

## Writing History with Films: The Example of the Conquest of Istanbul

### Filmlerle Tarih Yazmak: İstanbul'un Fethi Örneği

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#### Abstract

Popular historical films strive to capture the audience who create emotional bonds with the past by providing the audience the historical experience they imagined. On the other hand, the worldviews and likes of audiences are not constant and may undergo changes in parallel with historical developments. Popular historical films shot in anticipation of the box office bear the imprint of the expectations of the majority of the target audience. The aim of this article is to explore the transformation of historical representations of films and the reasons for the change by analyzing three Turkish-made historical films describing the handover of the city of Constantinople from the Byzantine Empire to the Ottoman Empire: *The Conquest of Istanbul* (Aydın Arakon, 1951), *Conquest 1453* (Fatih Aksoy, 2003), and *Love Under Siege* (Ersin Pertan, 1997). In this article, proceeding from the idea that a historical film is a form of audiovisual historiography, it will be argued that the historical representations of films are mainly related to the target audience that transform in line with the social and political changes, and the production process.

**Keywords:** Historical film, historiography, representation, political Islam, Ottoman State.

**Academical disciplines/fields:** Film design, cinema and television, media and communication studies.

#### Özet

Popüler tarihi filmler, geçmişle duygusal bağlar kuran izleyicileri yakalamaya ve onlara hayal ettikleri tarih deneyimini yaşatmaya çalışmaktadır. Öte yandan izleyiciler oldukları gibi kalmazlar; tarihsel gelişmelere paralel olarak beğenileri ve dünya görüşleri değişime uğrar. Gişe beklentisiyle çekilen popüler tarihsel filmler, hedef kitlenin çoğunluğunun beklentilerinin izlerini taşımaktadır. Bu makalenin amacı, Konstantinapolis kentinin Bizans İmparatorluğundan Osmanlı İmparatorluğuna geçişini konu alan üç Türkiye yapımı tarihi film üzerinden (*İstanbul'un Fethi*, Aydın Arakon, 1951; *Fetih 1453*, Fatih Aksoy, 2003; *Kuşatma Altında Aşk*, Ersin Pertan, 1997) sinemada tarihsel temsillerin dönüşümünü incelemek ve nedenleri üzerinde durmaktır. Makalede, tarihsel filmin, görsel-işitsel tarih yazımı şekli olduğu düşüncesinden hareket edilecek; filmlerin sunduğu tarihsel temsillerin, ağırlıklı olarak sosyo-politik değişimlerle dönüşen hedef kitle ve filmin prodüksiyon süreci ile ilgili olduğu tartışılacaktır.

**Anahtar Sözcükler:** Tarihi film, tarih yazımı, temsil, politik İslam, Osmanlı Devleti.

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## 1. Introduction

Cinema is a narrative form of art that offers the opportunity to establish strong ties with history. The relationship that films build with history can be manifested in two ways. First, whether they are fictional or documentary, films have the value of a historical document as soon as they were shot. Therefore, the film is "history, whether it is an image of reality or not, whether it is document or fiction, real or purely imaginary..." (Ferro, 1995, p. 32). The second relationship that cinema establishes with history finds its counterpart in films that represent history. In this case, it can be argued that a historical film is both a historical source and an audiovisual historiographical work. The article will focus on this second relationship of the film with history.

Although there is debate as to whether the historical film falls under the scope of genre film on the grounds that it does not have original iconographies, narratives, and themes (Salmi, 1995), "historical film" can be defined as a film that blends the conflict of people and society with entertainment and spectacle, reproducing the past from a current social point of view as Leger Grindon notes (Stubbs, 1993, p. 15-16). They are popular films that try to capture a large audience (Schwartz, 2013, p. 8), and thus, the high budgets of the genre drive producers to look for a narrative that will attract as many viewers as possible. Marcia Landy notes that the use of nationalist historiography and mythology and the recitation of the traumas and heroic stories of nations in historical films are directly related to the efforts to increase the number of audiences (Salmi, 1995). In line with this view, it can be argued that the expectation of box office success of the producers and the effort to attract a large number of audiences who have emotional connections with the past to the cinema halls play leading roles in the representation of historical figures, events, and even places in films. In addition:

The process of constructing the historical film's representation of history imbues the text with the concerns and anxieties of the society that produced it. As these concerns inevitably change, the representation of the past within each subsequent cinematic representation changes with it. (McMahon, 2017)

Therefore, it is likely that the same event in history might find different representations in the film industry depending on the conjuncture of society when the film was produced.

