

Research Assistant Can Diker
Dogus University Art & Design Faculty
can.diker@gmail.com

From Poetic to Dramatic Structure: Narratively Aesthetic Changes in Nuri Bilge Ceylan's Films and Perception of Reality

Nuri Bilge Ceylan was born in the Istanbul suburb of Bakırköy in 1959 but was only two when his father moved the family to the small village of Yenice, Çanakkale where he spent the rest of his childhood. He started his film-producing career in 1995 with the short film *Koza (Cocoon)*. The film was screened at Cannes in May 1995 and became the first Turkish short to be selected for competition at the Cannes Film Festival. His other films are *The Small Town (1997)*, *Clouds of May (1999)*, *Distant (2002)*, *Climates (2006)*, *Three Monkeys (2008)* and *Once Upon a Time in Anatolia (2011)*. Nuri Bilge Ceylan's films slowly developed a reputation at international film festivals. Unlike most other Turkish producers, Ceylan uses unvarnished narrative and imaginary cinematography along with photographic reality perception in his works.

His first three films, *Koza*, *The Small Town* and *Clouds of May*, widely known as the "Boondocks Trilogy" (*Taşra Üçlemesi*), are about Ceylan's childhood dreams and memories. Ceylan's reputation grew with *Clouds of May*, awarded at a wide range of film festivals from the Antalya Golden Orange Film Festival to the Buenos Aires Film Festival after which he was deemed worthy of the Jury Prize at the Cannes Film Festival with his film, *Distant*. In his last three films, Ceylan received monetary support from Eurimages, the European Union's fund for the co-production, distribution, exhibition and digitization of European cinematographic works. He was also rewarded for other films: the FIPRESCI Prize with *Climates*, the Best Director Award with *Three Monkeys* and the Jury Prize with *Once Upon a Time in Anatolia*. Nuri Bilge Ceylan continues to produce new films.

It can be seen that the main theme of his films is the characters' struggle and posture against their lives, caught between urban life and the countryside. In *Boondocks Trilogy*, Ceylan described his own life but with the film *Distant*, the direction of his films began to change. In the film, Ceylan can be seen giving more priority to aesthetic structure rather than to a realistic scenario in his films by using a narrative poetic style, explaining his film with rhythms of long shots. We might say that Ceylan's cinematography has similarities with Tarkovsky's aesthetic style but before discussing the similarities between the two directors it would be helpful to discuss form and context in films in order to understand reality and dream concepts in Nuri Bilge Ceylan's films.

Discussions of form and context are one of the major topics in art arguments. With a Marxist aesthetic approach, it can be said that the content of art must have a realist aspect. Murat Belge explains that according to Marx art is a perception of life as well as a source of information. This information source brings the duty of reflecting life to art – which will

be emphasized as *mimesis*. If the work of art is to be evaluated by its realist measures there will always be issues about aesthetic approach. Likewise, if the work of art is to be evaluated by aesthetic measures, it will be problematic in the same way so comments like “content is lacking, but the form is good” (or vice versa) might occur in this discussion (Belge, 1989:41).

In the context of the Marxist aesthetics theory there have been many discussions about film and its relativity with society, firstly by the Russian formalists Vertov, Eisenstein and Pudovkin and more recently by Frankfurt school members, Adorno, Benjamin, Lukacs and Brecht (Wayne, 2005). Formalism and Realism arguments between Lukacs and Brecht occurred after World War II, in order to develop the thoughts of the masses against Nazi potency. In the meantime, the Existentialism movement had also commenced and was designed to regain the value of humanity and the concept that people should exist as individuals. However, the existentialists were focused on the situations of individuals thus missing the social reality and how it affects individuals. In this manner, each day is perceived as downbeat by existentialists. That is why the existentialists’ purpose of discovering one’s inner self fails due to a lack of understanding of the external factors such as politics on individuals, such.

