

10 Gender, Family and Home(Land) in Contemporary Turkish Cinema

A Comparative Analysis of Films by Nuri Bilge Ceylan, Reha Erdem and Ümit Ünal

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Turkish cinema went through a significant process of change during the 1990s when a number of rising directors began depicting the suffocations of marginalized people in their low-budget minimalistic films. The films of the period, canonized as “New Cinema of Turkey”, or “New Turkish Cinema”, continually revolve around the issues of home(land), and “reveal tensions, anxieties, and dilemmas around the questions of belonging, identity and memory in contemporary Turkish society”.¹ In these films, home is not the haven that it used to be in the earlier Turkish cinema, but a dwelling of trauma, violence and horror. The works of the directors of the new cinema are thus often associated with the themes of homelessness, home-seeking and/or homecomings, and with aesthetic emphases on claustrophobic interiors and liminal spaces. Considering the political, economic and contemporary social climate of Turkey, their works might be taken as a response to, or a projection of, the post-junta transition in the homeland. Home is often portrayed as an uncanny figure, a locus of threat and horror as it is immersed in (mostly gender-based) violence and crime.²

The new cinema is differentiated from the earlier decades of the Turkish film culture by its considerably male-centred narratives, which, from various aspects, directly or indirectly, address critical matters of masculinity more than ever before. Gönül Dönmez-Colin describes this new period as “macho cinema”,³ and Nejat Ulusay names some of the examples as “male films”.⁴ Zeynep Tül Akbal Süalp, on the other hand, uses the term “male-weepy films” to define the gendered pattern of a particular group of films in this New Wave filmmaking.⁵ Among these male narratives, a number of films appear to praise male bonding and/or machismo (hypermasculinity), with the overtones of violence. Most, however, as Savaş Arslan suggests, seem to challenge the dominant representations of masculinities in Turkish cinema through “masochistic subtexts” that defy male characters’ authority. Contrary to the classical patterns of Turkish cinema, a significant number of male characters in this film culture are depicted as weak, fragile, clumsy and impotent. Yet, as Arslan notes, it is the male subject who writes the

screenplay in which he stages his own victimhood,⁶ and most of these self-pitying male characters blame everyone, especially women, for their victimization and oppression. Women are cast either as “morbid provocateurs and seducers who lead men to commit crimes, violence and irrational acts and who, of course, then become the victims of these brutalities”, or are completely excluded from the narrative.⁷ This new gendered and/or gendering tendency, as Süalp argues, resonates with a lumpen alienation without any reparative or analytical impulse to engage actively with its society:

Free of self-criticism and an analytical approach to society and the world system, the self-indulgence of the directors, with this stylistic and sanctified lumpen lifestyle, urges them to glorify and polish their wounded underclass male egos without any interest in their real problems and/or the meanings and experiences of unemployment, poverty and deprivation from life . . . In this glorified underclass world . . . women have taken their part as the unknown, threatening other, and stand for all others . . . These “manufactured” women are also fantasies and at the same time fears of wounded male egos, and seemingly of the directors.⁸

As the background of the emergence of the new cinema, the cultural life of Turkey during the 1990s, was characterized by a marked growth in nationalist and militarist ideologies on the one hand, and a visible clash of identity politics functioning through the religious and ethnic differences on the other. The collision of these socio-political discourses led to a crisis in the collective national identity which, in turn, determined the thematic and aesthetic elements of the new Turkish cinema. These films, therefore, register the tropes of this crisis with different degrees of critical engagement.

In this chapter we will explore the shifting critical agendas of contemporary Turkish cinema in the last decade. Focusing on the recent works of three directors, Nuri Bilge Ceylan, Reha Erdem and Ümit Ünal, we will discuss the narrative dynamics of gender, family and home(land) as the major conceptual tools for understanding the novelties of the new cinema and investigating the uniquely allegorical cinematic discourse of these films against the dominant representational tendencies. We will consider our case studies, Ceylan’s *Three Monkeys* (*Üç Maymun*) (2008), Erdem’s *My Only Sunshine* (*Hayat Var*) (2008) and Ünal’s *The Shadowless* (*Gölgesizler*) (2008) as significant examples that subvert and disrupt the contemporary politics of identification with gender and nation in Turkey. These three films offer a comparative framework that responds to the recent critical pattern of alternative filmmaking in Turkey and triggers possibilities for unsettling the gender-specific peculiarities of this contemporary film practice.

We aim to discuss how issues of gender in film is instrumentalized and appropriated, via allegory, exposure, estrangement and ambivalence, so that it contributes to film’s critical practice of resisting normative ideologies of

nation and family, as well as the dominant normative discourses of national cinemas. The following section discusses Reha Erdem's *Hayat Var* by concentrating on the director's aesthetic choices of depicting the female protagonist through a certain dialogic silence, supplemented by his strategic uses of soundscape and landscape, which operates as a practice fundamentally antithetical to the male-centred narratives of the post-1990s New Wave filmmaking. Our discussion then moves to Nuri Bilge Ceylan's cinema and analyses Ceylan's ambivalent discourse of masculinity-in-crisis by considering *Three Monkeys* as the film which does not merely revisit but also reinterprets the gendered dynamics within the director's previous films. Finally, we read Ümit Ünal's *The Shadowless* in investigating the film's allegorical setting of time-space and its critical potentials to narrate normative ideological constellations of Turkey-as-nation.

