

-Research Article-

Erksan's Critique, Berri's Spectacle: Water Ownership in *Susuz Yaz* and *Jean de Florette*

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Abstract

*This article examines the theme of private water ownership as depicted in *Susuz Yaz* of Metin Erksan and *Jean de Florette* of Claude Berri by questioning how the portrayals of water ownership in each film reflect historical and social attitudes towards private use of collective resources within capitalistic endeavors. In *Susuz Yaz*, clear ethical questions are raised about private ownership of water, stemming from the highly political background of Metin Erksan and the tradition of Turkish social realism. Conversely, *Jean de Florette* presents water as a spectacle, an element of French rural life, without any direct criticism or questioning of its ownership; the water issue is simply a structural given in a somewhat capitalistic setting, and *Jean de Florette* merely displays this given as a French rural heritage film. The article uses Marx and Engel's explanation of the peasants as the petty bourgeoisie to frame the plots of the films. Then, both films are contextualized in line with the genres and social contexts they belong to.*

Keywords: private ownership, water, water rights, *Susuz Yaz*, *Jean de Florette*

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-Araştırma Makalesi-

**Erksan'dan Eleştiri, Berri'den Temaşa:
Susuz Yaz ve Jean de Florette'de Su Mülkiyeti**

Haluk Ballı*

Özet

Bu makale, Metin Erksan'ın Susuz Yaz ve Claude Berri'nin Jean de Florette adlı filmlerinde tasvir edilen özel su mülkiyeti temasını, her iki filmdeki su mülkiyeti tasvirlerinin, kapitalist çabalar içinde kolektif kaynakların özel kullanımına yönelik tarihsel ve toplumsal tutumları nasıl yansıttığını sorgulayarak incelemektedir. Susuz Yaz'da, Metin Erksan'ın son derece politik arka planından ve Türk toplumsal gerçekçilik geleneğinden kaynaklanan, suyun özel mülkiyetine ilişkin açık etik sorgulamalar ortaya atılmaktadır. Buna karşılık, Jean de Florette suyu bir temaşa, Fransız kırsal yaşamının bir unsuru olarak sunar ve suyun mülkiyetine dair doğrudan bir eleştiri ya da sorgulama getirmez: Su meselesi, kısmen kapitalist bir ortamda yapısal bir verili durumdur ve Jean de Florette bir Fransız kırsal miras filmi olarak sadece bu verili durumu göstermektedir. Makale, Marx ve Engels'in küçük burjuvazi olarak çiftçi anlatısını filmlerin olay örgüsünü çerçevelemek için kullanmaktadır. Ardından, her iki film de ait oldukları türler ve toplumsal bağlamlar doğrultusunda bağlamsallaştırılmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: özel mülkiyet, su, su hakkı, Susuz Yaz, Jean de Florette

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Introduction

Control over natural resources has historically determined power structures within societies, shaping economic, social, and political relations. Water, as a fundamental resource, plays a particularly significant role in these dynamics. When monopolized, it becomes not just a necessity but an instrument of economic leverage, determining who thrives and who is excluded from production in rural areas. This struggle for water ownership is at the heart of *Susuz Yaz* (*Dry Summer*, Metin Erksan, 1963), which won the Golden Bear award for the best film at the Berlin Film Festival in 1964 and is at the center of the Turkish social realism movement (Daldal, 2005, p. 60), and *Jean de Florette* (Claude Berri, 1986), which set the standards for French rural heritage film (McMurray, 2010, pp. 34–35). These films, despite their differing historical and cinematic contexts, depict the conflicts that arise when access to water is controlled by a select few.

Both films present water as proto-capital, an essential resource that, when controlled, generates power and economic dominance. In *Susuz Yaz*, Osman claims exclusive rights over a water source on his land, refusing to share it with the villagers despite his brother Hasan's warnings that doing so will lead to conflict. In *Jean de Florette*, Cesar Soubeyran and his nephew Ugolin conspire to cut off water access to Jean, an outsider who inherits a valuable piece of land. By obstructing the natural flow of water, they create artificial scarcity, a tactic used by capitalists to manipulate markets and eliminate competition.

