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Realism in Recent Cinema in Turkey and The Use of Fairy Tales

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Abstract:

The concept of realism has been redefined countless times since 19th century in art history. In Turkey, especially in relation to cinema and to literature, realism is understood in a narrow and superficial sense as “being in agreement with social reality,” or as “realistic.” This conception of realism has been influenced by a variety of realist movements and been prevalent both in criticism and artistic production. Starting with few recent films that disrupt our assumptions about realism in cinema, I discuss how “realism” as an art concept is different from qualifying that which is true to reality. When realism is understood superficially as “that what is realistic,” it is possible without hesitation to contrast fiction with documentary, construction with reality, imaginary with what is visible, and eventually, political statement with entertainment. Competent films recently made in Turkey such as *The Majority* (Seren Yüce, 2010), *Min Dît – The Children of Diyarbakır* (Miraz Bezar, 2009), and *Autumn* (Özcan Alper, 2008), all first feature films of the directors, demonstrate that the change in cinema in Turkey is not solely a quantitative change. Even though these films differ in their subject matter and dramatic structure, I argue that they present a new quest of realism in cinema in Turkey. After investigating the main and common characteristics of this quest, I discuss the fairy tale used in *Min Dît* and argue that fairy tale here serves as a frame through which reality becomes visible and the realism of the film has to be evaluated not by the probability of what it depicts but by the reality that it makes visible and with its approach to this reality.

Keywords: Realism, Fairy Tales, *Min Dît*

Cinema and Realism

In *Waltz with Bashir* (2008), written and directed by Ari Folman, the protagonist has no recollection the period he spent in Lebanon in the Israeli army during the 1982 Lebanon War and he traces pieces of his lost memory by talking to his friends who were soldiers in Lebanon at the time. The film presents interviews with real people in animated form and thus merges oral history and documentary cinema with animation. The reconstruction of personal memory turns into a collective act; what is narrated, dreams, what is held from speech reveals the conflict between memory and reality. Ari Folman's choice of using animation in his film underlines the

impossibility of visualizing trauma and draws a veil on the spectacle of the atrocities of war. Even though the film has been praised for its visual artifice, its approach to Israeli Army's role in the Lebanon War, especially in Sabra and Shatila massacres has been widely disputed. The film has been criticized for covering up the debacle and accountability of war by focusing on personal traumas (Levy, 2009). If we leave aside the discussions of how its subject matter was handled, the film is important for disrupting some of our assumptions about realism in cinema.

In film historiography, cinema has been conceived as situating itself between two poles: between the single-take *actualité* films of everyday events by Lumière (*Arrival of a Train*, 1895) and Méliès's trick films (*Voyage à travers l'impossible*, 1904). The beginnings of cinema is situated in the mass entertainment forms that emerged in 19th century industrial societies such as world fairs, panorama, magic shows and magic lantern shows on the one hand, and on the other hand, cinema was conceived in relation to the assumed objectivity of photography, that is, the power of photography to show in an unmediated way. The presence of this polarization between of magic and objectivity at the origin of cinema has indeed been questioned and reversed recently. For instance, the knowledge that Méliès made *actualité* films as well as trick films, and that Lumière's actuality films were also projected backwards as well in such a way that those films were displayed as trick films, make it difficult to assume such a polarity at the origins of cinema (Marcus, 2007: 178). Nevertheless, this opposition between creating a trick using the technological potentials of cinema and conveying in an unmediated fashion still continues to be influential in our conceptualizing cinema and in our assessing realism in cinema. *Waltz with Bashir*, particularly through discarding the possibility of photographic display, problematizes the oppositions between documentary and fiction, narrative and direct speech, between what took place and what is remembered.

Recent films in cinema such as *Waltz with Bashir*, *Mothers* (Milcho Manchevski, 2010), and *District 9* (Neill Blomkamp, 2009) that complicate the relationship between documentary and fiction by targeting expectations of cinematic realism, have invited us to face the difficulties of conveying reality. The concept of realism, which has been redefined countless times since 19th century in art history, has been understood in Turkey, in relation to cinema as well as to literature, in a superficial way as “in agreement with social reality,” that is, in general as “faithful to what

really takes place.” This conception of realism has been influenced by a variety of realist movements and has been effective both in criticism and artistic production in Turkey. The scarcity of realist examples in cinema and the failure of produced films to be sufficiently faithful to reality has been explained away almost solely with market conditions and demands. If one facet of cinema in Turkey is the melodrama genre that has reached a large number of audience both in theaters and on TV channels, the other facet is auteur cinema. Realist cinema, whose rare examples are highly cherished, has been haunting those who desire a committed cinema in Turkey.

