

T. C.
KADİR HAS UNIVERSITY
SOCIAL SCIENCES INSTITUTE
COMMUNICATION STUDIES
MASTER PROGRAMME

**FILM AS A TOOL TO RE-WRITE
HISTORY:
NEW POLITICAL CINEMA IN TURKEY**

Master Thesis

ESİN PAÇA CENGİZ

Istanbul, 2010

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ABSTRACT

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Esin Paça Cengiz

M.A. Program in Communication Studies

Advisor: Prof. Dr. Louise Spence

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In order to “construct” a national narrative, unsettling moments of Turkish history have been disavowed by the official discourse in Turkey. As a consequence, uneasy and therefore repressed knowledge of the past, which has not been appropriated as a part of the official discourse on national history, is finding its existence in cinematic representations. Along with the mainstream films in which the official discourses on history resonate, the growing interest in representing the past in cinema in Turkey has also resulted in the emergence of a new political cinema. In this thesis I argue that, unlike mainstream historical films which employ conventional narration strategies and propose that they are reinstalling the missing pieces in the national historical narrative, new political cinema in Turkey adopts an experimental form and remarks that history remains elusive and incomplete. By examining two recent films of the new political cinema in Turkey, *Sonbahar / Autumn* (Özcan Alper, 2008) and *Bulutları Beklerken / Waiting for the Clouds* (Yeşim Ustaoglu, 2004) this thesis suggests that new political films attempt to revise history and its narration by using cinematic means in an unprecedented way. And they incite their viewers to reflect on historical thinking and their relationship with it.

Keywords: representation of history, political cinema, historiography, Turkish cinema

ÖZ

TARİHİ YENİDEN YAZMAK İÇİN BİR ARAÇ OLARAK FİLM:

TÜRKİYE’DE YENİ POLİTİK SİNEMA

Esin Paça Cengiz

İletişim Bilimleri Yüksek Lisans Programı

Tez Danışmanı : Prof. Dr. Louise Spence

Haziran 2010

Ulusal bir anlatı “oluşturma” süreci içerisinde, Türk tarihinin çalkantılı anları ülkedeki resmi söylem tarafından inkar ediliyor. Bunun sonucu olarak, ulusun “şanlı” tarihinin içine bir türlü uydurulamayan ve bu yüzden bastırılan tarihsel olaylar sinema temsilleri olarak geri dönüyorlar. Türkiye’de giderek büyüyen geçmişi temsil etme eğilimi resmi ideolojinin tarih üzerindeki söylemlerini tekrar eden ana akım filmlerin yanı sıra, yeni bir politik sinemanın oluşması ile sonuçlandı. Bu tez, konvansiyonel anlatım stratejilerini benimseyen ve tarihin eksik parçalarını yerlerine geri koyarak onu tamamlama iddiasında olan ana akım tarihsel filmlerin aksine, Türkiye’deki yeni politik sinemanın deneysel bir biçim oluşturmaya çalışarak tarihin muğlak ve tamamlanamayan bir olgu olduğunu öne sürdüğünü savunuyor. Türkiye’deki yeni politik sinemanın iki örneği olarak *Bulutları Beklerken* (Yeşimustaoglu, 2004) ve *Sonbahar* (Özcan Alper, 2009) filmlerini inceleyen, bu tez, yeni politik filmlerin sinemanın anlatım araçlarını alışılmışın dışında bir biçimde kullanarak, hem tarihi hem de onun temsil edilme biçimini yeniden yazdığını ortaya koyma amacı güdüyor. Bu yolla, bu filmler hem tarihsel düşüncenin kendisini hem de bizlerin bu düşünce ile kurduğu ilişkiyi tekrar gözden geçirmeye teşvik ediyor.

Anahtar Kelimeler: tarih temsilleri, politik sinema, tarih yazımı, Türk Sineması

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Starting from the beginning – while this thesis was just an idea in my mind – I had the opportunity to discuss my ideas deeply with Levent Soysal. He and I engaged in very intense arguments and he often criticized my work. Even though I sometimes disagree with him, his novel comments provoked me to reconsider my observations and interpretations. These challenges and our never ending good arguments has advanced my thinking. Nothing I say will be enough to thank him for his support and for the way he guided me to think analytically.

While researching for this thesis I attended courses by Jalal Toufic, Melis Behlil and Lemi Baruh. They were all involved with my thesis and spent long hours with me discussing my ideas, reading my work and commenting on it. Words are never enough to describe the “experience” of taking courses by Jalal Toufic. He thought me that there are always mind boggling things beyond the simplest things we take for granted. His ways of thinking, seeing and writing broaden the margins of the

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I have been lucky to have Kaya Tabanlı, Güler Canbulat and Elif Akçalı as my colleagues. We have reviewed each other’s work, stimulated each other with exciting ideas and contemplated possible projects we can do together in the future. I also thank Mark Wyers for giving his time and being always available to make me a better writer.

I watched a lot of the films that I discuss in this thesis with my closest friends Çağla Önder and Ayşegül Özbek. After seeing the films we analyzed the sounds and images over coffee, and exchanged our experiences. Their brilliant takes on any subject and distinctive perspectives paved the way for me to bring up new possible interpretations.

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INTRODUCTION

In recent years, there has been a growing interest around the world in works which deal with history, especially as regards turbulent events in the past. Countless books, articles and academic conferences have focused on history and how it is represented, dissecting the way that societies confront past turbulent events and how these events are ingrained in the collective memory of the societies. In line with this trend, there has been an explosion in Turkey as well of reconceptualizations of the past. In addition to academia, there has been a marked increase in popular television series, films, television discussion shows, newspapers, novels, columnists, documentaries and works on oral history which deal with critical and contested moments in narratives of history.

Some of these reiterate the state ideology (as reflected in history lessons in schools, state discourses and heroic nationalist narratives), while others explore histories that are disavowed by the nation, and thus are vanishing from the collective memory. The latent histories which find no room in the state discourse and nationalist representations are finding voice mainly through works of artists, filmmakers and writers where “challenging narratives” of the past emerge as an alternative perspective on the official history. The study of such dissident voices in Turkey would be a useful test-case for examining how the past is brought to the present within the particularities of a Turkish context, and within larger global trends. Such an approach will allow for a close comparison that will raise to the surface how some versions of the past have been suppressed and how others are being re-examined today in documentaries, exhibitions, novels, films and other

works which attempt to revise the acknowledged and universally accepted notions of history.

In this context, the number of films which grapple with the narratives of the past has increased drastically since late 1990s. Along with the mainstream films in which the official discourses resonate, this growing interest in representing the past in cinema in Turkey has also resulted in the emergence of a new political cinema. Exploring the “unexamined” moments of Turkish history, this new cinema dissects the past of the nation in an unprecedented way, examining the suppressed narratives – such as the mafia -state relations, forced migration of the minorities, prisoners who have gone missing under detention – which until recently were not open to discussion. The significance of these representations of uneasy moments in Turkish history derives not only from the fact that these films allow “unwanted” knowledge of history to come to light. But these revisionist films attempt to reinscribe the idea of history not as a precise way of reaching the absolute truths of the past, but as a construction in which selection, narration, invention and manipulation plays part.

Bearing all these in mind, this thesis explores how the new political cinema in Turkey experiments with the formal elements of cinematic representation and uses film as a tool to examine history by dealing with the undesirable, and therefore left aside, knowledge of the past. And it raises questions: How official narratives on history been constructed in Turkey? What do the films of new political cinema tell us about the history through unacknowledged narratives of the past and the relationship we establish with them? In seeking possible answers to such questions the analysis of the formal characteristics of the films acts as the essence of this research.

While some mainstream historical films reproduce the discourses on history by adopting simplified arguments, filmmakers of new political cinema use the means of cinematic representation in an unprecedented way in order to demonstrate the complexity of history. In doing so, the representation of history in their films distinguishes themselves from past political film traditions and mainstream historical films in the present day. Therefore, this thesis suggests that, the new political cinema in Turkey is distinctive due to the use of cinematic tools, through which questions and new ideas – both national and epistemological – regarding to history are being raised. These new political films by problematizing the idea of history as a science to reach the “truths” of the past, re-writes it as combined narratives of both fact and fiction which are subjected to persistent manipulation.

The first chapter “Construction, Narration and Return of History” dissects the general debate on construction process of historical narratives. Theories of scholars who appointed the role of manipulation in historiography are reviewed in order to reconsider the reliance we have established with the available versions of history. This chapter argues that history is never explicit and complete. Therefore, history tellers should not only endeavor to retrieve historical knowledge but also reflect on the problems of historical thought and consider the limitations of it.

The second chapter “Historical Film and Form” brings to the fore the distrust historians establish with the representations of history in historical films. Providing examples of the works of historians and speeches delivered by the national leaders, this chapter points out that the suspicious approach of the authorities in relation to alternative representations of history –such as films – lies in the formal characteristic of the film medium. In this respect, based on the analysis on the standard historical

films and experimental films by Robert A. Rosenstone, I construe the formal characteristics of both mainstream films in Turkey and new political films in chapter two. I discuss that while mainstream historical films in Turkey are simplifying history and offering alternative “truths” about the past, new political films are pushing the limits of traditional forms of historical representation. The new political cinema in Turkey experiments with the cinematic means in order to develop a form in which a critical engagement with the historical representation can be generated.

Building on the second chapter, the third chapter “New Political Cinema in Turkey” pursues the characteristics of the new form that is developed by the new political film-makers. A close formal analysis of two recent films of the new political cinema *Bulutları Beklerken/Waiting for the Clouds* (Yeşim Ustaoglu, 2004) and *Sonbahar/Autumn* (Özcan Alper, 2009) examined in this chapter in order to reveal how means of cinematic representation is used to encourage reconsideration of the “facts” of official historiography.

In the concluding chapter, I aim to put forward that the new political films are revising the traditional representations of history. By experimenting with the film form and putting together a complex and contradicting narration, new political films are distorting the coherent and progressive narrations of history. And they are leaving the audience with a disturbing, distrustful and uneasy feeling in regards to the past.

Finally, I would like to propose that the attempt of seeking for new ways to revise history and its narration is not particular to Turkey. Indeed in the global arena, many film-makers, artists, writers, scholars and historians are exploring the possibilities and potentials of various media forms to tell unnarrated histories while challenging the pre-existing ones.

