Abstract

Halit Refiş had impact on debates around Turkish national cinema both as a thinker and as a practitioner. Instrumental in establishing the Turkish Film Institute under MSU along with his director colleagues like Metin Erksan and Lutfi Akad, Refiş lectured for many years at the first cinema training department. This translation is from his 1971 collection of articles titled Ulusal Sinema Kavgası (Fight For National Cinema). Here Refiş elaborates on the concept of national cinema from cultural perspectives framing Turkey as a continuation of Ottoman Empire and its culture distinct and different from western ideas of capitalism, bourgeoisie art and Marxism. For Refiş, Turkish cinema should be reflected as an extension of traditional Turkish arts. Refiş explores the potential to form a national cinema through dialogue and dialectic within Turkish traditional arts and against western cinematic traditions of representation.

Keywords: nationalism; national cinema; cultural identity; Turkish cinema; Halit Refiş; Yesilcam Cinema

Introduction

Halit Refiş (1934–2009) was a film critic, theorist and director from Turkey. In 1971, his theoretical writings on film were collected in a single volume titled Ulusal Sinema Kavgası (The Fight for a National Cinema).¹ In this book, Refiş calls for a unique aesthetics in Turkish cinema at a time when the concept of national cinema was an overlooked issue in film studies.² The work also complements and contributes to some of the third cinema/post-colonial cinema debates during the same decade. In this book Refiş elaborates concepts of national, cultural and ethnic identity in cinematic expression. As a filmmaker, he made both popular and personal Turkish films between 1961 and 2001. As a film critic and theoretician, he produced a significant body of film criticism and proposed a theory of national cinema. As an intellectual, he focused on the schizophrenic identity split
in the Turkish psyche and criticised Turkey’s westernisation by praising the traditional visual and performance arts of the Ottoman era. Refiğ was one of the founders of the Turkish Film Institute at Mimar Sinan University, where he lectured between 1975 and 2001 and trained generations of future Turkish directors. The teachings were founded on Refiğ’s personal vision of a Turkish national cinema.

Refiğ started out writing film critiques for newspapers in 1953. From then on, his views progressively changed from a western-inclined vision of filmmaking to the glorification of the aesthetic particularisms of Turkish culture. One key development that led to his change of heart was Metin Erksan’s *Dry Summer* (*Susuz Yaz*), a film that won the Golden Bear award at the Berlin Film Festival in 1963. The film’s international acclaim led film critics, filmmakers and cinephiles to discuss ideas about the creation of an authentically Turkish film industry that promotes ‘art cinema’. Eventually, this created a schism between the different groups comprising the national film sector. The Turkish cinephiles, for instance, established a Cinémathèque and created the Istanbul International Film Festival. They also founded their own journal, *Yeni Sinema Dergisi*, and created a film critics association called SIYAD.

In turn, Refiğ and other fellow directors who were against the Cinémathèque group started making films together and gathered weekly at each other’s homes to discuss the future of Turkish cinema. During these private meetings, Refiğ and his comrades reflected on ways to promote quality cinema. Refiğ articulated his ideas in daily newspapers and magazines. Specifically, his definition of Turkish national cinema underwent three distinct definitions: populist/people’s cinema (*Halk Sineması*), social realist cinema and nationalist cinema (*Ulusal Sinema*).

According to Refiğ, spectators endorsed populist cinema because of its mass appeal narratives. He explained that these type of movies were financed through ticket sales, hence the notion of ‘People’s cinema’. At the origin of populist cinema is thereby the need for Turkish production companies to grow their relatively small capital by pre-selling films to theatre owners. To do so, film companies have to guarantee the popularity of the chosen film among the viewers via narratives, actors and décors that satisfy the general public’s expectations.

Refiğ’s second definition, the social-realist film, was influenced by post-Second World War Italian cinema. During the Cold War, Refiğ’s filmic diet was mainly composed of films from Europe and USA, as Turkey was becoming a western ally under the NATO missile shield. Italian neo-realism, in particular, had a huge impact on his ideas about social-realist cinema during the early 1960s when Refiğ joined a successful generation of filmmakers who critiqued American neo-colonialism and called for an authentic cinema. Refiğ encouraged Turkish social-realist films to focus on the storytelling of everyday and ordinary people. The ideas expressed in his 1971 book define the Turkish social-realist cinema as follows: the films should be realistic, that is, they should deal with ‘real’ people and their everyday problems; the films should have an anti-bourgeois and anti-capitalist stance through critiques of the alienation of the individual and the loss of human values in modern society; the films should have a political background
via social occurrences such as strikes, civil disobedience and migration to the big city; the films should have a new aesthetic, formal experimentation previously lacking in mainstream cinema.8

The Turkish social realist cinema movement came to a halt following the 1965 general elections, which brought a right-wing party, AP (Adalet Partisi/Justice Party), into power. The filmmakers were channelled to direct more commercially oriented features with occasional forays into social films. However, Refiğ was now able to mature further his reflections on national cinema. In this third phase, Refiğ fused many past and contemporary influences together. These influences included the birth of a new national architecture by Sedad Hakki Eldem in the 1930s, the emergence of a new national music style by Ahmet Adnan Saygun in the 1940s, a new dialectic-materialist literature by novelist Kemal Tahir in the 1950s, a new dialectic-materialist literature by novelist Kemal Tahir in the 1950s, the two-dimensional storytelling in Karagoz (Shadow Theatre) and Ortaoyunu (medieval Turkish vaudeville).9 Refiğ’s final definition of Turkish national cinema broadly corresponds to a critique of the west and a return to Ottoman cultural roots. As a matter of fact, Refiğ’s conceptualisation of Turkish cinema went hand in hand with a critique of Turkish modernisation. In 1923, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk and his close circle of friends put an end to the 600-year-old Ottoman Empire and proclaimed a brand new Republic of Turkey. For the next 27 years, the Kemalist elite made a series of reforms that shifted Turkish culture from its Islamic roots to a new secular European life style. Subsequently, cultural modernisation stimulated new, westernised ideas on art, which threatened the local, traditional Turkish art forms. In 1923, a new Republic of Turkey with a nation-state ideology was created and the policy makers privileged the promotion of western arts to achieve a rupture with the old imperial past. Ballet, classical music and theatre became favourite forms, while the film industry did not interest the authorities.10 Cinema remained an expensive elite art in the hands of a single man, Muhsin Ertuğrul, who dominated Turkish film production between the 1920s and 1940s. As Ertuğrul was a man of the theatre, he produced film adaptations of western European plays and cast actors from his own company, the Ertuğrul Theatre. Until 1949, the number of films produced per year remained very low: in the 1914–47 period, Turkish cinema produced only sixty-seven films, a very low figure considering the size of the population.11

