



TRACING EXISTENTIALIST THEMES IN THE FILM THE PIGEON

GÜVERCİN FİLMİNDE VAROLUŞÇU TEMALARIN İZİNİ SÜRMEK

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Abstract

Cinema, with its power to reflect and reproduce reality, is an art closely related to human experience. A vast spectrum of human emotions and ideas, from social issues to personal experiences, can be seen in films. In addition to its ability to reproduce and reflect reality, cinema has a close relationship with philosophy. By presenting philosophical concepts with the help of its unique apparatuses, cinema gives viewers the opportunity to experience and question abstract ideas. In this way, cinema encourages them to think, question and look at the world from a different perspective. Among these perspectives, existentialism, as a philosophical movement, paves the way to explore individual's freedom, responsibility and the necessity of creating one's own meaning. Cinema benefits largely from existentialism because it presents a suitable framework to depict individuals' struggle to exist in this world. This study explores how cinema portrays existentialist themes, focusing on the film *The Pigeon* to examine the connection between individuals and the social world. A combination of descriptive and thematic analyses was performed to uncover existential themes in the film, such as "the absurd", "alienation", "unhomeliness", "anxiety", "forlornness" and "authenticity". The analysis concluded that these recurring themes are prevalent throughout the film. The film clearly shows that the protagonist is pressured by social norms to conform. However, he chooses to follow his own path and finds an authentic way to live his life.

Keywords: Existentialism, Alienation, Unhomeness, Authenticity, The Pigeon.

Öz

Sinema, gerçekliği yansıtmaya ve yeniden üretme gücüyle, insan deneyimiyle yakından ilişkili bir sanattir. Toplumsal meselelerden kişisel deneyimlere kadar geniş bir yelpazede insani duygu ve fikirler filmlerde görülebilir. Gerçekliği yeniden üretme ve yansıtmaya yeteneğinin yanı sıra felsefeyle de yakın bir ilişki kuran sinema, felsefi kavramları kendine özgü aygıtlar yardımıyla sunarak izleyicilere soyut fikirleri deneyimleme ve sorgulama fırsatı verir. Bu sayede sinema izleyiciyi düşünmeye, sorgulamaya ve dünyaya farklı bir perspektiften bakmaya teşvik eder. Bu perspektifler dâhilinde, felsefi bir akım olarak varoluşçuluk, bireyin özgürlüğünü, sorumluluğunu ve kendi anlamını yaratma gerekliliğini keşfetmenin yolunu açar. Sinema, varoluşçuluktan büyük ölçüde yararlanır çünkü bir felsefe akımı olarak varoluşçu düşünce, bireylerin bu dünyada var olma mücadelesini anlatmak için uygun bir çerçeve sunar. Bu çalışma, *Güvercin* filmi örneğinde sinemanın varoluşçu temaları nasıl işlediğini incelemeyi ve bireyler ile sosyal dünya arasındaki bağlantıyı araştırmayı amaçlamaktadır. Filmdeki "absürd (abes)", "yabancılaşma", "evsiz olma", "kaygı", "kimsesizlik" ve "otantik olma" gibi varoluşsal temaları ortaya çıkarmak için betimsel analiz ve tematik analiz yöntemleri kullanılarak bir değerlendirme yapılmıştır. Bu değerlendirmede, varoluşsal felsefenin tarihi boyunca yinelenen temalarının film boyunca yaygın bir şekilde örneklendirildiği sonucuna varılmıştır. Filmin görsel ve işitsel öğeleri ile birlikte anlatısı, kahramanın sosyal normlara uyması için baskı altında olduğunu açıkça göstermektedir. Ancak bu karakter, yaşam serüveninde kendi rotasını izlemeyi seçmekte ve hayatını yaşamak için özgün bir yol arayışını ısrarla sürdürmektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Varoluşçuluk, Yabancılaşma, Evsiz Olma, Otantik Olma, Güvercin.



INTRODUCTION

Cinema reaches its true potential when it captures and unveils the tangible aspects of reality. This encompasses numerous phenomena that might go unnoticed without the capacity of the motion picture camera to capture them in motion (Kracauer, 1960, p. xlix). Camera's potential to record and disclose hidden realities of everyday life transforms cinema into a medium that makes people think about the things they wouldn't normally pay attention to. Therefore, cinema produces images that invite the audience to see what is not seen in the visible world. It offers a way to refrain from the pre-specified or given meanings of life and see the realities of the world in an alternative gaze (Öztürk, 2017, p. 23). This notion draws a clear connection between cinema and philosophy. The perspectives of the audience are expanded by films, which enable them to see and comprehend subjects they have never thought of before. Occasionally, they push them to consider some of the most fundamental issues that are customarily associated with the field of philosophy (Andersen, 2019, p. 1). In a nutshell, films provoke thought as does philosophy, which constitutes a bridge between cinema and philosophy. Films philosophize in different ways. Sometimes, they put forward a philosophical insight about the human condition. It might even be a mediator for the individual to question their own circumstances of existence and to search for the meaning of life.

