



Interview / Söyleşi

Cinema of Displacement: A Conversation with Andaç Haznedaroğlu on her 2017 film Misafir (A Guest from Aleppo to Istanbul) and the Syrian Refugee Crisis

Yerinden Edilmenin Sineması: Andaç Haznedaroğlu ile 2017 yapımı Misafir filmi ve Suriyeli Mülteci Krizi Üzerine Bir Söyleşi

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Abstract: This roundtable conversation took place on October 9, 2024, at Erciyes University as part of the EU co-funded Migramedia project, which explores the intersections of migration and media representation. The session centers on Andaç Haznedaroğlu's 2017 film *Misafir* (A Guest from Aleppo to Istanbul), being the first cinematic narrative focused on the lived experiences of Syrian refugees in Türkiye. Haznedaroğlu, who served as the film's writer, director, and producer, reflects on her fieldwork in refugee camps, her use of Arabic as the film's dominant language, and her casting choices, including Jordanian star Saba Mubarak and real-life Syrian refugee Rawan Iskeif. The conversation also raises urgent questions about trauma, realism, the ethics of child performance, and the role of cinema in reshaping public perceptions of displacement. With insights from international scholars and members of the Migramedia consortium, the discussion highlights how *Misafir* blurs the boundaries between documentation and fiction, making visible the invisible borders that shape the lives of women and children in migration.

Öz: Bu söyleşi, göç ve medya temsili arasındaki kesişimleri araştıran Avrupa Birliği destekli Migramedia projesi kapsamında, 9 Ekim 2024'te Erciyes Üniversitesi'nde gerçekleştirilmiştir. Söyleşinin odağında, Andaç Haznedaroğlu'nun 2017 tarihli *Misafir* (Halep'ten İstanbul'a Bir Misafir) adlı filmi yer almaktadır. Suriyeli mültecilerin Türkiye'deki deneyimlerini merkeze alan ilk sinema anlatısı olan bu film üzerine konuşan Haznedaroğlu, senarist, yönetmen ve yapımcı olarak yürüttüğü sürece dair deneyimlerini paylaşmaktadır. Yönetmen, film öncesinde çeşitli mülteci kamplarında uzun süreli saha araştırmaları yapmış ve mültecilerin yaşadığı zorlukları doğrudan gözlemlemiştir. Kadın ve çocuk bakış açısının öne çıktığı filmde, yönetmenin yaptığı yaratıcı seçimler anlatının etkisini derinleştirmektedir. Bu seçimler arasında filmin büyük ölçüde Arapça çekilmesi ve oyuncu tercihlerinde, gerçek bir Suriyeli mülteci çocuk olan Rawan Iskeif ile Ürdün-Filistin kökenli ünlü oyuncu Saba Mubarak'ın yer alması dikkat çekmektedir. Söyleşide ayrıca, travmanın sinemadaki temsili, gerçekçilik anlayışı, çocuk oyunculukta etik sınırlar ve sinemanın yerinden edilme algısını dönüştürmedeki rolü gibi konular tartışmaya açılmaktadır. Uluslararası akademisyenlerin ve Migramedia konsorsiyumu üyelerinin katkılarıyla zenginleşen bu oturum, *Misafir* filminin belgesel ile kurgu arasındaki sınırları nasıl bulanıklaştırdığını ve göç sürecinde kadın ve çocukların yaşadığı görünmez sınırları nasıl görünür kıldığını ortaya koymaktadır.

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Editors' Introduction

This conversation took place on October 9, 2024, at Erciyes University, Kayseri, Türkiye, as part of the Migramedia Consortium Meeting, a European Union co-funded initiative focusing on the intersections of migration and media. The roundtable featured Andaç Haznedaroğlu, writer, director, and main producer of *The Guest: Aleppo to Istanbul* (*Misafir*, 2017), widely considered the first feature film centered on the Syrian migration experience.

Developed through close research with NGOs and immersive stays in refugee camps, Haznedaroğlu's film portrays the refugee journey through the eyes of a child. The story follows Lina, a young Syrian girl portrayed by real-life refugee Rawan Iskeif, and Meryem, a war widow played by acclaimed Jordanian actress Saba Mubarak.

The casting and production decisions reflect a strong ethical commitment to authenticity and solidarity. The film is primarily shot in Arabic, a deliberate choice that prioritizes linguistic realism over audience convenience. This decision risks distancing Turkish and international viewers unfamiliar with the language but foregrounds the experience of refugees themselves, challenging the audience to listen across linguistic and cultural divides.

In this conversation, scholars and participants from across Europe engage with the film's artistic, political, and ethical dimensions. Topics include symbolic representations of borders and water, the role of female and children's experience, the ethics of using real refugee actors, the complexities of language and translation, and the long-term trauma of displacement. The discussion also examines the changing public perception of migration and the responsibilities of filmmakers, educators, and audiences in an era shaped by crisis and xenophobia.

As editors, we offer this transcript as a valuable contribution to current debates on migration, media, and cultural memory. It documents not only a powerful cinematic testimony but also the thoughtful reception and critique it has sparked in transnational academic circles. Lastly, we would like to thank out Migramedia Study Group students from Erciyes University, especially H. Hande Koçer and Ömer Duran who helped us with the transcription of the meeting.

Editors: Betül Ateşçi Koçak and Ahmet İpşirli

Cinema of Displacement: A Conversation with Andaç Haznedaroğlu on her 2017 film *Misafir* (*A Guest from Aleppo to Istanbul*) and Syrian Refugee Crisis

Ahmet İpşirli:

Welcome to this roundtable session on the first day of the third Migramedia Conference. We are honored to have with us director Andaç Haznedaroğlu, whose film will serve as the focal point of our discussion.

Our aim today is to reflect on the concept of "borders", how it is represented in the film, and how the film itself invites us to rethink what borders mean in contemporary contexts. Ideally, this conversation will lead to a collaborative publication, exploring both the thematic content of the film and the broader socio-political implications it raises.

Although we've outlined some key ideas in advance, we hope to keep the conversation informal and fluid. Andaç Haznedaroğlu joins us not only as the director but also as an engaged participant in this dialogue. With so many perspectives gathered here, we hope to generate a rich and productive exchange.

Let's begin.

