

Cinema, Horror and the Wrath of God: Turkish Islam's Claims in the Kurdish East

Sînema, Tirs û Xezeba Xwedê: Angaştên Îslama Tirkan li Rojhilata Kurd

Ali Sengul*

ABSTRACT:

This article offers an allegorical reading of the Turkish horror film *Büyü / Spell* (Orhan Oguz, 2004). As the first Turkish horror film that takes Islam at the center of its narrative and the first horror film taking place in the Kurdish East, *Büyü* shifts the ideology of cinematic East away from social realism and the representation of the region as a space to be modernized under national modernization process. Unlike the East in social realism where feudalism, Islam and illiteracy were seen as the main problems to be dealt with, *Büyü*'s main concern over the East is its diversion from Islam and the threat the influx of non-Muslims poses to the Turco-Islamic unity the region is shown to enjoy in a remote past. In *Büyü*, the Kurdish East is represented as a space of horror, death, and sorcery, and Islam is offered as a remedy. The article studies the film as an early example of popular culture in Turkey where one can trace the national and territorial ideology of the new pro-Islamic political formation, which during the early 2000s was in search of hegemony against not only the secularist Turkish political elite but also the Pro-Kurdish political movement in the Kurdish East.

Keywords: Horror film, Turkish cinema, social realism, allegory.

PUXTE:

Ev gotar xwendineke allegorîk ya filmê tirsê yê bi Tirkî yê bi nave *Büyü / Efsûnê* (Orhan Oguz, 2004) pêşkeş dike. Wekî filmê tirsê yê bi Tirkî ku cara ewil Îslamê dixê navenda vegotina xwe û filmê ewil yê tirsê yê ku li Rojhilata Kurd bûyerên wî têne meydanê, filmê *Büyü* îdeolojîya sînamatîk ya Rojhilatê ji realîzma civakî û ji wê

* **Baruch College, City University of New York, Communication Studies Department, Adjunct Assistant Professor** / Baruch College, Zaniñgeha City ya New Yorkê, Beşa Xebatên Komînikasyonê, Dr. alifuat.sengul@baruch.cuny.edu. ORCID: 0000-0001-6518-9375

temsîliyeta heremî dûr dixê ku ew wekî mekanekî di bin pêvajoya modernîzasyona neteweyî de dihate modernîzekirin. Di realîzma civakî de, li Rojhilatê feodalîsm, Îslam û nexwendatî wekî pirsgrêkên bingehîn dihatin dîtin ku divê pê re mucadele bihata kirin. Lê di filmê *Büyük* de endîşeya bingehîn ya Rojhilatê ji Îslamê dûrketin û îstîlaya unsurên ne musulman e ku ew îstîla li ser yekîtîya Turko-Îslamîk e ku ev herêm ji berê ve ye ji vê yekîtîyê sûd werdigire. Di filmê *Büyük* de Rojhilata Kurd wekî cihêkî tirs, mirin û efsûnê tê nîşandan û Îslam wekî çareserîyê tê pêşkeşkirin. Ev gotar li ser wî filmê dixebite ku ew wekî mînaka destpêkê ya çanda populer a Turkiyeyê dikare were nirxandin. Di vê çanda populer ya Tirkîyeyê de mirov dikare şopên îdeolojîya neteweyî û heremî ya şewesaiya siyaseta Îslamîparêz bibîne ku di destpêka salên 2000î de, ne tenê li dijî sekulerên politîk ên Tirk, lê li hember tevgera politîk ya Kurd-Parêz jî li pey hegemonyayê ketibû.

Bêjeyên Sereke: Filmên tirsê, sînemaya Tirkî, realîzma civakî, alegorî.

1. INTRODUCTION

What does cinematic horror have to tell us about the fears and terrors of its historical time? This article responds to this question in relation to *Büyük / Spell*, the 2004 Turkish horror film directed by Orhan Oguz. The film follows an archeology team en route to Dengizhan village in Eastern Turkey to find a lost manuscript written by Sultan Salih, a 14th century Sultan of Artuqids, which, according to a team member, was “one of the first Turkic states in Anatolia.” During their journey, the team comes across an old, white-bearded miller who reveals that the village “has attracted the wrath of Allah” after a sorceress came and forced the villagers to commit “terrible sins.” Despite the old miller’s warning that the village is uninhabitable, the professor, the leader of the team, assures the team members that “hundreds of similar stories are told in this region, they are all myths and legends,” and they should proceed as planned. Extraordinary accidents strike the team as soon as they depart from the miller. In the village, the team fails in its mission to find the manuscript as the team members are constantly attacked by invisible forces. At the end of the film, only two of them survive the attacks: Sedef, the professor’s daughter, who is possessed by a Jinn and is responsible for some of the atrocities, and Ayşe, the sympathetic linguist of the team who managed to repel Sedef’s attack by reciting sūras from Qur’an and with the help of the protective amulet that the miller gave her.

An allegorical reading of a horror film is one way to situate *Büyük* within its historical context by seeking correspondences between the horrific content within the text and the social and political fears and anxieties of its time.¹ In the horror

1 For an extensive allegorical study of horror film, see Lowenstein, A. (2005). *Shocking Re-resentation: Historical Trauma, National Cinema, and The Modern Horror Film*. New York: Columbia University Press.

genre, this relationship is often not readily available as the success of the shock value within the diegetic space relies on the suspension of the very relationship that the allegorical method seeks to expose. Theorizing within the context of the horror genre has the possible effect of disenchanting, or “spoiling” the premise of the film. This disenchantment, on the other hand, opens up the semiotics of the text and allows us to trace the referent that the horror text “speaks otherwise.”² The allegorical method, so to speak, seeks to reveal the semiotic map of the allegorical moment in the text which “delivers its message by way of concealing it.” (Jameson 2020, p. xiv) To make explicit an allegorical relationship between *Büyü*'s text and its historical time, I will address the following questions: Why does *Büyü* use the conventions of the horror genre to tell its story about the fall of an Islamic village? Why does the film take place in the Kurdish East? And whose fear is it that the horror we witness on the screen reveals and abuses?