In this study, the impossibility of an objective narrative of history in cinema will be discussed with references to historiography theories by attributing it to two main reasons: (1) the changing political conjuncture in the historical process and the change in the values of the dominant audience in parallel, (2) the influence of filmmakers' worldviews. To discuss this point of view, three Turkish-made films incorporating the same historical events and figures, *The Conquest of Istanbul* (Aydın Arakon, 1951), *The Conquest 1453* (Faruk Aksoy, 2012), and *Love Under Siege* (Esin Pertan, 1997), will be analyzed comparatively. As their titles suggest, all three films entail the capture of Constantinople by the Ottoman army in 1453. However, the differences in the shooting date of the films and the possibilities of their production yield widely dissimilar historical representations. With a comparative analysis of *The Conquest of Istanbul* and *The Conquest of 1453*, both of which are commercial productions using official historical sources, the effect of changes related to the social and political structure of Turkey in the long process will be examined on the historical representations. Furthermore, with the analysis of *Love Under Siege*, an independent film funded by Eurimages, it will be argued that when the box office expectation is eliminated, filmmakers have a better chance of taking a dissenting stance and disclosing a story that is beyond the official history.

## 2. Historical Film as an Audiovisual Historiography

Whether films that deal with history and recreate it visually might be considered a form of writing history is under debate. At present, the only valid way of understanding the past appears to be limited to written history. Nevertheless, while written history dates back to only 5000 years, verbal and visual history is actually far more rooted and goes back to ancient times (Desphande, 2004, p. 4455). Regardless of whether it is visual, auditory, or written, there are no examples of historiography that provide historical facts accurately in its entirety; this includes historical films. The most important reason for this is that the historical text inevitably accounts for its era although it is based on documents (Traverso, 2011, p. 11). Under this view, historical facts begin to change as if they are organic substances in the historical process. As E. H. Carr mentioned, history is "a continuous process of interaction between the historian and his historical realities, an unending dialogue between the present and the past" (1990, p. 30). In a similar vein,

Sigfried Kracauer defines the historian as an exile who is stuck between the past and the present, asking questions about the past from the cultural and political perspectives of the present (Traverso, 2011, p. 195). A similar situation applies to historical film: "like all narratives of history, Hollywood histories can tell us a great deal about the moment in which they were made" (Schwartz, 2013, p. 9). Therefore, whether written or audiovisual, it can be argued that a historical narrative is a view from the present to the past in constant change (Tekeli, 1998, p. 68).

The science of history began to be questioned in the 20th century when Hayden White emphasized that historians are in an endeavor to make sense of historical documents and information instead of conveying the reality of the past as it is (2000, p. 397). What the historical film does is not different; narrativity and fictionalism, which are two of the aspects about which historical films are most criticized, are actually the main features of historiography. History is inherently narrative because its origins are rooted in the writing of legends (Collingwood, 1990, p. 38). In addition, since history is not found and discovered, filling the gaps between documents and testimonies requires interpretation (Traverso, 2011, p. 197). This explains the theories and manifestos specific to the 20th century regarding the proximity of history to literature rather than to science, and therefore the need to include metaphor, representation, and narrative in historical texts (White, 2000, p. 395).

"The historian is necessarily selective" (Carr, 1990, p. 12). This also applies to the filmmaker who studies historical texts. The main reason for the selectivity is frequently ideological, especially the efforts of nation-states to forget their embarrassing memories. In contrast, proud memories are constantly reminded and etched into the collective memory (Ferro, 2003, p. 139). Historiography has generally been used as a tool for nationalist ideologies for a long period of its presence. Therefore, traces of extreme nationalism, racism, militarism, and religious marginalization can be encountered frequently in many historical texts, especially in the official historical narratives of nations. Accordingly, it is not surprising that historical film, which is one of the high-budget film genres, principally uses official history as a source due to its broad target audience and appeals to national, patriotic, and religious feelings. To give an example from the Turkish cinema, the poster of the film *A Nation is Awakening* (Muhsin Ertuğrul, 1932), which is about the Turkish War of Independence and was shot only ten years after the war, includes the following statements:

We will applaud the 7000-year-old Turkish Nation's independence, which has been won by transgressing malice and cruelty, and its heroism that made everyone tremble, the disaster of the occupation and our victories, the closest and most vivid history of our great independence, in Asri and Lale cinemas today, to the point of bursting our palms.<sup>1</sup>

In other words, it should be noted that objectivity is hardly possible in the historical narrative. The subjective point of view makes itself felt since the first records are kept (Carr, 1990, p. 22-24). Therefore, staying faithful to historical documents does not ensure presenting an objective narrative and it is not easy to speak of a study of history that is not ideological or devoid of value. This also applies to films, and it is the main reason for encountering completely different filmic representations of the same historical event or person. To give an example, in the British film *Lawrence of Arabia* (David Lean, 1962), Lawrence is represented as almost a folk hero who gives the Arabs their freedom, while in the Turkish film *İngiliz Kemal Against Lawrence* (Lütfi Akad, 1952), on the contrary, he is a ruthless spy who orders the death of Turkish revolutionaries. In the same film, Hrisantos is represented as a Turkish Greek bandit who is in cooperation with the British secret service following the occupation of Istanbul. The same character turns into a savage enemy who harasses Turkish girls and causes their deaths in the movie *Bouncers of Crescent and Star* (Semih Evin, 1966), another Turkish film that was shot 14 years later. The much more cartoonish and demonish representation of this historical figure who uses phrases such as "In honor of the Great Hellenism" and rides on the backs of defenseless Turks, gives the impression that social prejudice against non-Muslims was on the rise (Balçı, 2013, p. 110-111).