While four of Refiğ’s lengthy interviews have been published in book format, comprehensive accounts on his film criticism have not been written.12 As Refiğ’s films and writings have not yet been translated, his contribution to national cinema debates is largely ignored by anglophone discourses on film history and in the relatively recent English literature concerned with ‘world cinema’.13 To understand the context of Refiğ’s film theory one has to look at many cultural and legal components: the series of films emerging from Turkey between the 1950s and 1970s, called Yeşilçam (Green Pine), state-regulated film censorship, the nationalist directors’ reaction to censorship and, of course, Halit Refiğ’s expertise and intellectual status in Turkish film culture.
Yeşilçam System

The Turkish studio system between the 1950s and 1980s was named Yeşilçam, which literally means ‘Green Pine’ and was the name of the street where the film producers’ officers were located. On a political level, Yeşilçam essentially meant two things: an economic mode of production and a collective imaginary of popular taste. The Yeşilçam system was based on star actors, non-union labour, fast and cheap production (frequently) based on plot formulas that imitated American film genres. The financial investment originated from an advance on receipts system, which depended on Anatolian theatre owners. Indeed, the so-called ‘Bond System’ was named after the bonds signed by the producers, who borrowed money from the theatre owners by pre-selling the screening rights of the films. In return, the theatre owners could dictate what kind of films were made and which star should be assigned to a particular project.

The lack of finance, disorganised labour, producers with no capital and over-demanding stars led to the collapse of the Yeşilçam system. During its heyday, Yeşilçam served hundreds of theatres both in big cities like Istanbul and in small towns in central Anatolia. Yeşilçam was also responsible for creating a popular film language, its local interpretation of recycled American film genres and new sub/hybrid-genres, an infrastructure and craftsmanship, which were later revived with the introduction of private television channels and the resurgence of young filmmakers in the mid-1990s. This is the system that Refiğ experienced as a filmmaker and commented on as a film theorist.

The Turkish State’s Involvement in Film

After 1950, new filmmakers trained in French, American and German film schools started coming from abroad and entering the Turkish film business. In 1952, sixty-one films were produced in a single year. The state had some positive influences on cinema in this period: in 1942, CHP (Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi), the ruling Republican People’s Party, initiated a decision to prohibit Egyptian melodramas. This legislation resulted in the Turkish takeover of the national film market. In 1948, a decree on municipal taxation reduced the tax fares on domestic products and increased the tax on foreign films. Additionally, the economic drive initiated by the newly elected Democrat Party governments in the 1950s led to an increased production and consumption of domestic Turkish films. The investment in infrastructure as well as the rural migration to the big cities marked the rebirth of Turkish cinema as a means of mass entertainment.

The relationship between the state and the film industry is crucial in understanding how Turkish cinema worked in the 1960s. Successive right-wing governments managed to supervise Turkish cinema via two mechanisms: a legal framework that favoured censoring film content and economic incentives that controlled films’ output.

Articles in the criminal code monitored film censorship, along with a censorship
board. For years, screenplays were controlled in the pre-production stage and films were screened before exhibition, banned and cut without much explanation. Refiğ wanted to make films that suited popular taste but which would not be banned by state censorship either. He called for a ceasing of interference by the state and worked towards a national cinema that would privilege the efforts and creativity of the Turkish people and filmmakers.

**Directors’ Response: Turkish National Cinema Movement**

Between 1952 and 1961, some Turkish filmmakers formed a practice of domestic filmmaking with local themes that were to serve as a basis for the national cinema movement later on. Cinema attendance increased significantly and an attempt to create a national cinema was at hand. In 1949 a generation of young directors began to produce films that used local themes, everyday language and were shot on location, rather than in studios. Dealing with social matters seemed financially dangerous to the young directors and their not-so-zealous producers. The success of Memduh Un’s *Three Friends* (*Üç Arkadaş*, 1958) re-emphasised the importance of prioritising the everyday life of ordinary people as the main subject matter of popular filmmaking.

Later, this group of young filmmakers (Lütfi Akad, Memduh Ün, Atif Yılmaz, Metin Erksan and Halit Refiğ) deliberately relied on traditional performing arts such as *Karagöz* (Turkish Shadow Theatre) and Ottoman miniatures. They pointed out that Turkish cinema was not a cinema of capital, like the Hollywood system, nor it was a state-sponsored cinema, like west European cinemas. These directors claimed that Turkish cinema was in fact an intensive labour that depended solely on the Turkish audience for its survival. Furthermore, they suggested that Turkish films employing the Hollywood style did not appeal to Turkish people and that, for this reason, Turkish directors should this type of filmmaking. For these directors, Turkish cinema had to produce for the people. But the method of resisting the Hollywood system should not be through imitating Hollywood films or producing an alienated high-class art cinema. The new cinema had to rely on traditional Turkish arts and narrative forms. This group and its opponents, the Cinémathèque group, who supported the superiority of western cinema, had several heated and even aggressive debates regarding the nature of Turkey’s national cinema. While Refiğ’s filmmaking oscillated between art films and popular films, he made three films that he considered to be successful examples of national cinema: *Four Women in the Harem* (*Haremde Dört Kadın*, 1965), *I Lost My Heart to a Turk* (*Bir Türke Gonül Verdim*, 1969) and *The Tired Warrior* (*Yorgun Savaşçı*, 1979). In *Four Women in the Harem*, Refiğ uses women as symbolic, ideological markers of modernisation and shows their transformation as a revelation of cultural identity. The common ground between Refiğ’s films lies in the subtle mixture of Turkish, Islamic and Anatolian past and the technology of modern western society. To quote Refiğ, his idea of national cinema is based on:
the desire of (Turkish) people to show that our economic and political system, the relationships between men and women, the modernization and westernization projects, the idea of art go back to our Ottoman roots: it is based on karagöz (Turkish puppet theater), ortaoyunu (Turkish vaudeville), Ottoman palace music, miniatures. I made (Four Women in the Harem) as a search for such style.23

