



FROM ONE GENERATION TO NEXT

The ability to ridicule oneself must be one of the significant qualities one can acquire walking on the path of life. In Eğilmez, this quality is very evident. A sadly unfinished interview where he gives an extensive account of his life is full of reflections of his sparkling intelligence, hard work, perseverance, ambition, his power of intuition and problem solving as well as his frankness, rage, sarcasm, and relentless criticism that he directed to his very self too. Once a self-educated filmmaker, Eğilmez completed his walk of life having transformed into a sardonic artist.

CEM PEKMAN

Metin Erksan, a great director who passed away recently, reportedly made the following statement after the death of Ertem Eğilmez in 1989: “I suggest that Ertem’s life be made into a film. It would make such a great movie. He was an extremely ambitious man. And he has a great life story. I’m assured that it would be a film of awesome beauty.” [1]

Now unfortunately we are to wish the same thing for the late Erksan. And it is, again, unfortunate that we do not often see biographical films made in Turkey; let alone film directors, the life stories of even our actors/actresses cannot seem to find themselves any room in the big screen. Efforts to remember and recall are valuable in this sense as long as they serve to create a historical consciousness rather than catering to a purely nostalgic view of things. It is incumbent on our cinema to return to its own history more often and more firmly; publications made by researchers must also be directed towards resolving our problematic ties to the past in order to make better sense of what is at hand today; our cinema must be supported in this respect.

*Arabesk*¹ (1989), the last film of Ertem Eğilmez that he made shortly before his

death, is a rare Turkish film with such a retrospective glance. *Arabesque* stands beyond simply being a satire; he gets even with the history of Turkish cinema altogether by satirizing Yeşilçam melodramas, the poignant stories of the arabesque rush, and all in all - in Türker İnanoğlu’s words – “...with all the elements that had previously been exploited by Turkish cinema as work material” [2]. With this film, however, Eğilmez calls *himself* to account above all. In the words of Scognamillo, “[Eğilmez] confronts himself with his own artistic past in the sector, his cinematic perception, and all his previous films, and by lampooning his past works, he kind of draws up a balance sheet of his life” [3]. Indeed, the framework of this film - also his nuncupative will in a sense - was assembled based on those of his films that had earned him the title “the famed director of romantic films”, and in particular *Sürtük*² (1965), *Senede Bir Gün*³ (1966), and *Boş Çerçeve*⁴ (1969). Eğilmez plunges the “the biggest packing needle” to himself, yet he does not fail to give all those around him a massive injection.

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2 The Slut

3 One Day a Year

4 The Empty Frame

1 Arabesque

sadly unfinished interview where he gives an extensive account of his life is full of reflections of his sparkling intelligence, hard word, perseverance, ambition, his power of intuition and problem solving as well as his frankness, rage, sarcasm, and relentless criticism that he directed to his very self too[4]. Once a self-educated filmmaker, Eğilmez completed his walk of life having transformed into a sardonic artist.

As a very young lad who had just started out in life, he painted himself in all colors, that is, he left no job he did not try out. Before he finally settled on filmmaking, he did a lot of things; he worked as a grocer, published books and magazines, opened a restaurant, set up a “table football kingdom” [by importing the tables], and did many more odds and ends of jobs, sometimes climbing to summits, but also experiencing bankruptcies. When he decided to undertake his first film project as its producer in 1961, he was 32; his thoughts were engaged solely on making money from the film market, which was a rapidly growing sector promising a lot of profit. Efe Film, the first film company he founded jointly with his friend Nahid Ataman, went bankrupt after shooting a few films. Despite this bitter experience, the two cronies started Arzu Film in 1963; it probably did not even cross their minds that this company would soon become one of the five largest companies in the

Turkish film sector. Ertem Eğilmez took it upon himself to direct the first production of Arzu Film in 1964, entitled *Fatoş'un Fendi Tayfur'u Yendi*⁵, which was a romantic comedy. This was his directorial debut, and the reason was definitely not the love of or an interest in the big screen on his part; the plain truth was, the company had no economic means to hire a director. In Eğilmez's words, the film was “the weirdest film in the world” [5], but it turned out one of the best jobs of the year. This is how the young filmmaker, who was really conditioned for success in life, took a headfirst dive into film directing. Listening to the advice of his mentors like Kemal Tahir “to be persistent in the job”, he held onto his new job passionately and struck up a close friendship with Sadık Şendil, a great writer, and Münir Özkul, a legendary actor. Self-education was his way, and he learnt directorship on the set simply by making more and more films, benefiting all the while from Cameramman Kriton İlyadis in particular.

