THE CITY ON SCREEN

MODERN STRANGERS OF CINEMATIC ISTANBUL

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I dedicate this book to my family...

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This book, written as a Ph.D. thesis at Lancaster University, is the harvest of an inner journey on the part of its author. It took around three years to complete. During that period, I have made some valuable observations about myself and my soul along the way. Horace's quote is, in this sense, important: "Quid rides? *Mutato nomine de te fabula narratur*" — "Why you laugh? Change the name and the story is told of you". Yes, this was my own story. As Flaubert said, "Chacun de nous a un prisme à travers lequel il apercoit le monde" — "Each of us has a prism through which he sees the world". My prism was films and books and, while watching and reading, I encountered my own self most of all. Indeed, we all face ourselves in the books that we read and in the films that we watch, do we not? We sometimes emulate or sometimes hate these fictional characters and stories. But perhaps unwittingly, a constructive and destructive link is positioned between ourselves and those stories. As for the films and books that we ourselves create, they are not independent from the people and conditions that support or restrain us. In this respect, I must admit that I was quite lucky, considering the fact that I was always in close contact with my spiritual mentor, an encouraging family, and a supportive wife, even during her pregnancy. What a nice coincidence that I completed this book at the very moment when my first son was born. His fantastic journey into my lap motivated me even more to complete this book. Two births at the same time! Some arguments in this book have been published as scientific articles and papers in academic journals. Undoubtedly, each journey requires well-directed guidance. In this respect, I thank my supervisors, Prof. Bulent Diken and Prof. Graeme Gilloch, who always trusted and encouraged me to keep walking on my inner journey without any concerns. Also, this journey would not have been successful without my friends' support and contributions. Many thanks to Mirza-Gülfinaz-Fatma-Murat-Neslihan-Serhat-Gulcin Demir, Aziz-Keziban Sendur, Ihsan Erikli, Yavuz Selim, Baris Okumus, Adnan Moray, Nurettin Bagis, Mustafa Canli, Ibrahim Ethem Bagci, Berivan Saltik, Ebru Thwaites Diken, Muzeyyen Pandir, Emre Barca, Nader Talebi, Abdullah Leonidas Pollakis and all the other kind-hearted friends who have helped me along this journey.

CHAPTER ONE INTRODUCTION: THE CITY ON SCREEN

"The society we live in is an urban society: people live together in great density, travel a lot; in the course of their daily business they enter very diverse areas inhabited by very diverse people, move from one town to another, or from one part of town to another. In the course of one day we meet far too many people to know them all. In most cases, we cannot be sure that people we meet uphold our standards. Almost constantly we are struck by new sights and sounds we do not fully comprehend; worse still, hardly ever do we have time to pause, reflect and make an honest attempt to understand. The world we live in seems to be populated mostly by strangers; it looks like the world of universal strangerhood. We live among strangers, among whom we are strangers ourselves. In such a world, strangers cannot be confined or kept at bay. Strangers must be lived with"

Zygmunt Bauman, Thinking Sociologically, 1990: 63

1.1. Introduction

This book is an attempt to analyze how Istanbul is captured through the projector. In other words, the ontological relationship between city and film is elaborated in the context of Istanbul and of the sense of strangerhood. Since cinematic Istanbul has usually been described as a touristic or exotic city in various written works and research, my aim in this book is to shift the axis of Istanbul studies from the center to its corners, from its visible features to its underlying details through strangers of the modern city. For this purpose, I analyze five different films that may help to reveal and clarify the socio-urban life of modern Istanbul. These films can be seen as crucial crossroads or chronological witnesses that deal with the story of contemporary Istanbul during the last half-century. A Touch of Spice (2004), the first film in the book, is a story of Greek strangers who were deported from Istanbul to Athens in the 1960s. This event has had a destructive effect on the multi-layered notion and multi-national background of the city. One of the other fragile factors in Istanbul's urban life is the internal immigration flows from Anatolia to the city.

