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İBNE, GEY, LUBUNYA: A QUEER CRITIQUE OF LGBTI+ DISCOURSES IN THE NEW
CINEMA OF TURKEY

by

AZMI MERT ERDEM

A master's thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Liberal Studies in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, The City University of New York

2019

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This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Liberal Studies in satisfaction of the thesis requirement for the degree of Master of Arts.

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Abstract

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Advisor: David A. Gerstner

In my thesis, I examine the intersections between liberalism, neoliberal globalism, and LGBTI+ visibility and identity politics, through films that present “openly” non-normative sexualities through cis/transgender male, female, or non-binary characters in the new cinema of Turkey. First, I survey existing scholarship on how liberal capitalism impacts the formation of LGBTI+ subjectivities and identity politics. Furthermore, I trace how non-normative sexualities, practices, and discourses evolved along with socioeconomic and political shifts in the Turkish Republic following the Ottoman Empire. Accordingly, I review Turkey’s adoption of neoliberal ideologies in the 1980s and how these ideologies engage with its local, heterogenous gender and sexuality discourses, performances, and representations in films. I argue that along with neoliberal ideologies there is a reemergence and increase in the visibility of LGBTI+ identities in the public and media spheres. Secondly, I scrutinize the ways in which films imagine their non-heterosexual characters, remark on identity politics, and contribute to or disavow hetero- and homonormative discourses in the Turkish national context. To that end, I do textual and formal analysis of five films, *Dönersen Işık Çal* (1992), *Gece, Melek ve Bizim Çocuklar* (1994), *Il Bagno Turco – Hamam* (1997), *Anlat Istanbul* (2005) and *Tamam Mıyız?* (2013), written and

directed by well-known directors of Turkish origin. Consequently, I compare them with respect to their release dates, which reflect the political temperaments of their times in relation to the LGBTI+ politics. Finally, I argue that, despite the increase in the visibility of LGBTI+ identities in the Turkish media landscape, the recent filmic representations of LGBTI+ narratives are imbued with acceptance and respectability politics aligning themselves with the ideals of global neoliberalism, whereas the earlier films challenge the persistent stereotypes, gender norms, and the status quo.

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İbne, Gey, Lubunya: A Queer Critique of LGBTI+ Discourses in the New Cinema of Turkey

1. Introduction

Since the 1980s, discourses and practices of heterogeneous sexualities beyond heterosexuality have been proliferating on public and media landscapes of Turkey and destabilizing the hegemonic imaginary of sex and sexuality beyond heteronormativity. Indeed, non-heteronormative practices, performances, and discourses have already been in circulation and in flux prior to their prominence in the public eye. However, these dynamics do not occur in a spatiotemporal vacuum. Thus, in my thesis, I question the social, political, economic, national and transnational forces that impact the discourses and representations of non-normative genders and sexualities. I survey the historical and discursive shifts since the late Ottoman era, and highlight the recurrences of queer performances on public display, the emergence of LGBTI+ identity discourses and movements, as well as the filmic representations since the 1990s. I argue that the contemporary discursive and representational shifts in genders and sexualities coincide with the politico-economic and sociocultural changes in Turkey influenced by the globalization of late capitalism's free market economy beginning in the 1980s. Thus, it is crucial to examine the increase in the visibility of LGBTI+ identities and discourses in the Turkish public and media spheres in relation to the neoliberal globalization of identity discourses.

Accordingly, I investigate the intersections between neoliberal globalism and the LGBTI+ visibility and identity politics through the lens of films that present "openly" non-normative sexualities and cis/transgender male, female, or non-binary characters in the "new cinema of Turkey" since the 1990s. Hence, I study national films and transnational (co)productions that are approved and/or funded by the Ministry of Culture and Tourism of Turkey. I perceive these films as significant indicators of the changing social, political, and

economic ideologies, from a secular Kemalist nation-state to an authoritarian neoliberal and conservative populism. Thus, I question how these films imagine, respond, and contribute to these historical and ideological shifts by means of their representations and narratives of LGBTI+ characters. I analyze the following films from each decade: *Dönersen Islık Çal* (*Whistle If You Come Back*, dir. Orhan Oğuz, 1992), *Gece, Melek ve Bizim Çocuklar* (*The Night, Angel and Our Children*, dir. Atif Yılmaz, 1994), *Il Bagno Turco – Hamam* (*The Turkish Bath – Hamam*, dir. Ferzan Özpetek, 1997), *Anlat Istanbul* (*Istanbul Tales*, dir. Ümit Ünal, et al. 2005), and *Tamam Mıyız?* (*Are We Ok?* dir. Çağan Irmak, 2013). I discuss and compare the films' narratives and their representational politics of their non-normative subjects. I explicate how the film directors formally construct their narratives and, in turn, what their narratives communicate about gender and sexuality politics with respect to the films' historical contexts. Consequently, I question how these filmic discourses reflect, support, or challenge mainstream LGBTI+ identity politics within the neoliberal context of Turkey.

Overall, I argue that the filmic representations of LGBTI+ narratives from the 1990s and early 2000s challenge the hegemonic assumptions about gender, sexuality, heteronormativity, and heteropatriarchy. Contrarily, the latter films follow a conformist approach towards the sociopolitical and economic status quo by advocating for acceptance and respectability politics into the marketplace aligned with the neoliberal values of the mainstream LGBTI+ movements transnationally and locally. Thus, counter to the view that the increase in the visibility of LGBTI+ identities in the media landscape induces egalitarian politics, the latter films not only leave stereotypes, gender norms, sexism, and inequity very much uninterrupted, but depoliticize and negate any queer potentials for dismantling essentialist hetero- and homonormative discourses that strive for inclusion into a neoliberal global marketplace.

2. The New (Male) Cinema of Turkey

The subjects of the cinematic “other” have transformed since the *Yeşilçam* (literally: Green Pine) era of the cinema in Turkey. Taking its name from a street populated with film production companies in Istanbul, the *Yeşilçam* era is considered as the height of the national film production in Turkey, which roughly corresponds with the decades of 1950s through 1980s. However, as film scholars posit, starting with early 1990s, *Yeşilçam* cinema gives way to a new type of cinema in Turkey. Film historian Savaş Arslan demarcates that this new era “encompasses a clear-cut distinction between popular cinema and art house or auteur cinema: while the former is intended for Turkish-speaking communities around the world, the latter may well fall in the realm of world or transnational cinema often seen at film festivals and art house theaters by international cineastes.”¹ Whether the films are popular or art house, one of the novelties of “the new cinema of Turkey” is that male characters and narratives upstaged the eminent female-centered melodramas of the *Yeşilçam* era. Arslan characterizes these new narratives as “masculine melodramas,” in which women become less visible and quieter. Like Arslan, other film scholars point to the rise of male narratives voiced by male directors and distinguishes these new films as “male films,”² “macho cinema,”³ and “male weepy films,”⁴ and as part of a “new cinema of Turkey.” Furthermore, in her article “Silent Representations of Women in the New Cinema of Turkey,” Özlem Güçlü reiterates the film scholars’ views that the 1990s witnessed an uplift of the mainstream film industry while “the art house cinema produced

¹ Savaş Arslan, *Cinema in Turkey: A New Critical History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), xi.

² Nejat Ulusay, “Günümüz Türk Sinemasında ‘Erkek Filmleri’ nin Yükselişi ve Erkeklik Krizi,” *Toplum ve Bilim* 101 (2004): 144–62.

³ Gönül Dönmez-Colin, *Women, Islam and Cinema* (London: Reaktion, 2004).

⁴ Z. T. Akbal-Süalp, “The Glorified Lumpen ‘Nothingness’ versus Night Navigations,” in *Cinema and Politics: Turkish Cinema and The New Europe*, ed. Deniz Bayraktar (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars, 2009), 221–31.

a new type of film, which had a simpler style, focusing on the narration of marginalized lives, of ‘other’ lives, of the invisibles/inaudibles and of ‘silenced’ topics.”⁵

Regarding the increase of male narratives, film scholars present various ideas as the cause of this shift. For instance, Güçlü shares the theory that the increase in the male melodramas is a response to the crisis in masculinity stirred by the second wave feminist movement’s impact on the traditional gender roles and representation in the media in the 1980s.⁶ Arslan argues that “[m]asculine melodramas are, in a sense, about a crisis of gender power, reflecting the rural Anatolian man’s helplessness and castration in urban centers, because of the different credo...”⁷ Similarly, according to Akbal Süalp, the foregrounding of male narratives is a byproduct of the neoliberal shift in the 1980s and the subsequent increase in the unemployment among urban men. She argues that this resulted in the glorification of the underclass and lumpen attitudes in the cultural representations, and consequently, “[n]o woman, no class conflict or social analysis is included in these ‘male weepy’ films, which are praising these growing tendencies of appropriation of dominating and official ideologies.”⁸ Akbal Süalp adds that when women are present in these films, they tend to stand in for all “the Others,” who fulfill male fantasies and fears.⁹ According to Arslan, “men in search of identity voice a demand for recognition from women, who as the loci of this conferring and powerful gaze, are pushed to the fringes of the narrative.”¹⁰ Contrarily, I would argue that some of the “art house” and mainstream films—especially the ones from 1990s—that focus on marginalized lives of non-heteronormative, cis or

⁵ Özlem Güçlü, “Silent Representations of Women in the New Cinema of Turkey,” *Sinecine* 1, no. 2 (2010): 72.

⁶ Güçlü, 76.

⁷ Arslan, *Cinema in Turkey*, 255.

⁸ Akbal-Süalp, “The Glorified Lumpen ‘Nothingness’ versus Night Navigations,” 228.

⁹ Akbal-Süalp, 229.

¹⁰ Arslan, *Cinema in Turkey*, 254.

*trans**¹¹ characters refute these “male weepy films” representations of both female and male “Others,” and bring previously silenced identities and discourses to the forefront.

3. Neoliberal Capitalism and LGBTI+ Identities

In the following sections, I question how liberal capitalism influences the formations of LGBTI+ identities and identity politics, and how neoliberal globalism engages with transnational and local cultural discourses, performances, and byproducts. I draw from existing scholarship on the intersections of (neo)liberal discourses and the sexual-identity-based civil rights movements in the United States as a case-study. Next, I discuss how globally circulating mainstream identity discourses are appropriated, repudiated, translated, and reformed by the existing discourses and performances within the transnational context and history of the Turkish Republic.

¹¹ For the delineation of trans, I depart from the common conflation of transgender as the transitioning from one sex at birth to the other end of the binary. Hence, I take Jack Halberstam’s definition of trans with the addition of the asterisk in the book, *Trans*: A Quick and Quirky Account of Gender Variability*, in which Halberstam expands the abbreviated “T” beyond transgender:

...the asterisk modifies the meaning of transitivity by refusing to situate transition in relation to a destination, a final form, a specific shape, or an established configuration of desire and identity. The asterisk holds off the certainty of diagnosis; it keeps at bay any sense of knowing in advance what the meaning of this or that gender variant form may be, and perhaps most importantly, it makes trans* people the authors of their own categorizations. (4)

Thus, Halberstam’s expansion includes not only physically transitioning people but also anyone who may choose not to transform their bodies, or to identify with a gender in congruity with the one assigned at birth, and they may embody or identify with no gender at all. This progression beyond and against certain “diagnosis” seamlessly paves the way to an opening, rather than *an* identity category, of *queer*. Like trans*, *queer* becomes a becoming, a verb, which demarcates from the previously classified letters of the sexualities; thereby, it rejects being added to the line of LGBT or used as a wholesale umbrella term to define such identities. Thus, the verb *queer* functions to deconstruct essentialist identarian catalogues themselves. That said, I acknowledge that *queer* sprouts from the “minority” and marginalized gender and sexuality discourses and political movements; yet, it is not limited to them. As Tuna Erdem aptly posits, “[t]he subject of *queer* politics is not homosexuality but sexuality.” Tuna Erdem, “Hızadan Çıkmaya, Yoldan Sapmaya ve Çıkıntı Olmaya Dair: Kimlik Değil Cinsellik, Tektip Cinsellik Değil, Cinsel Çeşitlilik!,” in *Cinsellik Muamması: Türkiye’de Queer Kültür ve Muhalefet*, by Cüneyt Çakırlar and Serkan Delice (Istanbul: Metis Yayınları, 2012), 49. (my translation) Akin to Halberstam’s redefinition of *T**, *queer* also puts an asterisk to each of the LGB letters as well as to heterosexuality, or in other words, to any sexualities outside of the heteronormative order. Thus, my use of the term *queer* as an adjective or a noun, although might posit a type of subjectivity, it signifies non-normative genders and sexualities that resist definitive and exclusionary categories like gay, lesbian, and heterosexual.

In his seminal essay, “Capitalism and Gay Identity,” John D’Emilio refutes the myths of isolationist, essentialist, ahistorical, and universal homosexuality, and recounts the economic conditions that engendered homosexual identity within the context of the United States.

D’Emilio argues that gay men and lesbians emerged, coalesced, and organized politically *as* such in consequence of capitalism’s free labor system in the late twentieth century.¹² D’Emilio reasons that the spread of wage labor across the United States over two centuries destabilized the independent household production system, transformed the patriarchal nuclear family structure, and redefined the functioning of the family as a private institution, rather than a public setting of interdependent work. These shifts also altered the heteronormative and sexual imperative to procreate for the hereditary work force of the clan:

In divesting the household of its economic independence and fostering the separation of sexuality from procreation, capitalism has created conditions that allow some men and women to organize a personal life around their erotic/emotional attraction to their own sex. It has made possible the formation of urban communities of lesbians and gay men and, more recently, of a politics based on a sexual identity.¹³

In other words, D’Emilio maintains that only when the individual, independent from the familial bonds and work force, began to earn a living through wage labor, homosexual(ity) as a unifying identity, both within the private and public domain, came to be.

Following D’Emilio’s argument, in her book, *Selling Out: The Gay and Lesbian Movement Goes to Market*, Alexandra Chasin further roots out the connections between liberalism, social identity formations, and political rights. Chasin traces, first, John Locke’s description of liberalism, whereby a “man’s” first right to possession and exchange is his body and the product of his body’s labor; and, subsequently Adam Smith’s view of wage labor and

¹² John D’Emilio, “Capitalism and Gay Identity,” in *Powers of Desire: The Politics of Sexuality*, ed. Ann Snitow, Christine Stansell, and Sharon Thompson (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1983), 102.

¹³ D’Emilio, 104.

commodity exchange as valuation and producer of social meaning in the market society. “These features of a market society,” writes Chasin, “form the core conditions in which identity can come to function as a unit of exchange, a unit of social meaning, a basis for public political practice as well as private acts of consumption.”¹⁴ In other words, one’s body and labor are folded into one’s identity and its value, which are then commodified, exchanged, and consumed *freely* in the market societies under the auspices of the liberal democracy ideology of purported free choice. Thus, Chasin argues that “[i]n a consumer culture, subjectivity is negotiated in the marketplace; in the twentieth century, subjectivity was more and more often articulated as identity, and therefore identity too was negotiated in the marketplace.”¹⁵ Furthermore, Chasin construes sexuality as located in one’s body, thereby as one’s right to private property; yet this ostensibly private part of an individual is regulated by the public institutions (e.g. law, media), and further interpellated as a social identity (i.e. as a consumer within an identifiable social group). Thus, she maintains that “capitalism contributes to the formation of individual identity, which in turn contributes to the formation of identity-based social movements. For the most part, identity-based protest movements focus on the rights of the individual, the expansion of which reforms the capitalist market as a site of representation and enfranchisement.”¹⁶

Subsequently, any mainstream sexual-identity-based civil rights movement’s goal to operate within the capitalist liberal democracy risks being subjugated to what Lisa Duggan terms “the new homonormativity”: it is the new sexual politics of neoliberalism “that does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions but upholds and sustains them while promising the possibility of a demobilized gay constituency and a privatized, depoliticized gay

¹⁴ Alexandra Chasin, *Selling Out: The Gay and Lesbian Movement Goes to Market* (New York: Palgrave, 2000), 5.