The discussions of realism in cinema on the one hand present different understandings and choices in relation to what cinema is or what its functions are. On the other hand, they also reveal philosophical and aesthetic attitudes in relation to how “reality” is understood and how this reality can be conveyed. Hence, we need to stress the distinction between realism as an art term and the quality of being “realistic.” Cinema's relationship to the market as a mass art form and the fact that it brings together a number of arts as a “mixed media” (Mitchell, 2002: 170), makes its claim for its sole dependence on photographic indexicality difficult to sustain. (Experimental films such as Stan Brakhage's 1963 film *Mothlight* are of course exceptions to films that are mixed media.) Hence cinema is faced with redefining itself in the midst of new visual narrative forms created by still mixed but visually dominant media such as TV and internet while it interacts with literature and drama that are based on dramatic structure and narrative techniques. The claim to realism in art has always involved a discontent with the current reality and the current art, since, as Walter Benjamin states, "The adjustment of reality to the masses and of the masses to reality is a process of unlimited scope, as much as for thinking as for perception" (Benjamin, 2007: 223).

When we leave aside spectators' expectations and training in the convention of realism, in Turkey we come across very often with the term “social realism” on the subject of realism in cinema which is ambiguous in its conceptual and artistic references. If what is meant by social realism is the representation of everyday situations without sublimating or idealizing them, as opposed to the idealism of romanticism which brings forth the subjectivity and the perceptual realm of the subject, this already is one of the main tenets of realism that emerged in visual arts

during mid 19th century. Or else, if it refers to the idea expressed by materialist worldview that an individual cannot be conceived independent of the social conditions of the time and of the relations of production that the individual finds himself/herself in, reality from this perspective is already understood as social; that is, the qualification “social” becomes superfluous. In art history, social realism is a movement that gained precedence especially in painting and photography during the Depression Era of 1930s in USA which portrayed disregarded aspects of everyday life, the lives of working class and poor people without embellishment, and in this way aimed at creating a social awareness. Even though some of the artists included in this movement were socialists, this current should not be confused with socialist realism that was molded as a doctrine towards the end of 20s after Soviet Union was founded. Socialist realist works was formulated as works that “depict[s] reality in its revolutionary development” while depicting reality as it is (Taylor, 2007: 143) and which, in this way, can serve revolutionary purposes and give hope of a future. Briefly, it was expected of socialist realist works to underline the current contradictions while focusing on the revolutionary aspect of these contradictions and also to preserve a hope for the eventual resolution of these contradictions. This approach became more regulated and unforgiving as it ossified. Hence, the term “social realism” seems to refer to these artistic and conceptual resources in an ambiguous way. Since the connotations of the expression “social realism” (used when a need to make a qualification presents itself while discussing realism in cinema) are undefined, it is not clear what is really meant by the term. This is why it seemed necessary to make such an explanation in my discussion of realism.

The Quest of Realism in Recent Cinema in Turkey

In recent years, we came across a number of proficient first films by young directors among the increasing number of fiction films in Turkey. A number of these films were praised and rewarded in film festivals in Turkey and abroad. I suggest that films particularly such as *Min Dît – The Children of Diyarbakır* (aka *Before Your Eyes*; Miraz Bezar, 2009), *Autumn* (Özcan Alper, 2008), *The Majority* (Seren Yüce, 2010), which were made through various alliances, present a new quest of realism in cinema. Furthermore, each one of these films do not shy away from taking a political stance. The main indicators of this new cinematic realism (and at the same time the common aspects of the mentioned films) are firstly, regarding the subject matter, a

certain distancing from domestic melodramas and intellectual melancholia; in parallel to this distancing, the use of non-exotic and non-symbolic outdoor shooting; the construction of the dramatic structure with as few dialogues as possible through a minimal narrative, without burdening this structure with the story; situating the audience as active spectators by means of the dramatic structure; and, conveying film's stance on the subject matter through cinematography rather than through dialogues or characters (Batur, 2011). Obviously, the dramatic structure of the mentioned films are different, yet, we observe that especially local outdoor shots are not presented as an exotic background or because of their photographic qualities, but rather are used as a constitutive part. We would need to consider the “place of origin” films such as *The Town* (Nuri Bilge Ceylan, 1997), which take place at the home town of the directors, as a separate group. The film *Autumn* takes place in the home town of the director but the contribution of outdoor shots to the dramatic impact of the film does not contain themes that reminds us of poetic realism (eg. Jean Renoir's *Partie de Campagne* [*A Day in the Country*], 1936) themes such as an internal travel and a search for meaning, or a break from the chaos of the city that are present in the “return to homeland” films. The scenery of East Black Sea mountains in *Autumn*, shot with long takes and deep focus are aloof from being poetic; they instead contribute to the bleak and almost claustrophobic mood of the film. And *Min Dît* presents the back streets, poverty-stricken neighborhoods, marketplace and squares of Diyarbakır from the viewpoint of two children who live in the streets.