The economic motivations behind these actions can be read through the Marxist description of the petty bourgeoisie, a class between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat, struggling to secure its position through resource control. Osman and the Soubeyrans are aspirational petty bourgeois figures, attempting to consolidate their economic power by controlling access to water, the key to agricultural success. Their actions reflect broader capitalist mechanisms such as monopolization, market manipulation, and the suppression of competitors, demonstrating how small landowners attempt to survive and expand in an economy that is gradually getting more and more capitalist.

Despite these thematic similarities, the films approach the subject from different ideological and cinematic traditions. *Susuz Yaz* belongs to the Turkish social realist movement, shaped by the political climate of the 1960s, with its director, Metin Erksan, actively commenting on the struggle over the private ownership of water from a critical angle in his film. *Jean de Florette*, on the other hand, emerges from the French heritage film tradition, portraying rural life with an emphasis on spectacle and observing the rural conditions in 20th-century France rather than offering any critique. These contrasting approaches highlight how cinema interprets rural conflicts through distinct aesthetic and ideological lenses, shaping audience perceptions of resource ownership and power dynamics.

Peasants as the Petty Bourgeoisie

During the 19th and 20th centuries, capitalism evolved through dramatic stages leading to the birth and death of certain classes and groups. In this context, Marx and Engels demonstrate the emergence of peasants as the petty bourgeoisie.

The development of the modern bourgeoisie was a complex process rooted in the transformation of earlier forms of production and ownership. The worker who owned the means of production as his private property laid the foundation of a production system based on small-scale industry, allowing them to develop their independent individuality. This mode of production achieved its most complete expression through free ownership of labor conditions when farmers, for example, possessed their land and tools as independent owners (Marx, 1977, p. 927). In this sense, independent farmers were the preliminary form of the modern bourgeoisie that the small-scale ownership of the means of production would

ultimately evolve into. Their land ownership placed them in the emerging market economy which required them to produce and trade commodities. Their interaction with market forces pushed them toward adopting a more capitalistic operational approach. These farmers started showing traits of the developing bourgeois class while they attempted to grow their landholdings and production levels and handle market challenges (Marx & Engels, 2002, p. 247). From this very group arose the petty bourgeoisie, a class defined by their small-scale ownership and operation within the expanding market.

Petty bourgeoisie existed in an intermediate state between proletariat and bourgeoisie, which led to its continuous regeneration as an extra component of bourgeois society (Marx & Engels, 2002, p. 247). In order to carry out capitalist activities and maintain this regeneration, petty bourgeoisie relied on capital, which is value stemming from the creation of surplus (Stedman Jones, 2002, p. 60). This reliance on capital reflects the wider operational dynamics of capital accumulation. The fundamental basis for capital functioning as a social force emerged from the historical developments that led to the transition of separate individual ownership of production means into large-scale systems, creating a major historical change. This transformation required the consolidation of numerous small properties into the hands of few individuals. The systematic removal of land, essential resources and tools from the majority of people was the primary stage in the historical evolution of capital (Marx, 1977, p. 928). The historical process of consolidating production means into large-scale ownerships forced most people to lose their access to land and tools, thus demonstrating the unstable position of even those who retain their means of production. Along this process, “one capitalist always strikes down many others” (Marx, 1977, p. 929) in order to consolidate capital, expand their market share, and eliminate competition, ultimately accelerating the concentration of wealth and power within the hands of a diminishing number of individuals. Therefore, the resulting capitalist competition along with industrial development pushed the petty bourgeoisie toward the proletariat until they disappeared as an independent class and became wage workers (Marx & Engels, 2002, p. 247). Inevitably, greater concentrations of wealth and power among few capitalists made the general population face rising levels of poverty, harsh treatment and economic abuse (Marx, 1977, p. 929).

As this process unfolded, peasants were rendered one of the earliest examples of those caught in the transition between independent production and capitalist consolidation. In not only *Susuz Yaz* but also *Jean de Florette*, this dynamic is evident as Osman and the Soubeyrans attempt to consolidate resources and eliminate competition to be able to create surplus and profit from it. For this reason, their actions boil down to the control of water, which functions as proto-capital, a necessary resource that determines who can generate surplus and who is excluded from production altogether.

