THE METROPOLIS AND THE INDIVIDUALS:
AN ANALYSIS THROUGH NURİ BİLGE CEYLAN'S DISTANT

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ABSTRACT

Metropolitan cities have distinctive characteristics distinguishing them from the country. People living in these big cities can have an urbanized character in terms of their lifestyles and personality traits. This study analyses the relationships and lifestyles of the persons living in metropolitan cities through Nuri Bilge Ceylan's film Distant (2002). The film Distant is particularly analysed by benefiting from Georg Simmel's considerations related to individuals taking material values as a criterion, having a "blasé attitude" and the individuality coming into prominence. The aim of this study is to reveal how these urban behaviours which permeate individuals migrating to metropolis cities cause depersonalization.

Keywords: Metropolis, country/province, individuality, migration.

1. Introduction

The metropolis life takes shape in parallel with the authentic character of a city. However, this doesn't mean that big cities cannot have similar characteristics, such that similar cases are witnessed in relation to the lifestyles and personal relationships of individuals living in metropolis cities. In other words, individuals can have similar behaviour patterns developed from living in the metropolis. Economic relations direct the specific conditions of metropolis cities that contain various relations. Based on the determination of the economic relations, individuals of metropolis cities can lead a different life in some respects than those living in the country.

In his essay *The Metropolis and Mental Life* written at the beginning of the 20th century, Georg Simmel emphasizes that the city is economically and occupationally different than the life of a town and the country (2013: 84). According to Simmel, the metropolis has always been the centre of money. Moreover, the economy of money and the domination of the mind are deeply related to each other because both treat people and things with a pure "objectivity". Simmel indicates that in the metropolis cities, the economy of money reduces the exchange value to the question of "what does it cost?" while rational relations consider humans as a number or something to be quantified. Thus, he underlines that the individual of the metropolis see the people around as a seller or customer (Simmel, 2013: 85, 86).

Istanbul, which is the biggest city of Turkey, contains all these relationships peculiar to the metropolis. It became the centre of the money economy after receiving immigrants depending on industrialization as of the 1950s. With permanent migration, Istanbul is still the city on which people migrating from the country pin their hopes.

Within the scope of this study, the human relations and lives of people who have migrated to Istanbul are viewed through the film *Distant* (2002). It is discussed what personal attitudes and relationships specific to those living in metropolis cities are reflected by the characters of the film. The study rather utilizes Georg Simmel's findings about the ways of behaviour of individuals who live in metropolis cities. In this regard, Simmel lays emphasis on the urban people's individual attitudes, their act with rational mind and their constant "blasé" attitude. In this context, the characters of the film are analysed in accordance with the urban people's state of mind as described by Simmel. Further the analysis highlights how the film depicts Istanbul and its immigrants by means of these concepts. Within this scope, Istanbul as a metropolis and its processes of receiving immigrants are addressed in the first part of this study. In other words, this part demonstrates the way in which Istanbul is constructed as a city. As mentioned above, the second part of the study focuses on the characters' lives in Istanbul, their modes of relations and their personality traits coming out in the metropolis.

1. The Metropolis Istanbul

Istanbul is a city that is the centre of finance and capital in Turkey. In proportion to the development of the industry, migration to this city has been intensified in certain periods. Istanbul has been an important metropolitan centre of permanent migration particularly after the 1950s.

It is seen that this first period of migration waves in Turkey took place in rather sheltered circumstances of relationships. By virtue of these relationships, the potential tensions of the distribution of urban rents could be kept at a minimum. On the other hand, both the middle classes and the urban poor could achieve circumstances that wouldn't be easily available in other conditions. After coming to the city, both groups

and especially the urban poor have found themselves in networks which protect them from the anonyimizing effects and cruelty of the city as defined in western literature (Pınarcıoğlu, Işık, 2001: 34). It can be said that the relations with the "fellow citizens" constituted a crucial social basis for immigrants in these years. These functioned as feudal relations that sheltered the individual to some extent from the chaos and difficulties of the city. As Sema Erder points out, the continuous mass migration process creates an environment that enables and maintains "fellow citizen-type" "new" relations comprising persons and groups from different social strata and that is based rather on confidence and solidarity where individuals define themselves with their origins (Güneş-Ayata, as cited in Erder, 1995: 111). In addition, the immigrants were able to hold on easier in big cities due to the emphasis on social policies in the years of the welfare state.