¹⁵ Chasin, 13.

¹⁶ Chasin, 16.

culture anchored in domesticity and consumption.”¹⁷ In the case of the United States, the gay and lesbian liberation movements in the 1970s, following the riots at Gene Compton’s Cafeteria in San Francisco in 1966 and Stonewall in New York City in 1969, clashed internally over the implications of and rights to sexual privacy versus social visibility via publicity. And with the emergence of AIDS pandemic in the 1980s, the political schism between the mainstream and radical activists has deepened: the activists in the mainstream gay and lesbian “liberation” movement in the United States disavowed confrontational and subversive tactics, and instead, strived for moralist, assimilationist and respectability politics as opposed to queer theorists’ and radical activists’ critiques and protests against the conformist identity politics and essentialization of gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and intersex categories. Thus, the fight for private/public liberation tapered to a fight for respectable visibility in the marketplace and integration as compatible consumer citizens with their heterosexual “counterparts,” under the auspices of equal rights by public and private institutions that concurrently relegate gay and lesbian practices and identities to the private sphere and as homonormative. As such, “marriage equality” epitomized the neoliberal mission of the domesticated mainstream same-sex “liberation” movement, which was heavily funded, while organizing for politicized, vulnerable, and/or disenfranchised groups, such as people living with HIV/AIDS, transgender of color, disabled people, homeless youth, sex-workers, comparatively languished. Despite the achievements of gay and lesbian activism (e.g. elimination of homosexuality from the American Psychiatric Association’s list of mental illnesses in 1973), only a smaller constituency among the growing heterogenous LGBTI+ population can afford to conform (and indeed wants to conform)

¹⁷ Lisa Duggan, “The New Homonormativity: The Sexual Politics of Neoliberalism,” in *Materializing Democracy: Toward a Revitalized Cultural Politics*, ed. Russ Castronovo and Dana D. Nelson (Duke University Press, 2002), 179.

to the homonormative status quo to enjoy their new privileges and admission as legitimate consumers to the marketplace. As a result, only explicit types of identities at the intersections of upper/middle-class, white, able-bodied, cis-gendered are valorized, at the expense of others.¹⁸ Unfortunately, as Joshua Gamson delineates, “[t]he gay and lesbian civil rights strategy, for all its gains, does little to attack the political culture that itself makes the denial of and struggle for civil rights necessary and possible.”¹⁹ Consequently, the assimilationist tactics of the identity-based civil rights movements in general, and the respectability discourses of sexual-identity-based politics in particular, are reproducing and reproduced by the neoliberal ideologies of late capitalism. As David A. Gerstner reminds us, “it is no easy thing to claim radical difference and sustain it under the terms of global capitalism.”²⁰

4. Evolution of LGBTI+ Discourses and Identities in Turkey

In the context of Turkey, these transnationally circulating contemporary discourses are negotiated with and appropriated by the evolving same-sex practices, gender dynamics, identity formations and politics within the history of the Turkish Republic succeeding the Ottoman Empire. In his book chapter “From Queer Empire to Heterosexual Republic: Modernity, Homosexuality, and Media,” Serkan Görkemli surveys the histories of same-sex desire and gendered sex roles in the Ottoman Empire and traces how such diverse practices, discourses, and performances were impacted by the formative “modernization/Westernization” reforms of the Ottoman Empire in the nineteenth-century and the Turkish Republic in the 1920s. Without

¹⁸ Likewise, the capitalist culture industry commodifies bodies and identities on the margins and (re)presents and exchanges them through advertising and niche marketing to the masses, as well as the very subjects it appropriated from. For an analysis of the operations of advertising and commodification of marginalized sexualities in the United States, see Sarah Schulman, “Selling AIDS and Other Consequences of the Commodification of Homosexuality,” in *Stagestruck: Theater, AIDS, and the Marketing of Gay America* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998), 99–143.

¹⁹ Joshua Gamson, “Must Identity Movements Self-Destruct? A Queer Dilemma,” *Social Problems* 42, no. 3 (August 1, 1995): 400.

²⁰ David A. Gerstner, *Routledge International Encyclopedia of Queer Culture* (London: Routledge, 2011), xi.

romanticizing or Orientalizing the Ottoman period, Görkemli argues that, despite the orthodox Islamic denunciation of certain same-sex practices between males with varying gravity (meanwhile, rendering female desire invisible), male same-sex desire and homoeroticism were acceptable among certain institutions (e.g. the mystic Sufis, *köçekler*,²¹ male poets writing about their love of male youth and beauty); similarly, certain gender roles and sex acts were less condemned (e.g. being the male penetrator, kissing, caressing). However, the turbulent transition to the Turkish nation-state in the first half of the twentieth century altered these discourses, practices and gender dynamics.

With the founding of the Turkish Republic following the decline of the Ottoman Empire after the World War I, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk introduced top-down reforms to “modernize” by Westernizing the new Turkish nation. As Bilge Yesil summarizes, “[t]he nation-building project was based on ethnic, religious, and linguistic homogeneity and thus required the severing of links to the multireligious and multiethnic heritage of the Ottoman Empire and the rejecting of the historical, cultural, and religious experiences of the peoples of Anatolia.”²² Thus, these reforms sought to build a uniform Turkish identity by adopting “Western legal, social, and cultural institutions and practices—which, in effect, meant the banning of Islamic garb and the adoption of Western codes of dress; the banning of Ottoman-Arabic script and the adoption of the Latin

²¹ *Köçekler* referred to young boys around the ages of seven or eight, who were often recruited from non-Muslim families to join a troupe, and were trained to dance, sing, and play instruments in feminine attire and mannerisms in public and private spaces and ceremonies (e.g. in the courts of sultans). Likewise, *çengiler* referred to young girls performing in traditional masculine attire and mannerisms, including male choreographies. The popularity of *köçekler*, which peaked in the 16th century, lasted until the ban of their performances in 1856 by Sultan Abdülmeçid I due to their homoerotic qualities and same-sex practices. See the Ministry of Culture and Tourism of Turkey’s website entry on “Köçekler Ve Çengiler,” T.C. Kültür ve Turizm Bakanlığı, accessed February 24, 2019, <http://ekitap.kulturturizm.gov.tr/TR-79460/kocekler-ve-cengiler.html>.

²² Bilge Yesil, *Media in New Turkey: The Origins of an Authoritarian Neoliberal State* (University of Illinois Press, 2016), 18–19.

alphabet; and the abandoning of the provisions of Islamic law and the writing of a new legal code.”²³

Subsequently, Görkemli posits that public access to Ottoman sexual discourses and same-sex expressions were further curtailed by these self-Westernization projects. In fact, the Turkish “modernization” efforts reformed queer sexualities and practices via their heteronormalizing and heterosexist discourses:

[T]he roots of the contemporary Turkish rhetorics of homosexuality at the intersections of Ottoman religious, textual, and performance-based discourses demonstrates that the nineteenth-century Westernization of Ottoman concepts of gender and sexuality due to the importation of European heterosexual and gender norms augmented the existing sexism and misogyny regarding the penetrated parties in sexual intercourse, whether they were women, slaves, or passive sodomites. This development has thrown into further relief the increasing cultural, religious, and political disapproval and censoring of same-sex discourses and practices.²⁴

Even though the new nation-state did not criminalize same-sex practices, it censured same-sex desire and visibility under the auspices of its Eurocentric ideologies of heteropatriarchy, and further inculcated heterosexual gender and monogamous family norms (in contrast to the polygamous households²⁵) as the acceptable and “modern” form of conduct in the private and public spheres.²⁶

²³ Yesil, 19.

²⁴ Serkan Görkemli, “From Queer Empire to Heterosexual Republic: Modernity, Homosexuality, and Media,” in *Grassroots Literacies: Lesbian and Gay Activism and the Internet in Turkey*, Praxis: Theory in Action (Albany: SUNY Press, 2014), 35.

²⁵ Polygyny and polygamous relationships were outlawed in the Republican era. For a detailed discussion and history of polygamy in the late Ottoman Empire, see Scott Rank, “Polygamy and Religious Polemics in the Late Ottoman Empire: Fatma Aliye and Mahmud Es ‘Ad’s Ta ‘Addüd-i Zevcât’a Zeyl,” *Cihannüma: Tarih ve Coğrafya Araştırmaları Dergisi* 1, no. 2 (2015): 61–79.

²⁶ For instance, like the institution of *köçekler*, *tekkeler*—male homosocial Sufi residencies, where a dervish and his acolytes reside—were banned under the auspices of secularization. Similarly, homosocial spaces like *hamams* (public bathhouses) and *harems* (chambers for wives, concubines and female servants in an Ottoman household), which are known for their homoerotic dynamics and same-sex practices, were replaced by the “modern/Western” architectural structures designed for monogamous heterosexual family. For a survey of heteronormalizing effects of the Republic’s modernization projects on male and female same-sex practices see Evren Savci, “Queer in Translation: Paradoxes of Westernization and Sexual Others in the Turkish Nation” (Dissertation, University of

The nation-state's discriminating campaigns on behalf of a unified Turkish identity continued to expand with fluctuating responses to its founding Kemalist ideology of secular, modern/Western Turkey. The modern constitutions of the Turkish Republic protected the nation's alleged homogeneity by means of their authoritarian claims to national unity, territorial integrity, and secular order. As Yesil deduces, the "Turkish democracy emerged as a system based not on the prioritization of respect for the rule of law, civil society, and individual rights, but on the promotion of national unity and state interests."²⁷ Thus, since its inception in 1923, the nation-state's interests in political hegemony have been selectively and periodically utilizing the discourses of national sovereignty—including "public safety," "family values," and "terrorism"—to justify its suppression of groups with certain ethnic and religious identities. Yet, as an always ongoing process, the national hegemonic projects have met with challenges and resistance across Turkey's sociocultural and politico economic terrains. As meticulously argued in his article "Hegemonic Projects in Post-1980 Turkey and the Changing Forms of Authoritarianism," İsmet Akça dissects Turkey's neoliberal capitalist projects since the *coup d'état* of September 12th, 1980 and the subsequent authoritarian state under military tutelage. Akça outlines the climate of the 1990s as follows:

The 1990s was marked by a protracted crisis of political hegemony and the domination of the military over the political sphere in the form of a neoliberal national security state. The causes of this crisis were twofold: neoliberal economic and social policies, and the militarisation and securitisation of questions of identity politics, such as the Kurdish question and the rise of political Islam. The resulting political vacuum, which was itself partially produced by the military through its securitisation of politics, was in turn filled by the military.²⁸

Southern California, 2011), University of Southern California Dissertations and Theses. And for an account of same-sex sexuality see Murat Bardakçı, *Osmanlı'da Seks* (Istanbul: İnkılâp, 2005).

²⁷ Yesil, *Media in New Turkey: The Origins of an Authoritarian Neoliberal State*, 9.

²⁸ İsmet Akça, "Hegemonic Projects in Post-1980 Turkey and the Changing Forms of Authoritarianism," in *Turkey Reframed: Constituting Neoliberal Hegemony*, ed. İsmet Akça, Ahmet Bekmen, and Barış Alp Özden (London: PlutoPress, 2014), 23.

Thus, the reemergence of identity discourses in general and the increase in the visibility of non-normative sexualities in particular should be read within the context of post-1980s' neoliberal capitalist projects that fragmented the center-right and center-left coalitions and contested the homogenized Turkish identity on the one hand, and lead to “the successful implementation of the hegemonic project of the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) through neoliberal, conservative and authoritarian populism”²⁹ in the 2000s on the other.³⁰

The 1990s saw the political assembly and organization of people under the rubric of gay, lesbian, bisexual and trans* identities in Turkish metropolises. Among the first organizations, *Lambdaistanbul*³¹ was formed in 1993 in Istanbul; and *KaosGL* (Kaos Gay and Lesbian Cultural Research and Solidarity Association)³² with its namesake publication founded in 1994 in Ankara. Although *Lambdaistanbul* has organized numerous public events since its inception, the Istanbul Office of the Governor and the police intercepted their public assembly and compelled them into clandestine meetings and private spaces. Yet, on its 10th year anniversary, the first official pride rally was organized by *Lambdaistanbul*, and it took place on Istiklal boulevard on Taksim, Istanbul with the participation of approximately 50 people in 2003, approximately one year after the formation of the non-coalition AKP government. These organizations have persevered and gained visibility throughout the 1990s, despite the political hegemony and sociocultural challenges, including the military intervention of February 28th, 1997.³³ Indeed, as D’Emilio and

²⁹ Akça, 14.

³⁰ As Yesil aptly summarizes, “AKP in essence reproduced the authoritarian neoliberal order that had been established in the 1980s.” Yesil, *Media in New Turkey: The Origins of an Authoritarian Neoliberal State*, 130.

³¹ “Lambdaistanbul LGBTI Solidarity Association,” Lambdaistanbul, accessed March 4, 2019, <http://www.lambdaistanbul.org/s/lambdaistanbul-lgbti-solidarity-association/>.

³² “Kaos GL History,” KaosGL Dernegi, accessed March 4, 2019, <http://www.kaosgldernegi.org/document.php?id=history>.

³³ For a detailed analysis of the military intervention of 1997, see Akça, “Hegemonic Projects in Post-1980 Turkey and the Changing Forms of Authoritarianism,” 29.

Chasin outlined, emergence of non-heteronormative discourses—it is a *reemergence* in the Turkish case—were informed by the liberal free-market economy, the reception of homosexuality as an identity category, the growth of heterogenous LGBTI+ populations and organizing in expanding metropolises, and the increasing visibility of LGBTI+ individuals in the capitalist marketplace and the mass media.

Furthermore, Yesil maintains that neoliberal capitalism and global technological developments contributed to these sociocultural changes along with challenges to the hegemonic ideology:

The Kemalist state ideology, which took radical steps to create a Westernized, secular nation-state by suppressing Kurdish ethnic identity and Islamic expression, came under question in the post-1980 era as market forces and integration with global capitalism converged with increasing demands for political liberalism and the growth of more individualist, competitive ideologies in the cultural realm. The questioning of strict limits placed on cultural and political expression and the entry into the public sphere of Islamic and Kurdish political actors as well as feminist, LGBT, and human rights activists, were also accelerated by the opening of new discursive spaces prompted by increasing technological investment in telecommunications and emergence of commercial broadcasting.³⁴

Similarly, Görkemli posits that the launch of the private television channels as part of the larger media globalization contributed to the revival of gender and sexuality discourses via the broadcasting of trans* and queer celebrities and individuals in the 1990s.³⁵ Even though more prominent queer figures like the late Zeki Müren³⁶, Bülent Ersoy³⁷, and Huysuz Virjin [Cranky

³⁴ Yesil, *Media in New Turkey: The Origins of an Authoritarian Neoliberal State*, 30.