It is not bizarre for many individuals to question the significance of their existence and reassess their life trajectories in quest of purpose. This inner questioning may be characterized as an existential crisis which highlights the inherent absurdity of the human condition and the endeavor to derive coherence from it. The philosophical movement of existentialism has its roots in this kind of self-examination that all people can undertake at some point in their lives. Existentialism, which is initially originated in Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard's (1813-1855) writings and later associated with Heidegger, Sartre and Camus in the second half of the 20th century right after the WWII, is a philosophical movement about the condition of human existence (Lacey, 1996, p. 108). In a basic description, existentialism can be defined as "*the philosophy of existence, of the nature of human existence, its value, and its meaning*" (Panza & Gale, 2008, p. 1). This unique philosophical movement emphasizes the individuality of every human being as opposed to impersonal, universal human traits (Audi, 1999). In essence, existentialism underscores the significance and purpose of human existence amidst the external facticities dictated by societal norms. Furthermore, existential philosophy centers on the human existential experience, freedom, search for meaning and sense of responsibility. This philosophical approach focuses on exploring the fundamental questions that individuals face in the process of shaping their own existence. Therefore, it can be suggested that existentialism attributes the individual an autonomy of choice. Existentialist thought deals with the human search for a meaningful life and the effort to find one's own existential authenticity. The common themes of this movement are "*the individual, the experience of choice, and the absence of rational understanding of the universe with a consequent dread or sense of absurdity in human life*" (Blackburn, 1996, p. 129).

The relationship between cinema and existentialism points to a rich interaction that brings forward in-depth reflections on human experience. While existential philosophy deals with human existential problems and the search for meaning, cinema conveys various aspects of these problems and produces images in a quest for existentialism. This article examines how cinema engages with existential philosophy. It will be questioned how cinema contributes to understanding, questioning, and expressing the existential condition of individuals and how existential themes are reflected in cinema. Though the existential themes are examined quite commonly in cinema, it is observed that most of the analyses address the films of particular directors such as Ingmar Bergman, Michelangelo Antonioni, Andrei Tarkovski and some others. In addition, there are numerous academic works on particular films with existential themes such as *Fight Club* (Fincher, 1999), *Truman Show* (Weir, 1998), *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (Gondry, 2004) and so on. Likewise, in Turkish Cinema, several academic papers and theses have been written on the topic exemplifying some auteurs like Zeki Demirkubuz, Ömer Kavur and Nuri Bilge Ceylan. The common point of these research papers is that they all describe how films communicate with existentialist ideas. However, this research endeavors to seek the common existential concepts such as individualism, absurdity, alienation, freedom and associate these concepts with Heidegger's concept of the *unhomely* which lacks academic attention in film studies. Within this scope, this study aims to examine how cinema explores the relationship that the characters establish with the



social constructs, how they cope with the determinism of this social framework and how they create a sense of belonging in their lives. In doing so, the aforementioned existential themes were taken into account along with Heidegger's concept of the unhomey. With this objective in mind, the film *The Pigeon* (Sıvacı, 2018) was purposefully selected because the protagonist is portrayed in an existentialist crisis which causes a spatial alienation from the established social realm along with an emotional one. He experiences a kind of spatial unhomelessness refraining from his ties with space and seeking refuge on the rooftop of his brother's home, living with a group of domestic pigeons and turning to his inner-self. This alienation from the social, economic and cultural facticities around him leads him to avoid responsibilities and seek a solitary way of life.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The Basics of Existentialism

Existentialism does not seem to have a long history as it came to prominence as a distinctive philosophical movement in the second half of the 20th century. However, it could be reasonably argued that the roots of the main arguments conducted within this movement of thought can be dated back to Aristotle and Plato's *essentialism*. In classical Greek philosophy, the main claim about existence was that everything has an essence. There are some essential attributes that everything exclusively accomodates in their existence. This essence defines what something is. Moreover, what constitutes the identity of a thing is its essence (Cartwright, 1968, p. 615). Plato suggested that all the things in the visible world have an essence, an idea, and a form. Similarly, Aristotle argued that all objects have a core property that is essential to be what it is (Janicki, 2003, p. 274-275). Essentialism puts primal importance on the essence of things and individuals. This perspective delineates individuals with a central essence, prescribing a predefined set of characteristics that define human existence even prior to birth. An individual may remain true to their essence and strive to align their life accordingly, or they may deviate from the predetermined path. Nevertheless, by adhering to their essence, their life becomes a purposeful journey. To put it differently, the essence gives the individual a purpose to follow or a path to walk through in their life. Thus, "existence" and the metaphysical correlative of "essence" differ in meaning. While existence is correlated with consciousness and reason, essence is associated with metaphysics (Runes, n.d.).

Essentialism prevailed as the predominant worldview until the 1800s. 19th century marked an era of transformation for the Western World. The Enlightenment intellectuals had gained eminence as influential figures who questioned established systems such as religion and traditional belief structures. Moreover, the Industrial Revolution had become influential on the way people lived and worked. The world was evolving into an industrialized, scientifically driven, capitalist, and predominantly secular space. Despite being characterized as a social upheaval, there were some negative aspects to this time period for the individual. This process of social, economic and cultural transformation, often referred to by scholars as *modernity*, is closely linked to the deliberate rationalization of the society and a restraint from metaphysical belief systems (Touraine, 2012, p. 26). Modernity clearly attached significance to individuals by recognizing their capacity for rational action, but it also positioned them in a collective framework for the benefit of the nation states (Dunn, 1998, p. 54). When the individuals are reconstructed in a rational collectivity, the conventional belief systems that previously assisted people in making sense of the world and their lives start to feel alien to them (Panza & Gale, 2008, p. 10). Existentialism rose on the wings of this clash between the rationalization endeavors of the era and the individual freedom. It is possible to regard existentialism as a continuation of the modernist thought, but there is more to it. Existentialism is a mindset that acknowledges the complexity of the human world while restraining oneself from giving in to the human desire to overcome this complexity. Unlike Enlightenment ideals, existentialism embraces the ambiguity of life instead of clearing it up. It tries to understand the world as it is and make room for individuals to find their ways in their own terms (Solomon, 2005, p. xi-xii). At this point, it is worth clarifying that existentialism doesn't mean to reject reason and rationality all at once. Existential thinkers do not actually aim to substitute rationality with another commitment such as intuition or divination, nor do they want to promote an unsystematic life without reason (Cooper, 2012, p. 30). They merely believe that there are other ways for humans to understand and interact with the world besides reason (Panza & Gale, 2008, p. 11). What they crucially emphasize is that human beings cannot be reduced to any predetermined patterns and they are free to



choose any path in their lives according to their personal traits. At this juncture, it is crucial to deconstruct the term *existentialism* and examine its evolutionary processes chronologically in order to provide a comprehensive description.

