

lack of direct speech in both films also makes these (unusually, considering the overall trajectory of Armenian cinema) two of the most extreme examples of Soviet “poetic” cinema. They stand quite apart from the similar but somewhat agenda-driven models from other republics with their more established traditions of nonlinear filmmaking. Even Peleshyan’s *We*, despite being a film about the “nation” with explicit allusions to the genocide, somehow avoids getting trapped in an ethnographic framework, turning instead into a parable about humanity as a collective force, memory, and the will for survival. It is no accident that Godard described Peleshyan’s cinema as “pre-Babelic.”²³ This “more universal, even cosmological, thematic focusing on man’s relationship to the natural world, [would] define his subsequent work” as has been noted by scholar Daniel Fairfax.²⁴

So where is the political dimension in all this? Is it not mere formalism? According to French theoretician Jacques Rancière, aesthetics performs the function of distributing the visible and the invisible, the audible and the inaudible, the thinkable and the unthinkable, the possible and the impossible—the same function given to politics.²⁵ Hence, this distribution of the sensible is at once an aesthetic and a political act. The subversiveness (within the context of Soviet filmmaking) of Parajanov’s cinema as well as that of Peleshyan, consisted in their ability to reorganize the space of consciousness so that the subject could experience ideology, society, tradition, and modernity and find a way to transcend it as well. It is significant to note in this regard that both filmmakers created exceptional works outside of Armenia. Yet, within the changing ideological climate of the later decades this individualist and cosmopolitan engagement with bigger questions facing humanity was deemed anachronistic at best. There was no use value in such fluidly transcendental tactics within the various struggles of political resistance, and neither filmmaker has found a true following in or outside Armenia.²⁶ Transcendence was an extremely rare gesture in late modernist cinema in the first place, attempted by only very few European filmmakers.²⁷ That it occurred in the Armenian films of Parajanov and Peleshyan at the end of the 1960s is a testament to the wider importance of cultural thinking produced by such marginal cinematic contexts. Collectively, their response (and possibly solution) to the conflicted nature of 1960s ambivalence is a broken thread that remains to be reignited, perhaps during the next reincarnation of modernism.

23. See Jean-Michel Frodon, “Un langage d’avant Babel: conversation entre Artavazd Pelechian et Jean-Luc Godard” [A Pre-Babelic Language: Conversation between Artavazd Peleshyan and Jean-Luc Godard], in *Le Monde* (April 2, 1992).

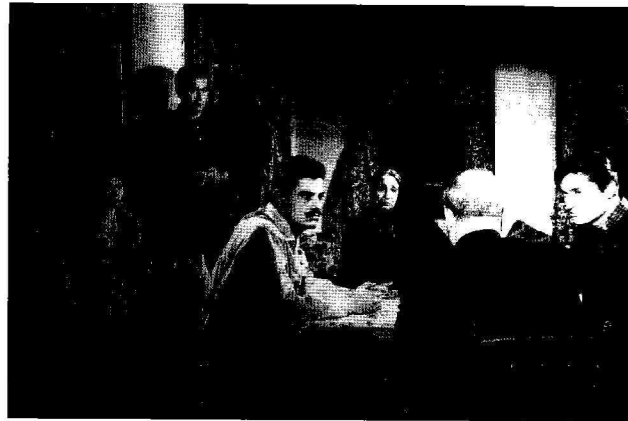
24. Daniel Fairfax, “Artavazd Pelechian,” in *Senses of Cinema* 62 (March 2012), <http://sensesofcinema.com/2012/great-directors/artavazd-pelechian/#b85> (accessed July 20, 2012).

25. “Aesthetics as Politics,” in Jacques Rancière, *Aesthetics and Its Discontents* (Cambridge and Malden, MA, 2009), pp. 19–44.

26. Parajanov’s style has been emulated by some, but only at a base, superficial level, as can be seen in the work of Don Askrayan and, more tellingly, in the MTV music videos produced internationally during the 1980s and 1990s. Peleshyan’s influence on Armenian and Soviet documentary cinema is perhaps more palpable, but it is a subject requiring further and more focused study.

