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Abstract

This essay will hunt down and classify the concept of the national as a discourse in Turkish cinema that has been constructed back in 1965, by the film critics, by filmmakers and finally by today's theoretical standards. So the questions we will be constantly asking throughout the essay can be: Is what can be called part of national film culture and identity? Is defining a film part of national heritage a modernist act that is also related to theories of nationalism? Is what makes a film national a stylistic application of a particular genre (such as melodrama)? Does the allure of the film come from the construction of a hero-cult after a director deemed to be national?

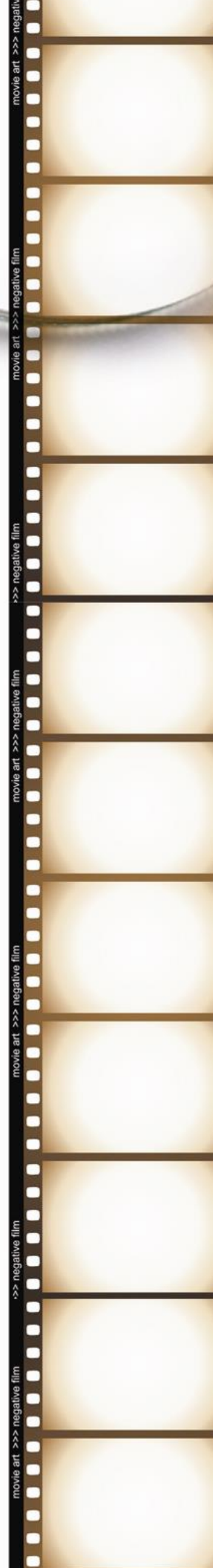
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Murat Akser

Twenty-five years after its publication in 1989, Andrew Higson's conceptualization of national cinema in his seminal *Screen* article has been challenged by other film scholars. Indeed there are now more books and articles published on trans-national cinema, a cinema without borders, an international festival cinema that crosses boundaries, an inter-cultural understanding of filmmaking has arisen. The Routledge series on national cinemas, with its groundbreaking Tom O'Reagan volume on *Australian National Cinema* has quietly disappeared from the academic radar. This essay will look at a film from 1965 that is celebrated by Turkish filmmakers and film scholars alike as the best film ever made. This essay will hunt down and classify the national as a discourse that has been constructed back in 1965, by the film critics, by filmmakers and finally by today's theoretical standards. So the questions we will be constantly asking throughout the essay can be: Is what can be called part of national film culture and identity? Is defining a film part of national heritage a modernist act that is also related to theories of nationalism? Is what makes a film national a stylistic application of a particular genre (such as melodrama)? Does the allure of the film come from the construction of a hero-cult after a director deemed to be national?

Introduction

In the late 1960s, a theoretical debate appeared in the Turkish film magazines between the members of Turkish Cinematheque Association and a group of young Turkish directors who

defined themselves and their work as the advocates of the *National Cinema Movement*. The main argument of the *cinematheque group* of film critics was that until that time (1964) not a single *original* work of cinema had been produced in Turkey. All that was produced were cheap imitations of Hollywood films and original contribution from Turkish filmmakers would come only after the creation of an educated elite cadre who would be familiar with world masterpieces of cinema and appreciate great masters of film. Their opponents, the young Turkish directors such as Halit Refiğ and Metin Erksan, were active in the domestic film production since the early 1950s and had produced their first features just before the establishment of the cinematheque in 1965. This group emphasized the possibility of producing films with local themes and they relied on the Turkish audience and traditional Turkish arts such as miniature and shadow theater. Shortly after this debate began, some of the most important works of the National Cinema Movement were produced by this group. These were Halit Refiğ's *Haremde Dört Kadın* [Four Women in the Harem] (1964) and Metin Erksan's *Sevmek Zamanı* [Time to Love] (1965). This paper aims to discuss national cinema in Turkey with special reference to *National Cinema Movement* and give an analysis of its finest example *Time to Love* in relation to the concepts of national cinema in film studies.