CHAPTER ONE

CONSTRUCTION, NARRATION and RETURN OF HISTORY

Construction of History

History harbors ideology. Both the process of history writing (based on historical evidence) and the evidence itself contain the interpretations of the history teller. However, we assume that historians are, as “scientists,” finding historical records which indicate the “absolute truth” of that specific period of history and reveal them, providing a comprehensive meaning in order for the audience to understand the past. Consequently, we tend to believe that history can ensure us with unequivocal answers to questions regarding our past. And we rely on the fact that through those answers, we can learn about our shortcomings so that we do not repeat history. Is this really the case? Or should we doubt what we “know” through narratives of history? Ahmet Gürata and Louise Spence write that “history, as we know it, is full of uncertainties, insufficiencies, unsatisfying or partially obscured views of the world” (2010)¹. They go on to argue that “Scholars strain to fill the gaps, to explain connections” (2010). Because historians are not only scientists bringing the knowledge of the past to the present, they are also narrators who desire to call our attention to the stories they have found, they adorn their discoveries with words. Then, they create smooth narratives out of a complicated past. Yet, in performing such operations, they inevitably project their personal “understandings” of the matter. But, as Gürata and Spence note, history writing is never a neutral and

¹ Gürata, A. And Spence, L. “Introduction” (Forthcoming in Fall 2010). I would like to thank Louise Spence and Ahmet Gürata for allowing me to read and cite their article before it is published.

innocent process” (2010). Thus, histories we are told, are never merely narratives that inform us about the lived past events. They are ideological constructs, aiming at specific causes. For this reason, R.G. Collingwood suggests that, even for historians the experience of historical thinking is not enough. For Collingwood, history tellers should also reflect on the experience of historical thinking. “He [or she] must be not only an historian, but a philosopher, and in particular his [or her] philosophical thought must have included special attention to the problems of historical thought” (1959: 8).

My experience of history education in schools, however, does not include thinking critically about historical knowledge. It does not pave the way for an understanding of the epistemology of history. Although I know the exact dates and “cause and effect” relations between the events that emerged, I was never incited to think about the questions: Why do we need history? What are the limitations of “traditional” history? What is the role of the “truth” in history?

When we tell stories about the supposedly true events, or are taught about histories, we should also be preoccupied with these questions. Historical thinking should not only be about the “reliability” of the information we are given, but it should also instigate us to decipher the “meaning” beyond that knowledge. One should deal both with what one knows and at the same time try to understand the process of knowing and ask what makes it possible for one to know that specific information. Such an approach will raise to the surface the deficiencies and inadequacies of that knowledge. Thereby, when we think about history, the problems of historical thinking should be examined along with history as a “system of knowing” about the “truth” of the past. But because history is complex and

inexplicit, it is rarely possible to find substantial answers for our questions. Even so, we can explore the boundaries and omissions of historiography by asking what history might consist of.

As Raymond Williams traces the root of the word history he writes that “in the early English use the word *history* and *story* were both applied to an account either of imaginary events or of events supposed to be true” (Williams 1985: 146). However, from the fifteenth century the use of the words altered, as *history* moved towards an account of past real events and *story* moved a range which includes less formal accounts of past events and accounts of imagined events, and history has become the “organized knowledge of the past” (Williams 1985 : 146). Williams’ definition suggests that some specific knowledge might be left out or manipulated during the process of “organization.” In his book *Metahistory*, Hayden White describes this process : “[h]istorical work represents the process of selection and arrangement of data from unprocessed historical record in the interest of rendering that record more comprehensible to an audience of a particular kind” (1975: 5). In *Tropics of Discourse* White elaborates his observations and argues that, while historians are constructing a narrative they exclude some facts because there are always more facts in a historical record than a historian can possibly include in the narrative representation of a given segment of historical process. Hence, a historian must “interpret” her data by putting aside some facts which she thinks are “irrelevant” to her narrative purpose. And in order to reconstruct “what happened” she inevitably includes her interpretations to fill in the gaps which are missing in the record (White 1985: 51). This kind of intervention discloses the “invention” which plays a part in the historians operations (White 1975: 6-7). As a result in order to put

together a comprehensible narrative for an audience, historical work represents arrangement, interpretation, selection, invention and narration. White's observation not only reveals the process of selecting and organizing data in order to construct "coherent" texts but it also reveals the "narrator" behind these "emplotted" (White 1975 : 7) historical representations. So instead of approaching historical knowledge as a representation of the "absolute truth," we should keep reminding ourselves of the stages through which the historical works have passed.

These stages engender questions of power, ideology and narration. Whose stories are told and whose are left aside? For what purpose? What kinds of stories are being told and which ones are silenced? Zeynep Tül Akbal Süalp mentions that history is shaped around the dominant ideology, dominant language, authority and the main narratives of its time (2006: 43). That is to say historical data can be manipulated for the benefit of the story that is meant to be told. As a matter of fact, if we consider Turkey's official discourse on history and practices of historiography, notably after the foundation of the new Republic, we can discern the discourses that infiltrated into representations of history.

Narration of History

The process of nation building generally involves ambivalences. The Republic of Turkey was established in 1923 on the remnants of Ottoman Empire reduced to the space of Anatolia (Neyzi 2002: 139). The Ottoman Empire tolerated Christians and Jews without repression or forcible conversion, allowing different communities to live peacefully together under Muslim rule, in a premodern cultural harmony, while Christian Europe was for centuries disfigured by savage religious

intolerance by every kind of persecution (Anderson 2008). However, as Perry Anderson notes, this peaceful harmony was relative. Because even though non-Muslims were neither forced to convert nor expelled by the sultanate, they were taxed more heavily than the Muslims, could not bear arms and hold processions. Muslim men could marry non-Muslim women. However, non-Muslim men were not allowed to marry Muslim women (Anderson 2008).

As the empire lost its power, a series of reforms were established to render the empire competitive with the consolidating powers of Europe. In parallel with this, the last years of the Ottoman Empire were marked by conflicting visions of what the nation should be, with pluralistic views struggling against religious-nationalist conceptualizations of the creation of a singular national identity. Perry Anderson states that Young Turks faced the challenge to ask themselves what ideological appeal could hold diverse populations divided by language, religion and ethnic origin together. The solution they came up with – and as it is later accentuated by the foundation of the new republic – was “Turkification.” This encompassed the “Turkification” of the language, state administrators, financial capital, the settlement of the Turkish population in specific areas that used to be inhabited by the non-Muslim non-Turks (Aktar 2006: 101) and the emphasis on “supremacy” of Turkishness in history.² In addition to these practices, the bonds with the past were cut off by the some of the reforms of the new Republic especially the abolition of the

² Turkish Historical Society and Turkish Language Society were founded in 1930 under the patronage of Atatürk, in order to study the history of Turkey and the Turks and to publish the results of these studies. Today, the aim of the Society of Atatürk Culture, Language and History reads in the constitution: to study Kemalist principals, reforms and thought and to study, introduce and disseminate Turkish Culture, Turkish History and Turkish Language by “scientific” approaches. <http://www.ttk.org.tr/index.php?Page=Sayfa&No=1> accessed on 16.05.2010

Ottoman language and creation of a modern Turkish by attempting to purge it of all the foreign words and by changing the script from Arabic to Latin.³ Exerting these reforms, the new Republic strove to erase the memory of the Ottoman past and committed itself to a secular and modernist future (Özyürek 2007:3).

In such conditions, a narration of a glorious “Turkish” history was thought to be essential because, they reckoned, the idea of a “common history,” which accentuates continuous achievements of the nationals, would unite the population. So the new Republic took action to replace the multi-cultural and multi-national history with a coherent history of a unified nation. Both Ayhan Aktar (2006: 101) and Aslı Gür (2008) note that in Turkey, state interventions have been undertaken in historiography. For instance, as Gür (2008) points out, in the early Republican years archeological findings were used as “scientific evidence” to prove the existence of the Turks in Anatolia so that the state’s claims to Anatolia could be justified.⁴ These attempts suggest an effort of constructing the history, using Homi Bhabha’s phrase, “as a continuous narrative of national progress” (1990:1). This characteristic of the narration of the nation marks the notion of history, in Benedict Anderson’s words, as a “necessary basis for national narrative” (Anderson 1986: 659).

Throughout the years, this necessary narrative has penetrated not only into the impositions of the official discourses in state institutions through which the nationals

³ This change was so radical that, for a native Turkish speaker the language of the Ottoman Empire is not different than any other foreign language she does not know. The bigger problem of the destruction of the connection with the past is, however, it is not only on the administration level. Neither I, nor my father can read or understand my grandfather’s journal that he kept for years. He learnt how to read and write in Ottoman language and although in time he had adapted himself to the new language, he kept writing with the Arabic alphabet.

⁴ On the website of the Turkish Historical Society, the section “Excavations” under the Brief History of the Turkish Historical Society reads: “As directed by Atatürk, the Society assists specialists to carry out excavations on civilizations in Anatolia throughout the ages, revealing the history of Turkey since prehistoric times.” <http://www.ttk.org.tr/index.php?Page=Sayfa&No=1> accessed on 16.05.2010

are “trained” as proud bearers of historical knowledge, but also in daily life with such sayings “Her Türk asker doğar” (Every Turk is a natural born soldier), “Bir Türk dünyaya bedeldir” (One Turk is worth the world) and “Ne mutlu Türküm diyene” (How happy is the one who says “I am a Turk”). They resonate as well in popular representations in the print and broadcast media, historical films which praise Turkish heroes, literature and songs. Along with the narratives of official Turkish history – which are taught in mandatory lessons in elementary school through the first two years of university – the interventions of the state in cultural productions have been shaping the necessary basis which aims to generate a unifying patriotism.

While the achievements and magnificence of the Turkish nation are persistently being repeated to us as “Turkish History” in various forms, some stories of the recent past remain silenced. Because the history of the recent past is marked by traumatic experiences which could not be easily appropriated into the stories of heroism, they were excluded during the “construction” of official history.

In fact, there have always been conflicting experiences which challenge the image of a unified nation. Minorities, such as the resident Greek population, were forced to leave the country via population exchanges in the 1920s, the remnants of the Armenian population faced state-instituted programs of assimilation following expulsions in the late Ottoman era, Kurdish movements were violently suppressed and oppressive policies geared towards non-Muslim minorities such as the Jewish population and again the Greeks were put into force by the government via extraordinary taxes. The Greek and Jewish populations, key holders of capital since the late Ottoman era, had their property vandalized in 1950s. The second half of the 60s and 70s was distinguished by leftist movements. By the end of the 70s many

leftists were executed in jails, died in raids and shootings. Many of the murders and assassinations in this period remain unsolved.