If existentialism is regarded as a philosophical movement, it wouldn't be wrong to claim that Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard (1813-1855) was the first existentialist. Kierkegaard introduced his existential perspective in the first half of the 1800s and emphasized personal agency, choice and passion in contrast to the collective ideals of the Enlightenment. He was the first philosopher that presented major existential themes such as “*the absurdity and forlornness of life, the importance and weight of choices, and the need to live passionately and authentically*”. He produced these themes in a Christian point of view, but not in an orthodox standpoint; instead, he claimed that religion is a choice (Panza & Gale, 2008, p. 16). This perspective demonstrated that even a revered belief system such as religion can adopt a subjective framework, allowing individuals to personalize the established truths traditionally held by authority figures. According to Kierkegaard, eternity can only be experienced within the bounds of time and that truth is subjective, emphasizing the individual over the universal. This subjectivity attaches the individual a primacy over the society and its creations. He argued that the social realm imposes a great deal of roles onto the individual, but the right way to live is to strive for stripping of those roles and find the path that leads one out of misery (Dreyfus, 2006, p. 141). In a nutshell, Kierkegaard attached special importance to the human power of choice. Humans find and define themselves via their choices. Kierkegaard posited that through making decisions as opposed to leading a passive life, one is forced to adopt an ethical way of thinking and living (Solomon, 2005, p. 1-2). Philosophizing about human choices can be regarded as a quest to emancipate people from the constraints of the rationalization process, the religious authority and other predetermined social structures. The only authority a person should follow is their own existence and authenticity. One can only find themselves by being loyal to their solitary choices. This view can also be found in Kierkegaard's understanding of truth. He proposed the concept of subjective truth, allowing individuals to interpret established structures based on their authentic selves. Kierkegaard defined truth as “*the objective uncertainty, held fast in an appropriation process of the most passionate inwardness is the truth, the highest truth available for an existing person*” (Kierkegaard, 1992, as cited in Flynn, 2006, p. 9) as opposed to the dominant rational view of his time.

Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) was another philosopher who produced some of the initial concepts of existentialism. Similar to Kierkegaard, Nietzsche scrutinized Christian morality and challenged the notion of the Church as the ultimate intermediary between individuals and reality. He stressed the importance of moving beyond traditional emphasis on rationality and acknowledging the irrational and unconscious aspects of our inner selves. This notion favored the individual over the dominant social sphere and marked a shift from defining human existence in terms of collective reason to highlighting the “*uniqueness of the individual*” (Stoehr, 2006, p. 11-12). The rise of the individual in modernity and moving away from traditional belief systems made Nietzsche declare (1974, p. 181) that “*God is dead*” and humans are the ones who killed him. This point of view contends that the need for supernatural explanations or religious beliefs decreased as modern science had already explained natural phenomena and the functioning of the universe. Put differently, the statement suggests that traditional religious beliefs became less relevant as a result of scientific discoveries and rationality (Flynn, 2006, p. 40). This concept leads to the inference that absolute truth and morality no longer exist. However, Nietzsche (1974, p. 108) also claimed that although God is dead, “*there may still be caves for thousands of years in which his shadow will be shown*” which anticipates that the meanings created around the concept of God will linger in the social realm for a long time. Clearly, what Nietzsche meant by God was the framework created by religion determining the relationship between individuals and God. The idea of the death of God in relation to religion implies that conventional narratives about this relationship are no longer relevant and cannot help people understand their place in the universe (Panza & Gale, 2008, p. 37).

Though Kierkegaard and Nietzsche were regarded as the founders of existentialism as a philosophical standpoint, 20th century philosophers such as Jean-Paul Sartre (1905-1980), Simone de Beauvoir (1908-1986) and Albert Camus (1913-1960) made it a popular field not only in philosophy but also in arts and



literature. Beauvoir and Sartre defined existentialism in ethical terms and suggested that freedom is the fundamental aspect of human existence and should be treated as the basis for all other values. From this point onward, Sartre (1987, p. 13) speculated on what it is to be human and grounded his theory on the notion that “*existence precedes essence*”. This statement contradicts the scholastic thought that essence precedes existence and implies that human nature does not have a predetermined purpose. According to him, man first exists and then acquires a meaning and purpose of his own. That is, man exists before his essence and then defines or determines himself. If existence comes before essence, human beings are naturally free from being defined and determined. However, they are labelled and put into social categories at the moment they are conceived. Therefore, it is also possible to say that “*freedom precedes essence*”. Freedom is deeply engrained in the human reality. A person is not born first and then gain freedom. It is the other way around, a person is free in their essence (Sartre, 1978, p. 25). This idea of freedom has strong ties with selfhood and consciousness. A person can be free if they attain freedom of consciousness; that is, never submitting to what others take them to be. Being conscious means being free, and being free means not having a nature, or essence that would explain who a person is or should be (Crowell, 2012, p. 211). Another figure that produced significant work on existentialism is Albert Camus. Although he declared that he wasn't an existentialist, his primary focus on authenticity makes him a part of the existential framework. Camus mainly focused on the absurdity of life. The absurd can be defined as the conflict that arises between the meaningless reality of nature and our minds' quest for meaning (Camus, 1979, p. 26). Within this contradictory existence, the importance of individual immanence has the utmost importance and Camus believed that a person should rebel against the absurdity of life by being authentic (Golomb, 1995, p. 119). Therefore, it might be suggested that the absurdity of life and the authenticity of the individual are the main concepts in Camus's existentialism.

