

Kenan Görgün and the Turkish Legacy of a Belgian Writer ClujShorts International Film Festival

The search of one's personal identity, a classic theme approached by literature and arts, is continuously given new shapes and nuances as the perks of global capitalism allow individuals to have access to a variety of experiences all across the world. Travelling from one country to another, getting in touch with several (sometimes opposite) cultures has become quite common and it leads to more and more people gaining new perspectives.

But, at the same time, transnational migration is a phenomenon which dissipates the borders of national and cultural norms, since so many people claim to belong to more than one society. Thus, at a constant speed, new issues need to be (re)discussed, issues of significant importance for artists, critics and scholars altogether.

In this context I would like to integrate the following discussion about the film *Yadel* (2010) and the complexity of acknowledging one's Turkish origins in a Western space. Born in Belgium as the child of a Turkish family, Kenan Görgün is an experienced writer and scriptwriter who, in the first film he directed, explores



the various dimensions of identity and its alteration by immigration.

During the third edition of ClujShorts International Film Festival, held in Cluj between the 23th and the 29th of March 2015, in collaboration with Centre d'Etudes de Lettres Belges de Langue Française Kenan Görgün was invited to moderate a masterclass on filmmaking, following his 21 minute movie and subsequent Q&A session.

Yadel

"My name is Yadel. I am not the first. Three years before me, another Yadel was born and died in the family."

Similar to Kenan's novels, *Yadel* is a complex work that mixes the autobiographical narrative level with elements and influences from fantasy and science-fiction, as well as with some strong socio-political criticism. At the core of this movie lies a personal story about a younger brother born a few years before the director. Then other personal elements were included in the script, such as his Turkish origins which for a long time were a taboo

topic for him, or the problematic contact with today's Turkish dogmatic mentality.

First of all, we are talking about a short fiction film which tells the story of a young man called Yadel. On his birthday, a series of events take place, and, in the end, the character will be able to get over his pressing existential dilemma: having received the name of his younger brother who died before his birth – a brother whom he did not know –, Yadel (the second) was constantly haunted by a strong feeling of restlessness, questioning his belonging in the *world*, a broad term which incorporates dimensions such as family, generations, culture, religion etc. Bothering dreams and nightmares, but also visions of his dead brother are invading the protagonist's memory and state of consciousness and create a parallel narrative level. On the other side, the primary narrative and the movie camera follow the young man in his confrontation of the unloving authoritarian father figure and the legacy of Islamic tradition, all of this in order to overcome his inferior status and to gain the right to individuality. Tension is building up as symbolic and surrealist elements challenge the main story's coherence. In the end, it is difficult to tell dream and reality apart, but the stake lies somewhere else: the film has its own grammar which, through moving images and montage, is able to visually construct a cleavage and a personal crisis which can be solved at a symbolic level.

From fiction to social criticism

Kenan Görgün's film presents a split identity whose psychoanalytical double manifests itself in the course of events. The

entire plot is built by using a dual narrative structure that questions the protagonist's personal history and identity. The main conflict is internal, as suggested by all the parallel sequences (the mark of alter-ego) which keep invading the main story. Opposite terms such as I – the Other, personal-collective, real-imaginary, free will-duty, life-death play an important role as they help to concentrate the action in fewer, but more powerful scenes. As it was initially written and shot, *Yadel* was a fifty minute fiction film, but under some constraints coming from the producers' side, more than half was taken out, including a really well-made scene where the main character sits in a bar and drinks. It is not a shame, though, as Kenan Görgün confessed during the masterclass, since the twenty minute short film is as dense and concentrated as it should be. Like stories, films – and especially shorts – need to be precise and to maximize their effects by using appropriate techniques.

When it comes to *Yadel's* socio-political criticism, the viewer can sense some tension already from the first minutes, when the protagonist goes down from the rooftop and into the block, then enters his relatives' apartment. A conservative, rigid space is revealed: though economical welfare is suggested through the modern furniture and the father's expensive suit, his angry face and voice and his fast and threatening moves establish a conflict not only between generations, but also inside the tradition. Yadel refuses to adopt his family's way of being, which would imply embracing the traditional Turkish way of life, including language, hierarchy, rituals, beliefs. As a second generation immigrant, he should be able to distinguish between ways of

being (Turkish) and ways of belonging (to the Belgian/ European/ Western society), but instead he seems to be isolated from both family and society. Moreover, by avoiding to speak his mother tongue, Yadel is repressing his cultural and historical heritage, which bears traumatic memories. This gesture is a revolt against himself. Yadel's inner split is constructed on several levels: he is stuck between two identities, cultures and languages. The refusal to speak Turkish is, nonetheless, not entirely efficient, since the *name* he was given encapsulates an entire history, unspoken, but powerful and haunting.

Maybe one of the most difficult to shoot, the scene inside the mosque depicts the clash of cultures in several ways. Filming a religious ceremony in a sacred place might lead to certain problems, especially when it comes to the Muslim environment. Surprisingly, the Imam was very open when Kenan Görgün asked for permission to film inside during the ceremony.

In this sense, a short documentaristic episode was produced. Then, through montage, the empirical reality and the symbolical scenes of inner struggle were intertwined, as the tension grew to the point where confrontation became an imperative. The archetypal dimension comes into focus as both earthly and heavenly Father, embodying the symbolical order, are portrayed as authoritarian and rigid figures whose laws pave the way to self-denial. At the same time, in denouncing the present and refusing its legitimacy lies a deeper meaning: it calls for a radical change and a radical future, where present norms are rendered redundant and limiting. Despite its short length, *Yadel* depicts how

political, social, moral, and aesthetic purposes should no longer function separately, but together for a common goal.

Kenan Görgün's personal experience blends with that of other fellows struggling to define themselves outside the borders of ethnic belonging. A generation of "mutants", as he calls those who distanced themselves from the given reality, is the one stuck between personal and collective history, and it is their chance and necessity to ask more and more questions about the concept of identity. On the other hand, in contrast to global capitalism's tendency to standardize and unify, belonging to several cultures enriches one's perspectives and the complex search for identity in a transnational context resists that uniformisation. Going back to the origins implies fictionalizing personal and collective history in an effort to understand the status of the individual subject in relationship to the social totality. Transnational individuals are cognitively mapping the world they live in, a process that dissipates the conventional borders established by world politics. Belonging to Turkish-Belgian culture is only one example out of many.

It is still fascinating how personal stories represent a great "raw" material for art. And, most of all, we should be highly concerned about the means art uses to transform these stories into relevant aspects of social criticism. Fictionalization seems to be one of the best strategies to create viable cultural products which, besides their aesthetical quality, respond to existing needs and problems and stimulate the audience's critical thinking and reception. By using the poetics of autobiographic fiction, Kenan Görgün's *Yadel* becomes more than

just a step on the path of self-knowledge or a coherent short film. It also creates a fictional space where the Turkish community is confronted with its own inner conflicts, and it familiarizes everyone with various consequences of migration and globalization. With so many tragic events having occurred not so long ago, the need to understand and react appropriately becomes unquestionably urgent. Writing, just like filmmaking, needs to acknowledge its social role and to use its potential impact, and for this reason works like Kenan Görgün's are of great interest.

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