



## Aesthetics of Displacement: Turkey and its Minorities on Screen

Akser, M. (2017). Aesthetics of Displacement: Turkey and its Minorities on Screen. *Memory Studies*, 10(2), 12-14. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1750698016683845>

[Link to publication record in Ulster University Research Portal](#)

**Published in:**  
Memory Studies

**Publication Status:**  
Published online: 12/02/2017

**DOI:**  
[10.1177/1750698016683845](https://doi.org/10.1177/1750698016683845)

**Document Version**  
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

### **General rights**

The copyright and moral rights to the output are retained by the output author(s), unless otherwise stated by the document licence.

Unless otherwise stated, users are permitted to download a copy of the output for personal study or non-commercial research and are permitted to freely distribute the URL of the output. They are not permitted to alter, reproduce, distribute or make any commercial use of the output without obtaining the permission of the author(s).

If the document is licenced under Creative Commons, the rights of users of the documents can be found at <https://creativecommons.org/share-your-work/licenses/>.

### **Take down policy**

The Research Portal is Ulster University's institutional repository that provides access to Ulster's research outputs. Every effort has been made to ensure that content in the Research Portal does not infringe any person's rights, or applicable UK laws. If you discover content in the Research Portal that you believe breaches copyright or violates any law, please contact [pure-support@ulster.ac.uk](mailto:pure-support@ulster.ac.uk)

treatment of Indo-English fictions. In a region that is dominated by periodic flare-ups of border disputes, religious intolerance and populist nationalism, Butt's commitment to transcultural imagination through memory and modernity is a breath of fresh air.

## Reference

Kanaganayakam C (1995) *Configurations of Exile: South Asian Writers and their World*. Toronto, ON, Canada: TSAR.

Ozlem Koksal

*Aesthetics of Displacement: Turkey and its Minorities on Screen*. New York: Bloomsbury, 2016. 248 pp. \$120

**Reviewed by:** Murat Akser, University of Ulster, UK

Ozlem Koksal's book focuses on the representation of minorities in Turkish cinema from a transnational perspective. The book examines recent filmic explorations of the three large minorities that disappeared from Turkey after World War I and with the establishment of Turkish Republic in the 1920s: the Greek, Jewish and Armenian minorities. The book also looks at films that depict a Muslim ethnic minority community, the Kurds, who were suppressed until the 1990s and found their cinematic representation in post-1990 cinema in Turkey. Koksal calls for the definition of a new 'aesthetics of displacement' through the selection of post-1990 transnational films on Turkish minorities that focus on remembering the moves from the home of the past to the home of the present.

The first section of the book gives the reader a contextual introduction to memory and identity in the Turkish context. The decision to include coverage of relevant historical events before proceeding with the analysis of the films works to Koksal's advantage, as the reader is exposed to attempts at turkifying the population and how these caused the displacement of minorities, especially through the use of language, which Koksal uses to illustrate the aesthetics of these films in later chapters.

The book claims that the proliferation of films dealing nostalgically with Turkey's past has to do with change in political leadership under liberal AKP party rule since 2002 and Turkey's EU membership bid that required the democratization of the country and the demilitarization of politics. The resulting films create a new experience, a sort of memory recall experience of suppressed memories and an end to minorities' silence on the screen. In addition to the liberal, globalised and democratizing socio-cultural context in post 2002-Turkey that allowed the production of such films, Koksal also provides reasons for the Turkish film industry's financial willingness to fund such projects. Koksal argues that all these factors, in combination with international co-production funding and distribution through art house festivals and cinemas, have led to a new Turkish cinema as a cinema of the emergence of repressed memories of history and minorities. Koksal pays close attention to the depiction of memory and language and to the way in which the geographies of minority experience affect narrative and cinematic space. She emphasizes that these films narrate the physical displacement of minorities in Turkey's past in order to ask questions about identity and memory in the Turkish present. The attempts to narrate this past physical displacement leads to new cinematic and narrative questions, which in turn determines the creation of a certain aesthetics of displacement. Koksal admits that these films contain more questions than answers. The book focuses only on traumatic mass events, looking at how events such as pogroms, genocides and population exchanges are remembered in cinema. Koksal emphasizes that the silence of official

discourse in Turkey shaped how Turkish films long kept these questions outside its narrative realm. Koksals's use of Hayden White's explanation of historical narrative in the arts as a modernist event is helpful as it combines a different filmic aesthetic to bring back memories and ask questions about the past. Koksals also employs concepts from Hamid Naficy and Laura Marks, stressing that memories of the new home and the old, remembered country accentuate these films.

