An examination of the thematic consistency and auteur signature in Tolga Karaçelik's cinema*

Tolga Karaçelik sinemasında tematik tutarlılık ve auteur imzasının incelenmesi

Selvi Ece Dugan[1] (iD)

[1] PhD Candidate, Anadolu University, The Institute of Graduate Education, Cinema and Television, Eskişehir /Türkiye.

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Abstract

The objective of this study is to analyse the filmography of Tolga Karaçelik, a director who is representative of the Recent Turkish Cinema, within the framework of the Auteur theory. This approach aims to elucidate the thematic consistency that forms the foundation of his cinematic style. The research sample consists of the director's feature films Gişe Memuru, Sarmaşık, Kelebekler, and Psycho Therapy: The Shallow Story of a Writer Who Decided to Write About a Serial Killer. In this study, the deductive thematic analysis method was employed as a qualitative data analysis technique, with latent coding being adopted. A systematic analysis process was undertaken, resulting in the identification of four fundamental thematic axes: authority and power, journey, dysfunctional relationships, and madness, suicide, and death. The research findings demonstrate that Karaçelik's characters are confined, both physically and psychologically, within the narrative structures he employs. Furthermore, the blend of tragedy and absurd humour is indicative of a consistent structure that extends from local stories to universal existential crises. The inclusion of the director's latest film, which was shot in English, in this structure serves to demonstrate that thematic continuity is able to transcend cultural boundaries. This study systematically demonstrates the content and formal continuity in Karaçelik's cinema, thereby supporting the director's distinct auteur identity in Recent Turkish Cinema.

Keywords: *Tolga Karaçelik, Turkish cinema, auteur theory, thematic analysis*

Öz

Bu çalışmanın amacı, Yakın Dönem Türk Sineması yönetmenlerinden Tolga Karaçelik'in filmografisini Auteur kuramı bağlamında inceleyerek sinemasal imzasını oluşturan tematik tutarlılığı ortaya koymaktır. Araştırma örneklemini, yönetmenin Gişe Memuru, Sarmaşık, Kelebekler ve Saykoterapi: Bir Seri Katil Hakkında Yazmaya Karar Veren Yazarın Sığ Hikayesi filmleri oluşturmaktadır. Çalışmada, nitel veri analizi tekniklerinden tümdengelimsel tematik analiz yöntemi kullanılmış ve gizil kodlama düzeyi benimsenmiştir. Sistematik analiz sürecinde dört temel tematik eksen tespit edilmiştir: Otorite ve iktidar, yolculuk, yolunda gitmeyen ilişkiler ve delilik ve intihar ve ölüm. Araştırma bulguları, Karaçelik'in karakterlerini fiziksel ve psikolojik olarak sıkışmış mekânlara hapsettiğini, trajediyi absürt mizahla harmanladığını ve yerel hikâyelerden evrensel varoluşsal krizlere uzanan tutarlı bir yapı kurduğunu göstermektedir. Yönetmenin İngilizce çektiği son filminin de bu yapıya eklenmesi, tematik sürekliliğin kültürel sınırları aştığını kanıtlamaktadır. Sonuç olarak bu çalışma, Karaçelik sinemasındaki içeriksel ve biçimsel devamlılığı sistematik verilerle ortaya koyarak, yönetmenin Yakın Dönem Türk Sinemasında belirgin bir auteur kimliği taşıdığını desteklemektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: *Tolga Karaçelik, türk sineması, auteur kuram, tematik analiz*

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* This article is related to the author's master's thesis titled "Tolga Karaçelik Cinema in The Scope of Auteur Theory". The article has been rewritten, the methodology has been changed, and the number of films has been increased to ensure the data remains up-to-date.

Introduction

The evolution of cinema from a mere entertainment medium to an art form that reflects the director's personal vision has been a subject of profound debate within the field of film theory. The Auteur theory, which emerged in the 1950s at the journal Cahiers du Cinéma under the leadership of François Truffaut and André Bazin, placed the figure of the "creative director" at the center of this transformation. The theory defines film not as an industrial product, but as an artistic means of expression in which the director uses the camera like a writer's pen (caméra-stylo) (Kuyucak Esen, 2015). From this standpoint, the repeated presence of thematic patterns, character archetypes, visual preferences, and narrative rhythms within a director's filmography is seen to contribute to the formation of a distinctive "signature".

The tradition of auteur directors in Turkish cinema has a deep-rooted history, beginning in the 1960s with Metin Erksan and Lütfi Ömer Akad, and deepening in the 1990s and 2000s with directors such as Nuri Bilge Ceylan, Zeki Demirkubuz, Reha Erdem, and Yeşim Ustaoğlu. This period is referred to as the "New Turkish Cinema," and is characterized by themes such as individual alienation and rural hardship (Atam, 2011). In the contemporary context, the term "Recent Turkish Cinema" has been employed to denote this evolving trend within the nation's film industry. Prominent directors such as Tolga Karaçelik, Emin Alper, Özcan Alper, and Pelin Esmer have emerged as significant contributors to this movement, showcasing diverse stylistic approaches that draw upon and build upon the rich heritage of their predecessors (Velioğlu-Metin, 2019).

