

# Cinematic Geography of the Countryside, Childhood, and Nostalgia: Remembering Ahmet Uluçay in the Age of Oblivion

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## Introduction

I am a stranger;  
Neither is there a beautiful woman to console me  
In this town  
Nor a familiar face;  
Let me not hear the sound of a train,  
My two eyes  
Two fountains

Orhan Veli Kanık<sup>1</sup>

Cinema is an art that penetrates the imaginary geography of childhood and memory of the country. “The idea of childhood has been part of the experience of moving images since the appearance of cinema”<sup>2</sup>; so much so that, cinema has visualised the childhood stories since the date when Lumière Brothers invented the Cinématographe. For instance, in the video *Baby’s Meal* (1895), a baby is seen

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1 The Turkish poem, titled *The Sound of a Train* (*Tren Sesi*) that is translated into English by Murat Nemet Nejat, always reminds us of the importance of childhood memories, the impression of nostalgia and the sense of melancholy.

2 Angela Bushati, “Children and Cinema: Moving Images of Childhood”, *European Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies*, 2018, vol. 3, no. 3, p. 34.

feeding by his parent.<sup>3</sup> In *The Sprinkler Sprinkled* (1895), which is the first comedy film in history, a child plays a joke on a gardener.<sup>4</sup> In *Enfances* (Childhood 1897)<sup>5</sup> different children who fall, play with a cat, eat fruit, take a ride, participate in a pillow fight, and play marbles together are seen on the silver screen. All these short, primitive but leading films indicates how cinema has an ontological relation with childhood.

The connection between film and childhood is still vibrant.<sup>6</sup> In other words, the child image takes an important place in the history of cinema.<sup>7</sup> Revisualizing the childhood era through memorising it can be defined as *desiderata* for both film-makers and the audience. In this sense, cinema takes the place of memory and (re)visualises it collectively. Just like the memory that reproduces and reconstructs the past,<sup>8</sup> cinema designs and makes accessible the childhood that depicts the sense of the past deeply. On the other hand, childhood also needs to be remembered and, as Bachelard suggests, to be re-imagined.<sup>9</sup>

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3 *Le Repas (de bébé)* [Baby's meal] (1895) Lumière Brothers. For watching this video, visit <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CvrDVj7tCk>

4 *L'Arroseur Arrose* [The Sprinkler Sprinkled] (1895) Louis Lumière. For watching this video, visit <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IooPPi1YzkM>

5 *Childhood* (1897) Lumière Brothers. For watching this video, visit <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dAwE6wpJqyw>

6 10 great films (about childhood) that are listed by The British Film Institute (Samuel Wigley, "10 Great Films About Childhood", 2014, <https://www2.bfi.org.uk/news-opinion/news-bfi/lists/10-great-films-about-childhood> [Accessed: 14.11.2020]): *Cría cuervos* (1976), *I Was Born but...* (1932), *Pather Panchali* (1955), *L'Enfance-nue* (1968), *The Spirit of the Beehive* (1973), *Fanny and Alexander* (1982), *Au revoir les enfants* (1987), *Hope and Glory* (1987), *Celia* (1989), *The Apple* (1998), *A.I.* (2001). In addition to these, *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* (1945), *Sciuscià* (1946), *Los olvidados* (1950), *Jeux Interdits* (1952), *La balloon rouge* (1956), *Les 400 coups* (1959), *Ivanovo detstvo* (1962), *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1962), *Mouchette* (1967), *Kes* (1969), *El espíritu de la colmena* (1973), *Alice in den städten* (1974), *L'argent de poche* (1976), *Die blechtrommel* (1979), *Ponette* (1996), *Bacheha-Ye aseman* (1997), *Cinema Paradiso* (1988), *Billy Elliot* (2000), *El laberinto del fauno* (2006), *Le gamin au vélo* (2011), *Boyhood* (2014), *Kefernahum* (2018).

7 For more readings, see Vicky Lebeau, *Childhood and Cinema*, London: Reaktion, 2008; Debbie Olson, *Children in the Films of Alfred Hitchcock*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014; Id, *The Child in Post-Apocalyptic Cinema*, Lanham: Lexington Books, 2017; Id, *The Child in World Cinema*, Lanham: Lexington Books, 2018; SH. Donald., E. Wilson., S. Wright, *Childhood and Nation in Contemporary World Cinema: Borders and Encounters*, London: Bloomsbury, 2017; Deborah Martin, *The Child in Contemporary Latin American Cinema*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019.

