Eurimages and Turkish cinema: history, identity, culture

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CONCLUSION

Any study of Turkish cinema will inevitably reveal that throughout its variegated history the tradition has displayed similarities to other national cinemas as well as peculiar and idiosyncratic characteristics originating from the country’s own circumstances.

The early years of this cinema history – a period of approximately half a century – was far from being the story of an industry but rather witnessed some emerging factors such as state measures (censorship codes and tax reductions in favour of domestic films), the dubbing process, Egyptian melodramas and individual efforts to make films. The formation of a national cinematic language and the emergence of a growing industry was clearly observable by the 1950s. Cinema pervaded the rural areas and new work migrants in the big cities (flowing in due to rapid industrialisation) became acquainted with movie theatres during these years. Cinema became the most popular form of entertainment. The lack of capital accumulation - not only in cinema but in terms of a more general deficiency of capitalism in the country – compelled the producers to rely entirely on the financial support of the audiences, i.e. on box-office returns. These were regional operators who mediated between the producers in Istanbul and the spectators across Anatolia to transmit the preferences of the mass audience so as to correspondingly design the themes and the actors of the films. This was a very definite factor in determining the content of the films as well as in inflating the number of them produced. With this increasing number of films, all thematic types of work came into the market, often bearing a melodramatic mode. Turkey became one of the top film producers of the world in terms of the number of released feature films. The first remarkable artistic films were also made in the 1950s and 1960s by pioneering directors in that period’s environment of abundant film production.

Another factor lying behind the content of the films was the censorship mechanism. A law issued in the 1930s under the imminent threat of World War II, the censorship code remained unchanged until the second half of the 1980s and it limited filmmakers to a very narrow discursive space. To make a critical film on the troublesome issues of the country was quite difficult to do, if not impossible. The existence of a handful of courageous filmmakers who broke the censorship should, however, be
commendably noted.

In spite of the censorship code, this was the heyday of Turkish cinema in terms of the number of produced films, movie theatres and box-office figures and it lasted until the mid-1970s, when sex comedies and violent B-films invaded the market. The increase in home televisions and the unsecure streets (because of political clashes) accompanied the invasion of movie theatres by a young male audience who were the target group of those genres. Thus families, who had been the impetus of Turkish cinema, withdrew from movie theatres to watch TV in their homes. Filmmakers sought to survive through the production of sex comedies and B-films in the second half of the 1970s, and through Arabesk films and video markets in the 1980s, when the system of regional operators that had supported filmmakers gradually began to disappear. A novelty of the 1980s was the dramatic increase in the number of more personal or intellectual works – the target of these had been film festivals and the European market – made by filmmakers in an environment of despair that followed the military coup. The content of the characters then replaced the ‘star’ roles in these films.

The 1990s brought in a series of dramatic changes to Turkish cinema. First of all, the insufficient production conditions were no longer an excuse for filmmakers to produce poor quality work, as the latest cinema technology, introduced by the advertising industry, had become available. American distributors penetrated the market and private TV channels began broadcasting. Movie-goers’ profiles changed such that the main audience of the films tended to be more educated young people. Filmmakers became relatively free in their discourses in an environment in which censorship had been abolished and the after-effects of the military coup of 1980 had gradually waned due to both democratic struggles and the Turkish application for membership of the European Union. While the popularity of videos decreased and the market practically disappeared, the producers could be supported by four types of new sources of finance by the beginning of the 1990s. These were: the TV channels, the Ministry of Culture, sponsorship from business, and Eurimages. A filmmaker can benefit from one or a combination of these financial support mechanisms. Yet Turkish cinema was in crisis in the 1990s and the number of released feature films was at its absolute lowest since the 1950s, although this started to increase again in the first decade of the 2000s.
Out of the four new sources for financing films that have been mentioned, Eurimages is the only non-domestic, supra-national one wherein decisions are taken by the representatives of various member states. Turkey acceded to the Fund in 1990 and 60 Turkish-initiative films have received 12.8 million Euros of co-production support, 59 of which have been released. Those films have been shot by 39 different directors, and this indicates a good and fair level of distribution. The 27 projects in which Turkish producers were the minority party (2nd or 3rd co-producer) received 5.9 million Euros of support. Through these 87 projects (60 as initiative taker and 27 as minority party), Turkish producers have collaborated with colleagues from 22 different countries. French, Greek and Hungarian producers have been the top collaborators.