³⁵ Görkemli, “From Queer Empire to Heterosexual Republic: Modernity, Homosexuality, and Media,” 38.

³⁶ Zeki Müren (1931-1996) was an eminent singer and performer since the 1950s; and Müren’s gracious rhetoric, flamboyant personality, and lavish fashion challenged gender norms and public attitudes. For an analysis of Müren’s image and Turkish national identity, see Umut Tümay Arslan, “Sublime yet Ridiculous: Turkishness and the Cinematic Image of Zeki Müren,” *New Perspectives on Turkey* 45 (2011): 185–213.

³⁷ Bülent Ersoy (1952-), Turkey’s first transgender singer and performer, whose transition and her turbulent trials with the judicial laws of gender in the post-1980s were extensively publicized. For a brilliant and meticulous analysis of her “tribulations,” see Başak Ertür and Alisa Lebow, “Coup de Genre: The Trials and Tribulations of Bülent Ersoy,” *Theory & Event* 17, no. 1 (2014).

Virgin]³⁸ have been mostly cherished and accepted into the media marketplace by the mass public and authorities, the gender-nonconforming and trans* citizens on the streets were discriminated and disenfranchised by the same masses and authorities in the public sphere.

As such, since the 1990s, the increasing national and transnational media attention to non-heterosexual and gender-nonconforming individuals has had contradictory effects in the context of Turkey. As Yesil maintains, the private channels' ostensible "liberalization" of content and representation through their entertainment programs and political talk shows were propagating the notion of a private identity separate from its public—political and cultural—counterpart:

Political talk shows served as a debating forum for ethnic origin, language, religion, and gender issues but portrayed them only as private matters that could now be discussed in public. By way of creating and circulating such an individualized, commercialized, and privatized representation of political and cultural identities, they failed to discuss collective democratic rights or aspirations.³⁹

In other words, though mass media granted public visibility to gender non-conforming and non-heterosexual identities, conversely, it denied their sociopolitical agency. Thereby, these identities were relegated to the private sphere away from the marketplace. In a similar vein, Görkemli argues that, despite the public exposure, the mass media aided to inculcate the notion of homosexuality as *sexual inversion*: "the supposed adoption of gendered behavior considered typical of the opposite sex, according to which men who have sex with men behave like women, and women who have sex with women behave like men."⁴⁰ Thus, the very visibility of male-to-

³⁸ Huysuz Virjin is the female drag alter-ego of male performer Seyfi Dursunoğlu (1932-), whose campy and brash performances were highly televised like Müren and Ersoy's. For a queer reading of all three performers, see Eser Selen, "The Stage: A Space for Queer Subjectification in Contemporary Turkey," *Gender, Place & Culture* 19, no. 6 (2012): 730–749.

³⁹ Yesil, *Media in New Turkey: The Origins of an Authoritarian Neoliberal State*, 44–45.

⁴⁰ Görkemli, "From Queer Empire to Heterosexual Republic: Modernity, Homosexuality, and Media," 24.

female trans* people, who were discriminated and dispossessed, destabilized the heteropatriarchal imaginary of the “modern” Turkish identity. As Görkemli posits, “*travestiler* have become the first modern, visible, *and* self-identified queer sexual subjects in Turkey.”⁴¹ However, beyond the screens and the stage, the trans* people were further commodified (literally, in the case of sex-workers) by public and private means; and, their presence in the public imaginary and public sphere were restricted to brothels and streets at night.⁴²

In the case of identity discourses, the Turkish lexicon and politics have expanded with the appropriation and transliteration of the globally circulating signifiers of *gay*, *lesbian*, *bisexual*, *transgender*, *intersex*, and *queer*.⁴³ Yet, these signifiers have been negotiated in various ways by the heterogeneous members of the LGBTI+ and queer communities in Turkey. In their essay “The Emergence of Gay Identities in Contemporary Turkey,” Tarik Bereket and Barry D. Adam juxtapose D’Emilio’s version of socioeconomic developments in the United States with Turkey’s increasing industrialization, urbanization, and individualism to account for the emergence of gay identities. They argue that “[w]ith the changing political economy of Turkey creating the social conditions, and global connections providing ideas and cultures, the distinctive characteristics of *modern* gay (and lesbian) worlds come into view when compared to other systems of homosexual bonding.”⁴⁴ They observe that these novel discourses and

⁴¹ Görkemli, 24. *Travesti* is an outdated derogatory term conflating male-to-female trans* identity with sex-work.

⁴² For more discussions on the oppression of trans* citizens in Turkey, see Görkemli, “From Queer Empire to Heterosexual Republic: Modernity, Homosexuality, and Media.”; Deniz Kandiyoti, “Pink Card Blues: Trouble and Strife at the Crossroads of Gender,” in *Fragments of Culture: The Everyday of Modern Turkey*, ed. Deniz Kandiyoti and Ayşe Saktanber (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2002), 277–93.; and the chapters in Berfu Şeker, ed., *Başkaldıran Bedenler: Türkiye’de Transgender, Aktivizm ve Altkültürel Pratikler* (Istanbul: Metis Yayınları, 2013).

⁴³ These new terms are adapted and used in addition to the already circulating ones, such as *ibne*, *eşcinsel*, *sevici*, *lubunya*, among many others. Like the reclaiming of the word *queer* as a political tool, some of these older terms are being reclaimed by LGBTI+ activist in Turkey for resistance, power, and pride.

⁴⁴ Tarik Bereket and Barry D. Adam, “The Emergence of Gay Identities in Contemporary Turkey,” *Sexualities* 9, no. 2 (April 2006): 136.

categories of sexual identity are interpreted and adapted differently by men from different socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds. They point out the growing resistance to the long-standing construction of gender roles as masculine/feminine with their respective “active-inserter/passive-receptive” sex roles by men who have sex with men.⁴⁵ They claim that some men, who have sex with men *and* do not conform to these binary norms, are embracing “*gey*” as a new way of identifying and representing themselves. Overall, this transliteration of a globally transmitted signifier into the Turkish lexicon and its use as a new category of identification demonstrates that “Turkish *gey* men are adapting, but also selecting, imported ideas of modern gay discourse and western identity politics into their way of conceiving or re-conceiving themselves.”⁴⁶

Expanding on the ideas of Bereket and Adam, Gul Ozyegin further discusses the political and socioeconomic aspects of the appropriation of *gey* as an identity category since the term’s first introduction to the Turkish lexicon in the late 1990s.⁴⁷ In addition to identifying same-sex desire beyond the binary gendered performances, *gey* resists the heteropatriarchal, misogynistic, and phobic connotations of *ibne* (faggot), signifying not only homosexuality typified by an effeminate male *and* the “passive” sex role but used to ridicule and degrade one’s masculinity.⁴⁸ However, Ozyegin argues that *gey* identity also represents a privileged socioeconomic class position that not everyone is eligible to acquire:

[C]lass identity...has multiple registers in Turkey and is expressed through a combination of an individual's level and type of schooling, English-speaking ability, work identity, income, and leisure-consumption practices. In Turkey, as in many other

⁴⁵ Bereket and Adam, 132.

⁴⁶ Bereket and Adam, 146.

⁴⁷ Gul Ozyegin, *New Desires, New Selves: Sex, Love and Piety among Turkish Youth* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2015), 252.

⁴⁸ Huseyin Tapinc, “Masculinity, Femininity, and Turkish Male Homosexuality,” in *Modern Homosexualities: Fragments of Lesbian and Gay Experiences*, ed. Ken Plummer (London: Routledge, 1992), 42.

national contexts, leisure-consumption practices in particular become a significant domain in which gayness gains public visibility and different bodies are alternately included and excluded from a collective *gey* identity. Indeed, the expression of *gey* selfhood through one's use of and relationship to commodities and leisure activities is a central practice in contemporary Turkey, and *gey* subjectivity has increasingly become rooted in a middle-class lifestyle in which individuals are expected to embody their class privilege through certain physical ideals—being young, beautiful, athletically built—as well as through their ability to purchase and wear the most fashionable clothing and to frequent sites of leisure such as gay clubs and bars.⁴⁹

Ozyegin's argument points to the neoliberal organizing of the *gey* identity with respect to its access to certain private goods, spaces, and activities, as well as its segregation of others from the marketplace. Likewise, the globally circulating signifier of gay, which has been privatized by the members adhering to the *gey* community, has paradoxical implications for the public and private spheres of Turkey. Therefore, as Ozyegin maintains, the young homosexual men “substantiate and give meaning to an otherwise empty term by aligning it with ideals of global identification, versatility, masculinity, cosmopolitanism, flexibility, and middle-class belonging—a process that, in turn, marks local identification, rigid active/passive roles, femininity, rural origins, stasis, and lower-classness as undesirable traits belonging to a stigmatized *ibne* identity.”⁵⁰

Rather than the imagined homogenized and unified LGBTI+ community, there are growing intersections of and oppositions to identifications under and beyond the rainbow flag in the last decade. As discussed, there are *gey/lezbiyen* populations who are seeking admittance to the global neoliberal marketplace via their “acceptance” and rights discourse; there are expressions that resist homonormative assimilations to heteropatriarchy; and, furthermore, there are struggles for more inclusive and queer commons. Thinking through the Gezi Park uprisings of June 2013,

⁴⁹ Ozyegin, *New Desires, New Selves*, 260.

⁵⁰ Ozyegin, 260–61.

Cenk Özbay and Evren Savcı investigate the role of *commons*—as “spaces, knowledges, organizations, and services that are owned, controlled, and used publicly for the well-being and survival of all”⁵¹—for queers, and the possibilities of queering “commons” in Turkey. Gezi park, one of the few remaining public parks in the heart of Istanbul, was planned to be replaced by a shopping mall by the government. Moreover, Gezi park had been a queer space for cruising and sexual encounters between men and trans* people since the late 1970s. Thus, the local protest that began as a reaction to the eradication of the park rapidly ignited a national resistance movement. Özbay and Savcı demonstrate that the civilian occupation of the Gezi park by intersectional groups, and particularly by LGBTI+ and queer assemblies, democratically claimed and repurposed the park as an anti-capitalist and uncommercial space, free from the authoritarian state rule, and rejected respectability politics. “[The] Gezi Park uprisings were certainly not the only performance of queer commons in Turkey,” the authors write, “but they provide a promising model for how various bodies and sexual subjectivities can come together to resist the privatization of public goods as well as respectability politics that neoliberal governments impose on citizen subjects.”⁵² Consequently, the uprisings indicate the potential bearings of the LGBTI+ resistance and politics in relation to the access to commons:

The unrelenting recognition of whom our struggle for survival might harm distinguishes queer commons from practices of self-preservation that readily take racist, xenophobic, anti-immigrant, and otherwise exclusionary forms. If this is the contribution of queer to commons, the contribution of commons to queer is in its refusal to think respectability politics as divorced from material dispossession, and the increased securitization of peoples and borders.⁵³

⁵¹ Cenk Özbay and Evren Savcı, “Queering Commons in Turkey,” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 24, no. 4 (October 1, 2018): 516.

⁵² Özbay and Savcı, 519.

⁵³ Özbay and Savcı, 520.

In the current sociocultural climate of Turkey, there is an ever-increasing public visibility of people identifying as LGBTI+,⁵⁴ of organizations with heterogeneous approaches and agendas for social justice, and of movements with intersectional causes.⁵⁵ Conversely, governmental bans are preventing the LGBTI+ communities and organizations from their access to commons. For example, the government has been violating the constitutional freedom of assembly by banning the annual Pride march since 2015⁵⁶ under the auspices of “public safety,” or “sensitivities” discourses. After the ban on the 2018 Istanbul LGBTI+ Pride March, which was to take place in Taksim, the Pride Committee released a press statement that read:

We call on you to also make fun of those who try to place boundaries on our identities, orientations, existences, bodies, languages, desires and everything that make us us. We grow as we transcend our own boundaries and become freer. We extend our boundless, non-gendered spaces into the streets. We stand against those who try to confine us within boundaries and force us into ghettos, those who try to push us out and change our spaces: we don't give up on Taksim.⁵⁷

As the press release indicates, the government not only denies the LGBTI+ identities their rights to be in public and assemble, but further disenfranchise them from access to the commons as well as the marketplace like Taksim.

Additionally, in the politico-economic context of Turkey, the definitions of the global LGBTI+ abbreviations vary interpersonally, locally, and transnationally. They may designate one's class, education, gender performances, and politics. Thus, these definitions might not

⁵⁴ Especially the increase in the visibility of trans* activists and artists on the streets, on television series, news coverages, and online and offline platforms beyond the reach of censorship are slowly yet positively shifting the former imaginary of the masses in Turkey since the Gezi protests.

⁵⁵ For a discussion on the LGBTI+ organizations, their agendas, political effectiveness, as well as their intersections with other causes and politics in Turkey, see Evren Savcı, “The LGBTI+ Movement: Evren Savcı Interviewed by Şebnem Keniş and Ipek Tabur,” in *Authoritarianism and Resistance in Turkey: Conversations on Democratic and Social Challenges*, ed. Esra Özyürek, Gaye Özpınar, and Emrah Altındış (Springer, 2019), 125–32.

⁵⁶ The 2014 Pride rally is considered to have the largest number of participants: over 100,000 people came together in solidarity on the first-year anniversary of the Gezi Park protests.

⁵⁷ lgbtinewsturkey, “Istanbul LGBTI Pride Week Committee Press Statement,” *LGBTI NEWS TURKEY* (blog), June 30, 2015, <https://lgbtinewsturkey.com/2015/06/30/istanbul-lgbti-pride-week-committee-press-statement/>.

account for people who cannot afford certain public/private goods, services, and spaces—due to their class, education, gender, health, citizenship, residence... etc.—and/or do not identify with one of the LGBTI+ abbreviations. Thereby, under the authoritarian neoliberalism in Turkey, these people are doubly omitted from accessing public commons and/or the privatized marketplace that might be available to certain LGBTI+ individuals. As such, based on one of her correspondences, Ozyegin concludes that every *gey* man is a homosexual, but not every homosexual is *gey*.⁵⁸

5. LGBTI+ Representation and Politics in the New Cinema of Turkey

Turkish media is a contested political arena, which is not only regulated by multinational conglomerates but reflects the shifting ideologies of the authoritarian state's political projects. For instance, television broadcasting, which commenced first in Ankara in 1968 and in Istanbul in 1971, and transmitted nationally in 1974, became the main apparatus of dissemination of the ideology of a given government. In 1993, the formerly state-owned broadcasting was opened to private enterprises by the Parliament, which passed the Broadcasting Law in the following year.⁵⁹ Subsequently, the Broadcasting Law formed the Radio and Television Supreme Council (RTUK) “as an administratively and financially autonomous and impartial public legal authority for the regulation and supervision of radio, television and on demand media services which are under the jurisdiction of Republic of Turkey.”⁶⁰ To this day, RTUK continues to monitor the content of national productions. Yesil further elucidates the RTUK's political makeup:

Despite its so-called autonomous status, the RTUK's ability in developing its own principles is limited, and it functions more like a penalizing and censoring body as opposed to a regulatory one. This stems from the fact that the RTUK has been granted

⁵⁸ Ozyegin, *New Desires, New Selves*, 254.

⁵⁹ Yesil, *Media in New Turkey: The Origins of an Authoritarian Neoliberal State*, 47.

