

2000 San Francisco International Film Festival—Part 2

There are still some courageous people, even in the film industry

An interview with Yesim Ustaoglu, director of *Journey to the Sun*

David Walsh

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This is the second in a series of articles on this year's San Francisco film festival, held April 20-May 4. Aside from an article on documentaries shown at the festival, the pieces will primarily be records of conversations—with five filmmakers and one performer. This is the first in that series of conversations which will be appearing regularly over the next two weeks.

This is what I wrote about *Journey to the Sun* when it appeared last September at the Toronto film festival:

“*Journey to the Sun* is an honest and compassionate film about Turkey by Yesim Ustaoglu. Mehmet, a young man from western Turkey who works for the water department, rescues Berzan, a Kurd who sells music cassettes on the street, from a nationalist crowd in Istanbul. The two become friends. Mehmet has a darker skin and could be mistaken for a Kurd. His girlfriend, Arzu, works in a laundromat. Berzan has a fiancée in Zorduc, a village near the Iraqi border.

“Mehmet is mistakenly detained by the police when a gun is found on a bus near where he was seated. The cops beat him up, convinced that he's a terrorist of some kind. Lacking evidence, they release him after a week. But now he's a marked man. He loses his job and, after a red cross is painted on his door, his roommates ask him to leave. He loses his next job because of a red cross too.

“Meanwhile the political situation is heating up. Kurdish prisoners are on a hunger strike. Berzan, a wanted man, is arrested. He dies in police custody. Mehmet, although not the next of kin, is permitted to take his body in its coffin. He steals a truck and sets out to return Berzan to his native village for burial. After various hardships and changes in means of transportation, Mehmet arrives with the coffin in Zorduc. The town is under water, presumably flooded by the Turkish authorities, and all its buildings destroyed or deserted. Mehmet can only look at the awful scene in front of him. He won't find Berzan's girlfriend, whose photo he has kept. He puts the casket in the water and pushes it out; it floats away.

“To speak out against the oppression of the Kurds in Turkey takes courage. More than that, the film is well made and lively. It manages to be angry and yet restrained. This is Ustaoglu's second feature film. She is to be congratulated.”

Artistic work mobilizes many physiological and mental qualities. One must have an eye or an ear (or both), sensitivity, curiosity, a feeling for form, knowledge of one's field, knowledge of society and history. And certain moral qualities: courage, for example. The willingness to tell the truth when it's difficult to do so, when others around you are more interested in feathering their own nests or making friends in high places. Such as the present moment. There must be a relationship, that works

itself out in a complex fashion, between principled behavior and artistic intuition. Both involve a sense for the essential sharpness, difficulty and beauty of the truth about things.

Turkish filmmaker Yesim Ustaoglu is a calm and soft-spoken but obviously determined woman. We spoke in a downtown San Francisco hotel lobby.

David Walsh: What attracted you to this particular subject?

Yesim Ustaoglu: I've always been very sensitive to human rights questions in my life. I'm always surprised by people who aren't. This has been a major issue in our lives for the past 15 years.

DW: My impression is that it must be difficult or dangerous to talk about the Kurdish question in Turkey. It seems to me a courageous film. Did you have difficulties with the authorities?

YU: Of course to talk about the Kurdish reality is kind of taboo in Turkey. There is an official version, but to discuss more about it is difficult for everybody. When I started to develop the idea for the film I didn't want to hear about the difficulties. This is a subject about which if you touch it you can either be in the system or if you want to try to discuss the system, you have to be very honest. In that case, we never thought about what might happen. I didn't want to hear that it was dangerous. Of course that wasn't easy. One thing, we were very well organized. I worked alone, in casting, locations, everything. And when we were ready, we did it.

DW: Did the film have to pass through censorship?

YU: No, there is no system like that. We just have to apply to show it in cinemas.

DW: Has the film been shown?

YU: It's running right now in Turkey.

DW: How's it doing?

YU: Its world premiere was in Berlin, and then it was shown in Toronto and elsewhere. For a period of more than one year, we had no distributor in Turkey. Not any of them wanted to do it. None of the cinemas wanted to touch it. There was a kind of embargo against the film. The media didn't want to talk about it. We had the permission from the Culture Ministry to release the film, after finishing it. After it showed at Berlin and other places, the government agreed to permit it, but there was another sort of pressure, embargo, from the old system that didn't want to touch this, that didn't want to talk, discuss and show it. I was pretty surprised by the media reaction. I knew some of them would be like that, but I was expecting they would discuss it, but it didn't happen. Very few people criticized the embargo.

In fact, the audience, I think, is good. Many young people come, students, Turkish and Kurdish, who appreciate the subject. Of course there

is discussion about the issues.

DW: You have a nationalist soccer mob in the beginning. Is there an effort to whip up nationalism to divert attention from the social problems, poverty, unemployment?