The Concept of National Cinema

The definition of what a national cinema stands for is somewhat problematic. On the one hand, the site of production can define the nationality of a film but, on the other hand, the site of consumption and the response of the local audience may also be important. That is to say the

questions of who makes the films and where they are made are as relevant as for whom they are made and where they are consumed.

Yet another important aspect is the worldview of the films that were presented to the audience. In Andrew Higson's words 'what sort of national projections do they offer?' (Higson 1989: 36) Do the stories told; the characters portrayed in national films reflect something inherent in local culture? All these questions are relevant in the Turkish context.

Turkish cinema does not have a long history compared with its western counterparts. Between 1896-1914 film production and exhibition belonged solely to French, German and American companies. The first film shot came with the declaration of First World War. The ruling party of the period, *İttihat ve Terakki* [Union and Progress], decided to implement a nationalist policy on all areas of economic activity. Thus, Turkish filmmaking was encouraged whereas foreign companies ceased to involve in the Turkish market for a few years. In 1923, a new Republic of Turkey with a nation-state ideology was created, and the policy makers preferred to utilize western arts to achieve a rupture with the old communalistic imperial past. Ballet, classical music and theater became favorite forms whereas cinema was left out by the authorities. Cinema remained an expensive elite art in the hands of a single man, Muhsin Ertuğrul, who dominated Turkish film production between 1920s and 1940s. As Ertuğrul was a man of the theater, the films he produced were adaptations of western European stage plays and the cast were actors from Ertuğrul's theater (Arslan 2011). Until 1949, the number of films produced per year remained very low. Between 1914-1947 only 67 films had been produced in Turkish cinema (Özgüç 1997: 9-22). In 1952 61 films were produced in a single year. This figure reached 214 films per year in 1965, the production year of *Time to Love*. The state has some positive influences on cinema in this period: in 1942 CHP, the ruling Republican People's

Party, initiated a decision to prohibit Egyptian melodramas which resulted in the Turkish takeover of the market. In 1948, a decree on municipal taxation reduced the tax fares on domestic products and increased the tax on foreign films Arslan 2011). Also with the economic drive initiated by the newly elected Democrat Party governments, domestic production and consumption of Turkish films increased. The investment in infrastructure and migration from rural areas to big cities marked the rebirth of cinema as a means of mass entertainment.

As happened throughout the world, Turkish cinema has also been influenced by Hollywood cinema. The Hollywood products invaded Turkish theaters and the audiences formed a specific set of expectations to be found in a film. The Turkish filmmakers strived to satisfy this kind of demand and produced Hollywoodish films. Turkish westerns, film noirs, melodramas, gangster movies etc. were produced. These were sometimes one-to-one adaptations of famous Hollywood films. Between the years 1952-1961, some Turkish filmmakers formed a practice of domestic filmmaking with local themes that were to serve as basis of a national cinema movement later. Some of these directors are Faruk Kenç, Sami Ayanoglu, Turgut Demirağ, Lütfi Ömer Akad and Atif Yılmaz. Movie attendance increased significantly, and an attempt to create a national cinema was at hand.

Turkish National Cinema Movement

As to the discussion of Turkish film critics, the definition of national cinema is still vague. First, there is the concept of *Halk Sineması* [People's Cinema], the kind of cinema produced for and consumed by the Turkish audience (site of production and exhibition). This definition is problematic in that films which resembled Hollywood features and which

presented American lifestyle were massively produced. And then, there is *Milli Sinema* [Cinema of the Nation], the cinema that takes its subject matter from Turkish people and their lives and themes. Again using local names and place would not make a film national since the plots were too much Americanized. And finally there is the self-acclaimed movement of a group of directors, *Ulusal Sinema Akımı* [National Cinema Movement]. While the first two conceptualizations need further analysis, this essay will be limited only to the discussion of *National Cinema Movement* in Turkey.

