An Interview with Tayfun Pirselimoğlu[1]

Serdar Öztürk: Dear Tayfun Pirselimoğlu,

Welcome to the third issue of our journal, *SineFilozofi*.

Tayfun Pirselimoglu: Thank you.

S.Ö.: Firstly, thank you very much for agreeing to give us an interview. Let us begin with general questions. Here is one directly related to cinema and philosophy. Gilles Deleuze asserts that there are three forms of thought. The first of these, philosophy, works with concepts. The second, art, works with sensations, and the third, science, works with functions. In addition, he adds that film directors think with images, and in this respect, they are like philosophers. Therefore, there is no need for philosophers to investigate film directors at the conceptual level. On the one hand, you produce cinema. That is, you think with images. On the other hand, you are a man of letters. Therefore, you are familiar with writing as well. I would like to know on which modes of thought Tayfun Pirselimoğlu concentrates more. Philosophy, cinema, literature, science… In other words, I am interested in the wellsprings of your work.

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[1] Translated by Özlem Atar and proofread by Dilek Kaya-Bakay and Serdar Öztürk.

T.P.: I see. If we are to begin with Deleuze, it is very important to note that he views cinema itself as a sphere of philosophical production. In other words, he dismisses the idea that cinema is an area of semiotic enquiry and rather imagines cinema the medium of its production of thought in itself. I agree, and in this sense, I will compare and contrast cinema with literature. Just like literature, cinema is a medium through which we express our opinion and make it possible for that opinion to reach its recipients. I think, however, there is a difference between the two modes of artistic expression. Literature builds up a relationship between the author and reader. This relationship is an area of imagination bringing together the reader's perception as opposed to the author's talents. Cinema adds another aspect to this relationship. It is a construction of reality. That is, using our perception, in cinema we produce what an author describes us in literature, and here we come up with images. Those images construct their own reality. However, what I understand from the concept of reality is that it is a reality which belongs to that film. This is not a general truth or reality. It is only a reality that particular film signifies. Yet, there is another point I must highlight. And I love it. It is what [Umberto] Eco calls intention. Eco acknowledges that the author has an intention and that the reader has an intention, too. And yet, he asserts that the text has an intention as well. This is very important. That is, the author presents his intention to his/her reader. The reader interprets it using his/her intention, but if it is a novel s/he is reading, and then issues the texts' intention from the novel as an entity. Film does this with great intensity. It is partially made possible by you, the director. Here is what I'm trying to tell: a cinema film, apart from being the world constructed both by its director and the audience, works on its own as a self-constituting entity. To what extent can I control this as a director? There is a world I create using my own intention. How does that world reach the audience? How does it interact with them? I try to build this relationship so that the reality I have created puts some question marks on the audience's mind. I demand that there is some distance between the film and the audience and that the audience takes the trouble to cover that distance. The film asks some questions. The audience generate something using their perceptions, and from there emerges a mutual relationship. This is what I am trying to achieve in my filmmaking. I wonder if this is what you were interested in hearing.

S.Ö.: Thank you very much. Now that we are talking about your filmmaking, let's take a journey among the images in your films. Your films have such characters and, I believe, types that seem to "drift" through life. I mean, there is a chaos outside of us or a time that determines us. This is a concept of time that denies us of our agency. It is as if they appear as powers that determine us. When we enter the world of your films with regard to these agents or powers that determine us, what can you tell us? Do your films have such a philosophical background? Is there such philosophical thinking behind your filmmaking?