A year later, if not earlier, he demonstrated the height he had achieved in film-making with *The Slut*. This film achieved one of the largest box office grosses ever witnessed in Turkish cinema. Eğilmez was now a significant and popular producer-director, and Arzu Film a leading company in the sector. Following the

⁵ Fatoş's Rig Got the Better of Tayfur

extraordinary success of *The Slut*, he shot some other love-melodrama stories into the 1970s. During this period, Arzu Film productions depended largely on adaptations of foreign films and literary works, domestic novels, and reproductions of popular films, and in so doing, it was just following the commercial cinematic patterns of the era.

In the 1970s, Arzu Film adopted a style that came to be called “family comedies” with which it left an indelible mark on Turkish cinema, and in this genre it made films watched not only in the time they were made, but by the next generations with the same interest and love; films that continue to be watched even today. The ones among these that immediately leap to mind are the *Hababam Sınıfı*⁶ series (1975-1981), *Köyden İndim Şehre*⁷, *Mavi Boncuk*⁸, *Salak Milyoner*⁹ (1974); *Süt Kardeşler*¹⁰ (1976), *Gülen Gözler*¹¹, *Şabanoglu Şaban*¹² (1977), which were directed by Ertem Eğilmez, and *Bizim Aile*¹³ (1975), *Tosun Paşa*¹⁴ (1976),

*Çöpcüler Kralı*¹⁵ (1977), *Neşeli Günler*¹⁶, *Sultan* (1978), which were directed by other directors of Arzu Film. Arzu Film became a full-fledged team during this period, operating similar to an American studio system, but as a small-scale local version of it. It formed its own staff; apart from a few stars like Tarık Akan, Emel Sayın, and Müjde Ar, all of its actors and actresses had a theater background and were faithful to the company. In addition to figures like Münir Özkul and Adile Naşit, who were already renowned masters, young actors like Zeki Alasya, Metin Akpınar, Halit Akçatepe, Kemal Sunal, Şener Şen, and actress Aysen Gruda, each of whom would become great stars, joined the team. Some of these actors were among those who contributed to the screenplay; although most films shot by Arzu Film were written by Sadık Şendil, the Arzu Film family working under Ertem Eğilmez participated in the screenplay writing efforts almost altogether, thereby becoming involved in a writing process very long and strenuous by the Yeşilçam standards of the day. At the shooting and post-production stages, exactly the same directors, image and set crews, and the same musicians; in short, the entire crew would work in harmony in the same spirit. Therefore, this local studio system knew how to reach the masses with its

6 The Unruly Class

7 I Went Downtown from the Village

8 The Blue Bead

9 The Idiot Millionaire

10 The Milk Brothers

11 The Smiling Eyes

12 Şaban, the Son of Şaban

13 Our Family

14 Tosun Pasha

15 The King of Garbagemen

16 Happy Days

well-written and well-played comedies that were similar to each other, and all of which were shot with the same standards, especially in terms of their screenplays that ran like clockwork.

When we try to unravel the mystery behind the warm relationship Arzu Film managed to establish in the 1970s with the masses - a relationship that was passed down to the next generation and that continues to date -, we, above all, find this harmonious teamwork behind every film, and, of course, Ertem Eğilmez, who brought together and directed this talented cast and crew. As a director, Eğilmez endeavors to achieve competence in his art, and continuously reads, explores, studies, thinks, and experiments to this end while, as a producer, he is in pursuit of meeting with the masses, being watched more, and commercial success. Cinema is the result of these two kinds of pursuits. Especially on account of his films shot in the 1970s, he created the notion of “people’s cinema”, and capitalizing on the fact that the cast behind him had been trained in the tradition of Turkish theater and performing arts, he formed a cinematic style very appealing to people, striking them as familiar and warm. This cinematic style gave birth to stereotypes such as “Şaban”, who gradually became folk heroes. The Eğilmez type of comedy incorporates a certain extent of social critique and seeks to de-

liver a moral message - as we are familiar from traditional performing arts - and in this sense it stands by the downtrodden, providing a kind of “relief” with its spectators.