After May 27, 1960 military intervention in Turkey, a new constitution was accepted by a nationwide referendum in 1961 that promised a new hope for the masses. The new constitution guaranteed several rights and reorganized state institutions. Autonomous Radio-TV, autonomous university system, a constitutional court, proportional representation and freedom of speech and expression led to an unprecedented social mobilization for the Turkish society. The communications revolution and infrastructure investments of previous DP governments enhanced this mobilization and led to the integration of market and cultural structure throughout Turkey.

Social mobilization became the theme of a generation of young directors in this era. At first they portrayed rural people and lives of workers and immigrants in big cities. This approach was called *social realism* [Toplumsal Gerçekçilik] by the critics. But later on the directors named their approach as *National Cinema Movement* [Ulusal Sinema]. The ideologue of this movement was Halit Refiğ and other representatives of the movement were Metin Erksan, Lüftü Akad, Atıf Yılmaz, Memduh Ün, Duygu Sağıroğlu, Ertem Göreç and Osman Seden.

These directors claimed total control over their films and their themes and stories were consistent. Meanwhile, they remained within the Turkish studio system-Yeşilçam (Green Pine reminiscent of *Hollywood*). This group relied consciously on old Turkish arts of representation such as *Karagöz* [Turkish Shadow Theater] and miniatures. It was pointed out by this group of directors that Turkish cinema was not a cinema of capital, like Hollywood system or it was not a state sponsored cinema, like west European cinemas. At this point, a historical analogy was drawn by some critics. The difference between Hollywood and Turkish practice was compared with the difference between feudal mode of production of Western Europe and Asiatic mode of production of eastern countries. These directors claimed that Turkish cinema was, in fact, labor intensive and depended solely on the Turkish audience for its survival. Turkish films with Hollywoodish style do not appeal to Turkish people, and the Turkish directors should resist such filmmaking. Thus Turkish cinema should produce for the people. But the method of resistance to Hollywood system should not be imitating Hollywood films or producing an alienated high-class art cinema. A concise but somehow subjective account of the movement can be found in this book. This was a famous novel adaptation by Halit Refiğ. Turkish state television TRT sponsored the project, but a few months after completion of the project, the military government decided to burn the negatives of the film because of film's political message. (Refiğ 2009: 96-97). The new cinema should rely on traditional Turkish arts and narrative forms. This group and its opponents, the cinematheque group, who supported the superiority of western cinema had several debates that even led to the use of swear words.

Members of the *National Cinema Movement* were excluded from national film festivals where cinematheque members were appointed as jury and critics condemned the films made within this movement. Finally in 1980, the movement ended with the burning of the negatives of Halit Refiğ's final work in the 1970s *Yorgun Savaşçı* [The Tired Warrior]. The 1980 military coup banned all political activity for four years and closed down all associations of any kind including the western cinema oriented Cinematheque Association, and many directors from *National Cinema Movement* were either arrested or quit filmmaking altogether. 25 films remained from this movement, but the state TV and the video market were closed for these films for 20 years. Only after 1986, with the inception of a civilian government could Turkish audience watch the film *Time to Love* and appreciate its director, Metin Erksan.

Metin ERKSAN: A Lonely Warrior

According to the film historian Agah Özgüç, Metin Erksan was born in Çanakkale, a coast town of Turkey, in 1929 (Özgüç 1995). He began writing film reviews in 1948. He got his BA degree in History of Art from İstanbul University in 1952. As noted by a critic, he was the only director of his generation who was directly exposed to the national education system and to a major related to his film career (Kayalı 1994: 72). The other directors of the movement Halit Refiğ attended Robert College of İstanbul, Lütfü Akad is a graduate of Lycée de Galatasaray and Atıf Yılmaz studied painting at the Art Academy of İstanbul.

