Eurimages and Turkish cinema: history, identity, culture

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INTRODUCTION

Located on the south eastern corner of the continent, the relations of Turkey with Europe have always been contentious. It was through the loss of territories incurred by the Ottomans that Europe and its Ottoman neighbours began for the first time to establish inter-cultural relations, and the Ottoman regime had admitted some limited Westernisation as early as the beginning of the 18th century. After the republican revolution adopted wholesale Westernised policies, Turkey became part of many Western/European-based economic, political, military, sporting and cultural transnational organisations in the 20th century. Nevertheless, Turkey has remained as the cultural ‘other’ of Europe. The position of the country has pitched it at the pivotal centre of arguments over the East-West dichotomy with regard to cultural identity. This has been the case perhaps more than ever since the negotiations over Turkish accession to the European Union began in 2005. Whether Turkey is culturally ‘European’, or indeed ‘Eastern’, is fiercely debated in EU circles today.

Europe - as a concept, a neighbour, a union and a cultural ‘other’ - has been no less contentious a bloc for Turkey. While the pro-Western approach in Turkey sees the West in general and Europe in particular as a reference point for reforms or improvements made in various arenas of social and political life, a more conservative stance perceives it as ‘foreign’, moreover a ‘threat’ to domestic culture. European organisations such as the Council of Europe and the EU have from time to time been perceived to adopt an ‘insolent’ attitude which gives Turkey a disdainful name. Due to the burning fire of ongoing debate, the cultural identities of Europe and Turkey continue to be critical points of argument in the international agenda.

Cinema, arguably the most popular of the arts, might well be thought to be an appropriate space to be explored as a medium that both reflects and contributes to the construction of cultural and national identities. Furthermore, when we think of the cultural relations between Turkey and Europe and the current debates, Eurimages - the cinema support fund of the Council of Europe - arises as a vastly significant phenomenon. Out of four new sources of financial support for Turkish cinema that emerged in the post-1990
period, Eurimages is the only non-domestic one wherein decisions are taken with the agreement of the various national representatives of the member states. Turkish-initiative co-productions - those directed by Turkish filmmakers, the themes and milieu of which belong to Turkey - that are approved for financial support by the delegates of a supranational European organisation have the potential to provide interesting data on the perceptions of Turkey in the West. The Council of Europe on the other hand, and naturally its correlate organs, stake a claim to a series of prized values such as democracy, human rights and the promotion of Europe’s cultural identity and diversity.

In this context, the objective of this research is to explore the contribution of Eurimages to the Turkish cinema industry, to discern the various relevant facts derived from a study of Eurimages-backed Turkish-initiative films, and to analyse the representation of diverse identities in these films. With an experience of twenty years of membership, Turkey’s case, I contend, is valuable in terms of being posited as an example of the impact and contribution that a European supranational fund can have on a national cinematic tradition, and tracing recent Turkish national cinema in this respect will uncover a variety of vital and deeply resonant cultural signifiers of Turkey.

As written materials on this quite new phenomenon are limited in number, my work is a field-based research - in addition to providing a historical background and theoretical references. I have studied all of the Turkish-initiative films that have received Eurimages co-production support in the first twenty years of Turkey’s membership in the organisation (1990-2009), except one that has not been released yet; which makes a total amount of fifty-nine films out of sixty. In addition I have examined relevant Eurimages documents (those that are accessible). I have also conducted interviews with relevant professionals. This study thus provides primary data on a large scale about Turkish cinema in relation to Eurimages.

The sixty films falling within the scope of this research are those whose majority co-producers were from Turkey and/or those in which the content represents Turkey even where the Turkish producer is the minority party in the co-production setup of the project. The year of the decision to support a film with Eurimages funds and the year a film is released are often not the same. The thesis covers the first twenty years of membership, so
the films covered are those that have been supported between 1990 and 2009. However, the first of these films was released a year later - in 1991 - and the last one was released in 2011. The films will be addressed with regard to their themes and thematic content rather than their technical and aesthetical aspects; i.e. I will not provide any value judgments as to the films’ directors’ talent or lack thereof.