Oleksandr Pronkevich:

My name is Oleksandr Pronkevich, and I'm from Ukraine. Watching *Misafir* was a powerful experience for me, especially because of my country's ongoing war. I am myself an internally displaced person, and while my experience differs from that of the protagonist, the emotional resonance was immediate.

I'd like to ask: If you were to make this film today, what would you change?

I ask this as someone working on Ukrainian drama and poetry in English translation. Since 2014, the war has inspired a great deal of creative work. Early in the conflict, playwrights often relied on shock to convey the gravity of events, as public awareness was limited. Now, the general public is far more informed, sometimes more so than the artists themselves, which has led to a transformation in narrative strategies.

How has your own perspective changed? Would the story be told differently today?

Andaç Haznedaroğlu:

That's a very important question. If I were writing and directing *Misafir* today, it would be a completely different film. The entire perspective has shifted. Back then, the war was immediate and raw, we were witnessing bombings near the Turkish border, and people were arriving in waves. The sense of urgency was overwhelming.

Today, although the war in Syria continues, it feels more like an illusion, distant, almost unreal. In contrast, what feels real now is the life that refugees have built over the years. I recently visited camps along the border. Life there is still difficult, far from luxurious, but it has evolved. I saw families buying televisions, decorating their spaces with color, and arranging furniture. A new form of cultural life has taken root.

This transformation changed the way I see the refugee narrative. I no longer approach it from the perspective of war, or even the literal border. My focus has shifted toward the cultural and existential realities of those who have resettled.

When I made the film, it was an act of courage. At the time, no one was addressing these stories with urgency. I spent nearly four years immersed in refugee communities, working alongside various NGOs. That experience opened my eyes to both the compassion and the complications within the humanitarian sector.

While many NGOs are genuinely committed to helping refugees, I also encountered others where aid had become a form of trade, a system of exchange, not empathy. Once that happens, we can no longer speak honestly about refugee lives. We begin to instrumentalize people instead of supporting them.

That's why, if I were to make the film now, it would have a completely different tone, less focused on escape, more on endurance and reconstruction, and far more critical of the systems surrounding migration.

Back then, the film came from a place of innocence, a deeply human perspective. But that innocence has been disrupted. Since then, war has become a business, aid has become trade, and even displacement has transformed into a kind of industry.

At the same time, refugee communities are reshaping their realities. Many are now watching Turkish TV series and developing new cultural perspectives. They are not only surviving, they are adapting and imagining new futures.

If I were telling a story today, I might focus on a different group entirely. Perhaps Afghan migrants. I remember watching a devastating scene on television last year, Afghans clinging to a military plane as it took off, desperate to escape. That moment captured something essential: the unbearable urge to flee, the total collapse of hope, and the silence that often surrounds such tragedies.

Ahmet İpsirli:

You're referring to the images from when the United States withdrew...

Andaç Haznedaroğlu:

Yes. That was such a painful moment. People just wanted to get out, anywhere, just to leave. That's the most tragic part: people across the Middle East are abandoning their homelands, desperate to move west.

But even in how these stories are told, the framing is often shaped by Western perspectives. That's where the real drama lies, not only in the wars themselves, but in how they're selectively narrated or ignored altogether. The same silence surrounds Gaza, Ukraine, and other conflict zones. We're surrounded by war, but we no longer understand what's truly happening.

Ahmet İpsirli:

And now we're seeing a reversal, people from Lebanon are migrating to Syria.

Andaç Haznedaroğlu:

Yes, that in itself is a tragedy. Lebanon, once a refuge, now drives people back toward Syria. That's a drama in the fullest sense.

Ahmet İpsirli:

They flee Lebanon, and the only place left is Syria.

Andaç Haznedaroğlu:

Exactly. There's an old saying: *if a dog bites a man, it's not news, but if a man bites a dog, that's drama*. Right now, we've lost our sense of what counts as news, what counts as truth.

I've worked in television for nearly 30 years, and I know how stories are constructed. I've seen how narratives are

shaped to serve particular agendas. Maybe what I say is the truth, maybe it's another construction. When it comes to war, we rarely know what's really happening on the inside.

Now, Turkish companies are already preparing to rebuild Syria. They've been waiting for over a decade for the war to end. Reconstruction is a massive business. That, too, is part of the story.

Oleksandr Pronkevich:

That point is crucial, especially for our project. We've been discussing the terminology around Ukrainian refugees. A friend recently told me, "You can't actually call them refugees in the strictest sense."

In Spain, for example, the official term is *persons under temporary protection*. That distinction is important, especially given the bureaucratic differences in how Ukrainians and non-Ukrainians are treated when seeking legal status.

In fact, conditions for Ukrainians are becoming more difficult now than they were at the start of the war. In Bulgaria, for example, I've seen openly hostile attitudes. Some Bulgarians resent Ukrainians, claiming they receive more financial aid than local citizens.

But money doesn't protect you. I try to explain, one of the wealthiest grain traders in Ukraine, a billionaire, was killed in a missile strike in Mykolaiv, along with his wife. Wealth didn't save them.

There are so many layers to this issue, economic, cultural, political that force us to rethink what we mean when we talk about migration, protection, and belonging.

Andaç Haznedaroğlu:

Thank you.

Panayiota Mini:

Since I work in education, I'm always thinking about how to use film, whether fiction or documentary to teach children about migration, displacement, and the human stories behind those experiences.

I'm curious: did you consciously reflect on that while making the film? I suspect you did, especially considering what you told me earlier about searching for a young, amateur actor for a long time. The child's perspective in *Misafir* is quite striking, it's emotionally powerful and deeply effective.

What stood out to me is the way the film captures the resilience of refugees, particularly through its focus on children. Was that a deliberate choice from the outset?

Also, I believe someone mentioned that the film has been shown in schools. Have you ever toured with it in educational settings? If so, what kinds of responses did you observe? Do you think the film helps children develop empathy? Could there be guiding questions developed for classroom use?

At the same time, from a drama education perspective, we often think about the need for trigger warnings, especially when students in the classroom may have experienced displacement themselves. Films like yours can reawaken difficult memories.

In Türkiye, in Greece, and across many contexts, we have children who have lived through similar realities. How do you handle that challenge? How did you go about shaping the child's perspective in the film? It's a unique and powerful choice, and one I greatly appreciate.