The Rebellious Girl of the Bosphorus

In *New Turkish Cinema: Belonging, Identity and Memory*, Suner argues that "the absence of women is one of the characteristics of the new wave cinema".⁹ Though the statement is true about most New Wave films, Reha Erdem's fifth feature *My Only Sunshine (Hayat Var)* (2008) is different in that it revolves around the harsh transition from childhood to adolescence of a fourteen-year-old girl, Hayat, in a daily routine of poverty, abuse, humiliation and lack of love. The film, thus, proposes a distinctively incongruous example that defies the gendered order of the new cinema of Turkey. Indeed, Erdem's critical attitude to the depiction of masculinities makes all his films different from the works of the other contemporary directors. In *Times and Winds (Beş Vakit)* (2006) Ömer plans to kill his dad; in *Who is a Human Anyway? (Korkuyorum Anne)* (2004) the male characters are scared of their parents and of the practices that "prove" their manhood, such as military service, leaving home and circumcision; in *Kosmos* (2009) Battal, the stranger/messenger, searches for nothing but love. These characters do not merely reveal but also make us confront the fears and anxieties of home and homeland. *Hayat Var*, however, transcends all these examples in that in contrast to the male-centred narratives of the new cinema, it reflects on the sufferings, experiences and feelings of a girl from her perspective. Erdem consciously withdraws from the domain of the other characters, especially the male ones, so that nothing could marginalize her experience and her presence in the course of the narrative. Male characters are only depicted according to the role they play in Hayat's life. Yet though they are the major sources for Hayat's suppression, Erdem blocks any spectatorial sympathy by refusing to reflect on their experiences or feelings.

As stated above, one of the dominant ways of depicting women in the new cinema is through silence.¹⁰ If women are not portrayed as evil characters ruining men's lives with their lies and deceptions, they are mostly muted,

literally and symbolically, throughout the narrative. Female silence provides a narrative tool for male characters to speak through their own wounds, fears and sufferings, and from their points of view.¹¹ In *Hayat Var*, the silence of the female character functions in an entirely different way. Although Hayat is silent in most of the scenes, her silence does not support the experiences, feelings or stories of the male characters. It is instead an *active* silence that highlights her presence, as she reacts to and resists oppression *in silence*. For instance, when her grandfather asks her to give him a piece of bread, but to wash her hands first as she just came out of toilet, she opens the tap without saying a word and makes him think she is washing her hands. Then when near the end of the film, he sells their television, Hayat's only entertainment, for his cigarette money, she leaves him to death and remains silent in the face of his cries for help.

Thus Hayat's silent presence is put in contexts that imply agency. Her repetitive hums which sound like a combination of inhaling and mumbling and prevail over the film's soundscape become a form of self-expression, a language of her own, which in line with the literal translation of *Hayat Var* asserts that "Life [Hayat] exists!" or "Hayat is present". In some scenes, her hums dominate all the diegetic and non-diegetic sounds, which again sonically privilege her point of view in the narrative, and therefore turn her silence into "a mode of uttering" and inscribe "a response in its own right"¹² in an aural level. In contrast to Hayat's hums, the loud background sounds—such as ferry hoots, planes passing by, police sirens, shootouts, screams and windows breaking—are used in a repetitive and disturbing way to constantly remind the audience of the "shadows of violence" and of the looming presence of dangerous experiences awaiting her in the outside world and in the future. The sounds of the coughing fits of the bedridden grandfather, who is dependent on an oxygen tank to breathe, function as a constant reminder of the suffocating conditions of Hayat's life at home. Similarly, the repetitive sound of the stuffed toy playing "My Only Sunshine" and saying "I love you" in a synthetic tone echoes the deep lack of love in Hayat's life and creates momentary gaps which move from being alienating to being disrupting and disturbing to contribute to the dark atmosphere of the narrative. These features function like metaphoric motifs in the soundtrack to inscribe Hayat's presence in life. The arabesque music of the soundtrack also contributes to this effect by functioning like an ironic aesthetic supplement to Hayat's rebellious presence in the narrative. Erdem's use of Turkish arabesque, a popular genre of underclass macho sensibility, with the sufferings of a teenage girl from Istanbul, manipulates the gendered codes of arabesque culture while presenting a unique counterexample to the hundreds of arabesque-noir films that have muted female characters.¹³

Though she is subjected to abuse, rape and humiliation, Hayat is portrayed neither as a victim nor an object of desire, but as a rebel resisting the violent domination and oppressive claims of men over her body and

life. This silent rebellion is also characterized by a sustained desire for life. After she is abused by the grocer, he gives her a chocolate as a “present” and advises her not to tell her dad about him. In response, she goes to the shelf, takes more packs of cakes and chocolates, and leaves the grocery without a word. When her stepfather orders her to cover her legs while she is sitting, she maliciously does the opposite just to make him angry. At the end of the film, just after she has ignored her grandfather’s cries, the spectator sees her with a blithe face, stealing a boat with her beloved one to tour around the Bosphorus. Leaving her grandfather to death, she moves on merrily to open herself to the boy from whom she receives the closest attention. Contrary to her counterparts in the new cinema, Hayat’s depiction with “unusual” and unexpected behavioural patterns, evoking a sense of estrangement, resists to be represented as lack or absence. Her actions and reactions inscribe her presence in the narrative, as they signify her desire for life against all odds.