Men on the Bridge (2009) focuses on the lives of those strangers who are pushed away from the center to the margins of society. In the third film, A Run for Money (1999), I discuss how the money economy has changed the moral values of Istanbulites and how it defictionalizes some of them as strangers. Distant (2002), the fourth film, which can be interpreted as an amalgam of the previous problems that were dealt with in the book (i.e., deportation, migration, and the money economy), provides a basis for realizing the reasons and results of stranger hood under the influence of the urbanization, individualization, isolation, and modernization processes extant in Istanbul. Last but not least, 10 to 11 (2009) zooms in on an old stranger who cannot integrate into the changes of urban life. This film raises the question of where the midpoint between now and eternity, between risk and security, and between memory and urban transformation stands. The characters and stories in these films tell how Istanbul has socially and architecturally become a city of strangers. Fanis: a Greek minority; Mustafa: a nationalist soldier; Cemile: a housewife; Umut: a driver; Fikret: an impoverished flower seller; Murat: a police officer; Selim: a shop owner; Mahmut: a photographer; Yusuf: an unemployed man; and Mithat: a passionate collector- each of them separately (and holistically) makes the hopes and tragedies of Istanbul blatantly visible. All these characters, even though they spend all of their lives in the city of Istanbul, are paradoxically strangers to modern Istanbul.

Before writing this book, I came across a seven-minute documentary entitled *Istanbul.* It is about Istanbul and was made by the BBC in 1967.¹ Throughout the film, which supports the cinematic representations of Hollywood and Yesilcam,² an English narrator persistently underlines how Istanbul is one of the most ancient cities in the world, while the most typical exotic places are seen utilizing a panoramic view: Istanbul's (Theodosian) Walls, the Hagia Sophia, the Blue Mosque, the Galata Tower, the Golden Horn, the Galata Bridge, Taksim square, wooden mansions on the Bosporus, ports, palaces, other mosques, etc. In parallel to this visual emphasis, Istanbul is defined as *a mysterious city between East and West* and is a world in which men, most of whom are perceived as carefree and rapturous (because they are seen either

¹ This film can be accessed via YouTube utilizing the following web address: http:// www.youtube.com/watch?v=fK09Vz75EyQ.

²Yesilcam refers to an Istanbul-centered era in Turkish cinema between the 1950s and 1980s. It involves mostly melancholic stories and characters (Ozturk, 2020; Yildirim, 2021; Tanrivermis, 2021; Donmez and Imik, 2022) As Richardson, Gorbman and Vernallis state, the Yesilcam industry is the Turkish equivalent of Hollywood (2013: 391).

while eating fish, drinking Turkish coffee, or smoking hubble-bubble), are dominant while the women are conversely either veiled or hidden away.³

Soon after I watched this video, I encountered another documentary, which was another BBC film about Istanbul made forty-three years after the film just noted in 2010.⁴ Its title was more assertive than the previous one: *The Real Istanbul*. Is there a *real* Istanbul? If yes, what and where is it? In order to answer these questions, this time, the BBC preferred to use three "native" narrators— or, more precisely, three "informants" (in Spivak's sense)—rather than an outsider. The stories of "others" that are told by the natives are frequently more convincing and tend to be believed as "real." As for the documentary, all these native narrators were artists: Haluk Bilginer (a star of the stage and screen), Zeynep Fadillioglu (an interior designer), and Idil Biret (a pianist). I wonder if it is possible to look for and even find "the real Istanbul" (if there is one) through the eyes of the three *elites* who are obviously far from the reality of the *other's* lives. To learn this, I watched the documentary patiently till its end.

The documentary starts with an Arabic melody, with the following images being unsurprisingly in harmony with the sound: Arab tourists—depicted as if they were Istanbulites—, mosques, and palm trees.⁵ I think if tulips, roses or judas trees were preferred instead of palm trees, which themselves bring Middle Eastern cities to mind, it would have been more authentic in terms of Istanbul's image. In relation to these scenes, the first native narrator, Haluk Bilginer, takes the viewers of the film to Istanbul's clichés: Hagia Sophia,⁶ the Blue Mosque, the city's veiled women as usual, phaetons, fish in the market, lokum (Turkish delight), raki, etc. Then, he goes to a luxury restaurant located on the Bosporus and eats octopus with raki. Is this the "real" Istanbul? I wonder how often regular Istanbulites can eat such expensive foods in such remarkable places.