Again in 1952, he directed his first film narrating the true life story of the famous blind folk-poet, Aşık Veysel, in *Karanlık Dünya* [The Dark World]. The film was banned for trivial reasons such as the poor depiction of the Turkish agricultural technology. Erksan did not give

up fighting and he became an ardent advocate of filmmakers. He founded Association for Cinema Artists in 1958. By that time, he also directed several documentaries.

In 1960, he directed *Gecelerin Ötesi* [Beyond the Nights] in which he made a strong criticism of the false capitalist development in Turkish society. This film was immediately labelled as the work of social criticism to the protests of Erksan who claimed that his films were only on people and humanity (Erksan 1966). The film was also banned and could only be shown with the interference of Cemal Gürsel, the military-oriented president of the Turkish Republic. In 1962, he founded *Sine-İş* the labor union of cinema workers. Later that year, his cinema adaptation from Fakir Baykurt's novel *Yılanların Öcü* [Wrath of the Snakes] was banned once again in 1962. In these years, Erksan's depiction of poor peasants and harsh realities of rural life appealed to the masses and his style was classified as social realism (*Toplumsal Gerçekçilik*) in Turkish cinema. In 1963, he made *Susuz Yaz* [Dry Summer]. This film was also banned in Turkey but was secretly sent to Berlin and won the best film award in Berlin International Film Festival. This film long lost was recently restored by the efforts of Fatih Akin and Martin Scorsese through their World Cinema Foundation and is available through criterion as Blu-ray (Akser 2014). In 1965, he directed *Sevmek Zamanı* [Time to Love] and to the claims of some critics, this film is the most stylized film ever made in the history of Turkish cinema. The film was not shown except for the small town of Sinop since Erksan was a banned director and he had been excluded from the distribution system. As he has a keen interest in literary adaptations, in 1966 he adapted Emily Bronte's *Wuthering Heights* as *Ölmeyen Aşk* [Neverending Love]. This version of the novel was compared with William Wyler's and Luis Bunuel's versions by Turkish critics (Özgüç 1997; Scognamillo 2003). His *Kuyu* [The Well] came in 1968 as a realistic personal obsession film based on a true event, the

story of a kidnapped and raped peasant girl who kills her kidnapper in a well which she fills with stones while he descends down to drink water. In 1974, he remade William Friedkin's academy award winner *The Exorcist* as *Şeytan* [The Devil]. In 1976, he adapted *Hamlet* as *İntikam Meleği-Kadın Hamlet* [She-Hamlet: The Angel of Revenge]. He also directed several features within the star system also adapted five Turkish short stories for TV. In 1977, he directed his last film and began teaching at Mimar Sinan University, Institute of Film and Television.

Metin Erksan is the most outspoken, stylist and dedicated film director of Turkish cinema. He is the first to organize film sector in Turkey and first director to win an international award for Turkish cinema. As one Turkish critic says: 'The auteur concept of the New Wave is, I think, especially created for Metin Erksan' (Kayalı 1994:88). This is because Erksan has become the first and foremost director to claim total control over his films in Turkish cinema as he openly declares in one discussion that 'they say cinema is a collective work. I say no! Cinema is the work of one man only: director is the god' .Cited from a documentary on Metin Erksan's art of filmmaking by Kerime Şenyücel in 1995.

Erksan is a conscious film-maker that is he has theoretical considerations on his plots and carefully prepares his visual themes. In other words, while other filmmakers of the period preferred to touch upon the surface of the themes of east-west, modernization- migration, and role of women in society in a superficial way, he did not yield to everyday economic realities of the period and pursued his studies to the human nature deeply. In every Erksan film, one can identify the melodrama the thriller and even the comedy of the period but all of these were employed to illustrate his point better. We will analyze *Time to Love* as a quest to discuss east-west discourse inherent in Turkish modernization.

