A transboundary cinema : Tunç Okan’s trilogy of im/migration

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Conclusion

Since his acting career started in 1965, Okan lived, worked, and made films in five different countries: Turkey, Germany, Switzerland, Sweden, and France. Just like the filmmaker himself, Okan's cinema is semi-nomadic, as it has continuously 'travelled' between different film styles, genres, aesthetics, and approaches since his debut film, *The Bus*. Okan is an eclectic filmmaker. He adapts, borrows, imitates, and, at times, even copies ideas and approaches from a diverse group of creators within film and literature, ranging from Aziz Nesin to Friedrich Dürrenmatt, from Jacques Tati to Jack Clayton. Like any nomad, Okan travels lightly, bringing only a few essentials with him from one film to the next. His *serio-comical* vision, which sees the good in the bad, and the bad in the good, and his split reception-invoking multi-layered structure are some of the most persistent of these features. Whichever subject he chooses, and whichever genre or film style he utilises, Okan's cinema persistently exhibits them.

Okan's serio-comical vision manifests itself in his persistent use of dark comedy elements, often bordering on the grotesque. As discussed in the previous chapters, dark comedy is not a common film feature either in Turkey or in Europe. Okan is a member of a very small group of European filmmakers who persistently employ dark comedy elements in all their films. If one takes into account financial and aesthetic independence, the number of filmmakers in this group shrinks even further. British

filmmaker Ken Loach, the Czechoslovak filmmakers Miloš Forman and Jan Němec, Swedish filmmaker Roy Andersson, Swiss filmmaker Rolf Lyssy, and Yugoslav filmmaker Emir Kusturica are perhaps among the most well-known filmmakers who can be placed in the same group. In comparison to these filmmakers, Okan is still an unknown name.

Although they use particular local events, issues, and stories as inspiration or starting points, Okan's films always approach their subjects with an international ambition and international viewer in mind. In *The Bus*, Okan's illegal migrants are from rural Turkey, but the ethnic or national identities of the characters are reduced to a hard-to-detect, insignificant, and irrelevant detail in the film. "The Turkishness of the passengers is a coincidence, (…) they could have very well been Italian, Spanish, Portuguese, or Arab, and this would not have changed anything in the film".[294] In *Funny Saturday*, Okan moves his focus to a set of interconnected short stories he observed in Switzerland, his country of residence at that time. Although the majority of these stories represent real events, Okan depicts these events in such a way that they do not feature any specific local references. This is demonstrated clearly by the successful Turkification of the film. In *The Yellow Mercedes*, Okan manages to depict a local story in such a way that the focus on the relationship between the film's protagonist and his automobile becomes more important than any particular local, political, or cultural aspect of the story.

Sociopolitical awareness and commentary are other persistent features in Okan's films. Although they revolve around different plots and characters, all four films are critical films, offering commentary on a wide variety of issues ranging from consumerism to human trafficking, im/migration to bureaucracy, orientalism to biopolitics, and alienation to commodity fetishism.

Okan's persistent effort to reach an international audience while dealing with local issues invokes a *split reception* on the audience. Without exception, all Okan's films can be read, at

least, in two different contexts: within a history of Turkey's national cinema; and in relation to European (art) cinema. This is because, despite his consistently expressed desire to make films for the wider world keeping an international audience in mind, Okan's films consistently employ features that specifically speak to a local audience in Turkey, addressing issues that are of significant importance to it. Okan cannot ignore this audience, as he is strongly connected to Turkey, its people, and his memories of his country of birth despite living abroad uninterruptedly since 1967. He also cannot ignore the international audience, for he is a committed humanist, interested in the human condition much more than in any national or cultural-specific issue. This is the grand tension reigning in Okan's cinema.

This tension is a double-edged sword: both a boon and a bane. While trying to reach different kinds of audiences, Okan, at times, fails to reach either of them. His latest film, *Umut Üzümleri* (Grapes of Hope), is a case in point, as the film was welcomed neither by Turkish nor by international audiences. Before proceeding to discuss what might be possible reasons behind the film's failure in attracting the attention of Turkish and international audiences, I shall provide a short introduction to the film.