Andaç Haznedaroğlu:

Yes, when you're casting children for a film like this, you usually start with simple questions: "What's your name? Where are you from? What are your parents' names?"

But during this casting process, I witnessed something I had never seen before. I'd ask a child their name, and within seconds, they would freeze. Their eyes would sink inward. You could see that they had lost someone, a mother, a father, and the trauma was written in their silence. It wasn't just acting. It was something deeply human and real.

Initially, the script wasn't written entirely from a child's perspective. But after meeting these children and seeing what was in their eyes, my entire perspective shifted. The depth of feeling was overwhelming.

I remember casting just three or four children one day. We asked them a few basic questions, then left the room in tears. When we came back in, they still hadn't spoken a word, just looked at us. That was more powerful than any line of dialogue. That was when I truly gave my heart to this project.

One boy, in particular, stood out. Every day at school, he would ask his teacher, "Can I go back to my country?" He repeated this for over a month. Then one day, his request changed. He said, "Please, teacher, I want to go and find my mother, just a piece of her hair. Please, let me go back."

That moment stayed with me. It showed me that children's perspectives aren't dramatized; they are raw, direct, and deeply real. Their grief doesn't come with an explanation. It just *is*.

Many of these children had lost not just parents, but entire extended families. They were living with grandparents or distant relatives. Once I realized the scale of their loss, I rewrote the script. The original drama no longer felt adequate.

There is a kind of innocence in the film that I think resonates with audiences. The child's point of view is emotionally resonant, but also psychologically complex. That's why I made sure to work closely with a psychologist and a translator during filming. I learned so much from them, about trauma, about emotional safety, and also about love.

One memory I'll never forget: I once hugged a little girl for the first time. She had been living on the street, and my first instinct was to notice the smell. But I took her home, cleaned her up, cared for her. Over time, we became real friends. And from that, I discovered a deep sense of love. That experience shaped the entire perspective of the film.

We also screened the film at many schools, particularly in Austria, Vienna, for example, where the students were incredibly attentive and asked thoughtful questions: "How did the children come here? What are they doing now? What can we do to help?" These were not children's questions; they were questions you'd expect from adults.

The film was shown in many places: Sweden, Frankfurt, Düsseldorf, and others. Every time, the children in the audience engaged with sincerity and seriousness. It showed me how meaningful this kind of storytelling can be, not just for portraying children on screen, but also for reaching them as viewers.

Ahmet İpsirli:

So children were not only the subject of the film, but also one of its most engaged audiences.

Andaç Haznedaroğlu:

Children understand very clearly. When they ask questions, they're often surprisingly insightful, especially when they speak from their own perspective.

People often ask why I focus on the child's point of view, but it's because children live side by side with others, they're in the same classrooms, the same communities. They *must* understand each other. And they often do better than adults.

Markus Heide:

That's something I really appreciated in the film, from the very beginning, actually. The children are already "playing" migration. They're imagining the globe, performing their understanding of mobility and borders.

That child's perspective sets the tone for the entire film. And it stays with us until the end. Lina's departure is especially powerful: she slips into a kind of dreamlike, open-ended space. We don't know exactly what happens as she heads into the ocean, but it feels both emotional and childlike, open to possibility, to imagination. It captures how children think: anything can still happen.

Andaç Haznedaroğlu:

That's one of the most touching parts for me, too. Lina, the little girl in the film, wasn't a professional actor. But she learned quickly, how to act, how to react. She had a natural sense of performance. I remember one day she told the lead actor, who was slightly older and already known: "*I'm the lead actor. If we ever go to the red carpet, I want to walk first, you can come second.*" They used to whisper to each other during breaks, asking things like, "What will you wear to the premiere?" Lina said, "I have a pink princess dress," and went on describing how her hair would look.

But before the official premiere at the Antalya Film Festival, she and her family fled and crossed into Greece. I lost contact with her and couldn't find her for a while. Eventually, I went to Greece myself, and I found some refugees who knew her. She had been telling people, "I'm an actress. I made a movie, but no one believes me." So, we arranged a special screening, her first real premiere, right there in a refugee camp in Italy. She came beautifully dressed, radiant, and proud. Everyone was congratulating her. She hugged me and said, "I'm so thankful for you."

I remember joking with her, "You're such a big liar!", because she had always talked about being an actress before anyone believed her. That premiere meant everything to her. It was the first time someone truly acknowledged what

she had done.

Betül Ateşçi Koçak:

She and her family now live in social housing in very simple conditions in Bremen, Germany.

Andaç Haznedaroğlu:

Yes, I believe her family may have been relocated recently. They were given an apartment, but I'm not sure where exactly. I still call her sometimes, she's now a teenager, but still kind and full of life.

I'd like to share something from an artistic perspective. As emotional as the process was, I believe the core of any film must be emotional truth. That's what gives a film its power. In cinema, emotion is not just an aesthetic, it's a form of honesty. It's what anchors the narrative to lived experience.

Ana María Manzanás Calvo:

I also loved the opening scene with the globe, the way the children play with it. I think it captures the child's perspective on mobility beautifully.

For them, the globe is a toy. You can spin it endlessly, move across continents with a finger. But in reality, their actual mobility is severely restricted. It's an important contrast.

I also appreciated the second time the globe appears in the home of the woman who hosts them. For those few days, while the baby is being cared for, her own children are seen playing with the globe. The symbol reappears in a domestic context, but its meaning subtly shifts.

I think it shows how mobility works so differently for different people.

If you're born into wealth or privilege, movement is easy. If not, even the idea of moving becomes a struggle. The globe becomes both a fantasy and a boundary.

Andaç Haznedaroğlu:

I've always loved globes. As a child, I used to spin them and imagine going anywhere. And sometimes I really did go. But it's not always so easy.

Once, I set my sights on the Andaman Islands. I wanted to go there just because I saw it on the globe. But it was impossible, no civilians are allowed, only soldiers. That moment stayed with me. There are always two perspectives. We judge refugees so easily, but we never ask what's happening inside them, what they've lost, what they're carrying. In the film, when Lina touches the globe again, it's not a game anymore. It's the weight of her story. She has lost so much. And yet she still imagines.