Büyü's production corresponds to an important shift within Turkey's national politics in the early 2000s from a long period of Kemalist/Secular ruling, during which political power put into effect drastic social and cultural reforms for national modernization—and when the pro-Islamic population was seen as the target of these state practices—to a period of pro-Islamic governmentality and religious hegemony, during which the ruling Justice and Development Party/Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi (AKP) effectively instrumentalized the discourse of victimhood to dismantle the Kemalist political establishment and their modernist reforms³. By the mid-2010s, AKP had accomplished the political transformation and become an authoritarian party-state. *Büyü* was one of the earliest cinematic texts that reenacted this transition from Kemalist-secular to pro-Islamic governance, and as such, it considerably informed the main contours of the domestic horror films later on. The significant majority of the domestic horror films released during the following decade took their subjects from Islamic cosmology and the Qur'an, and at its first-time peak in 2015, seventeen out of nineteen domestic horror films were inspired by pro-Islamic religious themes (Özkaracalar 2016). Arslan (2014), Özkaracalar (2013, 2016), Simsek (2016), Arapkirli (2017) and Koçer (2019) relate the prominence of religion in the horror genre to the rising hegemony of political Islam during the same period. That these horror films take their themes from within Islamic texts doesn't mean that Islam is represented as

-
- 2 Composed of the Greek *allos* “the other” and *-agorein* “the speak publicly”, the word allegory means “speak[ing] otherwise” (Lowenstein, 2005: 4) As a textual strategy, allegory functions at the limit of representation: at the intersection between what can and cannot be said, and what should and should not be concealed.
 - 3 In the 2002 general elections, when the AKP entered the elections for the first time, the party got 34.45 percent of the national votes which was about as much as the next three party's votes combined.

horrific. To the contrary, within the overwhelming majority of these films—in what Özkarakalar calls “Islamic horror” films—horror marks the *outside* of Islam, the horror is triggered by an anti-Islamic act like sorcery.

What is striking in the generic continuity of Islam in these horror films is not simply the religious references they animate but the recurrence of Jinn as the central character in charge of the horrific content (Şimsek 2016), whereas other supernatural forces like ghosts and zombies do not enjoy much screen time. One reason offered for this casting choice is the cultural relevance of Jinn in a predominantly Muslim society as it is the only supernatural character whose existence is recognized in Qur’an. Ghosts and zombies are transmuted humans who, due to their untimely—and typically unjust—death, are trapped between the worlds of the living and the dead until they settle their account among the living⁴. Neither ghosts nor zombies exist in the narrative traditions in the region. Jinn, however, as a third kind between humans and angels, is part of Islamic discourse.

In Islamic horror films, Jinn are inactive inhabitants of the earth until they are called for a mission by a sorcerer/sorceress and become actants intervening in the fatalistic world of Islam. The narrative structure of the Jinn stories has an important ideological function: although they appear to be antagonists challenging Islam, Jinn’s diegetic presence works to affirm Islamic jurisdiction. Their presence separates inside and outside, safety and danger, and life and death. When a Jinn is called for a mission, it wreaks havoc indiscriminately, but the violence we see on the screen has a circular structure and it always starts from, and comes back to, the characters responsible for its freedom. The diegetic Jinn is a trope of liminal space to separate what is acceptable according to (Islamic) law and what is not. The audience is called to embrace the diegetic horror through cathartic disidentification. The conservative, law-abiding effect of the Islamic horror is secured by creating a safe distance for the audience to watch the horrific encounter. Since the horror is triggered by a border-crossing anti-Islamic act like sorcery, when the characters are attacked by Jinn, the audience is assured to feel safe as long as they disapprove the border-crossing. This assumed difference between the audience and the victims is part of the pleasure of the text. Disidentifying with the hunted abject characters, claiming that *we are not like them* and even believing that *they deserve it because they are responsible for it*—they summoned the Jinn or they went in to a place they should not have gone—is an important part of the films’

4 George Romero, the director of the *Night of the Living Dead* (1968) explains how he came up with the topic of the film: “It came out of the anger of the times. No one was gleeful at the way that the world was going, so these political themes were addressed in the film. Zombies could be the dead in Vietnam; the consequences of our mistakes, you name it.” (from the interview in the documentary film, *The American Nightmare* (dir. Adam Simon 2004).

ideological investment. This disidentification affirms the law, normalize violence, justifies punishment, and interpellates the audience as Muslim subjects. We see this ideological work in *Büyü*. The film's ideological investment is predicated on the border-crossing sorceress who released the Jinn and the archeological team who, against the forewarning of the miller, came to the cursed space.

2. ONCE UPON AND TIME IN THE EAST...

Büyü is the first horror movie in Turkey to deal with Islam as a central concern.⁵ Rather than a source of fear, like it was in social realism, in *Büyü* religion is offered as the solution to the horror instigated by the sorceress' sacrilegious act. But the film's solution to the anti-Islamic horror is equally horrific: "Allah" punishing the anti-Islamic deed and annihilating the village without sparing any living being. This horrific act is neither articulated nor problematized as part of the horror, yet it is in this justified yet unarticulated horror that we can trace the film's allegorical investment. In the old miller's story where we learn why the village became uninhabitable, one can catch a glimpse of how the film treats the two horrors:

The village has taken the wrath of Allah. Nobody lives there anymore. A very long time ago, big sins were committed in that village. In the past, it was a peaceful and fertile place. Until one day a sorceress came and settled in the village. The village became home to inauspiciousness and evil. The sorceress convinced the villagers that baby girls were to blame for the evil. And people did things that attracted the wrath of Allah.⁶ Only one man didn't believe the sorceress, and he and his wife hid their only baby, a girl, from the villagers and the sorceress for years. One day the mother suddenly died [...] and the man married a woman from another village. Soon the new wife became jealous of the stepdaughter, and one night she went to the sorceress to cast a spell on the father to kill his daughter. Everything started after that night. Curse after curse rained on the village until no living being was left alive.