Eurimages documents were accessible via the official website of the organisation. Due to the changing conditions and various demands from the film industry, the Fund has often updated its regulations. The references in this research are the latest regulations but the earlier ones are also recalled in the footnotes to inform the reader and where it is necessary. In addition to the open public documents, I have also examined Eurimages documents that Ryclef Rienstra – the first executive director of Eurimages - donated to the library of Eye Filminstituut Nederland, thanks to his permission.

The interviews have contributed greatly to my conceptualisation of the phenomenon. My sample of interviewees consisted of nineteen professionals who have first-hand experience of Eurimages to varying degrees at various times and in various stages of the process. They included: two executive directors of Eurimages; three national representatives of Turkey; one national representative of the Netherlands; nine filmmakers from Turkey; one filmmaker (a co-producer of a Turkish-initiative film) from the Netherlands; and three managers of movie theatres in Turkey.\(^1\) These numbers thus made up one-third of the executive directors of the Fund throughout its history, one-third of the Eurimages-backed Turkish-initiative films (filmmakers), all of the national representatives of Turkey throughout Eurimages’ history and four movie theatres that have received exhibition support from the Fund. As for the filmmakers I could not access, I have compiled a body of literature on them and have cited some of those who have appeared in the media. Thus a general picture of the Eurimages narrative, its mechanisms of practice, its philosophy and the relation between Eurimages and Turkish cinema, has been achieved.

The data which I believe to be important but which could not be placed in the text for the sake of fluency can be found in the appendices. These are, respectively: The

\(^1\) A list of the interviewed professionals and the questions asked to them can be seen in Appendix-A.
Questions Asked to the Interviewees; the Number of Released Turkish Feature Films between 1896 and 2011; Eurimages Co-production Support in Years; Co-production Support Amounts for Turkish-initiative Projects and Audience Figures of Those Films; A List of Eurimages-backed Projects where Turkish Co-producers were the Minority Party; Exhibition Support Figures for the Movie Theatres of Turkey; Turkish Films Distributed in Europe through Eurimages Distribution Support and European Films Distributed in Turkey through Eurimages Distribution Support; Annual Fees Turkey has Paid to Eurimages and the Support Received; The Signs, Acts and Expressions that Represent Diverse Identities in Eurimages-backed Turkish-initiative Films; and Cast, Credits and Synopses of Eurimages-backed Turkish-initiative Films.

Since a substantial part of the research covers the representation of identities in the films concerned and those identities are components of Turkish national identity, I will briefly explain the term national identity as used in this work and its relation to cinema, before proceeding to an overview of the chapters.

National Identity and Cinema

Anthony D. Smith (1991) suggests that, as the main form of collective identification in modernity, the national is the most fundamental and pervasive identity in that it provides a powerful means of defining and locating individuals in the world. Covering the whole population in a limited geographical territory, national identity stresses common characteristics and a shared culture, and it aims to integrate the inhabitants into the nation-state and the national system. Smith lists the five fundamental features of national identity as: a historic territory or homeland; common myths and historical memories; a common, mass public culture; common legal rights and duties for all members; and a common economy with territorial mobility for members (14). In this sense he defines the nation as “a named human population sharing an historic territory, common myths and historical memories, a mass, public culture, a common economy and common legal rights and duties for all members” (14). An individual who is member of a nation and thus defined by a national identity is constituted of multiple other identities at the same time. Smith classifies these as being chiefly familial, territorial, class-based, religious, ethnic and gender-based. I will return to multiple identities later.
It was Benedict Anderson who termed the nation as an *imagined community*, formed in 18th century Europe via the contribution of novels and newspapers, “for these forms provided the technical means for ‘re-presenting’ the kind of imagined community that is the nation” (2006, 25). This representation is still undertaken today. That is to say, the nation and national identity need to be tirelessly buttressed and reassured, not only through printed media but also by means of audiovisual media and a variety of state apparatuses. Therefore, the role of cinema in the construction and re-construction of the nation is crucial.