According to Lukacs, modernist artists are mostly formal, suggesting that humans come from history and therefore human development is also hollow without historical development. Modernists concede that external factors - which they believe individuals do not have- have an effect on them so they comprehend life as a nightmare world, which brings weariness to individuals (Lukacs, 2000), as in the novels of Franz Kafka. Therefore, *mimesis* should explain the events behind the curtain with historical events, and not rely solely on reality. Walter Benjamin states “Its (Mankind’s) self-alienation has reached such a degree that it can experience its own destruction as an aesthetic pleasure of the first order. This is the situation of politics, which Fascism is rendering aesthetic. Communism responds by politicizing art” (Benjamin, 1988:334). Benjamin and Brecht, although knowing that mass media tools (including cinema) are under the command of the capital, still looked for a solution as to how to emancipate them (Wayne, 2005). On that point, Nuri Bilge Ceylan’s films and his cinematography have connections with the Marxist aesthetic approach, which will be discussed later. Before that, Tarkovsky’s aesthetic approach and how he switches between dream and reality states will be discussed briefly in order to better understand Nuri Bilge Ceylan, since Ceylan stated that he was inspired by Tarkovsky in the context of cinematography.

Despite the famous Russian formalists’ way of thinking, Tarkovsky believes that montage is not cinema’s main formative principle. In order to perceive Tarkovsky’s understanding of aesthetics, Bergson’s concept of duration must first be evaluated. Bergson distinguished between two types of time: real time and spatialised time. Real time gives the perception of indivisible time in a film: Tarkovsky’s *Stalker* is a good example of indivisible time. Tarkovsky stated that he wanted to maintain the unity of time, space and action. No time

lapse took place between long shots in his film, thus it was perceived as indivisible. Indivisibility is an example of Bergson's 'duration'. To be clearer, Bergson uses two metaphors to help define duration: music and consciousness. According to Totaro, duration rests within the consciousness of a person and cannot be stopped or analyzed like a mathematical conception of time as a line, our inner self and our memories do not stand apart from each other but flow one into another. Hence, our consciousness is not a succession of states but a simultaneous overlapping (Totaro, 1992).

Tarkovsky's film aesthetic resonates with time, rhythm, nature and duration. This aesthetic style challenges audience perception through the inner and outer states of reality. Memories go beyond boundaries and alter the reality, shifting to dreams and nightmares. Therefore, Tarkovsky uses nature and natural phenomena in order to shape his aesthetic approach to film. In the film *Mirror*, his childhood memories do not appear in a singular dimension, his narrative style is durational. Through long shots, indivisibility of a film can be built. In *Mirror*, Tarkovsky used subjectivity to describe his childhood through imaginary cinematography and poetic narrative, which was perceived by the audience as a dream process; memories of the director flowing into one another. Likewise, inspired by Tarkovsky, Nuri Bilge Ceylan's cinematography is similar in the concepts of reality and dream. In *Cocoon*, his consciousness is a simultaneous overlapping of memories and states. Ceylan is using memories with nature in his films, shooting in real time and making long shots; as a result, building his film as indivisible.

The meeting point at which Nuri Bilge Ceylan's cinematography and Marxist aesthetic come together is the Kracauer film theory. Therefore, in order to understand Ceylan's aesthetic approach, it is necessary to know more about Siegfried Kracauer's thoughts about the art of film. According to Kracauer, cinema is based on photography and photographic aesthetic principles are valid for cinema. Kracauer believed that cinema can rebuild the thin relationship between humans and nature. Kracauer emphasizes that the function of the camera is 'recording and transferring reality'. In order to preserve naturalness it would be more suitable to use inexperienced actors and have less sound in films, because photography does not have a place for sound either. Kracauer himself describes his aesthetics as '*basic narration*' in his study (Kracauer, 1960).