The old miller's story of the village explains the film's opening scene in which we see past events unfolding: In an old-looking room, the father carves a cradle for his daughter's doll and occasionally checks on her playing with a toy in the hallway. The stepmother seems to be frustrated with the father's disproportioned

5 There are only few other Turkish horror movies listed in Turkish cinema historiographies prior to *Büyü*. *Ciglik / Scream* (Aydin Arakon, 1949), *Drakula Istanbul'da / Drakula in Istanbul* (Mehmet Muhtar, 1953), *Ölüm Saati / Time to Die* (Orhan Ercin, 1954), *Ölümler Konusmaz ki / Dead don't Speak* (Yavuz Yalinkilic, 1970), *Seytan / The Exorcist* (Metin Erksan, 1973).

6 In a flashback sequence, we see a group of women in black chador on a hilltop standing a short distance from the sorceress. One of the women hands the baby she was holding to a young man who delivers it to the sorceress. As the women cry, the sorceress puts the baby in a hole and covers it with dirt.

love for the daughter. In the next shot, the father tucks the daughter in her bed while the stepmother watches them with a disappointed face. Then the camera follows her as she walks into another room and reaches out to a bookcase hanging on the wall. She takes what appears to be the Qur'an and leaves the house. Outside, she spots the sorceress's house on the hilltop under the moonlight. Inside the house, we see the sorceress preparing her spell in a dark room filled with scorpions on the ground. Upon entry, the stepmother takes off her clothes and waits for the sorceress. To initiate the spell, the sorceress whips the stepmother's bare chest with a thorned stick and scrapes her blood with a dagger, and uses it in her spell. No conversation takes place between them. The stepmother gives the sorceress a piece of fabric, apparently from the father's clothes. The sorceress conducts a series of rituals and as the ritual continues, we cut back and forth between the father still working on the basinet and the sorceress conducting sorcery. As the spell takes effect, the father gets distraught and the daughter wakes up in distress back in her room. The camera pans to a piece of stretched leather hanging on the wall in her room. The camera focuses on the Arabic script on the piece of leather. As we later learn, the inscription is from Qur'an, a part of the one hundred and second verse of Baqara Sūra, which says *"And they knew that the buyers of (magic) would have no share in the happiness of the Hereafter."* When the child runs to the door to reach the father, we see a quick cut between the piece of leather on the wall and the door closing, implying that the sūra on the wall protects the girl. But she pushes the door open and runs towards her father. In the other room, the spellbound father checks for the Qur'an in the bookcase; he cannot find it and gets infuriated. He appears to be fighting the spell. Unable to resist the spell, the father reaches for the knife he was using to carve the toy cradle and cuts his daughter's throat. In the last shot of the scene, the effect of the spell vanishes and the father sees his daughter lying on the floor drenched in blood, and screams her name "Ayşeee!"

3. ALLEGORIES OF ISLAM IN THE EAST

The film's narrative structure relies on two intersecting allegorical axes: national modernization and the cultural anxiety over the loss of (Islamic) faith on the one hand, and the fear of the loss of national hegemony over the Kurdish East, on the other. The film, then, might be seen as celebrating the hegemony of the Pro-Islamic ideology of AKP with its critique of Kemalist modernization, and working through the persistent national(ist) anxiety over the success of the Pro-Kurdish municipal candidates in the Kurdish populated East (when, for the first time, the AKP was entering the local elections as the new conservative right-wing party).

The opening scene of the film where we see the father, the daughter, the stepmother and the sorceress is filled with important cues which reflects the spatial-

religious-ethnic claims of AKP: the Qur'an and the stretched leather piece with the Arabic inscription, the name of the daughter, Ayşe, and the word "Baba," for father, which Ayşe exclaims as she tries to reach out to her father. These are plentiful ethnic-religious markers to establish the identities of the father, daughter, and the village as part of the Turco-Islamic (*Türk-Islam*) tradition. The scene also establishes the village as a contested territory, under attack by both the sorceress and the stepmother. It is quite curious that during the eight-minute-long opening sequence, the stepmother doesn't speak a single word. Because of her silence, her identity is left ambiguous: we don't know whether she is Turk or Kurd or Arab, although we know, from the old miller's story, that she is an outsider from another village. The sorceress is also an outsider to the Turco-Islamic tradition, yet her identity is much less ambiguous: during the sorcery ritual, we hear her reciting some enchanted words: "uruma muqleya.... ya tan ...ya Jinn." The recited words may not establish any ethnic identity but we know that they have something to do with the *Jinn* and involves black magic which the Qur'anic verse on the wall prohibits and punishes. A surer ethnic-religious identity marker, however, is the tattoos she has on her face and body. Tattoos have been common among women in the region before conversion to Islam. Currently, it is predominantly practiced by Kurdish women in the region, even after conversion to Islam, as a marker of beauty and endurance. One may ask, by forcing the villagers to kill the baby girls, does not the sorceress conduct a kind of ethnoreligious engineering in the village, first killing the future mothers thus pushing the males to marry outsiders and mixing blood with other ethnic identities, as a result ending ethnoreligious purity? The anxiety over ethnoreligious purity in the village significantly informs the aesthetic and political investment in the opening scene: the disrupted peace and fertility of once a Turco-Islamic village by two ethnically and religiously marked outsiders and the "the wrath of Allah," annihilating the village to restore the balance. Together with the old miller's narration later on, the opening scene affirms the religious-nationalist historiography that this village, and the region in general, was originally Turkish-Islamic before it was invaded and assimilated by the [Kurdish] outsiders, the contemporary inhabitants of the region.⁷