8 Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992, pp. 47-51.

9 Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Reverie*, Boston: Beacon Press, 1969, p. 57.

Childhood, which is a cultural as well as a universal period, is a social construction,<sup>10</sup> and cinema, as a constructive, is full of images of childhood.<sup>11</sup> In contrast to infancy, childhood is not a biological but a social fiction.<sup>12</sup> Childhood is a perpetual and endless era. The childhood that becomes sometimes *raison d'être* of fears and sometimes safe shelter is undoubtedly the home of most powerful and permanent feelings and scars. Besides, it is a motherland of memory that is pure and intact. Perhaps that is why childhood dreams have always an esoteric and privileged place in the sight of *nostalgics*. In this respect, childhood can be defined as the country of a human being.

Asuman Suner discusses *the space of happiness*, a concept borrowed from Gaston Bachelard,<sup>13</sup> in the context of the relationship between the country and childhood and deals with cinema as the space of happiness that unites the sense of childhood with the country.<sup>14</sup> Even if this is not entirely true; even if *de facto* childhood and the country are full of disappointments, they look as if perfect in some way. On the other, as seen in the film *Boats Out of Watermelon Rinds*, life in childhood and the country can be fragile and devastating. Perhaps, happiness is a mentally-felt or imagined rather than a bodily experienced condition. Childhood and countryside can be depicted as hollow that is filled with expectations more than experiences; that is why they are labeled not with intellectual but with sensual voices such as dream, promise, despair, spleen, resentment, sincerity, or yeast. This may be true also for films in and of the country.

Just as the country is not unbound and films are not acontextual, childhood has and is not a rigid and settled image. Remembered childhood needs always to be collected, concretised, and repeated through space (the country) and image (cinema). This is because childhood is, as Bachelard states,<sup>15</sup> a field of psychological ruins. For this reason, the sense of nostalgia, which is nourished essentially from childhood memories, should not be examined simply as an individual sickness. Instead, it is, as Boym suggests, a symptom of our age and a historic emotion.<sup>16</sup> In this study, it is hypothesised that nostalgia appears spatially in the country, temporally in childhood, and experientially in cinema at the most. Ahmet Uluçay, the director of the analysed film *Boats Out of Watermelon Rinds*, underlines this symbiotic relationship: "I could not grow up. I work with children. I concentrate

10 Allison James and Alan Prout, *Constructing and Reconstructing Childhood: Contemporary Issues in the Sociological Study of Childhood*, London: Farmer, 1997, p. 8.

11 Angela Bushati, "Children and Cinema: Moving Images of Childhood", p. 34.

12 Neil Postman, *The Disappearance of Childhood*, New York: Vintage Books, 1994, p. 6.

13 Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*.

14 Asuman Suner, *New Turkish Cinema. Belonging, Identity and Memory*, New York: I. B. Tauris, 2010, pp. 27-28

15 Bachelard, *The Poetics of Reverie*, p. 57.

16 Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, New York: Basic Books, 2001, p. xv.

on them in my films... All artists are children. They have to remain so... I am living what I have collected until seven years old".<sup>17</sup>

Ahmet Uluçay has deeply influenced contemporary Turkish filmmakers including Nuri Bilge Ceylan. *Boats Out of Watermelon Rinds* is his only feature-length film. Although the great director passed away in 2009 when he was 55 years old, he captured inspiringly the matter of the country, the sense of the past, and mysterious tales of childhood through his genuine projector. He saw films as a magical invention and changed the axis of Turkish cinema from centre (Istanbul) to the country (Anatolia). Despite this, there is no even one thesis written about him and his cinema. He and his cinema have a vigorous narrative. He positions himself in the middle of childhood, countryside, and cinema triangle: "I have been in the cinema since Athanasius Kircher's Magic Lantern. I have been in the cinema since Lumière brothers. I was a little boy. On the mud wall of a deserted barn in a dark and ruined village in Anatolia, I shared the sensation of the audience in Grand Cafe [where the first public movie screening took place]. I was in the cinema since Ancient Greece. I was young Prometheus who stole the fire from the gods of Olympus. I brought the magic light of cinema that peculiars to cities at the cost of burning my small handful... Do you think the cinematograph was invented in the 1900s? There was no electricity but oil lamps. Shadows were my only toys... I was one of the slaves in Plato's cave allegory... There was even no light, I found it within me..."<sup>18</sup>