T.P.: This has a bit to do with the characters in cinema... Well, as I always say, my characters tell the stories of women and men who pass right by you while you are walking in the street, and whom you do not notice. I find this very valuable because they lead seemingly ordinary lives, but in fact when you dig down, a whole series of issues arise from under their seemingly shallow stories. To some extent, these people are hurled into this life. Yes, they have been hurled and they do not know why. I like to tell the stories of people who do not know why

and how things are the way they are, and the stories of those drifting somewhere and yet can never know where. This is also linked to the uncertainty I have mentioned just now. I mean we head for somewhere, but we do not know where. Therefore, I can tell that the psychology resulting from this uncertainty, the suffering these people endure, the eccentricities they face and the sum and substance of all this make up my story. What they have common is... When I step back and think, I see that their most important feature is that, even though they are deliberately created as they are, they are quite ordinary people and their lives are ordinary. I often repeat this as well, and yet I see no harm in repeating this. Dostoyevsky writes in one of his letters that there is no one scarier than an ordinary person. In fact, as an endless number of people, we harbour an unlimited number of horrific stories. I very much enjoy wandering among these horrific stories.

Sarper Bütev: I'd like to step in right at this point and ask a question about the somewhat anonymous characters we come upon in your films. That is, the characters who lack agency, whom we may call ordinary, and if we consider them class-wise, who belong to lower or working class. I realize my own anonymity while watching them. Therefore, those ordinary lives dig out the ordinariness out of the people who initially look unordinary. Maybe, just like them, we are individuals governed by other forces, and as Mr. Öztürk mentioned earlier, we are thrown into a chaos. In this regard, we can say that everyone leads framed lives. Therefore, though your films clearly deal with the stories of characters from the lower classes, their presentation of the ordinary reflects what is global, typical of everyone. How would you comment on that?

T.P.: Right. In fact, the adjective ordinary needs elaboration here. It is a medium, but we do not realize what is behind it as it's been taught to us. Still, there is something behind it. It is just like peeling off the papery layers of an onion. As we peel off each layer, we see a different face. I particularly use the word "face". Maybe, here we can talk about *Ben O Değilim/I'm not Him* (2013). These faces belong to us, and each and every face hidden in us has its own unique story. That's why I tail after these faces. These faces might take you through this ordinariness to atrocities, which are not ordinary at all. This happens to us as well. And actually life itself is like that. We live as if it is not like so, yet it is like that in itself. Cinema shows us or points out what we go through as if we do not. Perhaps this is where cinema's peculiarity and power lie.

S.Ö.: You have made a very important point. Cinema is the art of exploring and maybe, to some extent, showing us the extraordinariness in life which seems ordinary. I guess this is also one of the definitions of science and philosophy. If we are to continue to wander among your characters and cinematic imagery, we see that we do not really get the chance to rationalize a causal relationship in your films. We know from classical cinema that if there is a cause, or a perception, it brings about certain reactions. This is one of the most typical features of classic, mainstream cinema. However, in your films, rather than looking for a reason or a result, we encounter characters that perceive things yet not react to them while they drift along in life. And we ask a question: What is their real motivation? What is their motive? And we get puzzled there. At this juncture, I'd like to add: Is this related to your view of modern art or the

literary works you have read and been influenced by? Or have you been creating new images taking and reinterpreting various elements from those books? What would you like to tell?