<sup>1</sup> The original text is in Turkish and it was translated by the author: Bir Millet Uyanıyor "7000 senelik Türk Milletinin mel'net ve kahbelikleri çiğneyerek kazandığı istiklalini; herkesi titretip coşturan kahramanlıklarını; İşgal faciasını ve zaferlerimizi, muazzam istiklalimizin en yakın ve canlı tarihini bugün Lale ve Asri sinemalarında avuçlarımızı patlatıncaya kadar alkışlayacağız."

### 3. Representation of 'Official' History in Popular Historical Films

In this section, two films focusing on the same historical subject, shot 61 years apart in Turkish cinema, will be analyzed comparatively. The films *The Conquest of Istanbul*, directed by Aydın Arakon in 1951, and *The Conquest 1453*, directed by Faruk Aksoy in 2012, are historical epics about a historical event that has not been discussed much in cinema, the siege, and conquest<sup>2</sup> of the city of Constantinople by the Ottoman army. Both are popular films made by major film production companies of their eras. Remaining faithful to the official historical narrative, these films were shot during the rule of the center-right conservative parties (*Democrat Party and the Justice and Development Party*) when the celebrations of the conquest gained popularity and attracted great attention from the local audience. Therefore, in both films, the conquest of Istanbul is fictionalized as a proud part of the historical past of the Turkish nation. They are based on the idea that there is continuity, not a break between the Ottoman Empire and modern Turkey. Despite these similarities, the historical, political, and social developments in the sixty-one-year period between the shooting dates reveal remarkable differences in the historical representations.

#### 3.1. The 'First' Conquest of Istanbul in Turkish Cinema

*The Conquest of Istanbul* was shot at the end of the transition period when Turkish filmmakers were trying to excuse away from theatrical film language, and the number of films, and therefore the domestic film audience was increasing. In this period, it is seen that productions in the genre of melodrama with the influence of musical melodramas imported from Egypt, on the one hand, and historical films with relatively large budgets, on the other hand, became increasingly invested in cinema (Ormanlı, 2006, p. 29). The 15 films shot in the 1940s were in the historical film genre. This number increased to 78 films between 1950-1960 in parallel with the expansion in the number of films (Bağır, 2016, p. 72-79). Most of these were popular productions that centered the Ottoman Empire and the War of Independence.

*The Conquest of Istanbul*, which was a high-budget film given the conditions of its period, stood out with its decor, costumes, and extras that had never been seen before in Turkish cinema and surpassed other historical films. According to cinematographer İlhan Arakon, research was carried out for about six to eight months before the production, and support was received from the Association of Conquest, Topkapı Palace, and the State Academy of Fine Arts (Özen, 2020, p. 43). Even so, it is difficult to claim that this whole process resulted in an objective and non-biased historical narrative based on scientific sources. The film, rather, has a Hollywood epic narrative style of entertainment and a discourse that glorifies Turkish nationalism. It can be considered that this choice is related to the expectation of profit from a high-budget production in accordance with the resources of the era (Özen, 2020, p. 51). It is also noteworthy that in the prologue, *scientists* and administrators are thanked, as well as the army, who did not spare their help in the battle scenes. It has become customary in many historical films to emphasize that historical documents and the views of historians are consulted. In this manner, the audience is assured that historical facts are not contradicted. Arakon's film surpasses this stance by thanking the military and politicians for their contributions. In this text, it can be said that an attempt is made to create a perception that the important public figures of the nation came together and supported the shooting of the film. Therefore, it appears that the text goes beyond the effort of persuasiveness, and in the eyes of the audience, it renders watching the film a national duty approximating the actual participation in the conquest.

*The Conquest of Istanbul* opens in Edirne in 1453. The main characters are Sultan Mehmet II, who is preparing for the conquest, and three friends named Ulubatlı Hasan, Hızır Bey, and Mustafa—paying tribute to Alexandre Dumas' *Three Musketeers*—who help him. Mehmet II is represented as a middle-aged, corpulent, tough-tempered, masculine, and self-confident sultan, who should have been only 21-year-old in reality. He has the Rumeli Fortress built and almost completed the siege preparations. As can be understood from Mehmet's words "We wish that the foreign flag does not fly in our country! We wish that when we pass an army through the straits, we do not give way to anyone," and "Our aim is to bring a fresh spirit, solid and unflinching justice to the old Byzantine Empire, which stands like a boil in the middle of our country, where morality and justice have been corrupted," the inclusion of Istanbul in the Ottoman lands in the film is presented not as a goal, but as an obligation or even a right. The geographical position of Byzantium, its location among the Ottoman lands, and its obstruction and corruption on the trade route