The film’s representation of family and home resonates with the new cinema’s prevailing tendency to associate home with trauma, violence, cruelty and horror. Suffering, danger and violence in Hayat’s life originate in the family and the familiar. Her mother does not give her the attention and the love that she expects. Her grandfather’s constant grumbles make life at home suffocating. Her father’s readiness to love others while neglecting her deeply upsets her. She is also abused by their neighbour, raped by the grocer, scolded by her stepfather and ridiculed by her classmates. Home, neighbourhood, family and familiar all function as sources of Hayat’s sufferings.

Istanbul and the waters of the Bosphorus play a crucial role in the film. Apart from their role in the creation of the beautiful but precarious atmosphere of the film, the sea and the almost deserted streets of Istanbul become the symbols of Hayat’s rebellious presence in the narrative. In the sequence where she wanders in the eerily deserted streets of Istanbul at night, the narrative pattern triggers a sense of suspense in which the spectator expects Hayat to get into trouble, but Erdem masterfully plays with the suspense to end the scene with no disaster. Thus home seems to be more threatening than the city. Unlike her peers, she is subject to punitive consequences of her sexuality in her close neighbourhood. The Bosphorus thus becomes the root through which she escapes the vicious circle of home and neighbourhood. Unlike new cinema in which the anxiety of being with and facing a stranger is dominant, in *Hayat Var*, Hayat receives love and attention from a teenage stranger who tries to protect her from her bullying classmates, sings her songs and finally makes her laugh and happy by helping her break away from the vicious circle of her life. The film, therefore, subverts the tropes of avoiding the stranger by showing the protagonist trusting the unknown other, who has often been depicted in the new cinema as a threat to the home and homeland, family and familiar, and as the virile figure of national or masculine fears and anxieties.

Reha Erdem's films introduce a "cinema of resistance" by attaching the political to the imaginary and changing or questioning our ways of seeing and looking at the reality.¹⁴ Through its aesthetically and thematically subversive portrayal of its female protagonist, *Hayat Var* challenges the dominant forms of gender representations in the alternative filmmaking of Turkey. Thus the dynamics of gender relations in the film offer an alternative critical mode of resistance to a peculiar territory of national cinema that has already been considered marginal and resistant. *Hayat Var* introduces "unusual" ways of depicting a female character, and disrupts the gendered regimes of seeing, showing and hearing in the new cinema. The character Hayat appears as an embodiment of resistance against a life full of gender-based violence, a life without love and kindness. The film not only gives Hayat an active agency but also narrates through her depiction the inevitable primacy of sustaining hope in life in the face of all the examples of the new cinema that prioritize a defeatist male experience and doom femininity to victimhood.

A Family of *Three Monkeys*

Revisiting the gendered discourse of "New Turkish Cinema" in the 1990s, Suner identifies female characters who are absent, or silent, both literally and symbolically, in this alternative filmmaking practice as an effect of a masculinist discourse in which one "can also detect a positive element . . . of exhibit[ing] a critical self-awareness about [its] own complicity with patriarchal culture".¹⁵ Such ambivalence in gender representation, according to Suner, may be seen as the male auteur's conscientious self-reflection where the absence of woman-as-agent adds another dimension to the depictions of the male protagonist as an alienated subject of masculinity in crisis. In this context, the extent to which the depiction of masculinity acts as an exposure of its unmarked thus hegemonic characteristics becomes important. The ambivalence may be considered to come from not merely the absent or silent/muted women but also the pseudo-critical strategy of re-enacting the relational field of hegemonic heteronormative masculinities.

Nuri Bilge Ceylan is one of the prominent figures in what has been conceptualized as "New Turkish Cinema". The recurring aesthetic and thematic elements in Ceylan's films from *The Small Town* (1998) to *Three Monkeys* (2008) are those of a self-reflexive "auteur" who seems to allegorize the post-junta structures of home, homeland, identity and belonging in contemporary Turkish society. In his early films, the trilogy *The Small Town*, *Clouds of May* (2000) and *Distant* (2002), the crisis of the modern subject is re-enacted by the depiction of the figure of the urban male intellectual confronting and reinterpreting his provincial origins. *The Small Town* narrates the disembodied homecoming of Ceylan as a filmmaker who documents the tropes of everyday life by capturing the peculiar rhythm of life in a provincial town and the young Saffet's boredom with his life. *Clouds of May*, however, associates its

homecoming with a self-reflexive agenda in which the plot itself contains the return of a filmmaker to his hometown. The documentary setting in *Clouds of May* gestures to the failed ethnographic gaze of the filmmaker objectifying the province as the folkloric exotic object. Muzaffer's personal and professional detachment is interrupted by the ongoing confrontation with his own uncanny proximity to the hometown. The film narrates those moments of confrontation and alienation in parallel to the failed position of Muzaffer as a filmmaker who tries to film his hometown and his family. The professional crisis of the figure of the urban male who appears in Ceylan's cinema as the male documentarist (*Clouds of May*), the male photographer (*Uzak*) and the male academic (*Climates*) suggests a curious reference to the gendered conventions of the modern intellectual, i.e. the modern author, in Turkey: the failed authority of the gaze always implies a certain failure of masculinity.