Recurring Themes in Existentialist Thinking

Although there are a number of philosophers who produced works on the existentialist movement, there are some themes that persist in being addressed. As it is clear from the previous title, existentialism focuses on the matters pertaining to the significance, aim, and worth of human life. Its main concern is on the meaninglessness of life and the individuals' quest on how to construct their lives in this irrational reality. Therefore, the first theme of existentialism can be *the absurd* indicating the irrational condition of the realm that surrounds individuals. Existentialists believe that there is no ultimate purpose or inherent sense to life; the only definition that constitutes life is absurdity. However, people are naturally drawn to finding significance and meaning in their lives. Camus (1979, p. 107) investigated this dichotomy of man vs. the absurdity of life in his essay *The Myth of Sisyphus* which depicts a character's struggle in Greek mythology. Sisyphus is punished by Gods and made to roll a huge rock up a hill, but every time he gets close to the top, the rock rolls back down, and this cycle continues for all eternity. The vain effort of Sisyphus to actualize himself and give meaning to his life is similar to real-life individuals and situations. People have a tendency to find a purpose in life and establish strong ties with the world; however, it is not possible to explain life in rational terms. Camus's concept of the absurd coincides with alienation in some aspects. An absurd universe could make an individual feel alienated. A person who feels alienated may fail in responding to life's requirements. Furthermore, an individual might experience a sense of inadequacy concerning their creative source. Since the self is a temporal process, alienation from oneself can occur through a variety of means, such as self-deception about one's past or abdicating responsibility for one's future. It can also occur when one becomes engrossed in the routine and concerns of daily life in public (Gordon, 1999, p. 5). Alienation is the condition that arises when a person feels like a stranger to his own life and his surroundings. Alienation often brings anxiety which can be defined within the intersection of life's meaninglessness and being aware of it. Though it may seem like a negative feeling, existentialists embrace anxiety. Individuals usually feel anxious about the meaninglessness of life and sometimes they can get carried away with the routines that life brings them. However, when a person is aware of the nothingness and, out of anxiety, take action towards being authentic and finding a path for themselves, they may reach a true freedom (Panza & Gale, 2008, p. 48). Kierkegaard (1980, p. 22) declares that anxiety “*is not depressing but instead is elevating, inasmuch as it views every human being under the destiny of the highest claim upon him*”. As it might be deduced from this sentence, anxiety makes one confront their own existential situation and responsibility, and this takes them to a higher level. Another concept worth mentioning is the *forlornness*. Forlornness is the solitary feeling when a person realizes that life is irrational and absurd. It is mostly associated with



the absence of God. When a person realizes that even if there is God, it wouldn't make any difference, they will feel abandoned (Judaken, 2012, p. 92).

The concepts of anxiety and forlornness have been employed by existentialists very often, but Martin Heidegger (1889-1976) was the one who expanded these concepts and come up with the term *unhomely* (*unheimlich* in Heideggerian terminology). Heidegger (1996, p. 175) argued that anxiety (*angst* in Heideggerian terminology) is a problem of "*being-in-the-world*" (*Dasein* in Heideggerian terminology). According to Heidegger, anxiety emerges from the unknown nature of being-in-the-world. To put it differently, the world may seem alien to an individual and they may feel like the world they call home is actually an uncanny space that give ambiguous sensations. In these occasions, one may have an unhomely experience in which he feels "*not-at-home*". In a nutshell, being unhomely refers to leaving one's familiar, everyday environment and exploring unfamiliar or alien facets of oneself (McCarthy, 2011, p. 111). The concept of unhomely is associated with the feeling of being in a place that is untamed, alienated or far from home. This can refer to the feeling of finding oneself in an unfamiliar environment, both physically and spiritually. Nietzsche also focused on the state of being not-at-home and he attributed a positive meaning to homelessness. He posits the idea that homelessness corresponds to being free from the imposed societal values; in other words, it is "*a force that breaks open ice and other all too thin realities*" (Nietzsche, 1974, p. 338). The homeless are progressive because they have experienced a disintegration in their community in terms of moving away from the belief systems (Gordon, 1999, p. 6). What Nietzsche highlighted here is being conscious about the ambiguity of metaphysics and choosing the self over outer realities. Only by being authentic, a person can achieve a free existence.

Another important theme widely utilized by existentialists is the *authenticity*. This term stands for the human agency that comes into play when the individuals successfully navigate their true selves and extricate themselves from dogmatic and naively accepted moral principles and beliefs. The information and facts that people gather over the course of their lives and that society promotes as necessary components of objectivity are not very relevant when it comes to personal struggle. In this domain, authenticity is paramount and directs people's paths through human life (Golomb, 1995, p. 1). In other words, authenticity is being true to oneself and taking action towards understanding who they are. The idea of authenticity implies three underlying assumptions: "*each human being has a way of being...; the task of life is to come to terms with who one is; and hence to choose those authentic possibilities of being which will enable the self to become who it is*" (Macann, 2014, p. 202). According to these assumptions, every individual is unique and he/she doesn't have to be in line with the dominant meanings of the society he/she was born in. On the contrary, one can only have a free soul if he/she acknowledges that life is absurd and he/she should develop an authentic being in order to lead a meaningful life. Therefore, authenticity gives supremacy to the individual.