After the economic crisis of 1970s, the system has entered a process of restructuration and thereby those migrating from the rural areas to the city encountered a different Istanbul and various experiences. The principal characteristic of the new post-crisis era to be underlined is that the relations of the state and society have brought a range of fundamental changes. In the period following 1980, the state has withdrawn from its role as an arbiter in social relations.

As remarked by Melih Pınarcıoğlu and Oğuz Işık, the state of the new era is not a state that acts like an arbiter between social classes and frequently interferes by favour of lower classes in order to maintain the social compromise in society (2001: 33, 35). Indeed, a process of deterioration of the public services and rights was entered with the abolition of the welfare state's social policies. The relations and ties among the immigrants have also become fragile and were weakened in this process. In the metropolis cities referred in Simmel (2013), rational relations emerged explicitly also in Istanbul in the 1980s and materiality started to determine relations.

In that vein, Istanbul is an international city growing every day and it is not easy for immigrants to cope with this metropolis. Tanıl Bora thinks that the differences between Istanbul and other large cities are getting bigger. According to him Istanbul, which is the biggest city in Turkey, has made considerable progress to keep pace with the world city (global city) dynamic (2013: 42). This major city is still a dream city to live for many today as it was in the past. On the other side, Istanbul is a source of hope for those living in the country without a job and who don't see a future there.

But it is hard to hold on in this city where relations of "fellow citizens" have weakened. Migrating to this city and finding a job and living there are not as easy as before. While the occupations requiring skills are considered for certain people from the middle classes and above, other occupations and working areas called unskilled are presented to the lower class and the poor. The number of people to work in unskilled, precarious, flexible and informal job areas is increasing day by day. For the poor who takes the risk of working under such circumstances, there is no field left to work in any case in the rural areas. The reason that leads a person to migrate from rural to urban areas is no doubt the expectancy and dream of a better life.

At this point, the next section of this study will, through the film *Distant*, discuss the process experienced by the person that migrated to Istanbul, what kind of a network the person established with the previous immigrants and the lives and personalities of those who has once become the residents of that place.

3. Characters of Distant That Migrate to Istanbul

Istanbul which is the centre of economic relations is also a space of intense work pace, absence of leisure, being lost in crowds and the mechanical and monotonous life. Simmel points out that the money economy fills the days of many people with calculations, evaluations, numerical determinations, and efforts to reduce qualitative values to quantitative ones (2013: 87).

Nuri Bilge Ceylan's *Distant* also focuses on the state of mind and personal relationships of individuals living in this chaos in Istanbul. The storyline of the film progresses over the characters Mahmut and Yusuf. While Mahmut is a character who has migrated to Istanbul many years ago and his hopes about the city are disappointed, Yusuf is a character who was bored with his town and migrated to Istanbul because he had difficulty in finding a job. Yusuf temporarily moved to the house of his relative Mahmut who lives in Istanbul. We learn that Yusuf is going to stay with Mahmut until he finds a job. Yusuf is hopeful about his new life.