<sup>2</sup> In the later parts of the article, especially in the analysis of the first two films, the choice of the word *conquest* is related to the reference of the title of the films. Since the historical event is described as a *conquest* as it is used in official history, this word was preferred throughout the analysis and in the title of the article.

passing through the straits are listed as the factors that legitimize the conquest. It can be added that the Byzantine priests support the conquest, the Byzantines sympathize with the Ottoman Empire, and they emphasize that they preferred the Ottomans to the Catholics in the film by saying, "We are willing to see the Turkish turban on the streets of Byzantium rather than seeing the hat of the pope's cardinal in Hagia Sophia."

Most of the main characters of the film are historical figures. Ulubatlı Hasan, who is frequently mentioned in official historical narratives and popular culture, is a soldier who is said to have been martyred while erecting the Ottoman flag on the Byzantine walls for the first time. Hızır Bey is both a scholar and the first qadi in Ottoman Istanbul. Emperor Constantine, Giovanni Giustiniani—the Genoese Commander, and Notaras Lukas—the last grand duke of the empire, are the other important historical figures common in both analyzed films. As İlhan Arakon, the cinematographer of the film stated in an interview, first copy of the film tries to establish a balance between the Byzantine and Ottoman rulers (Özen, 2020, p. 41). For example, the emperor is presented as an honorable character who prefers to be martyred by fighting rather than fleeing the city. On the other hand, Turks are presented as more brave, bold, and strong. The glorified Turkish identity and masculine images are intertwined, especially in the lower angle shots of the Janissary soldiers with their oil-covered bare bodies shining in the scene of the iconic image of the conquest, when the ships are slid from the land and lowered into the Golden Horn. The intelligence, strength, and fairness of the Turks are repeated with the dialogues, such as "We are Turks; we know how to fight against impossibilities if necessary," "We are the sons of Orhans, Yıldırıms, and Murats," and "We do not slaughter anyone just because they worship Allah differently," and, particularly, with many of Sultan's words such as "Either Byzantium takes me, or I take Byzantium."

In the final part of the film, even though Hasan and Mustafa are martyred, Byzantium is conquered. Local people, predominantly women, and children greet the Sultan and his army with flowers as Mehmet II enters the city gate on his horse. From the last close-up of Mehmet II in front of the flag with his sword resting on his shoulder, a cut is made to his portrait, which is thought to be painted by Gentile Bellini. A full-voiced man utters the epilogue: "You closed an era; you opened another. You have given your nation an indestructible country. They will call you the Conqueror. May your children be worthy of you".

While the nationalist discourse is fairly strong in *The Conquest of Istanbul*, in which the Ottoman Empire is represented as a *Turkish* state, it is noteworthy that the religious discourse of the film is just as weak. This suggests that the worldview of the era and the point of view of the target audience were substantially different from the audience of *The Conquest 1453*. In *The Conquest of Istanbul*, apart from dialogues of "Do we take pleasure in shedding the blood of the Ummah of Islam?" and "Your power is to make this great city an open city for those who fought for the sake of the holy land," there is no intense emphasis on Islam. While rites, bells, and hymns performed in churches are featured in many scenes that take place in Constantinople, it draws attention that images of mosques, symbols related to the religion of Islam and Islamic rituals are almost not included. Furthermore, it is also not mentioned in the film that Sultan Mehmet II has a goal of spreading Islam in the West and creating a strong Islamic Empire.

*The Conquest of Istanbul* was filmed in the first year of the conservative Democrat Party's rule, at a time when the celebrations of the 500th anniversary of the conquest were passionately discussed. During this period, the one-party regime was overthrown, and harsh restrictions on religion began to be eased. Therefore, what the reasons of the film are to rarely include symbols and discourses of Islam and furthermore adopt a cautious nationalist rhetoric might be questioned.

The Democrat Party came into power in 1950 by showing an approach against the Republican People's Party that was oppressive towards religion throughout the 1930s and 1940s, thus gaining over the Muslims. In this period, the Arabic "call to prayer" became legal again, and religious vocational high schools, mosque constructions, and religious publications increased. Nevertheless, all these practices were peripheral and did not threaten the secularism principle of the state (Zürcher, 2006, p. 339-340). Kemalist thought, which adopted a secular nation-state nationalism that tried to destroy the perception of "Turkish equals Muslim" in cultural life, was still strong in the first years of the Democrat Party rule (Okutan, 2009, p. 78-79). Moreover, the impact of "The Turkish History Thesis," which was created in the first years of the Republican period and showed Islam as a cause of underdevelopment, glorifying pre-Islamic Turkish history (Akman, 2011, p. 84), was still felt in the film. According to this thesis, the Ottoman Empire constitutes only a part of the history of the Turks, who are stated to have a far deeply rooted past. The national identity of Turkish Republic is explained through race rather than religion (Behar, 1996, p. 158). Similarly, in the film, there is a Turkish nationalism purified from religion rather than Ottoman nostalgia. This approach would gradually wear off during and after the 10-year rule of the Democrat Party. The rise

of conservatism in Turkey also compelled producers to exploit not only the national, but also the religious values of the audience.