Eurimages co-production support seems to have contributed significantly to Turkish cinema in terms of filmmaking practices. It has helped to familiarise filmmakers with film production in multi-national environments wherein they can share their experiences with co-producers and crews of other nationalities. That collaboration with other countries has promoted the advancement of technical skill, especially in terms of sound recording and processing. In addition to technical support, minority co-producers have contributed to the marketing of Turkish-initiative films both in their homeland and sometimes in other countries, depending on their domestic and international relations. Finally, the Eurimages scheme has brought in the possibility of working with extended budgets, which is vital for filmmakers who are in need of capital. Nevertheless, the average admission per Eurimages-backed Turkish-initiative film has remained lower than the other Turkish films that did not get the same support.

Beginning to benefit by 1994, the exhibition support has made up 12.4% of the support Turkey had received from the Fund in total when the currency was French Franc and it has been 23.4% of the total support during the Euro currency period. Turkey has been the biggest beneficiary (in terms of the number of theatres) of the exhibition support among the countries that have a right to access that fund, with 25 movie theatres being supported in 14 different cities by 2009. When it comes to distribution, 20 Turkish films have been distributed in 52 countries across Europe and 282 films from 26 different European countries have been distributed in Turkey thanks to distribution support in the first twenty years of its membership. Regarding the total amount paid to Eurimages and
the support received, Turkey seems to have greatly benefitted from the Fund in the past twenty years. While the fees have amounted to 47.5 French Francs and 8.09 million Euros, the received support has amounted to 73.25 million Francs and 10.63 million Euros.

The experience of these twenty years has shown that the Eurimages-backed Turkish-initiative projects, despite the existence of non-domestic support in their co-production set-up, can be classified as national films by and large. The themes, signs, characters and contexts are undoubtedly pertinent to Turkey in most of the films, even in the ones in which we do not know or recognise the shooting locations. A few works have been criticised for their orientalist approach – for being Western-centric or for pitching Turkey through a Western eye, or for presenting the Turkish land and people as a mysterious ‘Oriental Other’ - and a study of those films has justified these criticisms to some extent. The majority of the films follow the traditional narrative style of Turkish cinema, but films which fall outside the mainstream exist as well. Eurimages has been a good source of support for relatively ‘difficult’ projects which have less chance of box-office success due to their style and/or content. Some of those films that fall outside the mainstream remit have won awards in prestigious festivals and have attracted the international attention, thereby contributing to a greater recognition of Turkish cinema.

The experience of these twenty years, then, reveals that in general the Eurimages-backed Turkish-initiative films simply affirmed the Eurimages criteria, which do not allow pornography, or violence, or the infringement of human rights, and which encourage the filmmakers to reflect and promote the contribution of diverse national components to Europe’s overall cultural identity. Likewise a considerable number of the films reflect and promote the contribution of diverse ethnic, religious and gender components to Turkey’s national identity. Some of those films have been critical about the dominant taboos or established values related to those (ethnic, religious, and gender) identities – the taboos or values that are immanent to the official ideology of the Turkish nation-state.