The country underwent two military coups, one in 1960 which culminated in the execution of the former prime minister and government administrators, and again in 1980, in which various attempts were made to stifle the development of democracy. The coup in 1980 has been seen, by both the right wing and left wing, as a particular watershed that changed the faith of the nation and damaged society irreversibly through the harsh suppression of any voices (leftist, rightist, socialist, or otherwise) not following the state (military) line. The conflict between two separate sects of Islam, *Alevi*s and *Sunni*s, became severe and *Alevi*s were massacred in raids. The 1990s was marked by the rise of the Islamist movement, Kurdish nationalist movement and the war in the eastern provinces of Turkey to put down the Kurdish revolt. The 90s was also the period that the legacy of the 80s military coup and its practices of suppression were maintained as an integral constituent of state force. Assassinations against intellectuals and judicial terror began, innumerable people went missing (often tortured and killed while detained by the police or gendarmes), the unacknowledged war in eastern Turkey continued and government-mafia relations were brought to light. The claim that the state – often referred as the “deep state” – interferes in these atrocities and in fact “organized” some of them still remains unproven.⁵

These “other” stories bear darkness. And their disclosure falls outside the interests of the state. Because these are not stories of “unification,” they are seen as

⁵ I would like to point out that these “challenging” moments that I mention are also a “selection,” reflecting the narrator’s -- in this case mine -- personal experiences and interpretation.

stories of “separation.” That is why even today, after 87 years since the Republic was established, it is not completely possible to claim that these obscured stories have been acknowledged. Some of them are still severely disavowed, however, in the recent years, the state has begun to deliberate with others.

Return of History

By the end of the 90s, shrouded moments of history were beginning to return in literature, demonstrations on the streets, television series, art exhibitions, public announcements of the artists and activists, works of oral history, books, conferences, newspaper columns and films. It is as if all the repressed knowledge of the past finally exploded and permeating all sorts of fields. Possible answers to the question of the timing of this trend can be found in various dynamics of the world in general and Turkey in particular.

Andreas Huyssen writes that the distrust for a better future stemming from the disappointment with the promises of modernity caused the whole world turning into a museum (Huyssen, 2003). Bearing this disillusionment, a search for alternative narratives of history other than the master narrative has begun. In line with the world, the neo-liberal turn in the 90s changed the politics of Turkey drastically. Nurdan Gürbilek defines the characteristic of this period as the “co-existence of the contradictions” (Gürbilek 2007). For Gürbilek, the period after late the 80s has been as a turning point for Turkey due to the disillusion of the promises of modernization that Kemalism appropriated for Turkish society (Gürbilek 2004 and 2007). And this resulted in a desire to expose everything that Kemalism have been repressing for years (2007: 15). In the 80s and 90s sharply conflicting strategies endured in

harmony.⁶ On the one hand it was an epoch of oppression and prohibitions, on the other, it was a period of promises and opportunities in which the desires of the society could ostensibly be satisfied (Gürbilek 2007: 9). This period was marked by the complexity of the change – though not in the sense of a “progress” as it is repeatedly described. As the impetus of the Islamic movement accelerated, the fierce war in the Middle East exacerbated, at the same time highly secured housing complexes were build,⁷ Turkey has become one of the significant contributors of the global economy, briefly, on the one hand Turkey was becoming more free and “individualized” on the other it was constricted by its inner dynamics.

Interestingly, Gürbilek’s pioneering descriptions can be applied to Turkey’s political and cultural platform in the present day. Although it is very hard to externalize the complexity of today’s conditions, pointing out a few incidents might help to form a rough image. Turkey faces the return of the Islamic discourse mainly by the conservative (or as some prefer to define it -- modern Islamist or moderate Islamism) Justice and Development Party (AKP). Their power intensifies the debate of “secularism” which has been haunting the nation since its establishment. Their unprecedented initiatives pertaining to recognition of diverse ethnicities (through “Kurdish Initiatives,” “Roman Initiatives,” opening up state-owned TV Channels in various languages and so on) and their discourse on human rights which is mainly shaped around the European Union accession process has brought “covered” issues

⁶ Gürbilek notes that, in the 80s on the one hand the one hand different voices were repressed but on the other there has been an explosion of the different voices that challenge the official ideology of the country. The war and the raising voice of the Eastern Turkey in the cultural arena, the obligation to be quiet and the urge to speak up, briefly, and all these conflicting existences were practiced.

⁷ These are called *sites* mainly build in the impoverished neighborhoods of the cities. These house complexes are ultra luxurious, and highly secured with walls, or mesh wires surrounding them and innumerable security personel guarding the *site* at the gates to keep the “inhabitants of the impoverished neighborhoods” away.

to daylight. The ongoing *Ergenekon* case in which renowned intellectuals, journalists and soldiers are alleged to be part of the organization *Ergenekon* and held responsible for various brutal events⁸ that, according to the claims, were realized in order to create a chaos to stage a coup has also brought similar memories to the present day.

Meanwhile, Turkey gains global recognition through cultural products. Artists, filmmakers, thinkers and writers are receiving the most prestigious awards in the world. Their achievements are highly appreciated by some. But others accuse them of “constructing” materials which damage Turkey’s dignified image. Though, some believe that to be a position that guarantees an international award. Ironically, when Orhan Pamuk received the Nobel price, and although the prime minister phoned him in person to congratulate him, the suit filed against Orhan Pamuk for the accusation of “insulting Turkishness” was still in process. Similarly, when Hüseyin Karabey’s state sponsored film *Gitmek / My Marlon and Brando* (2009) was going to be screened in Culturespace Film Festival in Switzerland, the screening was cancelled by the request of a bureaucrat from the Ministry of Culture because it tells a love story of a Turkish girl and a Kurdish man (Cömert 2008). When Yeşim Ustaoglu made *Bulutları Beklerken / Waiting for the Clouds* and received innumerable international awards, she was accused by various intellectuals and members of the public who saw the film, of dealing with how Turks persecuted the Ottoman Greeks, but not how Greeks persecuted Turks. In fact, she was sued by the peasants of the village that the film was shot, because she was insulting a Turkish village by depicting it as a Greek one (Kaçar 2005). The documentary *Mustafa* (Can

⁸ These events include unsolved murders of the journalists, judges and non-Muslims.

Dündar, 2009), which develops a different perspective on Mustafa Kemal Atatürk and narrates his personal life along with his achievements as the founder of the Republic, was attacked immensely because it was portraying Atatürk as a “normal person.”

Such a complex and intricate ambiance bring back both the dark and the monumental memories of the past. We all have political stances in choosing what we want to remember. By the development in the “Kurdish Initiative,” families of the martyrs⁹ want to remember the sacredness of the “Turks” who died for this country. The same initiative made the Kurds remember the persecutions they have been through especially in the 80s and 90s. Kemalists are insisting on remembering Atatürk and the promises of modernization he endowed to this country. Diverse ethnic groups are remembering their “identity.” Prisoners remember the brutal treatment and torture they were subjected to in jails. In fact, the whole nation is in need to “remember” the past and point out the deficiencies of history. Because their stories were silenced, and it is about time that they find their voices and narrate their stories. That is why, today, every time we turn on the television, hear a politician giving a public speech, have a discussion with a taxi-driver stuck in the traffic, check the weekly schedule of the screenings in a theatre or enter a museum to see an exhibition, stories of history surrounds us.

New funding opportunities supplied by the state and the global recognition, have paved the way for new possibilities of an increase in production in the cultural

⁹ Martyrs have a specific sanctity in Turkey. They are highly respected because they die while fighting for their nation. At the same time, in Islam the person who dies while fighting for his/her country goes directly to heaven. In fact, as it is believed, martyrs do not die, they are immortal. In relation to this belief the saying “Martyrs never die, the nation is never divided” is chanted by thousands every time nationals die in the name of their country.

scene. Through them, this remembering becomes visualized. The importance of such investments is that they provide financial assistance for new generations of artists and thinkers to realize their works. Their positions are not always popular ones. Because the majority of these works are seen and referred to as “arty,” for most of them it is almost impossible to make a profit from their investments. Thus, state subsidiary and sponsorship contributes significantly in the production of these works.

The artists, thinkers and film-makers of such works grapple with the problems of the past. Their works visualize the “need to remember.” And they, as narrators, seek new ways of writing history. This new generation of narrators, as history tellers, tells us stories we are not familiar with. They detect the black holes of history and reveal them in order to bring the nation to terms with its past. Esra Özyürek comments that, “years after the establishment of the Republic, grandchildren of the founders have a different relationship with history. New generations utilize every effort to remember, record and reconcile the imagined earlier periods” (2007: 2). In their efforts to remember, they use the art and craft – be it words, camera, canvas, video, or computer – as a tool for exploring possibilities of alternative ways of telling histories. They also question the deficiencies of history, in narrating the stories of the past, including their personal ones. Imprisoned as a political prisoner during the 80s, film-maker, script writer and activist Sırrı Süreyya Önder says “I am the witness of my own films and I have an anger that I want to express. Therefore I am using my tools to re-create the reality that has been created for us, adding to it the personal reality I have experienced.”¹⁰ Writer Elif Şafak also

¹⁰ From his speech delivered at the conference *New Directions of Turkish Cinema* in 2009, Kadir Has University, İstanbul.

remarks on her novel *Baba ve Piç /The Bastard of Istanbul* (2004) for which she was sued with the claim of “insulting Turkishness” states that she has written this novel to encourage people to speak about the Armenian “issue” in an unprejudiced way (Sunar 2006).

These fictional works, however, are rarely considered as “serious” sources through which one can engage with historical thinking. Because they are “created” their affiliation with historical knowledge is not as highly valued as works by historians. Hayden White points out that this difference between history and fiction resides in the assumption that the historian “finds” his stories, whereas the fiction writer “invents” his [or hers] (White 1975:6). Yet, official discourses on history hide the fact that historians are also narrators and they are “constructing” comprehensive narratives which also involve “invention.”

As for “created” works, they provide an alternative pattern to speak analytically and critically about the past. The pursuit of a way to come to terms with the past and to re-consider our relationship with history is mostly visible in films. Along with other alternative representations of history, the importance of the film originates in the fact that it can engage a larger number of people with its materials and, they are not only seen in theatres but some of them are shown repeatedly on televisions. Thus, their intervention in political life is much stronger compared to other media. Moreover, the immense richness of the film form highlights its characteristic as a unique tool for depicting compound narratives and forming a basis for the discussion of the taboos. As Anton Kaes states, “films – as complex fictional constructs – offer ambivalent perspectives and contradictory attitudes that resist simple explanations and call for multiple readings” (Kaes 1989).