Time to Love: East vs. West

As pointed out above Erksan's *Time to Love* was not viewed to audience in the year of its theatrical release. It was condemned by critics as the musings of an obsessed man. Only after 20 years of its production could the Turkish audience see the film on TRT, Turkish National Television. Since there is not a strict copyright law in Turkey that restricts TV channels, *Time to Love* is viewed on TV nearly every month and has formed itself a cult audience. It is reported that the analysis of scenes from the film consist part of the entrance requirements of the Ph.D. program in Film Studies at Mimar Sinan University where Erksan taught as a director-in-residence for many years until his death in 2012.

Even without seeing the film, its synopsis may bring several questions to mind. We can analyze *Time to Love* as a philosophical search on the meaning of love through *mimesis*, representation. It is common in eastern literature to fall in love with the image as well as in the western mythology. The image may fulfill the mental and emotional needs of the person more than its original would do. Or a psychoanalytic approach may bring out other arguments. Halil is afraid of reality so much that he prefers fake, the imitated version of reality. We also have Derviş, Halil's friend both as a Sancho Panza figure and as the alter ego of Halil.

Since our topic is limited with national cinema, we will leave out the above mentioned approaches and concentrate on the theme of east vs. west in *Time to Love*.



Halil the painter takes the art of mimesis to its extremes in *Time to Love*.

Time to Love as a work of National Cinema

As mentioned above, some of the Turkish directors of the 1960s used cinema as a medium of narrating the nation's values. Using the parameters of production, exhibition and formal properties on *Time to Love*, we will illustrate that it is indeed the work of a national cinema. The film has been depicted a stereotypical *Yeşilçam* film by Donmez-Colin (2014: 280), yet there are many layers going beyond clichés in the film.

As regarding the site of production, *Time to Love* is very much a national film. It is shot entirely in Turkey, and the members of the production team are Turkish. It should be noted that in the history of early Turkish cinema, nearly all of the production team: lighting, photography and sound recording were done by Greek and Armenian minorities in Turkey, partly due to the reason that, until the 1940s, all technology and trade were controlled by

minorities and partly because until 1950s cinema was not seen as a profitable sector by Turks). But in terms of distribution and exhibition, *Time to Love* met some difficulties. In Turkey, the producers do not have the capital to produce film. Instead they find credit from the theaters; that is the owners of film theaters lend money to producers. By this way, the theater owners experienced a high degree of control over the products. They could specify the cast and even decide on the plot of films. This system is known as *the bond system* since the producer signs bonds of debt to be paid after the theatrical release of the film (Kirel 2005). *Time to Love* was not sponsored by the bond system. As a result, its creators were free in artistic terms. But again because it was an independent feature, the theaters did not view the film. So *Time to Love* did not reach its target audience. Therefore, some critics call the film as 'doomed' (Scognamillo 2003). But the film reached a totally different audience after it is shown on TV in 1986. A young generation of viewers who only saw American films became the cult audience of *Time to Love*. As late as ever, *Time to Love* reaches a local audience.

As regarding the worldview expressed or the sort of national projection it offers, *Time to Love* is about the centuries-long east vs. west debate inherent in Turkish culture. Indeed *Time to Love* is a melodrama. It has been pointed out elsewhere that Turkish cinema exploits melodrama articulating the desires aroused by eastern/western oppositions. The formulation of lower class/rural=East/local culture vs upper class/urban=West/foreign culture can be observed clearly in Turkish melodrama (Erdoğan 2006). *Time to Love's* plot is based on a simple boy-meets-girl story. In *Time to Love*, the love story of a poor boy Halil and a rich girl Meral is told. Halil is poor, and he is attributed the eastern honor codes of simplicity, loyalty, correctness and chastity. Whereas Meral is the daughter of an industrial tycoon and her life is described in luxurious cars, having expensive tastes displaying corrupt moral values. Halil's

profession as a painter is also worth mentioning. He is a painter, an *artisan* facing an industrialist father of Meral. His position is comparable with the directors of the National Cinema Movement to Hollywood films. (Refiğ 2009)