### Method and Approach

This interdisciplinary paper focuses on the concepts of childhood, countryside, and memory through the cinema. It assumes that the concepts are ontologically interrelated. In this respect, the film *Boats Out of Watermelon Rinds* is analysed as a model that represents the interrelation. This is not a film analysis; rather it is a sociological debate through film because films are a projector that allows researchers to examine social reality.<sup>19</sup> "Films, which reformulate societies, emerge as a sort of well-established research laboratory for social scientists; indeed, each change within societies creates a tremendous impression over *the conscience of cinema*. Just as thought is linked with the eye, analysis depends on the glance too; that is why focusing on film is like focusing on society and vice versa".<sup>20</sup>

17 Ahmet Uluçay, "Anadolu Üniversitesi Söyleşi", *Radikal Yaşam*, 2003, <https://sites.google.com/site/tepecikbeldesi/ahmetulu%C3%A7ay2> [Accessed: 17.02.2020].

18 Güven Adıgüzel, *Kendi Rüyasında Uyanan Derviş Ahmet Uluçay*, İstanbul: Profil Kitap, 2017.

19 Bülent Diken and Carsten Bagge Laustsen, *Sociology through the Projector*, London: Routledge, 2008.

20 Sertaç Timur Demir, "Cinematic Istanbul: Strangers of the Modern City", PhD Thesis, Lancaster University, UK, 2015, p. 16.

*Boats Out of Watermelon Rinds* is a story of two children, Recep and Mehmet who want to make a film in their village. Just like in the film *Cinema Paradiso* (1988), in this film, there are disharmonies between tough life and magic-like cinema.<sup>21</sup> For Recep and Mehmet, cinema is seen as a promise of going beyond the border of the country and as a childhood dream surrounded by love and passion. It is an imaginative shelter. Recep who draws paintings sells watermelon and falls in love with Nihal is indeed Ahmet Uluçay himself. In other words, this is an autobiographical film.<sup>22</sup> According to Baykal, the film is the most authentic example of Turkish cinema in terms of reflexivity. In reflexivity, directors reflect their own experiences, thoughts, emotions, and longings.<sup>23</sup>

These two children who do not have enough money to buy a camera try to make their cameras. That is why, Uluçay said that “if the Lumiere brothers did not invent the cinema, it would have been invented in this village for sure”.<sup>24</sup> Recep in the film is an apprentice of a watermelon seller. The title of the film comes from this. It represents ephemerality and frustration. In a scene, the seller says that “if you ride a boat made out of watermelon rinds, you are bound to sink soon”. Recep tends to art. As for Mehmet, he is a barber’s apprentice. He is often subjected to violence by his master. This situation makes life unbearable and makes cinema vital. In the country, dreams have to be tested by realities. Mehmet’s master says “have you ever seen any other village folk get to be artisans? Let them work their fields”.

In the light of these words, each fact in this article is debated with its contrast such as the country and city, childhood and adulthood, memory and oblivion, and nostalgia and change. This film that is a turning point of the New Turkish Cinema highlights prominently the question of memory, country, and childhood. In the New Turkish Cinema, the country is shown either through a childhood that represents innocence through the sense of restraint. However, this film both confirms and exceeds this evaluation. In any case, it is obvious that the axis of the New Turkish Cinema has shifted from Istanbul to the country and this transformation requires debate elaborately. This paper is such an attempt.

The country is torn between its own established belongings and a rapidly-changing world. This makes it ambivalent and vague. More crucially, the country is positioned illusively as the home of serenity and the absolute antithesis of the

21 Başak Demiray, “Cinema on Cinema: The Kinship between Cinema Paradiso and Zıkkımın Kökü, Karpuz Kabuğundan Gemiler Yapmak, Sinema Bir Mucizedir”, *Cinej Cinema Journal*, 2011, 1 (1), pp. 31-38.

22 According to Federico Fellini, Italian film-maker, all art is autobiographical; the pearl is the oyster’s autobiography.

23 Kemal Cem Baykal, “Karpuz Kabuğu Sinemaya Düşer mi?”, *Karpuz Kabuğu Denize Düşünce*. Seçil Bükür (ed.), İstanbul: Kırmızı Kedi Yayınları 2010, pp. 17-46.

24 Uluçay, “Anadolu Üniversitesi Söyleşisi”, 2003.

city, so much so that, as Süalp claims, the country turns into a tourist place of modern individuals who are defeated by the urban-based disorder.<sup>25</sup> The distant gaze, which may be related to nostalgic attitude, can prevent seeing secret and simplicity, surface and spirit, horizon and narrowness, wealth and poverty of the country as a whole.<sup>26</sup> This study aims to break the distant gaze zooms in on the possibilities of living in the country and of making a film-art. Furthermore, childhood and its memories are discussed within the frame of time, space, and the human condition.