Okan completed his fourth, and at the time of writing, the latest film, *Grapes of Hope*, in 2012, some twenty years after *The Yellow Mercedes*. Just like *The Yellow Mercedes* and his second film *Funny Saturday*, Okan's latest film has strong ties to literature, as it is an intermediate adaptation of the prominent Turkish social realist Fakir Baykurt's 1967 novel *Kaplumbağalar* (The Tortoises). Although it was only completed in 2012, *Grapes of Hope* had been a film in the making ever since Okan's debut film. Okan bought the filming rights from Baykurt in late 1979, just two years after *The Bus*' release in Turkey, and applied for a filming permit to the country's film control commission in early 1983 with a complete script, only to be rejected with the claim that the script humiliates the state and its officials.[295] Despite

convincing, and signing agreements with, Anthony Quinn and Nastassja Kinski to perform the main roles in the early 1980s, Okan could not realise the project due to financial restraints and bureaucratic hurdles until 2012.[296]

Grapes of Hope is an escapist comedy. It revolves around the adventures of a small central Anatolian village's inhabitants in their struggle to create a vineyard on a barren hillside, and take the property back after it is unjustly confiscated and given to a local bourgeois by the corrupt local bureaucracy. Like his previous films, apart from a very few professional actors appearing in leading roles, the film features predominantly amateur actors. Almost all villagers in the film are actual villagers living near the shooting location. Unlike his previous films, this film follows a classical linear narration, utilises identification mechanisms, and delivers a neat resolution of conflicts after resorting to a number of schematic narrative devices. *Grapes of Hope* was shot in a mock-up village built entirely from scratch for the film, reminiscent of villages in Hollywood westerns. Building a mock-up village is an unusual move, not only for Okan, but also for the film industry in Turkey.

Despite being an escapist comedy, Okan employs dark comedy elements comparable to the ones in *Funny Saturday*, as the film oscillates between dark comedy and slapstick. This oscillation is visible particularly in his depiction of the bureaucrats. For example, in one of the scenes, two land surveyors, one fat and one quite skinny, arrive in the village to survey the vineyard after learning that the villagers managed it on a barren piece of land, which until then, no one ever cared for. The surveyors are clearly reminiscent of iconic slapstick duo Laurel and Hardy. Welcomed by the village's mukhtar, they are invited for dinner. Accepting the invitation, the surveyors sit at a floor table, laid on the ground for them, and wait for the food. While waiting, the skinny surveyor leaves the table for the toilet. In the toilet, which is a stand-alone open-pit latrine, the surveyor notices chickens feeding on the human waste coming from the toilet. Disgusted

by what he saw, he returns to the table. Shortly after returning, the mukhtar's wife appears with a fried chicken, which, according to the mukhtar, is freshly slaughtered and homegrown. Seeing the chicken, the skinny surveyor says that he cannot eat it. Not having seen what the skinny surveyor saw while in the toilet, the fat surveyor starts to eat the chicken with a good appetite. Seeing the skinny official not eating anything, the mukhtar asks his wife to prepare something else for the man. She brings fried eggs this time instead.

Baykurt's work places its narration somewhere in the late 1940s and early 1950s. Okan transforms this time-specific story into a timeless one, which sends confusing signals regarding the historical and logical consistency of these events. For instance, while some of the events, particularly those in the city, seem to take place at the beginning of the 2000s, a big part of the film seems to be stuck somewhere in the 1950s. Strangely, this is not a result of a time-cut between these different times and places; instead, the film depicts the events as happening simultaneously and in close proximity to one another. Such a depiction creates a strange filmic land and timescape presenting a

21st-century modern city with its mobile phones and sports cars, and a 1950s village without electricity and running water next to one another. Stranger still is that the inhabitants of the village in this filmic universe seem to be unaware of the most basic benefits and requirements of modern urban life, such as traffic lights and pedestrian crossings.

Baykurt narrates his story in part from the perspective of a revolutionary teacher, appointed to the village by the newly established Republic's progressive government. Okan preserves the teacher figure in the film and narrates the story from his perspective, but he depicts him as a second-generation Turkish immigrant living in France instead, who decides to work in the village as part of a European Union project. This modification is one of two insignificant details that relate the film to Okan's im/migration trilogy, because the narration is seen through the eyes of an immigrant. The other detail which loosely ties the film to the trilogy is the depiction of the villagers as Crimean Tatars displaced by Soviet dictator Joseph Stalin's deportation policies. However, the supposed Crimean Tatar identity of the villagers is not a detectable feature and is communicated only through a short text inserted at the end of the film. Like the immigrant teacher, the Crimean Tatars do not exist in Baykurt's original work, as his villagers are Alevis, a religious minority in Turkey. Despite these newly added features, *Grapes of Hope* is neither concerned with im/migration nor with im/migrants. For this reason, I have left the film out of the trilogy and this study's main scope of interest. Still, it has some other elements in common with the previous films, such as Okan's persistent seriocomical vision, his sociopolitical awareness and commentary, and international ambition.