Other westernized figures like Başar and Meral's father are rich, high-class but corrupt figures. Başar's very name literally means 'succeed' in Turkish, and he is the representative of carnal instinct and love in opposition to Halil's pure and idealistic love. For instance when Meral first tells Başar about Halil, Başar does not care. Meral tells Basar that she cannot love him. Başar says he only wants to have Meral sexually, and her spiritual commitment to Halil is not important. Meral's father surprises us at first when he tells Halil that his daughter could not have made a better choice of husband. He says it is important to have moral values and lead a difficult life to earn a living. He seems to appreciate Halil and even says: 'see I don't sound like the other fathers!' But he discourages Halil even worse than any other conventional father. He says that Meral herself will get tired of Halil sooner or later because she is used to living a luxurious life. So in the case of Başar and Meral's father we see the western-oriented side characters as morally corrupt.



Urban western life presents only shadows of the real in *Time to Love*

In the deeper level of analysis eastern love versus, western love can be observed through the personalities of Halil and Meral. In classical Turkish literature falling in love with the image is very common. Recent studies show that there are several folk tales in which the lovers fall in love with each other only seeing one another's pictures (Derman 1989: 61). Also, ancient near eastern myths and especially *Arabian Nights* tell stories where the lover falls in love with the image of the girl on a tunic Alpay-Tekin (1985: 297). Eastern love is spiritual, honest and emotional in the personality of Halil in *Time to Love*. For instance, after Meral sees Halil adoring her picture, she offers herself instantly but Halil refuses her apparently physical/sexual offer and prefers 'the innocent look of her at the picture'. Meral instead represents carnal/sexual love and desires. Her relationships with high society gentlemen like Başar are based on sex and calculation. She is in search of the spiritual love that can only be found in the books (In one scene, we see Meral depressed and reading Ovid's *Art of Love* in which we can also find the ancient tale of *Adonis*- yet another western tale narrating a person falling in love with the image!). There are several Anatolian folk stories of couples who fall in love with the image like the stories of Elif & Mahmut or Güllühan & Melikşah. Alptekin (1982: 21-46)



Meral reading Ovid's *Art of Love*. The abstract translation of love (aşk) in Turkish is substituted by another concrete word meaning sex (sevişme)

The use of the images of the city is also underlining the east-west dichotomy presented in the film. Halil is always seen in the older parts of the city or in nature whereas Meral lives in the newly built apartment blocks far away from the ancient city of Byzantium-İstanbul. But later as their love develops the lovers are forced to enter the *other* part of the city.

East vs west motif is also reflected in the film's soundtrack. The film score was composed by Metin Bükey, one of the leading original composers in Turkish cinema. It is obvious that he has made a choice of using Turkish classical music and its note combinations throughout the film. The scenes with Halil are richly decorated with Turkish Classical music. Halil's friend Derviş always plays the *ud*, an eastern string instrument resembling guitar. Whereas Meral is seen with classical western music or disco music. She listens to Bach at home and her friends dance in disco music at her wedding.

Conclusion

To sum up *Time to Love* is a work of national cinema in terms of its content. It could not be viewed by Turkish audience in the year of its production, so in terms of production and exhibition it seems to have problems. But after 20 years of its production it has formed a cult audience through another medium, the television. *Time to Love* tells the stories of two lovers that represent eastern and western values in an attempt to reconcile, make a synthesis like Turkey tries for the last two centuries. Also, *Time to Love* is the work of a director who believes that the director is the sole creator and owner of the film. Although Metin ERKSAN belonged to a group that had the self-acclaimed name *National Cinema Movement*, he also had his vision of the universal as well as the local. His humanistic approach to eastern myth in *Time to Love* is, in fact, the reconciliation of western art in the Turkish context through his unique work: *Time to Love*.



Love at its most abstract in *Time to Love*

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