Those predominant taboos or established values have historical and ideological basis and reasons by and large. Following the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, which had a multi-ethnic and multi-religious dynamic and which held an according governing system (the millet system), the Republic of Turkey was established as a secular and republican
nation-state. From its inception a shared, unified culture and identity was officially adopted. The nation was presented in discourse as a people devoid of all types of conflict and contradiction. Although the founding ideology was a civic-territorial nationalism that used the term ‘Turk’ as a melting pot for all of the ethnicities that share the same land, the nation-state practices could not escape the criticism of being ethnocentric. In terms of religion, the nation-state adopted a pragmatic relationship with Islam. Christians and Jews were already defined as minorities by the Treaty of Lausanne, which was signed after the War of Independence and guaranteed the equal treatment of non-Muslim communities. Although the new republic emerged as a secular modern structure, Sunni Islam was embraced and privileged as the official religion so as to serve to the founding ideology of the nation-state. Thus any identity that remained outside Turkishness and Sunni Islam have been either neglected or excluded as the other(s) for many years. Subjected to domestic seclusion under the predecessor Islamic Ottoman regime, the relative emancipation of (Muslim) women did become possible thanks to the republican revolution on the other hand. However, greater equality with men and further emancipation has required their own struggle in a second wave of feminism. As for LGBT identities, they were not visible until the 1990s, when their struggle gained momentous acceleration.

Turkish nationalism and Turkey’s diverse ethnic identities are represented time and again by the filmmakers who received Eurimages co-production support, sometimes in a neutral fashion but in many cases in a critical manner. The Turkish flag, the military, Atatürk, patriotism and national anthems appear in films either as banal reminders of nationalism or as explicitly thematised critiques. Images related to Atatürk have appeared in at least fifteen and Turkish nationalism has been explicitly represented in at least twenty-one films. The national symbols and discourses are presented as a contrastive element to minority identities when the director intends to question the dominant ideology of Turkish nationalism and the national identity. Waiting for the Clouds – a film that portrays an old woman of Greek origin living in the Black Sea region - questions the Turkish nationalist ideology by challenging and criticising its symbols. Big Man Little Love displays the problem of dialogism and heteroglossia in the context of the ‘Kurdish question’ wherein it focuses on the relationship between a retired judge and a girl who does not speak any language other than her mother tongue, Kurdish. Journey to the Sun exposes the difficulties in bearing a Kurdish identity in the context of a predominantly
Turkish nationalism. Two films, on the other hand, *Toss Up* and *Bliss*, openly mention the clashes in South Eastern Anatolia related to Kurdish question. The practically exclusion of the Greek minority from Turkish national identity is mentioned via discourses or images of various prejudices between two nations, the Cyprus conflict, the handover of Istanbul from Byzantium to the Ottomans, and Greek deportations from Turkey. *My Darling Istanbul* is a film that mentions various aspects of the exclusion of Greek identity. *Mud* handles Cyprus issue and its effects on the inhabitants of the island’s northern part, and *The Boatman* displays the prevalent prejudices between Greek and Turkish nations. The ‘Armenian question’ is addressed only in one film, *Summer Love*, by the mentioning of the rescue of an Armenian child by a Turkish family, whereas the existence of Armenians as citizens of the country is mentioned in a couple of the films. In total, Kurds are represented in at least nine films, Greeks in ten, Armenians in eight, Arabs in four and other identities at least in seven of the fifty-nine released Eurimages-backed Turkish-initiative films, on a scale which ranges from directly problematising the issue to these identities being indirectly mentioned.

The representation of religious identities can be observed in quite a number of the films in this study’s scope. As the majority religious belief, Sunni Islam is presented, with its symbols and rituals, in many (at least forty-three) of the films. It is occasionally addressed very explicitly as well. Among those, *Takva: A Man’s Fear of God* is a film that depicts the social and economic power of the Islamic brotherhoods in Turkey, by narrating the transformation of an ordinary poor Muslim who somehow finds himself entangled in the power games of one specific brotherhood - leads him to a mental breakdown. Another film, *Istanbul beneath my Wings*, displays Islamic conservatism in the 17th century Ottoman Empire, and focuses on the story of the first man to fly in history. Alevi - the second biggest Muslim group in Turkey – and their rituals, and the Sunni prejudices against them, are represented in *Summer Love*, probably the first film that questioned this issue so clearly. Likewise *The Road Home* displays Alevi rituals and the counter Sunni-prejudice. The number of Alevi representations in total is four in fifty-nine films, which is a low number taking into consideration their population but a relatively high one compared to earlier Turkish cinema. Although none of the films focus on Christianity, its number of representations is as high as in sixteen different films – they include churches, praying practices and the Patriarchate – which is striking when set against the very low
Christian population in the country. Jewish identity, on the other hand, is mentioned only in two films.