In the above mentioned films, the fact that a minimal storytelling that depends on the knowledge and memory of the audience with respect to the subject matter is opted for and that the political stance is conveyed through cinematography rather than through dialogues demonstrate that this recent quest for realism in cinema is self-aware. What I mean by minimal storytelling is that the narrative depend much less on dialogues, which are used economically, and that the plot is constructed without a fear of having breaks in the plot, without a need to fill in the blanks and to give the full backgrounds of the characters. We do not learn the whole story of the characters: explanations of the situations are given to a minimum extent. For instance in *Autumn*, we learn that Yusuf had been incarcerated as a political prisoner but we are not presented with any other details; real news footage of police intervention in demonstrations and of

“Operation Return to Life” position the audience as an active spectator by relying on their knowledge for making the connections. Furthermore, the blanks in the plot left to the spectator here imply that the political climate of the 90s Turkey from which we could not return to life yet still persists and that we are still suffocated. This minimal narrative and dialogue in *The Majority* serves to create the communication disconnect of bourgeoisie presented in the film, and the conflict-free alienated characters who act upon the expectations of their family and friends rather than their passions or desires. Similarly, *Min Dît* too relies on the knowledge and memory of its audience: it shows, with as little indicators as possible, that the aunt of Gülistan and Fırat is a political dissident, that their father is a journalist, and that the assassin of their parents who killed them in a night ambush is a member of JİTEM (a clandestine counter-intelligence and counter-insurgency organization, a controversial wing of the Turkish Gendarmerie). Moreover, we can state that the dramatic structures of *Autumn* and *The Majority* are pretty flat, that is, they are devoid of dramatic climax and resolution. *The Majority* contains foreshadowing of a possible dramatic climax, for instance, whether Mertkan will have a fight with his father about his girlfriend, whether there will be a confrontation between the taxi driver and Mertkan, but life continues to run in its own bed. This choice of minimal narrative enables the films to frame their difficult subject matter from a certain point of view and prevents the films to be burdened by their stories. The mentioned films do not provide their characters with a last exit at the last-minute and hence avoid a cheap optimism, in fact, each one ends with a pretty pessimistic ending. I find this consistent with the quest of realism I tried to explore above.

The most distinctive aspect of these films which makes them proficient is that they convey their political stance, which they do not shy away from taking, by the totality of the film using the tools of cinema, rather than through the dialogues of their characters as we are accustomed to in our socialist realist works. In an unprecedented way, *The Majority* presents its title and credits at the end, and carries its stance over to its title. If the title of the film was a different one, the spectators could have come up on their own with the statement that the film makes in relation to its middle class analyses. But the title we see at the end of the film makes a judgment by adding an exclamation mark to the film: what you saw is the majority! This exclamation mark arriving at the very end is also a call to spectators to confront themselves by

reassessing the whole film. Since the spectators cannot intervene in the scene (or rather, exactly because of this), they become the fourth person at Mertkan's family dinner table. This implication of the audience in the filmic structure through the positioning of camera generates an alienating identification. On the other hand *Min Dît* of Turkey with its “lost” people, situates the audience as a witness by presenting the story of those whose stories are unheard from the point of view of children both through narrative and camera use: the only way for the audience to not see what Gülistan sees is to reject this position of witnessing. For the most part of the film, the camera follows Gülistan's eyes and what she sees, and at the very last frame returns to Gülistan's eyes again. Gülistan looks at the camera and returns the gaze of the audience. What Gülistan now sees is the audience: with this last gaze, the audience becomes a party to the film's reality and not just a witness.

Min Dît : I Saw

These films produced in Turkey in the last couple of years, with their subject matter and mastery, harbingers that the change in cinema in Turkey is not solely a quantitative change and each deserves to be analyzed in relation to the quest of realism I examined above. Nevertheless, *Min Dît* stands apart since it makes use of fairy tale in creating its realism. We can comprehend better that realism does not have to assume an opposition between documentary and fiction, between what is seen and what is imaginary, between reality and fantasy as we examine the use of fairy tale and the function it plays in this film. What is meant by fairy tale is not the use of fantastical elements, or fantasy as opposed to reality; rather, in the strict sense of the word, fairy tales are tales of oral culture that may or may not contain fantastic elements. Fairy tales are used to introduce children with the harsh realities of life in a circuitous way, and at times they might be intended for a wider audience with a moral lesson or parable. In their pedagogical aspect, fairy tales are open to be interpreted either as teaching a moral value or as reinforcing the present moral system.

