

A METIN ERKSAN FILM BEARS AS MUCH IMPORTANCE AS A KEMAL TAHIR NOVEL



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The 1950s was a period in the history of the Turkish cinema when intellectuals did not engage themselves much with the cinema. And those who did take interest in it concentrated their attention largely on foreign cinema. What was present at the time was a cinematic approach, moving further away from literature and theatre. Metin Erksan made films in that decade with which he focused on the realities of his country. In his *Dokuz Dağın Efesi*¹, he dwelt on Turkey's circumstances and realities at length, and his writings for the film were later published. Orhan Kemal, in the first edition of a book he wrote in the 1960s on screenplay, published the screenplay of Metin Erksan's film entitled *Gecelerin Ötesi*² as an exemplary script. The period in question saw no other films more sophisticated than these in terms of social and historical facts.

The time was that of focusing on the western cinema and its typical critic was Tuncan Okan. As the author of a 1962 book entitled *Türk Sineması Tarihi*³, he came across as being a cinema writer, typical in one sense, but atypical in another. The main focus of his book is on form, and what seems to be the most fundamental

statement in the book is that 'the camera really left studios for the street for the first time during the making of *Kanun Namına*⁴.' He does not distance himself from social themes, but he does not fully focus on them, either. Both of these approaches are rooted in his past as a TKP⁵ member. He stresses social themes based on this experiential knowledge coming from his past, while deliberately keeping this stress a very slight one in order to deliver himself of the burdens of the past. And for this reason, it misses the social dimension of Metin Erksan films in a quite voluntary fashion. Yet perhaps he pretends not to understand [this social aspect] simply to conceal himself.

"The relatively libertarian atmosphere of the 1960s" – a much arbitrarily uttered phrase – allowed Nijat Özön to speak of social matters with a greater ease. However, the climate of the 1960s caused writers and directors to gravitate more towards involving in political preferences rather than making sociological assessments. And it is because of this that Metin Erksan's *Yılanların Öcü*⁶ became his most highlighted and referenced film. And this film of his stands out from his other films with its political touches. Nonetheless, the reason for the political tone of the film is not to be found in the film itself, but rather it stems from

1 The Lord of the Nine Mountains - 1958

2 Beyond the Nights - 1960

3 The History of Turkish Cinema

4 In the Name of the Law, 1952

5 The Turkish Communist Party

6 The Revenge of the Serpents, 1962

the venture of the novel [it is based on] first as a theater play and the political reverberations triggered by this tentative theatrical undertaking. And Nijat Özön's most comprehensive criticism of Metin Erksan films was concentrated on this one. Furthermore, Nijat Özön and other film critics of the time directed their more positive evaluations at Halit Refiğ's films which revolved around more prominently political themes. Standing in the limelight are *Şehirdeki Yabancı*⁷ and *Gurbet Kuşları*⁸, two of his exemplary works in this genre. And even his *Şafak Bekçileri*⁹ received more acclaim and recognition despite its slightly childlike, heavily political, and overly schematic tone. Probably owing to some film projects they worked for together in mid 1950s, Nijat Özön took a more positive approach in his assessment of his films *Yasak Aşk*¹⁰ and *Haremde Dört Kadın*¹¹. As a matter of fact, another highly rated cult film of the era was *Karanlıkta Uyananlar*¹², whose screenplay was written by the same person¹³ who wrote that of *Şehirdeki Yabancı*. The message they wanted to convey, briefly, was the more prominently political preferences of Halit Refiğ and others in comparison to the sociological evalu-

ations of Metin Erksan. Such a generalization of the sociological aspect of Metin Erksan's evaluations can be found in an article by Sadık Yalsızuçanlar (*Doğu Batı*, issue no. 2) as well as in the first draft of Yıldırım Uysal's doctoral thesis (ODTÜ, Department of Sociology, 2012). It must be given serious thought as to why there was such a split between the people interested in the cinema at the time. In the subsequent era, probably based on the same reasons, the nationalist-conservative segment amongst film critics placed greater emphasis on Halit Refiğ's *Fatma Bacı*¹⁴ than on Metin Erksan's films.