I Lost My Heart to a Turk is about a German woman, Eva, who comes to find the father of her illegitimate son and goes on to become a Turkish saint, an ideal image that personifies all elements of Turkish culture including the language (Turkish), religion (Islam), technology (western), ancient civilisations (Byzantium, Ottoman) and, finally, nature. The Tired Warrior (Yorgun Savaşçı) is a TRT-sponsored adaptation of Kemal Tahir’s eponymous novel, published in 1965.

Refiğ and other critic/director friends agreed to call their efforts the National Cinema Movement, when they were able to develop, transform and theorise their themes between 1965 and 1969. These film professionals started to touch upon social issues in Turkish society at that time, such as the unequal distribution of wealth, the social and psychological effects of rapid modernisation, rural to urban migration, the dream of the big city and women’s position in society. Because all these issues relate to society’s problems at large, the directors associated these films with social-realist films. Members of the National Cinema Movement were excluded from national film festivals where Cinémathèque members were appointed as jury and where critics condemned films made in accordance with this movement’s political and aesthetic concerns.24 In 1980, the movement ended with the burning of the negatives of Refiğ’s final work, The Tired Warrior.25 As a matter of fact, the 1980 military coup banned all political parties and activities for four years and closed down associations of any kind (including the Cinémathèque association) and directors from the National Cinema Movement either quit filmmaking or turned towards more personal or commercial projects. The younger generations of filmmakers favoured a new form of transnational cinema, whereas the well-educated directors, who also depended on foreign finance, made art-house films concerned with alienation and modernist aesthetics. By 1989 Turkish cinema had lost its audience to television, and awaited 1995 to be revived again.26

Halit Refiğ: A Theorist Filmmaker

Halit Refiğ developed his ideas on national cinema in the context described here. He was lucky to be working in a prolific and dynamic era for filmmakers but he also had to endure a politically turbulent period. His success resides in his ability to intellectualise Turkish cinema.

Refiğ was born in an industrial family in the cosmopolitan coastal city of Izmir and raised in the imperial city of Istanbul. He had a bilingual education and attended Istanbul’s American Robert College, the oldest US institution of higher education abroad. He went to Korea, Vietnam and Singapore in 1955–56 where
he shot documentaries with a Super 8 camera. He started writing film critiques in 1958 and made his first feature film in 1961. Refiğ soon experienced the dilemmas of being a Turkish intellectual: being Turkish meant living in a culturally complex land, where a thousand years of cultures continuously merged and mixed together in the context of rising and falling civilisations. Refiğ soon understood that being an intellectual meant repressing the multicultural Ottoman past and turning a blind eye to the time when Turkic tribes were fighting the Chinese in the steppes of central Asia. It also meant allying with the reforming military-bureaucratic elite and forcing people to deny the history between 1299 and 1922. Finally, it meant despising religion and advocating the nationalisation and purification of traditional Turkish languages and customs. Refiğ refused to take such a political stance. His writings on national cinema therefore read more like a return of the repressed. As Kevin Robins and Asu Aksoy observed:

Refiğ’s counter-position put great emphasis on what made Turkish society different from western societies – it was said that Turkish society had a different social structure and also a different ‘soul’. The Ulusal Sinema movement aimed to draw on cultural elements from Ottoman period, and also on the style and motifs of popular Anatolian culture, such as miniature paintings and folk tales, with the aim of elaborating an idiosyncratic and particularistic popular cinema in Turkey. The imperative, according to Refiğ, was for Turkish film-makers to find inspiration in ‘their own history and people’; ‘to find a language that is right for the country’.27

In his attempt to conceptualise ideas on ‘national cinemas’, Andrew Higson identifies the criticism-based approach as one of the four ways to engage with national film culture.28 Refiğ’s film criticism and theoretical writings worked towards a new idea of national cinema by analysing the ways producers, scriptwriters and directors constructed Turkish film’s characters, the dominant narrative discourse and dramatic motifs, as well as the use of traditional and visual source materials. Undoubtedly, Refiğ also used some of the genres and conventions of Hollywood cinema in his early filmmaking; however, he progressively turned to Turkish popular culture to refine his filmic style. Refiğ’s writings stressed the necessity for Turkish directors to create authentic films by borrowing and combining traditional imagery with the themes of ordinary and everyday life.

‘Ulusal Sinema Kavgası’
Fight For a National Cinema29

Westernisation and Turkish Cinema30

The fortune of the real soldier is poverty on his road. (Yunus Emre)

I shall begin by mentioning first that I started to become bothered by constant theoretical talk. It is actually more interesting to concentrate on more concrete examples. Unfortunately, the concepts of ‘westernisation’ and ‘Peoples’ cinema’
that we have put forward have been used erroneously by all sorts of people without context or clue. We should, therefore, return to the heart of the matter.

We claim that when we think about our cinema, the concepts and values derived from the west lead us nowhere, or rather lead us to a dead end. To value the future of our cinema we must, first and foremost, define its past and current situation within its own historical conditions. Those who understand, please come forward, because you still have not done so! The ‘critics’ whirl around in circles, covering the same ground, turning over the same points, as if in a trance like a Mevlevi dervish does, exclaiming ‘Oh modern cinema, modern cinema oh la la!’

What is the issue then? They say that contemporary cinema narrates the human, that there is no humanism in Turkish cinema! They complain about the lack of ‘humanism’ as if the Turkish people are in great need of it. To understand this claim one must retrace humanism and the roots of Turkish thought.