Reflections of Existentialism in Cinema

When it comes to fiction, philosophy serves as an interpretive and instructional tool (Boulé & McCaffrey, 2011, p. 6). Fiction creates thought and leads the audiences into a world of questioning. Numerous philosophical movements have garnered the interest of artistic communities, particularly in narrative arts such as literature, theater, and cinema. Nevertheless, it's observed that existentialism stands out as one of the most sought-after perspectives among filmmakers. This is partly because existentialism provides a creative and suitable outline to reflect on the conflicting relationship between the individual and the structure. Cinema does more than just make one experience some intended emotions; it also assists them in analyzing and resolving feelings they already have (Panza & Gale, 2008, p. 325). At this point, it will be beneficial to examine the existentialist tendencies in cinema from around the world under the guidance of academic articles on this subject.

One of the most well-known examples of existential films is Peter Weir's *Truman Show* (1998). The film reflects the existential themes of the absurd, individual freedom, and authenticity by telling the story of Truman Burbank (Jim Carrey), who lives in a small town. A gnawing doubt gradually grows in him and he starts to question the world he lives in. Eventually Truman finds out that he is actually the protagonist of a reality TV Show and his life has been broadcasted live on TV since the very moment



he was born. After coming to terms with his awakening, Truman realizes that his life has been controlled and is the result of outside forces. Eventually, he makes the decision to accept responsibility for his life, reject the authority placed upon him, assert his independence, and create a fulfilling life for himself (Falzon, 2011, p. 18). *Truman Show* embodies an American context delving into capitalist relations of production in the media and consumerism. There are also other films in European cinema which represent existential themes. Italian film director Michelangelo Antonioni's acclaimed films from the early 1960s, *The Adventure* (1960), *The Night* (1961), *The Eclipse* (1962), and *Red Desert* (1964) contain existential meanings in some aspects. These movies explore the conditions of living in a contemporary, industrialized world and demonstrate the impact of this world on people. They show how the fast-paced lifestyle and social pressures can strain relationships and leave people feeling disoriented and without direction. They eloquently capture the ubiquitous feeling of emptiness that frequently accompanies modern existence through Antonioni's skillful use of dialogue and imagery. These movies show how existentialist themes are still very relevant today and how finding meaning becomes even more important in a world where traditional sources of significance are becoming less and less influential (Pamerleau, 2009, p. 85). In addition to Antonioni, Swedish director Ingmar Bergman developed an existential cinema and interrogated the existence of God in several of his films including *The Seventh Seal* (1957), *Through a Glass Darkly* (1961) and *Winter Light* (1963). His films can be analysed within the framework of Kierkegaardian approach to faith and despair. Especially in *Winter Light* several characters serve as powerful examples of despair and the "infinite resignation" of faith (Shaw, 2017, p. 56). Along with the European examples, there are some existential themes in the far eastern countries like Japan. Akira Kurosawa's film *Ikiru* (1952) depicts the story of a bureaucrat who seeks purpose in his life after learning he has a terminal illness. Although the film offers a gloomy atmosphere, it ultimately conveys a hopeful message. It explores the contrast between life and death, revealing the darker aspects of human existence to inspire the audience to discover genuine meaning and happiness.

In addition to the aforementioned existential examples in cinema around the world, Turkish cinema is also rich in depicting existential themes thanks to its long history of social realist films. One of these examples is the early cinema of acclaimed Turkish director Ömer Kavur. Kavur's films, including *Yatık Emine* (1975), *Yusuf ile Kenan* (1979), and *Kırık Bir Aşk Hikâyesi* (1981), are noted for exploring existential themes such as existence, death, and alienation. Especially in the storyline of these films, there are some aspects that coincide with the struggles of the individuals against the social realm. Kavur's characters are in a combat to survive, facing social pressures and being thwarted in their efforts to build a humane life. In these films, characters such as Emine and Yusuf experience a difficult life due to the moral contradictions of society and external circumstances. However, some characters, such as Kenan, manage to preserve their own existence despite these obstacles and find a hopeful future. In *Kırık Bir Aşk Hikâyesi* (1981), Fuat is trapped between his monotonous life and family difficulties. However, this character highlights the value of a person's inner strength when he finds courage in the hope of a new love entering his life (Sancar, 2023, p. 213). Another Turkish director who is known for reflecting on existentialist thought in his films is Zeki Demirkubuz. Demirkubuz's trilogy of films in which existentialist thought is most evident are *Fate* (2001), *The Confession* (2001) and *The Waiting Room* (2003), which are called *Stories on Darkness*. Inspired by existential thinkers such as Sartre, Camus and Kierkegaard, Demirkubuz presented their content in localized free adaptations. Each film in the trilogy references Camus's *The Myth of Sisyphus*, in that even as the characters progress, they return to their starting point. No matter how far they travel, the characters always tend to return to their starting point (Günay & Subölen, 2016, p. 166).

METHODOLOGY

As stated before, this study aims to investigate how cinema reflects on and portrays existential themes, thereby establishing a connection between cinema and philosophy through the sample of the film *The Pigeon* (Sıvacı, 2018). This study has been designed according to the principles of descriptive research combined with a thematic analysis which has been conducted to link the film's themes with existentialism. The main purpose of the descriptive research is to reveal and describe the characteristics of phenomena, objects, people, groups, or organizations (Gürbüz & Şahin, 2017, p. 101). By outlining the key characteristics of a dataset, this method provides a summary of the data. Descriptive analysis goes beyond just summarizing data by also categorizing it into specific groups. This categorization helps