Discussing Zeki Demirkubuz's *Innocence* (1997), Ceylan's *Clouds of May* (1999), Erdem's *Times and Winds* (2006), Semih Kaplanoglu's *Egg* (2007), Süalp problematizes the critical discourse of the New Wave Turkish films in which the narratives revolve around impossible homecomings and urban or rural conflicts. Süalp criticizes the radical alterity that those films attempt to construct by representing the non-urban towns as the timeless other, as the objects of nature, peace, boredom as well as yearning.¹⁶ The evolution of such gendered elements within the so-called lumpen sensibility of Nuri Bilge Ceylan's cinema, particularly in *Uzak*, *Climates* (2006) and *Three Monkeys*, becomes important in that the absence/presence of women create a metaphoric framework for the filmmaker's allegories of homeland. Although the pattern of silences, duration, the depiction of home as an uncanny space and the mode of photographic indifference can be taken as a mode of resistant minimalism in Ceylan's film aesthetics, the gendered connotations of these aesthetic elements, particularly when they intersect with the visual narration of women, offer a curious paradox. Does the female embodiment on screen reinforce or reveal the crisis of hegemonic masculinities? Rather than overinterpreting Ceylan's cinema as misogynistic, would it be possible to consider the representation of women through their *active passivity* as well as their overwhelmingly *visible silence* as one of the key elements in the filmmaker's allegory of homeland?

In *Uzak* the tension between the two male protagonists, Mahmut, the defeatist photographer, and Yusuf, the provincial relative visiting Istanbul, has been hitherto discussed by film critics through the paradox of home, provinciality, modernity and urban identity. What the film narrates as the paradox of belonging, however, is reinforced by its paradoxical markers of masculinity. References to the characters' genders and sexuality in the film do not merely dramatize but also trouble the differences between them. When the mouse in Mahmut's house has been trapped towards the end of the film, for instance, Yusuf objects to Mahmut's attempt to bin it without killing it. Then as Yusuf kills the trapped mouse, Mahmut watches in a

sequence that alludes to the paralyzed conscience of the urban male. The depiction of the characters' relation to their mothers offers a similar contrast. The highly stylized imagery of the scene in which Mahmut walks with his ill mother through the hospital corridors enacts a gendered metaphor of a devouring/castrating void. The dim lighting reveals the characters from their behind like two shadows walking through a narrow passage and thus the scene appears to dramatize, in projecting, the male character's anxious vision of being with, or having to be with, his old ill mother. This is juxtaposed with the pattern of Yusuf's phone calls to his mother which reveal his passionate concern about his mother's wellbeing. These moments construct a difference of "virtue" between the characters in the film whereas the film also entails, ironically, an emphasis on their homosocial resemblance. The visits of Mahmut's mistress to his house and Yusuf's curious encounters while strolling through Istanbul's streets represent male sexual agency as that which is not necessarily bringing pleasure or happiness to women. The woman, Mahmut's sex partner, presented as an anonymous figure in total silence, is shown crying in Mahmut's bathroom after one of their meet-ups. Yusuf, on the other hand, stalks a woman while wandering around the city and his persistent staring in the underground annoys the woman. Furthermore, through the parallel editing of the characters watching models in fashion channels on television, the concept of "distance" becomes dramatically gendered. The film narrates masculinity through its mundane (hetero)sexualization where the male characters do not construct any *personal* contact with or erotic commitment to women.

In *Uzak (Distant)*, women operate as anonymous figures that function as tools through which the male protagonist's impotency and guilt is underscored. The film treats the illness of Mahmut's mother, the abortion of his now infertile ex-wife and the visits of his mistress as the central elements to portray his relation to women. A similar gendered dynamic can be observed in the representation of the male protagonist of Ceylan's *Climates* (2006), Isa. Isa's relations to women, i.e. his insensitive attitude in his long-term relationship with Bahar and his callous stand in his affair with Serap serve to reveal his failure of commitment. None of the female characters appears on screen as anything but a supplement in the portrayal of the male character.

According to Suner, Ceylan's film *Three Monkeys* shares with his previous films the subjects of belonging and home although it contains a higher and more sophisticated level of formalism in its "mode of production, cinematic style and story".¹⁷ The representation of gender relations in *Three Monkeys*, however, may offer another mode of critical discontinuity within Ceylan's work. Rather than narrating women by splitting them into stereotypes of castrating mistresses, mothers, wives or guilt-projecting ex-wives, the film enacts these performatives in a single, seemingly noir, female character, Hacer, who is the mother, the housewife and the traitor/mistress of the story. As the title of the film also suggests, the central theme of silence appears to

politicize its allegory of homeland by narrating the story of an underprivileged family in crisis. Performing neither a positive nor a strictly negative representation, Hacer's indifferent and unapologetic presence within the film's traffic of hierarchical masculinities operates as a critically gendered mediator. Therefore, what Suner identifies as the ambivalent absences of women and what Süalp criticizes as projective lumpen masculinism with regard to Ceylan's previous films has swerved to a much more critically effective agenda in *Three Monkeys*.