Ahmet İpşirli:

If I may interpret, it seems that the children's game with the globe operates on both sides of the concept of borders. In their imagination, they are completely free to go anywhere. That playfulness is what opens the film. But as the story unfolds, we see that they are not free. They confront the physical and political reality of borders. And once they begin to travel, literally, not just imaginatively, they encounter all the barriers that follow: questions of acceptance, hardship, and displacement. So the globe in the film is not just a symbol of imagined freedom. It becomes a prophecy of struggle, of what comes *after* the game, when real movement begins.

Markus Heide:

There's a symbolic layer to the globe motif as well. In the second scene where it appears, a boy in Istanbul is playing a computer game. There's an explosion on screen.

Ahmet İpşirli:

Yes, all the male characters seem to be playing war games.

Markus Heide:

Exactly. The boy triggers the explosion in the video game without thinking, he's just playing. But Lina reacts instinctively, physically. That contrast is powerful. For him, war is a game. For her, it's a lived experience. It's trauma.

Nilgün Karsan:

There's another layer to the globe motif I want to ask about. I'm not sure if it was part of your intention, but it feels meaningful. Children in different countries play with globes as if they can go anywhere. At the beginning of the film, when Lina spins the globe, her situation hasn't yet become desperate. So I wonder, were you trying to show that anyone, anywhere, could become a migrant?

Many people around me talk about immigrants as though they are *always* the Other, someone far away, disconnected from their own lives. But if war came to Türkiye, their own children could become immigrants. Was that part of your message? Because to me, it felt like an invitation to empathy. Too often, people speak about migrants in abstract or dehumanizing terms. Like the student who, during a Q&A, exaggerated a story about a Syrian boy raping a Syrian girl, as if anything a Syrian does must be criminal or sensational. This kind of stereotyping strips refugees of their humanity. They are spoken of only as "migrants", never as people. But if Syria had remained stable, Lina might have visited those same places as a tourist. Her uncle is in Germany, under different conditions; her journey could have been one of joy, not flight.

Andaç Haznedaroğlu:

I have a friend from Syria who was a French teacher at a university there. She had traveled widely and had just bought a beautiful new duplex house. Everything in her life was new and full of promise. Then she lost it all. Now she's working in the social sector, not in academia, not in a university, just trying to make ends meet. That's how quickly life can change. That's what displacement really means.

Nilgün Karsan:

Now she is an immigrant.

Andaç Haznedaroğlu:

Yes, and that's the most dramatic part. If you've experienced a high standard of living, if you've lived with comfort and stability, then losing it all is the greatest tragedy.

If you've never known that life, the loss may feel less personal. But for those who have lived with opportunity and dignity, the fall is much steeper.

Nilgün Karsan:

Exactly. If you're used to that kind of life, adjusting to a completely new way of living becomes so much harder.

Andaç Haznedaroğlu:

I have many friends from Syria, university graduates, doctors, professionals. They are no different from us. But they lost their country. That's the real crisis. Some of them are managing to rebuild their lives here. Others are suffering from post-traumatic stress. Some have lost all their relatives. What are they supposed to do?

Nilgün Karsan:

It could happen to any of us. That's why it's so important to see both sides.

Andaç Haznedaroğlu:

Yes, absolutely. This is a war issue; it's not just about geography.

Ana María Manzanás Calvo:

That's what couples' conversations often become, right? Thinking about these "what if" scenarios.

Nilgün Karsan:

I think everyone should ask themselves the same question.

Andaç Haznedaroğlu:

If war came to your home, and you lost everything, what would you do?

Nilgün Karsan:

Exactly. What would you do?

Ana María Manzanás Calvo:

It's like the video game becomes real.

Nilgün Karsan:

Yes. Unfortunately.

Markus Heide:

And I think the film is also self-reflexive; it reflects on you as a filmmaker. Earlier today, you spoke about meeting a girl in Istanbul and how that encounter inspired the film. That comes through in the story. There's a scene where the characters talk in a way that feels very personal, like you're positioning yourself in the film. You collected these stories, and your presence is subtly there.

Andaç Haznedaroğlu:

Yes, it had to be that way. Because that's how I tried to find the truth. But the truth is always only one perspective. Even I had my own biases; I judged Syrians, judged foreigners, until I saw things from their point of view. And then I started thinking about my own background. My family came from Bulgaria and Greece. It's the same story. My grandmother used to cry all the time. She always wanted to go back. She would say, "There are so many flowers in my country. I just want to go home." She came from a region called Kızanlık in Bulgaria. It's famous for its roses. Whenever she saw or smelled a rose, she would cry. Everyone who has been displaced carries that longing to return, to belong. And now, more than 12 years have passed since the war in Syria began. We still don't know whether these people will ever be able to return home.

Markus Heide:

At my university, we worked on a student project in which students interview people after watching the film *The Swimmers*. When I watched *Misafir*, it reminded me in some ways of *The Swimmers*, even though your film was made earlier. You mentioned that *Misafir* is autobiographical and inspired by real situations. But were there other films or books that helped shape your storytelling, anything that particularly influenced your approach?

Andaç Haznedaroğlu:

Yes, there were many. One of the most influential films for me was *Life is Beautiful*. I was deeply inspired by how it handled the child's perspective in a tragic setting. There are several others, many films I've seen that focus on children's points of view. But not just from one director or one country. It's something I've always found compelling across different cultures and genres.

Markus Heide:

So the film was framed through a child's perspective?

Andaç Haznedaroğlu:

Yes, and I believe that's one of the most powerful elements in *Misafir*. Another important dimension was language. When characters speak English, German, or any globally recognized language, it's easier to reach international audiences. That's one of the disadvantages of Arabic-language films. Arabic limits accessibility, even when the story is universal.

Panayiota Mini:

So in the film, when characters speak Arabic, are we to assume that everyone understands them? I wasn't sure, do all characters in the film speak Arabic? Especially considering it's set between Syria and Turkey.

Andaç Haznedaroğlu:

No, not at all. Only Arabic-speaking audiences would understand the Arabic dialogue. For others, we used Turkish subtitles. And when Turkish is spoken in the film, we used English subtitles.

Ahmet İpşirli:

There's one scene in Turkish, but most of the dialogue is in Arabic. So Turkish audiences rely mostly on subtitles.

Nilgün Karsan:

We couldn't always tell who understood whom.