Tolga Karaçelik is a noteworthy exemplar of this emergent generation, exhibiting a cinematic style that transcends the conventional narrative structure characterized by "provincial angst." His filmography features a blend of the urban individual's sense of entrapment, accentuated by elements of absurd humor, psychological tension, and grotesque imagery. The director's filmography is characterized by an exploration of the nexus between individual and authority, the dynamics of miscommunication, and existential dilemmas. In Karaçelik's films, the characters are typically "those who cannot hold on," metaphorically crushed by the wheels of the system or pushed outside those wheels and resorting to madness. However, a review of the literature reveals that studies on Karaçelik's cinema are generally limited to individual film analyses or specific motifs. The absence of comprehensive studies that cover the director's entire and most recent feature filmography and address the continuity and transformation of his cinematic language from a holistic perspective forms the basis of this research.

This study aims to discuss the thematic consistency and auteur identity of director Karaçelik by examining his films Gişe Memuru (2010), Sarmaşık (2015), Kelebekler (2018), and Psycho Therapy (2024). Using thematic analysis, the study compares these films within the framework of auteur theory in terms of recurring themes. Throughout the analysis, four main themes are emphasized: "authority and power," "journey," "dysfunctional relationships and insanity," and "suicide and death." These themes reveal both the motifs that are consistently present in the director's cinematic narrative and the existential journeys of the characters.

Auteur Theory

The inception of auteur theory is commonly attributed to the publication of articles by a group of young film critics, led by André Bazin, in the magazine Cahiers du Cinema. In these articles, the critics offered critical assessments of their respective national cinemas. The film libraries of that era provided these young critics, who had received rigorous film education, with the opportunity to study directors working within the classical narrative tradition and the Hollywood studio system. These critics were able to write about these films and make comparisons with the cinema of their own countries (Kuyucak Esen, 2015). The Auteur theory, thought to have emerged with the writers of the 1951-founded Cahiers du Cinema magazine, was pioneered by Astruc's (2016) article Camera-Stylo

prior to the magazine's establishment. In his 1948 article, Astruc advanced the argument that cinema had evolved into a language and a medium of expression. He further elaborated on this assertion by drawing parallels between the director's use of the camera and that of a writer utilizing a pen. The Cahiers writers were influenced by Astruc's article and proceeded to analyze Hollywood directors' films, subsequently writing articles on the subject. Notable articles such as A Certain Tendency of French Cinema authored by Truffaut, a contributor to the magazine, and On the Politics of Authors by Andre Bazin, played a significant role in the development of this theory (Teksoy, 2009). The articles under discussion, collectively termed the "Creative Directors Policy," were adopted by the Cahiers writers and regarded as the foundational manifesto of French New Wave Cinema. This adopted policy resulted in the establishment of a distinction between Auteur and Metteur en Scene (Büker, 2019). The term "auteur" is used to denote individuals who write a film expressing their own feelings and thoughts, while "metteur en scène" is used exclusively for those who visualize a script written by someone else (Truffaut, 2016).

Adherents of the Creative Directors Policy, predominantly youthful critics, did not merely compose reviews; they proceeded to produce their own cinematic works. Contrary to the tradition of film production that had been established in French cinema prior to this period, these filmmakers did not continue this tradition. Instead, they subjected this tradition to harsh criticism and developed new narrative styles. These directors, collectively referred to as the French New Wave, subscribed to the belief that a director's personal world and vision should be manifest in their films. The argument was made that this should be reflected not only in the screenplays of the films but also in the style of the film (Abisel and Eryılmaz, 2014). The significance of the New Wave is predicated on its demonstration that the director plays a pivotal role in all stages of film production, from the initial draft to the screenplay, and from the shooting stage to the editing process.

In the examination of the development process of auteur theory, Andrew Sarris emerged as a pivotal figure. Sarris's transformation of the policy formerly recognized as the "creative directors' policy" into a coherent theoretical framework marked a significant contribution to the field. This transformation occurred as Sarris perceived a lack of a clearly defined manifesto that could be regarded as a comprehensive body of thought. Sarris (2008) identified three prerequisites for a director to be considered an auteur. The first prerequisite is the director's technical skill and mastery; the second prerequisite is the director's discernible degree of individuality; and the final prerequisite is expressed as internal meaning. Sarris's approach placed the director at the core of the film, a position that often contrasted with the tendency to prioritize screenwriters, producers, or star actors.