Humanism emerged as a thought and art movement of the rising bourgeoisie class in western Europe. During the feudal period, humanism questioned the idea of God and explored the position of man accordingly. It shares great similarities with the reform movement in religion. Humanism cannot be conceived
outside the historical, social and economic structures of the west. The art of the bourgeoisie that narrates humanity has replaced the art of feudalism that narrates God. In fact, both locate the principle of private property at their foundation. The feudal landowner, who was responsible to no one but God, was the absolute ruler and owner of his land. With the domination of the commercial and industrial economy, the feudal class, based on the agricultural economy, has lost its social hegemony to the bourgeoisie class, based on this new economic order. The humanist art that cries out ‘human, human’ is the final victory tune of the bourgeoisie as a consequence of this class struggle. The cries of liberty are echoes of the rumble of this war.

The bourgeois class, as we know it, still shows immense talent for devilish negotiations based on capitalistic interest. To overthrow feudalism, the bourgeois class first allied with the landless peasants and once they achieved social hegemony, they allied with the feudal class against the peasantry and working class. After the mid-nineteenth century, the bourgeoisie sat at the bargaining table with the working class, as the latter gained power over time. The west’s famous ‘social democracy’, that we all greatly admire, is the product of this new negotiation. If we are to consider Renaissance humanism as pangs of conscience for the Inquisition and its millions of victims who perished in the name of God, we shall see the new humanism, brought with existentialism, as a shame felt for World War II’s bloodshed, which murdered in the name of the fatherland and on behalf of the bourgeoisie. As Kemal Tahir once stated, it would be inappropriate to associate the guilty conscience of the western thinkers and artists with Turkish people who had no part in these bloody crimes.

Having presented the roots of the ‘individualistic’ worldview and the understanding of humanism of the west, let us now look at the structure of our society.

Towards the final years of the Byzantine Empire, people became either landless or land-slave peasants due to an aristocracy that owned large masses of Anatolian territories. With the Turkish conquest of Anatolia, a great land transformation occurred, one that was based on ancient Turkish traditions and on the Islamic conquest law. The state ownership system thereby replaced private land ownership. It is due to this state-owned land system (miri), established during the Seljukian era and maintained by the Ottomans, that Turkey came to have a different social harmony and order that cannot be compared to European countries.31

In The Development of Capitalism in Turkey, Dr Hikmet Kıvılcımlı suggests that

The Ottomans are a state and an empire that was created with primitive socialist tolerance and nomadic democracy and established firmly with the aid of the Janissaries’ striking power. Unlike the capitalist army of the west, The Ottoman army was not isolated from the people nor was it secluded from economic life and collective production.32

Mustafa Cezar, in The Levends in the History of Ottomans, writes: ‘We can say that during the era when the manorial system was practiced, the Ottoman
State possessed a socialist state structure in terms of village administration and economy. Thus the Ottoman state system was not a device used by a class to oppress another, like in Europe – it was a system that fed and protected its people. The term used by Sencer Divitçioğlu to describe this process is ‘Gracious State’ (Kerim Devlet).

Of course, there is a substantial difference in worldview and understanding of humanity between the west and Turkish society. The former is based on private land ownership and the latter on manorial land ownership. Therefore, ideas borrowed haphazardly from the west will not find their equivalent in our society – they will only remain a fantasy. This is the reason why Turkish society constantly resists revolutions that do not arise from within the needs of the whole of Turkish society and which are imposed by western thinking.

The shift of the commercial economy from road transportation to maritime lines, the discovery of America, imperialism and the development of capitalism are factors that caused the Ottoman state to rail against the western world. In the novel Tired Warrior (Yorgun Savaşçı), Tahir writes: ‘The Ottomans have seen that, since the state has grown poor and become weak, they will fail to fulfill their duties to their peoples. They wanted to abandon the burden of their responsibilities, and impose this duty on the classes as it was done in the west. But the rich from the east are different from the bourgeoisie of the west … Can our rich become bourgeoisie? No! The rich who thrived thanks to the state remain forever indebted to the state. For that reason westernization did not save us from this trajectory.’

Apart from saving, westernisation made things even worse. Since the Tanzimat movement, all the essential institutions of the Turkish state were shaken. From the mid-sixteenth century onwards, the sultan’s household troops took over state-owned lands and farms became private property under local landlords (ayans, aghas). In the imperial era, the manorial system began to deteriorate under the system of landed proprietors. Later, western states attempted to create a capitalist class based on non-Muslims. When this failed, the Republican state tried to create a nationalist capitalist class. This failed, too. The Turkish nation became divided in an unprecedented way. On the one hand, the administrative class consisted of civil servants who mostly inhabited big cities; on the other hand, the peasant class, who felt neglected, found salvation in nomad Turkish traditions, Islamic law, the mosque and the congregation. This social category reacted against the western sayings: ‘He who saves his ship is the captain’ and ‘Every tub must stand on its own bottom.’

The new administrative class, wittingly or unwittingly, became the imperial police of western thought and art. It is estranged from its people, belittles them, and even regards them as its enemy. Today, the attitudes of Turkish intellectuals are the result of this situation.

Turkish cinema is a (national) cinema that survives with the support provided by the people. It does not have the support and help that theatre, music and painting have received from the state. Turkish cinema is born from Turkish people’s
need to watch contemporary films that reflect on traditional folk stories, theatrical plays, shadow puppetry, light comedies and festivals. Surely, arts like painting, theatre and music, which are the products of westernised state policies, are quite separate from cinema, which is born from within the people.

It can be claimed that there are many contrary opinions concerning the technical and aesthetic aspects of the Turkish cinema today. There are numerous advantages in making these different opinions subject to constructive debate. But one cannot say that Turkish cinema is founded on a system of exploitation. Such a system can only exist when a capital-based industry is present. The Turkish cinema industry is based not on capital but on labour. Today, what makes the production of more than 250 movies a year in Turkey possible is not the presence of a certain capital but the bonds calculated according to the number of people who will pay to watch the film.37 From this perspective, Turkish cinema is a cinema of the people.