7 There is a curious historical reversal here. Since the 1930s, the Kemalist regime subjected the Kurdish East to ethnic engineering through population exchanges, forced migration and linguistic as part of the military strategy of dissipating the Kurdish speaking majority to promote Turkish identity in the region. (Yegen 1999, Jongerden 2007, Akekmekci 2010, Ergil 2009, Besicki 1992, Bozarslan 2005) Although the film's historical claim reaffirms the Kemalist ethno-politics that the Kurdish population poses danger for the articulation of Turkish identity, the film, by imagining a time of Turco-Islamic purity before the arrival of the Kurds, overlooks the early Republican conviction that Kurdish people were indeed dominant in the region.

Büyü significantly shifted the ideology informing the cinematic representation of the Kurdish East in Turkey. Since the 1960s, the dominant cinematic genre in which the region has been represented had been social realism. The ideological and aesthetic contours of social realism took shape in the *village realism* of the 1950s during which realist filmmakers such as Nedim Otyam, Metin Erksan, Atif Yılmaz, L.Ö. Akad appropriated a documentary aesthetic, using the cinematic medium in search of a secular – realist national culture in Anatolia, toppling the fatalistic worldview and religious conformism of their melodramatic predecessors. Yet the turning point for social realism, which made it a dominant genre, was the secularist military coup of 1960. The aesthetic politics of social realism were seen as progressive— social realist films and literature promoted land redistribution, social reforms, and economic justice—but they were also statist, taking statecraft as the rational motor of social and economic progress against feudalism and Islam. Social realist films, following the secular state and the socialist left of the 1960s, equated feudalism with religion and appropriated an anti-feudal and anti-Islamic representational strategy in the films taking place in the periphery. The cinematic East took shape within this secular-developmental statist ideology of social realism. Films such as *Topragın Kani / Blood of the Earth* (Atif Yılmaz, 1965), *Hudutların Kanunu / The Law of the Borders* (L.Ö. Akad, 1967), prime examples of social realism, based their narratives on the conflict between the feudal elite, landlords and sheiks, for instance, and modernizing state and the peasants, the disempowered enthusiasts of progress. In social realism, the representatives of the modernist state such as teachers, engineers, and army officers occupied a central position within the diegetic conflict. Although in the 1970s and 80s the state lost its favorable position as a “savior” in the region due to its policies of systematic territorial destruction and cultural assimilation during this period of civil war, the cinematic East was still a social realist space against feudalism and Islam. The political cinema of the 1990s and early 2000s began to address the civil war between the pro-Kurdish PKK (Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê) and the Turkish state. The cinematic iconography of the East shifted from farmland to the devastated “empty village” in *Güneş Yolculuk / Journey to the Sun* (Yesim Ustaoglu, 1996), *Isıklar Sönmesin / Let there be Light* (Reis Çelik, 1996), and *Eskiya / The Bandit* (Yavuz Tuğrul, 1996) to portray the catastrophic effects of the war in the Kurdish East. In political cinema, the ideas of progress, modernization, and development changed meaning from a state policy of building to that of systematic destruction. The state is seen in these films as the agent of underdevelopment rather than progress, recognizing, although slyly, the human and environmental cost of the Turkish state’s involvement in the Kurdish East. In these films, the empty village is a significant

space-time that sets the narrative in motion: The stories begin after the village gets burned down or is flooded under the water of newly constructed dams.⁸

The Dengizhan village, or Gundê Dengiza, as its last Kurdish inhabitants called it, where *Büyü* takes place was one of those villages evacuated by the Turkish security forces during the civil war in the 1990s. In a behind-the-scene interview, the producer Faruk Aksoy mentions in passing that the evacuated village contributed to “the creepiness of the atmosphere” that they were aiming for⁹. Although the film recognizes the history of evacuation, it offers a completely different reason for its emptiness. We hear about the current condition of the village for the first time from the old miller according to whom the cause of the annihilation and barrenness is a diversion from Islam, due to sorcery, and the resulting loss of ethno-religious purity. The opening scene and the old miller’s narration mark the village as a profane space outside the mercy of Allah. The film not only fails to mention the long military conflict, but it also ties the most catastrophic result of the military conflict to metaphysical punishment. People in the contemporary Gundê Dengiza were punished for their alleged support for Kurdish guerrillas. But in the cinematic village of Dengizhan, the historical inhabitants were punished for their “sins.” In the old miller’s account, the ethno-political demand turns into profanity, diversion from Islam. For the Pro-Islamic authority, there seems to be no difference between the two: the state is considered the embodiment of the divine order, and confronting this order is deemed by the political power as sacrilegious. The old miller’s story of terrible sins and the frequent references to the Qur’an and the wrath of Allah unmistakably call the region back into Islamic order

4. THE ARCHEOLOGY TEAM GOES TO THE KURDISH EAST

While the arrival of the sorceress to the Dengizhan village and its destruction in the opening scene betrays the historical anxiety around Kurdish identity, the film’s religious-nationalist anxiety in the present is set in motion by the team’s journey to the East to search for the lost manuscript in the same site that was inflicted by the sorceress and experienced the wrath of Allah in the past. We meet the team for the first time in a posh villa right after the opening scene. Over dinner, they discuss the journey they would be taking to the Dengizhan village the following day. In a large, affluently decorated living room, Ayşe, the linguist

8 Constructing dams was used as a military strategy in the 1990s to depopulate the Kurdish region. Its objective was partly to limit the geographical mobility of the Kurdish guerrillas and to cut tactical and logistic support for PKK.