Conversely, Wollen (2013) approached the theory from a different angle, attempting to integrate structuralism into it. He advanced an argument against the theory's exclusive emphasis on the director, highlighting the failure to consider the content and structure of films. He contended that criticism ought to encompass both the content and formal elements of films, while simultaneously acknowledging the role of the director.

In the contemporary context, the auteur theory has been recognized as a valid and operational film criticism approach for comprehending the continuities and transformations in a director's filmography, as opposed to asserting an unquestionable authority attributed to the director.

The Place of Thematic Analysis in Author Theory

The auteur criticism approach aims to explain the director's fundamental concerns, recurring themes in their films, and content and form preferences in the context of the consistency of their personality and their relationship with other works (Özden, 2004). The approach adopted in this study is to focus on the filmography of a single director, with the primary objective being to analyze the characteristic structures that recur, diversify, or appear in contrasting forms throughout the films,

as well as the director's personal mental preoccupations.

In this context, themes emerge as one of the distinctive elements or signatures at the center of auteur criticism. Thematic analysis provides a framework for understanding the director as a "creative subject" by offering a methodical approach to the analysis of cinematic discourse. This analysis enables the exploration of the director's intellectual orientation, aesthetic preferences, and the broader context of their cinematic work. As Bordwell and Thompson (2017) have demonstrated, thematic analysis is an approach that, from the perspective of auteur theory, goes beyond merely describing the content of the film and examines the continuity and consistency of the director's cinematic universe.

Themes are conceptual structures that exhibit continuity within a film script on a specific narrative or symbolic layer. In this context, themes are defined as areas in which the director's mental preoccupations, artistic orientations, and ideological positioning become visible on the cinematic plane. Thematic patterns are not confined to the film's subject matter; they can manifest themselves in different planes, such as character structures, forms of conflict, spatial preferences, narrative rhythm, and visual language. Thematic analysis can be utilized to examine the questions, tensions, emotional and social issues that are repeated in the director's cinema, as well as the values employed to construct a narrative.

According to Knight (2014), the concept of thematic consistency is identified as a fundamental element of a director's artistic identity in the context of auteur criticism. Consequently, themes facilitate the establishment of a connection between films produced by the same director in different periods and genres, thereby enabling the observation of changes and transformations within the production processes.

Finally, the dialectical relationship between content and form is critical in relating themes to the Auteur theory. Auteur criticism acknowledges that themes are addressed not only at the narrative level (screenplay) but also through the constitutive elements of cinematic form. The director's image composition, camera movements, use of sound/music, or editing approach are formal strategies that reinforce the impact of specific themes (e.g., loneliness or authority). As Corrigan and White (2012) point out, thematic analysis involves not only what the film says, but also how it says it and through which aesthetic arrangements this narrative is constructed. Therefore, the thematic analysis adopted in this study aims to read Karaçelik's cinema through both content and formal codes.

Methodology

Research Design

In this study, thematic content analysis, a qualitative research method, was adopted to reveal the characteristic features that define Tolga Karaçelik's cinema and his cinematic signature. Creswell (2013) asserts that qualitative research is the most appropriate approach for discovering and examining meanings related to human and social issues in depth. In the domain of film studies, thematic analysis exhibits a robust methodological congruence with the Auteur Theory, as it facilitates the identification, organization and interpretation of patterns of meaning in films.

The thematic analysis of a director's filmography transcends mere description of the elements that emerge in their films, thereby facilitating their linkage to the director's creative universe, narrative preferences, and cinematic language. As McKee (2003) emphasizes, this approach contributes to grounding the "personal signature" debate at the heart of auteur theory in concrete data and renders the content and formal continuities in the director's filmography visible.

In the context of this study, a deductive approach was adopted, whereby the data were analyzed according to a predetermined theoretical framework, namely the Auteur Theory. This approach entailed the examination of a latent coding level, which revealed subtexts that lay beyond the apparent (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The adoption of a

deductive approach in this research is based on the necessity that the analysis process be guided by the theoretical interest of the research (Auteur Theory) rather than the data itself. In this context, the coding process was conducted under the guidance of theoretical concepts. In a similar vein, given the metaphorical and symbolic nature of Tolga Karaçelik's cinema, an exclusive focus on surface-level semantics would prove inadequate. Consequently, the latent coding level was selected as the optimal approach for analyzing the underlying assumptions, ideological structures, and conceptual patterns inherent in this content (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This methodological decision enabled the interpretation of objects such as 'butterflies', 'ivy' and 'box office' in the director's films as indicators reflecting the psychological states of the characters, beyond their physical existence. The systematic structure offered by this method has enabled an evaluation of the intellectual and artistic elements that demonstrate continuity between the films within a holistic framework, thus transcending the surface-level genre and formal diversity observed in Karaçelik's cinema.