27. Kovács, *Screening Modernism*, p. 394 (see note 4).

NEW WAVES AND
NEW CONFUSIONS:
THE CASE OF *BIRDS OF EXILE* (1964)



Birds of Exile, directed by Halit Refiğ, 1964. Film still. Haifilm Studio (all images)

by Ahmet Gürata

Setting the Scene

The 1960s was a time for major shifts and changes all around the world. In the context of film history, during this period Hollywood companies had begun to lose their dominant status, as other countries’ film production became increasingly recognized. Nonetheless, although film festivals were bringing other cinemas into greater recognition, the film traditions of the non-Western world still remained under Hollywood’s shadow. This was also the time when “new waves” and “new cinemas” had begun to make their mark, and young directors inspired by the modernist tradition appropriated neorealist aesthetics and began launching a new era.

In Turkey, the film industry grew rapidly thanks to greater political and economic stability. The number of feature films produced annually almost tripled (85 to 241) between 1960 and 1966. This increase in film production was interrupted only by the transition from black-and-white to color films by the end of the 1960s. Nevertheless, the Turkish film industry produced its best-known classics during this period. The relatively liberal atmosphere of the early 1960s encouraged a “new wave” of films that dealt with social problems. Rather than the contemporaneous French new wave, these films followed in the footsteps of Italian neorealism. Starting with director Metin Erksan’s *Gecelerin Ötesi* [Beyond the Nights] (1960) the Turkish “new wave” ended abruptly in the mid-1960s as the result of political upheavals.

The 1960s was also a strong cinephilic era, marked by an increase in film publications and festivals. The ciné-club Kulüp Sinema 7 (founded in 1962 and transformed into the Turkish Film Archive in 1967) and the Turkish Cinémathèque Association founded by young cinephiles with the support of Henri Langlois, founder of Cinémathèque Française, were organizing regular screenings. Along with the publication of a number of other journals and books, the Turkish translation of André Bazin’s *Qu’est-ce que le cinéma?* [What is Cinema?] appeared in 1966, a year before it was published in English. Filmmaking and film viewing began to take on political overtones as debates among various groups became quite heated. Particularly, discussions between the cinephiles of the Cinémathèque and the filmmakers dedicated to the Turkish Film Archive were fierce. The Cinémathèque claimed that the problems of the Turkish film industry were rooted in social structures, and approached local films with criteria based on universal aesthetics. Since filmmakers attached to the Turkish Film Archive sought to create a “national cinema” that drew inspiration from Turkish art and culture, they were extremely wary of foreign influences. Director Halit Refiğ was prominent among these filmmakers in terms of the theorization of practice. Utilizing constantly shifting paradigms, he identified three “waves” in the 1960s which had similar characteristics: “social realism,” “people’s cinema,” and “national cinema.” It is notable that these waves also characterized the stages of Refiğ’s own filmography.

Istanbul and Milan: Two Different Takes on Modernization

Refiğ’s film *Gurbet kuşları* [Birds of Exile] (1964) dates from the director’s “social realist” period. It tells the story of the Bakircioğlu family, who had come to Istanbul from Maraş in southeastern Turkey in order to start a new life. The first scene is set in the well-known Haydarpaşa train station in Istanbul and depicts the arrival of the family.¹ In this scene, the father, Tahir, introduces viewers to the film’s characters, addressing the family members one by one: Haticce, the mother, together with her

1. This is probably one of the most iconic images of film history in Turkey. Most films from the 1960s and 1970s open with a similar scene in which immigrants arrive at the train station in Istanbul and are astounded by the view of the city across the water.



three sons (Murat, Selim, and Kemal), and Fatma, the daughter. “We need to keep each other in sight,” he warns them. Viewers are also introduced to another important character, Haybeci (which means “freeloader” in Turkish), whose attempts to make a living in Istanbul are contrasted with the efforts made by the Bakircioğlu family throughout the film.

The film dwells on the disintegration of the family and its traditional values in modern urban Istanbul. The father, who is a mechanic, opens a car repair shop in Istanbul with his two sons. However, when business starts going downhill, they try to find other ways to cope with the difficulty of life in the city. The eldest brother Selim, who helps his father in the repair shop, is led astray by his passion for Despina, the wife of the owner of the neighboring repair shop. We soon learn that Despina tricked Selim for the sole purpose of saving her husband’s business; since Selim had spent most of his time with Despina, the family business eventually went bankrupt. Murat, who is uninterested in the family business, decides to make a living as a taxi driver. But soon he too becomes obsessed with another woman, Seval, a club entertainer. Meanwhile, the youngest brother Kemal studies medicine and tries to integrate into the modern life of Istanbul.