National identity, nevertheless, much like the concept of identity in and of itself, is not a fixed entity but is flexible in the face of changing internal and international conditions. It is an uncompleted process of construction. National identity is indeed complex, impure, heterogeneous and culturally hybrid. It is multi-dimensional and intrinsically involves plurality, conflicts and differences. Those differences generate negligence and the exclusion of some groups (and their respective identities) which are therein subordinated to the dominant one(s). The ‘deviant’ or ‘other’ identities are often culturally or coercively oppressed. Homi K. Bhabha states that difference is the central problem of the nation: “Once the liminality of the nation-space is established, and its ‘difference’ is turned from the boundary ‘outside’ to its finitude ‘within’, the threat of cultural difference is no longer a problem of ‘other’ people. It becomes a question of the otherness of the people-as-one” (2006, 301). Counter-narratives that evoke and erase the totalising boundaries of the nation, however, disturb the ideological manoeuvres through which imagined communities are given essentialist identities (300). The argument of Bhabha is important for this study, for film often turns into one of the counter-narratives that question the essentialism of the nation by exhibiting cultural differences and diverse identities, as I will explain in the following paragraphs.

National cinema is a feature of the cultural milieu of the nation. It is one of several – and by all accounts often a crucial – facet of the propagation and discussion of the nation and its identity. Andrew Higson (1997) notes four uses of the concept of nationality with reference to national cinema. These are: economic terms; exhibition and consumption; particular film movements or directors; and representation, i.e. what the films refer to and ‘re-present’. It is the representational dimension which we can use to
evaluate the existence or absence of certain identities in films. In terms of representation, Higson argues that either national films reflect the status-quo of the nation, or national identity is constructed in and through representation. In other words, to recall and extend the definition given by Anderson and apply it to cinema, films re-present the imagined community to their spectators.

Stuart Hall (2003), on the other hand, notes three theories of representation: reflective, intentional and constructionist. According to the reflective approach, language functions like a mirror and it reflects meaning as it exists in the object, person, idea or event. The intentional approach, the opposite of the reflective, accepts that the speaker or author imposes his or her meanings on the world through language. Thus the meaning is what is intended by the one who uses the language. It makes meaning fully relative to the intentions of the speaker. The third one, the constructionist approach, addresses the social dimension of language. Accordingly, meaning is not fixed in language but is constructed by us using representational systems, concepts and signs in concert.

Referring to those three theories of representation that are remarked upon by Hall, I contend that the intentionality dimension can be added to the notion of 'representation in films' outlined by Higson. Basically, how the filmmaker imposes his or her meaning via a film, i.e. expressing his/her vision (in relation to national identity), is crucial. We can safely say that films reflect or narrate the nation and its culture, but at the same time they serve to construct and reconstruct the nation by representing it, and the intention of the filmmaker becomes a critical factor. Therefore national films not only underpin and support the conventional national identity but may pose questions about the internal conflicts within the imagined community through counter-representations, such as by representing the differences, the diverse identities, the schisms and tensions etc. Moreover, Hall (1994) reminds us that no representation could occur without relations of difference. What has not been shown before, what is absent in films, should be considered to be significant; national cinema, like national identity, is not fixed anymore, and this is especially so in our era of transnationalism and multiculturalism.

The Eurimages-backed Turkish-initiative films in this research piece might reflect the society, or intentionally impose their messages upon the viewer, or they might
act as artistic works which serve to construct identities. Whether the films either reflect the imagined community of Turkey or are critical about it and whether we think that the meanings that films transmit are constructed or not, what has constant prime significance in this research is what is represented in the films. Regarding identity as constructed within discourse, difference and representation processes, making identities problematic and representing diversity within the nation-state will, I argue, enrich our perception and understanding of identities by making us ask critical and crucial questions.