T.P.: Well, I can say this... This has much to do with my interest in literature. I would like to begin with my interest in literature, and then from there move on to cinema. And this is related to a determinist literature which requires that a particular cause brings about a particular consequence, and this is particularly linked to the literature in the nineteenth century and even in the literary works before then, and yet especially to the works by Zola. Yet, as you know, this criterion was broken in what we call modernist literature. This is a vague area, that is, it is an area which we cannot know, for instance, in Camus and André Gide. And violently rejecting this deterministic disposition, a new groundbreaking literary form emerged. To some extent, this is what I do. Sure there is an equivalent in cinema, and to me, the most influential one is Antonioni. For instance, *The Adventure (L'Avventura*, Michelangelo Antonioni, 1960) is the apex of a director's not bowing to expectations. As you know this film was booed at Cannes. There is a woman who suddenly disappears, and then we forget about this woman. It is unique. I mean, until that movie this does not make sense and nor can it be explained. Therefore, it deeply attracts my attention. Now we are talking about cinema or literature that pushes us the audience to ask questions. Yes, it is true that I deliberately use this much in my films because, in fact, not everything is that easy. Things to which we think we easily find the answers may lead us to wrong places, and they do take us to wrong places. To me, art is the area which pushes us to ask these questions and make us dig and see what is in the deep. Therefore, I feel that I have the right to hand the audience the mattock and make them use it to dig the soil and grub up the answers to their questions. Because I do this and I think this is the right thing to do for my films. This is true in both literature and cinema. As I often say, at this moment in cinema, the audience bear the responsibility, too. From the moment they sit in that chair, the audience must shoulder no less responsibility than I do as the director. Therefore, we enter this area of vagueness together; each person finds him/herself a way or a door and enters somewhere. I only wish to open the area and show the doors. So in the Q & A sessions, I never offer answers to questions like "What was this?" "Why is this so?" "Why did that happen the way it did?" Sure I have the answers and I am sure the audience have the answers to those questions. It is just I demand those answers be sought hard. We need to think about this. Cinema is an area of contemplation. When we see a film, if our relationship with the film makes us ask questions, we need to think about it. I can talk about audience responsibility and obligations, and I believe this. As a result, not everything may be that easy to explain. If that is not the case, it is nothing but saying "Welcome."

S.Ö.: It is very interesting that you define cinema as an area for meditation. Still, action films, the films which are calculative and after movement rather than being after contemplation are examples of calculative productions. If we begin with Heidegger's concept of calculative thinking, we may reach the calculative cinema... There is another concept of cinema called contemplating cinema. You say the audience must take responsibility, but we know that there is a paradox: Today, the audience are so framed with cliché and lively images that it is really hard for them to ask a question. We are talking about an audience who are after catharsis instead of being carried to the edge of a cliff, and if I may say so, left there helpless. This is the

audience who wish to release strong feelings and spend their energy at the cinema. How are we going to overcome this? Or does this paradox need to be overcome?

T.P.: I think this is a vital topic. I have just said that what makes cinema different from literature is that it is a construction of reality. I have also added that this reality is purely and simply the reality of that story. I have watched something like this on television. It has been quite a while now. It was after a clash, or a conflict in the East. Four soldiers die and three get injured. One of the injured is in hospital. A minister visits him and asks, "What's happened, son?" The soldier responds, "Well, Sir, Dear Minister, there has been a terrible blast." "It was as if we were in a film." I have seen such references to what we call reality. He has lost one leg, his friends have died, and he tells the event by referring to a film he has seen at the cinema. This is a horrible thing. I find this terrifying. This is the situation our mainstream cinema has evolved into, and as a result, created such an audience. Let alone its allowing the audience to reflect on the constructed reality of a film, it clutches them by the throat. That is why I call it coercive cinema. It is restrictive, and it puts you into an inescapable cell. Cinema -- we can add today's television, too --is an inescapable trap. You cannot escape. If that director and his film aim to knock you, and they certainly do, you'll get caught unawares. You have no luck. And I find this very dangerous. What I am trying to tell is that cinema now turns the constructed reality into the world's reality. This is a sign portending the approach of the doomsday.

S.B: In *I'm not Him*, you object to this. The characters watch television and one of them says something like this: "All we see here on TV is fake." As you have already touched upon, we witness a state in which the area of artificial experience, or this whole world of fantasy flooding the audience with televisual images, seizes reality. I guess Baudrillard says something similar to this. What would you like to say about televisual reality?