9 *Büyü* Filmi Kamera Arkasi (Behind the Scene). Retrieved from: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=udSibB0NdGc>)

member of the team, stands in front of a wall reading and translating for her colleagues the script on the same piece of leather that we saw in daughter Ayşe's room in the opening scene. After translating the script, she tells her colleagues, fascinated by the beauty of the piece, that she received the piece as a gift from her father who bought it in London.¹⁰ During the ensuing dinner conversation, we learn that the trip is to search for a lost manuscript written by Sultan Salih, the head of the Artuqids, a Turkic dynasty that ruled what is now Eastern Turkey from the 11th to 14th centuries. As one of the team members claims, "if found, the manuscript would reveal new historical facts about the life in one of the first Turkic states in Anatolia." The professor explains the importance of finding the lost manuscript: "Although they were Turkic and Muslim, there are diverse influences of other religions in their religious practices." Ayşe adds to the professor's wonder: "we see the same influence in their everyday life, for example on one side of their copper coins is the figure of Alexander the Great and the dragon, on the other side is Arabic script." The professor and Ayşe's interest in the life of Artuqids is noticeably in contrast with the history laid out in the opening scene. While the opening scene shows the centrality of Islam in the identities of the father and the daughter, and by extension, the village and the region, the conversation around the dining table challenges that purist-Islamic reading of national history with a cosmopolitan reading of a Turkic state and everyday life. It is not very difficult to read the team's search for the lost manuscript by a Turkic sultan as another contesting claim about the identity of the region. The team defines the Turkish identity not through Islam but from a more multicultural perspective, and significantly decenters Islam in Turkish identity by offering a more secular definition of nationhood. Unsurprisingly, the team fails to find the manuscript, therefore fails to substantiate its historical claim, and is severely punished for its attempt to *write off* Islam as a central component of the history of the region. If the film punishes Kurds for anti-Islamic practices and for threatening the ethnic purity of the Dengizhan village, the Archeology team is punished for its rationalism and cosmopolitan historiography, both posing a significant threat to the Turko-Islamic synthesis that the film promotes.

10 That the film opens in one Ayşe's house in the past and continues in another Ayşe's with the same piece of leather on the wall in the present establishes a historical continuity between two national temporalities. Ayşe the linguist is the continuation of the Turco-Islamic identity that the film lays out in the opening scene. She is the only team member with a genuine interest in Islam. She translates the *sūra* for her friends who are only interested in the beauty of the craft rather than the *sūra*. Ayşe shows great admiration for the miller they encounter on the road and even given an amulet for protection. During their work in the village, Ayşe is also the only team member who believes that the village is cursed by a dark spell. At the end of the film, when Ayşe the linguist is attacked by the spellbound Sedef, the historical Ayşe comes to save Ayşe the linguist from inevitable death.

Büyyü's archeology professor might be read as a parody of the bureaucrats, technocrats, and civil servants from the national center who visited the Kurdish East in the 1960s social realist films. They came to incorporate this “backward” “resistant” geography into the secular national space-time. From the statist, modernist perspective that informed the social realist genre, Kurdish resistance was caused and supported by Islam and the feudal order. Instead of directly addressing Kurdish resistance, social realism targeted feudalism and religion as the main culprits behind the uprisings. In these films the rationalist, positivist secular state officer who is sent to the region to remedy the problem invariably clashes with the oppressive and reactionary feudal elite. In *Hudutların Kanunu*, for example, the peasant Hidir (played by Yılmaz Güney) sides with the lieutenant and the teacher in a fight against the landlord who is against the construction of an elementary school in the village. In *Topragın Kani*, Hüseyin (played by Fikret Hakan) works with the idealist petroleum engineer against the alliance of the landlord and the imperialist American oil company. The film equates religion/feudalism with imperialism for their twin danger to national sovereignty. In these films, feudalism and religion are not only anti-modern and reactionary but also anti-national and the fight against them was a national cause for the secular elite. The social realist genre's emphasis on the modern-feudal conflict as a national cause strictly follows the narrative structure of the early republican foundational novels. The generic encounter in social realism between rationalism and reactionism is the same encounter that one finds in Yakup Kadri's *Yaban* (1932) and Halide Edip's *Vurun Kahpeye* (1923, 2007) with one crucial surplus: the narrational conflict between modern and anti-modern in the 1960s social realism works as part of secular governmentality that equated Kurdish resistance with anti-modernist religious reactionism, ignoring and therefore discrediting the secular demands underlying the resistance.

Büyyü's archeology team goes to the village with a similar social realist agenda: not to modernize the region—as there is nothing left to modernize—but to find a secular moment in the history of the region that would be the basis for a modern multi-cultural national identity. However, unlike his narrative ancestors in social realism who were primarily invested in the here-and-now of the region when they arrived, the professor expresses his disinterest in the present. In a conversation on their way to the village, the professor tells the team members that he is only interested in what is under the ground. As the film progresses, we see that the team's attitude towards the region's present is not only disinterest but also distaste mixed with contempt. Even before the team reaches the Dengizhan village, we are shown their attitude towards the region during their conversation with Adem, the driver of the minibus that takes the team near the village. Adem is a man in his mid-thirties, dressed in traditional eastern attire with shalwar and

headcover. His clothes, mannerisms, heavy accent and intonation mark him unmistakably Kurdish. The first question the professor asks Adem is whether what they had heard about the village burnings is true or not. Adem, interrupting the professor, responds with a heavy accent, “Don’t worry about it, my master.” The team members, apparently amused by the accent and the intonation of Adem, respond with laughter, which continues every time Adem replies to their inquiries.¹¹ When the professor explains how he decided to become an archeologist: “my grandfather used to say life is under the ground, my mother wanted me to become a doctor but I have to say, I also believe that life is under the ground.” Adem responds: “I wish you became a doctor just as your mother wanted, my master, then you would give life to people on the ground, instead of wasting your time searching for what is underneath.” The entire archeological team laughs out loud. The scene establishes a well-defined hierarchical relation between the team and Adem. Although he responds to the team’s queries wisely, the scene does not indicate that the team takes Adem seriously.