What we should ask ourselves at this stage is : can we say that all films propose complex perspectives and stimulate us to critically think about the information we are given? Or are they dictating their take on the historical subject and their narrative strategies, can we reach another “truth” through them different from what has been written. Huyssen writes, “we need productive remembering more than productive forgetting” (2003: 27). In that sense, do some films suggest that they reveal an obscured truth by adopting a conventional narration of history? Or are there other films that strike us in the way that they re-write history and explore new ways of telling histories which make us reconsider what we know and how we know it? To seek possible answers for these questions diverse forms of historical films should be analyzed.

CHAPTER TWO

HISTORICAL FILM and FORM

As a response to the legislation of Armenian genocide as “genocide” in various western countries the current vice prime minister of Turkey Ali Babacan, states that “history should be left to historians.” This statement has become prevalently used in political arena in Turkey especially in relation to the historical events the state disavows. What makes this expression significant is the fact that it points to the historians as the sole authority that can and should discuss history. According to this perspective, the contradictions of the past should be evaluated only by the historians in order to reach the “historical truth.” And this perspective indicates that histories that are told by history tellers, who are not necessarily historians either, are superficial or inaccurate. Because, as it is referred, unlike history, the stories of the past that non-historian history tellers recount are “unscientific.” This distrust in the various alternative representations of history has been common also amongst historians for a very long time. In his book *Writing History in Film* William Guynn reflects on the relation of the historians to the written word and writes that for most historians “only writing provides the kind of distance and discipline that a scientific approach requires”(Guynn 2006 : 1). However, today, history is crowding in on us especially through visual representations. Hence, in the recent years even historians are exploring alternative means of representation of history other than the written word. They are analyzing the potentials of different media forms for providing new ideas and raising challenging questions regarding to

the traditional forms of history. And in this analysis of other media, film plays the key role.

History on Film

Robert Brent Toplin, in “The Filmmaker as Historian” explains that historians examine film in order to understand its influence on public opinion and as an instrument of propaganda. And unfortunately they give very little formal attention to investigating film as a representation of the past (1988). Yet Robert Rosenstone asserts that times have changed drastically and major journals of history are now devoting sections to films (1995b: 2). For Rosenstone, “...history needs not to be done on the page. It can be a mode of thinking that utilizes elements other than the written word: sound, vision, feeling, montage” (1995b: 11). And along with written history by the historians, the potential of the film as a legitimate way to represent past should be explored.

Before moving on the promises of the film form, it is advisable to think about possible reasons why do historians not trust the vision that film spreads to the public. When we consider the general debate amongst historians, as Guynn points out, the common to approach designates that film involves editing, thus, the act of selection and putting together distorts the documentary evidence (2006: 2). However, as it is discussed in the first chapter, various theorists put emphasis on the fact that because historiography involves “interpretation” and “invention” of the historian, it is also possible for the historical record to be manipulated. But as Rosenstone points out historians tend to forget that “[a]ll history, including written history is a construction, not a reflection” (1995b: 11).

In this sense, there must be something deeper in the film form that dissatisfies the historians. William Guynn conceives that the skepticism stems from the standard historical films – mainly from Hollywood but also from other countries – which “have little pretense to authenticity.” For Guynn, such films disguise the trends and preoccupations of the day through “historical” mise-en-scène, and reproduce the melodramatic plot structures in the guise of historical necessity and the bare frame of historical events and characters dissolves in to the drama of the fictional protagonist and general anachronism (2006: 2). That is why the historians are skeptical about the potential of the films to evoke the viewer to think about history in an analytic way. Because for them, as Guynn states, these films are abusing historical representation by distorting historical chronology in the interest of dramatic structure, simplifying complex events, falsifying the historical figure to comply with the demands of the star system and emphasizing the spectacular rather than the analytic and so forth (2006 : 2).

Similarly, Robert Rosenstone suggests that there are two types of historical films: mainstream films and experimental films.¹¹ He explicates the characteristics of both forms of films in order to demonstrate the different approaches the films display in relation to history. As he suggests, mainstream films construct a world by using traditional codes of representation and conventions of film to create “cinematic realism” in which certain kinds of shots put together and underscored by music so

¹¹ Rosenstone uses the phrase “experimental film” in an unusual way. He refers to variety of filmic forms, both dramatic and documentary and sometimes combination of two. Experimental films include works of both avant-garde and independent film makers from United States, Europe, former communist countries and the Third World. He analyses experimental film form through works of Ousmane Sembene, Sergei Eisenstein, Alexander Kluge, Roberto Rosellini, Carlos Diegues, Trinh T. Minh-ha and many other filmmakers.

that the viewer can not sense the manipulation involved in the film (1995b: 54).

However, experimental film refuses the pretense that the past on the screen can be an unmediated window to the past and foregrounds itself as a construction (1995: 12).

Thus, it is clear that the distrust not only results from the film form which involves editing, but more importantly the essence of the suspicion lays in the use of the formal elements of the medium of film.

In this respect, if we take historical films from Turkey into consideration, we will notice that both forms of films are practiced as filmmakers deal with past events on the screen. However, while standard historical films have been produced since the early years of cinema, experimental historical films are emerging mainly in the last ten years. Based on the characteristics of the standard historical film as itemized by Rosenstone (1996b: 55-61), in such innumerable film series on Turkish heroes Battal Gazi, Malkoçoğlu and Tarkan¹² and films *Cumhuriyet/The Republic* (Ziya Öztan, 1998), *Kurtlar Vadisi Irak / Valley of the Wolves: Iraq* (Serdar Akar and Sadullah Şentürk, 2006) *Dersimiz: Atatürk /Our Lesson: Atatürk* (Hamdi Alkan, 2010), history is told as a continuous narrative of national and racial progress. They deliver the notion that, the nation has been through various atrocities wars and conflicts in the past yet it has overcome all of them. And today we live in a better world thanks to all heroes who have not hesitated even for a second to sacrifice themselves for their country. These films tell history as stories of individual accomplishments. For instance, the films which are based on the foundation of the Turkish Republic always

¹² To name a few, *Battal Gazi Destanı* (Atıf Yılmaz,1971), *Battal Gazi'nin İntikamı*(Natuk Baytan,1972), *Battal Gazi Geliyor*(Sami Ayanoğlu,1973),*Battal Gazi'nin Oğlu*(Natuk Baytan,1974), *Tarkan* (Tunç Başaran, 1969),*Tarkan Viking Kralı*(Mehmet Aslan,1971), *Tarkan Altın Madalyon*(Mehmet Aslan, 1972), *Malkoçoğlu* (Süreyya Duru, 1969), *Malkoçoğlu : Kurt Bey* (Süreyya Duru, 1972), *Malkoçoğlu :Ölüm Fedaileri* (Remzi Jöntürk 1971), *Malkoçoğlu : Cem Sultan* (Remzi Jöntürk, 1969) and so on.

focus on the personal story of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk and narrate the process of the regime change through him and stress “his admirable and heroic” achievements. Or they praise a soldier, an agent, a mother who is willing to sacrifice her son for the posterity of the country. The heroic role of these individuals in shaping the narrative of the nation is not only depicted by centering the historical period of the film on them but, as Rosenstone remarks, these individuals are made to seem important as they have been singled out by the camera and appear before us in large images on the screen (1996b: 57). The cinematic means are used to dramatize history, and through the camera work, music, sound and editing the feelings of the audience are intensified. Consequently the viewers identify with individuals and their stories on the screen. Instead of scrutinizing with the historical events and the period, they concentrate on individuals’ personal stories. Such narration puts “individuals in the forefront of the historical process. Which means that the solution of their personal problems tends to substitute itself for the solution of historical problems” (Rosenstone 1996b: 57).

Furthermore, the past in standard historical films are simplified. The complexity and shortcomings of history find no room in such representations. They depict no alternatives other than the political stand the film sets itself on. Almost all films made on the radical change the country has gone through in establishment of the Republic, for instance, portrays the process as simple and proper way for modernization with silencing all the other alternative voices. When we look at most of the recent historical films, although some of them deal with moments that are poorly discussed in Turkey, their method of narrating the events simplifies the turmoil historical moments they grapple with. *Nefes/The Breath* (Levent Semerci,

2009) sets its story in 90s Turkey during the war in southeast, and centers on the experiences of Turkish soldiers serving at the border of Iraq. The film portrays the conflict between Kurds and Turks as if it is between “the good” and “the bad.” Despite the fact that the film aims to break a taboo and speak about the “Kurdish problem” in the eastern Turkey, it simplifies the story by narrating it as a story of “us” and “them” without questioning the origins of the conflict. In fact, “they” are represented mainly by one character – although we see a few more in extreme long shots on the mountains and a heavily injured woman shot by the soldiers who is later abused at the patrol headquarters – he is literally the only Kurd whom we hear speaking. Throughout the film as we hear more about each soldier and their personal lives, “the others” are represented through the radio conversations of the main Kurdish character and commander while they are constantly threatening and abusing each other. Another recent film *Güz Sancısı/ Pains of Autumn* (Tomris Giritlioğlu, 2009) treats vandalism against non-Muslims that took place in 6-7 September 1955 in İstanbul with a similar approach. Positioning the historical moment as a background to an interreligious love story between a *Rum* (Turkish Greek) prostitute and a nationalist man, the film narrates the oppression and persecution that the non-Muslims have gone through, through three *Rum* characters and hides the complexity of the event behind a love story. Also, the only *Rum* characters represented are a prostitute, a grandmother who sells her granddaughter and her former lover whom she left because of his financial insufficiencies. The film does not portray resistance, while it depicts *Rum* characters as helpless. Furthermore, we know that in the events that took place, not only the property of *Rum* people but of all the non-Muslims’ were vandalized. These people were brutalized and murdered. However, *Güz Sancısı*

leaves out this information and prefers to focus on telling a interregional love story by placing a historical moment as a background.¹³

Another characteristic of the standard historical film, Rosenstone points out, is the “look” of the past (1996b: 59). Historical films give us a historical look of the past, through buildings, clothes, tools, landscapes and so on. Rosenstone argues that, “[t]his is the mistaken notion that mimesis is all, that history is in fact no more than a «period look,» that things themselves are history, rather than become history because of what they mean to people of a particular time and place”(1996b: 60). According to this notion, if the “look of the past” is right in the film, then it is possible to place all the characters and events as history and treat all of them with the same degree of confidence.