⁶⁰ <https://www.rtuk.gov.tr/en/about-rtuk/5297/5083/about-rtuk.html>

extensive punitive powers such as the ability to issue warnings, impose monetary fines, suspend broadcasts (for a number of days), or even revoke licenses.⁶¹

Thus, RTUK operates within the framework of the authoritarian state's hegemonic claims to national homogeneity, territorial integrity, moral values, heteronormative family structure, etc.⁶² These principles are reinterpreted and imposed on the media services and productions based on the political interests of the ruling government.

Similarly, the General Directorate of Cinema, which is the primary governmental institution related to cinema, was founded under the authority of the Ministry of Culture's department of Fine Arts in 1977. In 1989, a new General Directorate of Cinema and Copyright was formed by the amalgamation of the department of literary and artistic works and the department of cinema. And in 2003, the Ministries of Culture and Tourism were united. More recently, the General Directorate of Cinema and Copyright was reconstructed as separate entities in 2011. Overall, the General Directorate of Cinema, which has been operating under the jurisdiction of the state, is charged with reviewing, certifying, and funding national film productions that it deems in align with its mission.⁶³ Thus, film productions, which are approved by the Ministry of Culture and Tourism, are considered as national cultural "inheritance." Thus, the content of this "inheritance" fluctuates depending not only on the shifting politico economic ideologies of the state but also on the interests of the growing and private media market. As Yesil maintains,

⁶¹ Yesil, *Media in New Turkey: The Origins of an Authoritarian Neoliberal State*, 47–48.

⁶² See the current national audio-visual media law, which still contains these prohibitions: <https://www.rtuk.gov.tr/en/audio-visual-media-law/5350/5139/the-law-no6112-on-the-establishment-of-radio-and-television-enterprises-and-their-media-services-march-3-2011.html>

⁶³ The current General Directorate of Cinema's mission statements reads: "Providing extensive viewership by conveying national cinema works to the audience, developing policies to raise public awareness about art, supporting the projects serving this purpose, encouraging the creation of qualified artworks, conveying our cultural inheritance to the next generations and reinforcing the place and the role of Turkish cinema." <http://sinema.kulturizm.gov.tr/EN-144066/our-mission-and-vision.html>

In Turkey's contemporary media landscape—that is, what remains as the outcome of the dismantling of state monopoly in broadcasting, the privatization of communication assets, and the adoption of market-friendly policies in the 1990s—commercial outlets have been simultaneously independent of the state and dependent on it. They are not formally owned, operated, or dominated by the state, yet their survival depends on their informal ties with the ruling elite, high bureaucracy, and judiciary. While this dependency on the state is not a new development... it has nonetheless revealed itself in astounding ways under the AKP's single-party rule.⁶⁴

It is tempting to conclude that all films are beholden to these prohibitions and strictures of the co-dependent media outlets and the governmental bodies above them. However, different directors find more or less success negotiating the rules and pushing their films through the gauntlet. We can, however, conclude that filmmakers must be aware of and respond to the large-scale political climate and the particular dynamics of the regulatory forces in order to successfully produce, and have their work distributed on televisions and in cinemas. Therefore, the filmic representations of the LGBTI+ narratives, when they *can* be made and screened, are political performances themselves. Hence, these films respond to the cultural politics of their times on the one hand, and interpret the discourses and realities of LGBTI+ existence under the limitations placed upon them on the other. Consequently, while some films utilize persistent sociocultural stereotypes of LGBTI+ identities (e.g. *sexual inversion*) the others *queer* the very gender stereotypes, heteronormativity, and sexualities.

Furthermore, prior to the “new cinema of Turkey,” film directors played with gender binaries in their films as early as 1920s and exhibited non-normative sexualities ostensibly beginning with 1960s.⁶⁵ For instance, some films in 1920s featured men and women cross-dressing as disguise and for comedic purposes. Yet, the earliest example to explicitly display

⁶⁴ Yesil, *Media in New Turkey: The Origins of an Authoritarian Neoliberal State*, 105.

⁶⁵ I am borrowing from Delta Meriç's article that provides an extensive filmography. Delta Meriç, “Türkiye Sinemasına Queer'den Bakmak,” *Müdahil Dergi*, November 8, 2016, <http://www.mudahildergi.com/elestiridetay.php?link=-050558&dil=turkce>.

same-sex desire was *İki Gemi Yanyana*, directed by Atıf Yılmaz in 1963. This comedy film, which features multiple characters and parallel narratives following the mix-up of bags, shows two women kissing and indicates their ongoing yet ambiguous romantic relationship. In 1965, Halit Refiğ directed *Haremde Dört Kadın*, which alludes casually to a same-sex bond between two women in an Ottoman homosocial space of a harem. Decades later in 1985, Atıf Yılmaz explores a ménage-à-trois relationship between a man and two women in *Dul Bir Kadın*. Although the film is less explicit in its display of same-sex sexuality than *İki Gemi Yanyana*, its homoeroticism and feminist sexual liberation discourse coupled with a critique of monogamy subvert heteropatriarchal and heteronormative view of sexuality, gender binaries, and family structure. Another controversial Atıf Yılmaz film, made in 1992, *Düş Gezginleri* not only features the first explicit same-sex scene between two women but centers on the rise and fall of their romantic relationship. Two years later, Yılmaz focused on a group of trans* and queer-male characters in his now cult film, *Gece, Melek ve Bizim Çocuklar* in 1994, discussed below. In terms of male homosexuality, one of the earliest examples is the 1989 film *Acılar Paylaşılmaz*, directed by Eser Zorlu, that features a heteropatriarchic narrative of a father forgiving his son for being a homosexual. The 1990s booms with narratives that feature male homosexual and trans* characters. For instance, Mustafa Altıoklar's two films *İstanbul Kanatlarımın Altında* (1996) and *Ağır Roman* (1997) feature self-identified male homosexuals. Additionally, the first film to depict same-sex romance and sex between two men is Ferzan Özpetek's *Il Bagno Turco - Hamam* in 1997, is also discussed below. Kutluğ Ataman is another director, whose film *Lola + Bilidikid*, released in 1999 dealt with the lives of transcultural queer men in Germany.⁶⁶

⁶⁶ For various and detailed analyses of *Lola + Bilidikid*, see Cüneyt Çakırlar, "Turkey, Filmmaking," in *Routledge International Encyclopedia of Queer Culture*, ed. David A. Gerstner, 1st ed. (London: Routledge, 2006), 577–79. Christopher Clark, "Transculturation, Transe Sexuality, and Turkish Germany: Kutluğ Ataman's *Lola Und*

In the following sections, therefore, I examine how non-normative sexualities are granted certain types of visibilities by the increasing number of films in the specific terms of the Turkish marketplace and political contours. I look at national and transnational (co)productions approved and/or funded by the Ministry of Culture and Tourism since the 1990s, featuring “openly” gay and/or transgender characters. I analyze how these films imagine and represent non-heterosexual and/or non-heteronormative identities in their narratives. Consequently, I compare these films’ aesthetics and question how they reflect, support and/or negate the developing LGBTI+ and queer politics nationally and globally over three decades.

A. *Dönersen Islık Çal* (*Whistle If You Come Back*)

Orhan Oğuz, born in 1948 in Turkey, is amongst the prominent filmmakers coming out of the *Yeşilçam* eras. After working as a cinematographer, Oğuz began directing his own films in the late 1980s. His first feature film, *Her Şeye Rağmen* (1988) was screened at Cannes Film Festival in 1988, and earned him the “young filmmakers” award. His fourth film, *Dönersen Islık Çal*, which was made in 1992 but released a year later, was supported by the then Turkish Ministry of Culture. *Dönersen Islık Çal*, which Oğuz was both the director and the cinematographer for, narrates the friendship between an unnamed gracious male dwarf (Mevlüt Demiryay) and an unnamed trans* sex-worker (Fikret Kuşkan), living by Istanbul’s famous Beyoğlu district in Taksim.⁶⁷ The film earned him further awards from the national and international film festivals (e.g. “Young Audience Award” from International Festival of

Bilidikid,” *German Life and Letters* 59, no. 4 (2006): 555–572. Barış Kılıçbay, “Queer as Turk: A Journey to Three Queer Melodramas,” in *Queer Cinema in Europe*, ed. Robin Griffiths (Bristol, UK; Chicago, USA: Intellect, 2008), 117–28.

⁶⁷ There are no gender pronouns in Turkish; instead, they are all signified by a single letter, *o*. Hence, I will be addressing the trans* character, who is credited as “*travesti*,” with a female pronoun for she declares herself as a woman. Likewise, I will use the male pronoun for the dwarf, whose cis-gendered hetero-masculinity is (per)formed in opposition to the trans* woman’s contested queerness, and who is called “a little giant man” by the *travesti*.

Mediterranean Cinema Montpellier). The film is now considered as one of the earliest representations of trans* lives and struggles in Turkey.

Dönersen Islık Çal opens with a prologue, in which the camera pans and dissolves through the clouds in a blue sky as an omniscient non-diegetic voiceover of a boy is heard. The boy recalls men that the clouds resemble and retells the myths that he heard from his grandfather about the dervishes, who became clouds and rained when they were happy. Unexpectedly, a faint lower-pitched sound of an older man grunting becomes more audible. The camera tilts down from the clouds and we see a tree and a rundown building by train tracks tagged with a graffiti that reads “No to Imperialist Wars and Invasions. T.K.İ.H.” (Türkiye Komünist İşçi Hareketi [Communist Worker’s Movement of Turkey]). The boy and the man grunt as the boy calls that a big train is coming. After the red passenger train rapidly enters the frame, the camera pans left to reveal the source of the voiceover, the boy in an out-of-focus over-the-shoulder shot in the foreground. As the boy’s body rocks back and forth he asks the man off-screen, “What are you doing, Mustafa *abi*?”⁶⁸ Mustafa orders him not to move. The next shot zooms in on a dark tunnel the train is entering as the boy asks, “Mustafa *abi*, are you fucking me?”⁶⁹ Mustafa replies as they both continue to grunt, “No, I would have taken off your pants if I was fucking you.” Next, the title credits appear over the pitch blackness of the tunnel that fills the screen.

This prologue sequence on its own and in the context of the entire movie is open to multiple readings. I would argue that due to the fact that the film begins with an ostensibly omniscient narrator, and very soon after, strips him of his omniscience by revealing that the narrator is not only a diegetic one but a boy who is molested and deceived by an older man,

⁶⁸ *Abi*, a colloquial for older brother, may signify an actual male sibling and/or any older men.

⁶⁹ All the translations are mine unless indicated otherwise.

topples the narrator's sovereignty. Furthermore, the boy's recollections, which are passed through a patriarchal lineage—from grandfather to grandson—are exclusively about men and dervishes. The film not only elicits the discursive changes in the lineage of Ottoman era's homosocial institutions and homoerotic practices among men, such as dervishes in *tekkes*, *köçekler* and sex between older men and younger boys, but implies the existence of same-sex practices that are now overtly covert. Moreover, the graffiti by the Communist Worker's Movement of Turkey in the background coupled with molested boy in the foreground and Mustafa (Kemal Atatürk?)'s feeble lie could be read as the Imperial powers and ideologies (read: neoliberal capitalism of the United States and the United Kingdom) are abusing and coercing Turkey in an overtly deceitful manner. Therefore, on the one hand, the film aligns itself with a Marxist critique of Turkey's weakening coalition government and their neoliberal projects, and on the other, criticizes the authoritarian nationalist and statist identity politics of the Kemalist ideology.⁷⁰ Lastly, within the context of the whole movie the prologue stands alone. Contrary to the conventions of narrative structure, the film does not return or refer to this scene to disclose the identity of the boy. Therefore, it is never revealed whether the dwarf and/or the *travesti* were molested or not. Thus, on the one hand, the film contests the stereotypical diagnosis of “*sexual inversion*” (e.g. rape in early childhood) and conflation of gender and sexuality of trans* subjectivities. And on the other hand, the film sublimates the molested boy as the epitome of the destabilized heteropatriarchy in Turkey.

⁷⁰ As mentioned earlier, Akça describes Turkey's 1990s political hegemonic crisis in relation to economy and identity politics. In addition to the militarization and securitization of identity politics by the neoliberal national security state, Akça argues that the successive coalition governments' failed attempts at hegemony throughout the 1990s were also caused by their invariable neoliberal financial accumulation strategies that were uncontrolled, export-oriented, and enforced by the International Monetary Fund. Akça argues that the “economic cost of these accumulation strategies and the resulting economic crises were paid by Turkey's workers, urban poor, lower middle classes, fixed income receivers, peasants, small businesses, shopkeepers and craftsmen.” Akça, “Hegemonic Projects in Post-1980 Turkey and the Changing Forms of Authoritarianism,” 24.

After the prologue, we are respectively introduced to the dwarf working as a bartender at a bar, and the *travesti* running away from three men who are chasing her in the secluded and dark streets of Beyoğlu. The *travesti* momentarily hides by a building's gate; however, the three men spot her. As one of the men forces himself upon her, the film cuts back and forth from a close-up of her face in terror to a flashback, in which another close-up shot confines her crying face while her head is being gripped and her hair is snipped off by offscreen men. The sound of the clipper bridges over and transitorily bleeds into the present. After the flashback, the *travesti* tries to escape the clutches of the men yet fails. The film cuts to the dwarf walking through the dark streets. From a street corner, the dwarf sees a woman being sexually assaulted by a group of men. He hides and blows his whistle that he carries to imitate police guards and scares away the attackers. Once the men run off, the dwarf approaches the *travesti*, who is half-conscious and bleeding on the ground, and call her "miss." The *travesti* passes out and the film cuts to a flashback scene accompanied by only a non-diegetic music score. In this short scene, the shaved *travesti* is in a dark van with other trans* people. When the van comes to a halt, three men in suits dismiss them out to a remote rural area outside of the city perimeters. The identity of the men in suits, who were cutting the *travesti*'s hair, is revealed as the civilian police. Thus, the trans* bodies are purged, regulated, disciplined, and literally thrown out of the neoliberal city and the marketplace by the policing bodies of the 1990s' national security state.

In the following scene, the dwarf, who brought the disheveled woman to his apartment, tends to her. When the *travesti* regains consciousness, the dwarf offers her food and complements her beauty. However, after hearing her low-pitched voice and seeing her pee standing up in the bathroom without her wig, the dwarf's attitude, and perception of her beauty

alters. The following dialogue in the kitchen highlights not only the dynamics between these two characters but also the film's politics of representation of marginalized identities.

Dwarf: You are not a woman. You deceived me. You, you are a thing...
 Transvestite: Stop trying to be polite. Why don't you call it faggot?
 D: But, you deceived me. Why didn't you tell me?
 T: Would you have helped me then?
 D: I feel nauseous even thinking about it. You are so ugly. This is an ugly thing.
 T: Oh! Look who is talking! I guess you never look at the mirror. Am I the ugly one, or are you? With your shapeless body...what a pathetic excuse for a human being. [Dwarf slams the pot he is washing in the sink] Ah! I am so frightened! What vulgar crudity show-off!
 D: Get out! Get out of my house! Pervert! Vile faggot!
 T: I can't go anywhere at this time of night. Will you send me to my death row?
 D: You will leave in the morning, then.
 T: I will flee in the morning. I wouldn't stay even if you wanted to...Poor little giant man. [Blows a kiss]

The film's portrayal of these two characters and their relationship is oxymoronic. Instead of stereotyping, hierarchizing, or equalizing the struggles of these identities under the rubric of victimhood, the film oscillates between the slippery dynamics of morality and oppression among the oppressed.