in better understanding the distribution and connections within different sections, making it easier to spot patterns and trends. Organizing data into categories is crucial for simplifying complex information and enhancing the analysis and interpretation of the findings. To perform a descriptive analysis, the researcher must initially establish a theory that outlines the overall guidelines they will follow during the investigation (Berg, 2001, p. 230). In other words, this method “*highlights the outstanding characteristics of a sample, or of the population from which the sample was drawn*” (Gray et al., 2007, p. 398). In accordance with this account, a literature review was initially conducted to determine the characteristics of existentialism and the themes including the absurd, alienation, unhomeliness, anxiety, forlornness, and authenticity were acquired as research categories. In the second stage of the research, these themes were sought in the narrative, visual and auditory elements of the film utilizing thematic analysis method. Thematic analysis is a qualitative method used to analyze classifications and identify themes within data. It provides a detailed illustration of the data and addresses various topics through interpretation. This approach is particularly suitable for studies aiming to explore findings through interpretation. It adds a systematic dimension to data analysis by linking the frequency of themes with the overall content, thereby increasing accuracy, complexity, and enriching the meaning of the research (As cited from Marks and Yardly, 2004 in Alhojailan, 2021, p. 40). In line with this, the recurring themes of existentialist philosophy were taken as categories of research and a thematic analysis was conducted in the light of these categories. Moreover, it is beneficial to express that this study is limited to the film *The Pigeon* (Sıvacı, 2018) which was selected with purposeful sampling method. Depending on the goal of the study, purposeful sampling allows for the selection of information-rich cases, facilitating in-depth research (Büyüköztürk et al., 2014, p. 90).

FINDINGS

The Pigeon directed by Banu Sıvacı in 2018 depicts the story of Yusuf (Kemal Burak Alper), a young man living with his brother and sister-in-law after his parents’ death. They live in a small detached house in a slum area of Adana. The family appears to be part of the working class with limited financial resources. The brother, Halil (Ruhi Sarı) works as a mechanic in a car repair shop and he is married to Rümeyza (Demet Genç), who is a housewife. Although Yusuf lives under the supervision of his brother, he leads a solitary life spending most of his time isolated from his family and others. He is an introvert man who seems to find peace only when he is around his domestic pigeons he keeps as pets on the rooftop. He insists on dwelling on the rooftop despite his brother’s fierce objections. He tries to meet his personal needs on this place even though the space is not very suitable for it. He bathes on the rooftop using a bucket and sleeps on a mattress placed directly on the floor at night. He gives the impression of being stubbornly resistant to growing up, as he is unwilling to work and support himself independently. As the director Banu Sıvacı describes the protagonist in an interview, “*Yusuf is a young man who tries to keep himself away from the society and creates his own refuge... He is forced to sustain the life he was born into as a man, and he resists this*” (Göl & Ildır, 2021). As can be understood from this description, Yusuf has a problematic relationship with social realm around him. The social norms expect him to work, make money, get married and develop an economically independent life. Nevertheless, these are meaningless to him and he reacts by isolating himself both emotionally and spatially. He adamantly maintains his identity, resisting the facticities that attempt to dictate his actions and define his essence. In this framework, Yusuf can be regarded as an individual in an existential crisis and one that seeks to find a path for himself without losing his identity. In this part of the study, the film *The Pigeon* is examined via the existential themes such as absurdity, alienation, anxiety, forlornness, unhomeliness and authenticity.

The Absurdity of Life

In *The Pigeon*, the clash between societal norms and the individual autonomy is portrayed with a realistic approach. The conflict between the social norms and the individual is one the main themes the film problematizes. Yusuf is in transition to adulthood. During this transitional phase, societal norms pressure him to conform to a common theme observed by many, where he is compelled to take any available job, marry according to traditional standards, and support his family financially. His identity and essence, on the contrary, require to be away from all these facticities and invest in his passion. Therefore, the protagonist is stuck in this ambivalence placing him in a dead end. When he surrenders to the economic requirements of the modern society and try to work in odd jobs, he reluctantly neglects his birds. Hence,



it would be accurate to assert that the social sphere and Yusuf's individual world do not coincide with each other. This binary opposition can be correlated with Camus's term *the absurd*. Yusuf feels that the mechanism of life that assigns a huge responsibility on the individual is irrational. His pigeons are the only things that make sense to him. This irrational condition can be observed in the film through the use of space, the sound design and the dialogue.

In *The Pigeon*, the use of space in some scenes is planned to demonstrate the absurdity of life. With the aid of the camera angles, the use of space reveals some connotations regarding the dichotomy between the protagonist as an individual and his surroundings. The film opens up with the image of a pigeon hatching from an egg. Yusuf assists the bird in emerging from its eggshell, though the audience only sees his hands gently tending to the animal. Then, the title of the film appears on a black background in white letters: "*The Pigeon*". The next image depicts pigeons in the foreground with a bustling cityscape in the background. Only then, the audience meets the protagonist. The combination of these images signal that the pigeons are of great importance for the character and they constitute a big part of his essence. Apart from the pigeons, the external world does not appear to capture his interest. In addition, the first a few images of the opening scene convey the sense that the pigeons stand for the humanistic side of the protagonist and the external realities are unbearable to him. Yusuf perceives the world as chaotic and irrational which makes him choose to embrace his own essence instead of conforming to the established social patterns. In addition to imagery, this perception is conveyed through the sound design. The film opens with the soothing sound of the pigeons, then these sounds are interrupted by the crashing sounds of the city. A tram passes by in the background and drowns out the sounds of the birds. The prevailing city sounds highlight the inescapable reality of the environment into which one is born. In a nutshell, the antagonistic relationship between the individual essence and the irrationality of the external world can be inferred from the sound design. This duality in sound design is concurrently observed throughout the film.



Figure 1. The pigeons vs. the cityscape (Sıvacı, 2018).