The portrayal of the male characters and the dysfunctional family in *Three Monkeys* promises more than the revelation of a masculinity crisis as the film associates the crisis in the family with a crisis at home(land) in which crime, lies and violence become distinctive parts of the daily life of the family members who chose not to see, hear or speak. The recurring use of indifferent silences in Ceylan's cinema, supplemented by his use of close-up and landscape, offers resonances "with regard to the prevailing mood of silence, oblivion and complicity in Turkey".¹⁸ The film opens with the politician Servet involved in a car accident. Anxious about the forthcoming elections, he convinces his driver, Eyüp, to cover him up. While Eyüp is in prison for the crime his boss committed, his son Ismail decides to start his own business. Hacer agrees to meet Servet to ask for money, but the meeting leads to an affair. Ceylan's stylistic use of silence, sound, colour and close-ups, supplemented with the film's generic references to film-noir¹⁹, builds up the narrative tension around Hacer's adultery. The story ends with Ismail's confession of murdering Servet, and Eyüp's attempt to convince somebody else in the neighbourhood to cover up his son's crime:

In the circular narrative of the film, the story is bracketed by two identical acts: first, a crime that an outsider has committed is transferred to a family member; then a crime that a family member has committed is transferred to an outsider. In both cases, the actual crime is made inaccessible to the viewer. The emphasis is not on what happened, but on the air of guilt, complicity and silence that it has created. In this sense, the story has no clear centre. Instead, *Three Monkeys* presents a chain of evasive acts uncontrollably leading to one another; a series of wrongdoings, lies and cover-ups. Sharing a sense of complicity, the family's unity is sustained by ignoring the truth, and with the help of silence. Their life together rests on sustaining a mood of oblivion.²⁰

"The air of guilt and silence", which, in Suner's argument, appears to haunt the film's circular narrative and unsettle any possible "centre", installs Hacer's transgressive act as the primary event unveiling the film's gender dynamics. We would thus argue that Hacer's crystalline image-as-woman (mother, wife, mistress) functions as a certain centre within the film's discourse of gender, which catalyzes the cinematic affects of depicting masculinity-in-crisis.

Ismail is the embodiment of male adolescence represented in an expressionistic style throughout the film. His body is shown sprawled, beaten and wounded, sweating and vomiting. Being under his family's agitating pressure for his unemployment and unruly friends, witnessing his mother's sexual encounter with Servet whose money he depends on and persevering to keep silent to his father about his and Hacer's secrets, Ismail represents the post-junta young generation in Turkey whose repressed and silenced anxiety is a production of the ideologically rigid structures of nationhood and the normative constellations of family. Hence, the film conceptualizes a critical kinship between the mother and the son. Although none of the characters in the film operates beyond "the spirals of silence and oblivion generated in Turkish society",²¹ Ceylan depicts Ismail and Hacer's subjection to the hegemonic regimes of masculinity in a way that mediates critical possibilities of exposing and rethinking the gendered structures of contemporary Turkey. Investigating an entirely different Middle Eastern context, through *purdah* and polygamy, Deniz Kandiyoti argues that the fragile and ambivalent gender position of the male child or youngster, oscillating between the "repudiable mother" and the "patriarchal father", and witnessing the mother's subjection and the father's violence at once, demands a critical attention in order to understand "the paradoxes of masculinity" in Muslim societies. Though not being directly related to the figure of the Middle Eastern "profeminist male reformer . . . [who] does not speak from the position of dominating patriarch" in Kandiyoti's argument, the witnessing and suffering presence of Ismail in the film pertains to a critical discourse of masculinity, which is, to a certain extent, conscientious of its own self-constituting paradoxes.²²

There are moments in *Three Monkeys* in which the director engages playfully and critically with the gendered forms of representation and their normative spectatorial patterns in the conventional reflexes of national cinema. When Ismail witnesses his mother's adultery through the keyhole of his parents' bedroom, he gets paralyzed. The close-ups of Ismail's eye through the keyhole and his face and the medium shot of the knife in the kitchen suggest impending violence, but the narration does not swerve to a dramatic pathos of masculine honour and bloody revenge. Similarly, the tension between Eyüp and Hacer upon his homecoming and his suspicions of her relationship with Servet do not relegate into a scene of violent masculine aggression or a spectacle of apologetic confession. Regarding Hacer's suicide attempt, Dönmez-Colin argues that, "By not behaving like the underdog, [the character] gives her husband the chance to forego his injured male pride and forgive her".²³ In parallel, the ghostly appearance of the family's deceased son in the film alludes to guilt, conscience and grief, which seem to present a gender difference as the lost son appears only to the family's male characters, Eyüp and Ismail. Despite possible counterarguments, we prefer to relate to Ceylan's choice of not making the ghost appear to Hacer, in a different, less paranoid, way. Rather than considering this as an effect of representing the

female character as the evil woman devoid of guilt, we may read this as a reference to her agency as the one being able to grieve. Silence as an ideological marker not merely triggers such ambivalences but also effects the relational field within the family depicted in the film. The family thus becomes the *topos* of Ceylan's critique of the silencing contemporary state ideology in Turkey. The family enacts the homeland in *Three Monkeys*.

The allegorical suggestiveness of Erdem's and Ceylan's films, however, do not remain within the limits of the Turkish geography of homeland. The academic practices of criticism engaging with contemporary national cinemas often harbour an intellectual tendency to localize the filmmaking practice and presuppose that the national index should automatically be interpreted as allegorizing the socio-political context of its geography-culture. However, as the case of Erdem's and Ceylan's films reveal it would be much more helpful if one travels back and forth between particularizing and universalizing performatives of film criticism to discover the varieties of filmic discourses within national cinemas.²⁴ The international travel and reception of Nuri Bilge Ceylan and Reha Erdem come from the filmmakers' strategic use of allegory in which the films' visual aesthetics gain different modes of intelligibility, as well as appreciation, during their local and global exposure to the viewer. Our critical emphasis on the aesthetic, the "film-as-film", may be said to reciprocate the directors' approach to surface/depth binary, which, we would contend, does not necessarily set a hierarchy when performing, in problematizing, possible modes of critical engagement with Turkey-as-referent and with local/global modes of "Third World", accented, film aesthetics.

