-Söyleşi.Interview-

Interview with Thomas ARSLAN

Serdar Öztürk

Eda Arısoy

Eda Arısoy: First of all, I would like to start by saying welcome our symposium. The symposium is being held for the first time in Ankara and it's a great coincidence that you have a different connection with Ankara because it's your father's homeland and I guess we will be talking about that. So I would like to start with a very general question about your cinematographic point of view and your creative process. As we know most of the directors have different creation processes and different styles. This always arouses curiosity for us, for the audiences, and I would like to know how a Thomas Arslan film come about, how you formulate the film and so on.

Thomas Arslan: I wouldn't say that I'm trying to have a special style. Of course I think a lot about how I can do this in a film but in general I have mostly no concrete story in my mind as a starting point, or a theme. So I'm starting from very simple things. When I see a picture somewhere, or some impressions when I walk around, or a sentence in a book, which inspires me, the story or everything else is coming very much later. So I make some very loose notes and it takes some time to develop something out of this.

E.A.: Do you ever feel stucked in this process? If so, what are your sources for moving forward?

T.A.: Yes, of course, this is a very common experience for me to be stucked in some parts of the process. This is a part of the work I guess, especially during writing and shooting, not so much in the period of preparing a film, looking for locations, which is a very nice period of developing a film, and the editing. The period I prefer the most is the editing, when everything is there on the table, when the social chaos of shooting is over and you can really concentrate on what you have shot. This is mostly not that difficult. However, the period of writing and shooting is different. During writing I guess it's normal to get stucked somewhere and then, like most of the people who are writing scripts, I have to do several drafts until I'm nearly satisfied. During the shooting process I change a lot concerning the script, often together with the actors. This is a very special period as well because there are so many chances to get stucked. So sometimes I feel stucked because of myself. I'm mostly very well prepared, but when you're on the set together with the actors sometimes it doesn't work. The camera angle is wrong, the dialogue does not sound that good. This is of course complicated and you have to change things immediately on set. Sometimes even this does not work perfectly so I mostly have one or two reserved days because in nearly every film you are going to have to reshoot a bigger scene completely new. These are complicated issues, of course, and I mostly use these reserved days for this kind of reshooting. The actors are not machines; they have bad days sometimes for private reasons or it has something to do with the dialogues. There's often one day where even a very good actor has a kind of blackout. Nothing works because he had a bad day, a bad private experience outside the shooting or whatever. And then you have to do something. On the other hand, you can't do very much other than being patient. Sometimes it helps when you change the dialogue a bit and have a little break even if you don't have any time. These are serious problems during this period. For me, it gets much easier when these parts are done. I really like the editing period because it's different.

E.A.: …and there may be some technical problems as well.

T.A.: Yes, of course; but sometimes it's good to have these kind of technical problems because it gives you some free time to think about your scene. When the other guys have to fix something, the light or something else. This gives you some time to think about your scene.

E.A.: So when we look at your films there is a nice variety of genres actually and all of them masterfully carry the traces of your authorship. In particular, your documentary film *Aus Der Ferne* (2006), was shot in Turkey and it was screened in several international festivals, starting from 2006. I think *Geschwister* (1997) also has a part of your Turkishness. *Geschwister* stands as a very multicultural production in my opinion and of course I can count *Helle Nachte* (2017) in this context. In addition to these, there are western and action films and other genres as well. Which one/ones do you feel closer?

T.A.: I don't know; it's hard to say but the experience of shootings *Aus Der Ferne* (2006) was really special because it was a completely different shooting for me. Mostly I'm doing fictional films and you have to prepare a lot. You're surrounded by 20 or 30 people; they're waiting for you and you have to move from A to B. It takes you hours for the next take. The shooting of the documentary film was a completely different experience and a much more free shooting. I did the camera work by myself and we had been three people: just me, the sound man and the driver. This was really a great experience. We had more freedom and we were more flexible. We had been able to shoot much faster of course as an advantage of being a little team. It was a very personal project and was really strongly based on my family's story. This was very special for me but sometimes I felt the need to step away from my personal stuff when it's too close to me. Sometimes, I get bored of working on this stuff, and then I feel the need to open up more to different topics and surroundings, to get closer to things, areas and topics which I am not close to normally. *Gold* (2013) is somehow special as well because it's my only period film. It was never the starting point to make a western or a period film. I just found a diary by accident about a woman who attended a part of this former gold rush. This inspired me to do more research because it was for me more a story of immigrants who tried to step towards a new living. This was a connection for me. In Germany, mostly people have to deal with their feelings when they face to other immigrants who are coming to Germany but when you go back to history, it is similar with today. When you go back to former german history, german people had been really a huge group of immigrants as well, especially in the USA in the midst and the late 19th century, but this is nearly forgotten now. Now it's like they're pointing with the fingers to other immigrants who at least have the same reasons to leave their countries.