The binary opposition between the predetermined social setting and the individual is conveyed also through the dialogue. All the dialogues between Yusuf and Halil revolves around the reminder that Yusuf needs to find a job and earn an income. Halil, being the older brother, is a symbol of authority and he wants Yusuf to yield to the economic requirements of the system and compromise on his essence. When Halil is introduced to the audience, one of the first things he says is "*Let me talk to İrfan this week so we can arrange a job for you at the car repair joint. This can't go on like this*". Throughout the film, Halil is depicted solely with the aim of assimilating Yusuf into the prevailing economic system, lacking depth or complexity. Another dialogue demonstrates a similar tone. In a dictative manner, Halil says "*He has to work. There's no money for those who don't work. It's a time for making money. You have to be a man, be responsible, and work. You'll also sell those birds*". Similarly, in another scene, Halil reminds Yusuf that if he wants to marry, he needs to have a stabilized income with the words "*What will you do when you fall in love with a girl someday? Your mother is from the old generation, son, she put up with it. Today's girls won't. You'll have to put money in front of today's girls*". These dialogues assert that Yusuf needs to surrender to the economic mechanism to be a part of the system. If not, he will be excluded from the society. Despite Halil's disregard and disdain for Yusuf's efforts, Yusuf seeks to earn money through his pigeons. When he captures a bird which is not a member of the stock, he attends auctions and sells it. He uses the money for his essential expenses and the rest for taking care of the



birds. This approach resonates with his values and priorities. However, at a certain point, Yusuf gives in to the requirements of the economy and gets a job. He does some simple things which does not require any qualifications such as cleaning some used car parts and doing some construction work. In an odd job that he reluctantly accepts, he has to clean up the debris in a ruined warehouse. What he does there is like looking for a needle in a haystack. This action bears parallels to the narrative depicted by Camus in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, suggesting a shared concept between the two. Just like Sisyphus rolls the rock to the top of the hill, Yusuf collects piles of debris, brings them out of the building and collect them in a new pile. However, he does all this in vain because at the end of the day he does not gain anything. This action contradicts his essence, rendering it absurd.



Figure 2. Yusuf in the middle of the debris (Sıvacı, 2018).

Alienation and Unhomeness

Other dominant existential themes in the movie are alienation and unhomeness. These two concepts are very much attached to each other because they both emphasize solitude and a sense of withdrawal from the social sphere. However, while alienation stands for being a stranger to one's surroundings, unhomeness implies an uncanny feeling. Alienation can be observed throughout the film in two ways.

The initial indication of alienation becomes apparent through Yusuf's distinct character compared to his surroundings. He is an introvert person who almost never speaks to people. Initially, the audience may think that he is shy and insecure. However, as the plot unfolds, it is strongly insinuated that Yusuf's silence is a choice because he is just different from the society and he prefers to not confide in people. And when he tries to reveal his identity, he is ridiculed by the people around him. This constitutes another binary opposition between the protagonist who insists to be himself and the people who try to stereotype him, marginalize him and even abuse him. Halil deceives Yusuf regarding the terms of the job and sends him to a remote location, assuring him that he'll return home at night. However, it turns out to be a one-week assignment, leaving Yusuf unaware and deprived of his rights. Moreover, his employer tries to exploit Yusuf's labor making him work long hours with a low wage without any job security. The hypocritical nature of the system causes Yusuf to feel alienated from labor and experience anxiety. He ultimately rebels against his employer and flees the workplace. Walking for a considerable distance, he boards on a train without a ticket, leading him to evade the ticket inspector. Throughout this journey, he is depicted as isolated in the wilderness, disconnected from public spaces. Indeed, numerous scenes throughout the film illustrate Yusuf's estrangement from the urban landscape. When Yusuf runs some errands in the city, he prefers routes where there are no other people. This shows that he deliberately alienates himself from his surroundings.

Another example of alienation in the film occurs when Yusuf is alienated from himself when he surrenders to the system. At one point, Yusuf develops a liking towards a girl he sees in a wedding and he decides to follow his brother's advice and get a stabilized employment hoping that he will get married. This is never stated clearly by the protagonist but it is implied by the images in his dreams. When he starts working, he utters some words similar to his brother's. In a chat with his co-worker, he states that no matter how bad it is, it is a job after all and "...*there's no money for those who don't work*". In addition, he assumes his brother's role and acts like him in another scene while he talks to his favorite bird named Maverdi. Similar to how his brother assigns tasks to him, he delegates the responsibility to Maverdi to attract stranger birds and add them to the stock with the words "*There's no feed for those who don't*



work, Maverdi”. This change of roles shows that Yusuf acts like he is somebody else. As he fails to be true to himself, he enters a process of self-alienation. It is a process that he is not true to himself which brings anxiety and forlornness at the end. When he actualizes the requirements of the social reality and forsakes his essence, he becomes anxious and agitated. Before long, he grows weary of the responsibilities of his new role and in the end he rebels fiercely against his employer to leave the workplace. This anxiety reveals itself as forlornness or a solitary being. Yusuf almost never communicates with his co-workers unless he has to. At night, while everybody is sleeping, he prefers to go outside and try to communicate with the pigeons in the area. He is portrayed in a lonely atmosphere throughout the film but his forlornness is mostly visible when he is around people.

As mentioned before, Heidegger's concept of the unhomely (*unheimlich*) refers to the existential alienation of human beings and the disturbing experience of their relationship with the world. This concept defines the moments when one feels out of home, discontent, and lacks a sense of belonging. The most striking example of the unhomely in *The Pigeon* is visible through the use of space especially the image of home. The film problematizes the meaning of home as we know it. Yusuf lives with his brother and sister-in-law in a detached house, which they are implied to have inherited from their father, as stated earlier. However, Yusuf prefers to live on the rooftop where he tends to his pigeons. Although Halil wants him to stay indoors, Yusuf insists on spending all his time on the rooftop. This unusual preference reveals that Yusuf has some issues with the conventional ways of dwelling. The home symbolizes the rules, expectations, responsibilities and predetermined roles in life. However, Yusuf has a different kind of nature that nobody comprehends. These conflicting camps show themselves in the character's spatial attitudes.