If I turn to the classification of Smith for the multiple identities an individual is constituted of (namely familial, territorial, class, ethnic, religious and gender), this research will put special emphasis on, and open separate headings for, the last three of these for their significance in the founding ideology of Turkey as a nation-state and thus of ‘Turkish national identity’. Ethnic, religious and gender identities had crucial roles in the transition from empire to republic which came with the 1923 revolution, and they have remained problematic hitherto – a historical background and detailed information regarding this will be provided in the second part of the research. Hence, compared to others, ethnic, religious and gender identities are represented or problematised much more in the films in our scope.

As for the other three multiple identities, I will treat territorial identity with respect to national territory and it will be thereby be covered where the nationalness of the Eurimages-backed Turkish-initiative films is discussed (Chapter 3). Smith (1991) argues that class identity is inherently difficult in terms of our treating it as a basis for an enduring collective identity and community, as categories of economic interest are likely to subdivide people and economic factors are subject to rapid fluctuations. Class is thus beyond the scope of this research. Moreover, class identity is not sufficiently focused on or represented in Eurimages-backed Turkish-initiative films to justify a separate chapter. Nonetheless, I believe that class and its representation in Turkish cinema deserves to be researched on its own. Familial identity is not covered separately for the same reason – representations of ‘the family’ and family dynamics are not as comprehensively covered in the Eurimages-backed films. Hence, familial identity is treated as a part of the gender relations in these films (Chapter 6).
Overview of Chapters

The research is composed of two essential blocs. Part I (chapters 1, 2 and 3) is more descriptive, aiming to provide a backdrop so as to inform the reader as to the general phenomena concerned. It presents a short history of Turkish cinema, links this with Turkey's early acquaintance with Eurimages, and explores the results that have come of the co-production, exhibition and distribution support provided by the Fund to Turkish cinema. The cultural objective of the Council of Europe (2009) is ‘to promote awareness and encourage the development of Europe’s cultural identity and diversity’. Its cinema support fund, Eurimages (2003), hence encourages filmmakers to ‘reflect and promote the contribution of diverse national components to Europe’s cultural identity’. Part II explores this principle of reflecting and promoting Europe's diverse identity in the imagined community of Turkey by addressing the problematic aspects of national identity therein and by looking at the representation of the intrinsically complex diversity of the Turkish nation in films, with specific regard to ethnicity, religion and gender. Besides providing a historical background, chapters 4, 5 and 6 in Part II are more analytical. In other words, Part II examines how Eurimages-backed Turkish-initiative films reflect and promote the contributions of ethnic, religious and gender minorities/components to Turkey's national and overall cultural identity.

Chapter 1 provides a short history of Turkish cinema up until the 1990s, the time when Eurimages came onto the scene. It is impossible to name Turkish cinema as an industry during the period between 1896 and 1950, the early years, but rather this was an era when a series of factors that influenced the filmmaking practices of the later periods emerged. The following period, between 1950 and 1975, saw cinema attain a distinctive economy in which films were shaped by mass audience demand. This led to a high number of films being produced, such that Turkey was among the top producers of the world. The pervasiveness of TVs, the heated political atmosphere and the invasion of cinemas by sex comedies brought about the withdrawal of families, the mass audience, from movie theatres, and Turkish cinema sought to merely survive from the mid-1970s on. Chapter 1 depicts the film history of Turkey in relation to the economic and political conditions of the country tout court and the cinema industry specifically.
Chapter 2 describes the post-1990 period of Turkish cinema and its acquaintance with Eurimages. Compared to the preceding periods, the cinema environment of Turkey was then experiencing a series of novelties, such as changes in the movie-goers’ profile, the penetration of American distributors into the film market, and the emergence of new financial sources for filmmaking. Out of the key new financial sources, the only non-domestic one was Eurimages. The second part of Chapter 2 outlines the philosophy and rationale behind the establishment of such a film fund in the Council of Europe, and looks at its history and mechanisms, i.e. how the system works in terms of co-production, exhibition, distribution and digitisation support.