But as in any other folk art, this is not a conclusion but rather a starting point. The real issue of Turkish cinema is returning what derives from the people back to them. This cannot be done by spreading threats stolen from random western magazines. Populism in cinema is not about hanging torn socks in the living room, or collecting wooden spoons or listening to Alawite songs. Western imperialists are doing this kind of folk exoticism very well, too.

Populism (Halkçılık) cannot be achieved bydictating random worldviews or enforcing alien values and tastes. It is totally impossible to force these on the Turkish people, who formed the basis of a 600-year-old empire. The popular reaction against westernism, although it was brought up by the Turkish state itself, is the best evidence for westernisation’s failure. Populism can be achieved by approaching the people as citizens, understanding them rather than seeing them from an imperial perspective. Turkish cinema is a window that opens on the thoughts, pleasures and excitements of the people. It is a great treasure for intellectuals who desire to get close to the people and to understand them.

I, Halit Refiğ, learned everything I know about Turkey and Turkish people from my occupation and my interest in Turkish cinema. I am proud to be one of the pioneers of the first real folk art that comes from and will return to the people … (1967)

**Conceptual Debates**38

**People’s Cinema**

Since Turkish cinema was not founded by foreign capital, it is not the cinema of imperialism. It is neither the cinema of the bourgeoisie, since it was not founded by national capitalism, nor the cinema of the state, since it was not founded by the government. Turkish cinema is a ‘people’s cinema’ since it is based on labour rather than capital and was born out of Turkish people’s need to watching films. Today, even Turkish film producers, who have enough capital, do business
by taking long-term bonds. They rely on the open credit of people and public opinion. As soon as people cut out this support (when they give up seeing Turkish films), filmmaking in Turkey becomes restricted to one or two films made by some brave fellows.

The closed economic structure of Turkish cinema unavoidably shares similar sentiments and attitudes with Turkish folk arts (such as Anatolian folk paintings, Turkish folk stories, meddah/public storyteller, ortaoyunu/comedies and Hacivat-Karagoz shadow plays), whose roots are based on a self-sufficient local economy. In this respect, to ignore Turkish cinema is no different from ignoring other Turkish folk arts. As in other folk arts, developmental and changing opportunities are very limited in Turkish cinema.

Therefore, it is impossible to put Turkish cinema on a pedestal – as it is with other folk arts. The real value of Turkish cinema and folk arts is that they are cultural treasures with infinite potential for inspiring national arts researchers and performers. They show us how to move people; the way people express their excitement, as well as their reactions and opinions about certain issues.

It is not because Turkish cinema is a folk cinema that it possesses a completely populist characteristic. A lot of folk poems have been written to entertain the landlords, a lot of folk songs have been sung to praise the tribal masters, haven’t they?

However, Turkish cinema often made populist experiments (in genre, star system, plotlines), whose features depended on the fashion of the time. Yet just like my own films, these works approached the issue by treating Turkish people as if they belonged to a capitalist bourgeois system, as in western societies. As a result, our populist films appeared insufficient in terms of thinking and narrative, and our audience was usually disinterested in these films, which they considered extraneous, and even deviant. Of course, more populist films will be made in Turkish cinema. However, an understanding of populism based on the historical characteristics of Turkish society rather than the patterns of western populism will both provide immensely solid and unique works of cinema and bridge the gap between Turkish filmmakers and the people. So far, this challenge has been hard to achieve.

(1968)

National Cinema

Before explaining the concepts of ‘national cinema’ and ‘folk cinema’, it is best to mention Muhsin Ertuğrul’s filmmaking, which took place over a period of seventeen years. Ertuğrul’s cinema was mostly based on western sources (films, plays and novels). In terms of its outer and internal structure, his film aesthetics were influenced by western classical theatre. During the westernisation efforts of the single party (1923–46), Ertuğrul’s cinema pretty much reflected the artistic and intellectual style of the period. In the 1950s, the movement pioneered by Lütfü Akad, Osman Seden and Atif Yılmaz aimed to improve the language of
cinema and purify it from the influence of the theatre. However, this was merely a matter of adopting western cinematic influences instead of western theatrical influences. The real reaction to Ertuğrül’s cinema came from certain filmmakers who were trying to get into the business in Yeşilçam Street in Beyoğlu. They were neither interested in theatre nor in western cinema and their financial and technical capabilities were extremely limited. The films they produced, even though they were extremely commercial and primitive in terms of technique and aesthetics, had a lot of national characteristics. Traditional Turkish theatrical arts were indeed at the root of their film practices. In contrast with Ertuğrül’s cinema, which drew on characteristics from the single-party period, Yeşilçam cinema, which began in the years of the government’s Democrat Party, was a progressive and positive step in the history of Turkish cinema. In other words, cinema started displaying national characteristics, in the same way as politics were becoming public. The people who best represented Yeşilçam cinema were prominently employed in Fuat Rutkay’s company, Halk Film. Vedat Örfi Bengü, Seyfi Havaeri, Memduh Ün, Hüseyin Peyda, Şinasi Özonuk and Nuri Akıncı, who belonged to ramshackle film offices on Yesilcam Street were also representatives of this type of cinema. Undoubtedly, the most typical examples of Yeşilçam cinema were produced by Muharrem Gürses. Even though he did it in a very vulgar and primitive form, Gürses was a filmmaker who revealed the attitudes and sentiments of Turkish people in a way that was appropriate for traditional Turkish theatrical arts. He was indeed the most attention-grabbing director among the pioneers of Turkish art cinema.