The Population and The Sample

The population of the study consists of all visual productions directed by Tolga Karaçelik. In accordance with the objective of the research, purposive sampling was employed, as delineated by Patton (2014) as "information-rich cases," and four feature films that most comprehensively reflect the director's cinematic language and auteur identity were incorporated into the sample.

When the films comprising the sample group are examined in chronological order, Gişe Memuru (2010) represents the director's entry into the world of cinema with its success at national and international festivals. Next came Sarmaşık (2015), which premiered at the Sundance Film Festival, giving the director global visibility. After this success, Kelebekler (2018) was awarded the "World Cinema Grand Jury Prize" at the Sundance Film Festival, thereby consolidating Karaçelik's auteur identity. The final instalment of the sample, Psycho

Therapy: The Shallow Story of a Writer Who Decided to Write About a Serial Killer (2024) serves as a concrete exemplification of the director's capacity to translate local themes into a universal framework, as it was filmed in New York and premiered at the Tribeca Film Festival.

The decision to exclude the director's short films and digital platform series from the study's sample was a deliberate methodological choice. Auteur criticism is predicated on the assumption that the director's artistic vision, technical proficiency, and thematic consistency can be observed in their most mature form in feature-length cinema films. The time constraints of short films and the industrial format requirements of series projects can make it difficult to follow the director's "personal signature." Therefore, to maintain the scope validity of the research and the homogeneity of the analysis, only feature-length films over which the director had full creative control were included in the analysis.

Data Collection and Analysis Process

The analysis process was conducted in accordance with the six-stage systematic framework developed by Braun and Clarke (2006).

The initial stage of the process is to become acquainted with the data. The four films in the sample group were watched at least three times each, in chronological order and independently. During the first viewing, the general narrative structure was noted, while subsequent viewings focused on recurring visual/auditory motifs, character behaviors, and spatial uses that were thought to reflect the director's style.

The creation of initial codes is the second stage of the process. The initial code list was created by identifying the smallest meaningful units within the data set. At this stage, Auteur Theory was utilized as a lens; not only the script and dialogues but also cinematographic choices were included in the coding process.

The creation of themes is the third point for consideration. The codes obtained were then

grouped according to their similarities and relationships to one another, with a view to creating potential themes. A comprehensive analysis of the director's body of work revealed recurrent patterns that emerged as potential main theme candidates. For instance, the concepts of "incommunicability" and "loneliness" were categorized within more extensive classifications.

As a result of this systematic analysis process, the main themes derived from the raw data, subcategories, and all the unique codes that constitute these categories were brought together to create the thematic codebook for the research.

This structure, which forms the conceptual framework of the study, and all the codes identified are presented comprehensively in Table 2 below.

Table 1. Research coding strategy and sample data analysis matrix

Raw Data	Cinematographic Indicator	Open Coding	Main Theme Reached
Kenan doesn't give his father his medicine when he has a heart attack, he just watches.	Close-up facial expressions, ambient sound, and use of silence.	-Not helping father -Passive action -Waiting for authority to die	Authority and Power
The ship's engines stop, and it remains stationary in the middle of the sea.	Use of claustrophobic spaces, narrow corridors, low angle shots.	-Stopping of movement -Spatial confinement -Impossibility of escape	Journey
The siblings talk in the car but don't listen to or understand each other.	Characters talking to each other without looking at each other in the same space.	-Disconnected dialogue -Clash of monologues -Sense of incomprehension	Dysfunctional Relationship and Madness
Suzie's transformation from the victim role in the finale to the person who makes the life-or-death decision.	Increased light-shadow contrast on the character and the camera framing the character in a dominant position.	-The death of innocence -Victim-Perpetrator transformation -The urge to kill	Suicide and Death

Fourthly, a review of the themes is to be conducted. The themes that were identified were then checked for consistency with the codes and the entire data set. Weak codes that appeared in only one film or were not directly related to the director's auteur identity were eliminated; it was verified that the themes were homogeneous within themselves and heterogeneous in relation to each other.

The fifth point pertains to the definition and naming of themes. The themes that emerged from the analysis were assigned academic and descriptive names that best represent the director's cinematic universe. For instance, the theme initially identified as "Troubled Relationships" was renamed "Dysfunctional Relationships and Madness" with the support of the literature, and its scope was clarified.

Sixthly, the issue of reporting is to be addressed. The findings were presented in an analytical narrative, supported by direct quotations from the films and scene descriptions, and linked to discussions of auteur theory.

The coding strategy followed during the analysis process and the process of transforming raw data into themes are shown in the example table 1.

The analyses in the following 'Findings and Discussion' section were conducted in accordance with the systematic framework and terminology presented in this table.

Findings and Discussion

Theme 1. Authority and Power

The themes that dominate Tolga Karaçelik's feature films are references to power and authority; the state of being on a journey, the loneliness and madness that arise from relationships that are not going well; and finally, suicide and death.

