

Turkey and the West:

Mutually Suspicious Perceptions in Film and Television

This is the summary of the online and in-person public event, which was held on 7 March 2023.

You can access the podcast [here](#) and the [video here](#).

Summary by Dr Arzu Kırca Şahin



On the 7th of March 2023, Contemporary Turkish Studies hosted an online and in-person public event that explored Orientalism and Occidentalism in Turkish and Hollywood cinemas. The event was entitled: “**Turkey and the West: Mutually Suspicious Perceptions in Film and Television.**” This event was hosted as part of the *Turkish Week: 100 Years of the Republic*.

The speaker was **Dr Murat Akser**, Lecturer in Screen Production at the School of Communication and Media, Ulster University.

In his talk, Dr Akser discussed the representation of Turks and Turkey in Hollywood and Turkish cinema. He argued that Hollywood films presented Turkey and Turks in an Orientalist manner, depicting them as lustful and barbaric. Turkish cinema, on the other hand, portrayed the West as negative and often mocked them. He suggested that this discourse of Orientalism and Occidentalism in both cinemas fed upon and reflected each other.

Akser referred to Edward Said's idea of an Orientalist outlook that created an othering process, denoting Turks as savage, lustful, and barbarian. He added that the critical reading of filmic texts involved assessing the imaginative relationship to reality that texts constructed. Akser mentioned that American cinema shifted its attention towards Arab characters after a while but remained negative and confrontational towards Turkish characters, which could be considered offensive. The image of the terrible and demon Turk did not improve, and Turks in American cinema continued to be represented as cruel, violent, murderous, treacherous, corrupt, sexually aggressive, and sexually perverted.

He further explained that Turkish despots had been of particular interest to Western cinema from early on, and they were often presented as lawless brutes and womanizers. Moreover, the sexual aggression of Turkish men manifested itself in a homophobic/rapist depiction of homosexuality in some films. Akser mentioned films that used Turkey and mostly Istanbul, as the hedonist location of lazy ease, bazaars, and lust. Akser suggests that Orientalism in cinema with Turkish people/settings remains popular, citing the recent film "Three Thousand Years of Longing" as an example.

Turkish cinema also framed the West in a negative way. He gave examples of war of independence films of the classic Yesilçam cinema in the 1950s-1970s. These films presented the Western invasion forces as inhuman and disrespectful to cultural values, corrupting young Turkish women, and being portrayed as uncivilized and dishonest. He further added that there was a special historical action genre in Turkish cinema that represented the Westerners as pure evil.

Akser concluded that the discourse of Orientalism and Occidentalism that both Turkish and Hollywood cinemas fed upon and reflected each other have continued to shape

perceptions. The Turkish view of the West in cinema was first influenced from memories and films of WWI, invasion, and war of independence. Western heroes were often portrayed as moral, energetic, and high-tech, while in Western cinema Turkey was depicted as an exotic, womanizing, and backward land.