You Me Lenin: When a statue of Lenin shows up on a beach in Turkey …

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15 July 2022

Tufan Ta?tan’s intriguing You Me Lenin had its world premiere at the 43rd Moscow International Film Festival in 2021 and made its Turkish debut at the 40th Istanbul Film Festival this year. The film, which began streaming on Netflix in May, received many awards, including Best Screenplay at the 22nd International Frankfurt Turkish Film Festival.


Leading cast members Bar?? Falay and Sayg?n Soysal are joined by Melis Birkan, Serdar Orçin, Nur Sürer, Salih Kalyon, Hasibe Eren, Binnur Kaya and Serkan Keskin, who are well known to theater and cinema audiences in Turkey and have collected many awards.

The movie is a fictionalized account of an actual event. A statue of Russian revolutionary Vladimir Lenin was thrown into the sea after the Stalinist bureaucracy dissolved the Soviet Union in 1991. Two years later it washed ashore in Akçakoca, a town in the western Black Sea province of Düzce in Turkey.

In 2009, officials in Akçakoca discussed erecting the Lenin statue in the town square or displaying it in a museum to boost tourism, but the proposal was never acted upon. Instead, the wooden statue was left to rot in a municipal warehouse.

The story of Akçakoca’s Lenin statue was previously the subject of a short documentary, Welcome Lenin, directed by Ahmet Murat Ö??üt, Aylin Kuryel, Begüm Özden F?rat and Emre Yeksan. With the support of the Turkish Culture and Tourism Ministry, this short documentary dealt with the journey of the statue in a humorous way.

The creators of the documentary, winner of the 2016 Johan van der Keuken Special Jury Prize at Documentarist / Istanbul Documentary Days, emphasized that the work was the product of a collective effort. The short was also screened at the ART?ST 2017 / 27th Istanbul Art Fair on the theme “100th Anniversary of the October Revolution,” which took place simultaneously with the 36th International Istanbul Book Fair.

As noted, You Me Lenin tells the story of a statue of Lenin washed up on the shore of a town on the Black Sea and stolen just before an opening ceremony, complete with the participation of the Turkish and Russian prime ministers. Two policemen dispatched from Ankara search for the missing statue in the town.

Vladimir Lenin was the founder of the Bolshevik Party in Russia, leader of the 1917 Russian Revolution and a towering political and intellectual figure in the 20th century.

In an interview with film journal Ba??ms?z Sinema, director Ta?tan described the genesis of the film as follows: “One day I called Bar?? [B?çakç?] and asked him, ‘What would have happened if the Lenin statue that reached Akçakoca in the 2000s had actually been erected in a conservative town in the Black Sea region?’ Bar?? replied, ‘That would have been a movie.’”

The film has been in development since November 2016. One of the principal reasons for the film’s delayed release was the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition, Ta?tan explained in an interview that after their request for support from the Culture Ministry was rejected, they were unable to work with the producers they had and the first full-length version of the film could not be shot. The final film, a crime thriller and black comedy shot in 12 days, which
doesn’t abandon the original story, was made on the basis of a second, shorter script. This film too is the result of collective work in the face of financial difficulties.

*You Me Lenin* did not have a mass audience in Turkey at the time of its release, partly due to the fact that it could only be seen in 124 theaters in its first week. Moreover, that number dropped to 30 theaters in the second week; the movie remained in cinemas for only four weeks. During the pandemic, which has deeply affected the production of and access to cultural and artistic works, the filmmakers made the effort to have *You Me Lenin* released in order to reach a wider audience.

Despite taking place in a single location, the movie manages to keep the audience glued to the screen with its rapid pace and the tragi-comic situations of the townspeople. Through the theft of the Lenin statue, the film is able to address a phenomenon that has occurred countless times in the last four decades: the Turkish state’s kidnapping and disappearance of leftists and Kurdish nationalists. This criminal practice, which became widespread after the NATO-backed military coup in 1980, reached its peak in the early 1990s.

One of the film’s leading characters, Gül Ana (Nur Sürer) explains that her leftist husband was detained by the police in the early 1990s and vanished in the Black Sea. Disappearance at sea brings to mind the first major state murder during the period of the founding of the Turkish republic. Mustafa Suphi, leader of the Communist Party of Turkey (TKP), founded as a section of the Communist International in 1920, along with 14 comrades, was put on a boat and murdered in the Black Sea by elements linked to the Kemalist Ankara government.

*You Me Lenin* unfolds through scenes of interrogation of the people involved in the incident in the town. The investigation reveals that the statue was stolen not by enemies of Lenin, but by a group of idealistic leftists who are disturbed by the attempt to exploit it as a commodity to promote tourism. At that point the police officials begin to interrogate the known leftists in this seaside town.

Fikret (Serdar Orçin), who photographed the statue, says, “At the beginning I liked the statue being displayed. I was happy that people would be curious about Lenin and learn about the experience of the Soviet Union. But then things got out of hand. Unimaginable things happened.”

?dil (Melis Birkan), a young teacher newly hired in the town, explains, “On the one hand, the affair turned into commerce; on the other hand, the statue turned into a mausoleum. Whereas I thought Lenin would change the town, the town changed Lenin.” This more or less summarizes what happens in the community after the statue washes ashore.

Throughout the movie, the characters interviewed on suspicion of stealing the Lenin work reflect to a certain extent the current political and class structure in the country.

*You Me Lenin* makes an impression on the viewer with its music, as well as its cast and cinematography. In the film’s final moments, a song based on *Mendilimde Kan Sesleri*, *(The voices of blood in my handkerchief)* a poem by Edip Cansever, one of the most important poets of the “Second New Movement,” composed by Bar?? Diri, is performed.

*You Me Lenin* is one of the best films in the black comedy genre that has appeared in Turkey in recent years. The film was followed with great interest after its release on Netflix and continues to be appreciated by audiences. In the interview with *Ba??ms?z Sinema*, director Ta?tan observed that “I am of the opinion that it is not the statue of Lenin that is important, but his ideas. In *You Me Lenin*, we wanted to raise this issue.”

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