The use of these mainstream codes of cinema creates the illusion that we are looking through the window of the screen at a “real” world. And this kind of narration hides the “fiction” that underlines the standard historical film (Rosenstone 1996b: 55). Concealing the fiction that is involved in the film and the look of the past aims to sustain what we look for in our idea of history and what we want to find in the written works: the truth. As we refer earlier, we have a tendency to “believe” that written history, because it is based on empirical evidence and real events, gives us the truth. Yet we should approach written history with the same healthy distrust we approach films. Because we already know that written history is also representation, which pass through the stages of “collection,” “selection,” “organization” and “invention”. Thus, standard historical films, instead of

¹³ For a detailed analysis of the film see my “*Güz Sancısı*,” *Altyazı*, March 2009, issue 82, p82.

challenging our idea of history and stimulating us to re-consider our preexisting remarks and bring new ideas, feeds on the conventions of written history and like written history conceals the “invention” which plays part in the filmic world.

However, Rosenstone claims that “experimental films” struggle against the codes of representation of the standard historical film. They refuse to see the screen as a transparent “window” onto a “realistic” world (1995b: 53). Among films defined as history as experiment, it is possible to find the following: works that are analytic, unemotional, distanced, multicausal; historical worlds that are expressionist, surrealist, disjunctive, postmodern; histories that do not just show the past but also talk about how and what it means to the filmmaker (or to us) today (1995b : 61). In doing so, experimental films violate – if not all – the characteristics of the mainstream film, as listed above. These films do not suggest a “progressive” history which puts emphasis on history is happened and finished, and that we are in a better position today. Experimental films create “collectivist” histories and use competing voices and images that refuse to resolve into a single story with a single meaning. Many are also parallel with Brecht’s epic theatre with their distancing devices, in order to make the viewer to think about rather than feel the past (1995b). For all these challenging use of the cinematic means, Rosenstone considers the experimental film form innovative in the way that it promises a revision of what we mean by the word history (1995b: 54).

Most of the distrust historians feel for historical film originates in the formal characteristic of the films. And for historians who take films in consideration as a legitimate way of representing the past, the use of cinematic means plays a crucial role to make the distinction between standard historical films and films which have

serious intentions to “re-invent” history. From this standpoint, the film language, the medium of film can expose “new” ways of looking at history which differs from the discourses we have been accustomed to. In this respect, I will argue that the form – the narration –of the films must be more than the narratives they bring out in order to refer to them as “revisionist.”

Crucial Role of the Form

When referring to some historical films as revisionist, we are pointing out their potential to re-write history by modifying the preexisting narratives of the past. However, this modification not only involves the stories that are told in the films, but also, as it will be discussed, how the means of representation are used unprecedentedly. In this perspective the “form” of the film not only refers to the narration, but the narrative, in the way that they converge together inextricably. In other words, the importance of the revisionary films originates as they expose inaccessible pasts to viewer but more importantly, by interpreting on the narratives and emerging alternatives for them. In so doing, these films challenge the stories of the past we are already told.

I consider films of the new political cinema in Turkey as revisionary. As the nomenclature indicates these films are introducing something “new” and challenging with their form. They not only demonstrate the past but also explore what history means for the nation in the present day. The importance of revisionist form is that it reflects on numerous controversies and it is a powerful attribution to name the formal characteristic of films I will be discussing as “new.”

When we think about the history of cinema, all the movements which are labeled as “new” have been innovative in the use of formal features of the cinematic representation. The formal choices inevitably have brought forward the questions of politics involved in any kind of representation. Thus, naming the contemporary political films in Turkey as a “new” cinema is in a sense suggesting that these films are breaking off the bond with the previous political films in Turkey, such as works of – to name a few – Yılmaz Güney, Erden Kıral, Zeki Ökten and Şerif Gören. At the same time it is suggesting a movement away from historical films that were produced in Turkey. If this is the case, one should ask what “new” they offer? Is it possible to notice a “new language” in these films? In order to answer these questions a special attention must be paid to the formal characteristics of the films and explore how they revise the use of the film medium.

Ultimately, it is true that the new political films are influenced by the “legacy” of political film in Turkey which rose in 70s and continued after 80s coup regardless of the extraordinary conditions the state was in. However, the distinguishing characteristic of the new political films is that, unlike the old films they are persistently representing the past. And they are using the medium of film to excavate the past as an archeologist uses her tools to bring the past to the present. The important function of realizing such an excavation and bringing the objects that are buried with layers of earth deep underground to the daylight is that, such objects and in the case of films such narratives, will help us to understand our past and eventually our present. The stories that emerge in new films are indeed buried and covered with layers of dirt. But the process of dealing with it is more important than the act of excavation. In other words, the use of the historical knowledge revealed is

more significant than the process of digging deep down. Based on this statement, I argue that the new films do not portray a “future” or a search for “truth” as in films of Yılmaz Güney, Erden Kıral, Şerif Gören. Further, it is the feeling of “lack” of the future which marks these films, especially as depicted in the point of view shots of the main characters. Also, unlike mainstream historical films such as *Battal Gazi Destanı*, *Nefes* and *Kurtlar Vadisi Irak*, to name just a few, new films focus on ordinary people. They do not point out a “progressive” history which eliminates alternatives rendering it “easy” to comprehend. Rather, the past that emerges in new films is unclear, complex, not easy to access and comprehend, and therefore interruptive.

In revealing the complexity and uneasiness of the past, new films adopt various forms of representation. Films of new political cinema bring together different sources of information and implicate them. Historical archival footage interfuses with the personal archival documents and fiction, the personal dissolves in the political and “official” histories in “personal” stories. By composing a hybrid form, new political cinema complicates the notion of reaching the “truth” through evidence and obstructs the trust in which viewers can differentiate the fictive and non fictive.

Another characteristic which occur in new political films is the co-existence of presence and absence. By using the “present” and accessible knowledge of the past the films are referring to the absence of the stories they are telling. With this approach, these films manifest a lack of faith in the available knowledge of the history. That is why they emerge a gap to insert the voices of their silenced and erased presence. Also, the framing, use of on-screen and off-screen space, very few

point of view shots, which demonstrate what the characters see, build on the contradiction of how absence and presence conflate.

In these films the past is not over. Thus, the depiction of the past is not uplifting in the way that it signifies a “progress” but it is ambiguous. In contrast to mainstream films which illustrate past as “passed,” new political cinema accentuates the past as “not passed.” The “look of the past” that Rosenstone remarks, lacks in these films. Although the fictional world of the film takes place in past, nothing in the narration gives away the time frame of the film if we were not given information about the dates.

All these characteristics of the new political films aim at only one cause: to discomfort the viewer. The simplicity of the narration of the past as “passed” and things got “better” do not exist in these films. By revealing alternative sources of the information along with the ones we memorized, the past is indicated as ambiguous and indeterminable. In doing so, these films depict a past which is not easy to extricate, and they make the viewer re-consider the idea of history.

Toward the ending of 1990s and onwards, films such as *Sonbahar / Autumn* (Özcan Alper, 2008), *Bulutları Beklerken / Waiting for the Clouds* (Yeşim Ustaoğlu, 2004), *Hiçbir yerde / In Nowhere's Land* (Tayfun Pirselimioğlu, 2001), *Yazı Tura* (Uğur Yücel, 2004), *Filler ve Çimen / Elephants and Grass* (Derviş Zaim, 2000), *Güneşe Yolculuk* (Yeşim Ustaoğlu,1998) and , *Eve Dönüş* (Ömer Uğur, 2006) emerged a revisionist form in cinema in Turkey which applies the characteristic of the revisionist films in the way I have been exploring in this chapter. These films can not be referred as “new” only because they discuss the traumatic moments of the nation. They are new because in telling their stories that have been

questioning the concept of history and the way it is conceived by the people. At the same time, they are impelling the capacities of the film medium and experimenting with cinematic means for providing a critical engagement with their works. The capability of cinematic representation and its tools are used in these films in an unconventional way that it has provided film-makers to explore possibilities of cinematic form while narrating history by questioning the very notion of it.

A closer analysis of *Bulutları Beklerken* and *Sonbahar* will reveal the potential of these films to re-write history while scrutinizing the problems and limitations of the pre-existing narratives and narrations of the past.

CHAPTER THREE

NEW POLITICAL CINEMA IN TURKEY

By rendering the dark moments of the past visible to a large number of audiences, new political films in Turkey call for confrontation with the deficient knowledge of the past. The deficient knowledge of the past in these films, however, does not complete the missing pieces of the national history. Rather, it examines history epistemologically, and incites a critical engagement with the stories, and the tools they use to tell them. These films do not grapple with the disavowed moments of Turkish history to reveal a concealed “truth” and disclose an unreachable past. Instead, they explore “silenced stories” of the past and revise the taken for granted versions of history. In order to do so, these new political filmmakers experiment with the film form by disrupting the use of the cinematic means which suggests films “as an unmediated window to the reality” of the past. New political cinema in Turkey does not affirm that the films are capable of representing a reality which had been buried for years. On the contrary, they construct the stories they tell as fiction. And they complicate the notion that it is possible to reach “a truth” about past through its representation – be it words, archive, memories and records. Thus, the past, in the new political cinema in Turkey, returns by changing its shape. The simple and coherent past that we have been told about, becomes ambiguous and complex.

The new characteristics of political cinema in Turkey have been explored by various scholars and each of them categorizes different aspects of this film practices. Övgü Gökçe (2009), Asuman Suner (2009) and Z. Tül Akbal Süalp (2008) suggest

that there is a thriving tendency in contemporary Turkish cinema which consists of bringing the traumas of the past to the screen. Akbal Süalp addresses this tendency by comparing various manners of filmmaking in Turkey. She points out that the environment in which criticism, moments of defiance and forms of resistance have been eliminated, has facilitated the dominance of mediocre ways of seeing and interpreting both in Turkey and in the wider world (2008: 50). These have lead filmmakers to produce particular films which she refers to as “the cinema of the 12th of September.” She describes the cinema of 12th September as a type of cinema which has passed through the phases of shame, anger and denial regarding the 1980s military regime. And she contends that, instead of “individualized” worlds of cinema of the 12th September, other films have remained engaged with history and society, and dealt with the problems of the past by establishing a relationship between past and present. In addition, she discusses, some directors have kept on dwelling on the traumas of history and sought ways to confront them (2008: 51).

Similarly, Gökçe examines loss as an emerging sentiment in her article “(Cannot) Remember: Landscapes of Loss in Contemporary Turkish Cinema” through the films *Sonbahar* and *Bulutları Beklerken* , and addresses these films as distinctive attempts that engage with poorly discussed moments of history. She suggests that both films seek ways to manifest remembrance, loss and mourning with their film language (Gökçe 2009).