First, the film exhibits both these characters within their larger social, economic, and political milieus. Instead of stereotyping him as a woeful disabled man, the film depicts the dwarf as a working-class man, who travels mostly in the night to avoid looks and harassment, tends his own and his two puppies' needs, pays his rent, fortifies his body by exercising, takes the law into his hands with his police whistle, and outsmarts the offenders. Similarly, the *travesti* is a lower-class nocturnal sex-worker, who has her own network of community and chosen family. Even though, the lack of judicial recognition of and discrimination against trans* identities engender limited work opportunities, thereby enforcing majority of male-to-female trans* individuals to sex-work, there is no mention in the film if she is an unwilling sex-worker or not. In addition to undermining the stereotypes and moralistic didacticism, the film

acknowledges the brutal realities and state oppression of the trans* lives, and the lack of structural provisions and welfare for the disabled.⁷¹ Consequently, the film posits that the foreclosure of these identities to the “safety” of the night is duplicitous for the night keeps them further invisible in the dark.



Figure 1. Film still from *Dönersen Işık Çal* (1992). The *travesti* and the *dwarf* out in the daylight getting harassed by men on İstiklal Avenue.

Secondly, the film exposes the intra-personal and communal dynamics among the minority groups, and the thin layers of oppression as the oppressed becomes the oppressor and vice versa. As illustrated, the dialogue above reveals dwarf’s transphobia of the “beautiful/ugly” *travesti*. Later, the *travesti* forces herself upon the dwarf to look at his penis out of curiosity, akin to her own “kind’s” institutionalization within the “cabinet of curiosities.” Similarly, the *travesti*

⁷¹ For example, the following scenes are good examples: 1) the dwarf goes to a bank and climbs onto the automatic teller machine to reach the keyboard and withdraw cash; 2) he confronts a small-business owner who defrauds dwarfs by claiming that he can elongate them or promises fame to talentless people.

assaults the dwarf to lend her money and open the secret closet he keeps locked. Moreover, one of the dwarf's neighbors, a cis-gender, heterosexual, female prostitute (Derya Alabora) is married to her impotent pimp (Menderes Samancılar), whom she bosses around to find her clients. In one occasion, she tries to have sex with the dwarf for free although the dwarf rejects her offer. Later, the prostitute clashes with the *travesti* for the decline in the demand for cis-female prostitutes due to the “faggots” increasing presence in the marketplace. Another notable example is the dynamic between the two Greek women: The old woman, Madam Lena (Ferment Yönel), who is the dwarf's landlady, and her younger servant (Cihan Bıkmaz). Madam Lena purposefully leaves her jewels on her dresser and sometimes let her servant steal them; she embraces this as a game of “loneliness and death” between the two. The film's pairing of these allegedly incongruous characters and their complex dynamics not only destabilize the conventional black and white assumptions of the oppressed/martyr and the oppressor/villain, but further subverts heteronormativity gender and family dynamics.

Complimentarily, the film's *mise en scène* also duplicates the ironic relationships. For instance, in a scene at the sex-workers' shared apartment, the *travesti*, wearing a pink robe and a bonnet over her curled wig, is composed next to a blurry poster of a mesomorph male body with the English subtitle “All Men Are Not Created Equal.” The tongue-in-cheek “subtext” juxtaposes hypermasculinity attributed to compulsory heterosexuality with the “unequal” male-to-female trans* body and queer sexuality. Thus, on the one hand, the film's use of the English poster not only illustrates the localization of the already circulating global discourses of hetero-masculinity and standards of male beauty within the performances of gendered bodies in Turkey, and on the other, the film's reclaiming and rereading of the “subtext” through the body of the male-to-female *travesti* queers the essentialist image of hetero-masculinity and the ideals of manhood.

Overall, I would argue that the film's representation of multifaceted characters endows them with agency and negates the very stereotypes these characters are expected to perform.

Consequently, the film subverts not only the melodramatic modality and moralistic narratives of *Yeşilçam* films, but also queers the "masculine melodramas" of the new cinema of Turkey.

Furthermore, like the prologue, the film's final moments and the ending are equivocal. One late night, the dwarf gets attacked and lethally wounded by three men on his way home. While lying on the ground unconscious, a police whistle is heard offscreen. The dwarf wakes up and looks for the source of the whistle. The film cuts to a long wide shot of a side street, where a short girl in a white dress and a whistle in her mouth stands on the steps next to a street sign that reads "Angelidis." The film cuts to a close-up shot of the smiling dwarf; and the reverse shot of a close-up of the girl, who is revealed to be an older woman (Asiye Murtaza). Although, the woman might be read as an angel or/and the dwarf's mother, her identity is ambiguous (the credits indicate her as the "female dwarf"). The film returns to the close-up of the smiling dwarf on the ground, and back to the long wide shot of the now-empty steps. The final close-up shot of the scene shows dwarf as bleeding and falling unconscious.

Later in his apartment, the dwarf's bleeding gets worse, and he falls paralyzed and unconscious on his bedroom floor. This time the film cuts to a short scene, in which an older man (Samim Meriç), whose identity is only legible in the credits as the dwarf's father, carries the dwarf, who is screaming inaudibly (perhaps, one can lip-read the dwarf as possibly saying "baba") and drops him face-down on the ground surrounded by ruins of a stone building. While the dwarf is lying on the ground, multiple young boys run and jump over him. The only audible sounds that are bridged over are the diegetic noises from the television and the call of the *travesti* looking for him in the apartment. Back in the apartment, the *travesti* finds him unconscious and

manages to wake him up. At first, the dwarf calls her mom, and asks where his dad is. Following the dwarf's final wishes, she carries him out to his terrace facing the İstiklal avenue in Beyoğlu. After the death of the dwarf in her arms, the *travesti* finds the key and unlocks the closet that the dwarf (and the film) kept secret and discover that it is stacked with balls with different colors. The next morning, the balls rain down on the İstiklal avenue—reminiscent of the myth the boy told in the prologue, in which the dervishes who are ascended to clouds cry rain out of joy. As the passing men, women, and children gleefully play with the balls, the *travesti* walks freely among the distracted crowd. In the final shot, the *travesti* throws away her wig, walks towards and stares into the camera; and the shot freezes on her close-up.



Figure 2. Film still from *Dönersen Islık Çal* (1992): The *travesti* walks freely among the distracted crowd.

These final sequences of the film are laden with symbolism and open to multiple readings. One may postulate the balls that the dwarf collected as a symbol of his lost and abused childhood and innocence in respect to the mentioned sequences of “mental subjectivity”⁶⁸ above.

However, this would dismiss the latent possibilities that are beyond the level of the individual. The fact that the balls are all the same, yet with different color iterations, could be read in conjunction with the people on the street as “we are all people *yet* different.” Moreover, when the balls rain on the people, they disrupt the flow and create a festive chaos on the street. By means of this chaos, which negates the distinctions between sex, gender, age, class, ethnicity, and their embodied intersectional politics, the policing of the bodies come to a halt. Although, this is a temporary fissure in the social, political, and economic order, the film freezes it at the crux of the *travesti*'s disposal of the wig. I read this, on the one hand, as an act of queer defiance of the essentialization and conflation of sex, gender, and sexuality as mutually dependent (i.e. the “sexual inversion” notion of homosexuality as an inherent desire to perform the opposite sex to have same-sex relations), on the other hand, as reforming of the public discourse and space in the foreground of the chaos. Accordingly, one can argue that despite the momentary disruption, the *travesti* is reasserting herself into the hegemonic cis-heteronormative cultural sphere and the neoliberal marketplace instead of a radical restructuring of the very sociopolitical culture itself.

Nevertheless, I would argue that through its equivocal narrative and narration, the film is the first crucial example within the history of the new cinema of Turkey that deconstructs discursive distinctions of sex, gender, and sexuality, thereby dismantling the slippery foundations of manhood, masculinity, and heterosexuality. Consequently, the film, through its unnamed *and* unnamable *travesti*, redefines transitivity beyond the binary model of sex and gender; thereby, as Halberstam reminds us, “makes trans* people the authors of their own categorizations.”⁷²

⁷² Jack Halberstam, *Trans*: A Quick and Quirky Account of Gender Variability* (Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2018), 4.

B. *Gece, Melek ve Bizim Çocuklar (The Night, Angel and Our Children)*⁷³

Atıf Yılmaz (a.k.a. Atıf Yılmaz Batıbeki) is a renowned filmmaker, known for his films from the *Yeşilçam* periods. He produced 28, wrote 53, and directed 120 films between the years 1950 and 2004 until his death in 2006. The 116th film that he directed in 1994, *Gece, Melek ve Bizim Çocuklar*, is a controversial film for its depiction of real trans* individuals, nudity, quasi-representation of sex between two men, and *lubunyaca*.⁷⁴ Even though the film was sponsored by the Turkish Ministry of Culture and not censored at its initial release, parts of it were censored during its television broadcasting in the following years. Currently, the film's unrestored, and low-resolution copies—on VHS and VCD—or pirated versions on online platforms rarely exist. Recently, the film was screened in honor of its 25th year anniversary at the 8th Pembe Hayat KuirFest⁷⁵ in 2019 with the attendance of actors and crew.

The film narrates the intertwined stories of female sex-workers Serap (Derya Arbaş) and Melek (Deniz Türkali), trans* sex-worker Arif/Fulya⁷⁶ (Deniz Atamtürk), and “rent boy” Hakan (Uzay Heparı), living in Beyoğlu. The film opens with a series of flashing still images of

⁷³ Also known as *The Night, Melek and Our Children* for Melek is also a proper noun and the name of a character.

⁷⁴ Simply put, *lubunyaca* (or *lubunca*) is an evolving and disseminating slang variety made up of wordplays derived primarily from Turkish and Romani lexemes. In Turkish, *lubunya* refers to effeminate gay men or trans* women. Although *Lubunyaca*'s social and linguistic histories are debated—some argue that a form of it was in use among *köçekler* and *tellaklar* (male masseurs in *hamams*) who were also engaged in same-sex sex-work during the Ottoman Empire as early as the 16th century—the “contemporary” form of *lubunyaca* as spoken specifically by the queer communities in Istanbul dates back to the 1980s. For an extensive analysis of the transhistorical and spatial evolution of *lubunyaca* see, Nicholas Kontovas, “Lubunca: The Historical Development of Istanbul's Queer Slang and a Social-Functional Approach to Diachronic Processes in Language” (M.A. Thesis, Indiana University, 2012).

⁷⁵ Turkey's first “queer” festival, Pink Life QueerFest began in Ankara in 2011. It is organized by the Pembe Hayat LGBTT Dayanışma Derneği (Pink Life LGBTT Solidarity Association), which was founded by trans* activist in 2006 in Ankara. This year's traveling festival was relocated to Istanbul due to bans on the LGBTI+ events by the Ankara governor. It was sponsored primarily by European embassies, such as Norwegian, German, Denmark, Finland, United Kingdom, Netherlands, as well as the European Union Sivil Düşün Programme.

⁷⁶ Due to the absence of gender pronouns in Turkish, I will use the singular *they* when referring to Arif (a male name)/Fulya (female name); because, Arif/Fulya contests the gender binaries by their embodied fluidity. There are instances in which Arif refers to themselves as *gacı* (woman) in *lubunca*—demarcating it from *hasgacı* (“real”/ciswoman)—and, later calls themselves Fulya.

debauched nightlife in Istanbul with incessant noises of a heartbeat and sirens with sporadic sounds of screams, laughter, Turkish and English songs, dialogues among trans* sex-workers, and indiscernible police radiotelecommunication. As the credits roll, the film flashes images of nude female and trans* performers on and off the stage, police patrols, street musicians, drunk men and destitute kids, street food vendors, shop windows with female mannequins, money exchange offices, erotic film posters, vibrant signs of nightclubs in Turkish and English, as well as a shot of the *Yeşilçam* street label. The credit sequence culminates in a still image of policemen dragging people and sounds of brawl. The image animates and exposes policemen arresting female and trans* sex-workers and shoving them into the police van. Next, the film introduces a young woman, Serap, who gets out of a building yet hides back in when she sees the police van. When the van drives away she runs into a different building. There she finds a young effeminate male-presenting Arif waiting by her apartment. Arif, who was waiting for a friend of Serap's who no longer lives there, says they recently moved to Istanbul and has no place to go nor any money. Serap reluctantly lets Arif stay overnight. Later, Arif sees Serap hide her money in a box and steals it the next morning before Serap wakes up.

The following night, while hustling at a nightclub owned by Osman (Cengiz Sezici), Serap meets a handsome young man, Hakan. Serap mentions that her money was stolen; and Hakan offers to go looking for Arif. They go to another nightclub, populated with queers watching a trans* belly dancer. Shortly after, Arif walks in. Serap and Hakan catch them and ask where the money is. At that moment, the police raid the club and begin arresting the women and trans* people. Serap and Arif run out the backdoor leaving Hakan behind at the club. Outside, Arif apologizes and hands the leftover money back to Serap and promises to pay her back once they make more money. They decide to continue clubbing; thus, Arif takes her to another queer

club, where they watch a burlesque show. Later, Hakan walks in and meets them at the bar. The film's display of nightclubs with queer clientele, stage performances, and sex-work networks despite the police raids expose the queer resistance to the neoliberal national security state's crackdown on queer bodies, privacy, and spaces in the 1990s.

Next morning, in Serap's apartment, Serap invites Arif to try some clothes from her closet. When Arif takes their top off, instead of showing their body, the camera shows Serap's reaction from an over-the-shoulder shot of Arif. Serap states that Arif does not have any breasts and suggests filling a bra with cotton. Arif tells her that they will start the hormone therapy. Next, Serap puts make-up on Arif and tells him that they are ready for work. Despite the opening sequence's exposure of nude female trans* bodies, one can argue that the film contradictorily omits Arif's body from the screen for Arif's body is not-yet transitioned to a final female form; however, I would argue that, instead of Arif's body, the film exposes the very ideologies of recognition and interpellation of a body within Turkey's hegemonic sociocultural and politico economic discourses of sex and gender. Moreover, Arif/Fulya epitomizes the embodiment of queer defiance. After getting arrested and their hair cut by the police, Arif retells their experiences with other trans* women at the police station:

Arif/Fulya: I didn't make a sound. I said cut it, *ayol*. Cut some from below, too. As if I will be a man when my hair is cut. What difference would it make if I was to be wrapped in a burka? They advised me at the police station: "my son, return to your home, there is no end to this" blah blah! I said, "My *son*? You will call me 'my *girl*'" And, that's when they slapped me. They said, "We will report you to your family." I said, "Go ahead! They should all know; as if I hadn't already suffered enough from their hands." Then, they opened a case file. What a shambles! I had fun, sang songs, and played games with all the *gacıs* till the morning. You wouldn't have had this much fun even if you asked for it.⁷⁷

⁷⁷ All translations are mine unless stated otherwise.

Arif/Fulya's queer body resist the national security state's authoritarian discourses of sexual identity and enforced performances of gender. As, Halberstam argues, "[w]hen logic that fixes bodily form to social practice comes undone, when narratives of sex, gender, and embodiment loosen up and become less fixed in relation to truth, authenticity, originality, and identity, then we have the space and the time to imagine bodies otherwise."⁷⁸ Thereby, on one hand, the film negates the projection of fixed gendered identities to the trans* bodies, and imagines a queer body beyond the conflation of sex, sexuality, and gender. On the other, considering that the film was supported by the Ministry of Culture at the time, it further exposes the loopholes within the national discourses and systematized oppression of queer bodies in the 1990s.