In the film, Selim and Murat, who are dedicated to the traditional values of south-east Turkey, play key roles in the destruction of the family. The harder they try to transpose their traditional notions of honor and the family to Istanbul, the more villainous they become. It is Kemal who tries to strike a sort of compromise between modern Istanbul and rural Turkey. In this sense, although Kemal represents the moral example of the film, his elder brothers represent the emotional center of the plot.

Birds of Exile was actually based on a stage play titled *Ocak* (meaning fireplace, gathering point, and family) by Turgut Özakman. Halit Refiğ wrote the screenplay with

the well-known novelist Orhan Kemal, who is credited as the author of the dialogues. Although the family in *Ocak* is from Istanbul, Refiğ transformed the plot into a story of migration. In this way, the film is not bound to a single location (the living room) as in the play. Another source of inspiration for the film was Orhan Kemal's novel bearing the same title, *Birds of Exile*; apart from the title, however, the two works do not share much in common.

The film is often compared with *Rocco e i suoi fratelli* [Rocco and His Brothers] (Luchino Visconti, 1960). The similarities between the two are striking. *Rocco and His Brothers* is about the Parondi family, which migrates from the impoverished Italian south to Milan, and it focuses on five brothers. As in *Birds of Exile*, it is a woman, a prostitute called Nadia, who brings about the destruction of the family. Refiğ was also aware of this comparison, and noted: "Obviously you can find similarities and a relationship between *Birds of Exile* and *Rocco and His Brothers* [. . .]. However, it is more important to compare how Visconti and I conceive the problems of our own respective societies, and identify the differences."² And that is exactly what I will try to do in the following, through a comparison of Visconti and Refiğ's perspectives on modernization and migration.

Both Italy and Turkey began the transformation from an agricultural to a capitalist economy from the mid-1950s to the late 1960s. This period of modernization was characterized by industrialization in Turkey, during which a substantial private industrial sector began to emerge. This required a large labor force, which was drawn mainly from rural areas. In the 1950s, approximately 1.5 million immigrants in search of a better future arrived in the country's urban areas.³ The 1960s were a period of economic development, and from 1963 to 1969 the annual average growth rate was 20 percent.⁴ This growth, however, brought about social transformations, and confrontations between the resident urban population and newly arriving migrants. As the industrial sector grew, the working class became better organized through trade unions and was thus able to make its presence felt politically. The industrial proletariat, which joined forces with the growing student population, was the main source of political radicalism. At the same time, new habits of consumption pushed the growth of a consumer society.

Despite Turkey's similarity with Italy in terms of economic and social structures, the political scene was marked by major differences. Perhaps that is why the two films offer such different perspectives on the possible outcomes of mobility and relevant strategies for a better future. In Visconti's film, it is the central character Rocco who is the most attached to the peasant values of the south, but in the end he is forced to compromise his beliefs, which leads him to become one of the main causes for the

2. İbrahim Türk, *Halit Refiğ: Düşlerden Düşüncelere Söyleşiler* [From Dreams to Opinions: Interviews with Halit Refiğ] (Istanbul, 2001), p. 152 [translated].

3. Çağlar Keyder, *State and Class in Turkey: A Study in Capitalist Development* (London, 1987), p. 137.

4. Erik Jan Zürcher, *Turkey: A Modern History* (London, 2004), pp. 250–51.

destruction of his family. It is left to the youngest brother, Luca, to bring together the industrial north and rural south in a vision of unified Italy. According to Sam Rohdie, Visconti's vision is largely based on the ideas of Antonio Gramsci, who saw the north-south question in terms of class. Gramsci drew attention to the exploitation of the south by a political bloc of northern industrialists and large, semifeudal southern landowners. He proposed that resistance required an alliance, guided by the Communist Party, between the northern working class and the southern peasantry against the exploitative relations of capital and its political manifestations. In the Gramscian progressive ideology, social class holds the key to genuine development and real political unity. Thus the real solution required becoming a conscious member of the working class.⁵

Halit Refiğ takes a somewhat different stance on the issue of migration. In *Birds of Exile*, the behavior of the eldest brothers (Selim and Murat) and their emotional predilections also bring about the destruction of the family. However, the main difference is the ending. *Birds of Exile* ends where it started, at the train station. Disillusioned, bankrupt, and tormented, the family decides to return to their hometown Maraş. Kemal, the youngest son, and his fiancée, Ayla, see them off at the station. Studying medicine, Kemal and Ayla plan to go to Maraş and serve the people there when they finish their studies.