With the political-economic-cultural environment rapidly changing in Turkey in the 1980s, the film industry was hit by a great crisis, and Eğilmez and Arzu Film had their share of this period of depression. Eğilmez shot *Banker Bilo* in 1980, *Hababam Sınıfı Güle Güle*¹⁷, the last of the series, in 1981, and then until his death in 1989, he directed only three more films: *Namuslu*¹⁸ (1984), *Aşık Oldum*¹⁹ (1985), and *Arabesk* (1988). Nevertheless, he retained his influence and power over Turkish cinema although many problems surrounded the sector and his deteriorating health seriously impeded his production. In that period, as their master, he continued to train and lead his group of “students” consisting of script writers and actors/actresses. So much so that he somehow affected all of the outstanding comedies of the 1980s, shot by companies other than Arzu Film, such as *Davaro* (Kartal Tibet, 1981), *Çiçek Abbas* (Sinan Çetin, 1982), *Dolap Beygiri*²⁰ (Atıf Yılmaz, 1982), *Şal-*

17 The Unruly Class - Farewell

18 The Honorable

19 I Have Fallen in Love

20 Work Horse

*var Davası*²¹ (Kartal Tibet, 1983), *Çıplak Vatandaş*²² (Başar Sabuncu, 1985), *Züğürt Ağa*²³ (Nesli Çölgeçen, 1985), *Değirmen*²⁴ (Atif Yılmaz, 1986), and *Muhsin Bey* (Yavuz Turgul, 1986). And during this decade, Arzu Film produced a number of quality films such as *Şekerpare* (Atif Yılmaz, 1983), *Milyarder*²⁵ (Kartal Tibet, 1986), *Selamsız Bاندosu*²⁶ (Nesli Çölgeçen, 1987), and *Zengin Mutfağı*²⁷ (Başar Sabuncu, 1988). In *Banker Bilo*, and especially *Namuslu*, both shot by Ertem Eğilmez, observations on current issues became sharper, and the messages became clearer. This period, in which he produced his masterpieces, unfortunately ended with his untimely death.

The “Ertem Eğilmez effect” continued after his death, playing a determinative role in the cinema and television industry. Arzu Film productions have been used as rating boosters, particularly in the first years of the private TV stations, also becoming an inspiration to many domestic TV series. This effect is clearly visible in the comedy vein of our current popular cinema. On the other hand, Eğilmez’s students have maintained their activity

and directive influence in Turkish cinema and televisions. It may be said that Eğilmez is one of the first people that young generations look up to as a guide while establishing a connection with the history of our cinema. In this country, almost everyone - regardless of whether they know his name or not - has established a kind of kinship with him through his cinematic works. Eğilmez has touched the lives of all of us in some way or another. Such a bond of fondness and even love is not destined for every artist; as Metin Erksan once wished, we hope that it will be the lot of Turkish cinema to shoot the life of this “people’s artist”.

(Translated by Ömer Çolakoğlu)

- [1] Erksan, Metin (1989). “Ertem Made So Many People into Stars.” *Beyazperde*. Nov. 1.
- [2] Scognamillo, Giovanni (2004). *Mr. Cinema Türker İnanoğlu*. Istanbul: Dogan. p. 382.
- [3] Scognamillo, Giovanni (2005). *Şener Şen in Turkish Cinema*. Istanbul: Kambalçı. p. 98.
- [4] Akçura, Gökhan (1990). “I am Ertem Eğilmez.” *Güneş*. Sept. 21 -27.
- [5] Ayça, Engin, and Coş, Nezi (1974). “Interview with Ertem Eğilmez.” *Yedinci Sanat*. December.

21 The Baggy Trousers’ Case

22 The Naked Citizen

23 The Impecunious Agha

24 The Mill

25 The Billionaire

26 The Brass Band of Selamsız

27 The Cuisine of the Rich