According to Saadet Özen, “the political framework of Turkey would continue to determine the film in the following years” (2020, p. 42). During this period, the rights to the film remained with producer Murat Köseoğlu, one of the partners of Atlas Film, and he requested a lot of changes for the re-releases in the 1970s and 80s. Köseoğlu, not only colored the film, but also changed Nedim Otyam's orchestral music with Ottoman military marching. Although new scenes with religious motifs were not added to the film, Turkish nationalism was reinforced through the texts and new dubbing. The Ottoman-Byzantine balance, which İlhan Arakon maintained in the 1951 copy, changed in favor of the Ottoman Empire due to the new dubbing in the re-release version, and to Özen, this “is an example of historical films portraying the way society looks at the past in the period when they were shot” (2020, p. 42).

### 3.2. Representation of the Conquest in the 2000s

*The Conquest 1453* differs from *The Conquest of Istanbul* in that it frequently refers to images and dialogues emphasizing Islam. The main difference is felt in the first scenes because the film opens in Medina in 627, with Muhammad giving the good news that Istanbul will be conquered by a Muslim commander. In these scenes, the image and voice of the prophet are not included by following the method used in films such as *The Message* (Mustafa Akkad, 1976). The strong bond between Islam/Islamic history and the conquest continues by listing the miracles that took place in the year Mehmet II was born, which is revealed by the male narrator: “The horses gave birth to twins, the soil gave fruit four times, the trees bowed to the ground with the weight of their fruits.” Unlike Arakon's film, Mehmet II of *The Conquest 1453* is sanctified by being represented beyond a hero.

In the first scenes of *The Conquest 1453*, information is given about the birth of the Sultan, his first accession to the throne, his removal from the throne, and his return to the throne five years after his father's death. Unlike *The Conquest of Istanbul*, Mehmet is tried to be portrayed as a young ruler with weaknesses. On the contrary, Ulubatlı Hasan, who is the most trusted man of the Sultan, stands out as a masculine hero and duplicates the stereotypes of male heroes in popular historical films. The tabooing of the Sultan's private life causes the commercially valuable love scenes of the film to occur between Ulubatlı Hasan and Era, the adopted daughter of the cannonball casting master Urban. Era was raised by a Hungarian, but she was actually a Muslim girl whose village was burned by the Crusader army. Era's rejection of the Byzantine commander Giustiniani, her falling in love with Hasan, and becoming pregnant constitute the fictional scenes of the film. While a love story that will attract an audience is being told through this fictional character, it is implied that Christians massacred civilians by burning Muslim villages, thus legitimizing the conquest.

There are sharp differences between the Byzantine and Ottoman representations in the film. On the Byzantine front, Emperor Constantine, Grand Duke Notaras, and other rulers are presented as characters who are fond of women, liquor, and entertainment. However, on the Ottoman counterpart, Sultan Mehmet II is free from worldly pleasures and needs, and it was avoided to show him even while eating. Unlike Byzantine rulers, he does not entertain himself, sleeps alone in his room at night, and his relationship with his wife Gülbahar Hatun is demonstrated only through a poem he wrote for her. In these scenes set in Byzantine and Ottoman palaces, *Muslim and Christian* are separated as *us* and *the other* with stereotypes; thus, Byzantium is discredited in the eyes of the conservative Muslim Turkish audience.

In the film, the characters who insult the *other* appear as Byzantines, not Ottomans. In many hostile expressions, such as “The irreligious Turks set out to put their teeth in our throats and pour their venom like a snake.” *non-religious* is attributed to Turks—as well as to Catholics. The Sultan and the Ottoman army, in the words of Constantine, are none other than the *Dajjal*, the greatest enemy of the holy religions. He also speaks about the Sultan as “*Goddamn Turk!*” As it can be understood from these statements, the Byzantines, who should be on the defensive, whose cities are under siege, and who took refuge in the aid of the Catholics, are presented in an extremely aggressive manner. The effort to establish a balance in Arakon's film is not available in *The Conquest 1453*.