In contrast with Visconti's film, social class does not play a significant role in *Birds of Exile*. The film presents two alternative scenarios of success in the city: Haybeci, who started as a porter in Istanbul, has established a successful construction business by the end of the film. Despite the fact that he was penniless when he arrived in the city, he manages to make his way upward. On the other hand, Kemal, who convinces his family to go back to their hometown, becomes integrated into Istanbul by marrying a rich girl, rather than by dint of his own medical credentials and qualifications.

Kemal is the embodiment of the ideology underpinning the film, and *Birds of Exile* concludes with his story. According to Kemal's voice-over narration, it was greed that led to the catastrophe the family went through:

Our first mistake was to move from Maraş to Istanbul, dreaming of conquering this city. We are a family and we should have carefully looked after our limited resources. But instead, we tried to strike out on our own. Rather than supporting each other, everyone went their own way. We tried to seize the blessings of this city without making any contributions. That is why we failed.

5. Sam Rohdie, *Rocco and His Brothers (Rocco e i suoi fratelli)* (London, 1992), pp. 16–17.

Halit Refiğ believes such opportunistic acts are characteristic of the economic system in Turkey and defines it as the "order of plunder." He suggests that in societies that fail to make the transition from feudalism to urban civilization, the economy of production is replaced by an order of plunder. Here, the main motive behind geographical mobility is not access to the means of production but a strong desire to plunder, like an advancing army. Refiğ claims that Turkey does not have an institutionalized society, since there are no strong foundations for economic production.

In this sense, Refiğ was influenced by the prominent thinker and writer Kemal Tahir.⁶ Tahir's views on the socioeconomic structure of Turkey are generally based on Marx's category of the "Asiatic mode of production," which he refers to in *Pre-Capitalist Economic Formations*. According to this approach, land ownership was in the hands of the state in Anatolia for centuries, first under the Selçuks of Rum and then the Ottomans. Tahir believes Turkey is a classless society because private property was introduced rather late. In the 1960s, a major debate among Marxist circles centered on the question as to which historical phase Turkey was currently in. As opposed to those who suggested that Turkey was an Asiatic society lacking a proletariat, as Tahir proposed, the followers of the newly founded Workers' Party of Turkey sought to spread class consciousness and political awareness among workers. As a result, there were strong differences among these groups regarding the means to bring about revolutionary change.

Halit Refiğ, taking up Tahir's analytical perspective, posits that there is transitivity between classes in Turkey, in contrast to the West in which class distinctions are more rigid. That is why the young brothers convey different messages in the two films. As a boxer, Rocco struggles in the arena of the capitalist economy like a gladiator, while the youngest brother becomes a member of the working class. In *Birds of Exile*, neither the youngest brother nor Haybeci join the working class. The latter joins a wealthy club and the former is accepted by an elite group. What does this mean? There are no rigid barriers between classes. Those who can pull something out of the bag can transfer from one class to the other. That is a distinctive feature of Turkish society.⁷

Employing a distorted analysis of the Asiatic mode of production, *Birds of Exile* dreams of an alternative where there is no mobility, rather than offering solutions to the problems of migration. This confusion arises from a misreading of the process of modernization in Turkey. It is true that class struggle specific to the capitalist mode of production was, in the 1960s, not as yet the mobilizing element in social transformations. However, Turkey entered a new phase of capitalist development in those years. In the period 1950–70, Istanbul became the major locus of a new generation

6. Thus, differences between the two films can be read as an ideological clash between two different Marxist approaches: Visconti/Gramsci and Refiğ/Tahir.

7. Türk, *Halit Refiğ*, p. 153 (see note 2).

of large-scale private manufacturing enterprises which were encouraged through financial incentives and protected from the competition of imports through state-imposed tariffs and quotas. This led to rapid economic expansion that benefited from the influx of destitute migrants. Released in the same year as *Birds of Exile*, the film *Karanlıkta uyananlar* [Those Awakening in the Dark] (directed by Ertem Göreç, 1964) hints at developments concerning the emergence of this new working class.