YU: Yes, the Turkish republic is based on the idea of one nation. For me it's a kind of brainwashing. To concentrate on one nation for the whole country. In Turkey there are many economic and social conflicts, and it's always so easy, when you have problems ... it proves useful to the government or the system, let's say, in a very good way that you can manipulate the people on the nation and you can play very well on religion too.

And there are a lot of struggles in Turkey on these two issues. One is emphasized at one point, the other at a different point. It's always so easy to manipulate the lower classes on this nation issue. If you look at the people from leftist or very right-wing nationalist circles, you can see they have similar problems, but to cure or improve the political situation, they always work on nationalism, so you forget your real social and economic problems, and concentrate on nationalism. It hurts.

DW: What are the economic conditions for the mass of people?

YU: Turkey is trying to privatize its economy, this process has been stepped up. This has created a gap between rich and everyone else. There was a middle class before, in the 1970s, the 1980s, workers and middle class. You could get your effort back if you worked. The union system was much better before. But after the coup in the 1980s, they created very different conditions. They created a very different country in the past 10 or 20 years. The population is very apolitical, except for the nationalists. Some parts of the population became very rich, you never know in what dark way they got such wealth, and the working class, the middle class suffered. Many people from the countryside in the eastern part were pushed into the cities and this created big problems. Unemployment, other problems. Inequality is a big problem.

DW: This is almost universal. In one way or another it's true here, it's true in France. I had the same conversations with directors from France, Lebanon ...

YU: This is globalism.

DW: There is global social inequality. And also there's a universal political problem, that the old parties are discredited, the unions and traditional labor movement have proven worthless. There is a vacuum. People are not happy, but they don't see an alternative. Religious or nationalist movements fill the space and try to appeal to people in a demagogic way. What about the question of Islamic fundamentalism?

YU: In Turkey since you don't have enough democracy for every idea you can create the problem on your own, if you want to have this problem. In our history we had a big pressure for secularism against Islam, and at the same time the system pushes the idea that we are a Moslem country too. They play a game. "We are Moslem, but I give you some rights. We are Moslem only this far." If the people want more, then there is oppression against that. You make these [religious] people politically active. So we had this struggle of the Islamic parties. People who are oppressed look to them, because there is nothing else for them. But the Islamic parties belong to the same system. The people are used, abused. I think the system will stay secular, in any case.

DW: What's your attitude toward the Ocalan trial?

YU: During the trial I was not in Istanbul, I was in Berlin. I followed what was happening. There was again great manipulation by the nationalists. You could read the news in the Turkish media and the foreign press, it was completely different.

There are contradictory pressures. It's up and down. For one thing, Turkey wants to be in the European Union, that tends to make things more moderate. But they don't know how to do it.

I just read, before coming, that the Kurdish reality is accepted, at least for the moment, but still our prime minister says that Kurdish is not a

language. So it's up and down, back and forth. It will take a long period for people to understand this.

DW: What is the position of Turkish filmmakers?

YU: Audiences really want to see Turkish productions. Any of these films can be distributed—except mine. There are some big commercial productions. The industry is bigger now. There are some low-budget, independent films.

DW: Is it possible to show your film in different parts of Turkey?

YU: Yes, at the same time we opened the film in Istanbul, it went to other cities too. Small cinemas, but still ...

DW: There have been no protests or problems?

YU: One advantage we had was that it was so well known outside the country.

DW: Is it difficult to treat social truth, psychological truth and artistic form with equal seriousness?

YU: For me it's one thing. I cannot separate these elements. I want to be honest about what I discuss, about what I want to tell people and to make this in my aesthetic way, in my style. Of course this is important. I want to be a filmmaker, to be an artist. I think all three elements are important in the creation of anything.

DW: What filmmakers do you admire?

YU: Tarkovsky is very important for me. Bergman, Bresson. In Turkey, [the late film director] Vilmaz Güney.

DW: Is he still a big figure in Turkey?

YU: The young generation has started to know more about him.

DW: His films are available?

YU: *Yol* became available last year. This is important for the new generation. Of course my generation knew his films.

DW: Why do you make films?

YU: This is something I love. I love to talk with images, to explain my ideas. I love it.

DW: Did you train in anything else?

YU: I studied architecture, but meantime I was writing stories. In cinema I found everything was present. When I made my first film I realized there was no way to stop it.

DW: I wanted to raise the issue of democratic rights and censorship, the case of Deepa Mehta. It's part of an international process. We launched a campaign in defense of Mehta. I wonder what are your feelings about this problem. Does it represent a danger to democratic rights and artistic expression?

YU: Yes. But she should continue; I should continue. In my country there is a problem, many of my generation, just because they're scared, they don't want to touch anything difficult. And even among the younger generation too. They make films in the system, and it's not good enough. Artists should look at society too.

DW: I think your film is a contribution and I hope many people see it.

See Also:

2000 San Francisco International Film Festival

—Part I

Everything must be done to restore hope

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