³ In this video, which is fictionalized around superficial information and stereotypical images, thereare some obvious contradictions and mistakes. For instance, the Galata Bridge is defined as a bridge between East (Asia) and West (Europe). However, the bridge, as stated in Chapter 6, links Eminonu to Karakoy, both of which are located on the European side of the city.

⁴ This film can be accessed via YouTube utilizing the following web address:http://www. youtube.com/watch?v=hBeIavt6zWQ.

⁵ Interestingly, particularly in Hollywood, cities in the *East* are conceived, depicted, extruded and standardized somehow as fixed and monotypic places in terms of architectural design, social fiction and urban experience. Accordingly, it is represented as if there is no difference between Damascus and Baghdad, or between Istanbul and Casablanca.

⁶ Hagia Sophia was reconverted into mosque and reopened to Muslim worship in 2020.

As for the second native narrator, Zeynep Fadillioglu, she also is always wandering around the Bosporus Strait: Sariyer, Rumeli Hisari (Rumeli or European Fortless), Anadolu Kavagi (Anatolian Poplar), etc. She underlines how Istanbul has dynamic, multi-dimensional, and mixed cultural forms. Is she really in the right place to capture the real Istanbul and to realize the complex notion of the city? Just then, the third and last narrator, Idil Biret, unsurprisingly, brings the viewers to the town of Moda—which literally means "fashion" in Turkish, where once upon a time, Greek, Armenian, and British communities dwelled. However, today, Moda is a "purified" town in which the past is experienced only as an imaginative nostalgia and is occupied mostly by Turk elites. Despite this, the narrator only meets the "wealthy and happy" inhabitants of Moda and their "smooth and comfortable" lives, as if everybody is unexceptionally serene and as if no one was a stranger in Istanbul.

Similar attempts at describing the city by means of disconnecting it from its own socio-urban reality have been made, not only by international but also by local, productions. For instance, in *Istanbul 2020 Olympic Bid Film* (2013), as well as in the commercial film *Istanbul Experience* (2014), which was promoted by Turkish Airlines, similar images and discourses are repeated: the Bosporus Bridge, the city's palaces, the Historic Peninsula, the Hagia Sophia, the Grand Bazaar, roofs, the Galata Tower, the Galata Bridge, the Maiden's Tower, night clubs, belly dancers, fish, seagulls, spices, etc.⁷ According to these representations, Istanbul is doomed to be depicted as an epic, surreal, and fun-filled city in which urbanites are intoxicated under the influence of its magical and tempting atmosphere.

Similarly, during the Hollywood and Yesilcam eras—and as discussed in Chapter 1, Istanbul has been cinematized predominantly through three colors: pink to exoticize, black to detract, and white to sacralize. Hollywood has focused mostly on the Bosporus Strait and the Historical Peninsula, while Yesilcam gained insight into the *gecekondus* (squatters) and internal immigrants' lives.⁸ But, with time, each colorization and depiction by Hollywood and Yesilcam turned into a rigid cliché—so much so that each social and spatial relationship was shown as being *either* a mysterious beauty *or* as a fatal ugliness, as if everything in the city were pure without antibook and completely polarized.

⁷ These images and discourses are, once again, from different points of view and are also dealt with in Chapter 2 in the film, *A Touch of Spice* (2003).

⁸ For more details about *gecekondu*-style dwellings and immigrants' lives, see the film *Men on theBridge* (2009) in Chapter 3.

As for this book, however, I attempted to penetrate into the world of secondary and intermediate colors, people, spaces, lives, relationships, and values without entirely ignoring the importance of the established colors and clichés of the city. This book is the story of strangers, not only those who are seen as "worthless," "dangerous," "marginal," and "enemies" and who perceptively live in distant places, or those who are one of us and who live with us (Bauman, 2003b: 6); but also, those who *whisper* the reality of "we are all strangers"—or, at least, the reality that "we are very close to being strangers." In other words, each of us is indeed an actor in the film of strangerhood. Sometimes, it might be one's self who is the stranger. In others, it is the naysayer spouse, friend, relative, boss, or neighbor who is the stranger.