The strongest theoretical aspect of Koksals's book comes from her ability to define recurring themes, motifs and stylistic continuities in the films she discusses. She is able to define an aesthetic by asking questions around five distinct categories: the politics of the language used by the characters in films, the silence of these characters as they refuse to speak their agony, spatial relations of people and landscapes, the idea of haunting and haunted narratives and finally the usage of still photos to recall memory, which she refers to as epistolary narratives. The underlying argument of this book is significant, as it claims that, in addition to physical movement of minorities, ideas, aesthetics and cultures also move, thereby creating a new language of displacement. This proposition finds its first elaboration in the discussion of non-Muslim minorities. It is illuminating to see the details of how non-Muslim minorities in republican Turkey were targeted and forced to leave. This leads to the discussion of the films. Koksals's aim here is to analyse films that go beyond the nationalist, ethically pure representation of Turkey through a binding and unifying narrative. The key films that inspire the study are Yesim Ustaoglu's (2003) *Waiting for the Clouds* and a Tassos Boulmetis' (2003) *A Touch of Spice*, both of which deal with the Greek pogrom and the population exchange of Greeks with Muslim Turks between Greece and Turkey in the 1920s.

The most challenging part of the book is when Koksals focuses on Atom Egoyan's (2002) *Ararat* and memory of the Armenian genocide. She boldly confronts the debates around the massacre of Armenians during World War I under the Ottoman Empire and the Turkish Republic's denial that followed. It is interesting to see the similarities and difference of other transnational films that deal with the issue, such as Fatih Akin's (2014) most recent *The Cut*. Koksals's look at *Ararat* reveals an alternative aesthetics and narrative system that allow it to open up dialogue and debate on the subject between the Armenian diaspora and Turkish society. Koksals finds that this is related to Egoyan's previous search for identity as he made films on the themes of absence, denial and memory. She points out that Egoyan's film uses different layers of narrative that led to a multitude of opinions about the film: whether is it about truth, the fickleness of memory and vengeance, or just a story. *Ararat* became the subject of discussion about the Armenian genocide even before the film was released in Turkey. Ironically even though the film was banned in Turkey, Egoyan's approach worked as the film attracted the attention not to its cinematic aesthetic and achievement but to its ability create debate and dialogue around the subject matter.

Another provocative discussion Koksals makes is on the Kurdish question: how the Kurds, a Muslim minority population, were subject to assimilation and relocation. The book discusses the Kurdish question around the key Kurdish films *Journey to the Sun* (Yeşim Ustaoglu, 2001), *Hejar/Big Man Little Love* (Yeşim Ustaoglu, 2001), *My Marlon and Brando* (Yeşim Ustaoglu, 2008) and *DOL* (Hiner Saleem, 2007). In this discussion, Koksals is successful in displaying the themes and motifs she has used to define this new displacement aesthetic: silence, haunted narratives, multi-layered narrative that refuses a happy ending are all trademarks of the Kurdish films. There is an addendum chapter on Nuri Bilge Ceylan's (2011) *Once Upon a time Anatolia*. Here, the discussion about this film feels out of place as it touches the issues of the past and displacement in an implicit way. Koksals claims that her discussion about the film in relation to the rest of the book is informed by a reading that narrates the land and its history thereby complementing the narratives on minorities in the other films discussed in the book. This is the land (Anatolia) they have left, and it is silent, haunted and empty in Ceylan's film.

One of the weak points of the book is its exclusion of some recent films produced in Turkey that discuss past displacement of minorities. Her selection, based on the availability of the films through international distributors in western countries, misses some of the films that are distributed domestically. For example, Ozcan Alper's 2011 *Gelecek Uzun Surer/Future Lasts Forever* looks at the memory of both Kurds and Armenians through a trip to Eastern Anatolia. Another film from 2013, *Surgun/Exile* by Erol Ozlevin, is focused on the relationship between a Greek woman and a Turkish man during the 1964 Greek pogrom. Similarly, Ulas Gunes Kacargil and Dilek Keser's 2012 *Evdeki Yabancilar/Strangers in the House* is about a Greek woman visiting her Turkish home after 50 years as she lives her childhood memories in her mind as she struggles with Alzheimer's disease. Cagan Irmak's *Dedemin Insanlari/My Grandfather's People*, 2011 about the Cretan pogrom against Turks is another film that takes a parallel but counter-position to films Koksall discusses. It is the alternative look back at the *other* land, that of the Greek other, through memory and silence. Koksall also points out that since the 1990s, Turkish-Greek co-production funding increased. This, she claims, can lead to the development and production of 'festival'-darling films from Turkey that deal with topics liked by the funding bodies around the international film festivals. These topics include treatment of minorities and rediscovery of ethnic/cultural identities.

Overall Koksall's discussion of three different aspects of displacement within these films define the book: the first one is the displaced nature of the filmmaking project. Here, these films are defined as coproductions and part of a transnational cinema. Second, displacement aesthetic is defined as to how the home is reimagined and memory is formed in the films after the physical displacement occurs. Finally, the distinctive narrative and visual strategies of the films, such as silences, long-takes and lack of narrative disclosure, define the displacement aesthetic. Koksall's success comes from her pointing out that these films are cultural tools that narrate the different versions of history, create contestations over the meaning of the traumatic past and turn these events into stories which, in return, lead to a certain psychic mastery over these events. Koksall's discovery of the themes and motifs that create the aesthetic of displacement points to the refusal to make the traumatic past intelligible. The point of these films according to her is to lead others to discuss the meaning of these events further. Hence, the debate and controversy created by these films is the key point.