### **The Country Between Dream and Melancholy**

The film starts with rural images: pathways, train, station, rooster, coffeehouse, etc. All these are references to place and time. Everything is so cyclical and repetitive in this village that any unusual change or slight movement can easily be realised by the country dwellers. Two children are seen in the first scene. These are Recep and Mehmet. Also, women and men of the country are seen in their characteristic style and local dress. The filming location is Uluçay's hometown, Tavşanlı in Kütahya. Stories in the place are as minimalist as in the film. Uluçay displays his country not only as spatial but also as a social reality that involves dreams and melancholy at the same time.

In this narrative, there is also a paradox between urbanites and rural dwellers. The city appears as the place of possession and salvation for them while the country is fictionalised as the place of perfect serenity by urbanites.<sup>27</sup> On the other hand, the present time in the sight of Recep and Mehmet shows always a tendency to be suppressed by superb dreams of the future and supreme tales of the past. To put this differently, peasants in some way escape from the melancholic, cynical, and worn present to the past and the future that is imagined as a realm full of flawless dreams and glorious memories. Just like the watermelon seller who boasts of his wrestler grandfather, rural dwellers live mentally with their ancestors and future generations. That is why, namely to symbolise and show this reality, in a scene of the film, a corpse moves abruptly. In another scene, Recep talks to his [dead] grandfather in his shrine that is located inside the home and that is serviced by residents. To be obvious, the dead are alive in the country.

Women in and of the countryside live motionless, perhaps even less than the dead. They experience dreams and melancholy as private emotions. The weak and colourless identities are seen in the film as dark and dreadful shadows,

25 Z. Tül Akbal Süalp, "Taşrada Saklı Zaman-Geri Dönülmeyen", *Taşra Kavramı Üzerine Tartışmalar: Taşrada Var Bir Zaman*, Z. Tül Akbal Süalp and Ash Güneş (eds.), İstanbul: Çitlembik Yayınları, 2010, pp. 87-116.

26 Köksal Alver, *Taşra Halleri*, Konya: Çizgi Kitabevi, 2017, p. 9.

27 Sertaç Timur Demir, "Modern Kültürde Kentten Kaçmanın ve Uzaklara Gitmenin Sosyolojisi", *İnsan ve İnsan Bilim Kültür Sanat ve Düşünce Dergisi*, 2017, 4 (13), pp. 242-252.

which represent the imaginative world of the country dwellers. Shadows in the country may refer to fantasies based on excessive isolation and to surveillance culture attached to affinity. Shadows can be interpreted as the visual equivalent of the boredom in the country, which, according to Gürbilek, stands for being excluded and narrowing.<sup>28</sup> In this sense, she establishes a relationship between childhood and the countryside and claims that childhood itself is the country. The country, just like childhood, is an incomplete and faceless [spatial, temporal, and emotional] geography surrounded by promises and longings that stimulate the sense of dream and melancholy.

This dilemma crystallises thoroughly in Recep and Mehmet's desire to make and show a film. In the sight of peasants, the film is an urban-based art and action. As for these two children, in the shade of invisible walls, they are simultaneously dreamer, hopeful, fragile, melancholic, and angry. In one scene Recep says, "Us being villagers. This city folk thinks a camera is too much for our hands. We keep working like a mule and they take photographs, they got used to doing so". Ahmet Uluçay has also similar criticism and reproach. To him, cinema has been associated with the centre and the city (Istanbul) and eventually should be transferred to the corners and Anatolian countryside.

This approach, although based on some real experiences, is not completely rational. The country has perceptively a tendency to position itself as the opposite of the city. This is the result of will that desires to appear and resist against the city. In other words, the country generates itself by depending upon the city. As Çiğdem underlines, what constitutes the countryside is not itself but the centre; so much so that, the country is secondary to what the centre primarily stands for.<sup>29</sup> The country is marked on the edge of, or outside the centre.<sup>30</sup> Perhaps, for this reason, the rope between the city and the countryside is always tight. The city largely determines the rural horizon,<sup>31</sup> so the country, despite having simple life standards, is both restrictive and restraining.