Chapter 3 examines the effects and contributions of Eurimages, a supra-national cinema support fund which demands a series of extra-domestic criteria to be met, on Turkish national cinema after its experience of twenty years of being left behind in terms of membership. The co-producer country preferences of Turkish producers, the contributions of Eurimages support to filmmaking practices in Turkey, and to the exhibition and distribution of films, are put forth in this chapter. The experiential history of the past twenty years is accompanied by relevant statistical data and numerical graphs. The nationalness of Eurimages-backed Turkish-initiative films is an interesting topic for they are co-productions supported by supranational funding and this is discussed in terms of both style and content. The debates over whether Eurimages supports certain films that ‘throw dirt at Turkey’ or not will be addressed in Chapter 3.

Chapter 4 explores the question of ethnic identities and their representation in Eurimages-backed Turkish-initiative films. Historical background regarding the Ottoman state is provided - this was an empire composed of diverse ethnicities. This is followed by a description of the establishment of the Republic of Turkey as a modern and centralist nation-state that adopted a unified cultural identity. Although it was rather more a territorial nationalism than an ethnic one in theory, the actual practices of the state could not escape from excluding, oppressing or neglecting diverse ‘other’ identities and a homogenisation process was an intrinsic element of the state-building endeavours of the republic. This rendered the nation-state open to the criticism of engendering Turkish ethnocentrism. As Smith writes, ‘the context, if not the form, of Turkish national identity, proved elusive’ (1991, 104). Chapter 4 thus looks at the representation of Turkish
nationalism as the official ideology of the nation-state and of diverse ethnicities in the films addressed herein.

The focus of Chapter 5 is religious identities, which have easily recognisable signs such as customs, theistic symbols and rituals. Like a common language, religion seems to be a very important component of national identity. However, since certain sub-ethnic groups adopt ‘other’ religions and religious forms of identification and practice, religion can also have a divisive function. This can occur even within the same ethnic grouping. The Sunni majority and the Alevi community are the two biggest Muslim communities in Turkey, and are unrelated to ethnic membership. The approval of the former as a state religion and the exclusion and negligence of the latter during both imperial rule and the republican period necessitates these two beliefs being treated under separate headings. The groups which are officially named ‘minority’ refer to the Christian and Jewish communities. Chapter 5 puts forth the founding ideology of the republic with respect to religion and secularism, the influence of religion in politics, and the representation of diverse religious beliefs in Eurimages films.

Gender identities are the concern of Chapter 6. Encompassing all economic classes – as do ethnic and religious identities - and yet holding a more universal character, gender in recent years has been included in the scholarly works that focus on national identity. While roles based on sexuality (biologically defined) have benefitted nation-building processes, discourses on gender (those that divorce gender from sex) often challenge the unity that a national identity presumes. Women were substantially secluded from social life until the republican revolution which attributed central importance to their ‘emancipation’. The identities that fall outside heterosexuality were neglected and excluded by the state, society and family but they have become more visible in the post-1990 period thanks to their own political struggles for rights. The cases of womanhood and LGBT identities – gender identities that remain outside manliness (a term of George L. Mosse) - are still problematic and they merit separate headings in terms of their representations. Chapter 6 covers these two.

Overall, moving through the inter-disciplinary realms of cinema, history and cultural representations, this research aims to achieve valid and helpful findings,
establishing the key links between Turkish film history, Eurimages and the diverse components of the Turkish national identity. The study explores these interrelations, and it demonstrates both how Turkish history, identity and culture (in their myriad multiple senses) have shaped the content of the films, and conversely how the themes embedded in the films have challenged, questioned, criticised and vocalised Turkey’s history-cum-culture-cum-identity - again, in a quintessentially conflictive and multifarious way.