Istanbul might be an easily understandable city for those who have not visited it yet but who have merely seen it through Hollywood and Yesilcam¹ films. Some of these spectators, just like Sean Connery (007 James Bond: From Russia with Love, 1963), may look for mysterious cases, intoxicated Sufis, belly dancers, and an environment in which people easily kill each other. Tod Browning, the director of *The Virgin of Stamboul* (1920), identifies Istanbul with harems and palaces that are controlled through intrigue. In his imagination, men are insidious, malevolent, and womanizers, while women are passive, off-guard, and dreamers—with the dream somehow always being that of the American dream. In this sense, Captain Carlisle Pemberton (Wheeler Oakman), the protagonist in *The Virgin of Stamboul*, ironically represents American heroism, mercy, and kindness when compared with *stereotypical* Turk vandalism and rusticity. Even the word "virgin" is considerably ironic to reflect an exotic Oriental image.

James Brennan (Errol Flynn) in *Istanbul* (1957) shows Istanbul as the city of extraordinary relationships, unexpected surprises, weird loves, and dangerous secrets: Istanbul is a common space "where the passion of the East meets the sins of the West."⁹ This film creates a magical nostalgia by using panoramic shots over the Blue Mosque, the Golden Horn, and the Galata Tower. *Topkapi* (1964), another Hollywood film, is the story of international robbers who plan to steal an emerald dagger from the Topkapi Palace. What an ironic object: "the emerald," which refers to the magnificent sultanate, and "the dagger," which refers to a deadly power. In this film, Istanbul comprises pursuits between cops and robbers in the shade of historical and exotic images. As for *Murder on the Orient Express* (1974), Istanbul is associated with a ruined village that is full of sheep herds and with a rough camp that is occupied by stubborn beggars and hawkers.

⁹ This quote is extracted from the film's cinematic poster.

Zombie and the Ghost Train (Zombie ja Kummitusjuna, 1991), which is a Finnish film, depicts Istanbul utilizing a dark ambiance and depicts it as an ideal city for "zombies" who wish to be isolated. Contrariwise, Bei (Jackie Chan), in *The Accidental Spy* (2001), is, as usual, in a hustle and bustle. This film depicts Istanbul as a test city in which courage and endurance can be measured. *The Net 2.0* (2006, *The International* (2009), *Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy* (2011), *Taken 2* (2012), and *Skyfall* (2012) also merge the exotic - chaotic images of Istanbul and fictionalize it as being an "action-city" in terms of editing, sound, color, cinematography, and narrative genres. Places, spaces, and images that leap to the eye at first glance through these films are the Sirkeci and Haydarpasa train stations, the Blue Mosque, Hagia Sophia, the Bosporus Strait and its bridges, the Grand Bazaar, the Galata Tower, the Golden Horn, the city's labyrinthine streets, men with mustaches, hamals (porters) and beggars. The women of the city are predominantly displayed either as belly dancers or as veiled women—namely, either fully naked or fully dressed.

Argo (2012), directed by Ben Affleck and which won Best Adapted Screenplay, Best Editing, and Best Picture at the 85th Academy Awards, portrays Istanbul as the social antibook of Tehran in terms of citizen rights and legal affairs. In the film, Tehran is shown as a city of captivity, enclosure, threat, and oppression, whereas Istanbul is depicted as a city in which people are relatively free and peaceful. Despite this, paradoxically, scenes in Tehran could not be shot in Tehran due to the political disagreements that exist between Iran and the United States; hence, the film's producers looked for another city that looked similar to Tehran. Many cities in Bulgaria, Jordan, Morocco, and Turkey were observed and compared with Tehran. In the end, Istanbul was chosen: "Istanbul is a phenomenal city to be in and work in," Ben Affleck says (Levy, 2012). There are indeed many cities inside Istanbul; Tehran may merely be one of the thousands of these cities. Istanbul is like a flexible mask that suits all kinds of faces. Similarly, it shows how the same city can be depicted for two extremely different ends-liberalism vis-à-vis totalitarianism and plenty vis-àvis poverty.