The script of *Min Dît* was written by Miraz Bezar in collaboration with Evrim Alataş, and it is both a story of unsolved murder and a story of the children of Diyarbakır living in the streets. Film recounts the life struggles of Gülistan (Şenay Orak) and his brother Fırat (Muhamed Al) whose parents were killed in front of their eyes. Their baby sister Dilovan dies and they start to

live in the streets after they are forced out of their house. The film tells the events from the point of view of Gülistan and Fırat through its cinematography. In narrating its story, film relies on the knowledge of the audience and it frames the story with a fairy tale. This fairy tale is a wolf tale that their mother used to tell to Fırat and Gülistan as they went to sleep. The mother recorded the tale on tape. The fairy tale is about an elderly village man defeating a wolf that has targeted his village's herd. Men of the village arm their guns in order to get rid of the wolf. They go out searching for the wolf and find it beside a rock. As men raise their arms, the older man tells them to stop and approaches the wolf with a piece of meat. While the wolf eats the meat, the old man gently puts a bell around its neck and they go back to the village. When the wolf with the bell approaches the herd, the shepherd and the gazelle wakes up: "From now on, this wolf cannot hurt any living creature." The wolf eventually dies of hunger. This tale of neutralizing the wolf through wit runs parallel to the event at the end of the film in which the street children expose Nuri of JİTEM (Hakan Karsak) who had murdered the parents of Gülistan and Fırat. This plan of retribution executed in full wit at the end of the film is indeed the organizing element of film plot: all the details in the film add up to the construction of this final act and they serve to make it convincing in the diegesis of the film.

When we consider the story of the film as a whole, it does not seem realistic that these two kids, Gülistan and Fırat, with a political dissident aunt and a journalist father, are left on their own in Diyarbakır after their parents are killed and their aunt is detained, without someone to take care of them. On the other hand, the murder scene at the very beginning of the film serves as a framework for the siblings' living in the streets. The fact that the film leaves out details about the background of these children's story, for instance that no information is given as to why Aunt Yekbun (Berivan Eminoğlu) leave the kids to go abroad and why she is later detained, is consistent with film's situating the story of the kids in the centre and constructing the film from their point of view. Spectators who are familiar with the political situation of the past three decades in Turkey fill the blanks on their own: this discrepancy between what is depicted in the film and what the spectator understands from it makes it difficult even to summarize the plot without making additions. In short, the reality conveyed in the film is a reality conveyed through the eyes of the kids.

Fırat and Gülistan start to accompany Zelal (Suzan İtir) and Mikail (Mehmet İnci), two other kids who live in the streets with their old and blind grandfather. The kids sell tissues and lighters on the streets, towards the end of the film Fırat is involved with a pickpocketing gang of older kids. Gülistan helps a prostitute Dilan (Berivan Ayaz) who uses the alias Dilara. At first Gülistan hands out Dilan's fliers and later she starts to accompany Dilan. The kids listen to the voice of their mother telling the story of the wolf in order to go to sleep, using the tape player on their handcart. The new world that Gülistan and Fırat experience on the streets, the people they meet, all help them to realize the plan at the end of the film. One day, Fırat sees the man, Nuri, who had killed their parents before their eyes during a night ambush while they were returning from a wedding with a car. Fırat does not say anything, he pisses in his pants. Another day Nuri becomes a customer of Dilan; Gülistan looks Nuri in the eye. Dilan takes Gülistan with her to Nuri's now empty apartment. Gülistan now witnesses the signs of Nuri's ordinary family life that the film had presented to the audience in advance. She looks at the photographs on the wall, learns Nuri's full name and takes his gun. While Dilan is in the bathroom, Gülistan walks toward the bedroom with the gun in her hand, comes closer to Nuri who is lying on the bed face-down. Gülistan raises the gun but does not fire it. At the end of the film, Gülistan and Fırat, with the other street kids and pickpocketing gang, expose Nuri as the killer of their parents by distributing fliers and making an announcement using the loudspeaker on the minaret. They bring Nuri's gun with a letter to the newspaper their father was working at. In this way, the fairy tale in the film is repeated in the diegetic reality of the film with the collaboration of street children. In a way, the tale of the wolf with bell also explains why Gülistan does not use the gun. The whole plot is tied up at this last scenario. In the very final scene of the film, Gülistan and Fırat get on a car with other children herded by the pickpocketing older boys and leave for Istanbul. Hence, even though at the end, the children ally together to institute justice in their own nonviolent way, we cannot say that the film ends with a happy ending.

It is possible to read *Min Dît – Before Your Eyes* on its own as a fantasy of instituting justice. The wolf tale in the film and the repetition of the tale in the filmic world transforms the film into a tale with a lesson. The realism of this world created by the tale, however, reveals itself from within the tale. In other words, the film reminds us that reality can only be told by being

constructed, and that every story and transmission also reflect how we conceive of reality. In conclusion, the fairy tale in *Min Dît* serves the function of providing a frame through which reality becomes visible. Hence, the realism of the film has to be evaluated with the reality that it makes visible and with its approach to this reality, rather than simply by evaluating the probability of the events it presents.

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