The team’s attitude later on towards the old miller and the two porters carrying their equipment to the village on mules is not so different. After the team leaves the miller, one of the team members gets frustrated with the porters who cannot tell him what time they would arrive at the village. The team member complains, “what strange people are these mule drivers! Whenever I ask, they keep saying ‘we will go, we will go’ but they never say when we will arrive.” The other team members laugh out loud at his impression of the porters. The mule drivers’ sense of time, based on approximation, apparently doesn’t work with the team member’s modern sense of Cartesian time based on numbers. The professor comments in a sure tone affirming the team member’s opinion: “the people of the East are strange.” In contrast with how they feel about the porters, the members of the team find the miller “very charismatic” with his “white long dress and headcover,” “just like the white-bearded saint who comes into your dreams.” As the team members recite the old miller’s story of what happened in the village, the professor intervenes one more time: “Don’t pay attention to what he said. There are thousands of stories like this in this region; they are all myths.” The mule drivers disagree with the professor: “that village is cursed,” to which the professor responds: “there you go, people want to believe something.”

11 This is the only time we hear about the village burnings, but the weight of the topic dissipates as the team laughs at the way Adem responds to the professor. It is curious as to why the filmmaker decided to mention the village burnings and then immediately shot it off with no discussion. One possibility is that the filmmakers wanted to show that the team’s willingness to veer off the topic may have to do with their disbelief in the village burnings or their discomfort with the topic. In the early 2000s, the AKP capitalized on this critique to differentiate itself from the past governments.

The most curious moment in the film is when the team accompanied by the mule drivers who carry the team's load through the unpaved hilly pathway, stops in a cave right outside the village. As the team freshens up and the porters feed the animals, the cave is shaken by an earthquake and lightning. Everybody gets scared, especially the porters already anticipating a sign of the curse they were warning the team about earlier. The team members hear the porters' discussion and when they pay attention to what the porters talk about, they cannot understand the language even when they hear the conversation clearly. During the entire cave sequence, the porters speak in Kurdish among themselves and they speak with the team members in Turkish. In the following scene after they are shaken by the earthquake, they discuss the danger of going into the village. The team gets even more worried as they "cannot understand what they say." As soon as they reach outside the cave, the porters tell the team that they have to take the rest of the road alone as they "don't want to go to that cursed village." Beyond its achievement in setting up the eerie mood for the rest of the film, the cave sequence plays a pivotal role in testing the team's fitness to work in the region as archeologists. That even the linguist, "one of the best in Turkey," as the professor proudly stated during the aforementioned dinner conversation, cannot figure out what language people in the region speak, let alone understand it, is an important detail marring their qualifications as scientists studying the region. How can the team be so oblivious to the region, its people on the ground, and the language they speak? This is the kind of question that the film provokes by its rendering of the incompetency of the team. One can see this representational strategy as part of a more systematic criticism posed by the pro-Islamic AKP against Kemalism, which denied not only the "Kurdish question" but also Kurdish as a proper language. Erdogan's 2005 public speech in Diyarbakır was considered a turning point in a national government's position vis-à-vis Kurds and Kurdish question:

We solve every problem with more democracy, more citizenship rights, and more welfare; and we will keep solving problems in this way. A big state and strong nation are the ones that face its mistakes as well as its strengths, and that can walk into the future with confidence. The Kurdish question is not the problem of only a part of the nation but the problem of all of us. It is my problem as well. One cannot address problems piece by piece. All problems whether it is of Turks, Kurds, Circassian, Abkhazia, or Laz, are the common problems of all citizens of the Turkish republic. Everybody should know that there is no return from where we are, and democracy will take root as everybody experiences it. I will not let anybody halt the democratic process.

The archeology team, with their elitism, their arrogance toward the Kurdish characters, and their adherence to a scientific explanation—which fails to get anything right in the village—is the embodiment of secularism from the pro-Islamic perspective. It is possible to see the parallel between the film's assessment of the

archeology team as incompetent and unqualified, and Erdogan's critique of the dominant ideology of Kemalism as authoritarian and dismissive of differences. It is not a coincidence that both of these counter-hegemonic tropes were in use when the AKP was in search of hegemony in the region.

What sets *Büyü* apart from the earlier pro-Islamic films, with which it shares the critic of secularism, is the intensity of physical violence, allegorized through the conventions of the horror genre, that film affords against the archeology team. As soon as they enter the village, and before they even begin the excavation, the team's troubles begin: the professor's computer stops working, Ayşe's nose bleeds inexplicably, Cemil is attacked by a three-fanged flying creature, and Aydan is raped by an invisible being in her sleep. The film leaves the source of the violence ambiguous, though: is it the spell cast by the sorceress? or is it "the wrath of Allah" inflicted over the region, and the team gets its own fair share? or, possibly, both? ¹² We can respond to this question by way of identifying why the team deserves such horrific treatment. In horror films, there is always a strong reason and an explanation—no matter how credible it would be—for horror. The victims may have disturbed the evil spirits, or they may have visited a space that they were not supposed to visit—and warned against—or the agents of horror were once the victims themselves and they come back to take revenge. *Büyü* alludes to these scenarios with varying degrees. The film openly questions the existence of the team in the village: they are not supposed to be there and they don't belong there, and the team members, except Ayşe, are portrayed so poorly that they seem to deserve the treatment. The team's effort to find a document in the village to prove a cosmopolitan history of the region is a threat that the horrific treatment neutralizes. Against all warnings by the old miller and the mule drivers to keep them away, the team enters the village only to curse it the second time.