There are few scenes that depict Yusuf indoors at home and in all of them he hastes to go out. The home is a space of authority and it is an extension of the social sphere. The main authoritative figure is Halil and his main objective is to alter Yusuf's essence. He declares many times that Yusuf is in transition to adulthood and he has to start behaving like an adult or rather “a man”. Being a man includes many things such as getting a job, being responsible, being tough, being strong etc. He is reminded all that when he is at home which makes it a space of the authority rather than a shelter, a haven or simply a private space. Therefore, the home becomes unhomely for Yusuf. It is deprived of its initial meanings and become an uncanny space which makes him feel like an alien. As a reaction to the spatial drawbacks, Yusuf prefers to live on the rooftop where he is close to his pigeons. He can communicate with them without judgmental and hegemonic relationships. Therefore, the rooftop, as an out-of-home space, transforms into a homely space.



Figure 3. Yusuf on the rooftop (Sivaci, 2018).

The notion of homeliness vs. unhomeliness can be best observed at the end of the film when the camera slowly ascends in the air and takes a bird's-eye view. In this shot, the rooftop as Yusuf's living space can be seen in contrast to the other homes and rooftops which makes the vastness of the social sphere clear. This shot gives the impression that all the spaces but the rooftop is unhomely for Yusuf. Although the rooftop seems like an inadequate space for a person to dwell, he uses it as a space where he can practice his personal agency.



Figure 4. Yusuf's home vs. others (Sıvacı, 2018).

Authenticity

In existentialism, the concept of authenticity is defined as being true to one's own self and values, as stated in the conceptual framework of the study. This notion can be observed best within Yusuf's struggling moments to remain true to himself and sustain his essence. There are two instances that put him in a dilemma. One is about working, as mentioned before, and the other includes his battle against a drug-dealer who uses birds to traffic drugs. In the progression of the film, Yusuf stumbles upon a peculiar bird, only to discover a small package attached to its leg. Upon discarding the package, which unbeknownst to him contained drugs, Yusuf decides to sell the bird. Little does he realize, this decision exposes him to the drug dealer's scrutiny, putting him in a vulnerable position. When confronted by the dealer, Yusuf faces threats and witnesses his beloved bird, Maverdi, being harmed with a knife. The dealer's subsequent actions include stealing all the birds, though luckily, Maverdi narrowly escapes this fate because it is kept in a box at the time. Although this is a discouraging event that may easily make a person compromise from his essence, Yusuf does not give up and he fights back. He gives the criminal away and gets him arrested. The next thing he does is to strive for attracting new birds to his rooftop. This entails discovering his own inner truths rather than following social conventions and emancipating himself through living a life that is authentic to these truths. He faces his own existential reality and searches for meaning by remaining true to his own essence. Through this process, he expresses his individuality and struggles to live a true life.

CONCLUSION

It is natural for individuals to question the conditions of their existence and seek ways to remain true to themselves. They endeavor to carve their own paths, aiming to cultivate a free spirit and understand what it means to be truly content within their essence. Existentialism is a philosophical movement that emphasizes human freedom and individual responsibility. This thought questions the pressure of social norms on the individual and emphasizes the individual's effort to create his or her own meaning. According to existentialism, human beings determine their essence through their own actions and try to live an authentic life. In cinema, these themes are reflected through characters' struggles to find their own way against the expectations of society. For example, in many films, protagonists try to discover their own identity and meaning by rebelling against social norms. This process encourages the viewer to reflect on the depths of individual freedom and responsibility. One of these films is *The Pigeon* (Sıvacı, 2018). It depicts the dichotomy between the individual freedom and the hegemony of the social realm. This study explores existential themes within the sample film, examining the complex relationship between the individual and their surrounding world. It focuses on the plot, dialogues, and visual and auditory elements to trace this dynamic struggle.

The descriptive analysis has revealed that the film prominently features the recurring existential themes such as the absurdity of life, alienation and unhomeliness, anxiety and forlornness, and the quest for authenticity. Yusuf, the protagonist, is depicted in an existential dilemma throughout the film. He wants to keep on being true to his essence by taking care of his pigeons and build a life around them. However, he sometimes feels compelled to conform to social expectations. This binary opposition of the individual authenticity and the social field constitutes the absurdity of life. As he grows weary of fulfilling the hegemony of the social expectations, he becomes alienated from his surroundings and also himself. If he chooses to practice his personal agency and ignore the social construct, he is estranged from the social



sphere. On the contrary, when he conforms to societal expectations, he feels he is betraying himself and thus becomes alienated from his true essence. This dilemma also causes anxiety which manifests itself in nervous breakdowns. In this character's case, the alienation process gives way to unhomeliness which appears as a spatial estrangement. Yusuf opts to live apart from his family, preferring instead to reside near his pigeons on the rooftop. Therefore, the evidence suggests that the meaning of space is altered and deterritorialized according to what the dweller interprets it to be. The home as a space is deprived of its privacy and turns to a social construct that imposes predetermined roles on the individual. Last but not least, this film can be read as an individual's quest to protect his authenticity against all the dominant meanings surrounding him. Yusuf may be seen stumbling but he returns to himself and never gives up on his authenticity. The optimistic conclusion of the film particularly implies the character's prioritization of his inherent nature over predetermined societal norms. In light of these observations, it is clear that *The Pigeon* (Sıvacı, 2018) is a film that describes the existential themes as a core component of its narrative, offering profound insights into the human condition and the struggle for individual authenticity.

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