Suner locates a “new political cinema” in her book *Hayalet Ev* (*New Turkish Cinema*, 2006: 263-287) and her article “Silenced Memories” (2009) as a different mode of remembering. She explains that this new political cinema differs from the new popular cinema whose engagement with politics does not go beyond light-

hearted handling of social problems. In these popular films the question of history and politics are often given little importance whereas in the new political films subjective remembrance of the past is strongly interconnected with questions of history and politics (2009: 72). According to Suner while new popular films critique contemporary Turkish society by contrasting it with an idealized representation of the past, new political films are preoccupied with questions of a traumatic past without offering clear-cut solutions. Therefore, the past we encounter in the new political cinema is not as nostalgic as it is in the new popular cinema. Rather it is disturbing (2009).

According to Suner's approach to the new political cinema, each film should be analyzed individually because, although there is no question that the new political cinema portrays a dissident stand against official ideology, she claims it is not possible to speak of a common cinematic language and a common critical understanding in these films (2009: 255).

My approach, however, differs from Suner's conception of the new political cinema. Indeed new political films question official ideology and we can not speak about a common cinematic language regarding all the dissident films. Yet these particular films foreground a common concern on our understanding of history and they attempt to revise this understanding by using the cinematic elements. Their way of experimenting with the cinematic means distinguishes them from other dissident films which use means of cinematic representation to reveal a hidden truth about history. In this way, the new political cinema in Turkey does more than positioning itself against official ideology by making unavailable stories available. The new political films' common concern exceeds the limitations of official historiography

and proposes a distinctive perspective on history. They do not put forward their stories as “alternative truths.” Instead, they point out the impossibility of a complete and intact past.

Bulutları Beklerken and *Sonbahar* are two strong and remarkable examples of this tendency. Based on the book *Tamama* by Yorgos Andeadis, *Bulutları Beklerken* centers on the story of Ayşe /Eleni, a *Rum* woman who was forced to march through snowy mountains from Black Sea to the south with her family when she was a little girl during the liquidation of Turkish Greek villages at the end of the First World War. After cold and starvation killed her mother and father, Ayşe /Eleni and her brother Niko were adopted by a Turkish family. Niko, however, ran away. Ayşe/Eleni stayed with the Turkish family and, in order to survive, kept silent for 50 years about her true identity. After the death of her Turkish parents Ayşe/Eleni’s elder sister Selma buys the house in which Ayşe/Eleni was born, located on the mountains of the Black Sea, to slightly ease her pain. Selma dies at the beginning of the film. And her death, and the subsequent march from the village to the plateaus (a tradition in the Black Sea region of Turkey, where inhabitants move to the highlands to spend the summer in the mountains) brings back memories of Ayşe/Eleni, as she “remembers” her tragic past, her identity and her language. Ayşe/Eleni begins to mourn for her “loss” after 50 years. And through Tanasis, another *Rum* who was also deported 50 years ago, Ayşe/Eleni finds the whereabouts of her brother and goes to Thessaloniki to see him. When Ayşe/Eleni arrives to Thessaloniki, Niko disavows her and claims that she can not be his sister.

Sonbahar tells the story of Yusuf, who is sentenced to jail due to his political acts as a university student. 10 years later he is released from the prison

because he suffers from a fatal disease and he returns to his village in the eastern Black Sea region. Later in the film we learn that Yusuf's father died while he was in jail and his elder sister got married and moved away. In the village Yusuf spends the last days of his life with his mother and his childhood friend Mikail. He keeps his fatal disease a secret, not telling anyone, including his mother. One day Mikhail takes Yusuf out to drink and there Yusuf meets Eka a young Georgian prostitute. Yusuf falls in love with Eka and this love becomes the only tie that bonds Yusuf with life. However, Yusuf's health gets worse each day and Eka goes back home to Georgia to her daughter. In the end of the film, Yusuf dies as autumn gives way to winter.

As discussed in the previous chapter, I argue that the revisionist perspective of new political films in relation to history does not stem only from the stories these films deal with. *Bulutları Beklerken* and *Sonbahar* narrate dissident stories by experimenting with the film form and introducing a new form of narration in the cinematic representation of history in Turkey. This new narration disrupts conventional engagement with stories that we value as "history." The films attempt to provoke a critical understanding of the past and our taken for granted conceptions regarding historical events and their narration. Thus, instead of proposing clear cut margins that separate seemingly opposite notions, *Bulutları Beklerken* and *Sonbahar* attempt to efface those seemingly prominent boundaries.

A Hybrid Form

In her book *Skin of the Film* (2009) Laura Marks introduced the term “intercultural cinema” as a mode of film practice which is characterized by experimental styles that attempt to represent the experience of living between two or more cultural regimes of power. Although *Sonbahar* might not be considered as intercultural cinema, I find Marks’s inferences on intercultural works useful to explore how the “hybrid form” in both *Sonbahar* and *Bulutları Beklerken* functions. Marks writes that in the face of the erasures, intercultural films and videos turn to variety of sources to come up with new conditions of knowledge (2000: 24). In order to come up with such new conditions, artists and filmmakers of intercultural cinema must dismantle the official records of their communities, and then search for ways to reconstitute their history, often through fiction, myth or ritual (2000: 25).

The new political cinema in Turkey narrates unnarrated stories of the past by interrogating the repeatedly narrated and represented forms history. While doing this, instead of positioning itself as another “legitimate” source of information, it feeds on various sources of knowledge and merges them in order to open up new possibilities of understanding of the materials which comprise “history.” These new political films blur the strict distinctions between contrasting conceptions such as history as static and memory as flexible, official records and newsreel footage as trustworthy and personal experiences as exceptions or deficient to prove a matter, and facts as the fundamental way to deliver the “truth” and fiction as “complete invention.” In these new political films, these separations become inverted. Each record – be it memory, document, film, photograph – harbors “hybridity” compounded with various forms of data which are impossible to decompose. These different forms of records are

brought together and superimposed frequently in new political cinema, so that they melt into each other. And they compose a hybrid form.

Both *Sonbahar* and *Bulutları Beklerken* demonstrate the available and unavailable, “trustful” and “distrustful,” “official” and “unofficial” sources of history through which the narratives of the past are constructed. These include regional myths, archival footage, newsreels, memories, official state records, photographs, television reports, letters, personal stories, films, books and national oaths. However, unlike the way official discourses of history valued these sources, both films stand against the understanding that these sources can be lumped in to strict categories of “fact” and “fiction.” In contrast, diverse sources and records of knowledge dissolve into each other and generate new sources, which include much of the information that is excluded by the “scientific approach.”

Bulutları Beklerken starts with black and white archival footage which shows people walking in large numbers, getting on ships, carrying luggage, trains filled with people, coaches moving from one place to another and families in tears. In these shots we see a young girl with a baby on her lap looking right into the camera. This black and white image dissolves into the cloudy mountains of the Black Sea in color, to a house in extreme long shot. The title of the film appears on cloudy mountains: “*Bulutları Beklerken*.” And the superimposed title appearing right after the title of the film reads: “Trebolu, 1975.” This shot cuts to an interior shot of a woman Ayşe/Eleni sitting on a divan looking out of the window. Ayşe/Eleni hears her elder sister Selma coughing in the other room, gets up and walks out of the frame and then she carries her sister to the toilet on her back. In the next shot we see a little boy approaching the house, as Ayşe/Eleni wipes her sister’s face with a cloth. The boy

knocks on the door and Ayşe/Eleni lets him in. We hear the first dialogue of the film as the boy asks “Has *Battal Gazi* started yet?” Ayşe turns the television on to see if the film has started yet and we hear the news reporter speaking about the census being held in the country. The reporter says “The Republic established its first census in 1927. Since 1935, the census occurs every 5 years. Today’s census will determine statistics about religion, language, gender.” While she continues to announce “those who do not participate in the census will be ...” we see newsreel footage, in full screen, of the soldiers in trucks and empty streets because of the curfew. The image of the empty streets cuts to two state officials walking in the village. And the sound of the reporter continues. As we return back to the Ayşe/Eleni’s house, the reporter speaks about the “anarchy in the country” (referring to the leftist movement in the 70s) and little boy tells Ayşe “There are *karagoncalos* (gremlins) under my bed.” Ayşe/Eleni starts to tell a story about *karagoncalos* to the boy, blocking the view of the television and drowning out the sound of the reporter and the politicians reviewing the “anarchy” in the country. Ayşe/Eleni says that the village was cursed once and *karagoncalos* started to whisper into people’s ears at night. The peasants were afraid and moved beyond the mountains to get away from them. But, as she continues, there was no freedom from the curse of the *karagoncalos*. A little girl amongst the peasants lost her whole family in a snowstorm because of the *karagoncalos* and while she was alone and freezing in the snow a fairy came and saved her. While Ayşe/Eleni finishes her story, renowned politicians appear on television delivering public speeches. And there is a knock on the door. Ayşe/Eleni lets in the two state officials that we see in the beginning of the film. They ask for the national identification cards of Ayşe/Eleni and her sister. As Ayşe/Eleni gives her

identification card to the officers, they start to ask questions about her name, her father's and mother's name, her place of birth. Ayşe tells them that she was born in Mersin, the officer asks why she is in Trebolu now. Before Ayşe can answer his question, her sister Selma has a stroke. But the officials continue to get the official records of the two sisters.

In this first eight minutes of *Bulutları Beklerken* a certain distrustful approach to historical records is revealed. This scene brings together different sources of information and implicates them. By bringing different sources of knowledge together and infusing them in each other in an indissoluble way, this scene suggests a new hybrid form of history. The personal dissolves into the historical, fiction interfuses with non-fiction, scientific findings are juxtaposed on the invented ones and myths mingle with official narratives of history.

Eleni is treated and written in the official record as Ayşe a Turkish- Muslim woman as she gives them another official record, her identity card, which represents the existence of someone who does not exist. Whereas the story of *karagoncalos* she tells as a regional myth is her personal experience which finds no room in the official records. At the same time, the first dialogue we hear in the film, "Has Battal Gazi started yet?" refers to a well-known Turkish hero who fought and defeated the Byzantine. The strong presence of Battal Gazi in comic books, playing cards, films and television series demonstrates the impact of the representation of the "selected" segments of the past. Along with images of the politicians, and the brutal force of the police during the street demonstrations of the students on the television, we hear the reporter commending on the 70s leftist movement as "anarchy." The voice over these images belongs to a celebrated actress, Bennu Yıldırımlar, but the footage we see on

the television is non-fictional. By putting the “fictional” voice over on “non-fictional” images in this scene the film indicates the possibility of the manipulation of the historical records. In this scene, each source is hybrid. All bear fact, fiction, invention, interpretation, manipulation and exaggeration. Not only does the film give so much diverse information all at the same time overlapping each other, *Bulutları Beklerken* asserts that not all repositories of knowledge are ever pure.