A Village of the Shadowless

The story of Ümit Ünal's *The Shadowless* begins with the arrival of a barber from Istanbul to an unknown and unnamed village. He takes the place of the long-missing barber of the village, Nuri, on request of the villagers. Meanwhile, the beautiful young girl of the village, Güvercin, vanishes and the Mukhtar starts an interrogation to find out who could have kidnapped her, or rather who could be the "dirty dog" inside. The hidden truths, lies and corruptions behind a seemingly peaceful and orderly ordinary village are revealed through the course of the narrative. On the other hand, as the characters, scenes, objects, stories and places constantly interchange and interpenetrate into each other throughout the narrative, this leads to an indeterminacy, which affirms nothing, but evokes questions and creates a constant multilayering of meaning. This is also supported with the characters who constantly ask questions about everything that happened in their intertwined past and present, here and faraway, existence and non-existence. The film, thus, connects the audience with the experience of loss, while questioning our assumptions about *the* truth and being. These questions dominating the diegesis, as a

strategy antithetical to the repetitive uses of silence in the New Wave Turkish contemporary cinema, inscribe a critical self-reflexivity in the face of an historical context overwhelmed by silenced and suppressed memories. Ünal's previous films *9* (2002) and *Ara* (2008) contain similar allegorical reflexes: the filmic space does not identify time but expands and confuses the filmic temporality. In *9* almost all the story takes place in a police interrogation room after the rape and death of a homeless woman in a district of Istanbul. Whilst in *9*, the editing reveals the conflicting declarations of the residents to open up critical gaps and generate doubt about the "truth", fiction and truth in *The Shadowless* recurrently merge with self-reflexive suggestiveness to transform the film into a question about the mixing of reality and fiction in the idea of the homeland. This becomes most clear in the last scene where the barber is looking at the village for the last time, and the pollens falling turn into the words of the last page of *The Shadowless's* scenario.

While the stories of *Three Monkeys* and *Hayat Var* crystallize around the family which makes the depiction of gender relations and the films' allegorical references to Turkey-as-homeland dramatically visible, in *The Shadowless*, which is Ünal's adaptation of Hasan Ali Toptaş's novel *Gölgesizler* (2009), the story takes place in a timeless village the community of which can be said to embody a nation. Most of the examples of the new cinema—from horror films to historical dramas and from rural escape films to nationalist adventures—can be cited as films displaying and representing an anxiety of belonging pervading the homeland in the post-junta period. There are also a significant number of films that establish a direct critical link, in terms of their content, with the official history of Turkey, Turkish identity and belonging.²⁵ *The Shadowless* differs from the films of these groups in that it introduces a distinct example in its content, narrative forms and filmic style. Whilst the prominent examples of the group refer to traumatic, and mostly silenced, events in the past of the homeland through a realistic style, *The Shadowless* allegorizes the homeland in a surrealist ambiance. It reveals its historical context only through the use of blurred and interpenetrating boundaries between past and present in a timeless village.

The film opens in a barber's shop in Istanbul. The writer starts imagining his new story while having a conversation with the barber: "Everyone has the same problem; they want to be here and faraway both at the same time". The film's fragmented atemporal narrative is the writer's writing-in-process. Every object and character in the barber's shop is transferred to the timeless village fantasized by the writer. Moreover, in contrast to Ceylan's depiction of the province (*tara*) in *The Small Town* and *Clouds of May* and Erdem's poetics of time, being and nature in *Times and Winds*, the time and space of *The Shadowless* does not incorporate a dialectical conflict between the urban and the rural. The imaginary periphery/province projected by the Istanbul-based writer in the film functions as the "shadow of the centre".²⁶ The space in the film is neither the object of alienating boredom nor the poetic, erotic

and/or exotic embodiment of temporal alterity: it is the hypervital, theatrical, anonymous time-space of allegory that functions as the allegory of the nation-state.

The character Mukhtar is the authority figure of the village, an extension of the state, controlling and regulating the memory of the community. The cries of Mukhtar's detained son provide the only set of auditory motifs proving the subtle implications of incest in the covered-up history of the village: "You the belle of the village, and me the best-looking man, the bravest . . . Who would have thought that we'd produce such a freak [*hilkat garibesi*]?" says Mukhtar to his wife in bed after their failed sexual encounter.²⁷ The characters remind the spectator that there have been missing people in the village. Güvercin, the beautiful innocent virgin, who can easily be taken as the gendered signifier, the object of masculine protectionism (*namus*) or the metaphor for the homeland (*vatan*), disappears in the film. "Our forefathers used to talk about a bear making off with a bride. Could it be a bear made off with Güvercin?", Mukhtar asks the Guard of the village. Guard replies: "But there aren't any bears in the hills around here."²⁸ The exchange of gazes among the villagers, underlined by Ünal's expressionistic use of close-ups, implies that they are aware of, but wish to deny and forget about history, about Mukhtar's involvement in Güvercin's disappearance.

