aynaroz* (*Aynaroz Kadısı*). When the movie raised some controversy over obscenity, the government banned its international release. The popular film journal *Yıldız* immediately praised the decision: "It is not only the theme and direction, but the scenes that are almost obscene prevent us from making any positive comments. Thus, by banning this movie's international release the government acted rightly."⁶

As I have tried to explain, what is significant about 1930s and 1940s debates on national cinema and culture is the very ambiguity in defining what is nationally specific. In some cases, appropriation of a new technique such as the sound technology is enough to celebrate indigenusness of a multinational film. In other cases, national cinema has been defined as realist portrayals as opposed Hollywood's dream-like romances of high society.

Transnational Cinema of 1990s

To return to the 1990s, the issue of 'Turkishness' of a movie is still at stake in present discussions. Turkey's once successful movie industry became dependent on national and

⁵ Kemal Or, "_ki Film," *Ülkü* no. 59 (March 1st, 1944), p. 24

⁶ *Yıldız*, 1939qtd.in Özgüç, 1992: 16

international founding. This means in order to make, distribute and exhibit their movies, filmmakers often need international resources as the government founding is limited. One of these resources is the Euroimages scheme of the European Council which sponsored a number of co-productions involving film companies from Turkey since its launch in 1989. There are also some other co-productions that did not benefited from any such official support. We can also identify the so-called transnational films, the films of diasporic subjects living cosmopolitan First World cities. All these movies generate different discourses of national and cultural specificity through various kinds of criticism, depending on their points of exhibition such as international festival circuits and local theatres. For example, some of these movies were marketed and reviewed as authentic and accurate representations of Turkey abroad. However, in Turkey their “Turkishness” has been questioned and they were criticized for not being suitable for representing Turkey. Their creators were hailed as cultural outsiders.

One of the most common criticism attached to the movies of Turkish directors living abroad is orientalism. An article in semi-academic journal *25. Kare*, defines *Hamam: The Turkish Bath* and *The Wound (Yara)* (Yilmaz Arslan, 1998) as orientalist movies. The latter was described as a movie that was “shot from an entirely European perspective.”⁷ The discussions on *The Wound*'s representation of Turkey was heated when its lead Yelda Reynaud was awarded as the best actress in prestigious Antalya Film Festival. Some critics even compared the movie with *Midnight Express* (Alan Parker, 19).

Co-produced movies usually compared with European art cinema and this comparison usually results in contradictory value judgments. The critics that celebrate Europeanness in terms of visual style, are preoccupied with the question of national specificity of the very same movies. For example, *Sawdust Tales* (1997), a German, Hungarian and Turkish co-production supported by Euroimages is such a movie that is considered as non-specific or too European for national audiences:

“The movie resembles a central European movie and it was shot in English. A Turkish director shot a movie in English and we were watching this with subtitles.

⁷ Rıza Kırış, “_iddet, oryantalizm ve minimalizm: 90'lı yıllarda Türk sinemasına genel bir bakı_,” *25. Kare*, no. 31 (2000), p. 15.

Film's antipathetic atmosphere and seeing even the Turkish actors speaking in an European language irritated some spectators as the movie didn't attract much attention in terms of box office."⁸

When the veteran critic Atilla Dorsay came in defense of *Sawdust Tales* ironically his comments were not much different from his opponents. Accepting the claims of national non-specificity, Dorsay stressed the inescapability of cross-cultural exchanges in a global environment:

"Probably, this movie will be criticized harshly, as it is extra-universal, as it resembles those stereotypical and ambiguous co-productions, or it is not Turkish enough... However, in today's world where national borders are becoming highly porous in the domain of art, I believe, we should praise and defend this movie because of the universal standard it has achieved."⁹

According to its director, Barı_ Pirhasan, *Sawdust Tales* is a film about global problems such as war and refugees. However, he does not deny the analogies drawn between the movie's non-distinctive country and Turkey under the military oppression during 1970s and 1980s. Would it be too difficult to consider the movie as yet another representation of the military period that is labeled as a new genre by most of the critics? And for a while let us accept that all those filmmakers are cultural outsiders. Aren't those cultural outsiders usually the ones who provide the most thought provoking and accurate representations that a national cinema could achieve? Think of émigré directors in British and American cinema for example.