Yeşilçam cinema, which had a life of just ten years, was a ground for preparation of both the emergence of the people’s cinema and national cinema. The emergence of cinema coincided with the electrification of Anatolia. The creation of urban households coincided with the emergence of audiences who watched Turkish films. As a result of Yeşilçam’s success, Turkish film production increased and filmmaking came to be known as a professional vocation. Yet since there was not enough capital to produce films in large numbers (the number of filmgoers was increasing at the same time), the bonds issued by production companies started to finance Turkish films. This bond system, which came to be standard practice after 1958–60, was based on the agreement that a film’s expenses would be reimbursed only after the film was made and the tickets sold. As the real bond owners were the audiences, these films were supposed to be made according to the taste of the Turkish audience: stories people loved, stars people adored and fashionable music of the day. These films flourished in Turkish cinema, along with ‘Turkey’s first ‘star system’. Neither the producers nor the directors were concerned with contemporary topics. Rather, stylish actors and actresses such as Türkan Şoray, Yılmaz Güney, Cüneyt Arkin, Hülya Koçyiğit and Sadri Alışık became Turkish cinema’s emblems. I do not know what others think but, this is what I mean by ‘people’s cinema’ when I refer to that kind of film practice. I accept this type of cinema as ‘people’s cinema’ because it was based neither on private capital nor on the government’s economic support.
Instead, it possessed a general and ‘anonymous’ artistic character. Even though this ‘people’s cinema’ was based on Yeşilçam cinema, it no longer has a relationship with it, because Yeşilçam cinema did not have a star or hero-based narrative system or a bond system based on public support. Nevertheless, with the appearance of bonds and Turkish stardom, no film companies, including Fuat Rutkay’s Halk Film company in Yeşilçam Street, survived. Today, there is little or no scientific merit in associating contemporary Turkish cinema with Yeşilçam cinema. The filmmaking practices that existed briefly from the mid-1940s to the mid-1950s, which are sometimes related to Yeşilçam, lasted for only ten years and naturally disappeared.

Despite all the developments in the technique and language of cinema, we actually cannot possibly say that this ‘people’s cinema’, which began to improve from 1958 to 1960, is as positive and progressive as Yeşilçam cinema. One of the most significant aspects of ‘people’s cinema’ was its stereotyping tendencies and more generally, the loss of its nationalistic characteristics due to foreign influences. Remakes of foreign films and narrative emulation were indeed characteristic practices of the period. According to certain authors, this was never the directors’ and producers’ fault. If there is something to blame, it is the stars’ stereotypical personalities and the people’s dependence on foreign support.

‘National cinema’ is a concept which came to be used consciously from 1966–67 onwards. This is not a popular movement like ‘people’s cinema’ but a form of cinema which was theorised by directors like Metin Erksan and Halit Refiğ and by institutions such as the Turkish Film Archive. The concept of ‘national cinema’ was born as a reaction both to ‘people’s cinema’ and the admiration for western cinema. This kind of cinema depends on the government’s general policies on culture and on public support. Today, Turkish people rely upon foreign, rather than domestic, production. The Turkish economy is mainly based on migrant workers in Germany, American support and foreign capital investments. There is no support from the public nor any official promotion from the government. In this sense, the examples of ‘national cinema’ are limited to a number of films such as *Sevmek Zamanı* (*Time to Love*, 1965), *Kuyu* (*Well*, 1968) and *Bir Türke Gönül Verdim* (*I Lost My Heart to a Turk*, 1969).

Today, Turkish cinema is on the threshold of a new era. Turkish films reached a remarkable number of foreign markets for the first time in history. The fact that Turkish films are being screened in countries like Iran, Egypt and Greece will undoubtedly have an impact on Turkish cinema. The quicker money comes from foreign countries, even more than the domestic market can provide, the more Turkish filmmakers will have to accept this new source of revenue. Just as Yeşilçam disappeared, now the company bond system is dying out. Co-productions bring foreign actors, with their own cultural characteristics, to our cinema. This improvement, without doubt, is disadvantageous both to the existing ‘people’s cinema’ and the theoretical ‘national cinema’. Yet if expanding abroad can empower Turkish cinema economically, a Middle Eastern cinema, where Turkish cinema has a dominant and unitary role, could potentially be
born. This type of cinema would be different from, and a reaction against, western cinema. That is, of course, unless higher politics aborts such attempts …

(1970)

**History Will Be the Ultimate Judge**

III. While we were asleep, Osman Bey was not, he waited for us. Poverty was finally at hand, and he did not act in stinginess like many did. He tried to clothe our naked, feed our unfed, no matter if he could or not.

*Mother State*

From 1967 to 1969, I was facing various problems, far away from the film set. Meanwhile, the staff of *Sinematek* and *Genç Sinema* (whose brains cannot function due to the feverish tingling of rage, whose eyes are bloodshot because of greed) was calling Metin Erksan and I (with their drooling mouths), ‘the gate hounds of Yeşilçam’, ‘Mussolini worshippers’, ‘censorship collaborators’ and ‘highway robbery bandits’.

I was trying to put this time to good use by searching the sources of Turkish culture. Before the publication of *Mother State*, Tahir hinted at the cornerstone of our culture in *The Tired Warrior*:

While the state has become a device for one class to crush another at different times in the west, in the east the state has an emancipatory role for all classes. Therefore there have been times in the west when societies existed without the presence of a state but in the east, no society has ever existed without a state. In the east, the state is the prerequisite for the existence and dissolution of societies.

From the systematisation of Sufism by the *mudarris* (headmasters) of Nizamiye Madrassah Gazali (Islamic University of the Middle-Ages) until the beginnings of westernisation, there has been a great compatibility between the worldviews of state-sponsored art and Turkish folk art. From this perspective, Mevlânâ and Yunus have said the same things in different styles; Nedim and Karacaoglan have expressed the same excitement in different ways.

In contrast to the individual drama caused by class struggle (which I believe is the essence of western arts), traditional Turkish arts are based on the idealisation of the concepts of beauty, goodness, virtue and behaviour. They are also based on narratives that portray culturally emblematic characters that live in a society ruled by a divine order. In this sense, the understanding of realism in Turkish and western arts has evolved in completely different directions. Turkish arts do not strive to represent the outer and physical appearance of the world. Rather, Turkish arts represent an interpretation of reality within the framework of a divine order, embodied by the state. In contrast with western arts that represent nature as it is, traditional style and expression patterns exist in Turkish arts, as in other eastern arts. This difference is most obvious between western theatre and traditional
Turkish theatrical plays, between Renaissance painting and ornamentations and embroidery used in Turkish books to increase the power of expression.