Every decision taken here is easily and loyally legitimated by social agreement in compliance with cultural norms and historical regulations. Hence, any new idea or act is hypothetically rejected or judged. For instance, making a film is accepted as the devil's work. As far as shown in the film, wizards, executed puppets, obscure shadows, nightmares and scary sounds all imply this evil. Everybody destroys each other with the promise of purgation and purification. Here, films, just like society, do not even move. However, as the director insists on, cinema

28 Nurdan Gürbilek, "Taşra Sıkıntısı", *Defter*, 1994, 7 (22), pp. 74-92.

29 Ahmet Çiğdem, "Taşra Karalaması: Küçük Bir Sosyolojik Deneme", *Taşraya Bakmak*, Tanıl Bora (ed.), İstanbul: İletişim Yayınları, 2013, pp. 101-114.

30 Alver, *Taşra Halleri*, p.11

31 Gürbilek, "Taşra Sıkıntısı", pp. 74-92.

is also madness. It is the essence of retrieving hope and dream, so one should be crazy to achieve his/her goal. Interestingly, the country is well-known for its crazies. More importantly, each crazy is encumbered with the characteristics of his/her cultural climate.<sup>32</sup> As for children, they are all crazy as they can deconstruct rules with their dream-like world. Besides, childhood corresponds to the period of exposure, surveillance, and discipline.

### Childhood and its Discontents

Childhood is a representation of the dream in the film, but dreams contain always the possibility of disappointment as well as expectation. Recep and Mehmet experience a tragic childhood in the country. They are under the pressure of the people around them. Their only joy is to collect dupe negative and to watch it together. They are not supported, funded, and encouraged. Despite this, beauty comes from this hardship. Childhood is a period that cannot be captured; contrarily, it captures. It is the starting point of personality, the touchstone of worldview, and the root of memory. Bachelard draws attention to the link between remembering and dreaming and adds that “the world of childhood reverie is as big, bigger than the world offered to today’s reverie... And that is why childhood is at the origin of greatest landscapes”.<sup>33</sup> In childhood, experiences, just like spaces, are perceived as if gigantic; so much so that they encircle the rest of life. That is why, for Recep and Mehmet, cinema turns into an existential issue and remains so. They escape from the sense of absence to the fictional realm of cinema. Even the future is designed with this orientation.

Childhood dreams may lead children to liquid attachments. These attachments in the country are deeper and more permanent than anywhere else. Belongings and feelings are also more intensive. Tales are more enthusiastic while the end of stories is marvelously supreme. Even the most ordinary people can readily be canonised in the fantasy world of children. Thus, as Halbwachs asserts, they can identify with the actors of history;<sup>34</sup> so much so that, they are imaginatively able to be scholars, shipmaster, commander, and hero at the same time. Nevertheless, their fictional world is not completely free and independent. Immensity desire in their mind is generally precluded by the normative perspective of adults. The predetermined and given treatment has been operated on and repeated for ages. Children who are caught between two opposite demands<sup>35</sup> are deprived of sufficiency, opportunity, permission, or exemption of creating a third, alternative

32 Ejder Ulutaş, “Taşradan İnsan Manzaraları”, *Taşra Halleri*, Köksal Alver (ed.), Konya: Çizgi Kitabevi, 2017, pp. 209-250.

33 Bachelard, *The Poetics of Reverie*, p. 102.

34 Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, p. 88.

35 Sevinç Güçlü, “Çocukluk ve Çocukluğun Sosyolojisi Bağlamında Çocuk Hakları”, *Sosyoloji Dergisi*, 2016, no. 1, pp. 1-22.

world. This unsolvable and inevitable social fate is met with obedience until the adolescence period, but it turns, in time, into showdown and conflict. From this point forth, although the system based on sanction, fear, and punishment becomes invalidated to a large extent, the discipline culture, as Büyükcebeci claims, may cause a lack of self-control.<sup>36</sup>

This situation is more prevalent especially in the modern culture that highlights industrial rules and technological attitudes of *becoming a child*.<sup>37</sup> This view is compatible with Ariés' understandings. According to him, childhood itself is an invention.<sup>38</sup> In parallel to this, children in modern culture are seen as an entity in need of private care or like an incomplete project that should be developed continuously following universal ideals of the age.<sup>39</sup> Children are now instruments of gaining status for their parents.<sup>40</sup> Hence, especially children in the city consume formal education, well-structural places, leisure time activities, and virtual moments instead of personalised learning, common sharing with family, street games, and physical experiences. In contrast to the city, the country has still a collective culture for children by the way. This is not because of a deficiency of communication technologies, but because of having deep-rooted routines and settled relationships that enable people to generate their memories.