Serdar Öztürk: Welcome to our symposium. I thank you for your contribution to our symposium Professor Arslan. Instead of following economic considerations, your filmmaking seems to stem from personal issues or self actualization motives. Actually it is a general question. You approach film as an art and as a mean of individual expression but many people, including social scientists, see movies as a kind of entertainment. In your opinion, what is cinema?

T.A.: Both is okay for me. When people are going to see cinema as an entertainment, I have no general problem with this because I'm watching these kind of films also as a spectator. I'm a huge fan of *John Wick* and this kind of films. I really like them but, of course it's different when you try to shoot your own film. You have to know you can't do everything and you have to decide what your special interest in a film is. I never thought about being an arthouse person and that I have to do arthouse films, or anything like that. It was not my idea of cinema. Even in this field of arthouse there are so many different films. At first I try to make films which I like to see myself in cinema. Of course, I have some special interests and I like to start from things which are around me, which I know a little bit about. This helps me to develop something, and it is important for my filmmaking to have this base. Otherwise, I would feel lost. I'm really curious about the new *Avengers*, the film *Marvel* from Chloe Zhao. I really liked

the first ones, like *The Songs My Brother Taught Us* and the second one was a really beautiful film. It is totally crazy for me that now she is going to make a *Marvel* movie with 150 million US Dollar. I don't know, this is totally a different planet. Maybe it will work maybe not. I don't know but this is of course a kind of American topic. Nobody would ask you in Germany to give you 150 million to shoot the film so I don't have to think about it. Personally I like to start from things which I know. Persons and places, I have to know a bit about them to develop a story. What is cinema? This is really hard to say. Cinema is maybe something which gives you the impression that the world exists. This is because when you go around the streets and you have your all daily life, you mostly don't really watch the streets, watch the buildings, the trees, or even the people closest to you. I think cinema is a possibility to make a step backward or a step forward. Sometimes when it works or it's properly done then you realize that the things exist. Maybe, you didn't realize it before. This is an important thing for me in cinema.

S.Ö.: In many of your movies it seems you create two worlds conflicting with each other; one world is a materialistic one, dominated by money, and the other world is non-materialistic life, full of emotions. Of course, there are different types of relations and in your movies we see many of them. Family, kinship, friendship, love, there are lots of close human relations. Do you think human relations are a problem in the modern age?

T.A.: Definitely it is. On the other hand, I guess it always has been like this. It has been like this 200 years ago and it will be the same in 200 years from now on. But, of course, it appears in different ways. Societies are getting more and more complex, making human relations more complicated, though interconnected. Even if you have strong feelings you never know whether they're really true, this is a big problem because it's all mixed up. This is very hard to say what true emotions are and what not. This is a very complicated topic and to find a path through this intricate jungle, to have a closer look at this kind of mixture of the relations is part of the work of a filmmaker.

S.Ö.: I want to mention on the reality issue. In your movies we see reality in a different way. It seems like you are searching for the core reality rather than reality as it is. I wonder what your viewpoint about reality, both in cinema and in physical life, is.

T.A.: This is hard to say because you never know what really is the core of your reality. You learn it from the physics. You don't know what the core of reality is. It's getting more and more chaotic when you go deeper into it. Maybe, it's easier to talk about right or wrong. Maybe, you can try to explore some structures. But I wouldn't say that either. Maybe, other people tell but I wouldn't say that I really get into the core of reality. You try to explore something and develop something, but you never know if you really get to it. But in cinema you have to deal with surfaces with faces, streets, rooms and this is the interesting part. I don't believe that much in this psychological cinema, which is trying to get too much behind what you're going to see and get into the heads of the individuals. I'm very careful with this. It's a limitation of cinema but, on the other hand, there's a chance for the cinema as well to work only with the surfaces.

S.Ö.: I want to come to the topic of characters in your movies. You know characters seem like puppets in your movies, alienated from the world, from the people. Cinematic characters in your movies are similar to those characters in Robert Bresson's movies. They have no interest in even the most serious events. Is there any specific reason why you create this kind of characters in your films?

T.A.: Maybe it's not only about alienation when the actors are not very expressive in front of the camera. I prefer actors who are not too expressive and have a tendency to underplay things and are comfortable with this because many actors are the opposite of this, which doesn't mean that they're bad. They're good actors as well but sometimes they do not fit to the particular films. I don't want to focus my work on taking away everything from an actor.