T.P.: Interestingly, [Baudrillard] uses illusion in a very positive sense. He laments that cinema has turned into pornography and that images have become polluted leaving no space for the audience. This is quite true. The implicative aspect of cinema has become blunt, and you have been shown a picture, or an image you can do nothing but conform to, and you cannot escape it. Well, the reality stemming from here leads the soldier to feel as if he were in that film. At this juncture, I can do nothing but fall silent. I certainly support another cinema as opposed to this, and as I was trying to explain earlier, it is one of the reasons why I was saying that it is the kind of cinema that challenges the audience. I am talking about being honest so far as possible. I mean, opening my hands, I want to build a relationship with the audience from the beginning. I suggest not using the media the mainstream cinema often uses. For instance, the use of music is terrible; it cues the audience when and where to act. It is only one of the weapons the mainstream cinema deploys. There are a whole lot of other great things. How the framing is done remains very crucial. You know Godard famously proclaimed, "Tracking shots are matters of morality". I believe there is another matter of morality as important as where camera stands; [it is] montage. Cinema has many weapons, and I believe montage comes first. It is used to capture the audience and thrust them into the cell. Well, today we live in an age when visual pornography has reached its peak in mainstream cinema. Cinema today

has exceeded the limits of three dimensions. I wonder what kind of an audience will emerge from all these changes, and how and where they will turn.

S.Ö.: If you will excuse me, I have a question at this point. It may be concluded from what you have just said that mainstream cinema frames the audience's world, and that images capture them, and yet the audience need to construct their own images in connection with the film. I mean, you will create images in such ways that they will open a space for the audience, provoke them to ask questions and through these questions the audience will contribute to the production of different images. Well, this is quite labour-intensive work. If we turn to my previous question, the production of the audience who will do this labour-intensive work -- well, it is necessary to note that I do not mean a one-sided production here -- is culturally determined. Some call this media literacy, a term I really dislike. How is it possible to construct an audience that will interact with cinema, commenting on and discussing cinematic images? I would like to hear your comments on this issue.

T.P.: This is a problem to do with the course of events in the world we live. We live in a time that can be explained with the spirit of the times, or to put it more precisely, we live at a moment that cannot be explained in any other way. There is an issue with cinemagoers in general, and especially with the ones in our country. This problem has many aspects to it. In addition to mechanical, technical problems, there is a problem related to the audience's access to cinema. Yet the real problem remains the audience's perception of the narrative presented by the film. We can admit that this is a problem those who want to produce film as art face. On the contrary, the mainstream cinema doesn't have such a problem. In contrast, maybe it is because of this that we face the problems I have just mentioned. Because mainstream films invade so much space that -- and they take it as their right to do so -- there is little room left to those who wish to make film as art. There used to be something like this... I can tell this about festivals, particularly the Istanbul [International] Film Festival, which, I think, is a festival that has produced an important generation of filmmakers. In my day, it was important to learn what was going on in the world. The festival was a place from which you nourished yourself. It is now much easier to do so. If you have the Internet, you can reach any film you wish to see. However, a strange type of film audience has arisen from this. This is probably related to the relative ease in accessing films. As I said before, there is so much supply and such many films are produced that we are now confronted with audience caprice. It is too easy to reach a film you want, and if you cannot find it, to forget about it, skip to another, and watch yet another and jump to still another only after you have spent five minutes watching it. A new type of audience has emerged out of this situation. I believe this is quite a disturbing development for the real cinema, film as art. What can be done? There isn't much I personally can do because it is a really big problem in our country and even in the world. At least I can say this: People like me must insist on producing films and speaking their own voice. There is something else as important. It is the demand for an increase in the quality of film criticism. I think [the lack of] film criticism is a serious one. This is valid both in our country and in the

world. We need people who are well-informed about film theory and who think in collaboration with film-makers. I am afraid I do not know how this may come true.

S.Ö.: I would like to add this right here: Jean-Luc Godard now shares his films on a domain he has created. In fact, the problem of a qualified audience, which seems like a problem we face only in Turkey, is also a problem in countries like France and Italy, the countries with a history of high quality films. There are serious problems in watching high quality films called art films. I view this as a problem that exceeds the borders of cinema. As you have just mentioned, films are easily accessed now. In fact, there are online channels which call themselves "cinema festival", and this seems to be a matter with today's human beings' existential feelings.

T.P.: Well, this is what I call the spirit of the world, connected to what I said about the spirit of the times.