The main feature that distinguishes *The Conquest 1453* from *The Conquest of Istanbul*, is that the religious aspect of the conquest is emphasized, and the expressions of Turkish nationalism are replaced with Islamic emphasis. The good news of the prophet, the Surah of Conquest recited at the birth of Mehmet II, the arrival of White Sheikh to the battle front, the hunting of a pig symbolizing Christianity, the Qur'anic inscriptions placed on the masts of the ship shifted to the Golden Horn, and the prayers of the entire army under the leadership of the Sultan before the final attack on May 29, 1453 are only some of the scenes

with an emphasis on religion. The Ottoman Empire is presented to the audience as an Islamic Empire, and the religious dimension of the reason for the conquest is underlined. In the first scenes, the Sultan states that he wants to conquer Istanbul with the aim of “unifying our country divided between Anatolia and Rumelia and becoming an empire”. Further, with the words of Osman Bey, the founder of the empire that the Sultan saw in his dream, “You are one of the beautiful commanders, Mehmet, about whom our Prophet gave good news,” and the Sheikh's statement, “You came here to be that heralded commander,” the relationship between the conquest and the religion of Islam is reinforced. Just before the conquest, the Sultan responds to Emperor Constantine's ultimatum “a lot of blood will be shed” as follows: “We obeyed the decree of the Qur'an.”

Similar to *The Conquest of Istanbul*, *The Conquest 1453* ends with the Sultan's entering the city on his horse after the martyrdom of Ulubatlı Hasan. However, this time the Sultan proceeds to Hagia Sophia, enters through its door, and calls out to the Byzantines, who are hiding in fear as “From now on, our lives are one, our property is one, our destiny is one. You are free to live your faith as you wish.” Thus, it is underlined that the Ottoman Empire was an *empire of tolerance*, as the official history emphasizes. It is also not a coincidence that the film is ended in the most important church of the Byzantine Empire, which will be converted into a mosque immediately after the conquest, and it can be argued that with this scene, it is emphasized that the Muslims were victorious in the Muslim-Christian war.

*The Conquest 1453* was shot by Faruk Aksoy, who is also the producer and founder of Aksoy Film Production and mostly directs and produces popular films including the *Recep İvedik* series. The film, which was shot for 18,200.00 TL (Aksoy, 2012) and promoted as the most expensive Turkish film, set a grossing record when it was released as it was expected. The fact that the film received such attention from the audience can be associated with the fact that it established a narrative of history that would meet the expectation of the audience. The following words of Aksoy correspond to this opinion:

The film is made to meet the audience. That is the problem with every filmmaker. Film is an expensive business. It is not like painting. It is not like writing a book. (...) You cannot spend such money on 'Let's watch only five people'. (Aksoy, 2012)

Who the target audience of Aksoy's film is and why they are different from the audience of Arakon's film, which was shot 61 years ago, are hinted in Aksoy's following statements:

Cinema operators in Germany and the Netherlands were alarmed the first day the film was shown because the cries of “Allahu Akbar” started to rise from the hall. Since there was a situation that the men had never experienced, they rushed in to say, “What's going on, is there a fight?” They saw that the audience is watching the film with great enthusiasm. (Aksoy, 2012)

Unlike the historical narratives of the early Republican period under the influence of the Turkish History Thesis, *The Conquest 1453* brings the Ottoman populism to the fore, which puts Islam in the center, instead of Turkish nationalism that evokes nostalgia for the Asiatic past. The roots of the transformation that took place from a Kemalist secular understanding of the nation-state to an understanding that places Sunni Islam<sup>3</sup> at the center of social, political, and public life can be traced back to the Democrat Party, which came to power in 1950. On the other hand, the period when political Islam gained real power was Necmettin Erbakan's *National Vision* (Milli Görüş) movement, which stretched from the 1970s to the 1990s (Carney, 2014, p. 3). Synthesizing neo-liberalism and Islam, The Justice and Development Party (JDP), on the other hand, has preferred to emphasize Islam rather than Turkishness in its understanding of national identity since 2002, when it came to power, or to define the Turkish identity through Islam (Yaşlı, 2014, p. 54), as can be observed in the film *The Conquest 1453*. This approach makes itself felt in the celebrations of the conquest, which were revived and institutionalized after the Welfare Party's rule. Celebrations during the JDP rule included an increasingly intense Islamic tone, and the conquest was interpreted as a victory over the Christian World (Tamdoğan, 2015).

In the context of the comparative analysis of these two films, the following conclusions can be drawn: Both films are popular historical films shot in the same country and use official historical texts as sources, but

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<sup>3</sup> Sunni Islam “is the largest branch of” Islam.

over the course of approximately 60 years, the political context, the official history, and audience expectations have changed in a concurrent manner. Especially the rise of political Islam and the conservatism of the audience affected the representations of history in popular films. While the audience was captured with the *Turkish* identity in the early period, it was noticed by the producers that the sensitivity of the audience shifted to religion over time, and thus the religious identity began to be glorified gradually in popular historical films in the recent period.

### 3.3. A Contrary Example and the Perspective from the 'Other'

Ersin Pertan's film *Love Under Siege*, released in 1997, has a different standpoint since it approaches the siege from a perspective other than Turkey's official historical narrative and is a low-budget modernist film with Brechtian influences. Offering an alternative history focusing on the other side of the city walls, *Love Under Siege* is presented as a historical drama about the *fall of Istanbul* rather than an epic film about the *conquest of Istanbul*.