This is not a nice work. They have to be comfortable and satisfied. I am trying to choose actors and non-actors which have a tendency not to be too expressive in front of the camera, because for me it mostly leads very fast to special cliches of acting, special cliches of the presentation of emotions. I'm very suspicious about this, about the so called true expressions of emotions, especially in the artificial surrounding of cinema. It's completely artificial, at least what you're doing and I'm very suspicious about this aspect.

S.Ö.: You oppose the idea of two spaces in your movies and it seems like you would like us to see one of them is much more convenient for human communication. In a crowded place like a city where people do not see either themselves or others, you have to go to a quiet place in order to solve your problems such as a forest, a mountain, a park, or a village. You have to focus on your problems in these places. Do you think that the pace of the modern life may prevent us from paying attention to our problems?

T.A.: Not in general, because many people are used to handle this kind of pace. When I look at my kids they're 14 and 22, it is much different from my experience. Maybe because they are much faster with everything, with social media or anything and they're not reading much anymore, only short texts to read. Of course you can say this is a big loss and so on but, on the other hand, something will come out of it. It always had been like this when you're going back to history. It was the same arguments when TV came out, when computer came out. I am not quite sure about this topic. Maybe it's helpful to go away from this fast paced living and go into the woods, to the mountains. But I'm very skeptical about this. It is a very bourgeois concept. To have some vacation, to go inside you and think about something. You only can do this when you have money and when you can go to nice places and have some time to spend there. At least it never works because you take all your problems with you and when you're back all the problems are popping up again. This is a bit different in *Helle Nachte* where the main reason to go to a remote area is the death of the father of the main character. There's a different reason. He takes his son along and they try to find a way to get closer to each other and this works somehow because they stick together in this remote area. They have to deal with this

S.Ö.: In your movies, we see a combination of Italian New Realism and French New Wave. I think you get together both of them and you create your own style in your movies. But if you want to reach a bigger audience, you have to compose images not in an intellectual way. Why do you prefer to compose images in this way?

T.A.: I don't want to make films only for my own, of course. Yes, I'm my first spectator but every time I hope that there are other people around who get connected to the film and to whom I am going to present. When I start a film I don't think that only a few people will see it. Let's make it a bit different, maybe you have a wider audience. It doesn't really work when you think like this. It's too abstract and you're going to get lost in abstract ideas.

E.A: We can take a question or two in our remaining time.

Audience 1: In your films *In the Shadows* and *Bright Nights* you prefer to use natural sound compared to your other films. When there is a long course they use natural music and some other things. You also use long shots. What's your motivation to use these techniques?

T.A.: The sound and the picture have the same importance for me. It's very important for me to find the right locations. We mostly don't mix shots which are shot here and there and suggest they are close to one another in the film. I like working on concrete places and do the same with sound. Of course, sometimes we have to re-record something. I have a great interest in original sound, which is not easy to record on a set, especially in a city. But this is interesting for me because you always have some elements which you can't control totally. You have elements which are happening, kids crying or birds flying around and this gives the sound

and the film a richer texture. The unexpected findings during the shooting are important. This is interesting for me. The score for *In The Shadows* had been made by Geir Jenssen, better known as Biosphere. He worked a lot with our original sounds and combined his music. It's a combination of the original sound and music. Sometimes, especially at the beginning, when it starts to rain on the street, it starts with original sound and the music comes in step by step. In *Bright Nights* there's a long car ride scene which was not planned. We just found this foggy road, which leads up to a mountain. When you get higher and higher, it gets more and more foggy to an extent when you don't see anything. We shortened the scene in the editing room, but it didn´t work. It was much more interesting to keep the whole ride because only in this way you have a feeling for the height of the mountain, the increasing density of the fog and the clouds. The original sound of the car-ride fades away step by step and and some more atmospheric ambient music takes over more and more. The scene shifts away from a strong realism to more dreamlike mode.

Audience 2: My question is about *In the Shadows*. In this film, there are some characters that undergo power struggle in the context of economics. Their struggle is against authority. You can see some other films with the same theme: economic struggle since the 1990s. How do you relate this power struggle between the characters and the economy with European social reality?

T.A.: It was not an explicity statement of the social economics in Germany. The story is completely based on the behaviors of professional criminals. The struggle with authorities is a part of their job and their life. The main character, a professional thief, is trying to have his own rules for his life; he's trying to have an independent life in a strange way, and this causes a lot of alienation, a lot of distance to a normal life, and this is a topic which was interesting for me.