Cennet is the strong mother-figure of the film. The name itself, meaning "heaven", entails gendered valencies as it refers to the hadith which is very well known in Turkish culture: "Heaven lies under the feet of mothers". Cennet's son is the romantic poet of the village. Having encountered him reciting his poems about love, the Guard informs Mukhtar about his suspicions of the poet. Mukhtar thus blames Cennet's son for Güvercin's disappearance before beating him:

You think I wasn't young once too? That I didn't burn with desire? That I didn't fall in love from afar? That I didn't dream of making off to the mountains with my beloved, of quenching my desire for three nights and marching back into the village to get married? You think [your] wild flowers, love porters and all that mean nothing to me?²⁹

The hegemonic state masculinity which projects guilt, paranoia and anxiety of its authoritative ego—as violence—to the individual who thinks and imagines otherwise is powerfully allegorized by the encounter between Mukhtar and Cennet's son triggered by Mukhtar's assistant, the Guard. Silently gathering in front of Mukhtar's office, the village people witness the violence. The poet loses his sanity after Mukhtar's violent attack and then disappears until he returns from the hills with Güvercin on his back. Cennet becomes the maternal conscience of the story as she is the only figure who constantly challenges Mukhtar's authority in public: "Mukhtar, give my son back to me! You stole his mind!". In other words, Cennet does not reiterate the predominant

nationalism in the media representation of mothers who grieve the deceased soldiers as martyrs of the homeland:

Keep away, Mukhtar! It's you who did this to my boy! Don't come near me! Go dig a hole for yourself! You've robbed an innocent of his mind! You've ruined his life! Dig a hole for yourself!³⁰

The imam of the village and the old blind man of wisdom, Dede, are also crucial characters in sustaining the village's denial and amnesia. Dede, as the storyteller, is the witness, the mediator, as well as the manipulator of the village's incestuous history. Pretending to be anxious about Güvercin's disappearance, Mukhtar asks for advice from the Dede who ends up telling him about the love story of the Dazzling Fatma, the mother and the lover of the soldiers, and Hamdi the Soldier. The existence, if not the death, of Hamdi, known as the mythic man "with nine wives and a yardful of children", remains questionable in the so-called official memory of village people. "What became of those children? Who do you think they are?", asks Dede to Mukhtar.³¹ Hence, the incest becomes the metaphor of the disavowed secret, which unsettles difference (i.e. difference as the normative core of nationalism) in collapsing the past of a nation, and those who it ostracizes as its abject others, to the same kin. No character in the film has the courage to answer Dede's questions. The questions about Hamdi and the villagers' inability to even speculate about possible answers bear critical implications about issues pertaining to a traumatic past and a state-controlled cultural memory in contemporary Turkey.³² Recalling Turkey's recent struggle with the overpolarized political ideologies of militarism, nationalism, republicanism and Islamic liberalism, the subtle allegoric depiction of the village as an indefinite timeless space makes *The Shadowless* gain many layers of critical meaning. Ünal's film reveals a dramatically gendered finale in which the men of the village walk towards the mountains with guns to hunt the bears that "make off with girls". The allegory of homeland in *The Shadowless* narrates a sublime state-masculinity whose subjugatory power creates anxiety due to its hegemonic invisibility.

In Place of Conclusion

In our analyses of films by Erdem, Ceylan and Ünal, we reread a particular contemporary pattern within the diverse critical trends of Turkish cinema to demonstrate how the representations of gender in national cinemas can be revisited in order to reveal the complex and debatable logic of resistance within alternative filmmaking practices. While Erdem's film *My Only Sunshine* introduces a contradictory and exceptional example through the rebellious presence of its female protagonist Hayat, Ceylan paves the way for revealing not only a masculinity crisis, or a paradox, but also a crisis in family and

home(land) in *Three Monkeys* through narrating the triangle between its characters doomed to be silent on crimes, lies and deceptions. On the other hand, Ünal disrupts the traditional cinematic imagination of homeland in Turkish cinema, in terms of narrative and style, by his homeland allegory with an atemporal narrative and in a non-realist style in *The Shadowless*. Thus, our discussion here foregrounded the directors' playfully subversive appropriations of gender as significant objects of inquiry that resist via allegory, exposure, estrangement and ambivalence the politics of identification with gender and nation in Turkey and the dominant discourses of masculinity/femininity in Turkish cinema. All of these films, we argue, by inscribing counter- and contradictory moments, and by their innovative style and aesthetics, open up critical gaps in the contemporary cinema of Turkey regarding the dominant modes of representations of gender, family and homeland.

One can use a similar method to study the works of the new generation of filmmakers in Turkey to investigate the ways in which the above films have triggered further innovations to critique and cinematically respond to the dominant ideologies of gender, sexuality, family and home(land). In this respect, İnan Temelkuran's *Bornova Bornova* (2009), Taylan Brothers' *Vavien* (2009) and Seren Yüce's *Majority (Çoğunluk)* (2010) offer striking examples for critical depictions of the mainstream family structures, the depoliticized post-junta youth and the everyday performances of societal nationalism, militarism, violence and heteronormative gender identifications.

