

## Turkish cinema in the 2000s: an interview with turkish director Emin Alper

Mehmet Işık & Funda Masdar Kara\*

Emin Alper was born in Konya on 13 August 1974. Alper studied at Ankara Science High School and then Economics at Boğaziçi University. After graduating from Boğaziçi University, he completed his postgraduate studies and obtained his doctorate in Modern Turkish History at the Atatürk Institute for Modern Turkish History of the same university (Donmez-Colin, 2014).

Emin Alper directed two short films *The letter* (2005) and *Rıfat* (2006) before his first long film *Beyond the Hill* (*Tepenin Ardı*), a family drama set in an Anatolian town. *Beyond the Hill*, written and directed by Alper, won 16 national and international awards including "Caligari Film Award" at the Berlin Film Festival and the "Best Film Award" at the Asia Pacific Film Awards as well as the Istanbul Film Festival. In 2013, he received the "Best Director Award" for the film *Beyond the Hill* at the 24th Ankara International Film Festival.

*Beyond the Hill* tells the story of Faik, his son, his grandsons, and a Yoruk (nomad) family who worked for him in the Turkish wilderness of Anatolia. The story is focused on Faik's conflicts with the Yoruks who, he claims, live *Beyond the Hill* but who, apart from their presence in Faik's discourse, never actually appear throughout the film. By telling this story of the Yoruks, whose existence is a "fiction" and whose reality is "fictionalized" Emin Alper displays people's need and tendency to see others as enemies.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, he shows that the "reality" of individuals and societies is also a fiction, built upon an ontological void that threatens to engulf that very reality (Gündoğdu, 2014: 27).

His film *Frenzy* (*Abluka*, 2015) won the Special Jury Prize in the official competition of the 72nd Venice International Film Festival. The film, also screened in the Contemporary World Cinema section of the 2015 Toronto International Film Festival, won several awards at national film festivals, including the best film, the best director and the best scenario. *Frenzy* is the story of two

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1. After 12 September 1980 Turkish Coup D'état Turkey became the laboratory of neoliberal politics. As a result of these politics, identities become more important than ever in different subcultures and ethnics started to see others as enemies.

brothers as they strive to survive in the environment of political violence in the slum neighbourhood where they live, which has been blockaded as a security measure.

Alper teaches at Istanbul Technical University in Department of Humanities and Social Sciences. He also writes on cinema and politics in several Turkish magazines such as *Tarih ve Toplum*, *Birikim*, *Mesele*, *Altyazı*, and *Görüntü*.

This interview took place at Istanbul Technical University on the 2<sup>nd</sup> of June 2016.

Mehmet Işık: You are one of the most important directors of the New Turkish Cinema.<sup>2</sup> Your films contributed to the renovation process of the Turkish cinema. How can you define this renovation process in the New Turkish Cinema?

**Emin Alper:** This is obviously related with the developing of financial conditions of the Turkish cinema. As it is well known, cinema is highly depended on money. If we can talk about an emerging generation of Turkish filmmakers, it is mostly related with the boom of the production in Turkey. 15 years ago, the number of yearly productions was not more than 10. Last year more than 100 films were produced. One of the reasons of this production boom is commercial. Blockbusters discovered a very lively domestic market in the last years and most of the productions are being produced for this market. Second reason is the emergence of public funding for films. In 2004 the government decided to fund Turkish films. Many art-house films were produced with the support of this fund. For many directors, including me, it was impossible to shoot films without this support. The increase of production somehow led to the increase of good films.

**Funda Masdar Kara:** What do you think about the future of the New Turkish Cinema?

**EA:** More and more new directors are showing up nowadays. Almost every year, we are welcoming at least one remarkable new director in Turkey. There are many new directors coming each year, and some of them are really promising. Moreover, the second and third films of the second generation of Turkish cinema after Nuri Bilge Ceylan's, Zeki Demirkubuz' and Yeşim Ustaoglu's generation are coming in the last years. And these directors are

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2. The Turkish Cinema emerging after 90s has generally been called as "The New Turkish Cinema" defined as a cinema that "put the crisis of identity and belonging in Turkey crystalizing gradually since 90s on the agenda and argued in the frame of varying cinematic, philosophical and ideological stances" (Suner, 2004, s.257; transmitting Mencütekin, 2014)

showing that they are at the beginning of a bright career. So, I am optimistic about the future of the New Turkish Cinema. Not only numerically improving, but new styles and new searches are appearing with this new generation. There is considerable amount of variance in the style of new directors.