S.B.: There is a reserve. That the world is so reachable, that it stands at a place we can reach out at will, in other words, it's being right out there, have changed our consumption habits and our outlook on cinema. Now we face this: As the technological advances make it easier to produce films, we are confronted with the quality in film. What can you tell about this?

T.P.: This has something to do with technology as well. When I first started filmmaking, I shot 35mm. I made the short film using a 35mm camera, and then I started using a digital camera. I think digital camera is a breakthrough capable of determining the future of cinema. However, it has brought along its problems. Digitalisation of cinema made it easy to shoot a film. On the other hand, it has also led to a great problem, which is the delusion that filmmaking is money for jam. Yes, it is technologically simpler, and yet the speed of filmmaking has begun to steal from the time you would normally devote to thinking about the film. As I see it, this is also effective. In the past, you would do three, five, seven, 10, or 15 takes for one scene with a 35mm camera, now you can do as many as 1000 takes. You see, you have unlimited freedom. On one hand, it has its advantages. On the other hand, you begin to think if a take does not work well, you may use others. To me, it is a problem of taking it too easy. I think this influences the spirit of the film you make. Moreover, the development of digital cameras has opened up opportunities for the post-production phase of filmmaking. This results in producing with comfort as you know that someone will be dealing with the maths you would normally have to consider and do some estimations. I am talking about the situation in Turkey. I have seen this problem in debut films, new productions and in many of the films directed by younger directors who directed a film for the first time. The problem is that it is too simple. Cinema is not easy. I say this to the aspiring film makers. It looks simple yet it has its hardships. These hardships are connected with the fact that the lessons one could take from the trials of film-making have now disappeared.

S.Ö.: I would like to change the topic and ask a different question if it is fine with you. Your characters are like zombie-brains-- a concept I have coined-- rather than real people. We sometimes come across characters we cannot be sure whether alive or dead. Your characters' physiological death can be interpreted as the sudden ending of their lives, which are

themselves long suicides as Spinoza contends/maintains. Life itself may sometimes be a long suicide. Spinoza sometimes called this "ethics of death." You are dead when you live; you are a zombie. Your physiological death does not shock the audience. You die in the end. I would love to hear your views on life and death.

T.P.: There are themes that run through all my works and death is one of them. This is why my trilogy of *Rıza*, *Puş/Haze* and *Saç/Hair* is called "conscience and death". It is such an absurdity that we know what will befall us. Yet there is nothing we can do. There it stands, and it is an inevitable end. And we are doomed to this inevitability. I think this is the whole paradox philosophy tries to understand. As for its relation with conscience, I believe that conscience is the sole element that will guide us between the starting and the end points. This is an end. All of my films have the same beginning and ending. They end as they started. I use this to signal... I believe that our life forms a cycle. We begin somewhere. This is a large circle and then we reach an end, an inevitable end. Yet this does not lead to pessimism in me as it's not a deterministic concept. It has its own dialectics because the person that reaches the end is not us anymore, but a new person. We know where this journey will end, [but] we do not cease to exist at the point it ends. It is a state of accomplishment. There are things we learn through the journey. Death of my characters in a film is connected to their rebirth in another. This is how I see life and death.

S.B.: Then, we can say something like this: Tayfun Pirselioglu's film has a cosmos. This involves a cosmological recurrence. I mean there is both a cosmological recurrence and moral recurrence, which we may call becoming another person. Nietzsche suggests something similar when he stipulates that events in the world repeat themselves in the same sequence through an eternal series of cycles. That is, we are born again and again, but in fact, we are not born as the same person. We undergo a change even if it is minute.

S.Ö: Eternal recurrence or eternal return as Nietzsche put it.