As the film continues, the distrust in historical records and their narration penetrates the whole film. From children’s playing cards which have pictures of the Turkish heroes, to the oaths to Turkish prosperity children recite everyday at school, from television series to films of Battal Gazi, songs children chant in schools and national products day which praise Turkishness, from newsreel footage to sayings in the vernacular, the film points to the “official narration” of history. This way the personal merges with the official, memory disproves the scientific, and the records which portray the “truth” reflect something that does not exist. The sources which we count on to “reach” the truth of the past are projected as precarious and unreliable. Moreover, the narration of a continuous progress as it is reported in the newsreel footage of the progress in the census is deconstructed by alluding the fact that the knowledge that is provided by the state might consist of false facts as well.

The last scene of *Bulutları Beklerken* glimpses at the ways we construct histories. Ayşe/Eleni’s brother Niko asks her to look at pictures with him. Ayşe/Eleni sits beside her brother and Niko shows her pictures of “his life.” He tells the story in each picture showing his parents-in-law, his wife, his children and his friends. Ayşe/Eleni listens to him. Niko says “these photographs represent my life. You are not in any of them. If you were my sister, you would be in these photographs.” Then

Ayşe/Eleni reaches into her pocket and hands an old black and white photograph to her brother showing in close up Ayşe/Eleni, her parents and her brother Niko taken years ago when they were together. This photograph dissolves into the black and white archival footage of the young girl we saw at the beginning of the film.

Övgü Gökçe suggests that in *Bulutları Beklerken* the juxtaposition of the different forms of historical sources creates an uneasy and ambiguous feeling, because it possibly refers to something unknown in history (2009: 271). This ambiguity continues throughout the whole film, even in the ending scene in which a photograph damages the whole “system of knowledge” Niko has constructed for himself based on “evidence.”

Niko’s narration in the last scene is, thus, very important. He narrates his life story by using the photographs as proof of the existence of the stories he tells. And he is reluctant to accept Ayşe/Eleni as her sister because her story is missing from the photographs Niko holds in his hands. However, the photograph Ayşe/Eleni gives to Niko disrupts his neatly constructed narrative of his life. Regarding this scene Dina Jordanova suggests that “[a] singular faded photograph in the shaky hand of an old woman stands against the overwhelming systematic record of tidy linearity and consistency of mainstream history” (2008: 15). Therefore, the film, in a way, puts emphasis on the impossibility of reaching “absolute truths” of the past.

Sonbahar also starts with archival footage of the operation “Return to Life.” The operation was held by the state against prisoners who had started hunger strikes (which eventually turned in to death fasts) against F-Type prisons (isolation cells) and ended by the death of 30 prisoners and 2 soldiers. Hundreds of people were wounded. In the opening scene of *Sonbahar* we hear an officer saying

“Attention! Human life is the most precious thing!” while we see the prisoners shouting from a distance behind the barred windows of their cells. The time code of the footage shows us the date, 22.12.2000. This archival footage cuts to the interior of a prison and we see Yusuf behind the bars in long shot walking with two guards to the infirmary of the prison.

Later in the film, Yusuf looks at the pictures in the family album and his mother explains the stories of the pictures that Yusuf missed while he was in prison. His mother leaves after a while and Yusuf keeps looking at the pictures of himself with his friends. The photographs cut to the archival footage of the student demonstrations in the 90s. We see thousands of students chanting and marching on the streets resisting the brutal force of the police beating them up and trying to stop them with pressurized water. This archival footage cuts to the mountains of the Black Sea and the camera slowly pans to the left until we see Yusuf lying on the bank in the garden of the house. The interruption in the fictional world of the film occurs again as we see Yusuf watching television at this home. The news footage on the television shows Behiç Ahçı, an advocate who went on hunger strike to protest the practices in F-Type prisons, leaders of the non profit organizations declaring statements on the hunger strike and a prisoner in his isolation cell. While the film cuts back and forward to the archival footage and Yusuf watching television, Yusuf’s glance at the television cuts to another archival footage which shows the revolt and the raid in the prisons. This archival footage cuts to another time and space, Yusuf hitting his head against the wall at night in his room.

Like *Bulutları Bekleken*, the fictional world of *Sonbahar* is interrupted frequently by a variety of archival footage. And by bringing different sources of

knowledge together and infusing them in each other in an indissoluble way, both films constitute a new hybrid form. Personal dissolves into historical, fiction interfuses with non-fiction, scientific findings juxtaposed to the invented ones and myths mingle with historical narratives. In this manner, both films refuse to offer any representation of historical knowledge as completely divided by appropriated margins such as fact and fiction, truth and intention. As it is denoted in the films, each source implicates selection, narration, interpretation and point of view. Therefore, by interrogating the acknowledged and concealed versions of the past, the films suggest that history is never complete and intact. There is a certain suspicious approach to the “scientifically proved” truths of history. For both films, historical records harbor “inventions” and “fiction,” and fiction harbors “truth” and “scientific” evidence.

Presence and Absence

It is very common that when we propose an idea, point out a deficiency or speak about something we observe, we feel the need to indicate evidence in order to defend the existence of the things we believe to be present. Likewise, history generally only takes into account the events, people and stories of which presence can be confirmed and sustained with visible records. What about the ones whose records are corrupted, eradicated or simply not kept? Is it possible to speak about a concrete history without taking into consideration the absences and gaps?

The new political films in Turkey propose that history is marked by absence as much as presence. Both *Bulutları Beklerken* and *Sonbahar* tell absent stories

which challenge the present ones. However, their attempt is not to reinstall the removed and impaired parts pertaining to a reality. New political films point out that history itself has an ambiguous characteristic filled with fissures and black holes that cannot be easily retrieved. Therefore, for new political films, history remains inevitably incomplete.

Bulutları Beklerken and *Sonbahar* use means of cinematic representation in a distinctive way to restructure the notion of “incompleteness.” The framing, shot compositions, the use of off-screen and on-screen space, the soundtrack that contradicts the images on the screen and the use of point of view shots of the characters depict absences. This subtle play with depicting presences with absences challenges conventional narration of historical films and creates a vaguely uneasy feeling.

Teshome Gabriel writes that “What is not on the screen, but falls through the gap of the splice between images, is the eminent world that is not represented” (Gabriel 1999: 79). In the last scene of *Bulutları Beklerken*, we tend to consider and acknowledge the existence of the things that are “represented” and contest the presence of the ones which are “not” in the picture.” Therefore, the onscreen images, the represented ones, have power over the ones they exclude. However, that “eminent world” which is not visible on the screen is, in fact, present, even though it is not in the picture. That is the reason Gabriel suggests that every image is a mask concealing other image (Gabriel 1999: 81).

Bulutları Beklerken and *Sonbahar* affirm this state of the images they represent and at the same time imply that there are other worlds and other incidents that are not present in the picture, but present in the universe that stays off screen. In

order to imply what is happening off screen both films use the soundtrack to connect what is on screen with the absent images it masks.

In both films, the images on the screen are interrupted by the sound of newsreel footage, providing an idea about what is excluded from the filmic world. Taking place in 1975, while telling a story which goes back in the beginning of the twentieth century, *Bulutları Beklerken* insinuates the “surrounding unstated images,” by the interpolation of non-fiction footage and the sound of the news reporter. Similarly in *Sonbahar*, through television, sounds of a news reporter and non-fiction inserts of the ongoing debates and conflicts in the country, what is left off the screen interferes in the fictional world of the film.

Bulutları Beklerken marks the off screen presence in a more sophisticated way particularly in scenes where we see Ayşe/Eleni or Tanasis. In the scene where Ayşe/Eleni sits by the window knitting, we hear sounds coming from the off screen “I am a Turk, I am honest, I am diligent. . . .” We do see the source of this sound on screen few minutes later in the scene, as children reciting the daily national oath, and the film cuts back and forth between Ayşe/Eleni’s house and the school yard. But we only hear the sound of the children chanting the national oath in these two different spaces. We have an image of Ayşe/Eleni in her house and later the image of the children in the school yard. However, when the image of the school yard cuts to the image of Ayşe/Eleni, the sound of the children continues and drowns out all other sounds in Ayşe/Eleni’s house.

In the beginning of the film, again, the sound of the news reporter dominates different spaces. The source of the sound of the reporter maintains onscreen for a while. Then the news footage becomes off screen, however, her sound continues to

be dominant while we see the state officials walking in the village, Ayşe/Eleni telling her story and Selma praying.

Later in the film when we see Tanasis, a similar contradiction between the image track and soundtrack occurs. While Tanasis books a room in the hotel we hear sound of a revolt coming from the off screen television, which we saw in the previous scene, overlapping with the onscreen sound. Later, when he visits the house in which he was born, and looking around, we hear the *ezan* coming from the off screen space, without seeing its source.

In these two scenes the contradiction not only results from the mismatched video track and the sound track. The predominant sounds of the national oath, the revolt and *ezan* have no relevance with these characters. And more importantly, those off screen sounds drown out the on screen sounds and render them silent. In the scene at the hotel, even though Tanasis is not silent, the sound of the revolt that comes from the off screen space disturbs the viewer.

These images bring “other” fictive or non-fictive knowledge visible or heard or both in the fictional world of the film. In so doing, the images of *Bulutları Beklerken* and *Sonbahar* position themselves against the notion that the image is a pure reflection of a reality. The films, instead, indicate that there are other presences apart from the world that is represented on the screen. Although they are absent in the picture, the films imply that the images on the screen “masks other images.” And they foreground themselves as constructs which show a partial view of the whole image.

Another example use of off screen and on screen space is the compositions and framing in *Sonbahar* and *Bulutları Beklerken* which resemble paintings.

Throughout both films some scenes look static and are seem to be framed by the surroundings. In *Sonbahar* there are scenes in which we see the outside from the inside, the trees and mountains are framed by windows from interiors. The outside looks vivid and bright in these scenes, whereas the interior is relatively dark or the other way around. Also in *Bulutları Beklerken* there are many scenes in which Ayşe/Eleni sits by the window and looks outside from the interiors. She is framed either by the window frame or the doorways in the house or the furniture that surround her. What is remarkable about these painting like scenes is the way that the off screen space becomes on screen either by a reflection on the window of a house, or the static camera starts to move on tracks and abolishes the seemingly frame and connects the onscreen space to its surroundings. However, the off screen space never comes on the screen in its full existence. It appears as either a reflection juxtaposing with the onscreen image thorough glass or it becomes dominant on the screen with the sounds we hear of which we do not see the source. Thus, the connection is in the state of being absent and present at the same time.