Okan explained that he made certain alterations in the original story, such as the identity of the teacher, because he wanted to make the film more accessible to a non-Turkish audience.[297] Obviously, such a strategy is a simple and effective one in the transformation of a local plot into a more internationally

accessible film. However, at times, such a strategy can also have unforeseen consequences, as it does in *Grapes of Hope*. As mentioned earlier, Okan reimagines Baykurt's teacher, the narrator in both the book and the film, as a second-generation Turkish immigrant living in Europe. Okan's re-imagination of the character transforms *Grapes of Hope* into an orientalist, and even a self-orientalist, narration, which is by no means the case in Baykurt's novel. In his book *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient*, Edward Said observes that many European Orientalists perceive and depict the Oriental individual as "irrational, depraved (fallen), childlike" while positioning Europeans as "rational, virtuous, [and] mature" in relation to the Oriental.[298] Such a perception codes the Oriental as someone who is incapable and in need of guidance. If one remembers the euphemistic name given to French colonial missions, *Mission Civilisatrice* (Civilising Mission), one would see that such a perception is neither unique nor limited to orientalists, but widely shared during the colonial era, and, albeit not as powerful, a persisting one today. Bearing Said's observation in mind, one can detect an obvious orientalist representation of the villagers in *Grapes of Hope*.

The film opens with the arrival of the teacher to the village, consisting of only a couple of houses located on a barren hilltop in the middle of nowhere. There is neither an obvious nor a convincing sign in the film to justify the existence of the village in that location, as the villagers do not seem to do anything but farm a small patch of land until the arrival of the teacher. Shortly after his arrival, the teacher convinces and *guides* the villagers to undertake the project of trying to create a vineyard on a barren hillside. In Baykurt's novel, this storyline serves the ideological function of promoting the revolutionary teacher as well as the policies of the progressive government which appointed him to the village. In Okan's storyline, even though he is of Turkish origin, the European teacher invokes a completely different reading. With the re-imagining of the teacher as European, Okan reduces the villagers to oriental subjects in need

of guidance, while positioning the teacher as "the European civiliser". Watching the scene in which the teacher teaches a villager how to use traffic lights to cross the road in a chaotic city centre, this civilising mission becomes undeniably obvious. Interestingly, in *Grapes of Hope*, Okan not only depicts the oriental villagers as "childlike", but literary as children, as many of the inhabitants of the village happen to be children who are literally *schooled* by the teacher. Furthermore, if one considers the fact that the teacher is not a European foreigner but a "Europeanised" Turk, the relationship between the teacher and the villagers signals something that goes beyond the individual relationship between these characters. The "Europeanised" Turkish teacher positions Europe as a civilised domain where anyone, even an oriental individual like himself, can be civilised by living there and/or internalising its values, while positioning the orient as a domain that is to be guided and civilised. In this conceptualisation, Europe (the Occident) is depicted as the source of "light" of "enlightenment", a place where anyone can come and receive this light, thus get enlightened, while the Orient is depicted as a place in the "dark" that needs to be enlightened by the selfless torchbearers of the Occident.

One may wonder if these changes which transform Baykurt's social realist story into a Yeşilçam style cliché-ridden film that revolves around the experiences of a selfless, devoted missionary-like European teacher versus donkey-riding thick-skulled villagers who are unaware of the world outside of their village, are introduced to embolden the comedy aspect of the film. Unfortunately, the answer is no. This is because, the replacement of the Turkish teacher with a Europeanised one does not add the film anything other than a more contemporary temporal context—which itself makes the temporal continuity of the film problematic as discussed before—and a self-orientalist perspective. The Europeanised Turkish teacher does not make the film any funnier or ironic than it could have been if he was kept as imagined by Baykurt. Unlike what he does in his second film, *Funny Saturday*, Okan does not introduce clichés and stereo-

types in *Grapes of Hope* in order to make fun of them, instead, he takes them seriously and tries to build his narration on them, which, in my opinion, does not work.