S.B.: True, it is eternal recurrence or eternal return. Kierkegaard has a comparable notion of repetition. When we move on to your film *Ben O Degilim*, we see that there is a story featuring three characters: Nihat, Ayse and Ayse's husband, who Nihat replaces. Yet the audience cannot make out to whom each experience belongs. Necip might be imagining the whole story in another life. Nihat is nailed at the exact moment he becomes Necip, and returns to the point where he was at the beginning of the film. Necip was in jail. At the end of the film, Nihat becomes Necip and goes to prison again. There is something quite intriguing in the narrative flow. It is hard to grasp the meaning, which adds an uncanny feeling to your film. It leaves us with a whole lot of questions to which we cannot find the answers. Deleuze notes this state of uncertainty and uncanny feeling as one of the most important features of modern cinema. Another topic I would like to raise is your use of time. We feel the time in your films. Now we can turn to Deleuze here. He believed the time-image to be the most important feature of modern films. Still another striking element in your films is the theme of crime. We observe that in almost all of your films the characters commit crimes. Yet, this element of crime and mystery in your films does not offer the entertainment that we experience while watching classic thriller-mystery films or film noir. As it is, it does not satisfy the audience anticipation.

In contrast, it leads to a philosophical questioning of existence. We see this element, the effort to understand our human existence through crime, in Dostoyevski. When we combine all these together, your film takes the form of a game in which the characters who are thrown somewhere at sometime have to deal with a reality which is not quite a reality. Therefore, while watching your films, I get the feeling that we are in a game, some kind of a puzzle. Am I right? How would you comment on that?

T.P.: You have explained it pretty well. Maybe I should dwell on my concept of time and how I use time in my cinema. Well, I try to approximate the filmic time to real time. Now that we look at the issue philosophically, this can be explained as the Bergsonian perspective. That is, this relates to our internal time, and what he calls the external time, duration to be exact. What he calls *dureé* is actually a state of exchange between the audience's own time and the external time, [and this exchange begins] the moment when the audience sit to watch the film. As far as I know, Bergson was not particularly interested in cinema. His misfortune was to have lived it an era when cinema was not this developed, the era of the Lumière [brothers].If he were alive now, the thing he said about cinema would be very different. The audience's internal time merges with the filmic time. This is a state of immanence It is very important to construct this. I am very careful about this. I pay much attention to this. Though it is Bergsonian, I, as the director, decide how much the intuitive time, that is, duration or dureé will take. This causes some problems for the audience of mainstream cinema since it is not easy to enter that time. That is, it was not easy at all to be involved in an exchange with that time and today it isn't easy, either. Why? Our perception of time has been changed. Now, we have to consider speed. Our relation with speed makes it difficult for us to connect with the real time as time has been made compact and --I must say again -- forced upon us. And as I said before, the audience need to take some trouble. The biggest trouble for the audience here is to make their time interact with the filmic time. This is what I demand. Now with respect to crime, yes it is true that the characters eventually will have to be involved and they do become involved in crime in all of my films. Yet, as you have noted in your earlier comment, their crime may not be explained by a causal relationship or be linked to a clear cause. I think this exists in real life as well. I enjoy narrating it in film. I include this in my stories and novels, too. One way or another, you can call it fate as well. Our stories are all related to being involved in a crime and revolving around it to some extent.

S.Ö.: Now, if you do not mind, let me put my last question. What do you think about our journal, *SineFilozofi*, Mr. Pirselimoglu?

T.P.: I must confess I have only discovered it thanks to you, and I have researched it as far as I could. Very valuable work. Just moments ago, we were wondering how it is possible for us to make the audience get in touch with real cinema. It is clear that a limited number of people will read your journal. This is so everywhere in the world. Nevertheless, it has great importance for its reader. I will read it, too. That it offers us new perspectives telling us about new routes, pointing out possibilities is very crucial. I mean your journal has such a relevant and vital function. It carries the potential to do what a film needs to do; to push us to think over possibilities.

S.Ö.: Thank you very much for this very nice interview.

T.P.: My pleasure.

S.Ö.: Hope to meet you again.

T.P.: Hopefully.

S.Ö.: Thank you.

T.P.: Thank you.