Meanwhile, it should be accepted that some of these routines and relationships can be suffocative, irksome, and even destructive. In any case, repetitive cases and events are consolatory and calming even if they are also dull and monotonous. Whenever we [the adults] try to overcome the given living of the present time, we gravitate towards childhood memories, the past, and the country. Bachelard explains eloquently this instant orientation: "When, all alone and dreaming on rather at length, we go far from the present to relive the times of the first life, several children faces come to meet us".<sup>41</sup> These faces perhaps the warmest and the most innocent side of our rapidly-disrupted body and memory. That is why the country and childhood are issues strongly connected to the concepts of memory and nostalgia.

36 Ayça Büyükcebeci, "Çocukluk Çağı Örselenme Yaşantılarının Yaratıcı Kişilik Özellikleri ve Aleksitimi ile İlişkisi", *Manas Sosyal Araştırmalar Dergisi*, 2019, 8 (4), pp. 3187-3213.

37 Postman, *The Disappearance of Childhood*.

38 Philippe Ariès, *Centuries of Childhood: A Social History of Family Life*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1962, p. 33.

39 Ayça Demir-Gürdal, "Sosyolojinin İhmal Edilen Kategorisi Çocuklar Üzerinden Çocukluk Sosyolojisine ve Sosyolojiye Bakmak", *İş, Güç Endüstri İlişkileri ve İnsan Kaynakları Dergisi*, 2013, 15 (4), pp. 1-26.

40 Kemal İnal, "Türkiye'de çocukluk: nereye!", *Çocuk ve Medya*, Selda İçin-Akçalı (ed.), Ankara: Nobel Akademi, 2009, pp. 13-51.

41 Bachelard, *The Poetics of Reverie*, p. 56.

## Memory and Nostalgia

Memory refers not only to the past but also the present and the future. Beyond envisagement and longings, it is the essence of human existence. Past experiences are half-buried in distant corners of time. Memory keeps them alive, so much so that, memory deficit can be defined as the death of the mind. It generates existential meanings for now and later. Undoubtedly, all these recollections cannot always be the things that should be remembered, that is why Bauman sees it both as the blessing and as the curse.<sup>42</sup> Besides, forgetting may not be certain and absolute. Memory operates itself subconsciously. It is free of willpower. Perhaps, for this reason, it highlights mostly what is desired to be forgotten.

The past cannot be lived again, but in memory, as William Faulkner writes, “the past is never dead. It’s not even past”.<sup>43</sup> The past, like a shadow, pursues the being with the help of memory. It gives him sometimes peace and sometimes melancholy. In any case, as stated before, memory takes the place of existence. Namely, the continuity of personality depends on the vitality of memories. The self is constructed in, with, by, and through the remembered scenes and fragments of time. As for the film *Boats Out of Watermelon Rinds* and Ahmet Uluçay, the director here re-creates his past strongly embedded into his childhood and tries to protect his memories through art. In this respect, it can be claimed that not only this film but every work of art is also primarily and inevitably an attempt at reconstruction and resurrection of the artist’s memory.

This manner concentrates mainly on childhood<sup>44</sup> and people become nostalgic for their childhood as s/he get older. This projection of the past, which carries the image of childish innocence, is perceived as [if] a spotless era against the disruptive and disrupted world. Since old age bears the traces of death and mortality,<sup>45</sup> memory is, after a point, instrumentalised to relieve the fear or anxiety of caducity and extinction. Nostalgia, as a mental cure, suspends the liquidity of time. The now does not consist merely of the present time, rather, all remembered and imagined events or objects in a nostalgic view are a reference to the now. On the other hand, the past, which needs to be remembered to be able to get in touch with the now, is not always accessible. As Walter Benjamin indicates, “The past can be seized only as an image which flashes up at the instant when it can

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42 Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Love: On the Frailty of Human Bonds*, Cambridge: Polity Press, p. 91

43 William Faulkner, *Requiem for a Nun*, In *Faulkner's County: Tales of Yoknapatawpha County*, Chatto & Windus, London, [1951] 1955, p. 85.

44 Kate Douglas, *Contesting Childhood: Autobiography, Trauma, and Memory*, New Brunswick, New Jersey and London: Rutgers University Press, 2010, p. 21.