Andaç Haznedaroğlu:

That was intentional. In some scenes, characters don't understand each other at all. For example, one woman wants to leave, and another tries to stop her, saying, "I don't understand you, please stop here. Maybe we can go tomorrow." The lack of a shared language creates tension. It reflects real life. These people don't always speak the same language, and that's part of their struggle.

Panayiota Mini:

So in real life, what language would the different characters be speaking? I found it confusing.

Ahmet İpşirli:

That confusion is actually part of the film's realism. The multilingualism and the misunderstandings reflect actual experiences in border zones and refugee spaces.

Nilgün Karsan:

Yes, they don't share a common language. That's part of the film's honesty.

Panayiota Mini:

I noticed that too. Although I thought I heard a bit of a semi-Russian accent at one point.

Markus Heide:

Yes, there is Russian in the film.

Nilgün Karsan:

Yes, briefly, in a scene with one of the cleaning staff.

Panayiota Mini:

I understood that part was in Russian, but I didn't notice significant differences.

Andaç Haznedaroğlu:

There were various dialects in the film, not only Russian, but also several forms of Arabic. Arabic has at least six to eight major dialects. Syrian Arabic is very different from Saudi or Egyptian or Lebanese Arabic. That was one of the most difficult aspects of production. Our lead actress had a Syrian accent, which was very distinct from other Arabic-speaking regions. That linguistic diversity made subtitling and comprehension a real challenge.

Panayiota Mini:

So, even some of our audience today likely couldn't understand the dialogue fully.

Nilgün Karsan:

Exactly. That's why subtitles were necessary. In Türkiye, very few people speak Arabic.

Andaç Haznedaroğlu:

Yes, for most Turkish audiences, everyone in the film was speaking a foreign language.

Panayiota Mini:

I also wanted to ask about the scene involving the young girl and the wedding arrangement. Were all the men involved Syrian, or was it a deal between a Syrian and a Turkish man?

Nilgün Karsan:

That's why there was a translator in that scene, because it was a negotiation between a Syrian and a Turkish man.

Betül Ateşçi Koçak:

Yes, it was a bargain, a deal, between a Turkish man and a Syrian man.

Nilgün Karsan:

Yes, that's why the interpreter was present. The characters didn't share a common language. That house was the only Turkish one in the film.

Markus Heide:

At first, I thought the men involved were both Syrian, which shaped how I interpreted the moment. But now that I understand it was a Turkish and a Syrian man, it changes the meaning entirely. That scene casts both groups, Syrian and Turkish men, in a troubling light. And I know the film received some criticism, with some saying it portrayed Turkish society too negatively. But I saw the film as showing both groups from different angles, positive and negative alike.

Still, that particular scene, the bargain over the girl, was something we struggled to interpret. I assumed she was married to a Syrian man. But now, with this added context, the scene becomes more nuanced, and more disturbing.

Andaç Haznedaroğlu:

Unfortunately, this kind of thing is very common. In rural areas, some men "purchase" foreign girls, especially in parts of Kırşehir or Ankara. It's known. Maybe you've heard of it.

In some places, a girl is brought into the home not just as a bride, but also as labor, she's expected to work on the farm, take care of the house. It's a form of commodification. It's not far from slavery.

Nilgün Karsan:

This is the first time I've heard of something like this so direct. I mean, we had dowries as part of marriage traditions, but this is something else entirely. Buying?

Ahmet İpşirli:

Yes, dowries were part of our traditions.

Nilgün Karsan:

We used to have that, yes, but this is different.

Andaç Haznedaroğlu:

Yes, it's different. In these cases, the girl isn't just a bride, she's seen as an asset, a worker. That's the reality in some regions.

Markus Heide:

But I understood that the girl was supposed to marry this man.

Ahmet İpşirli:

Yes, they did marry. It was legal, at least in some cases. These are rare occurrences, but unfortunately, they do happen.

Panayiota Mini:

I didn't feel that the film portrayed this negatively. I mean, this *is* life. One of the women even says that line: "What else can we do?"

Andaç Haznedaroğlu:

You can find stories like these online. There are platforms where women are traded. It's not widespread, but it exists.

Nilgün Karsan:

It's not common, but...

Andaç Haznedaroğlu:

There are many examples. I remember one very clearly, near Ankara. A girl was brought in; she was around 14 years old. She didn't speak a word of Turkish. She just sat silently, like a maid. There are so many stories like this.

Grigoris Voskakis:

It's a man's world.

Markus Heide:

Regardless of the context, that scene felt like the moment when the girls' dreams collapsed. Earlier in the film, they talk about their hopes for the future, dreams we all have. It doesn't matter what gender you are, but for girls, these dreams are more brutally crushed. Patriarchal power just sweeps in and erases everything they had imagined. I remember you mentioned during a previous discussion that a student had asked a powerful question about women in Turkey. But it's not just Turkey. These dynamics exist in all of our countries. That's what I appreciated about the film: it portrays the destruction of those girlish dreams with honesty.

Cristina Garrigós:

And it's also tied to borders, not just geopolitical, but symbolic. There's a border in the film between being a child and having to grow up far too quickly. There are moments when characters say things like, "I'm grown up now," or "You're not a child anymore." War does that. It pushes you across that line, and once you've crossed it, you're lost.

Ahmet İpşirli:

It becomes a kind of rite of passage. A border crossing that marks the coming of age.

Markus Heide:

Yes, *Misafir* is a coming-of-age story, but a very painful one.

Andaç Haznedaroğlu:

She also takes care of her younger sister.

Nilgün Karsan:

And she's a child herself.

Panayiota Mini:

What about the soldiers at the border? Are they local people?

Andaç Haznedaroğlu:

It's a very interesting story, especially from the beginning of the war. At that time, many people from Aleppo didn't even understand how the conflict was reaching their doorsteps. People would knock, loot whatever they could, gold, valuables, and leave. These were neighbors, people who once knew one another. In our community, we all used to know who was Alevi, who was Kurdish, who belonged to which side. But in the early days, many of the soldiers were

not local. They came from elsewhere, Iraq, Afghanistan, and beyond. People arriving from abroad were drawn into the conflict, and many covered their identities. We didn't know who was with which affiliated factions, or what their politics were.