Water as Proto-Capital

Both *Susuz Yaz* and *Jean de Florette* are set in the 20th century, 1960s and 1920s respectively, and illustrate attempts by farmers to monopolize the resources, eliminate probable competitors, and expand in the market. Osman, the aggressive big brother in *Susuz Yaz*, demonstrates a keen ambition to elevate his farming enterprise and increase his wealth through the control of the water source on his land. In this parallel, the very first lines from the film hint that *Susuz Yaz* is about water rights, which is “the legitimacy of claims to water and to decision making power over water management” (Guevara Gil et al., 2010, p. 8). It is the two brothers, Osman and Hasan, talking in the first scene. There is a water source on the land they possess, and Osman is rejoicing about the fact. He says that they will “own our own water. First, our fields will be watered. We will give the remainder to the neighbors” (00:03:54). Hasan does not agree with Osman, saying that water is “the blood of soil” (00:04:30), implying that not giving water to others in the village will eventually kill their soil, thus them, because “to be denied water is to be denied that which sustains life” (Fioret, 2017, p. 17). For this reason, Hasan believes that

they should not be keeping the water to themselves only; or else, there will be issues between them and the villagers.

Similarly, Cesar Soubeyran and Ugolin of *Jean de Florette* endeavor to cultivate and sell carnations, seeking to expand their small-scale operation into a profitable venture within the local economy. Hence, they need water as the proto-capital for their business too, recognizing that control over essential resources is key to getting surplus product. In the farm called Les Romarins, there is a secluded spring known only to Cesar Soubeyran and other elderly villagers. This hidden water source represents not just a practical necessity but a form of economic leverage that, if controlled, will allow them to maximize profits and consolidate their agricultural dominance. Thus, Ugolin and Cesar Soubeyran wish to buy this farm and go to the owner, Pique-Bouffigue, to negotiate. However, they see him not just as a seller, but as an obstacle to their financial ambitions, as he stands in the way of their plan to acquire the land. As the negotiation gets more and more violent, the duo unintentionally kills Pique-Bouffigue and places the body next to a tree so that it will seem like an accident. They also block the spring with the hopes of buying it at a low price.

Osman and the Soubeyrans as the Petty Bourgeoisie

Osman's unwillingness to share water and Soubeyrans' orchestration of artificial scarcity mirror real-world capitalist strategies where resource control determines who thrives and who is forced out of the market, making them examples of the petty bourgeoisie in their pursuit of economic dominance. In *SUSUZ YAZ*, Osman is the prototypical, or perhaps aspirational, petty bourgeois figure, demonstrating the desire for monopolistic control through his claim over the water rights on the land owned by him and his brother. Despite his brother Hasan's staunch opposition, he relentlessly pursues this monopolistic ambition. Hasan tells Osman that it is not right for them to use the water only for themselves. Moreover, Hasan is foreseeing that the villagers will not let them get away with this. However, since Osman is the elder brother, Hasan feels that he has to respect him and do as he says. Then, Osman and villagers have disputes over the water rights. Osman says, "The water has sprung from my land. I use it as I please" (00:08:39), and one of the villagers says, "The water belongs to everyone. How can you own the running water?" (00:08:47).

When the issue comes to a dead-end, the mukhtar tries to talk Osman into letting the other villagers use the water as a figure of authority, especially in a community like a village. However, Osman does not show any change of heart and tells the mukhtar that they can take the issue to the court, which they do. The application of the villagers reads: "Although there is an issue of ownership and title deed, from the point of view of public interest, this case reveals that the aggrieved persons have a legitimate position against the defendant" (00:27:47). The court rules that Osman shall unblock the water until the end of the trial so that there will not be a public grievance caused by the dispute. Osman comments that "The sword of justice has no scabbard" (00:29:01). As a counter move, though, he himself hires a lawyer and goes to the court. It is then decided that Osman can block the water, which he does. Not surprisingly, the fields of the villagers are doomed to drought.