45 Sertaç Timur Demir, *Ten Medeniyeti: Modern Kültürde Beden ve Ötesi*, İstanbul: Açılım, 2018, p. 63.

be recognized and is never seen again".<sup>46</sup> Cinema is also an activity of capturing and monitoring the past. Films record, display, share, and reduplicate memories fictionally; that is why watching old –especially black-and-white films are identified as a nostalgic act.

The bygone is replete with countless confrontations and experiences. Not all of these are remembered because memory selects and interprets.<sup>47</sup> It, just like a filmmaker, fictionalises the reality. In the narrative of nostalgia, presumptively, the now is restless and the future is ambivalent. The past is, however, missed passionately and mentioned with the idiom of *those were the days*. The past for the nostalgic person is always the safest imaginative realm, so much so that it is more than a temporal period. Perhaps things are indeed getting worse, but the recent past, as Adorno describes, "always presents itself as if destroyed by catastrophes".<sup>48</sup> That is why the nostalgic focuses more on distant memories. "For consciousness rejuvenates everything, giving a quality of beginning to the most everyday actions".<sup>49</sup> Thus, childhood gets closer [to the rememberer] every passing day.

Nostalgia is a term related to the sense of loss [of childhood]. Even all destructions have picturesque beauty in the nostalgic world of childhood. Nostalgia and childish dreams reproduce each other, so dreaming is supreme for children and elders in a similar vein. Just as the things that are desired and missed are not apparent in nostalgics lives,<sup>50</sup> the line between facts and dreams and between experiences and memories is ambiguous. They mostly substitute each other. For this reason, remembering necessitates fighting against this confusion and uncertainty. This struggle is like searching for the last piece to complete the jigsaw puzzle. From this point of view, nostalgics are also melancholic to some extent. Just like nostalgics, the melancholic subject, as Žižek states, remains faithful to the lost object.<sup>51</sup> This can be comprehended in the loyalty of Ahmet Uluçay about the country and the past, and of Recep and Mehmet about cinema.

## Conclusion

Ahmet Uluçay is a director of incomplete stories and films. After his only feature film *Boats Out of Watermelon Rinds*, his second film *Seashell in the Steppe* (Bozkırda Deniz Kabuğu) could be finished, but he has many short films. Even the titles of these films show how Uluçay had a rich dream world: *Optical Dreams*

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46 Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History", *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, trans. Hannah Arendt, New York: Schocken, 1968, pp. 253-64.

47 Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Love: On the Frailty of Human Bonds*, p. 91

48 Theodor W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, New York: Verso, 2005, p. 49.

49 Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, p. 67.

50 Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, p. xiv.

51 Slavoj Žižek, "Melancholy and the Act", *Critical Inquiry*, 2000, 26 (4), pp. 657-681.

(Optik Düşler 1994), *Middle of Our Village Is a Movie Theatre* (Bizim Köyün Ortayeri Sinema 1995), *Dream in Microcosmos* (Minyatür Kosmos'da Düşler 1995), *Pearl is Under the Water* (İnci Denizin Dibinde 1996), *Epileptic Film* (1998), *Picture of the Feature Film* (Uzun Metrajın Resmi 1999) and *Exorcise* (2000). All these films contain the impossible realm of nostalgia and dream of the countryside and childhood. During his relatively short life, Uluçay tried to keep the spirit of childhood memories in a nostalgic passion.

Just like in Uluçay's life, there is no happy ending in the film *Boats Out of Watermelon Rinds*. No one can attain his/her desire. What we [the viewers] know about what happened to Recep, Mehmet, Nihal, the crazy man and the watermelon seller at the end is obscure and incomplete. Perhaps, the director wants the viewers to complete it. Only some minor fragments of failure and frustration in the country are apparent. There are however still dreams that struggle to suppress these unfavourable feelings. Cinema is the only instrument of escape from tough reality for Recep and Mehmet; that is why, in the last scene, they look at a photograph with the view of the beach long time and daydream about distant geographies and times. This simple photography represents the plain supremacy of film-art. Despite this, dreaming is not an absolute and permanent solution in the country. Stubborn realities are on the alert at any moment. The country, although it seems different at first glance, has a watchful and dominant climate. Its authentic, nostalgic, and exotic image that is composed mainly by urban gaze is, however, chimeric and illusive.

The place is perhaps one of the most inevitable fate of humanity. It determines feelings, thoughts, actions, and reactions. More ironically, in time, human resembles the place where s/he lives in. Countryside, which is both an experience and sensation beyond a place, refers to the past rather than the future, to the inner world rather than the outer world, to death rather than life, to remembering rather than forgetting, to wisdom rather than reason and melancholy rather than pleasure. This is also true for childhood. The country and childhood that complete each other are the most characteristic images of nostalgia. They never become indistinct despite the passing time. Instead, they are attached to memory and become clearer in time.