That's the core problem: you didn't know who was fighting or why. For example, at the very beginning of the war, there was an incident where a boy picked up a soldier's cap on the street. That alone was enough to bring punishment. The boy and his father were both imprisoned. After that, people began protesting in the streets. But at that time, it was dangerous to protest. Whether you opposed Assad or another side, it could bring trouble either way. Within a month, the streets were flooded with fighters from other countries, people we didn't recognize. No one knew who they were, or who had sent them.

Grigoris Voskakis:

So they weren't soldiers, they were more like pirates.

Betül Ateşçi Koçak:

Yes, it was like a boiling pot. And more and more pressure kept getting added.

Markus Heide:

I assumed they were ISIS fighters.

Andaç Haznedaroğlu:

It's complicated. When you entered Aleppo, especially at the border, you would pass more than twenty checkpoints. Each was run by a different armed group. You had no idea who they were or what they represented.

I traveled to Aleppo many times. I would cover my equipment and documents, especially when visiting the children's camps. But there were a lot of different groups and we truly didn't know. No one knew. That's what made it so unsettling: you couldn't tell who had joined the war, or why.

Nilgün Karsan:

So when you said earlier that it didn't feel like a "real" war, I understand now.

Andaç Haznedaroğlu:

Exactly. The people didn't know who their enemies were. They only knew their neighbors, at least before everything collapsed.

Betül Ateşçi Koçak:

It was like a double civil war.

Nilgün Karsan:

Yes, and it felt like it was provoked by someone. But no one knew who.

Markus Heide:

What about the bombings at the start of the war? Were those Russian airstrikes, or...?

Andaç Haznedaroğlu:

No, the initial bombings came from the Assad government. They targeted various areas of Aleppo, mostly the Sunni Muslim neighborhoods. It was strange and disturbing to witness. Just last month, they bombed a Hamas building, or maybe it was Hezbollah, I'm not sure. But they hit it with precision. And it makes you wonder, how did they know where to strike?

Markus Heide:

And they also dropped leaflets, right? Telling people to evacuate beforehand? Like they do in Gaza?

Andaç Haznedaroğlu:

Yes. I remember that clearly. First, they distributed flyers. Flyers telling people there will be bombing.

Betül Ateşçi Koçak:

That was a real incident, right?

Andaç Haznedaroğlu:

Yes, very real.

Markus Heide:

I didn't realize that tactic was used before. I thought it was an invention used by the Israeli army.

Andaç Haznedaroğlu:

No, it had already been used before. But even if you know where the bombing will happen, how can you possibly evacuate? Where can you go?

Betül Ateşçi Koçak:

Exactly. What kind of evacuation is even possible under those conditions?

Markus Heide:

May I shift the conversation slightly? I wanted to ask: what kind of reactions have you received from Syrians? How did they respond to *Misafir*?

Andaç Haznedaroğlu:

Actually, their response has been overwhelmingly positive. They were genuinely thankful, which meant a lot to me. There hasn't been much courage among Syrian directors to make films like this, so many stories remain untold.

Nilgün Karsan:

Especially for a film that addresses such difficult themes. It takes real courage.

Andaç Haznedaroğlu:

Exactly. They appreciated that their story was being shown. There was only one point that raised discomfort, specifically, the marriage scene involving the young girl.

Ahmet İpşirli:

Yes, even for many Syrians, that scene is deeply unacceptable.

Andaç Haznedaroğlu:

I agree. But I also see it as part of the honor of making this film, telling the truth, even when it's hard. The reality is, child marriage is not uncommon in either Türkiye or the broader Middle East. It's not unique to one culture. Sadly, cases of 12-year-olds being married exist, and they happen across the region. Still, the overwhelming response from Syrian viewers was gratitude. Interestingly, when the film was broadcast on Saudi television, on MBC, they bought the rights but didn't invite the film to any festivals.

Bogdan Chuma:

As a historian, I find films like yours incredibly valuable. I see them as historical sources.

What you've done is to offer a Turkish perspective on the Syrian war and the refugee crisis, something we don't often see. We hear a lot about how Europe receives refugees, but not enough about Turkey's view. It's the small details that matter most.

Andaç Haznedaroğlu:

Yes, and to me, this is the most important point: Who brings the weapons? That's where the war starts. We talk so much about consequences, but someone *puts the guns on the table*, and once that happens, someone will shoot. That's where the real tragedy begins. War is a trade, guns and medicine. One destroys, the other pretends to heal. It's a cycle. And both are part of the same system.

Betül Ateşçi Koçak:

It reminds me of *The Constant Gardener*. That's the kind of work I would like to be involved in.

Bogdan Chuma:

And of course, politicians are deeply involved. That's crucial. As historians, we always tell our students: start with the simplest questions. For example, *Who was bombing Aleppo*? That question may seem straightforward, but the answers often reveal the deepest truths.

Markus Heide:

That's why your film is so important, for all of us. Through this cinematic experience, we learn not only about the refugee crisis but also about the situation in Turkey. In Northern Europe, there's often an assumption that Turkey receiving Syrians should be easy, because "they're all Muslims." But reality is far more complex.

That is what films like this can teach us. We learn general truths across countries, but we also need to recognize what's different. That's why we started our *Migramedia* project: to learn about European experiences of migration *through narratives*, through the migrants' own stories.

Every country has its traumas. When we visited the Exile Museum in Berlin, we saw how many German families once

fled, from Poland, from Romania. All of us have migration histories, but we often forget. And that's what makes your film so valuable, not just for emotional or aesthetic reasons, but for historical ones. It helps us understand Turkey's role and the wider consequences of war and displacement.

Betül Ateşçi Koçak:

Yes, especially the first question from one of the audience members after the film screening earlier, about controversy within Türkiye was incredibly relevant.

Markus Heide:

It was good that he asked that question. Because this happens in all countries. In Germany, too, some Syrians or Afghans have committed terrible crimes. They've killed people. And unfortunately, those isolated cases shape public perception. His question, "Why do they become criminals?", reflects a broader anxiety.

Betül Ateşçi Koçak:

Exactly. There's this sentiment: "We gave them houses, so who are we? And who are *they*?"

It becomes a question of identity, of perceived gratitude and belonging.

Viola Giorgi:

And the expectation is: they should be thankful.

Nilgün Karsan:

Yes, that's what society expects. Gratitude, silence, assimilation.