In Tolga Karaçelik's cinema, "authority and power" emerge as a fundamental axis that determines not only the social statuses of the characters but also their psychological and physical spaces. The analysis reveals that the director explores the concept of power through three fundamental sub-codes: (1) Patriarchal Authority and Spatial Enclosure, (2) The Collapse of Institutional Authority, and (3) Relational Power. The following analysis examines the manifestations of these codes in four films and the common narrative techniques that bear the director's "signature."

Table 2. Main themes and code list identified in Tolga Karaçelik's cinema

Main Theme	Subcategories	Codes
Authority And Power	Spatial Authority Authority Figure Power Relations	Spatial Siege Cyclical Power Legitimacy Crisis Power of Absence Voluntary Servitude
Journey	Motion/Stationary Vehicle Use Road Function	Capsular Isolation Halted Journey Nonfunctional Vehicle / Closure Cyclical / Pendulum Movement Purification / Confrontation Cognitive Transformation
Dysfunctional Relationships and Madness	Language and Dialogue Social Psychology Closure	The Dysfunction of Language Collective Monologue Silent Power Paranoid Suspicion The Great Confinement Loss Reality
Suicide and Death	Trauma Transformation Confrontation	The Invisible Determinant (Traumatic Legacy) The Haunted Conscience Passive Murder Symbolic Death The Death of Innocence

Patriarchal Authority and Spatial Enclosure

In the films Gişe Memuru and Kelebekler, the concept of power is embodied directly through the "father" figure. In Gişe Memuru, the father, Hakkı, is positioned as a figure who derives his legitimacy from the sanctity of the past, as in Weber's (2005) conceptualization of traditional authority. However, the director takes this authority out of an abstract concept and reflects it in the use of the domestic space. Hakkı, the "head" of the household, intervenes in a variety of matters, ranging from Kenan's sleep schedule to the placement of objects. This behavior is characterized in the analysis as the "Spatial Siege" code.

A noteworthy discovery in the data set is the "Cyclical Power" code. In the final sequence of Gişe Memuru, the character Kenan, who is expected to be liberated by his father's death, sits in his father's chair and mimics his gestures. This indicates that the director perceives power as a 'transferable' rather than a "destroyable" phenomenon. This scene is a fundamental discovery that disrupts the character's narrative of liberation and underscores the pessimistic cycle that is characteristic of Karaçelik's cinema.

In Kelebekler, the absence of the father figure – who is portrayed as deceased – from a physical standpoint does not preclude his continued influence over the characters.

This is achieved through the utilization of a traumatic legacy that he has created. This situation has been analyzed under the code "Power of Absence." In the scene where the characters listen to the "Patruşka-Matruşka" conversation, the director conveys the impossibility of confronting authority in a tragicomic language.

The Collapse of Institutional Authority

In the film Sarmaşık, power emerges from the family and transforms into the metaphor of "state/institution." The character "Beybaba," as his name suggests, represents both traditional and legal authority. The "Legitimacy Crisis" code identified during the analysis emerges with the ship's halt (the termination of the law's rule). The confinement of Beybaba to his cabin is representative of the shift in power from legitimate authority to unrestrained force. The director initially elevates Beybaba in the frame using low-angle shots, but in the film's denouement, he portrays him as helpless and diminished within his cabin, thereby visually deconstructing power.

Relational Power

In his latest film, Psycho Therapy, the director subverts the "male/father" centered power structure that was evident in his earlier work. In this text, the

institution of marriage is characterized by the figure of Suzie, who embodies the notion of authority within the context of familial relationships. The film's director demonstrates an ability to address the theme of power on both a societal level and a micro-relational level, as evidenced by the depiction of Keane's passivity and Suzie's role as the decision-maker over life and death. In contrast to the prevalence of conflict with authority in other cinematic works, this film presents a paradigm of "voluntary servitude". This situation demonstrates that Karaçelik's analysis of power introduces a novel dimension, positing that authority can be sustained not only through coercion but also through the generation of consent.

Cyclical Journey

In the film Gişe Memuru, the journey is represented not as a linear progression from one place to another, but as a cyclical movement between two points. Kenan's mandatory service between home and the ticket clerk symbolizes the modern individual's imprisonment in routine. The "Capsular Isolation" code, which stands out in the analysis, is seen in Kenan's efforts to repair his father's old car. Here, the car is not a means of transportation, but an imaginary refuge from his father's authority. The director often uses cramped frames and shots through glass in these scenes to visualize the character's isolation from the world.