Figure 3. Film stills from *Gece, Melek ve Bizim Çocuklar* (1994): *Left*, Melek, Arif, and Serap form a happy queer family; *above right*, Arif retells the events from the police station to Serap and Hakan; *below right*, Mehmet declares his love to Mehmet.

⁷⁸ Halberstam, *Trans**, xii.

Moreover, the film presents a queer love triangle vis-à-vis Hakan. The film depicts Hakan as a poor “rent boy,” and his multifaceted relationship with his client, Mehmet (Mehmet Teoman). In his study of “rent boys” in Istanbul, Cenk Özbay describes their contradictory class positions and fragile performances of hetero-masculinity. Özbay argues that rent boys come from *varoş*—marginalized sociocultural and politico economic communities at the outskirts of Istanbul—and assert their heterosexuality in opposition to the upper-class, ostensibly global gay identity by their “top only” positionality, rejection of romantic engagement with other men, homophobia, purported female partners, and toned body, which culminate in a self-governed performance of “exaggerated masculinity.”⁷⁹ Likewise, the film exposes Hakan’s fragile heterosexuality through his performance of “exaggerated masculinity.” On the one hand, Hakan maintains his hetero-masculinity via his toned body, clothing, brutish manners, and *ibne*phobia. Additionally, Hakan proposes to marry Serap, and asks her to quit sex-work. Serap declines Hakan’s proposal for a heteronormative monogamy and upholds her choice of sex-work to reject matrimony. Instead, she offers him to be her pimp and lover. On the other hand, Hakan has an ongoing, secret rapport with Mehmet, an upper-class, educated *gey* man, who loves Hakan and supports him fiscally and his bond with Serap. In the film’s quasi-sex scene between Hakan and Mehmet, the camera scans through their scattered clothes in Serap’s apartment accompanying their moans. When Serap catches them in her bedroom, the camera stays on her reaction. Serap calls Hakan *ibne* and kicks both men out of her apartment. In his analysis of the film, Eren Yüksel reads Hakan’s macho performance as a sign of his masculinity crises for the desire of inclusion within heteronormativity, and argues that by keeping the sex between men offscreen

⁷⁹ Cenk Özbay, “Nocturnal Queers: Rent Boys’ Masculinity in Istanbul,” *Sexualities* 13, no. 5 (October 2010): 645–63.

and, instead, idealizing the romantic heterosexual couple, the film denounces homosexuality as negative.⁸⁰ Contrarily, the fact that the film exposes Hakan's futile attempts at heterosexuality through his duplicitous performances of "exaggerated masculinity," it further queers the heteronormative romance instead of idealizing it. Likewise, Serap's rejection of matrimony and monogamy, and maintaining her right to possession of her body and to exchange the product of her body's labor for monetary compensation *and* for romance subverts heteronormativity.

Overall, I would argue that the film still stands out as an astonishing byproduct of Turkey's political climate of the 1990s. Like *Dönersen Islık Çal, Gece, Melek ve Bizim Çocuklar* surveys the lives of minorities within a neoliberal metropolis that simultaneously disenfranchises and capitalizes on them. As the film ends with the same noises from its opening, it not only criticizes the continuing militarized police forces and systematic homo/transphobia, misogyny, and oppression of non-heteronormative practices, but it exposes the unstable and queer performances of hetero-masculinity at large. Moreover, contrary to the alleged "silenced female" archetype in the new cinema of Turkey, the film not only queers womanhood but affords Serap and Arif/Fulya agency by denouncing the view of women, especially sex-workers, as sole victims, without negating their systematized state oppression.

C. *Il Bagno Turco – Hamam (The Turkish Bath – Hamam)*

Ferzan Özpetek is a renowned, openly "queer,"⁸¹ Turkish-born director and writer living in Italy. Özpetek's first feature film, *Hamam* is an Italian-Turkish-Spanish coproduction,

⁸⁰ Eren Yüksel, "Güneşi Gördüm ve Teslimiyet filmlerinde trans kimliklerin mekânsal örgütlenmesi ve sınırlılıkları," *Fe Dergi* 8, no. 2 (2016): 146.

⁸¹ Although Özpetek is open about his sexuality and is married to a man, he states that he is against people identifying themselves as homosexual or heterosexual. "Ferzan Özpetek: Mithat Alam Film Merkezi Söyleşi, Panel ve Sunum Yıllığı" (Conversation Transcript, 2009), 54. Hence, I use "queer" to account for Özpetek's political stance that resists an essentialist sexual identity.

supported by Eurimages in 1995, made in 1996, and released in 1997. *Hamam* is a controversial film for its portrayal of same-sex sex, which is considered as the first in the history of cinema in Turkey. Although *Hamam* was not primarily funded by the Ministry of Culture, it was approved for distribution in Turkey. *Hamam* won multiple awards for best director, film, supporting actor/actress, and soundtrack in various national film festivals. Moreover, it was initially chosen by the civil film committees as Turkey's nominee for the Academy Awards for Best Foreign Language Film in 1998; yet, the Ministry of Culture overturned their selection and nominated another film.⁸² Likewise, during *Hamam*'s television broadcasting the sex scene was omitted. Internationally, it was screened at the 50th Cannes Film Festival as part of the *Quinzaine des Réalisateurs* and awarded the Best First Feature (*Migliore Opera Prima*) in Italian Golden Globes in 1997.

Hamam revolves around a married Italian man, Francesco (Alessandro Gassman) and his journey from Rome to Istanbul to resolve the sale of a house bequeathed by his recently deceased aunt, Anita (voiced by Ludovica Modugno). Francesco discovers that Anita owned a *hamam* adjacent to her house in an old neighborhood; yet, he needs the missing cultural heritage certificate to complete the sale. In his search for the certificate, Francesco is introduced to the Turkish family who lives in the house and had taken care of Anita. The four members of the bilingual family welcome Francesco and show him Anita's belongings and *hamam*, which has not been in operation since she got sick and due to lack of customers and changing times. As Francesco uncovers Anita's life in Istanbul through her letters and acquaintances, he gets further accustomed to the nuances of patriarchal customs and fading and remaining traditions, guided by

⁸² "Hamam rekora Eşkîya Oscar'a," Newspaper, Hürriyet, October 23, 1997, <http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/gundem/hamam-rekora-eskiya-oscar-39270198>.

the son, Mehmet (Mehmet Günsür). Mehmet introduces Francesco to a *hamam*, a *kahvehane* (cafés where men meet and play games), a soccer match, and a male circumcision party, where Francesco learns how to *halay* (a central and southeastern folk-dance style). After discovering that the company that wants to buy Anita's house and *hamam* is planning on demolishing the neighborhood to build a new commercial center, Francesco declines the offer and decides to renovate the *hamam*. Alas, at the end of the movie Francesco is stabbed to death by a man, alluded to be hired by the company.

The film traces the remnants of the Ottoman era's homosocial spaces and practices and accentuates their homoerotic tensions through Francesco and Mehmet's bonding over them. When Mehmet takes Francesco to a functioning *hamam*, he explains how Anita taught him how to love traditions and give relief to the body and the soul. Their exchange is narrated by close-ups of Francesco and his point-of-view shots of Mehmet. Next, Francesco asks Mehmet if women in Turkey shave their pubic hair; as a response, Mehmet takes him to the *hamam*'s roof to peep at the women in the female section. As they furtively watch women from above, the camera rises up and watches them from above as Mehmet rests his hand on Francesco's shoulder. Similarly, in one of Anita's letters that Francesco found, Anita's voiceover reads:

I like the idea of organizing a place of relaxation just for men. I'll be the first Western maitresse in this city of all-powerful patriarchs, and I'll be able to secretly spy on their private pleasures. Hamams are strange places, where the steam relaxes customs as well as bodies. I have many friends here who would be grateful if I offered them a welcoming and discreet shelter for certain pleasures.

The film's text and narration mirror one another and queer the heterosexual "male gaze." In his reconsideration of Laura Mulvey's theory of the hegemonic heterosexual male gaze in cinema, Steve Neale concurs with Paul Willimen and argues that mainstream films *assume* a dominant heterosexual order and aim to reproduce heteronormativity in their narratives by diverting the

voyeuristic male gaze from male bodies via the sado-masochistic “spectacle” of contest between men.⁸³ Therefore, “male homosexuality is constantly present as an undercurrent, as a potentially troubling aspect of many films and genres, but one that is dealt with obliquely, symptomatically, and that has to be repressed.”⁸⁴ Comparatively, *Hamam* turns Francesco and Mehmet’s heterosexual and voyeuristic male gaze back at them by replicating the high-angle shot. Thus, instead of diverting the male gaze from male bodies, the film further accentuates Francesco and Mehmet’s homoerotic rapport.

Later, the film negates any doubt about their same-sex desire by explicitly showing Francesco and Mehmet kiss. Interestingly, the kiss is shown through the point-of-view of Francesco’s wife, Marta (Francesca d’Aloja), when she spots them in the *hamam* one late night. The next day, Marta confronts Francesco, and confesses her own affair with their business partner, Paolo (Alberto Molinari). Their conversation destabilizes the sacrosanctity of heteronormativity:

Marta: You should have told me Francesco. I shouldn’t have discovered it myself.
 Francesco: You didn’t say anything about Paolo either.
 M: It’s not the same thing!
 F: It is.
 M: Francesco, I cheated on you with a man.
 F: If that’s all, so did I.

On the one hand, *Hamam* contradicts the stereotype of homosexuality through the heterosexual masculine bodies of Francesco and Mehmet, who nevertheless do not stake a claim at a specific sexual identity (unlike Hakan’s performances of “exaggerated masculinity” in *Gece, Melek ve Bizim Çocuklar*), and underlines the fluidity of desire and sexuality regardless of performances

⁸³ Steve Neale, “Prologue: Masculinity as Spectacle: Reflections on Men and Mainstream Cinema,” in *Screening the Male: Exploring Masculinities in Hollywood Cinema*, ed. Steven Cohan and Ina Rae Hark (London; New York: Routledge, 1993), 9–20.

⁸⁴ Neale, 19.

of gender. On the other hand, the film's exposé of their desire through protracted shots of looking and Marta's point-of-view further undermines the hegemony of the heterosexual male gaze. Thus, the film's queer gaze not only reveals Francesco and Mehmet's homoeroticism but further queers the homosocial space of and dynamics in *hamam*, whereby the "customs and bodies" are loosened up.



Figure 4. Film still from *Hamam* (1997): Exchanges of steaming looks between Mehmet and Francesco.

Moreover, Özpetek juxtaposes the queerness of the institution of the *hamam* with the heterogenous, transient, and transnational identity of Turkey. Some critics rebuke *Hamam* and Özpetek for the ways they deal with sexual and national identities. However, instead of condemning *Hamam* as self-Orientalizing, film historian Savaş Arslan retorts: "The Turkish, often leftist or nationalist, criticism of Özpetek's *Hamam* as a self-orientalizing film that carries colonial subplots... often reflects the critics' understanding of what the Kemalist nation-state

should look like rather than an examination of its shifting parameters.”⁸⁵ Thus, *Hamam* challenges the neoliberal shifts that aim to homogenize politico economic discourses and eliminate practices that they deem outdated or traditional, like the company that wants to build a commercial center over the queer space of *hamam*. Furthermore, in an interview, Özpetek mentions that “some Italians see him as Turkish, and some Turks see him as Italian.”⁸⁶ The simultaneous in-between and outsider look of Özpetek queers sexualities and hyphenated national identities; indeed, as John Champagne observes, “Özpetek ‘queers’ not only male/female and heterosexual/homosexual but also Italian/other, intertwining issues of national and sexual identity.”⁸⁷ Instead of reading *Hamam* as a self-Orientalizing film, or trying to situate Özpetek within specific national borders, I would follow Christopher Clarks’s reiteration of “transculturation,” and emphasis on Hamid Naficy’s approach to “transnationality” in which “the boundaries between self and other, female and male, inside and outside, homeland and hostland are blurred and must continually be negotiated.”⁸⁸ Thus, I would argue that, like Anita’s *hamam*, Özpetek’s *Hamam* welcomes its spectators to a “discreet shelter,” which not only relaxes heteronormative customs but strips identities from the binaries of East/West, traditional/modern, heterosexual/homosexual. Hence, Özpetek is the queer “maîtresse among the patriarchs,” spying on his spectators, who are privy to private pleasures of Francesco and Mehmet within the transcultural discourses, histories, and settings of Turkey.

D. *Anlat Istanbul (Istanbul Tales)*

⁸⁵ Savaş Arslan, *Cinema in Turkey: A New Critical History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 271.

⁸⁶ “Ferzan Özpetek: Mithat Alam Film Merkezi Söyleşi, Panel ve Sunum Yıllığı” (Conversation Transcript, 2009), http://www.mafm.boun.edu.tr/files/64_Ferzan%C3%96zpetek.pdf. (my translation)

⁸⁷ John Champagne, *Italian Masculinity as Queer Melodrama: Caravaggio, Puccini, Contemporary Cinema*, 1st ed., *Global Masculinities* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 175.

⁸⁸ Clark, “Transculturation, Transe Sexuality, and Turkish Germany.”

Ümit Ünal is another eminent author, screenwriter, and film director. *Anlat Istanbul*, the second feature film that he wrote, reimagines five intertwined Grimm's fairy tales, namely the Pied Piper, Cinderella, Sleeping Beauty, Little Red Riding Hood, and Snow White. Ünal transforms these famous fairy tales into local narratives that deal with nationalism, racism, classism, ableism, sexism, and homo- and transphobia in Turkey. The Pied Piper is imagined as a poor, Gypsy clarinet player, cuckolded by his wife; Cinderella is a trans* woman from Izmir, who is forced into sex-work, and falls in love with a young shoe clerk; Sleeping Beauty is a delusional heiress who awaits for the return of her family's ancestor pasha, yet confuses him with a Kurdish trespasser; Little Red Riding Hood is a first-generation German-Turkish immigrant, who gets imprisoned for couriering drugs planted by the mafia; and Snow White is a pretty, naïve, and rich girl who studies in New York, and she is the daughter of one of the kings of the underground. All these characters' storylines take place on a single day and intersect with one another as a result of the king's assassination. Moreover, each of these intertwined tales are narrated by a different character and directed by one director. For the purpose of my paper, I will analyze the Cinderella storyline, directed by Selim Demirdelen, in relation to the whole film.

Anlat Istanbul opens with the image of a galaxy with a quote from Jorge Luis Borges's *Plot* floating within it: "Fate is partial to repetitions, variants, symmetries." The words and the galaxy zoom out and transform into an image of the Earth in space on a page from a pop-up book. A voiceover of a young girl (Ece Hakim) narrates as she flips through the pages, displaying next the image of Bosphorus from the Anatolian shore facing the historic peninsula of Constantinople in the European side. She states that Istanbul is the most beautiful city on Earth because "she had never seen it." Contrary to her statement, the camera tilts up and zooms out, revealing that the girl is sitting exactly where the image in the pop-up book is depicted from, as

the title of the movie appears. The repetition of the seamlessly continuous zoom out shots of the prologue with its self-contradicting narrator inform the spectator that what they see and hear are not all there is to know. Thus, by means of a paradox between narrative and narration, the film hints that one should take couple steps back, keep their distance, and be aware of the symmetrical stitching of the cuts to see the multilayered truths. Consequently, *Anlat Istanbul*'s prologue foreshadows the layered and intertwined fates of its characters, as well as its politics.