12 A side story runs parallel to the team's trip to Mardin. During the dinner conversation when we see the team for the first time, we learn that Zeynep, Ayşe's friend from school is in love with Ayşe's fiancée. As the team leaves for Mardin the following day, Zeynep goes to a sorceress to cast spell on Ayşe to kill her. This is the same spell as the one that we see in the opening scene. Zeynep's visit to the sorceress is cross-cut with the team's arrival to the village. The spell sets in motion evil forces in the village as we see the team settling in the empty house. Although this side story further complicates who and what may be responsible for the violence imposed on the team, it reveals a historical pattern in effect in the region: in both times, the spell is cast by outsiders, and it is an outsider facilitating the spell and animating the horrific events. While the Kurdish sorceress cast the spell, it is the stepmother's judgment that leads to, and justifies, the total annihilation of the village. In the present, another sorceress, this time from Istanbul, cast the same spell and the village is cursed the second time as the team arrives the village. In both cases, the outsiders, Kurds in the first and the archeology team in the second are seen responsible for the horrific events.

During the first day of their work, the team finds a piece of cloth, a dagger and a metal box—all used by the sorceress in the opening scene—right beneath the surface. After reading the words on the cloth, Ayşe tells the team that it is about demonic Jinn and it must have been used in grand sorcery, which, according to her, confirms the old miller's story that the village is indeed cursed. When Ceren expresses her disbelief that an entire village would be cursed, Ayşe tries to convince her: "Why not! According to Qur'an, even entire tribes are cursed. For example, Lut, Semud and Ad tribes were cursed because they did not abide by Allah's orders." As if to prove Ayşe's interpretation, soon the team members get struck by invisible forces one by one: Cemil, Ceren and Aydan are killed on the same day: The team finds Cemil's head severed from his body and hanging on the door. Ceren and Aydan are attacked in the same way and their mutilated bodies are found by Ayşe and the professor in one of the empty houses. The professor's head is cut off by Sedef, his daughter, who falls under the influence of a demonic Jinn. After killing her father, Sedef stalks Ayşe, but she is stopped by the little Ayşe from the opening scene, who is dressed in white, standing by the other Ayşe. The little Ayşe disappears after leaving an amulet for her namesake. Ayşe holds up the amulet and walks away while reciting sūras from Qur'an.

5. CONCLUSION: HORROR AND HEGEMONY IN THE KURDISH EAST

Büyü challenges two generic conventions in Turkish cinema: its adoption of the East as a cinematic space is a clear diversion from the social realist East, and its pro-Islamic perspective is in contrast with the pro-Islamic cinema's earlier discourse of Islam as the belief of the oppressed. Although the film affords the critique of social realism's developmentalist ideology and its power effects in the East, it digresses from the political films of the 1990s such as *Güneşe Yolculuk / Journey to the Sun* (Yeşim Ustaoglu, 1996) and *Ax / The Land* (Kazim Öz, 1999) which confronted social realism's East from a similar perspective yet with a deconstructive agenda. The counter-hegemonic discourse that *Büyü* appropriates has been instrumental in the rising political Islam's search for hegemony in the East. The film hides its hegemonic desire behind its critique of the archeology team as the embodiment of the Kemalist modernization project. *Büyü*'s trope and its professor with historical-spatial motivations in the Dengizhan village, closely resembles the archeology professor in *Indiana Jones* series about the adventures of an archeology professor searching for enchanted historical artifacts in the exotic and savage geographies of the Third World. The professor survives countless life-threatening circumstances in each episode, and in the end, he saves the artifacts from the native savages and their evil alliances. The *Indiana Jones* series naturalize many orientalist and racist tropes to justify the new world order the United States

was promoting as a contending international power during the late Cold War. Native populations in Latin America, India and the Middle East are portrayed in the film as primitive, untrustworthy, power-hungry, people, except a few who help the professor to acquire the artifact for the imperial center. However, *Büyü* appropriates the *Indiana Jones* trajectory with a critical reversal: *Büyü*'s archeology professor and his team are the antagonists in the film, and the story is designed to discredit their historical and territorial claims in the village. *Büyü* treats its professor through a Third-Worldist critique of the imperial trope of *Indiana Jones*, and aims to convince the audience that behind the professor of *Indiana Jones*'s journey to the foreign lands and the professor of *Büyü*'s journey to the East stands the same imperial desire. While in *Indiana Jones* the audience is expected to identify with the title character—and with the geopolitical interest he represents—in *Büyü*, the audience is pushed to disidentify with the team as outsiders. We are not given any point of empathy for the team when they get hunted by invisible forces; instead, *Büyü* justifies the metaphysical violence and offers a catharsis that the audience is invited to appropriate.

The pro-Islamic cinema in Turkey has often targeted the modern characters as snobs who belittle the common man and ridicule tradition. Excessive alcohol consumption, sexual promiscuity, inappropriate use of foreign language, all ridiculing ordinary people, are common characteristics of the modern-secular types in pro-Islamic cinema. What separates *Büyü* from the earlier pro-Islamic cinema (and what makes it horrific) is the amount of violence it allowed against its main characters. Islamic cinema had habitually appropriated a victim's discourse to avoid conflict with the official ideology of Kemalism. As Özkarcacalar aptly points out, "the contemporary pro-Islamic cinema that is marked by the rising authority of political Islam is no longer the cinema of [...] melodramatic 'suffering' but the cinema of the horrific" (2016). The shift is not simply generic, from melodrama to horror, what we also witness is a shift in the identity of the protagonist from a victimized believer to an omnipotent executioner in the name of Islam. Although *Büyü* begins with the story of victimhood, later on, the invisible protagonist perversely attacks the archeology team and punishes their modernizing attempt with metaphysical violence. Not surprisingly the team fails to complete the mission due to their misjudgments about the village: On the first day of excavation, the professor explains why the village must be uninhabited: "as I told you last night, for months maybe for years it hasn't rained on this land. So, the ground is dry and stiff. This explains why people haven't been able to live in this village." The professor's reasoning may sound more plausible than that of the old miller who claimed that the village is cursed by evil spirits and punished by Allah, but for the audience who is familiar with the history of the region, the professor's scientific

explanation would be understood as equally metaphysical and dismissive of history. While the film opens a critical window by exposing the ahistoricity of the professor's rationalist-scientific explanation, it closes the window when it exposes the team to grotesque punishment for their ineptitude. In the end, instead of going forward with the critique, the film pushes us back to its beginning warning for the Kurdish inhabitants: in this blasphemous, wretched village, it is time to go back in time and turn your face towards Allah who is almighty.