Manifold features which are explored in Kracauer's 'basic narration' are also discussed by Daldal in her examination: Inexperienced, natural actors, minimalistic narrative style, photographic realism...etc. 'Basic narration' is quite relevant especially in the *Boondocks Trilogy* of Nuri Bilge Ceylan. For instance, films using this kind of narrative do not support dramatic structure. Because Ceylan's films are indivisible, they maintain real time as the film flows like lifetime. This kind of film narrative is about 'recording and transmitting the harmony and poetry in life'; the aforementioned minimalistic approach can be interpreted as an uprising against consumer society, which is a good example of politicizing art, in the manner that Walter Benjamin stated (Daldal, 2004). Ceylan's *Boondocks Trilogy* is similar to Tarkovsky's aesthetic approach made in nature, time and

duration; with long shots directors' own memories are recollected, films are perceived as indivisible through the use of real time and long shots. Ceylan was using a mystical aura with nature, a state between dream and reality, while reflecting on his memories through film. Using photographic reality, in *Boondocks Trilogy* this mystic aura is perceived by the audience as more dream-like, but in his later films the dream turned into a nightmare plot, boosted by lack of means.

Ceylan's fourth film, *Distant*, differs from the *Boondocks Trilogy* in narrative style as dramatic film narrative can be seen in it. While the struggle between memory and the real world remains, his alter ego Mahmut gives esteem to items that he finds valuable, like the scene of the clock which he thought had been stolen. It can be observed that Mahmut gives more value to objects than to individuals. Mahmut is also quite isolated from society and the city, stuck between urban life and the countryside. His sole individuality and his dejected appearance are reflected in film in modernist ways. In general, *Distant* expresses the alienation of urban life, as opposed to the inner world narrative in *Clouds of May*.

The Marxist aesthetics, referred to by Lukacs, Kracauer and Benjamin, can be found in Nuri Bilge Ceylan's *Boondocks Trilogy* with these elements: artistic narrative involving reality, photographic reality and naturalness (the choice of actors, less sound, no dramatic structure), explaining a calm world, thus politicizing feelings against consumer society. Last but not least, film cannot be evaluated in the terms of powerful relations because the trilogy's funding did not much depend on other financial sources.

Climates, *Three Monkeys* and *Once Upon a Time in Anatolia* are the films that received monetary support from Eurimages, after *Distant's* success at the Cannes Film Festival. In these films, dramatic narrative structure takes place, which can be explained as modern aesthetics evolving in Ceylan's films. Ceylan shows us the characters' pessimistic atmosphere in reality; however the audience cannot find the reasons behind this pessimism and the social reality of the film's characters. According to Lukacs, this can be interpreted as a typical formal approach of a modernist to art.

Shot as an autobiography, *Clouds of May* with its predecessors, *Cocoon and The Small Town*, have gained a remarkable reputation and level of support from national film critics and film festivals because of their originality with indivisible cinematography and poetic narrative. The tales from the past of the director reflect on screen as childhood memories and natural surroundings of his countryside, merged together as if dreams and reality mingled together with spatial time. However, in his last four films, his attitude of narrative slightly shifted towards the modernist aesthetic. Causes of this change might include financial needs and/or gaining a reputation internationally, especially at modern film festivals. We observe that in *Climates* and *Three Monkeys* without knowing the proper reason characters are permanently in a downbeat mood. This might be explained by the films becoming more aligned with existentialist philosophy.

In order to understand Nuri Bilge Ceylan's conception of dream and reality, the conditions of Ceylan's filmmaking atmosphere must also be understood, as well as the discussions on form and context. With the army coup of 1980, artistic and every other kind of intellectual movement dwindled. This change also had a massive effect on cinema in Turkey. Foreign film distribution companies had taken over the web of film distribution in Turkey, thus lessening the impact of the remaining independent film directors. In 1994, Turkey signed an agreement with Eurimages, which seemed to show encouraging signs for independent filmmakers. Though it must be emphasized that for independent directors deprived of Eurimages funding, there was almost no other financial aid for them except the small budget of the Ministry of Culture. Nuri Bilge Ceylan did not receive any help from this fund for his *Boondocks Trilogy*. However, when he inevitably began to prosper, Ceylan had to find an alternative source of finance for his filmmaking, production and distribution.