Similarly, the Cinderella segment, which succeeds Snow White, forms unanticipated and layered narratives within itself. The *fabula*⁸⁹/story of Cinderella tells of a young trans* woman, Banu (Yelda Reynaud), who was convinced by her male partner, Recep (Şevket Çoruh), to migrate to Istanbul and have a gender reassignment surgery. After her operation, Banu was forced into sex-work and trapped in a brothel by Recep, even though Recep claims that he loves and wants to marry her. The *syuzhet*⁹⁰/plot picks up from the present day and narrates the love story of Banu and a young male clerk, Fiko (Ismail Hacıoğlu). After confessing their love for each other, Fiko proposes to Banu to escape Istanbul with him. They make a deal to meet at the train station at midnight. When Banu returns to the apartment to pack, she is confronted by Recep, who set up an appointment with a client that night. Banu rejects Recep's order, which provokes him. When Recep attacks Banu, their next-door neighbor Mimi (Güven Kıraç) the queer "fairy grandmother" takes Banu under her wings. After hearing Banu's tragic story, Mimi

⁸⁹ Borrowing from the Russian Formalists, Bordwell delineates *fabula* as that "imaginary construct we create, progressively and retroactively," and which "embodies the action as a chronological, cause-and-effect chain of events occurring within a given duration and a spatial field" David Bordwell, "Principles of Narration," in *Narration in the Fiction Film* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985), 49. In other words, *fabula* is the story that the spectator deduces from the visuals and/or audio of the film.

⁹⁰ Likewise, *syuzhet* is what the film shows/tells the spectator through "the actual arrangement and presentation of the *fabula* in the film" Bordwell, 50..

agrees to help Banu escape with Fiko. However, later that night, Fiko never shows up at the train station; and Banu and Mimi never find out why.



Figure 5. Film still from *Anlat Istanbul* (2005): Fiko tries the slippers on Banu and declares his love.

Formally, the Cinderella storyline begins with a dissolve and a sound bridge of a non-diegetic somber clarinet tune. As the shot dissolves onto a close-up of a radio, the music is revealed to be diegetic. The shot tracks out and, first, frames a sleeping old man, then a young man, Fiko, in a clothing store. Fiko changes the station to a radio host, whose voice wakes up the old man. The scene transitions as it wipes and dissolves to a shot of the radio host, VJ Bülent, who is a famous, openly gay, radio and television host, playing himself. He introduces the tale of a beautiful woman who fell in love. As he narrates, the shot continues to wipe across the screen and dissolves back to the exterior setting of the clothing store, which locates it in the well-known Beyoğlu district of Istanbul. The shot ends on a woman and her reflection in the shop's window in an over-the-shoulder shot. Meanwhile, via sound bridge, VJ Bülent's voiceover falls over the

exterior shot and becomes non-diegetic. The next shot returns to the interior of the store and shows Fiko recognizing Banu standing outside. Banu enters the store and asks to try a shoe; yet, her size is no longer at the store but at a nearby storage building. As they leave for the storage together, VJ Bülent's narration returns as a diegetic voiceover through the radio speakers until the old man switches the station. During the storage scene, Fiko and Banu confess their desire for one another; however, Banu realizes that Fiko is not aware that she is trans*. While they have sex, VJ Bülent's voiceover bridges as the camera wipes and dissolves back and forth from VJ Bülent to them. VJ Bülent's voiceover states: "There, that's love for you. There's no telling where it'll come from or when it'll strike. Some people are puzzled by some romances. They find them strange. Are you one of them? In that case, it's you that's strange. You see, in the land of love nothing is strange, nothing impossible..."

At the end of the Cinderella segment, VJ Bülent's voiceover narration returns one last time to question why Fiko had not shown up at the train station. VJ Bülent's non-diegetic voiceover accompanies a flashback scene from the Snow White segment, in which the wolf and the evil stepmother characters hit and run a pedestrian by car. During the repetition of this scene, the identity of the pedestrian is revealed as Fiko by the variant shot of Fiko crossing the street. Thus, VJ Bülent's voiceover functions as an unrestricted and omniscient *deus ex machina*, exposing the fate of Fiko unbeknownst to Banu and Mimi and cinematically delivering on Borge's "repetitions, variants, symmetries."

VJ Bülent's voiceover narration and casting further complicates the narrative of the film for its audiences in Turkey. As discussed above, VJ Bülent is first introduced as the narrator of a diegetic radio show, and later revealed to be an omniscient narrator of the Cinderella tale. Moreover, the extra-diegetic knowledge of VJ Bülent as a radio and television host, and seeing

him on the screen playing himself, distances the spectator and create self-awareness of watching a movie. Furthermore, this distancing and witnessing a real and openly gay individual narrate the fictional story of a trans* woman on screen, paradoxically, functions to problematize the public awareness of the realities these marginalized identities face. Contrary to the stigmatizing narratives of voiceless non-normative sexualities and gender identities in the media, the film gives voice and agency to these identities. Therefore, VJ Bülent via the film, and the film via VJ Bülent, question and challenge the sentiments of the status quo on gender and sexuality, as in the words of VJ Bülent's affirmations above.

Likewise, the Cinderella segment contests the essentialist view of performances of gender and sexuality within the context of Turkey. By retelling the cis-gender and heteronormative Cinderella tale as the tragic narrative of a disenfranchised trans* woman, the film not only subverts the heteronormative "happily ever after" scenarios but challenges the identities and performances that stake a claim at heterosexuality. From this outlook, the scene in which Recep confronts Banu also confronts the myth of essentialist heterosexuality. As argued above, men who perform heterosexuality through "exaggerated masculinity" are not considered and stigmatized as *ibne*. Thereby, the heterosexuality of men, like Recep, is "authenticated" through their performances of strict gender binaries and hypermasculinity. In the brothel scene, against the cis-gender female sex-workers who dispute about the authenticity of Banu's womanhood, Recep asserts that Banu is "more of a woman than you in some places" and "the guys who go for her are one thing... And guys who go for you are another." Later, when Banu challenges Recep's authority, Recep contends that Banu will be his wife and obey his wishes. Thus, Recep's hypermasculinity that protects him from the public recognition of the stereotypes of *ibne* contrasted with his queer desire for Banu, exposes the performative façade of heterosexual

subjectivity. Thereby, *Anlat Istanbul* not only strips off the layers of sexism, but also lays bare the myth of essentialist heterosexuality bestowed by the patriarchic construction of, and setting it against, the binaries of masculine-active (“heterosexual”) and feminine-passive (“homosexual”).

Overall, I would argue that *Anlat Istanbul* is more than fictional fairy tales and akin to social realist films that reflect on their times’ social, economic, and political realities through their disenfranchised subjects. The common denominator of *Anlat Istanbul*’s subjects is that they are all migrants who are pushed to the fringes of the neoliberal city. These characters left their homes with the hopes for a better life but found themselves lost (Gypsy Pied Piper), changed and exchanged (transgender Cinderella), imprisoned (transnational Little Red Riding Hood), stripped of their identity and language (the Kurdish pasha of Sleeping Beauty), compromised and languishing as a pseudo-Westerner (New Yorker Snow White), or unwanted and dehumanized (the 8th female dwarf). All these hybrid identities join one another at the end of the film as the Pied Piper cries:

Everyone wake up!... It’s all one big fairy tale. Your love affairs, your homes... They’re all lies! You’re sleeping. They’ve put you to sleep. Come on! Let’s get out of here!... It’s time to leave for another land... This land is not for us! The women there are different! Everything is just a little bit better! More like the real thing!

When asked what or whom he meant by “they,” Ümit Ünal elucidated that, “the Pied Piper is against everyone, to all the authoritarian politics.”⁹¹ Thus, like the Pied Piper, *Anlat Istanbul* brings together various identities that are marginalized and alienated from Istanbul *and* Turkey regardless of their class, ethnicity, nationality, gender, sexuality, and body by the rising neoliberal, conservative and authoritarian populism that drive the social, economic, and political

⁹¹ Ümit Ünal, Unpublished Personal Interview, interview by Azmi Mert Erdem, trans. Azmi Mert Erdem, December 3, 2016.

landscape following the devastating economic crises of 2001 and the establishment of the AKP government instigated by the ex-Islamist cadres in 2002.

Furthermore, Ünal elaborated on the impacts of these radical changes on the economy of the film industry and the expressions of filmmakers working in Turkey. First, he mentioned that:

We can no longer talk of a financially autonomous and freestanding studio system like Hollywood's, which *Yeşilçam* imitated. Most films that are currently being made are co-productions, and/or are supported by the Ministry of Culture. The directors invest the money they make via TV series or commercials into their own productions. Everyone is independent from one another, telling their own stories. Thus, we can't speak of a unison—of aesthetics, narratives, or movements—among the directors. The only common ground is that we are making movies in Turkey.⁹²

Subsequently, Ünal explained how forms of censorship have intensified since the 1980s in relation to the fluctuating signifiers of national identity, unity, and values, and instigated a self-surveilling, cyclical imperative under a more authoritative government:

When I first started my career [the 1980s], there was an official censorship committee, to which you had to submit your script to have it checked prior to the production. Now, the government appointed this power to province governors (*kaymakam*). They can ban the film if they think that the film devalues the Turkish family and traditions or poses a threat to the government. The TV channels could be sued for one million dollars if the movie they screen is insulting being a Turk. Thus, both the producers and distributors are scared, and they are pickier about selecting the films they fund. Consequently, the writers and directors auto-censor themselves in case they may not get the funding from TV distribution and release. Hence the movies must be “appropriate” to be screened on TV more so than the cinema. As a result, both films and TV series follow the same and safe storylines and genres: family melodramas, sketch comedies, and national themed action films. *Yeşilçam* and its mentality—copying, remaking, and rewriting—live on in TV series.⁹³

Consequently, Ünal infers that it would be harder to find a distributor for *Anlat Istanbul* if it was being produced in the 2010s, because the beginning of the 2000s had much more freedom for multivocal, perhaps dissident, if not critical representations. Thus, one can discern the growing

⁹² Ünal.

⁹³ Ünal.

conservative and authoritarian reemphasis on a new populist mode of national homogeneity in opposition to “marginal” bodies and discourses.

Indeed, *Anlat Istanbul* was produced in 2005 during the first term of the AKP rule. AKP then portrayed itself as a secular party; however, it “was less about democratization and more about the reconsolidation of Turkey’s enduring authoritarian political culture, only this time mixed with the party’s particular brand of Islamism, nationalism, and neoliberalism.”⁹⁴ Thus, *Anlat Istanbul*, a precursor to the Gezi Park uprisings, epitomizes intersectional responses to persisting nationalism, racism, classism, ableism, sexism, and homo/transphobia persisting under the AKP’s neoliberal, conservative and populist régime.

E. *Tamam Mıyız? (Are We Ok?)*

Çağan Irmak is a famed film director and screenwriter in Turkey famous for his male-centered and family melodramas. He has been directing multiple television series and mainstream films for television and cinema since the late 1990s. Irmak has written and directed all his films; and, his ninth feature, *Tamam Mıyız?* was released in the theaters in 2013.

Tamam Mıyız? tells the story of Temmuz (Deniz Celiloğlu), a young, upper-class, “gay,” able-bodied, male sculptor, and Ihsan (Aras Bulut İynemli), a young, heterosexual, quadruple amputee man living with his working-class parents in Istanbul. In his dreams, Temmuz is haunted by the dismembered face of Ihsan, who tells Temmuz to find him. Additionally, Temmuz’s lover breaks up with him unexpectedly, and Temmuz goes through a phase of depression and heavy drinking. Although the name, voice, or the gender pronoun of the lover is never revealed, the film implies that the lover is male. One day, although Temmuz has never met Ihsan before, he recognizes him when he serendipitously spots Ihsan and his mother, Feride

⁹⁴ Yesil, *Media in New Turkey: The Origins of an Authoritarian Neoliberal State*, 2.

(Zuhal Gencer) at a park. Puzzled by his mystical visions and this happenstance, Temmuz introduces himself to Ihsan and Feride as a social worker partaking in a project to read books for people with disabilities. When Temmuz visits Ihsan, Ihsan admits that he has seen Temmuz in his dreams before, too. Subsequently, Ihsan reveals that he wants Temmuz to save him from his crippled life by killing him. Despite rejecting Ihsan's wish at first, Temmuz makes him a deal: if Ihsan still wants to die by the end of the book, Temmuz will grant his wish.



Figure 6. Film still from *Tamam Mıyız?* (2013): Temmuz and İhsan “different since birth.”

Later in the film, Temmuz and Ihsan develop a close friendship and discover more about each other's lives. After learning that Ihsan's father (Gürkan Uygun) is physically abusing Feride and Ihsan, Temmuz offers to take care of Ihsan in his apartment away from the abusive father. During Ihsan's stay, he asks Temmuz to open up about himself. In the ensuing bathroom sequence, Temmuz's background *fabula*, and with that his sexual identity “comes out of the closet” and becomes visualized in the *syuzhet*. I will dissect how this sequence narrates the coming out story, and further, discuss the ways in which the film exposes its *gay* politics.

The sequence opens in the bathroom where Temmuz supports Ihsan sitting on the toilet. To break the uncomfortable silence Ihsan asks Temmuz to tell him about himself.

Temmuz: I'm like you, you know.

Ihsan: What do you mean, like me?

Temmuz: I'm different. I'm different since birth. That's how I am to other people.

The film cuts to an extreme close-up of a collage image with a color photograph of a young boy in front of a line of human silhouettes made out of monochrome paper cutouts. The camera scans the collage in slow motion as Temmuz's voiceover unsubtly states, "I'm a different color." The following two shots display in slow motion a pair of bare feet over grass in close-up. Temmuz narrates in voiceover, "Like you, I'm a rare color." Next, a close-up of an arm caressing the trunk of a tree in slow motion is accompanied by Temmuz's lines, "I was born into this world..." Next, a medium shot with shallow depth of field focuses on the middle ground, in which Temmuz stands out among the crowds walking in slow motion. His voiceover continues, "but I have another world of my own, unlike anyone else's. I choose life partners, intimate friends, lovers that are like myself, Ihsan." The next shot briefly returns to Temmuz and Ihsan in the bathroom as Temmuz says, "According to you, this may be a terrible thing." Then, the film returns to the tracking shot of the hand caressing the tree trunk and reveals a second hand below, as Temmuz's voice over claims, "But believe me, it's really a minor detail." The following two shots center on Temmuz at a Pride rally among a crowd of people holding rainbow flags and placards with slogans, such as "Get Used to It, We Are Everywhere!" "Public Moral-Less!" whereas Temmuz's banner reads "Art!" Further, Temmuz's voiceover asks, "When you think about it, we all live the same life, don't we?" The next cuts show two pairs of legs dipped in a pool in slow motion, accompanied by Temmuz's voiceover: "Our problems, our joys, sorrows,

our love, our conversations...” The words bridge back to the shot with Temmuz and Ihsan in the bathroom, where the dialogue continues:

Ihsan: For real? I get it, what’s not to understand, bro?

Temmuz: What is there? The world and my father have always wanted me to be someone else. The more they wished for me to be like them, the more I wanted to keep my hands in my pockets and whistle while walking countryside roads. They wanted me to the manage companies and make money, I wanted to become the summer rain and freshen things up. When they didn’t want to hear the truth...