In *Jean de Florette*, the aspirant petty bourgeoisie is Cesar Soubeyran along with his nephew Ugolin. They do not attempt to form a monopoly over water resources through direct control or legal means per se. Rather, through trickery and manipulation, they aim to eliminate a potential competitor, acquire valuable land, and expand their position within the local market. After Pique-Bouffigue dies and Jean inherits the land, Cesar Soubeyran and Ugolin do everything in their power to make him leave the town so that they can take control of the spring. For example, they block the spring in the land so that no one will be able to use it until they buy the land themselves. In the meantime, while Jean is working hard to adapt to rural life, Cesar Soubeyran and Ugolin act as if helping him but are awaiting his downfall. Cesar

Soubeyran tells Ugolin to “act friendly” towards him and “lend him my mule” (00:39:03) “so that when he leaves, he’ll sell the farm to you, no one else” (00:39:17). In other words, they are “push[ing] him in the direction where he will fall” (00:40:16).

In the end, the uncle and the nephew emerge victorious as they buy the land, and the water source becomes theirs. They had little faith in Jean becoming a farmer as Cesar Soubeyran says, “A farmer may grow a hump, but a hunchback rarely becomes a farmer” (00:27:19). However, they are also aware that it is them who caused Jean’s failure as Cesar Soubeyran tells Ugolin, “If you start to strangle a cat, finish it off” (01:24:10). In the end, it is their cunning plan all along that made Jean unsuccessful.

Erksan’s Social Realism vs. Berri’s Spectacle

Even though *Susuz Yaz* and *Jean de Florette* show a nonnegligible amount of similarity in terms of their plots, their contexts and the motivations of the directors are quite distinct. *Susuz Yaz*, rooted in Turkish social realism, serves as a direct critique of private ownership of water, reflecting Erksan’s socialist background. In contrast, *Jean de Florette*, as a French heritage film, presents water as a rural spectacle and its control as an aspect of rural life. While both films explore the consequences of monopolization of water resources, they do so through distinct ideological and cinematic lenses, shaped by their respective cultural and historical backgrounds.

Susuz Yaz cannot be thought of without taking its director’s political background into account. Erksan was politically very engaged and supported socialist ideas affiliated with the Socialist Party of Turkey (TSP) in the 1950s, became a parliamentary candidate from the Workers’ Party of Turkey (TIP) list in 1965 and advocated for a local and national revolutionary approach to cinema (Kesal, 2018, p. 10). Therefore, it is not surprising that property is one of the first few concepts that come to mind when talking about his cinema (Gündoğdu, 2017, p. 56). Erksan, who introduced many famous actors to cinema, lived in a rented house throughout his life despite being financially successful. Moreover, he pioneered unionization and association movements in the cinema industry in Turkey (Kesal, 2018, p. 10).

Regarding *Susuz Yaz*, Erksan states that he shot it in order to discuss the issue of private property (Yılmaz & Vatansever, 2019, p. 441). He says,

When I was making the film, I thought about the issue of property. ... What is property, what is not property? Where did the issue of property come from? ... At that time, the *Cari Law* was in effect in Turkey. Lakes, territorial water sources and rivers were the property of the public, only springs were the property of whosever land they sprung from. ... You can surround a piece of land with a fence and say this is mine. But you cannot own the water. ... Let’s say you have land in the palm of your hand. You can hold that soil in your hand as long as you can. But when you have water in your palm, you cannot do the same thing. The water will flow away, no matter how much you squeeze your fingers. It is water from a spring. The spring is always boiling. How can you own it? Even if the property owner builds a dam, he still cannot hold the water. The water will definitely go somewhere. I was very interested in this element of water that does not recognize property boundaries. (Sönmez & Öztürk, 1985, p. 28)

Erksan emphasizes the ephemeral nature of water and explains, through it, why water cannot be privately owned like land. In this sense, *Susuz Yaz* aligns with the social realism movement in Turkish cinema, which emerged following the political environment in the aftermath of the May 27 Coup in Turkey.

After the general election in May 1950, the Democrat Party (DP) dominated the Turkish Grand National Assembly with an overwhelming number of seats, which was an unprecedented situation as the Republican People’s Party (CHP) had been ruling the country thus far since its

establishment. In 1960, the DP government was broken off in the 27th May Coup for a number of reasons: economic deterioration, political instability, a growing sense of resentment within the military, the perceived threat of US influence, and the increasing authoritarianism of the government (Demir, 2016, p. 177). The constitution introduced following the coup contained progressive regulations as to freedom of speech, freedom of association, and union rights. As a result, certain new intellectual doctrines, including socialism, started to become popular in Turkey. This new atmosphere also influenced the Turkish film industry and enabled filmmakers to address social issues through social realism (Kılınc, 2019, p. 42). These filmmakers were engaged with strong social and political beliefs; they made films that appealed to the public and intellectuals and aimed to raise awareness. They focused on the problems of ordinary people, telling the story of “one of us” rather than marginal stories (Daldal, 2005, pp. 61–63)