The post-1965 era marked a time when thoughts became more crystallized including those about politics. It was also a segment of time in which politically sensitive groups operating abroad began turning their attention to Turkey. Despite the international success of *Susuz Yaz*¹⁵ in those years, Metin Erksan, its director, still did not receive the acclaim enjoyed by his film. Between 1950 and 1960, Turkish films were getting growingly less attention. And it came as a strange phenomenon to witness a Turkey turning its back on its own cinema while trying, on the other hand, to focus more on its social problems. In addition, the second volume of Nijat Özön's *The History of Turkish Cinema* not following the first one in due time or its not cover-

7 The Stranger in Town, 1963

8 Birds in Exile, 1964

9 The Watchmen of the Dawn, 1963

10 Forbidden Love, 1961

11 Four Women in the Harem, 1965

12 Those Who Woke in Darkness, 1965

13 Vedat Türkali

14 Sister Fatma, 1972

15 Dry Summer, 1964

ing the time after 1960 was directly related to this reality. Özön concentrated more on translating cinema texts after 1960. No socially realist film was to be seen until 1966 [*Hudutların Kanunu*]¹⁶, that is, realist enough to get Lütü Akad to emphasize its importance.

The year 1965 also saw the foundation of the Turkish Cinematheque Association, and this means a group of socially sensitive Turkish intellectuals now viewed Turkish cinema as “a swamp that must be dried.” And only after about five years it was thought a new era was dawning with *Umut*¹⁷, a film considered a significant milestone. And this New Cinema adopted a more positive stance toward certain Turkish filmmakers, primarily toward those under the influence of Yılmaz Güney, and then some others. In no other preceding decade, in which films were made, were filmmakers approached with such a positive attitude. However, another group of filmmakers including Metin Erksan became an object of quite harsh criticisms in spite of the positive attitude most others partook of. An interesting example is that Mahmut Tali Öngören, who wrote Turkish cinema’s problems that were of secondary importance¹⁸, brought up the

¹⁶ The Law of the Border

¹⁷ Hope, 1971

¹⁸ The writer is playing with words here: “Tâlî”, which is of Arabic origin, means “that which is secondary/of secondary

criticisms against the shooting of *Yorgun Savaşçı*¹⁹, while, himself, defending that it had to be burnt²⁰. To sum up the general atmosphere of those years: the classical directors of Turkish cinema were utterly begrudged any positive attitude until the 1990s. Those who discovered “miracles” in the films of Ertem Eğilmez still did not evaluate Metin Erksan films as positively.

Starting from the 1990s, when it was now seen that the cinema had run its course, the critics were forced into assessing cinema based on criteria other than purely political ones. In addition to this alteration of criteria in their approach, they started directing more positive assessments toward the Turkish cinema of the past decades. Based on all of these reasons, their stance toward Turkish cinema changed to some extent, but this time almost everybody’s chief area of interest happened to center on analyzing the most recent epoch of Turkish cinema. But contrary to this development, the flexibility taken on in the evaluation of the old cinema did not bring with itself a thorough rethinking and reconstitution of all of the analyses made in the past. The May-June 2012 is-

importance”. He makes an allusion by using this word, which happens to be the middle name of his example person, despite the existence of some other Turkish adjectives to give the same meaning.

¹⁹ The Tired Warrior, 1981

²⁰ The film was indeed burnt in 1983

sue of *Modern Zamanlar [Modern Times]* being almost a laudatory tribute to the Turkish Cinematheque Association in its entirety shows itself to be an undeniable proof of this hypothesis.