In his essay "Painting and Cinema" Andre Bazin dissects the differences between the painting and film, and compares the framing traditions of both practices. For Bazin, the essential role of the frame in painting is to establish a discontinuity between the painting and the outer space. "In contrast to natural space, the space in which our active experience occurs and bordering its outer limits offers a space the orientation of which is inwards, a contemplative area opening solely onto the interior of a painting" (1967 : 166). Whereas, the kind of frame that Bazin privileges does not close the image to its surroundings but it refers to continuity with the surroundings in

an outer space in cinema. Bazin remarks that,

The outer edges of the [film] screen are not as the technical jargon would seem to imply, the frame of the film image. They are the edges of a piece of masking that shows only a portion of reality. The picture frame polarizes space inwards. On the contrary, what the screen shows seems to be part of something prolonged indefinitely into the universe. A frame is centripetal, the screen centrifugal (1967: 166).

By closing Ayşe/Eleni and Yusuf to their surroundings the films constrain these characters. At the same time neither Ayşe/Eleni nor Yusuf show any interest to what is happening around them. Not only are they limited by the “frames” around them, but also they imprison themselves in their houses and in their inner worlds. These characters have chosen to keep silent. Their experiences can not suggest any “continuity” or “progress.” They can not find any outer space to speak out loud about the atrocities they have gone through. The frames that surround them do not connect them with the indefinite universe, but sharply break off the continuity. Therefore both Yusuf and Ayşe/Eleni and their stories remain absent in historical narration. This particularly the case with the conflicting absent-present state of Eleni as Ayşe in *Bulutları Beklerken*.

Both *Bulutları Beklerken* and *Sonbahar* lack a clear past, present and future. It is never possible to make direct connections or be completely satisfied with the information that is given to us. However, this is not to say that spectators are provided with restricted information in order not to give away the ending of the films. Rather both films treat any kind of knowledge as being implicit. Neither the characters nor the spectators can see anything evidently or explicitly. Because the films bring forward the conception that nothing about the past, and therefore present,

is as clear and obvious as it is narrated to us. On the contrary, everything is unclear, blurry and misty.

The unclear nature of the past, present and future is represented mainly through point of view shots of the characters. In *Bulutları Beklerken* whenever we switch to point of view shot of Ayşe/Eleni and look at things through her eyes, everything we see becomes unclear. It is either the curtain that blocks our view or the dust that covers the surface of the photograph prevents us to see things clearly. When Ayşe/Eleni watches activists sticking posters on the walls of the village through her window, she looks behind the curtains. Even though Ayşe/Eleni removes the dust from the surface of the photograph of her family the image remains unclear because it is worn away. In Thessaloniki, Ayşe/Eleni sits by the window and looks at the photographs behind the curtains without opening the curtains. And then as she realizes that her brother Niko is leaving the house and she follows him with her eyes as he walks -- by looking through the curtain. In addition to these point of view shots, Ayşe/Eleni, Tanasis, Cengiz in *Bulutları Beklerken* and Yusuf and Eka in *Sonbahar* frequently stare at “emptiness.” When we switch to the point of view shots we see that what they stare at is either the mountains of the Black Sea, or the sea, or a cliff. They stare at these empty spaces very often and for a quite long time. In fact, when Ayşe/Eleni utters her first words in Greek after 50 years, she declares her real identity, her real name, her parents name and tells her sorrowful story as she is looking at the mountains of the Black Sea. Similarly, Yusuf keeps silent and does not show any insubordination to his slow death; however, the only time he expresses his anger and feelings is the scene where he stares down at a cliff and screams with all his power.

We can interpret these scenes in two ways. First of all, point of view shots which reveal the implicit look of the events, characters and records engender an awkward feeling about the things we see. Because we are always unable to see things clearly, this feeling disturbs us. We want to fill the gaps and make connections though the images we see in order to provide ourselves with coherent meanings. We want to understand the stories behind the photographs, events and characters coherently. Yet, in these films, everything remains uncertain. And we can not fill the absences with our comprehension.

Secondly, the long shots of “emptiness” points to the absence of a diegetic audience and a future. They indicate the absence of an audience to hear the repressed and silenced stories that these characters might have told. That is why these characters express their feelings and experiences only to nature. And when they look ahead, instead of a future, they see the past.

In previous political films in Turkey, even in the most disturbing films which deal with the traumatic pasts, there has been an indication of a future. For instance, in *Sen Türkülerini Söyle/ Sing Your Folk Songs* (Şerif Gören, 1986) which tells the story of a political prisoner who return home after his release, although the character faces the fact that all his comrades have changed and are attuned with the new capitalist system, there still remains a belief in future. The main character of the film, Hayri, neither believes in his comrades nor the youth, however, as we see through his point of view shots, he believes that the future generations will dream of a better world, which he failed to realize. In the ending scene of the film, as Hayri is exiled from Istanbul he sees a child staring at him through the window. The child waves at

him and Hayri smiles and keeps on walking with a smile on his face and tears of joy in his eyes.

Even Yılmaz Güney's film *Yol* (Şerif Gören, 1982)¹⁴ which inscribes the whole country as a prison is optimistic about the future to a certain extent. In the last scene of *Yol*, one of the five prisoners, a Kurdish character Ömer, rides his horse and his horse gallops through the valleys of Eastern Turkey. Hamid Naficy interprets the last scene of *Yol* as: "In the midst of the claustrophobic and militarized spaces of the village, Güney introduces a new space of immensity and freedom, which he encodes as the open longed-for Kurdish homeland that can be created only from exile" (2001: 183). For Naficy, Ömer is wooed by his passion for a Kurdish nation as he joins to the rebels in the hills beyond Turkey's borders and his fast trotting horse becomes a symbol for freedom.

Such optimistic reliance on a better future is absent in the new political films. The characters do not believe in a future in which the succeeding generations will fight for a better world. On the contrary, both films display a pessimistic view of the next generations. As it is remarkably viewed in *Bulutlar Beklerken*, future generations are still "taught" to monumentalize the Turks and Turkish past. By indicating the variety of daily practices of children in schools the film underscores how "continuous progress of the nation" is taught to the young generations without encouraging them to think about the shortcomings of history. Hence, the long takes of "emptiness" through the point of view of the characters evinces the absence of a preferable future and it renders the traumatic past as ever present.

¹⁴ *Yol* is written by Yılmaz Güney. However because he was in prison, the film was directed by Şerif Gören through the directions of Güney.

The Past is not Passed

For the new political films in Turkey, the past is not over. Rather it is ubiquitous. In doing so, the cinematography of new political cinema not only connects the screen to indefinite outer space, but also it prolongs the screen to a variety of times. As discussed in the second chapter, Rosenstone argues that standard historical films give us the “look of the past” through the props, buildings, objects and clothes. The look of the past, however, is absent in new political cinema. If we are not given any information about the dates of the events or the historical period the films set their story in by the intertitles, nothing in the image gives away the time period of the films.

Both *Bulutları Beklerken* and *Sonbahar* start with archival footage which obviously represents the past. But these images of the archival footage dissolve into the images of the Black Sea region of Turkey, to the landscape of the mountains. The landscape depicts a place in which nothing changes and the past does not pass. Although *Sonbahar* sets its story in the 2000s and *Bulutları Beklerken* in 1975, if we compare the imagery of the two films, it is impossible to mark anything in the filmic world that can prove the 30 years time difference between two films.

In this manner, both films distort our notion of the past and avoid providing the “relief” for the audience which derives from the narration of the past as being distant. The past in new political films is present, and it surrounds us.

This is most obvious in the ending scene in *Sonbahar*. In the last scene, Yusuf sits in living room with his mother and plays the *tulum*. The camera moves slowly to the window and shows Yusuf’s funeral in a tracking shot without a cut in between.

The continuity in the camera movement regardless of the change in time connects the past to the present and the present to the future, as if all of them co-exist together.

Also, even though the characters seem to be in the present day of the time that the film is based on, they “live” in the past. Ayşe/Eleni embraces the son of his neighbor as if he is Niko. When she looks at the mountains and the clouds, she sees the march she has gone through with her family and friends. Yusuf’s present day is also distorted by the memory of the past. Even though he is home and free, he relives his experiences in prison repeatedly in his nightmares.

The strong presence of the past in the present not only haunts the characters of the films, but the audience who view them. New political films do not depict a past in which certain disturbing events were experienced, but they all are “history.” For new political films, past is strikingly in the present. It is not passed, it is not over.

CONCLUSION

This thesis has explored how the new political cinema in Turkey experiments with the formal elements of cinematic representation and uses film as a tool to examine history. It also tried to bring to the fore the potential of new political films to open up new ways of reflecting on historical thinking and historiography in Turkey. A close formal analysis of two recent films of the new political cinema *Bulutları Beklerken/Waiting for the Clouds* (Yeşim Ustaoglu, 2004) and *Sonbahar/Autumn*(Özcan Alper, 2009) revealed how new political films attempt to revise the taken for granted notions of history by the use of the means of cinematic representation.

The significance of new political films does not derive from their discussion of traumatic moments of history that had remained a taboo in Turkey until very recently. What makes these films revisionist is the way that they question history as a “constructed” progressive national narrative and explore new possibilities of narrating histories that challenge the pre-existing ones.

In telling their stories, these new political films, unlike mainstream historical films which employ conventional narration strategies, adopt an experimental form. While mainstream films – including the ones which tell stories that challenge the official history – propose that through them a buried “truth” can be revealed and then reinstalled into history, the new political films remark that what is lost might never be retrieved.

In order to suggest this idea, new political cinema mingles fact and fiction in an indissoluble way and introduces a hybrid form. In this hybrid form, all the sources

of knowledge bear both fact and fiction. And these various sources of information are juxtaposed and melt into each other.

In this hybrid form, for example, the use of onscreen and off screen space plays a crucial role. Pointing out what is missing on the screen, new political films indicate that what is present and onscreen is demonstrating a “partial” view of a bigger picture. And in this partial view, nothing is clear and explicit. This way, because the films do not suggest that they indicate “the reality” of these historical moments they deal with, it is not possible to make connections, fill the gaps and compose “a meaning” to reach the “truths” of history. New political films create an uneasy feeling by pointing out that something is always missing in the picture.

For new political cinema in Turkey, history is not static. New information can challenge and disprove everything we think we know. It is also possible that the missing pieces can never be found. As the last scene of *Bulutları Beklerken* portrays, our “constructed” narratives can be interrupted and fall apart. Because history is never static, it changes. It is always in the process of being written and revised. It is never complete or completed. Thus, as new political films remark, history is never in the past, it is always in the present.

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