At this point, independent Turkish filmmakers found themselves on the threshold of interaction with Western societies. Their films would have to be more like mainstream American cinema to comply with the criteria of Eurimages, in form and context, leading to independent filmmakers making modern European film art. This brings up the context of Edward Said's Orientalism; directors self-orienting themselves in a post-colonial world and straining their own essence against western culture. According to Pratt, elite intellectuals are the first ones to undergo self-orientalization (Pratt, 1991). Bezci and Ciftci argue that self-orientalism's presence is made as a modern paradigm, which can be expanded through the out-of-West cultures. After the 'attempts of articulation to modernity' it turns out as self-colonization and with the support of global modernity, it finally becomes as self-orientalization (Bezci & Ciftci, 2012:144-145).

Today, global modernity takes form in the art of film as a dramatic narrative structure with an existentialist philosophy. The previously mentioned 'attempt of articulation to modernity' explores the lack of monetary support offered to Turkish Cinema. Ceylan discusses this issue in an interview:

"Enforcements of making a definite film style increase as the competition in the global world of cinema soars. The feeling I have felt where filmmakers gather in festivals intensively is the 'Society of Cinema' made from empty talks and filmmakers forgot their set off principles and ready to stretch. [...] I think in the world cinema there is a clear sensation of creative crisis exists. [...] This is some kind of artistic tiredness, aimlessness, emptiness."

Nuri Bilge Ceylan expresses the 'essence' of his land in his *Boondocks Trilogy*, an epic and poetic narrative with minimalistic cinematography using real time to get across the consciousness of indivisibility, self-memories with nature, childhood and the countryside almost without sound. However, in his last three films traces of modernity, self-orientation, existentialism and more individuality can be found supporting the dramatic film narrative.

We might consider that the mandatory film narrative change from epic/poetic to dramatic in Ceylan's films replaces childhood memories, nature and dreams about conflicts in urban life and weariness with the burdens of outer reality. This narrative change reverberates into cinematography as the shift from countryside dreams to urban nightmares. In childhood the director reflects reality in the way he perceives life – dull and indivisible. Mostly, reality shifts through to the dream state with the use of music and the effects of montage. In the later works of Ceylan, modern aesthetics and narrative take place and insoluble reality situations appear to (or are perceived by) characters as nightmares. How does that connect with the enforcements that Ceylan mentioned in his interview? Firstly, it is hard for independent filmmakers to get monetary support for films in Turkey, which leads us to think that Eurimages pressurizes filmmakers about which kind of films can get benefit from the fund. Secondly, the general atmosphere of modernity in film festivals leads directors into a self-orientalized approach where aesthetic concerns are determined by stories of pessimistic individuals and a dramatic narrative structure. Last but not least, due to changing conditions in the filmmaking atmosphere the cinematography of Nuri Bilge Ceylan shifted towards realist nightmares, politicizing the art of film in the context of a Marxist aesthetic approach. This shift also thickened the border between dream and reality in Ceylan's cinematography. Ceylan expresses the existentialist philosophy against the rise of the consumer society, or the world of capital, though this seems ineffective for his film characters.

Conclusion

Poetic naturalness, photographic reality and basic narration lead the way in modern filmmaking trends, which is why Nuri Bilge Ceylan has gained such recognition at international film festivals with his exploring the meaning of existentialism. The art of cinema in Turkey persevered against the dominance of Hollywood primarily with the support of Eurimages. While Western contact was inevitable the films of Nuri Bilge Ceylan nonetheless succeeded in changing narrative structure from poetic to dramatic. Mimesis-based harmony and integrity were the focus of Ceylan's first three films. However the shortage of financial aid and dire need for monetary support from Eurimages, lead the director to change his narrative style, using the concept of alienation in society in order to explain individuals' depressed situations. As a result, Nuri Bilge Ceylan had an interaction with Western film culture (mostly at Eurimages and International Film Festivals), which caused his cinematographic perception to change from dreams of childhood memories taking place in nature to realistic nightmares of urban life, where individuals struggle against the 'order' of the human world rather than against nature.

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