Conclusion

So far, I have emphasized on discussions about national specificity in two distinct time spans. What is clear from this picture is the definition of what makes a movie distinctively Turkish or non-Turkish affected by the specific discourses which tends to shift through time. In 1940s, it was the realist and moral representation or technical innovation of a movie that would count whether or not they involved some transnational interaction. In 1990s, the founding bodies, or the national identity and informant credibility of the director that is under question. I would further claim that, some of those co-productions are far from being non-realist or orientalist. On the contrary, they are

⁸ *ibid.*, p. 15.

probably unbearably realistic, like *The Wound* or *Journey to the Sun*. Therefore, for those who are experiencing a negative hallucination, the only way to deal with them is to question whether they are insider or outsider's view.

- Importance of historical research: I would like to suggest that the transnational, post-national or international cinema is not extremely different from the national cinema of the past. We might further claim that in some respects the cinema has always been transnational (and in Turkey this wasn't problematized as much as today). However, until recently these transnational interactions were neglected in Turkish cinema. We should evaluate national specificity with reference to these interactions. To give you an idea about the amount of these interactions... Italian co-productions starring American actors or Greek co-productions. Or international actors starred in Turkish films: Ferit _evki (Farid Chawki, died in 1998), an iconic star of Egyptian cinema who was credited in many films including *Bab al-Hadid* (Gare Centrale) (Yusuf _ahin, 1958) starred in a number of movies in the early 1970s. Iranian Cihangir Gaffari starred in some 28 movies in Turkey between 1968-72
- Popular cinema-art cinema distinction: Another reason for this neglect was that these movies were considered of a lesser cultural value. We have to reevaluate this distinction which is becoming highly problematic over the recent years. However, this doesn't mean that we should ignore the specificity of cultural formations that are identified with certain exhibition points and audiences. For example, the popular cinema of the 1960s and art-house movies of the 1980s are targeting different audiences and quite distinctive. Identification of such cultural formations would be another challenge to a homogenous vision of Turkish cinema and nation.
- Comparison with European movies: "looks like a European movie"; "shot from a European perspective". We have similar criticism in international review of Turkish movies: Derek Elley on *Third Page* (*Üçüncü Sayfa*) (Zeki Demirkubuz, 1999): "An intriguing drama with an almost Central European flavour..." The definition of the

⁹ Atilla Dorsay, " _p Cambazı Deniz Kızını Sevince," *Yeni Yüzyıl*, 12.11.1997, qtd. Scognamillo, 487.

central European or European is problematic in itself. Is there a distinctive, coherent central European style?

- National specificity: It is true that the film production is usually regulated by nation-states inside their national boundaries. However, the movies are often produced, exhibited and received internationally. And, national cinema's links with the nation state in terms of policy and legality is becoming problematic thanks to multinational institutions and international capital flow. The movie industries are becoming increasingly dependent on international funding. That is why it is quite difficult to define national specificity. The critical discourse around these co-productions and transnational films tend to label them as non-specific. But, it is the unified and coherent notions of national identity that is under question. This is quite clear from the films that represent the instability of any such identity. It is not just national or ethnic identities, but religious and gender identities that are challenged in these films. Transnational cinema in a way reflect such questions. That is why we should try to redefine the notion of national cinema in film studies. In this context, one should shift away from unified and coherent notions of national identity, and emphasize diversity and transcultural interaction. As Andrew Higson states "the national is almost always a fragile and contingent compromise."¹⁰

¹⁰ Andrew Higson, "The Instability of the National," in Justine Ashby and Andrew Higson (eds.) *British Cinema, Past and Present* (London/New York: Routledge, 2000), p. 46.