

Dina Iordanova, Review of Turkish Cinema: Identity, Distance and Belonging  
by Gönül Dönmez-Colin,  
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## **Turkish Cinema: Identity, Distance and Belonging**

by Gönül Dönmez-Colin. Reaktion Books 2008. \$35.00 paper. 268 pages

reviewed by DINA IORDANOVA



A variety of recent publications have highlighted specific aspects of Turkish cinema,<sup>1</sup> Turkish-German diasporic cinema,<sup>2</sup> the New Turkish Cinema,<sup>3</sup> and the history of Turkish cinema.<sup>4</sup> Is another big cinematic tradition about to be discovered as a result of this surge in scholarly writing? Just a decade ago there were only a handful of books on Indian film; now

they occupy significant shelf space at every respectable bookstore. Is Turkish cinema going to be next?

In this context, Gönül Dönmez-Colin's volume is both timely and handy. The book covers all issues related to Turkey and its cinema that the average student of film in the West may want to hear about. It opens with a broad yet succinct historical overview; it discusses the ways in which Turkish cinema has addressed concerns of national identity and rural-urban migration; it addresses uneasy questions of gender and sexuality (from homosexuality to honour killings); it touches on ethnic minority matters. It also talks of important female stars (Türkan Soray), of German Turkish diasporic filmmaking, of new wave directors, and of the troubles affecting the industry related to Turkey's contested ascension to the European Union. Dönmez-Colin dedicates a separate chapter to the life and times of the legendary "ugly king" of Yeşilçam, Yılmaz Güney, a larger than life proletarian entertainer who is extremely popular in Turkey.

With such a large variety of themes, the author's decisions about structure and approach remain somewhat concealed. Some chapters focus on directors or trends, some on history and social discourse. At moments it appears that there is not a unifying principle in the selection of themes or films. Yet when a lesser-known cinematic tradition comes to the attention of a wider international audience, this is precisely the type of book that is needed. Other studies may go deeper analytically and approach the material more systematically, yet general questions about Turkish cinema would still linger. Dönmez-Colin, an independent scholar who lives in France and Quebec, and who attends a range of international film festivals, addresses most of these disparate questions and makes an important contribution. Written from a Western point of view for Western readers, her volume manages to address a range of complex issues and perceptions related to the discourses that dominate Turkey's cultural

reality in a clear and succinct manner. One needs books like this in order to establish basic knowledge of lesser-known cinemas, and it's good that the book appears at this point in time before other studies that use a more advanced theoretical apparatus.

*Turkish Cinema: Identity, Distance and Belonging* is comparable to the pioneering work of Antonin and Mira Liehm on Eastern European cinema, or to Roy Armes's writing on African film—classic texts that remain indispensable introductory reading and reliable reference sources. These books are more preoccupied with the way national self-perception has evolved than with the history of cinema. Similarly, *Turkish Cinema* explores mostly how cinema reflects the nation's identity discourse. There is little on style, little on industry, and next to nothing by way of textual analysis. The volume is more about Turkey's anxious reconciliation with its complex multicultural history, about various aspects of internal and international migration and their intersection with the patriarchal tradition, and about ideological splits, political dissent, and exile, as revealed on film.

At the same time, perhaps because the focus is kept on the films, key stages in Turkey's political evolution remain blurred. Most other books that explore cinema through its link to social discourse tie developments in film to prevailing political regimes: colonialism, state socialism, dictatorship, and so on. This book, however, does not explicitly correlate the turbulence in Turkish politics of recent decades to the politics of filmmaking in Dönmez-Colin's narrative. Still, the analysis traces the genesis of various national identity narratives (e.g., the Kara Murat films) and the ideological complexity of the Islamist and modernizing strands. Though the author zooms in on Güney, the popular tradition of Yeşilçam and of the critical realist strand are underplayed in this narrative, yet they both, I would argue, have evolved in response to political conditions that warrant greater attention.

The link with politics is mostly present in the chapter on “Denied Identities,” which constructs a picture of Turkish cinema’s brave attempts to address the awkward Kurdish issue, related to various aspects of the forcible assimilation and Turkification of the Kurdish population in the country’s southeast. It is important to keep in mind, however, that many of the Kurdish-themed films discussed here have been marginalized or banned and have had little presence or impact in Turkey. Importantly, the author includes the work of filmmakers from the diaspora, although primarily only those based in Germany. A high-profile figure like Italy-based Ferzan Özpetek is treated in passing as a stranger with a tendency to exoticize his native land.

I learned a lot from reading this book. But it also reinforced my general feeling of uneasiness about the use of the national framework in film history, an approach that I no longer find useful. In all of her previous work—which tackles issues of cinematic representations of women and Islam and brings together filmmakers and films from the Middle East, Central Asia, and North Africa—Dönmez-Colin has approached matters in a supranational manner, but the very framework of the current study precludes her from approaching the issues transnationally. For example, she brings to light the work of a forgotten female director, Bilge Olgaç (1940–1994); however, the very context of investigation does not allow her to go a step further and observe that other high-profile female filmmakers from the same generation who worked in the periphery of South Eastern Europe (Greece’s Tonia Marketaki, Serbia’s Soja Jovanovic, Bulgaria’s Binka Zhelyazkova) remain equally unknown. In another instance she discusses the existentialism of directors Zeki Demirkubuz and Nuri Bilge Ceylan, yet the national cinema framework prevents her from making observations that would trace their philosophical and aesthetic lineage to non-Western ⇒lm traditions like those of Iran and Russia. These, and more, are observations that would be worth making. I

hope to see Gönül Dönmez-Colin return, before long, to the mode of exploration that she has helped establish and to resume work in transnational film studies.

**Notes:**

1 See, for example, Deniz Bayrakdar, ed. *Cinema and Politics: Turkish Cinema and the New Europe* (Newcastle, UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009); and chapters in *Shifting Landscapes: Film and Media in Europe*, ed. Miyase Christensen and Nezhir Erdoğan (Newcastle, UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2008).

2 See the special issue of *New Cinemas: Journal of Contemporary Film* 7, no. 1 (2009), ed. Daniela Berghahn.

3 See Asuman Suner, *New Turkish Cinema: Belonging, Identity and Memory* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2010).

4 See Savas Arslan, *Cinema in Turkey* (Oxford University Press) (forthcoming 2011).

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