

CITY OF INTRIGUES

Istanbul as an Exotic Attraction

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ISTANBUL HAS BEEN a popular setting for international film-makers since the inception of cinema. In 1896, Alexander Promio, a cameraman working for the Lumière Brothers, visited the city and filmed two of the most spectacular places in Istanbul: the Bosphorus and the Golden Horn. *Panorama de la Corne d'Or* and *Panorama des rives du Bosphore* both consist of a single tracking shot filmed from a rowboat, documenting Istanbul's deep intimacy with the sea. These bodies of water are the quintessential starting point for almost every depiction of Istanbul. Particularly well-known is the Galata Bridge with its panoramic view over the Golden Horn, and most international cinematic tours of Istanbul start with a tracking or aerial shot over the bridge.

During the silent era, Istanbul was often represented as an exotic, foreign locale, holding to Orientalist tropes. In these films, western heroes rescue beautiful girls from the hands of mischievous sheikhs, as in Tod Browning's *The Virgin of Stamboul* (1920).

During and after World War II, Istanbul, as a city of espionage and political intrigues, became an ideal destination for film noir. *Journey into Fear* (Norman Foster, 1943), *Background to Danger* (Raoul Walsh, 1943), *The Mask of Dimitrios* (Jean Negulesco, 1944) and *5 Fingers* (Joseph L. Mankiewicz, 1952) all depict a city rife with mystery and intrigue. These films offer an atmospheric studio version of Istanbul with occasional stock footage, while hints of realism were added with signs written in Turkish, street sounds and rear projection.

Stories of geopolitical intrigue continued during the Cold War era with *From Russia with Love* (Terence Young, 1963). Sean Connery as James Bond discovers some of the most prominent sites of Istanbul in the film: the Blue Mosque, Dolmabahce Palace and the Bosphorus. The mysterious underground passage in the film is in fact the Basilica Cistern (*Yerebatan Saray*). Urban legends abound about the Basilica Cistern, which was originally used for water storage for the Byzantine Palace. As a space that connects the world above with a world below, it constituted an ideal setting for mystery and horror in a number of films. Jules Dassin's *Topkapi* (1964), apart from such historical sites, also depicted scenes of an Istanbul which was newly modernizing, including the Istanbul Hilton, a symbol of capitalism and modernity that was built in 1954.

A rather different depiction of Istanbul appears in Alain Robbe-Grillet's *L'immortelle* (1963). Shot entirely on location *L'immortelle* tries to capture the well-known postcard images of Istanbul. However, the film suggests that these tourist images are constructed through the fantasies of the main character N and us, the spectators. The mosques, secret gardens, and harems of this 'legendary





world' form a backdrop for N's erotic fantasies. Similarly, *Vampiros lesbos* (Jesus Franco, 1971) employs some of the conventions of European art cinema to create an atmosphere of erotic intrigue. In this film, directed by Jesus 'Jess' Franco, the Princes' Islands, off the coast of Istanbul, form the setting for an otherworldly venture into lust and ruses.

Sidney Lumet's *Murder on the Orient Express* (1974) recreates the atmosphere of 1930s Istanbul. Apart from picturesque images of Istanbul, hotel Pera Palas, where Agatha Christie used to stay, is also featured in the film. *Midnight Express* (Alan Parker, 1978), on the other hand, is mostly set in a prison, but Istanbul is briefly seen when the main character attempts to escape in a crowded market. The film was critiqued for its portrayal of Turkey and the Turkish people.

Istanbul has also been depicted as a refuge for the destitute and heart-broken charac-

ters of European cinema. In *Zombie ja Kummitusjuna/Zombie* and the *Ghost Train* (Mika Kaurismäki, 1991), *Zombie* (Silu Sepala), who is adrift in depression, slips away to Istanbul. In this film, Istanbul is a ghost city full of melancholic

drinkers who gather at the bars under Galata Bridge. Galata Bridge also appears in *La fille sur le pont/The Girl on the Bridge* (Patrice Leconte, 1999), this time as the final destination. The knife-thrower Gabor (Daniel Auteuil) decides to end his life there, by throwing himself into the waters of the Golden Horn after he is separated from his lover.

Istanbul has also attracted many other figures of world cinema. In Jackie Chan's *Te wu mi cheng/The Accidental Spy* (Teddy Chan, 2001), the Grand Bazaar was yet again selected for the setting of a chase. Globally expanding Bollywood also visited Istanbul recently. *Mission Istanbul: Daar Ke Aagey Jeet Hai!* (Apoorva Lakhia, 2008) features chase and action scenes in various districts of Istanbul, including the Grand Bazaar and its roof. With its maze-like structure, the fifteenth century Bazaar provides an ideal setting for action and adventure.

In recent years, Hollywood also returned to its city of intrigues with yet another James Bond movie, *The World is Not Enough* (Michael Apted, 1999), in which villain Elektra King plans to destroy Istanbul by detonating a nuclear submarine in the Bosphorus. The film includes a scene at the Maiden's Tower, located at the mouth of the Bosphorus and yet another typical postcard image of the city. Most recently, Tom Tykwer's *The International* (2009) includes Istanbul among many locales as part of a global intrigue. The Interpol detective Louis Salinger (Clive Owen), hoping to wrap up his investigation in Istanbul, ultimately fails after a series of tailings and chases in the Blue Mosque, Basilica Cistern and Grand Bazaar.

Despite the differences in their origin and genre, the similarities between these cinematic texts are striking. They often use the same landmarks, starting with the Galata Bridge and ending at the Grand Bazaar via the Blue Mosque. In fact, the clichés of how Istanbul is signified in cinema has not changed much since the early travelogues. As a cosmopolitan city, Istanbul provides a setting for a number of binary oppositions such as East-West, communist-capitalist, Asian-American, and exotic-modern. These ideological oppositions reinforce the conventions of cinema tinged by Orientalist tropes in most of the films set in Istanbul, whether old or new. ✱

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