The film begins in Constantinople on December 12, 1452, when it was announced that the Orthodox and Catholic churches have been united. Byzantium, *the last stronghold of the Roman Empire*, is facing the danger of the Ottomans. The majority of the characters in the film—except for Prince Orhan and Sultan Mehmet II, who appears in the last scene—consists of Christians. Unlike the other films analyzed, this film presents a weary Byzantine image to its audience partly due to its low budget and the use of real historical buildings. The interiors are not depicted as extravagant rooms under the influence of ancient Greek architecture but as neglected and dark spaces. In a similar vein, the government is also represented as extremely weak; accordingly, the film begins with the approval of the union with the Catholics despite all the resistance of the Orthodox people of Byzantine. Chaos reigns in the city. Churches are looted, and houses are sold cheaply.

Although he is a Frankish Catholic, the main character, George meets and falls in love with Anna, a young Orthodox Greek woman in Constantinople. Anna's father, Notaras, is loved by the Byzantines as he does not support church unity. Saying, "I will compromise with the sultan if necessary to prevent my people from dying in vain," he foresees that the empire is about to collapse. Emperor Constantine, on the other hand, receives support from the Genoese Commander Longo because he does not trust Notaras. The Emperor also loses the support of the cannonball casting master Hungarian Urban due to financial inadequacies. This historical event is told differently in the film *The Conquest 1453*, in which Urban joins the Ottoman army for political reasons and is tried to be killed by the assassins hired by the Byzantine Empire on the grounds that he is a traitor.

Unlike the other films analyzed, the war between Byzantium and the Ottomans is not presented as an inter-religious war in *Love Under Siege*. It is emphasized that the army forces are too complicated; in particular, there are many Christians in the Ottoman army. Besides, Ottoman prince Orhan who is fighting with his army of hundreds of soldiers on the Byzantine front, is not depicted as a demonic character. As other striking differences not mentioned in the previous two films analyzed, this film unfolds that Mehmet II had his own brother murdered and the city of Constantinople was plundered by Ottoman soldiers for three days after the conquest. Hence, as an independent co-production film, *Love Under Siege* has been able to approach historical events a little more objectively. In this respect, political reasons are shown as the reason for the conquest in the film: "This will not be a nation and religion war! It will be a war where the big fish want to swallow the little fish."

In the final scenes, the city is captured by the Ottomans because of the Catholic allies who do not wholeheartedly support the war. Anna joins the army and dies during the battle. The emperor is honorably martyred by fighting in the guise of a Byzantine soldier. At nightfall, a Janissary, presumably Ulubatli Hasan, who erects the Ottoman flag on the walls is vaguely visible. Sultan Mehmet II, on the other hand, is depicted as a young man for the first time in accordance with historical facts. This time, a reference is made to a prominent portrait painted by Nakkaş Sinan Bey. The Sultan, seen from the profile, elegantly smells a rose he is holding in his hand. He is represented as cultured enough to quote Aristotle and to order the return of books smuggled from the city, but he is at the same time cruel enough to have killed Notaras, who does not obey him, and his son, and George, who confesses that he is the son of Theodoros, the heir to the Roman throne.

The film ends with the sentence that appears accompanied by a Byzantine fresco image and a Greek hymn: "The Eastern Roman Empire, founded by Constantine I, born from Helena, ended eleven centuries later, under the reign of Constantine XI, also born of Helen". This text reveals once again that the film takes a stance on the side of Byzantium. In addition, the reason for the shooting of the film is revealed right after



with the sentence of “We cannot understand the Ottoman Empire without knowing Byzantium, and we cannot understand the present without knowing the Ottoman Empire”, at which point it is possible to argue that the film acted cautiously towards the Turkish audience.

The year *Love Under Siege* was released coincides with the second half of the 1990s, when the conjuncture is in favor of Islamic movements. In 1995, the Welfare Party came to power. The films of the Islamic movement, known as *White Cinema* from the late 1980s to the mid-90s, were of interest to the public despite their grotesque, slogan-based structure. This raises questions about how Pertan could interpret the conquest of Istanbul in this period not as the heroic story of the Ottoman Empire but as the sacrifice of a 1000-year-old civilization to political conflicts.