There is a huge gap between the theatre that narrates the drama of the individual as a product of class society and Karagöz’s shadow play, which describes a classless society. In comparison with the Aristotelian understanding of realist theatre, Karagöz’s understanding of realism finds its origins in Sufism. The opening stanzas (Ghazal)\textsuperscript{13} in a Karagöz play express this idea:

This screen is the platform to tame the eye on representation
It is a mastery of imitation, yet a fine reproduction of reality.\textsuperscript{44}

Therefore, it is impossible to find a (creative) way out from Karagöz or other Turkish theatrical plays to a westernised representational theatre. It is also impossible to find a middle ground, to adopt a westernised style of painting within the art of miniatures. Our national theatre’s attempts, which are inspired by Brecht’s epic theatre, are unbearable charades. Turgut Zaim’s honourable attempts to westernise his own style resulted in nothing other than closing this avenue for Turkish artists.

As in every work of art, Turkish artworks have emerged in particular eras, under particular conditions and responded to particular needs. Where the conditions for the existence of an art form disappear, it becomes dead and inefficient, and attempts to revive it can only give rise to useless art products. In today’s art scene, artworks that do not take the people’s needs into consideration and are pale copies of western or traditional Turkish sources, without authentic interpretations, are doomed to fail, even though the adaptations were, at the time of their inception, contemporaneous and fashionable. Turkish architecture and literature have produced the most successful examples of pragmatism and eclecticism against powerful states. However, once the state started to weaken, these art forms became miserably low in quality. In parallel with the Empire’s decline, the architecture of Islamic-Ottoman social complexes started to disappear; buildings constructed by Unionists, in agreement with Ziya Gökalp’s romantic Turkism (i.e., useless lancet arches, stalactite capitals and domes) have taken weird outdated shapes; buildings were constructed in spite of how desperate living conditions were and needs have turned into places where even villagers who lost their homes in natural disasters wouldn’t want to live. Along with these changes, the domination of Anatolian Turkish in daily dialect was a natural process; Turkish language was purified, its logic structure was undermined and all its living words dismissed due to foreign tendencies. Instead, the purist writer Ataç tried to get rid of all living words and logic in Turkish language in favour of creating a so-called ‘pure’ but artificial Turkish idiom, whose underlying system was French secularist thought. In the end this ‘pure Turkish’ language became alienating and usually unintelligible to the reader. Today, it is funny to see the metropolitan casinos’ efforts to entertain the people through corrupted music such as folk songs, which have nothing to do with Turkey. These are all freaks that emerged when we tried
to westernise our national values, like stones crushed between gears, actions that accelerate the dissolution of our society.

Since Turkish cinema comes from the people and turns back to them, even in its most primitive films, it should reflect the people’s static thinking and behaviours, even when corrupted statesmen permeate the country. The pressure of Turkish traditions on Turkish filmmakers is even stronger than state censorship. The cliché storylines, the stereotyped characters and behaviours are expressions of the directors’ reflections on the virtues and beauties of a once divine order (in Ottoman times). This lamented order has been long lost, or it probably has never existed. Today the duty of conscious and virtuous Turkish thinkers and artists is to protect the state from breaking down and the society from dissolving, to expose the people to the concrete realities of the day, as in traditional Turkish arts, to involve them in the interpretation of reality.

Does the Turkish cinema that is based on people carry on this duty? Absolutely not. Because under the influence of a thousand-year-old tradition of being governed by the state, people actually believe that their life conditions are in harmony with the Turkish state’s divine justice. Turkish films express a certain style, which contains ethical and aesthetic behaviours in accord with this order. In this sense, when watching Turkish films, the Turkish public is not passively exploited. On the contrary, for those who understand, the films are stimulating and thought provoking. Besides, Turkish cinema has accumulated a great power for collectively embracing the sentiments and excitements of the people.

Exposing the people to daily physical realities is the responsibility of the ‘national Turkish cinema’. Considering that the privileged classes will never risk losing their properties due to a film’s commercial failure, I propose that the state should be in charge of financing and developing Turkey’s national cinema. However, this is only possible when the state administrators have a national consciousness. On the contrary, it cannot be done with administrators who aim to turn Turkey into a rural state of Europe and get away with money in their pockets. Despite their efforts, Turkish filmmakers, who want to produce national films, are often confronted with obstacles. Eventually, they only produce works that are lost like the seeds that are scorched under the vastness of a prairie. Metin Erksan’s films, which he made with great efforts, The Well, my film, and I Gave My Heart to a Turk, are only a few examples of the numerous efforts in building Turkey’s national cinema.

(1971)

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Notes

1 This book was first published by Hareket Yayınları in 1971 in Istanbul and later republished twice. The third edition was published by Dergah Yayınları in 2013. The complete film writings of Halit Refiğ can be found in a recently published book: Ali Can Sekmeç, Türk Sinemasının ‘Yorgun Savaşı’si Halit Refiğ, Istanbul: İstanbul Büyükşehir Belediyesi Kültür Daire Başkanlığı Yayınları, 2015.

3 Refiğ’s early film criticism begins with a pro-western stance but ends with a critique of Turkey’s forced modernisation by the Kemalist elite. The detailed analyses of Turkish modernisation and its impact on culture can be found in Erich Jan Zurcher, Turkey: A Modern History, New York: I.B. Tauris, 2004; Carter V. Findley, Turkey, Islam, Nationalism and Modernity: A History, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010.

4 These cinephiles were initially inspired by Henri Langlois’ Cinémathèque Française and later became prominent film critics and film festival managers. The core group included Şakir Eczacıbaşı (photographer, philanthropist), Cevat Çapan (poet, academic), Onat Kutlar (film critic, screenwriter), Tuncan Okan (film director), Mengü Ertel (graphic artist), Jak Şalom and Sabahattin Eyüboğlu (literary critic and poet).