Despite this and a few other problematic aspects discussed in the previous chapters, such as the Occidentalist tone in the Turkified version of *Funny Saturday*, Okan's films provide a considerable level of depth concerning the issues of im/migration and modern human's problematic relationship with commodities. These issues are core thematic elements in his films. Regardless of their plot lines, in varying degrees and significance, his films always revolve around these two core themes. These themes are overlapping and intertwined in the films. Okan always investigates them simultaneously, and furthermore, in dialogue with each other. In the trilogy, Okan's im/migrant characters are defined and developed through their interactions with commodities. In *The Bus*, the would-be foreign workers travel to Sweden illegally with the hope of finding a better life and having better access to commodities. While these would-be workers are defined through their destitution, and by their desire to end it by travelling to Sweden, the film's villain, the bus driver,

is defined through his greed, fetishistic attachment to, and praise of, modern technology, and the commodities he acquired in Europe. Furthermore, Okan establishes the film's main axis of conflict as the clash between those who have and those who have not. In his second film, *Funny Saturday*, Okan continues his investigation by placing an immigrant couple in a literal marketplace and observing their interactions with the market, commodities, and the culture of consumption. In *The Yellow Mercedes*, Okan continues his investigation by focusing on a Turkish guest worker's fetishistic attachment to his newly bought automobile. Even though the teacher is portrayed as an immigrant, and the villagers as Crimean Tatars, migration and migration-related discourses are reduced to peripheral and insignificant references in *Grapes of Hope*. Human's problematic relationship with commodities, on the other hand, continues to serve as the central thematic concern, articulated through the struggle between the inhabitants of the village and the local bourgeois over the ownership of the vineyard. Here, Okan again places capitalistic commodity fetishism and bureaucracy in his line of fire. This time, commodity fetishism is addressed through the examination of the local bourgeoisie's unceasing appetite for money, farmland, and the vineyard.

Beyond giving it a self-orientalist tone, Okan's alterations of the original story also make the film a less realistic and less convincing for a Turkish audience. Despite its downsides, and its failure to attract attention in Turkey and abroad, *Grapes of Hope* is still a manifestation of Okan's unceasing desire to look for new ways of storytelling. For the first time, he utilises the classical narration strategy that is often used by commercial cinemas, such as those of Hollywood and Yeşilçam. He uses clear-cut good and bad characters, linear narration, identification mechanism, and a neat resolution of conflicts. During the several meetings I had with him, Okan was generous enough to allow me to read the script of his fifth film project, which he has been working on for some time, and informed me of his plans to make a commercial film by fully following commercial cinemas'

tried and tested recipes, narration methods, and marketing and distribution mechanisms. Keeping this in mind, one can see *Grapes of Hope* as a practising ground for a shift in Okan's cinema.

There are only a few filmmakers from Turkey who are internationally known. Many of my friends, even those who are interested in cinema, cannot name any filmmaker other than Yılmaz Güney, and less so, Nuri Bilge Ceylan. Though certainly important filmmakers, their films by themselves are not enough to understand and appreciate Turkey's rich cinema landscape, which is still one of the most productive national cinemas in the world today. If one wishes to acquire a deeper understanding of Turkey's (art) cinema, one can watch and study a long and diverse list of films by filmmakers including, but not limited to, Lütfi Ömer Akad, Metin Erksan, Halit Refiğ, Duygu Sağıroğlu, Şerif Gören, Zeki Ökten, Ömer Kavur, Erden Kıral, Nesli Çölgeçen, Tevfik Başer, Yeşim Ustaoğlu, Kutluğ Ataman, Zeki Demirkubuz, Derviş Zaim, Reha Erdem, Semih Kaplanoğlu, Ümit Ünal, Pelin Esmer, Özcan Alper, Tolga Karaçelik, and Emin Alper. Tunç Okan is one of the most essential names on this list, not only because he is one of the first independent Turkish filmmakers, but also because he is one of the earliest filmmakers from Turkey who made films with the ambition to reach an international audience. I hope this study will contribute to adding Okan's name to the list of internationally known filmmakers from Turkey and encourage people to discover and study his cinema more closely.

Notes

[294] "Otobüs ya da insan sevgisi" in *Tunç Okan, Otobüs*. Pan Film, 1977.
[295] Luxembourgeus. 195, 246-247.
[296] Ibid. 249-253.
[297] Ibid. 197.
[298] Said. 40.