In the film, as Yusuf looks very excited about Istanbul, Mahmut seems so frustrated in contrast. Simmel thinks that no other mental phenomena are directly linked to the metropolis more than blasé/frustration (2013: 88, 89). In his view, everything has the same dullness and greyness in the eyes of the person with blasé attitude; no object is preferable to any other one. Simmel's conviction is that this state of mind is a reflection of the money economy since he emphasizes that every sort of qualitative difference is reduced to the "what does it cost?" question (2013: 89, 90). We witness in the film that Mahmut remains indifferent to many things in his life. Mahmut postpones the solutions of many problems but doesn't make any effort to solve them. We see that Mahmut retreats from basic relationships/issues such as relatives, love, work. Despite loving his ex-wife, he stays away from correcting his mistakes and entering into dialogue. For instance, despite Mahmut is sorry because his ex-wife is moving abroad, he went to the airport but couldn't find the strength to call after her. On the other hand, Mahmut has been so insensitive that he forgets that Yusuf is going to stay at his house. We see Yusuf waiting a long time for Mahmut to come home. Yet Mahmut is unconcerned also about his mother's health problems and visited her days after she had an operation. In contrary, it is shown that Yusuf permanently calls his mother by phone and cares about her trivial teeth problems. It can be said that the film contrasts the different approaches to problems of those living in the metropolis and in the country and their state of sensibility. At the same time, we can infer from the film that Mahmut has given up his ideals about his profession.

To put it differently, Mahmut's blasé attitude is not only towards others; he has also become insensitive against his own ideals. Mahmut, who once wanted to be a director like Tarkovsky, is working as an advertising photographer for a company. Mahmut takes Yusuf with him to shoot photos for his company's work outside the city and when they come across a beautiful moment of a landscape which Mahmut wants to take a picture of during their return, it is seen that he doesn't even have the energy/enthusiasm to do that. Dreams are postponed for him.

In a similar vein, Necla Algan (2003) analyses the character of Mahmut as follows:

> "The character of Mahmut is a socially self-interested, selfish type who conforms the existing order, taking advantage of the economic structure because he can establish organic relationships with it; has broken his traditional and social bonds and doesn't have any responsibility towards anybody. This type of intellectual is depicted as an unhappy personality that is drowned in its own loneliness and selfishness".

We see in *Distant* that individuality is regarded superior to anything else by those living in the metropolis and that this weakens human relations. As mentioned above, Simmel (2013) argues that quantitative values supplant qualitative values in metropolitan life. One of the signs of one's presence and attainment of a certain dignity in metropolitan cities is to prove itself as an individual. The distant relationships and the struggle to survive as an individual in the metropolitan cities make a lonely and individual life decisive. We can feel from the very beginning that Mahmut is uncomfortable with Yusuf's visit and that he likes loneliness and a solitary life. Mahmut is disturbed by the provincialism infiltrating into his house. As described by Asuman Suner, Mahmut first tries to keep the undesirable excess caused by Yusuf's presence in control: he asks Yusuf to use the small toilet instead of the main bathroom, removes Yusuf's shoes from the entrance after spraying anti-odour deodorant, doesn't allow Yusuf to smoke except the balcony… (2006: 117). Then he begins to speak out his discomfort of that Yusuf is staying at his house. He despises the "provincialism" of Yusuf and says that those like him have "ruined" Istanbul.

In fact, what Mahmut can't stand is not Yusuf but his own "provincialism" that follows him, that is to say his own past. According to Algan, "As from the eighties, there has been a period of shift in which the lifestyles and choices of people like Mahmut were favoured and idealized while "the other" symbolized in Yusuf was continuously and totally disdained, just as the disdain of Mahmut was transformed to the eye of the director" (Algan, 2003). We can see that Mahmut is posing this attitude of disdain against "provincialism" in order for his presence in Istanbul. Yusuf cause Mahmut to face his ignored past, the mask he wears to veil his provincialism and the hurtful price he paid for hold on in Istanbul. As precisely pointed out by Suner, Mahmut's discomfort about the prolonged visit of Yusuf is not about strange and unfamiliar things that enter his life but, quite the contrary, is about confronting something he knows and that is very familiar (2006: 118). For example, we see Mahmut sitting on a bench and smoking the cigarettes that Yusuf forgot before leaving the house. After Yusuf has left, Mahmut smokes the cigarettes that he displeased when Yusuf offered him since that cigarette reminds him his past and hometown. While Mahmut misleads Yusuf by trying to look like an intellectual who watches complicated art movies and thus disdain Yusuf's "provincialism", we see him watching porn movies. The "provincial" behaviours that Mahmut contemn are not distant to him. It can even be said that Mahmut is stuck in a dilemma of his urban identity and provincial identity and can actually not hold any of them.