Table 3. An analytical view of the "authority and power" theme

Code	Movie	Concrete Cinematic Indicator (Evidence)	Analytical Interpretation (Auteur Signature)
Spatial Siege	Gişe Memuru	Hakkı dominating the living room; Kenan retreating to his room.	Power is not an abstract concept; it is a force that constricts physical space.
Cyclical Power	Gişe Memuru	In the final scene, Kenan sitting in his father's chair and doing the same thing.	The individual who rebels against authority eventually becomes authority itself.
Legitimacy Crisis	Sarmaşık	Beybaba hiding the keys and locking himself in his cabin.	When the law (ship rules) becomes ineffective, authority turns into paranoia.
Power of Absence	Kelebekler	The phone call scene, the father never appears but gathers everyone in the village.	Even if the authority figure dies, they continue to rule through the trauma they have created.
Voluntary Servitude	Psycho Therapy	Keane's silent compliance with Suzie's decisions about life and death.	The power relationship is a symbiotic bond that goes beyond the oppressor-oppressed dichotomy.

Theme 2. Journey

In film literature, the concept of "journey," which is often associated with liberation, transformation, and discovery (Laderman, 2002), has been stripped of this function in Tolga Karaçelik's cinema and transformed into an unsettling, cyclical, and claustrophobic experience.

During the analysis process, it was determined that the theme of "journey" was explored under three different codes: (1) Cyclical Journey, (2) Stalled Journey (Immobility), and (3) Journey into the Past/Inward Journey. Although the director appears to use the conventions of the classic "road movie," he constructs an "anti-journey" narrative that physically moves his characters while keeping them psychologically static.

The fact that Kenan's imagined "journey to freedom" ends with him sitting in his father's seat, a "return to father" emphasizes that the journey is actually a cycle chasing its own tail.

Stalled Journey

The film Sarmaşık represents the most radical deconstruction of the "road movie" genre. The ship (Sarmaşık), which is intended to serve as a means of transportation, is transformed into a stationary prison in the midst of the sea as a result of the ship-owner's bankruptcy. The "Non-Functional Vehicle/Trap" code identified in this study creates a "limbo" where the characters are forced to confront the past they wish to escape. The vessel thus becomes a disciplinary space, reminiscent of Foucault's (2006) concept of enclosures, while the director physically halts the journey, redirecting

movement into the characters' minds (paranoia, madness). The sense of spatial expansiveness that is characteristic of the "horizon line" in conventional road movies is substituted in Sarmaşık by the confining and claustrophobic atmosphere of the ship's corridors.

Journey into the Past/Inward Journey

In the director's filmography, Kelebekler is the work that most closely resembles the classic road movie structure. However, the journey here is not toward the future, but toward the past (the father's house/village). In this process, defined by the code "purification/confrontation," the car interior becomes a scene where the siblings confront each other and their past. The director often confines the characters to a single frame in the car scenes, forcing them into physical proximity.

deepens the characters' loneliness. In this process, madness is coded as a necessary "counter-space" to which individuals, pushed outside the disciplinary mechanisms that society accepts as "normal," as Foucault (2006) points out, take refuge. Within the scope of the analysis, this theme is examined along three fundamental code axes: (1) The Dysfunction of Language, (2) The Great Confinement and Paranoia, (3) The Loss of Normality and Loss of Reality.

The Dysfunction of Language

The director places his characters in physically close but mentally unreachable positions. In Gişe Memuru, the relationship between Kenan and his father Hakkı is established through the code of "Silent Power."

Table 4. An analytical view of the "journey" theme

Code	Movie	Concrete Cinematic Indicator (Evidence)	Analytical Interpretation (Auteur Signature)
Cyclical Movement	Gişe Memuru	The bus constantly traveling the same routes; the barrier at the gate going up and down.	A journey is not progress, but a repetition of the monotony of modern life.
Non-Functional Vehicle/Trap	Sarmaşık	The ship's engines fell silent and it lay still in the middle of the sea.	When the ship stops, the characters' inner journey—that is, madness—begins.
Purification/ Confrontation	Kelebekler	Scenes of three siblings arguing while stuck in a car.	The road is a unifying element that forces the characters together.
Cognitive Transformation	Psycho Therapy	Keane internalizing the killer's story while driving.	The physical journey is a metaphor for moral decline and learning "evil."

On the other hand, the journey in Psycho Therapy is more of a cognitive transformation than a physical one. Keane's physical movement inside the car parallels the dark journey into the mind of a serial killer. The initial "Neanderthal-Homo Sapiens" metaphor shows that this journey represents a regression from civilization to savagery.

Theme 3. Dysfunctional Relationships and Madness

In Tolga Karaçelik's cinema, the tragedy of the characters stems not from their actions, but from their inability to communicate. The director removes language (speech) from its role as a means of agreement and transforms it into a wall that

Hakkı's passive stance in front of the television and his failure to answer Kenan's questions is a power strategy that makes communication impossible. In these scenes, the director often uses a fixed camera and wide angle to visualize the physical distance and emotional void between the characters. Kenan's silence at work and in social life is not a conscious choice but a reflection of his father's "silent" authority at home.