The film cuts to a series of tracking shots scanning Temmuz’s sculpture workshop with busts and figures, as his voiceover continues, “I purposefully chiseled stones to reflect the truth. I put sounds and words in them. The more I told them to look into my eyes, the more they worried about what’s in between my legs.” The following shot/reverse-shots show Temmuz looking directly at the camera/at his dad and mom. His dad slaps him as his voiceover states, “Then, when they learned the truth, they kicked me out from their world.” Finally, Ihsan’s concluding pun bridges this flashback scene to the present in the bathroom: “Bro, I’m sorry, but I’d crap on a world like this.”

The formal structure of this sequence epitomizes not only the film’s representation of homosexuality, but also the writer and director Çağan Irmak’s view on LGBTI+ politics. The sequence uses editing to combine multiple scenes in one by intercutting discontinuous moments and cohering them through voiceover narration and sound bridges. As such, the film utilizes non-diegetic inserts of male bodies in slow motion, which enhances the visuals’ effects by expanding their duration on screen, as well as a flashback scene of Temmuz fighting with his dad.⁹⁵ Thus, unlike anywhere else in the movie, the film incorporates all these cinematic tools to narrate

⁹⁵ I consider this scene as a flashback based on Temmuz’s reference to his dad in the past tense even though we have never seen it before and only see it once in the entire movie; however, I cannot make the same claim for other moments that are presented, e.g. Temmuz on the street or at the Pride rally.

Temmuz's "coming out of the closet" process. Through his emphasis on this process, Irmak's politics come out of the closet as well. Until this moment, which is fifty minutes into the film, Irmak has partially kept Temmuz's sexual orientation under the radar by eliminating any visual or sound cues of his former lover (e.g. name, voice, or image). However, through this montage sequence, Irmak implies Temmuz's homosexuality through visual and textual markers (e.g. "I choose life partners, intimate friends, lovers that are like myself"⁹⁶). That said, instead of proclaiming Temmuz's homosexuality, Irmak employs slow motion non-diegetic inserts of male body parts *as* metaphors to accentuate same-sex desire. Thereby, Irmak construes same-sex desire more as metaphorical and clandestine than literal and publicly visible or audible.

Furthermore, one can argue that Irmak is not declaring Temmuz's sexuality for one's sexuality does not define a person as a whole; or, as Temmuz argues, "it's really a minor detail." However, by delaying and partially revealing Temmuz's sexuality as a metaphor at a later point in the movie, Irmak also sustains the "closet" and emulates the "open secret." Ozyegin exposes how these two concepts regulate one another:

[T]he closet as a metaphor for social interaction that organizes and manages knowledge around homosexuality, rather than a metaphor to register a single state of being out. Aptly identified and conceptualized in literature as the dialectics of the "open secret," the metaphor of the closet in Turkey is also governed by the familiar dynamic of knowing the secret subject but refusing to acknowledge it... That is, the closet yields its repressive authority by making the secret subject's presence absent. In this sense, the closet decisively structures gay life/identity, not because it hides it, but because it serves as a means of controlling its presence.⁹⁷

Accordingly, Irmak and his film narrate Temmuz's coming out story; yet, they simultaneously render Temmuz's homosexuality absent by maintaining it as a precious, cinematically-adorned

⁹⁶ This ambiguous comment can also be taken as Temmuz's narcissistic inclination; and further, in the context of homosexuality Irmak's text can be interpreted as claiming homosexuality as essentially narcissistic. Nevertheless, I take this text to mean that Temmuz chooses romantic and sexual partners from people who identify as cis-male.

⁹⁷ Ozyegin, *New Desires, New Selves*, 264–65.

metaphor. Consequently, Irmak's film opens the closet door just enough to make homosexuality's presence felt, yet keeps it in check as an "open secret." Indeed, the uses of flashback and non-diegetic inserts in slow motion betray that Temmuz's sexuality is not just a minor detail but something to be looked at for an expanded duration.



Figure 7. Film still from *Tamam Mıyız?* (2013): The disjointed bodies and identity discourses.

Additionally, the film's narration of the montage sequence further reveals Irmak's contradictory vision of non-heterosexual subjectivities. The repetitive use of nondiegetic insert shots of disjointed masculine body parts (e.g.: feet on grass, hands on a tree trunk, legs in water) that do not belong to the diegetic narrative, disrupt the continuity of editing, and function as a metaphor. At first glance, these body parts symbolize male companionship infused with the text of Temmuz's voiceover. However, these dismembered body parts, which are fragmented by means of close-up shots, form an uncanny resemblance to the limbs that Ihsan lacks. Thus, when Temmuz claims to be like Ihsan, "different since birth," he conflates being a disabled quadruple amputee with being non-heterosexual. In his essay, "Compulsory Able-Bodiedness and

Queer/Disabled Existence,” Robert McRuer exposes how disability and queerness are conflated and utilized in the able-bodied heterosexual public imaginary:

The most successful heterosexual subject is the one whose sexuality is not compromised by disability (metaphorized as queerness); the most successful able-bodied subject is the one whose ability is not compromised by queerness (metaphorized as disability). This consolidation occurs through complex processes of conflation and stereotype: people with disabilities are often understood as somehow queer (as paradoxical stereotypes of the asexual or oversexual person with disabilities would suggest), while queers are often understood as somehow disabled (as ongoing medicalization of identity, similar to what people with disabilities more generally encounter, would suggest). Once these confluations are available in the popular imagination, queer/disabled figures can be tolerated and, in fact, utilized in order to maintain the fiction that able-bodied heterosexuality is not in crisis.⁹⁸

Accordingly, Irmak’s attempts to meld sexual identity politics via its purported semblance with disability not only erases the realities of queer and disabled lives, but also reproduces them as *opposed* to compulsory and idealized heterosexuality.

Moreover, Çağan Irmak’s representation of Temmuz proves incongruous when Irmak exposes his particular vision for homosexual subjectivity and politics for LGBTI+ rights. Irmak depicts Temmuz as an educated, English-speaking, cosmopolitan, upper/middle-class, able-bodied, masculine, cis-gender man, whose identity and leisure-consumption practices fit well within Ozyegin’s account of the privileged status of *gey*. On the one hand, Irmak utilizes Temmuz’s voiceover as a mouthpiece to convey the globally circulating rhetoric of homonormative politics—e.g. “born this way,” “we are all the same”—for inclusion into the neoliberal marketplace, to its targeted heteropatriarchal audiences. On the other hand, Temmuz’s *geyness* appears antithetical to Irmak’s homonormative and neoliberal politics, for Temmuz refuses to “manage companies and make money,” but wants “to become the summer rain and

⁹⁸ Robert McRuer, “Compulsory Able-Bodiedness and Queer/Disabled Existence,” in *The Disability Studies Reader*, ed. Lennard J. Davis, 2nd ed.. (New York: Routledge, 2006), 304–5.

freshen things up.” As Halberstam delineates, “Heteronormative common sense leads to the equation of success with advancement, capital accumulation, family, ethical conduct, and hope. Other subordinate, queer, or counter-hegemonic modes of common sense lead to the association of failure with nonconformity, anticapitalist practices, nonreproductive life styles, negativity, and critique.”⁹⁹ Thus, Irmak attempts to account for two mutually exclusive—homonormative and queer—politics simultaneously. The project is bound to negate itself, just like Temmuz’s depoliticized appeal for “art” on his protest sign at the Pride rally: Temmuz wants to be recognized as a political and counter-hegemonic subject under the rainbow tide; yet, his tepid call for “art” lacks any critical engagement in political resistance, and instead seeks for individualist, privatized, and depoliticized enfranchisement in the capitalist marketplace. Evidently, Irmak disavows and misses the queer Marxist critique of neoliberal identity politics, and instead, he reaches for a global, all-inclusive (read: excluding), homonormative “utopia.” After all, aren’t Temmuz and Ihsan living “the same life,” facing the same problems, such as economic disenfranchisement and disability, with same joys, such as access to private education or leisure-activities, or same sorrows, in which sexuality (homophobia, heteropatriarchy, misogyny) is just “a minor detail”?

Compared to the queer politics of the films from the 1990s and early 2000s, Çağan Irmak’s privileged *and* “disabled” *gey* subject eschews the opportunity to queer sexualities and identity politics under the auspices of neoliberal rights for “equality.” Whereas the bodies of *travesti* and the dwarf in *Dönersen Islık Çal* expose the disciplinary governance of Turkey’s authoritarian neoliberalism, the conflated bodies of *Tamam Mıyız?* reveal a desire for the very disciplinary structures that exclude them. Thus, Irmak falls prey to his own homonormative stereotypes while

⁹⁹ Judith Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 89.

trying to instill politics of acceptance and respectability to his mass audiences by means of conflating queerness with disability and “born this way” and “sameness” discourses. Overall, *Tamam Mıyız?* is emblematic of local adoption of global mainstream LGBTI+ movement’s depoliticized tolerance discourse. Ironically, released only months after the Gezi Park uprisings in 2013, the film poses a homogenized *gey* movement and a timid response to Turkey’s neoliberal, conservative, and authoritarian populism, unlike Gezi’s intersectional LGBTI+ and queer resistance. Thus, if I should answer the question that Irmak poses in the title of his film, I do not think *we* are *all* “okay.”

6. Conclusion

In my thesis, I have questioned how political and economic forces, both local and global, impact the discourses and performances of LGBTI+ subjects, and their representations in the “new cinema of Turkey.” First, I drew from scholarship examining the intersections of liberal capitalism, neoliberal globalism, and LGBTI+ identity politics and visibility. Next, I surveyed the evolution of the discourses and the visibility of non-heterosexual practices and gender-nonconforming identities since the Ottoman periods and the foundation of the Turkish Republic. Subsequently, I argued, as Turkey adopted a free-market economy, LGBTI+ identities and politics reemerged in the public and media spheres. However, the increase in the visibility of discourses and representations has not always amounted to the intersectional and queer considerations of identity politics. To provide a rich perspective on this, I analyzed national and transnational films since the 1990s that present “openly” non-normative sexualities through cis/trans* male, female, or non-binary characters; I explored how Turkey’s post-1980’s hegemonic neoliberal projects have changed and impacted these filmic representations of LGBTI+ identities and queer political discourses in the past three decades. Consequently, I

argued that, counter to the view that the increase in the visibility of LGBTI+ identities in the media is allowing for egalitarian politics, some of these productions not only reproduce homo/transphobic stereotypes, sexist, misogynist, heteropatriarchal and/or homonormative discourses, but fail to criticize, and therefore normalize, the very hegemonic neoliberal politics that disenfranchise and subjugate them.

What, then, can this thesis offer to LGBTI+ and queer activists, artists, and subjects as they navigate under the Turkish authoritarian neoliberal regime today? My hope would be to provide an incisive curiosity about how politico economic and social cultural ideologies shape LGBTI+ and queer discourses, practices, and performances, as well as representations in the media. Subsequently, I would hope to contribute to an inquiry into the options for, and risks involved in, resisting hegemonic and homogenizing forces.

Indeed, today, on the national political level, due to self and state censorships, LGBTI+ representations in the mainstream Turkish media, namely the films supported by the Ministry of Culture and Tourism, and television series backed by state and private channels, are back in the closet, or worse, for the purpose of comedy only. For example, heralded as “Turkey’s first gay themed comedy film,”¹⁰⁰ *Tatlı Şeyler* (*Sweet Things*, dir. Uğur Uludağ, 2017) repeats the cliché slapstick narrative of men with a baby and portray two middle-aged, bickering, flamboyant, asexual, *gey* fashionistas. The film continues to appropriate gender stereotypes of “sexual inversion” and reproduce assimilationist discourses and heteronormativity in the name of inclusivity. However, simultaneously, independent short and feature film productions that are supported by fiscal sponsorships and crowd-funding beyond the jurisdiction of the Ministry of

¹⁰⁰ “Türkiye’nin ilk eşcinsel temalı komedi filmi,” Online news portal, OdaTV, June 6, 2017, <https://odatv.com/turkiyenin-ilk-escinsel-temali-komedi-filmi-0606171200.html>.

Culture and Tourism continue to showcase the realities of LGBTI+ and queer subjects in Turkey at film festival and online platforms. For example, *Benim Çocuğum (My Child*, dir. Can Candan, 2013) is a famous feature-length documentary which consists of interviews with the parents of LGBTI+ individuals and their experiences with their children's coming-out. Another feature-length project is Rüzgâr Buşki's queer documentary *#Direnayol (#Resistayol*, 2016), which follows trans* activist Şevval Kılıç during the 21st Istanbul Pride Week in the aftermath of the Gezi Park uprisings in 2013.

Furthermore, technological developments, social media and online platforms, such as subscription-based video streaming services (e.g. BluTV, puhutv, and Netflix), YouTube, Instagram, and Twitter are providing new venues for visibility for LGBTI+ individuals in Turkey. The new and transnational online video streaming services claim to be censor-free in the interim due to lack of laws that account for these platforms. Also, although Turkish government periodically attempted to ban YouTube and Twitter, currently these platforms are accessible and used for infotainment and activism beyond the reach of strict governmental regulations and censorship. Thus, these social media platforms are fertile grounds for freedom of expression, and visibility of gay (and *gey*), lesbian, bisexual, trans*, intersex, and queer individuals, whose lives are not portrayed in mainstream channels. It is no surprise that there are more individuals coming out of their closets, voicing their individual experiences, and granting visibility to heterogenous gender expressions and sexualities through these platforms. Thus, these platforms offer a field for further intersectional investigation of growing LGBTI+ representation, discourses, and activism. I would posit that, more so than the productions released for and in the private on-demand services, audiovisual content uploaded to social media platforms by individuals will spearhead the growing heterogenous visibility and political discourses of LGBTI+ and queer

existences in the face of all bans and censorships by the authoritarian neoliberal and conservative Turkish state.

Since the Gezi Park uprisings in 2013 and the failed *coup d'état* attempt on July 15th, 2016, the AKP has further consolidated its powers, marginalized more and more bodies, and tightened its grip over their lives. AKP's authoritarian policies, neoliberal and conservative populism, and hegemony over state apparatuses continue to manipulate and violate constitutional laws. As such, AKP government's *de facto* laws indefinitely contravene the freedom of expression and assembly and impede LGBTI+ groups and events (e.g. Pride march) on the account of its own understanding of the nation's "unity" and "moral sensitivities." However, AKP's extended hegemony is not absolute and continues to be challenged by national and global politico economic tensions and fissures. As Akça indicates, although AKP has successfully instituted a hegemonic neoliberal politico economy, and increasingly disavowed social and political oppositions, Turkey's weak economy is, nevertheless, susceptible to global crisis due to its current account deficits and dependency on external capital flows. Hence, Akça predicts that financial crises will fracture AKP's neoliberal populism and influence over capital groups and dominant classes and mobilize fractions of the working and lower-middle classes.¹⁰¹

When and if AKP's hegemony is splintered or disestablished, how will the LGBTI+ and queer lives, politics, discourses, and movements change? Likewise, what will be the implications on the representations of LGBTI+ subjectivities in state, social, and private medias? Further, what can attending to the junctures and disjuncture between lived experience, discourses, and representations teach us about how to resist not only the normative imaginary but the neoliberal subjugation, disenfranchisement, and commodification of identities?

¹⁰¹ Akça, "Hegemonic Projects in Post-1980 Turkey and the Changing Forms of Authoritarianism," 45.



Figure 8. Film still from *Dönersen Işık Çal* (1993): Queer disruptions.

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