Markus Heide:

And I appreciated that the audience member asked the question. In academic settings, we often self-censor. We manage our prejudices. But that question broke through the usual politeness, and that's a kind of progress too. As Oleksandr also said earlier, the wars have changed and so has the world. And our thinking about refugees has changed as well.

Ahmet İpşirli:

Yes, we, humans are far more experienced now in comparison to 10-20 years ago. For the contemporary era, it all started with Syrians. That's why *Misafir* remains such a valuable film. It captured something early, something raw, before we even knew what to expect. Now we know what routes people take, and how many might arrive. That awareness is not necessarily good, but it shows how much has shifted.

Markus Heide:

Take *The Swimmers*, for example. It has a happy ending; one of the girls becomes a professional swimmer.

Viola Giorgi:

But that's because it's a true story. She really did go to the Olympics. It's not a fictional resolution.

Markus Heide:

Yes, of course. But still, it's a choice. As filmmakers, we choose how to end a story. And a happy ending is always one option. There's another film I think of: *The Other Side of Hope* by Aki Kaurismäki. It follows a Syrian refugee in Finland. The actor himself became a star there. But the film ends on a darker note, he gets stabbed by Finnish nationalists. It's brutal. So, filmmakers have different narrative strategies. Your film, *Andaç*, ends in a more open way, which I find incredibly powerful.

Andaç Haznedaroğlu:

For me, the ending felt dangerous. Like walking with a knife.

Making this film was like that. If you choose to represent the Syrian side, you're walking a very thin line. It's never safe. It's always precarious.

Panayiota Mini:

But it's a wonderful ending, really. It's haunting. It's powerful. And yes, it's frightening too.

Ines Ordiz Alonzo-Collada:

What I appreciated most is that despite the heaviness of the story, the film still offers hope. There are small moments of joy, through the child's play, her imagination, and her dreams.

Even the ending, which we as adults understand to be frightening, still carries a sense of possibility through the child's

eyes. That contrast makes it deeply moving. The child represents the future. It's bittersweet, but also hopeful.

Markus Heide:

Yes, there's hope in the film, and that's exactly what made us cry.

Ana María Manzanás Calvo:

The film gives water a positive connotation. There's a line during the journey when a character asks, "Why is the sea always different?"

They're not afraid of the sea, they admire it. That admiration connects to the final scene. Even though the sea is dangerous, it's also mysterious and full of possibility. So I read the ending as containing hope.

Andaç Haznedaroğlu:

That meaning is captured best in the speech by the old woman, Sultanah. It's the most important moment in the film, in my view.

Ahmet İpsirli:

She's a powerful character, the archetypal wise woman.

Andaç Haznedaroğlu:

Yes, and it was her first time acting. She's not an actress. She's a real person, and that speech is based on her real story.

Ahmet İpsirli:

So that's her own experience?

Andaç Haznedaroğlu:

Exactly. She says, "The coast is full of dirt. You must go to the deep side."

That idea stayed with me. It's philosophical, something close to Mevlana's teachings. It's not about what's good or bad. It's about moving forward, transcending limits, and going beyond what's immediately visible.

Ines Ordiz Alonzo-Collada:

That's something the film does beautifully; it reveals the nuance in situations that are often oversimplified.

Panayiota Mini:

But it's interesting to reflect on how we read certain images today. In 2024, when we see the sea and those orange life jackets, we immediately think of tragedy.

The media has conditioned us. When you made the film, was that imagery already so emotionally charged? I honestly can't remember how it felt ten years ago.

But now, the combination of ocean and orange jackets is instantly terrifying.

Markus Heide:

Water carries powerful symbolism throughout the film. There's the ocean, of course, but also subtle moments, like the sound of a single drop of water. That drop makes a sharp noise, and suddenly there's no music, only the sound of the drop. That auditory moment connects symbolically to the emotional tone of the film. It links to the ocean at the end and recurs throughout the narrative.

Cristina Garrigós:

And there's the rain.

Markus Heide:

Yes, and the tears. Water appears in different emotional registers across the film.

Ahmet İpsirli:

What about your choice for the sea's appearance? In the final scenes, it looks murky, even brownish. That's not typical of how the Aegean Sea is usually depicted.

Betül Ateşçi Koçak:

Yes, the water is rough.

Ahmet İpsirli:

The brownish tone gives it a disturbing, even foreboding quality. It doesn't feel entirely hopeful, it seems ambiguous

or even threatening.

Andaç Haznedaroğlu:

We shot those scenes in a part of Istanbul, not in Bodrum. That decision was partly practical, but also emotional. That final scene is the saddest part of the film for me. Almost all the actors in that scene were Syrian. Many had lost relatives in similar circumstances. They were sitting in the boat, and suddenly the trauma returned. They couldn't act, they just started crying. I cried too. We all cried. It was overwhelming. We stopped the shoot. I couldn't direct anymore at that moment. But we were running out of time. We had only an hour to finish that scene. So we returned to shooting. We got into the boat again, but it was like a hurricane.

Ahmet İpşirli:

It was a very crowded scene, I remember.

Andaç Haznedaroğlu:

Yes, extremely crowded. There were babies, so many people on board. The waves were huge, the boat was moving up and down. I shouted "Stop!" but no one could hear me. The boat just kept drifting. It was incredibly dangerous. And again, it became something beyond fiction. It became another real story.

Ahmet İpşirli:

They almost reach Europe.

Andaç Haznedaroğlu:

Yes. They have a baby with them, and they're coming back. The rain was unbelievable, everyone was drenched, and the weather was freezing. It was extremely difficult. After finishing the shoot, I slept for a week. I couldn't process what we had done. It was hard to believe, because if something had gone wrong, if someone had died in those conditions...

Ahmet İpşirli:

Was that the last scene?

Andaç Haznedaroğlu:

Yes, especially that final scene. It was unbelievable.

Ana Manzanar:

I was also struck by the way the film portrays invisible borders, especially in the hospital scene. A woman brings a baby in need of care, and the staff say they can't treat the baby because she has no ID. That's another kind of border, one that decides who is entitled to health care. That really happens, right?

Ahmet İpşirli:

Especially in the early years of the Syrian refugee arrival, I imagine.