**MI:** Many researchers and academicians find Turkish cinema apolitical. Can you evaluate the relations between the Turkish cinema and politics?

**EA:** To say that the Turkish cinema is apolitical is a harsh statement. The previous generation maybe was not very much involved with politics in their films, but the new generation is quite different in that sense. Özcan Alper, Hüseyin Karabey, Erol Mintaş, Seren Yüce and I shot films which are directly or indirectly political. Sometimes, a film is not directly political but involves a political sensitivity or perspective. For instance, *Motherland* by Senem Tüzen is such kind of a film. I think we will see these kind of films more and more in the New Turkish Cinema because politically we are passing through very hard conditions nowadays, so that everyone feels that they have to do something to protect their freedom. So everyone is pushed and forced to be political these days. We will definitely see the results of these experiences in the near future.

**FMK:** How can you define your cinema? Do you find your movies political?

**EA:** I prefer not to define it

**MI:** Turkish cinema seems to be experiencing a new wave of filmmaking. Has the New Turkish Cinema reached a level that you hope will inspire younger generations?

**EA:** Honestly, I do not know. We can never be sure before seeing the obvious inspirations in the upcoming generation. The elder generation inspired us. So I hope that new films will inspire the newer generations.

**FMK:** What are your favourite New Turkish Cinema directors and films after 2000s?

**EA:** Nuri Bilge Ceylan's *Once upon a time in Anatolia* and *Three monkeys*, Yeşim Ustaoglu's *Araf*, Reha Erdem's *Times and winds*, Zeki Demirkubuz's *Underground*, Taylan Brothers' *Vavien*, Seren Yüce's *Majority* are among my favourites.

**MI:** Your films are highly appreciated all around the world. Your films won awards from lots of national and international film festivals. Can you explain the underlying reasons of the success of your films?

**EA:** It is difficult to answer it. I am just trying to make good films. I am trying to write stories that catch many people around the world, and I am trying to deal with universal themes. And I do my best to make a good film

**FMK:** Can you tell us which film that you have directed that is your favourite one? *Beyond the Hill* or *Frenzy*?

**EA:** For the time being, the second one, *Frenzy* is my favourite. It was hard to shoot, but it was more exciting cinematically. However, I can change my idea. Maybe ten years from now, I will see these two films again and I will change my idea.

**MI:** You have a harmony of style and themes. Do you consider your films as a continuation of each other?

**EA:** There are certain continuities in terms of themes. Although the styles of these two films are a little bit different, in content there is some similarities. The concepts of “hidden enemy” and social paranoia which emanates from or directs to political conflict are common themes. The mixture of dream and reality is also a characteristic style that can be seen in both films.

**FMK:** What are the most problematic points in filmmaking in the New Turkish Cinema?

**EA:** The financial difficulties are still the most important problems. The fund of the Ministry of Culture is very helpful for us, but it is not enough. In European system there are some other resources apart from the main public fund of your country. But, in Turkey, there is only one source. It is very hard to find co-producers in Turkey. TV channels are not interested in investing in our films. So we are dependent on only one fund, which is not enough to finance your whole budget.

**MI:** What are the challenges you have to encounter when you are making a film?

**EA:** The main limitation is money of course. In my both films [*Beyond the Hill* and *Frenzy*], I had to rush during the shooting, since we did not have enough time for the shooting. It is really tiring, to work in these conditions. The level of professionalism of turkish cinema increased highly in the last years, but still we need further expertise. The dog shooting scenes and the all scenes with the little dog were very difficult in my last film [*Frenzy*]. I wish we would have better trained dogs

**FMK:** What can be done, in order to make Turkish cinema successful worldwide?

**EA:** The financial conditions should be improved, and there must be complete freedom. We should have the opportunity of financing all kinds of films, including the “scandalous” ones.

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