The dialogue “They say that history consists of what the historian writes, not facts” by George demonstrates the director's critical perspective on the objectivity and the scientific nature of historiography. What distinguishes Ersin Pertan's film from the other films analyzed is that *Love Under Siege* is an independent film, supported by *Eurimages*, a fund created for European co-productions. From 1989 to 2018, *Eurimages* supported more than 700 films from 27 countries that were members of the Council of Europe. One of these countries supported since 1990 is Turkey (Şatana & Yücesoy, 2018, p. 103). Owing to the fund, independent films received financial support from a source other than the Ministry of Culture unprecedentedly. Soydan explains the purpose of the fund as follows:

The most important goal of the cinema sector is to reach more audiences and, accordingly, to get the most profit at the least cost. To achieve this goal, they pay more attention to issues that will appeal to the general public. Because of this, (...) subjects that concern fewer people are not attractive for production companies involved in the film industry (...). Therefore, EURIMAGES has a very important function. Since the economic purpose of the fund is secondary, aiming for profit is not a priority. (2008, p. 184)

One of the most critical effects of the fund on cinema was the fact that different sexual, ethnic, religious, and political identities, apart from the dominant groups and ideologies in the society, began to be featured more frequently, and official history and religious discourse could be discussed more freely (Soydan, 2008, p. 184). A new door has been opened for directors who have different opinions to voice but cannot find support, as was the case for Ersin Pertan, who wished to analyze the conquest from a different point of view. Thereby, *Love Under Siege* was shot in 1995 with the co-production of Greece and Hungary, with the support of 182.939 Euros of *Eurimages* (Soydan, 2008, p. 189). In his interviews, Pertan described the film as a European film, in line with the European support, the influence of the script that was written entirely using Western sources, and the influence of his wife, art director Annie Geelmuyden Pertan, who was also one of the producers. The following account of the director describes the opposing historical narrative of the film, which is not one-sided and does not seek to attract an audience through glorifying Turkish nationalism or Islam:

We are not European; we cannot be. Even if we want to be, Europeans do not accept us. We are not Eastern; we are not close to Eastern or Arabic culture. We are people of a culture which is peculiar to us. A journey to our roots reveals that the Byzantines influenced the Ottomans more than the Sumer, Hittite, or Urartu cultures. (Yılmazok, 2010, p. 96)

In accordance with the director's words, the film contains different historical representations from popular historical films that seek the roots of modern Turkey in the Ottoman Empire and evoke Ottoman nostalgia. The target audience of the film, which has a modern narrative structure, is the audience of domestic and foreign film festivals. Without having box office concerns, the director had the opportunity to present his own worldview regardless of the audience factor. For these reasons, while presenting a historical representation, the film avoids reflecting the social and political influence of the period it was shot. Unlike popular historical films, *Love Under Siege*—despite some problems in the script and cinematography—shows its audience that the historical narrative of cinema may not be limited to visualizing the official history.

#### 4. Conclusion

A historical film is a fictional film that represents and revives past events with costly set designs, attractive costumes, special effects, and populous casts. High budgets of historical films require a wide audience to

make a profit. Hence, historical films, which portray popular stories set in the past, also appeal to the nationalist, patriotic, and even religious feelings of the audience. The effort of popular films to attract audiences by echoing the dominant views in society is effective in the transformation of historical representations of the films as the values of the society change. Following this view, first, two Turkish historical films with ambitious box office goals, *The Conquest of Istanbul* and *The Conquest 1453*, have been analyzed comparatively in the article. Although they are popular and fictional historical films shot in the same country describing the same historical topic, the 61 years of difference between them is the main reason why the historical representations of the two films vary. *The Conquest of Istanbul* was made in 1951, the year after the conservative Democrat Party came to power. The party was influential in the revival of Islam, especially at the popular level, but it took time for this effect to cast over cultural life and cinema. For this reason, the film takes a closer stance to the nationalist Turkish History Thesis, which shows Islam as a cause of backwardness. *The Conquest of Istanbul* was screened in the tenth year of the ruling of JDP, a conservative party that synthesizes neo-liberalism and Islam. The understanding of the JDP government, which emphasizes Islam rather than Turkishness and advocates Ottoman populism, has gained visibility in many historical productions in the cultural field, especially in *The Conquest 1453*, in the 2000s. In this film, the conquest was not between Byzantium and Ottoman, but between Christians and Muslims. The Ottoman Empire is presented as an Islamic State.

Since the genre often requires high budgets, low-budget independent historical films financed by various funds or sponsors are relatively rarely encountered, but these films illustrate the point of view of filmmakers instead of the inclinations of audiences. In other words, it can be argued that in many independent historical films, the ideological allegiances or the critical point of view of the filmmaker is ahead of the political, social, and cultural views that dominate society. The third film analyzed in the article is *Love Under Siege*, which was shot with the support of Eurimages—a fund created for European co-productions. Supported by a fund, appealing to the festival audience, and not expecting a profit, the director of the film was able to seize the opportunity to present a narrative of history that the audience of a popular film could criticize with a rather harsh attitude. Accordingly, this film tells the story of the *fall of Istanbul* instead of the *conquest of Istanbul*, contrary to the expectation of the general Turkish audience, who has developed a strong commitment to the narrative of current official history, which leads to the conclusion that the more independently produced a film is, the more critical it can be of the official historical narrative.

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