According to Halit Refiğ, in Turkey the main conflict is not between social classes, but between elite state officers and the remainder of society. That is why he is more sympathetic toward the "national" bourgeoisie as opposed to "nonnational" capital. In *Birds of Exile*, there is fierce competition between the two neighboring repair shops. Initially, the hard-working Bakircioğlus are successful. Things start to change, however, when Despina, the wife of the mechanic next door, who is of Greek origin, begins meddling in their affairs. In the end, we learn that Despina duped Selim in order to save her husband's business. This highly problematic portrayal of a non-Muslim couple is another example of the confusions evident in the film. Halit Refiğ, whose family migrated from Thessaloniki, must have been well aware of the fact that the Turkish bourgeoisie gained considerable strength with the elimination and expulsion of non-Muslims from Ottoman lands and subsequently from Turkey after the founding of the Republic in 1923. Even a decade before the film, in September of 1955 there was an organized effort to terrorize the non-Muslim population of Istanbul through a series of coordinated attacks on their shops and houses, which included personal violence as well.

Another significant difference between *Birds of Exile* and *Rocco* is that the father figure in the latter is missing. The father of the Parondi family has passed away before the story actually begins. However, in *Birds of Exile* it is the father who seeks to save the family from destruction and establish his authority over his elder sons. This could be thought of as a transition from a classical Oedipal scenario to a "regime of brothers," but more importantly the father figure serves as a shield against the disintegration of the family whose values and structures are in a state of crisis.

As discussed above, in both films the disintegration of the family is attributed to personal or erotic causes rather than social forces such as migration and alienation. It is, in fact, destructive and self-destructive women who destroy the family. In that sense, the way that the female characters are developed supports the myth of the dualistic nature of woman as an obedient "asexual virgin-mother" and the "prostitute vamp" who is inherently threatening and out of control.⁸ In *Birds of Exile*, the mother and Kemal's fiancée, Ayla, belong to the first group. Fatma, the daughter, is led astray when she befriends their neighbor Mualla, and she struggles to receive validation for

8. Andreas Huyssen, *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism* (Bloomington, IN, 1986), p. 73.



her “desire to desire.” In the end, she opts for freedom through death as a result of her brothers’ condemnation of her way of life.

The second stereotype is mainly signified through Seval, who has run away from her family in Maraş and works as an entertainer (*konsomatris*) at a nightclub. As a “woman of the night,” she seduces Murat. This “prostitute vamp” character poses a threat to male efficiency and rationality, and the male characters try to neutralize this threat with the aim of reestablishing control. This is usually achieved by devaluing and punishing women. In *Birds of Exile*, after being slapped by Murat, Seval is transformed from a sexy prostitute into an innocent, tender woman. Selim also attempts to beat Despina, but instead he punches the wall. This male anxiety is often projected outward onto the city, as if Istanbul represented a threat to the male order, just as the prostitute vamp does. It is notable that in the opening scene, Haybeci calls out: “Hey you, bitch city, beware that Haybeci is coming. I’m going to be your lord.” This male view of the destructiveness of sexuality is a very common theme in Turkish films about migration.⁹

9. Feride Çiçekoğlu, *Vesikalî Şehir* (Istanbul, 2006).

“Who Cares About Turkish Cinema?”

In an article that obviously targeted an international audience and was rather ironically titled “Who Cares About Turkish Cinema?”, Halit Refiğ concluded: “Virtually nobody, including the Turkish state and Turkish intellectuals, with the exception of perhaps only the Turkish people themselves.”¹⁰ In his plea for attention, one can sense a strong desire to be recognized, not by the Turkish state or intellectuals, however, but by the people (hence, so-called “people’s cinema”) and the West. This is a common desire for almost all national cinemas. But let’s look more closely into this relationship between Turkish cinema and the West. In the article, Refiğ mentions his latest film project, *Impossibly Yours*, a working title that was later replaced with *I Lost My Heart to a Turk* (1969). The film is based on a newspaper story about a German woman (played by Refiğ’s wife at the time, Eva Bender) who is searching for her husband in Turkey. After finding out that her husband has married another woman, she decides to stay in Turkey. This representation of Europe as a young woman who falls in love with a mature Oriental man is a common motif which can be found frequently in the nineteenth-century Western novel. However, it is precisely this inverted Orientalist perspective and confused ideology that makes the recognition impossible. Being someone else requires a self-critical and even ironic approach to one’s own identity. I believe that is why *Birds of Exile* failed to be recognized as a classic and why this new wave was doomed to isolation in the search for international recognition as national cinema.

10. Halit Refiğ, “Who Cares About Turkish Cinema?” In *FIBA: Actualité* 1 (1969).