Therefore, as Daldal (2005) explains, social realism in Turkish cinema aimed to reflect the existing order with an impartial and revolutionary view and to establish an original cinematic language. These two objectives complemented each other. The focus was thus to be on the issues of the oppressed, the consequences of urbanization and industrialization, and realistic solutions were to be sought. This understanding influenced the narrative, making the dramatic structure more serene, scientific and realistic, and the subjects were chosen from the problems experienced by the people (p. 58).

In the context of social realism in Turkish cinema, *Susuz Yaz* was a turning point, breaking new ground both in terms of form and content. The film became a political issue, brought state-cinema relations to the agenda and increased the interest of the Turkish intelligentsia in cinema. It reignited the problem of censorship and made Turkish cinema internationally recognized. Erksan stated that he created a cinematic language with his film and addressed the issue of property (Gündoğdu, 2017, pp. 51–52). The political dimension of this film can be comprehended better considering that, prior to *Susuz Yaz*, water sources belonged to the owner of the land where they were located. However, afterwards, this situation changed, and water sources became the property of the state (Gündoğdu, 2017, p. 55)

On the other hand, *Jean de Florette*, being a French rural heritage film, approached water and the water issue through a lens of rural heritage and spectacle, prioritizing visual storytelling and entertainment over direct political engagement. As maintained by McMurray (2010), French rural heritage films have several key components: the physical land itself, the people who live on that land, the values and customs they uphold, and specific visual and cultural cues that communicate rural to viewers. These components are rural landmarks and indicators of the picturesque countryside. Geographical features, landscapes, stereotypical characters, and traditional social behaviors collectively contribute to the understanding of the nation’s rural identity (p. 27). In this context, *Jean de Florette* is considered by numerous film historians to have launched the French heritage film style (McMurray, 2010, pp. 34–35) and, along with its sequel, *Manon des Sources*, it achieved remarkable commercial success, topping the French box office in 1986 with millions of viewers. Moreover, due to the captivating portrayal of rural France, critics lauded the two films as prime examples of high-quality popular French cinema. As a result, beyond their narrative fidelity, Berri’s films established the hallmarks of the genre: a visually stunning cinematic experience with expansive landscapes and vibrant colors, underpinned by a record-breaking budget and a star-studded cast that fueled an extensive media campaign. This combination of literary adaptation, visual spectacle, and strategic marketing solidified the films as landmark cinematic events and defined the emerging heritage film style (McMurray, 2010, pp. 42-60).

Furthermore, Berri’s emphasis on expansive landscapes and intense dramatic tone resonated beyond French borders. Like many heritage films that followed, these films were perceived as quintessentially French internationally, symbolizing French customs and traditions. Global audiences began to seek films rooted in tradition, personal yet universal

stories, and timeless human relationships. This highlighted the exceptional exportability of Berri's films and the heritage film genre in general. The elements that captivated French audiences also appealed to international viewers, setting these films apart from many other French productions (McMurray, 2010, pp. 59–60).

Nonetheless, it is also important to note that, in addition to offering a rich array of visual aesthetics, certain rural heritage films also “depict life on small French farms as a harsh and vanishing way of life” (McMurray, 2010, p. 26), which is what *Jean de Florette* does: narrate the social and economic condition of its time. Accordingly, in France, the 19th and 20th centuries witnessed a significant decline in subsistence farming and the concurrent rise of capitalist agriculture, driven by a complex interplay of economic and social forces. Initially, the term “paysan” encapsulated a broad rural identity, signifying someone from the country and often used in a cultural, sometimes pejorative context. However, as market economies encroached upon rural life, exemplified by “rising taxes and manorial dues” compelling peasants into cash-generating activities, the definition of “paysan” shifted; it increasingly became associated with “self-employed farmers producing for the market” (Bulaitis, 2008, p. 4). This transformation was further fueled by the erosion of traditional subsistence practices, where “diversifying crops, livestock, and money-making work and relying on common lands assured the subsistence of rural households and communities” (Lafrance, 2024, p. 17). The increasing necessity to participate in the market, coupled with evolving land ownership structures and advancements in commercial farming, effectively transitioned rural populations from a primarily subsistence-based existence to one integrated into a capitalist agricultural system. As a result, rural areas in France started to depend on small market towns to sustain their economy through their enduring relationships with neighboring peasant communities. These towns developed into commercial centers, and this collective group of modest wealth individuals, that is peasants, maintained substantial power throughout the entire country (Kemp, 1969, p. 3).