8 According to Refiğ, the representative films of the movement can be listed as follows: Metin Erksan’s Wrath of the Snakes (Yılanların Öcü, 1962), Dry Summer (Susuz Yaz, 1963), Refiğ’s Birds of Exile (Gurbet Kuşları, 1964), Ertem Göreç’s Bus Riders (Otobüs Yolcuları, 1961), Awaking in the Dark (Karanlıkta Uyananlar, 1965), and Duygu Sağıroğlu’s Never-ending Road (Bitmeyen Yol, 1965). See Murat Akser ‘Turkish Independent Cinema: Between Bourgeois Auteurism and Political Radicalism’, in Doris Baltruschat and Mary P. Erickson (eds), Independent Filmmaking Around The Globe, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2015.

9 Turkish shadow theatre is very much like its Greek and Japanese counterparts, two dimensional cardboard-cut characters are reflected from behind a white cloth screen lit by candle. Adventures of different characters, such as Karagoz and Hacivat, are displayed for children during festivals. For more details see Serdar Öztürk, ‘Karagöz Co-Opted: Turkish Shadow Theatre of the Early Republic (1923–1945)’, Asian Theatre Journal (2006): 292–313.


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13 Some US universities like UCLA, Texas at Austin and Wisconsin-Madison have Refiğ’s films with subtitled copies.


16 For a detailed discussion of Turkish state mechanism on censoring films see Dilek Kaya Mutlu, Film Censorship During the Golden Age of Turkish Cinema,’ in Daniel Biltereyst and Roel Vande Winkel (eds), Silencing Cinema: Film Censorship Around the World, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013, pp. 131–46.

17 In 1952 his Dark World (Karanlık Dünya) was banned because of its depiction of poor peasants in Anatolia. After the addition of images of high crops, fertile land and high-tech farming machinery from American films, the release of the film was finally allowed. In 1961 the same Metin Erksan had to screen his Wrath of the Serpents (Yılanların Öcü) secretly to Cemal Gürsel, the President of the Republic, to bypass the censorship bureau. In 1963 Erksan smuggled his Dry Summer (Susuz Yaz) to the Berlin Film Festival and won the Golden Bear for best film. See Atilla Dorsay, ‘An Overview of Turkish Cinema from its Origins to the Present Day’, in Günsel Renda and Carl Max Kortepeter (eds), The Transformation of Turkish Culture: The Atatürk Legacy, Princeton, NJ: Kingston Press, 1986, pp. 113–30.

18 As happened throughout the world, Turkish cinema has also been influenced by Hollywood cinema. The Hollywood products invaded Turkish theatres and the audiences formed a specific set of expectations. The Turkish filmmakers strived to satisfy this kind of demand and produced Hollywood-ish films. Turkish westerns, film noirs, melodramas, gangster movies were produced. These were sometimes one-to-one adaptations of famous Hollywood films.

19 Some of these directors are Faruk Kenç, Sami Ayanoğlu, Turgut Demirağ, Lütfi Ömer Akad and Atif Yılmaz.

20 At this point critics drew a historical analogy. The difference between Hollywood and Turkish practice is analogous to the difference between the feudal mode of production in western Europe and the Asiatic mode of production in eastern countries in the Middle Ages. See Murat Akser, Green Pine Resurrected: Film Genre, Parody and Intertextuality in Turkish Cinema, Saarbrücken, Germany: Lambert Academic Publishing, 2010.


22 The Cinémathèque group are film critics who founded Türk Sinematek Derneği (Turkish Cinematheque Association), which screened film classics from all over the world in Istanbul in the 1970s.

23 Refiğ, Ulusal Sinema Kavgası, p. 34.

24 The animosity between the two groups is also revealed in a recent interview with one of the founders of the Sinematek. See Jak Salom, ‘Cinema Has to be Seen on Big
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25 This was a famous novel adaptation by Halit Refiğ. Turkish state television TRT sponsored the project but a few months after completion of the project, the military government decided to burn the negatives of the film because of its political message.


29 The following translation is based on selected fragments from Halit Refiğ’s book Ulusal Sinema Kavgası, originally published by Hareket Yayınları in Istanbul in 1971.

30 Refiğ, Ulusal Sinema Kavgası, pp. 73–8.


33 Mustafa Cezar, Osmanlı Tarihinde Levendler, Istanbul: Çelikçilt Matbaası, 1965. The name derives from Levend (Marine Soldier) of the Ottoman Navy.

34 Sencer Divitçıoğlu, Asya Üretim Tarzı ve Osmanlı Toplumu, İstanbul: İstanbul Üniversitesi Yayınları, 1967.


36 Proclaimed as a charter of rights in the name of the Sultan in 1839, Tanzimat meant reorganisation of the Ottoman state and governance structure and transformation of the legal system in accordance with its western counterparts. It is also referred to a whole system of westernisation of lifestyle idealised by Turkish intellectuals of the period. For details see M. Şükrü Hanioğlu, A Brief History of the Late Ottoman Empire, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2010.

37 Theatre owners in Turkey in the 1960s pre-sold the tickets and then financed the making of the films.

38 Refiğ, Ulusal Sinema Kavgası, pp. 89–94.


40 Here the selection is from Refiğ, Ulusal Sinema Kavgası, pp. 123–40.


42 All of these twelfth- to fourteenth-century Turkish poets have written poetry whose roots lay in folk songs and legends. More on this can be found in Talat Sait Halman and Jayne L. Warner, Rapture and Revolution: Essays on Turkish Literature, New York: Syracuse University Press, 2007; Talat Sait Halman and İlhan Başgöz, Yunus Emre and His Mystical Poetry, Bloomington: Indiana University, 1981.

43 The Ghazal is a poetic form consisting of rhyming couplets and a refrain, with each line
sharing the same meter. A Ghazal may be understood as a poetic expression of both the pain of loss and the beauty of love. For examples of the genre see Thomas Bauer and Angelika Neuwirth (eds), *Ghazal as World Literature I: Transformations of a Literary Genre*, Wurzburg: Ergon Verlag, 2005.