But on the other side, it is shown in the film that Mahmut has paid a high price to gain his respect and image in the eyes of the others. While having an argument, Mahmut tells Yusuf that he hadn't any money for a hotel when he first moved to Istanbul and struggled with everything by himself. Mahmut has survived in Istanbul by playing a lone hand and now it is Yusuf's turn. As mentioned before, it is not easy anymore for those migrating to Istanbul to hold on in a big city. As the film is progresses, we see that Yusuf gradually loses his hopes he once had for Istanbul, faces the reality of the city and witness a new experience of human

relations. By realizing the difficulty of living in Istanbul, Yusuf thinks that those migrating to big cities also change, so that Yusuf says "the city has changed you" to Mahmut when he disdained Yusuf.

After that point, ferry sirens, the sound of seagulls, howling of dogs, a snow-covered silence reflect all the loneliness of the city. Further this loneliness applies to both Mahmut and Yusuf. The style of expression of Nuri Bilge Ceylan effectively reflects the loneliness and solitude in the great city. Indeed İbrahim Türk describes the style of expression of film *Distant* as following:

> "Just like his previous films, Ceylan sets up a visual expression with a very high photographic quality by not making too much use of words, with mise en scènes full of long silences that allow us to understand the moods of the characters, and with the use of plan sequences. We gently enter the film which lasts about two hours and progresses with a slow tempo and feel the authenticity of the world built by the director" (Türk, 2002).

Distant portrays the people's lives in the big city as entangled by loneliness, lack of solidarity and insensitivity just like ivies. Hence in the film, Mahmut is "distant" from the city he lives, "distant" from his place of birth, "distant" from people, "distant" from his dreams and in fact he is "distant" mostly to himself.

4. Conclusion

The distinctive texture of the metropolis, i.e. being the centre of economy, and the time being measured with quantitative values lead the people living there to keep up with that rhythm. This lifestyle withers the image of the big cities that is the dream of many. A lot of individuals who are tired of the country's limitations and have difficulty in finding a job move to the metropolis cities with great expectations. But this time they confront the specific circumstances and problems of the big cities. According to Georg Simmel, the relations of the persons living in the metropolis are determined by the quantitative values, not the qualitative ones (2013). As highlighted by Simmel, these quantitative values give way to a situation in which individuality is idealized. Thus, the individual has to establish a dignity to hold on in the big cities. Nonetheless, the point that the writer underscores is that the blasé attitude of individuals created by the determination of quantitative values is directly in relation to the metropolis.

Within this study, it is possible to read Simmel's considerations of metropolitan cities through the film *Distant*. It can be concluded that the film addresses the issues of personal relationships, blasé attitude and individuality over the story of two characters that migrated to Istanbul, which is the biggest metropolis of Turkey. The character of Mahmut who lives in Istanbul for years is depicted with a plain expression in the film as having wasted all his relationships, being sunk into his own loneliness and lacking the will to correct anything in his life. Yusuf who just migrated to Istanbul seems to be quite happy and excited because of being outside his province. But soon after, when Yusuf sees that his relative Mahmut doesn't help him and realizes that it won't be easy to find a job, the film also shows his dreams withering. The film plainly expresses that networks of solidarity is decreasing among those living in the metropolis, and individuals are losing themselves and their ideals and getting lonely while they try to hold on. On the other hand, we can observe that the urban and provincial characteristics of individuals sometimes conflict and they suffer from being stuck in this dilemma. Finally, with this sense of being lost which pervades individuals, *Distant* reveals that they belong to nowhere.

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