Accordingly, in addition to offering an abundance of spectacles and visual elements, *Jean de Florette* also reflects the broader transition of rural France from subsistence farming to capitalist agriculture. The Soubeyrans' plan to establish a commercial carnation business exemplifies the shift from self-sufficient farming to market-oriented production, where agricultural success depends on resource control and economic competition. As rising taxes, manorial dues, and land ownership changes forced peasants into cash-generating activities, the traditional paysan identity evolved, aligning more with self-employed farmers producing for the market rather than subsistence-based livelihoods. The film captures this transformation, highlighting the tensions between traditional rural practices and emerging capitalist structures, where economic survival hinges not just on hard work but on access to essential resources like water.

However, this aspect of *Jean de Florette* does not signify any political or critical outlook; the film is simply observational. While *Susuz Yaz*, with its highly political approach, brought the water issue into the national agenda, *Jean de Florette* had no such effect; nor did it aim to. The corresponding law in France, which is the article 642 of the Civil Code, has been in effect since 1804, and it clearly states that a landowner with a natural spring on their property can use its water freely (*Chapitre Ier: Des Servitudes Qui Dérivent de La Situation Des Lieux (Articles 640 à 648) - Légifrance*, n.d.). This legal framework had long established the principles of water ownership in France, making the film's depiction of resource control more of a historical reflection than a call for change. Unlike *Susuz Yaz*, which actively challenged existing laws and contributed to legal discussions on water rights, *Jean de Florette* simply portrays the social conditions of rural life within an already defined legal structure, without seeking to question or alter it.

Conclusion

In terms of their themes, the two films are quite similar. *Susuz Yaz* and *Jean de Florette* both center on the struggle for water as a source of power and economic survival. In each film, water is not merely a natural necessity but a monopolized resource that dictates who thrives and who is driven to ruin. The protagonists who control the water, Osman in *Susuz Yaz* and the Soubeyrans in *Jean de Florette*, use force, legal means and manipulative tactics to maintain dominance over their respective communities. Meanwhile, those who are deprived of water, such as the villagers in *Susuz Yaz* and Jean in *Jean de Florette*, represent small landowners struggling against the petty bourgeoisie figures.

Despite their thematic similarities, the films diverge significantly in their cinematic and ideological framing, reflecting the historical and social contexts of their settings. *Susuz Yaz*, shaped by Turkish social realism, actively critiques private ownership of water and the broader implications of resource monopolization, aligning with the socialist concerns of Erksan. The film portrays Osman's control over water as a direct moral and social transgression, emphasizing the exploitative nature of privatization and its consequences for the people living in rural areas.

In contrast, *Jean de Florette*, as a French heritage film, takes a more observational and historical approach, depicting water monopolization as a condition rather than explicitly condemning it. The film emphasizes the structural forces of petit bourgeoisie capitalism and market competition, showing how small landowners might resort to ruthless strategies to survive in a changing economy. The film's cinematic style prioritizes visual grandeur and the romanticization of rural landscapes, in line with the aesthetics of heritage cinema, which often focuses on the past as a means of cultural reflection instead of engaging with it politically. Unlike *Susuz Yaz*, which actively makes an evident critique of the status quo, *Jean de Florette* presents the tragic consequences of economic ambition as part of rural life, not putting forward a systemic critique of capitalism.

This contrast demonstrates how different cinematic traditions shape the portrayal of rural conflicts, influencing whether a film serves as a social critique or a historical reflection. While *Susuz Yaz* functions as a politically engaged film advocating for change, *Jean de Florette* offers a depiction of economic hardship and power struggles, allowing audiences to witness the impact of resource monopolization without overt ideological messaging.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The author of the article declared that there is no conflict of interest.

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