Betül Ateşçi Koçak:

Yes, this was based on her real experience. That was the fourth hospital she tried. She was finally able to accept it, there was nothing more she could do.

Andaç Haznedaroğlu:

We took her to a hospital, and they did nothing. We had to pay out of pocket for a private doctor. Then we returned home. At that time, there was no "guest ID." That system was introduced two or three years later.

Ahmet İpşirli:

Right, it was still very early.

Andaç Haznedaroğlu:

Yes. Eventually, they received guest IDs and could access public healthcare. But early on, they had no such rights. And honestly, many Turkish citizens were also uncomfortable with that situation.

Ahmet İpşirli:

Yes, and ironically, one of the main criticisms later was the opposite: that Syrians received *better* treatment than Turkish citizens. That perception created resentment from some people on the Turkish side.

Everyone:

(Agreement and acknowledgment of the commonality of this issue.)

Ahmet İpşirli:

It's the same pattern we've seen in many situations. I'm not surprised.

Viola Giorgi:

This is how right-wing parties win elections: by telling people that migrants are just arriving and receiving better medical care, more aid, and advantages in every field.

Ana Manzananas:

Now there's this new extreme right party that emerged out of nowhere. They're saying, "the party is over", as if there ever *was* a party of hospitality. That whole rhetoric of openness and welcome is being shut down.

Markus Heide:

It's similar in Germany. What Trump said about Mexicans, that they are rapists, implies they are just a burden to society. That kind of discourse is spreading.

Ana Manzananas:

I want to return to the young actress. One thing I really liked was how the beginning of the film seemed to spill over into reality. You mentioned how she asked whether she would ever walk on a red carpet, just like in the film's opening scene where they try on different clothes and talk about makeup. It's beautiful to see life imitating art in that way, but in a positive light.

Andaç Haznedaroğlu:

Yes, you might remember the scene. There's a woman at home doing makeup, talking about very girlish things. One of them told me that when they had to flee, she was in the middle of putting on wax strips. She said, "When we ran away, the wax was still stuck to my back."

Later, when we visited their tent, I noticed that although they had very little money, they had bought hair dye. So, I asked, "Why did you buy this?" And she explained how, in Arab culture, Thursday is a special night, because Friday is a holiday. On Thursdays, women often dress up, do their makeup, and try to look their best. She said, "This is what I do for my husband. We try to have a nice night, maybe dancing, something romantic."

I was amazed, such a small, intimate detail of resilience and dignity. Even amid displacement, they preserve beauty, intimacy, and rituals.

Markus Heide:

That scene stood out to me, too. It's such a strong female perspective, so intimate and personal. It's a moment of humanity in the middle of such a harsh narrative.

Viola Giorgi:

Two thoughts came to mind. The first relates to what you said about women doing their makeup. After World War II, there are fascinating interviews with Holocaust survivors, especially women. When asked what they did first after being liberated, besides eating, they often say: getting soap, combing their hair, and using hair colorant. These things were incredibly important because they had been deprived of them for so long. It gave them back their humanity, their dignity. That was the word I was looking for: dignity.

The second is more critical, perhaps pouring a little water into the wine. I've been thinking about the ethical dimension of using actors who've lived through the very experiences being portrayed. It applies to other films too, but especially when working with children who have experienced trauma. How do we take responsibility?

When we show such films to students, we always consider the risk of triggering something. Just imagine that the girl you worked with had been triggered by a scene in a way that went out of control. You mentioned working with psychologists, and I know that professionals working with children in the film industry usually do, but this is still a highly vulnerable group.

To make the ethical concern clearer: would we ever ask a rape survivor to reenact a rape scene? It's a stark example, but it illustrates the ethical dilemma. There's a flip side to the power of authenticity in cinema, it can come at a cost. That's the point I want to make.

Andaç Haznedaroğlu:

You're absolutely right. I talk extensively with my actors and actresses. Working with children is a completely different process. We only *play games*, it is not their story. We make it clear that it's someone else's story. If you use a child's actual emotions or trauma, that is dangerous.

Ahmet İpşirli:

Because it stops being acting. It's no longer a job, ethically, it becomes something else.

Andaç Haznedaroğlu:

Exactly. I never ask children to draw on their own experiences. I might say, "Can you imitate her?", but not "be" her. It's a small, careful distance.

As for the lead actress, many years ago, she lost her mother. Her mother was Palestinian. When I sent her the script, she replied, "I want to work with you. This is part of my family's story, and I want to be involved." She is a very famous actress in the Arab world and very talented.

She trusted me. And even though she usually stays in luxurious places, in Lebanon, she has a very upscale life; she chose to stay in the streets with us during filming. She said, "Let's go to the real places." We visited various refugee homes together. She stayed for a week, observing everything: how the refugees clean their dishes, how they cook, how they share one toilet.

She saw everything, and after that, she was completely in character. She was *correct*, emotionally and ethically, in how she portrayed the role.

Betül A. Koçak: But she reflected it perfectly.

Andaç Haznedaroğlu: Yes, she did. I'm very thankful to her, and she's thankful as well, because this was about a human perspective.

Markus Heide: You know, the ethical question that was raised earlier is very important when making a film like this. But in your case, I think the ethical concerns are less problematic. The experience is not just a detail; it's at the center of the film. From beginning to end, the story revolves around the child's experience, especially in those traumatic moments. You don't simply use someone's suffering for a brief emotional effect. The whole film is built around it, and I think that's commendable.

Andaç Haznedaroğlu: She herself has suffered.

Betül A. Koçak: That's a very good point. There's no exploitation of suffering in the film. It reflects the reality of the situation in a respectful and honest way.

Markus Heide: And the scene with the couple in bed, that kind of self-reflexivity is also important. It shows how all of us are implicated in this broader story of suffering. You're not just focusing on one character's pain, you're reflecting on the whole system. That, to me, is a strong ethical position.

Ahmet İpşirli: To wrap up, I'd say this film represents one of the most recent starting points in the current phase of global migration. It prompts modern viewers to question the concept of borders. It seems like this particular crisis was one of the first real tests of borders in this new context. And that's the reality we're still facing. Thank you, everyone, for your valuable insights, and especially we thank Andaç Haznedaroğlu for both making this courageous film and being here to discuss it.

(Everyone thanks Andaç with applause, and conversation ends.)

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