A similar situation appears in the film Kelebekler as a "Collective Monologue." The dialogues between three siblings reunited after thirty years in a car are more like conversations that pass each other by than actual "communication." The director posits that the act of "speaking" does not inherently imply "understanding"; the collective trauma,

Table 5. An analytical view of the "dysfunctional relationships and madness" theme

Code	Movie	Concrete Cinematic Indicator (Evidence)	Analytical Interpretation (Auteur Signature)
Silent Power	Gişe Memuru	Hakkı constantly watching TV, ignoring Kenan's questions.	Power is established not by speaking, but by remaining silent and refusing to engage.
Paranoia	Sarmaşık	The crew's glances at each other, whispering, and increasing physical distance.	When communication breaks down in closed spaces, the survival instinct (paranoia) takes over.
Collective Monologue	Kelebekler	The siblings' conversations in the car not complementing each other/interrupting each other.	Traumatic pasts prevent characters from engaging in dialogue in the present.
The Loss of Normality	Psycho Therapy	Suzie's calm demeanor turning into an irrational outburst in the end.	Madness is a crack created by excessive conformity to social norms.

in this case the suicide of the mother, has rendered the language inaccessible.

The Great Confinement and Paranoia

Foucault's (2006) concept of "The Great Confinement" which refers to the isolation of the insane from society at the dawn of the modern era, finds its most concrete expression in the film Sarmaşık. The vessel is employed as a metaphor for an asylum or prison, isolated from society. The "Paranoid Suspicion" code identified in the analysis is triggered by the depletion of food stocks and uncertainty, as the characters perceive each other as threats. The director employs a series of techniques to convey this sense of paranoia, namely the utilization of narrow corridor shots, the strategic use of shadows and low-key lighting. This mise-en-scène serves to imply that violence and madness emerge in the absence of effective communication.

The Loss of Normality and Loss of Reality

In Karaçelik's cinema, madness is not an illness, but a reaction to an unbearable reality. In Gişe Memuru, Kenan's hallucinations are the only way he can cope with his autonomous work life. In the film Psycho Therapy, this situation is coded as "The Loss of Normality". The "seemingly normal" relationship between Keane and Suzie actually masks a significant lack of communication.

The director's statement, "Those who read the script couldn't understand that the film was actually Suzie's film because Keane talked more..."

(Çınar, 2025), confirms that the real carrier of madness in the film is the repressed female character, Suzie.

Suzie's mental breakdown at the end is the fragmentation of the subject against the pressure of the "normalizing" institution of marriage in the Foucauldian sense.

Theme 4. Suicide and Death

In Tolga Karaçelik's cinema, death and suicide function not merely as biological endings, but rather, as Yalom (2001) emphasizes, as traumatic confrontations that reshape the existence of living characters and as narrative catalysts. The director's approach to depicting death is not as an 'act that is shown', but rather as an 'absence' that is 'felt' by those left behind, and which governs them. The coding reveals that this theme manifests in three primary dimensions: (1) ghostly trauma, (2) passive murder/inaction, and (3) suicide and symbolic death.

Ghostly Trauma

In Gişe Memuru and Kelebekler, death is depicted as a "past" that preceded the present time of the film, yet had a profound impact on the characters' present circumstances. The fundamental motivations that determine the characters' actions in both narratives are the mother's suicide in Kelebekler and the mother's death in Gişe Memuru. The "Invisible Determinant (Traumatic Legacy)" code indicates that deceased characters possess greater power than their living counterparts. In the film Sarmaşık, this situation is represented by the

concept of "Ghostly Conscience". The phantomization of the Kurdish figure, followed by its reemergence as a silhouette on the vessel, offers a visual interpretation of death as the reemergence of a repressed consciousness. In these scenes, the director employs shadow play and blurred frames to emphasize that death is not a physical but a mental entity.

Suicide and Symbolic Death

Suicide begins as a "show" and a "cry for help" through the character Nadir in the film Sarmaşık, but as despair grows, it becomes reality. This phenomenon can be understood as a physical reaction to spatial confinement. Conversely, in the film Psycho Therapy, death transitions from the physical to a purely symbolic dimension.

Table 6. An analytical view of the "suicide and death" theme

Code	Movie	Concrete Cinematic Indicator (Evidence)	Analytical Interpretation (Auteur Signature)
Passive Murder/Inaction	Gişe Memuru	Kenan not intervening when his father had a heart attack, but watching him instead.	Liberation from authority is achieved not through active rebellion, but through the choice of "non-rescue."
Ghostly Conscience	Sarmaşık	The silhouette of the lost Kurdish character appearing on the ship.	Death leaves its mark on a place and feeds the madness of those left behind.
Invisible Determinant (Traumatic Legacy)	Kelebekler	The invisible mother's suicide separated and united her three children.	Death is not an end, but a founding event that begins the story.
Death of Innocence/Failure	Psycho Therapy	Suzie's transformation from victim to killer.	The death of physical existence is replaced by the death of ethical values and innocence.