Before starting to analyze Istanbul and its strangers through the projector, for this book, I shall first touch theoretically upon the relationship between film art and sociology, between cinema and the city, and between social reality and films as background. In other words, I seek stimulating answers to questions of why films are rich sources for elaborating upon the city, how films capture the socio-urban reality, and how cinema simplifies and purifies the social reality of the city. Can cinema be reduced to sociology? I hyperbook that the relationship between the city and cinema is not based on arbitrary combinations but rather on existential proximity; therefore, in the face of the ontological argument, I feel obliged to explain why I chose Istanbul, how I will attempt to analyze films in order to make Istanbul more readable and visible, and why I am conducting this project today. In the film analysis chapters of this research, the initial theoretical explanation offered will be a convenient way to capture how Istanbul is cinematized. Moreover, it will also be crucial to discuss how cinema differs from literature, music, dance, sculpture, painting, and theatre.

1.1.1. How do films capture and (re)produce socio-urban reality?

Even though we live in cities and societies, why do we tend to examine cities and societies through the projector as well? First of all, as Orhan Pamuk, a Nobel Prize-winning Turkish author, wrote, "...just as we learn about our lives from others, so too do we let others shape our understanding of the city in which we live" (2005: 8). Residents—and I think researchers and filmmakers as well—who become blind or remain unresponsive under the influence of intensive seeing and excessive images of the city may inevitably need an external eye (projector) to see where to look and how to realize what they are seeing.

A monolog from a Turkish film, *The Letter (Mektup*, 1997), summarizes the need for and importance of an external eye: "Once upon a time, the swamp was being seen from a distance, but now, it is not being seen, because we are under the swamp." This aphorism indicates how cinema, as an external eye, carries a crucial value for cities that are full of visual messages, images, and references. It stimulates an off-voice, activates fiction and logical cohesion, and clarifies cities have become dumping grounds for globally begotten problems (Bauman, 2003a: 101) due to complex relations, unlimited consumption, social exclusion, endless mobility, uncontrolled immigration, population explosions, a powerful money economy, and unplanned destruction and construction. Cinema has the power to portray the city by elaborating on its hazy environment and by reducing its excessive intensity.

Films have a shocking and awakening effect against the audio-visual intensity of the city that may generate a different notion of blindness and desensitization. Tarkovsky defines this stimulating and evocative ability of films as "an impression of the truth, a glimpse of the truth permitted to us in our blindness" (1987: 106). As films have a multisensory orbit (Mullarkey, 2009: xiv), they are preferably used by researchers who attempt to analyze socio-urban forms in and out of the city. All films that depict urban life either deeply imply or explicitly articulate hope and disappointment, struggle and deadlock, peace and conflict, harmony and contrast, solidarity and enmity in socio-urban life. Therefore, "when we talk about film, we talk about society and vice versa" (Diken and Laustsen, 2007: 13). This relationship between life and film has often been debated throughout the history of cinema. In other words, "the urge to show life as it is is as old as the cinema itself" (Armes, 1974: 50).

Not only films themselves but also film theories have tried to understand and construct the connection between cinema and life. Some of these theories have seen films as a tool that captures and reflects social reality as it is, while others have dealt with them to interrogate what they conceal. Many problematic and essential questions have been asked with regard to this context: Is cinema an illusion, or is it real? Is it a fantasia or confrontation, a secret or a revelation, a representation or a reflection? In any case-for instance, according to Framptonthe comparison between film and social reality may turn into a stalemate (2006: 5). He sees cinema as a purified and isolated artistic arena and suggests that film should be re-interpreted as a new part of our reality rather than just a reproduction of reality (ibid.). However, nothing that derives from society or touches on society can be isolated and disconnected from the reality of the world. Reality uses films just as films use reality. They do not necessarily have to be obvious and honest about society; instead, they may lie, but: "even when films lie, they tell the lie which dwells in the very heart of our social edifice" (Zizek in Diken and Laustsen, 2007: xi). Indeed, films primarily fulfill this function; most of them run after impossible dreams, hopes, ideals, and loves.