Notes

1. Asuman Suner, *New Turkish Cinema: Belonging, Identity and Memory* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2010), 1.
2. Asuman Suner, "Horror of a Different Kind: Dissonant Voices of the New Turkish Cinema," *Screen* 45, no. 4 (2004): 305–23.
3. Gönül Dönmez-Colin, *Turkish Cinema: Identity, Distance and Belonging* (London: Reaktion, 2008).
4. Nejat Ulusay, "Günümüz Türk Sinemasında 'Erkek Filmleri'nin Yükselişi ve Erkeklik Krizi," *Toplum ve Bilim* 101 (2004): 144–61.
5. Zeynep Tül Akbal Süalp, "The Glorified Lumpen 'Nothingness' Versus Night Navigations," in *Cinema and Politics: Turkish Cinema and the New Europe*, ed. Deniz Bayrakdar (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars, 2009), 221–31.
6. Savaş Arslan, "Venus in Furs, Turks in Purse: Masochism in the New Cinema of Turkey," in Bayrakdar, *Cinema and Politics*, 263.
7. Zeynep Tül Akbal Süalp and Başak Şenova, "Violence: Muted Women in Scenes of Glorified Lumpen Men," in *New Feminism: Worlds of Feminism, Queer and Networking Conditions*, ed. M. Grzinić and R. Reitsamer (Wien: Löcker, 2008), 92.
8. Süalp and Şenova, "Violence," 91.
9. Suner, "Horror of a Different Kind," 163.
10. See Zeynep Tül Akbal Süalp, "Allegori ve Temsil: Korkunun Yüzü ve Çılgınlığın İzleşti Filmler III," *25. Kare* 26 (1999): 13–20; Özlem Güçlü, "Silent Representations

- of Women in the New Cinema of Turkey,” *Sinemasine* 1, no. 2 (Fall 2010): 71–85. See “The Glorified Lumpen ‘Nothingness.’” See also Süalp and Şenova, “Violence.”
11. Güçlü, “Silent Representations.”
 12. Trinh T. Minh-ha, *Women, Native, Other: Writing Postcoloniality and Feminism* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1989).
 13. Süalp suggests that the narratives of the 1990s cinema register particular time-spaces. She considers it as arabesque-noir that presents film-noirish features, self-pitying arabesque atmospheres and allegorical frameworks. Süalp, “The Glorified ‘Nothingness’”; and Zeynep Tül Akbal Süalp, “Deneyim Ufkumuzun Sineması,” in *Özgürlüklerden Kayıplara ve Sonrası*, ed. Zeynep Tül Akbal Süalp, Ayla Kanbur and Necla Algan (Ankara: De Ki, 2008).
 14. Firat Yücel, “Önsöz,” in *Reha Erdem Sineması: Ak ve şyan*, ed. Firat Yücel (Istanbul: Çitlembik, 2009), 13.
 15. Suner, “Horror of a Different Kind,” 163. See also Süalp, *Zamanmekan: Kuram ve Sinema* (Istanbul: Bağlam, 2004); Süalp, “Allegori ve Temsil: Korkunun Yüzü ve Çılgınlığın İzleği Filmler III”; and Süalp, “Allegori ve Temsil: Korkunun Yüzü ve Çılgınlığın İzleği Filmler,” *25. Kare* 24 (1998): 11–13. It is Süalp who first introduced the arguments, and triggered debates, on issues of silence and absence of female characters in these male narratives in the context of the new cinema of Turkey.
 16. Zeynep Tül Akbal Süalp, “Taşrada Saklı Zaman- Geri Dönülemeyen,” in *Tarada Var Bir Zaman*, ed. Zeynep Tül Akbal Süalp and Asli Güneş (Istanbul: Çitlembik, 2010), 87–116.
 17. Asuman Suner, “A Lonely and Beautiful Country: Reflecting upon the State of Oblivion in Turkey,” *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 12, no. 1 (2011), 15.
 18. *Ibid.*, 15.
 19. See Süalp, “Deneyim Ufkumuzun Sineması”; and “The Glorified Lumpen ‘Nothingness.’”
 20. Suner, “A Lonely and Beautiful Country,” 23.
 21. *Ibid.*
 22. Deniz Kandiyoti, “The Paradoxes of Masculinity: Some Thoughts on Segregated Societies,” in *Dislocating Masculinity: Comparative Ethnographies*, ed. Andrea Cornwall and Nancy Lindisfarn (London: Routledge, 1994), 197–213.
 23. Gönül Dönmez-Colin, “Women in Turkish Cinema: Their Presence and Absence as Images and as Image-Makers,” *Third Text* 24, no. 1 (2010): 95.
 24. For an in-depth discussion on this, see the analysis of Kutluğ Ataman’s videos in Cüneyt Çakırlar, “Queer Art of Parallaxed Document: The Visual Discourse of Docudrag in Kutluğ Ataman’s *Never My Soul!* (2001),” *Screen* 52, no. 3 (2011): 358–75.
 25. For more, see Süalp, “Deneyim Ufkumuzun Sineması,” 7–54.
 26. Mesut Varlık, “Gölgesizler ve Taşrasızlar,” in *Tarada Var Bir Zaman*, ed. Zeynep Tül Akbal Süalp and Asli Güneş (Istanbul: Çitlembik, 2010), 237.
 27. Ümit Ünal, *Gölgesizler*, DVD İmaj Film, 00:16:58–00:18:34.
 28. *Ibid.*, 00:14:30–00:14:50.
 29. *Ibid.*, 00:32:50–00:33:10.
 30. *Ibid.*, 00:40:12–00:40:30.
 31. *Ibid.*, 00:23:43–00:28:56.
 32. Nurdan Gürbilek, *The New Cultural Landscape in Turkey: Living in a Shop Window* (London: Zed Books, 2011).

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