Passive Murder/Inaction

In Karaçelik's films, the characters do not directly kill authority figures; rather, they "allow" them to die. In one of the most critical scenes in Gişe Memuru, Kenan simply watches his father, who is having a heart attack, without giving him his medicine. This inaction is conceptualized as "Passive Murder/Inaction," representing a tacit acknowledgment of the character's endeavor to evade his father's legal authority. The director accomplishes this through the use of a close-up shot, accompanied by the strategic removal of ambient sounds, thereby underscoring the profound moral significance of the scene for the viewer. A similar ambiguity is present in the film Sarmaşık. In the film's finale, Beybaba's fate is not shown, but the crew investigating the question of where the key to his room implies that authority will be eliminated by collective agreement (and possibly violence). In this film, the director presents death as a "necessity" rather than a crime.

In this process, defined by the code "Death of Innocence/Failure," Suzie experiences the fear of being killed (paranoia) and, by the conclusion of the film, becomes the killer (the perpetrator). The director employs a high-contrast lighting technique, illuminating only half of the character's face, to symbolize this transformation. Retired serial killer Kollmick functions in this context less as a genuine death threat and more as a "shadow archetype" that awakens the dark impulses within Suzie. Despite the continued existence of the character's physical being, her moral and psychological integrity has been deemed "dead."

Conclusion

The present study examines the feature filmography of Tolga Karaçelik, a seminal figure in the context of Recent Turkish Cinema, within the framework of the Auteur theory and employing a deductive thematic analysis method. A systematic analysis and coding process was conducted on the films Gişe Memuru, Sarmaşık, Kelebekler and Psycho

Therapy within the scope of the research. This process revealed that these productions form a comprehensive and consistent cinematic universe bearing the director's "auteur signature," rather than being independent stories.

Research findings demonstrate that Karaçelik's cinema is constructed upon four primary thematic axes. The initial axis of analysis, Authority and Power, is manifested in the films through two distinct yet interconnected facets: firstly, as a hierarchical power relationship, and secondly, as a form of spatial confinement. Representatives of Weberian legitimate authority, such as the father, captain, or spouse, physically and psychologically surround the characters; this enclosure, as demonstrated in the case of the Gişe Memuru, does not result in the character's liberation but rather in the cyclical reproduction of authority. The second fundamental axis, entitled "Journey", is employed as a metaphor for illusion and confinement in Karaçelik's cinematic works, contrasting with the prevailing "liberation and transformation" (road movie) narrative commonly associated with cinematic literature. Despite the physical movement of the characters, for instance in Sarmaşık or the service routine in Gişe Memuru, their mental and existential states remain fixed. Consequently, the journey ceases to be a route to salvation and instead functions as a claustrophobic "trap" in which the characters confront their own pathologies.

The third axis that shapes the director's cinematic universe, Dysfunctional Relationships and Madness, becomes apparent in a plane where language and dialogue lose their function. In this process, which can be linked to Foucault's concepts of confinement and normality, the bonds between characters are severed, and paranoia, hallucination, and violence replace rational reality. The films Sarmaşık and Psycho Therapy, in particular, demonstrate that madness, as a consequence of a lack of communication, is coded as an escape from the pressure of social norms. The fourth and final thematic axis, Suicide and Death, is positioned not as a biological end, but as a transformative force that governs the actions of the living characters. The analyses demonstrate that death establishes a

'power of absence'; the phenomenon of 'ghostly trauma', observed particularly in Kelebekler and Sarmaşık, is the fundamental catalyst that initiates the narrative and triggers the characters' inner transformation.

A further noteworthy finding of the study is that the director's most recent film, Psycho Therapy, which was shot in English, does not signify a departure from his filmography, but rather, a thematic continuity. The shift in language and cultural geography has not, however, resulted in the disruption of Karaçelik's established triangle of power, communication breakdown, and dark humor. On the contrary, it has demonstrated that these themes can also function on a universal level.

In conclusion, it is evident that Tolga Karaçelik has established a distinctive and coherent cinematic style within the context of Recent Turkish Cinema. His approach entails the confinement of his characters within limited spaces, the subsequent confrontation of these characters with authority figures, and the juxtaposition of tragedy with absurd humor. This language conveys the individual's inability to cope in the modern world through a systematic narrative structure that spans from local motifs to universal existential crises.

Declarations

Data Availability: All materials analyzed in this study consist of publicly available feature films. The analytical framework, coding scheme, and interpretative notes used during the thematic analysis can be made available by the author upon reasonable request.

AI Disclosure: The author declares that no artificial intelligence–based tools or applications were used in the conception, analysis, writing, or preparation of this manuscript. The study was conducted entirely by the author in accordance with academic research and publication ethics.

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