It is usually thought that one can more easily maintain one's temper unruffled in an academic environment. But the academic field in Turkey is kind of handicapped when it comes to cinematic criticism. It was at the end of the 1980s or the beginning of the 90s that Turkish academics – who are in their sixties now - first published any books on Turkish cinema. Perhaps due to some political reservations, they did not produce any texts on the cinematography of Yılmaz Güney. The texts on Güney came from outside the academic field. The clearest example of what kind of texts could be written at best in a Turkish academic environment can be found in the texts of Âlim Şerif Onaran. We may easily notice the narrowness of his academic texts caused by “certain academic constrictions”, and besides it is obvious that he does not go beyond the general tendency ingrained in the field of cinematic criticism. Academics have conspicuously had their portion of the “realignment” efforts undertaken by the coterie of ruling Turkish intellectuals. It would definitely be not incorrect to state that the prevailing attitude of approach in any particular time helped create a literature to serve its purposes.

If those who do not focus on this matter except through their interest in the criticism of the official ideology (something that has become possible in the recent years) except in its religious and ethnic manifestations gravitate also toward a comprehensive cultural evaluation, they will probably be able to have a more accurate picture. And if these people do not, or cannot, resist and criticize people like Nevzat Tandoğan, who make arbitrary judgments about our cinema, there will obviously be an issue of harmony with the “tongue-twisters” imposed on cinema in Turkey. The way to get rid of this is to comprehend, or try to comprehend our problems including those related to Metin Erksan based on analyses that do not miss or obfuscate any nuances, or more frankly, by placing Metin Erksan right at the center. Almost none of those who articulate that ‘history must be rewritten in Turkey’ does not ever mention anything about rewriting the history of Turkish cinema.

Undoubtedly, Metin Erkan catered to the limited understanding that was able to portray him only as an intellectual and a filmmaker. He was a difficult man who imposed limitations on the cinema academics and cinema critics in their interactions with him. A posthumous article on him also presents an example about this fact.²¹ He did not adopt a

²¹ Esra Yıldız, “What is left behind Erksan”, *Altıyazı*, issue 120, (September 2012), p. 65.

positive approach to long conversations that the most prolific writer of Turkish cinema who has a vast archive of documents, and the first cinema professor of Turkey wanted to have with him. He also imposed limitations on the showing of his films at certain film festivals. However, at this point we may easily find clues about to what extent he might have been right in doing so. In a recently published memoir of, we can see how in a book, published about Turkish Film Festival in France, Mehmet Başutçu, a cinema critic who organized the viewings, turned Sami Şekercioğlu's positive article on Metin Erksan into a drastic criticism.

Metin Erksan apparently well understood how those who wrote on cinema looked at this matter. Through his statements, Erksan takes a critical approach to whatever has been written on cinema as well as his own films. Additionally, he built his rationale about cinematic education in Turkey over a premise of criticizing the cinematic education already given by Turkish universities. There is or even could be nothing more inappropriate than for an intellectual with such a frame of mind like his to try and reconcile himself with the cheap widespread perceptions.

It might be deduced from what has been said up to this point that writing a text on Metin Erksan is not easy. It is, however, easy to write thick books about him by listing all the statements made so far

about him and by, in a way, reaching an agreement with those who made these statements. But it is very difficult to make authentic analyses, and especially analyses that have their own different voices. The reason is, the statements of the major directors of Turkish cinema, including those by Erksan, can not only easily be ascribed a political character, but also lack originality. A statement of one of the New Wave directors is almost tailor-cut for Erksan: "We have triumphed by adopting the principle that holds a Hitchcock film as valuable as a book by Aragon." There are just so many directors in Turkish cinema very keen on repeating and conveying the statements of others. Almost everybody is unanimous on the fact that intellectuals as well as literary texts employ a haughty language. And in return, most directors are so prone to feel inferior to these intellectuals and men of letters. Most of them, moreover, have made it the ideal of their lives to adapt a literary magnum opus or a successful literary text for the silver screen. Metin Erksan is thus a director who can be appreciated largely with an uncinematic perspective and in the context of his endeavors to get even with certain works produced in fields other than cinema.

And to make better sense of the generalizations in this text, one must read Erksan's own writings carefully. And that, naturally, calls for another article.

(Translated by Ömer Çolakoğlu)