For many years Turkish cinema, like the classic cinema of Hollywood, treated women as secondary and as passive objects of the male gaze, to-be-looked-at, and the spectators were supposed to identify with the powerful male protagonist. It was by the 1980s that this type of treatment was challenged by the production of feminism-orientated films which focused on emancipated female characters. Regarding the Eurimages-backed Turkish-initiative films, a high number of works, at least twenty-eight of them, either presented the unfavourable status of women in the society due to the patriarchal order or indeed problematized the gender roles ascribed to them. *Nude, Bergen or Love is Colder than Death, Harem Suaré, Rosa I Love You, Graduate of Insanity, Balalaika, Angel’s Fall, Borrowed Bride, Bliss, Justice and My Only Sunshine* are the films that centre on women. Among these, *Graduate of Insanity* narrates the story of an emancipated urban woman who is diagnosed with bi-polar disorder and *Bliss* questions and criticizes ‘honour killing’ through the impressive story of an uneducated rural woman. When it comes to the representation of LGBT identities, Turkish cinema has by and large adopted heteronormativity, like other national cinema traditions. The first LGBT identities to appear on the screen were lesbians in the early 1960s. The first transgendered character appeared in 1975 and the first gay-themed film was made in 1989; mainstream films gave a certain amount of space for gay roles occasionally but their representations did not go beyond ridiculing homosexuality. Compared to other films, Eurimages-backed films proportionally have represented LGBT identities far more, i.e. at least two films in a way address lesbian identification, nine films gays, four bisexuals and five films address transvestites. These include both the representations that display them in a neutral manner and those which address the negative reactions of society towards them, an attitude shaped by the values of heteronormativity. Among these, *Steam: The Turkish Bath* focuses on the love affair between two males whereas *Toss Up* explores the immense prejudice against gay people in Turkey through the presentation of the problematic relationship between two brothers.

In conclusion, Turkish cinema failed to empower the voice of neglected and excluded identities for many years, due to two main factors. One was the censorship
mechanism that limited the filmmakers to a very narrow discourse remit. Another reason was the absolute obligation on filmmakers to prioritise box-office returns, as the films were not supported by any other source. In the post-1990 period, the abolition of censorship and the introduction of new sources of finance to the cinema industry have facilitated filmmakers in producing more ‘difficult’ films in terms of style and content. Among the new sources of finance, Eurimages – in addition to its support to movie theatres and the distribution of films - has contributed to the co-production of counter-narratives in which diverse identities have been represented and the predominant taboos related to Turkish national identity have been questioned with regard to ethnicity, religion and gender. In this sense, Eurimages practically has been a good source of financial support for the filmmakers who seek to handle problematic aspects of Turkish national identity or simply reflect the contribution of diverse components to Turkey’s cultural identity. Those counter-narratives have evoked and erased the totalising boundaries of the nation and disturbed the conception that attributes essentialist identities to the imagined communities, to recall Bhabha.

As Eurimages is a supra-national cinema support fund which endeavours to support works that reflect the multiple facets of a European society and contribute to European cultural identity, those films - reflecting the multiple facets of Turkish society and thus contributing to Turkish cultural identity – have made the same reflection of and contribution to European society at the same time. Consequently, a study of these films has revealed that the mission of the Council of Europe to ‘promote awareness and encourage the development of Europe’s cultural identity and diversity’ is substantially justified in the case of Turkey over its past twenty years of membership in Eurimages.