Is it really society that manifests itself in sensationalist film hits? The breathtaking rescues, the impossible noble-mindedness, the smooth young gents, the monstrous swindlers, the criminals and heroes, the moral nights of passion and the immoral marriages – do they really exist? They really do exist (Kracauer, 1995: 292).

Kracauer's realistic theory of film is, of course, not new. It even coincides with the early stages of cinema becoming an art and integrating with society. What makes Kracauer distinctive in this book is his view of cinema as a medium that presents reality at different levels and genres. Films record life with subjects, each of which is real material. On the other hand, Kracauer is not very strict about realism. As a matter of fact, the filmmaker has the will to use original forms while transferring the apparent reality to the film. But in any case, the formalist attitude should not suppress or replace the impression of reality. This is the essence of cinema as art. Accordingly, cinema, which is not a monolithic medium, plays a crucial role in managing temporality and spatiality on behalf of spectators who are desensitized due to the monotony and routines of the liquidity of daily life. For this reason, although "films are the mirror of the prevailing society" (Kracauer, 1995: 291), it is hard to depict the cinematic power of eye and vision only with the mirror metaphor in order to reveal the cinematic power of spectacles and spectators. First and foremost, "cinema is much more than reflections of a reality" (Diken and Laustsen, 2007: 129). It may be a gun and a shield that can manipulate and edit time and space. This is admittedly one of the impacts of cinematic narration; however, this is also inadequate for coming to grips with the other features of the world of film.

Film and social reality display, formulate, deform, and ultimately reproduce each other; furthermore, they-sometimes compatibly and sometimes dialectically-nourish each other. In other words, their relationship can be described as a kind of mutual creation. Many metaphors which represent this affinity and which symbolize the cinema may be made. For instance, Tabor compares cinema to an X-ray machine, a mirror, a keyhole, a gun, and a shield (2000: 122-38). I think one of the most preferable metaphors for cinema is the keyhole. A keyhole does not only show the interior of a room but also symbolizes an irrepressible curiosity about others' lives. Looking into a mirror can mostly be through necessity, while looking through a keyhole indicates obscurity, qualm, fantasy, curiosity, and desire¹⁰. A keyhole has deeper symbolic meanings than a mirror in a world that is full of closed doors. The mirror is an introverted object that reproduces what it reflects, whereas the keyhole is an extroverted object that focuses mainly on others. Each part of the body is active in front of the mirror; however, only the eye has authority over a keyhole. A mirror may be deceptive, but the frame that is seen around the keyhole is the most naked framing of people or stories since they do not know they are being watched by someone else.

There are also some significant differences between a camera and an eye that looks through a keyhole: a film camera, which is a go-between (Odin, 2008: 437), knows exactly when it should look through the visor and what to look for. It finds, selects and captures the most valuable frame (Kracauer, 2004: 7); also, it records and converts physical reality into a *camera reality* (Kracauer, 1960: 28). In other words, cinema is not only like a passive spectator that is equipped with transparency and mirroring features (Kracauer, 2004: xxvi); it is also an active actor that has the ability to act upon reality (ibid.) and change what it sees. A camera is so influential and transformative that it is able to give shape to the social relations that it depicts as much as it desires. "This refers to the camera's unprecedented and unrivaled capacity for capturing the 'real,' for revealing and recording 'physical reality,' which Kracauer aptly terms 'camera reality'" (Gilloch, 2007: 127). In due course, camera reality exceeds and replaces physical reality; furthermore, it constitutes a cinematized society that consists of signs, images, and sign systems (Diken and Laustsen, 2007: 5). Perhaps for this reason, "no form of art is as tied to reality as cinema" (Hamilton, 2011).

Cinema has so great an influence on social reality that "social reality sometimes appears as a fallout effect of cinematic virtualities, producing the uncanny impression that reality mirrors cinema and not the other way around" (Diken and Laustsen, 2007: 1). This means that cinema is important, both as a

¹⁰ The keyhole introduces obvious connotations of illicit, secretive viewing, voyeurism anderoticism—all important concerns for film theorists.

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