6. REFERENCES

- Adivar, H. E. (2007) *Vurun Kahpeye*. Istanbul: Can.
- Akekmekci, T. (2010). *Doğu Sorunu: Necmeddin Sahir Silan Raporlari*. Istanbul: Tarih Vakfi.
- Arapkiri, B. (2017). Religion Takes Over: A Retrospective Analysis of Turkish Horror Genre. Retrieved from https://www.researchgate.net/publication/320557028_Religion_Takes_Over_A_Retrospective_Analysis_of_Turkish_Horror_Genre.
- Arslan, S. (2011). *Cinema in Turkey: A New Critical History*. New York: Oxford University Press
- Beşikçi, I. (1992). *Doğu Anadolu'nun Düzeni*. Ankara: Yurt.
- Bozarslan, M. E. (2005). *Doğu'nun Sorunlari*. Istanbul: Avesta.
- Carroll, N. (1989). *The philosophy of horror*. New York: Routledge.
- Danacı, F. (2015, March 26). Onuncu yılında Türk korku sineması. Öteki Sinema. Retrieved from <http://www.otekisinema.com/onuncu-yilinda-turk-korku-sinemas/>
- Ergil, D. (2009). *Kürt Raporu: Güvenlik Politikalarından Kimlik Siyasetine*. Istanbul: Timas
- Ilgın, Ö. (2015, September 7). Türk sinemasında korku filmleri. Açık Günlük. Retrieved from <https://ozgurilgin.wordpress.com/2015/09/07/turk-sinemasinda-korku-filmleri/>
- Jameson, F. (1981). *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act*. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press.
- Jameson, F. (2020). *Allegory and Ideology*. New York: Verso.
- Jorgensen, J. (2007). *The Settlement Issue in Turkey and the Kurds: An Analysis of Spatial Policies, Modernity and War*. Leiden: Brill.
- Karaosmanoglu, Y. K. (1983). *Yaban*. Ankara: İletişim.
- Koçak, B. (2012). Doğu-Bati Arasında Türk Sineması: Korku Filmleri Üzerine Bir Değerlendirme. İstanbul Üniversitesi İletişim Fakültesi Dergisi. Retrieved from <https://dergipark.org.tr/tr/pub/iuifd/issue/22863/244131>
- Koçer, Z. (2019), "The Monstrous-feminine and Masculinity as Abjection in Turkish Horror Cinema: An Analysis of Haunted (Musallat, Alper Mestçi, 2007)." In Holland, S., Shail, R. and Gerrard, S. (Eds.) *Gender and Contemporary Horror in Film*. Emerald Publishing Limited, pp. 151-165. <https://doi.org/10.1108/978-1-78769-897-020191011>
- Kristeva, J. (1982). *Powers of horror: An essay on abjection*. (L. S. Roudiez, Trans.). New York: Columbia University Press.

- Lowenstein, A. (2005). *Shocking Representation: Historical Trauma, National Cinema, and the Modern Horror Film*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Newman, K. and BFI (1996). *The BFI Companion to Horror*. London: Cassell.
- Özkaracalar, K. (2003). Between appropriation and innovation: Turkish horror cinema. In S. J. Schneider (Ed.), *Fear without Frontiers: Horror cinema across the globe*. Godalming: FAB Press.
- Özkaracalar, K. (2012). Horror films in Turkish cinema: To use or not to use local cultural motifs, that is not the question. In P. Allmer, E. Brick, & D. Huxley (Eds.), *European Nightmares: Horror Cinema in Europe since 1945*. (pp. 249-260). London: Wallflower Press.
- Özkaracalar, K. (2016, February 13). İslami korku filmlerinin ideolojik/siyasi topoğrafyası. *Ileri Haber*. Retrieved from <http://ilerihaber.org/yazar/islami-korku-filmlerinin-ideolojiksiyasi-topografyasi-50243.html>
- Peterson, M. A. (2007). From Jinn to Genies: Intertextuality, Media and the Making of Global Folklore. In Sherman S.R. Sherman and Koven, M.J. (eds.) *Folklore/Cinema: Popular Film as Vernacular Culture*. Utah: Utah University Press.
- Prince, S. (2004). *The Horror Film*. New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press.
- Şahintürk, Z. (2015). *Digital Horror: Haunted Technologies, Network Panic and the Found Footage Phenomenon*. London: I.B. Tauris.
- Schneider, S. J. (2004). *Horror Film and Psychoanalysis: Freud's Worst Nightmare*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Şen, S (2019). *Gemideki Hayalet*. İstanbul: Metis.
- Şimşek, G. (2016). *Sinemada Korku ve Din: 2000 Sonrası Amerikan ve Türk Filmlerinde Cin Unsurunun Çözümlemesi (Eleştirel Kuram ve Göstergebilimsel Metodoloji Çerçevesinde)*. İstanbul: Pales Yayınları,
- Yegen, M. (1999). *Devlet Söyleminde Kürt Sorunu*. Ankara: İletişim.
- Yücel, M. (2008) *Türk Sinemasında Kürtler*. İstanbul: Agora.