This orientation unites with the sense of melancholy especially in consequence of modern-time circumstances such as technology, commodification, urbanisation, etc. Perhaps, human, despite the bodily transformation, lives perceptually and mentally in the past and particularly in his/her first home in the country; and remains always a child. Memory enables him/her to travel through time and to cross spatial borders. This is because memory is like a film that fictionalises and is fictionalised. As for nostalgia, it has a magical-like feature to purge the past from traumatic memories.

Life can be likened to a country in which everything is half. Perhaps, the half is the whole itself. Remembering is at least an initiative of completing the *halfness*. In any case, namely on the assumption that all elders are, as debated before, still children, childhood can be positioned as the first and final phase of the life story. It is the home of missing parts of dreaming. Traces of purity and sincerity are included in childhood. We [the viewers] did not see how Recep and Mehmet grow up, but even if we saw it, we would probably see surely how they miss their childhood and village along with its constructive and destructive sides at the same time. The evidence of this big claim is Ahmet Uluçay himself. He sees childhood in the country nostalgically as the most beautiful period despite loneliness and despair: "I am a filmmaker who dwells on my childhood. I do not like the age we live in. My whole life is a lament for my childhood. And so do my films... My camera monitors the world with the eye of children... The most beautiful days were lived in my childhood. I am a person who still cries for my childhood. Temporally and spatially, I feel myself away from home. My childhood is gone and does not come back again. Can I capture it in some way?"<sup>52</sup>

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## Taşra, Çocukluk ve Nostaljinin Sinematik Coğrafyası: Nisyan Çağında Ahmet Uluçay'ı Hatırlamak

### Öz

Bu makale bir taşrada doğan, büyüyen ve yine orada 2009 yılında henüz 55 yaşındayken vefat eden Türk yönetmen Ahmet Uluçay'ın hayatı ve onun tek uzun metraj filmi olan *Karpuz Kabuğundan Gemiler Yapmak* (2004) üzerinden Anadolu'nun çocukluk, taşra ve sinema deneyimlerine odaklanmaktadır. Uluçay'ın otobiyografik eseri olan filmde, sinema yapmak isteyen iki çocuğun hikayesi anlatılmaktadır. Bu anlatıya göre çocukluk, insan hafızasının hem en saf düşleriyle hem de en derin hayal kırıklıklarıyla doludur. Taşraya gelince, o eşzamanlı olarak kaçışın ve izole olmanın mekânsal karşılığıdır. Ahmet Uluçay, düşük bütçeli ve minimalist insan hikayelerini öne çıkaran Yeni Türk Sineması açısından dönüm noktasıdır. Öyle ki, çok sayıda filmi olmamasına rağmen, hala ülkenin sinema okullarında ders olarak gösterilmektedir. Uluçay'ın eserlerindeki öyküler, karakterler, değerler ve dil tümüyle kendi coğrafyasından beslenmektedir. Buna rağmen, hakkında yapılmış yeteri kadar yabancı dilde akademik yayın bulunmamaktadır. Bir taraftan söz konusu açığı kapatmaya çalışan bu makale, diğer yandan sinema, çocukluk, hafıza ve taşranın birbirlerini nasıl inşa ettikleri sorusunun yanıtını aramaktadır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Taşra, Çocukluk, Hafıza, Nostalji, Ahmet Uluçay.

## Cinematic Geography of the Countryside, Childhood, and Nostalgia: Remembering Ahmet Uluçay in the Age of Oblivion

Sertaç Timur DEMİR

### Abstract

This article focuses on the experiences of Anatolia's childhood, countryside, and cinema through the life of Turkish film-maker Ahmet Uluçay who was born, grew up in a small town and died there at 55 age in 2009 and through his only feature film *Boats Out of Watermelon Rinds* (2004). The story of two children who want to make cinema is narrated in the film that is Uluçay's autobiographical work. According to the narrative, childhood is full of both the purest dreams and the deepest disappointments of human memory. As for the country, it is simultaneously the spatial equivalent of escape and being isolated. Ahmet Uluçay is a turning point of the New Turkish Cinema that highlights low-budget and minimalist human stories, so much so that, although he does not have many films, has been shown as a lecture in cinema schools in the country. Stories, characters, values, and language in Uluçay's works are nourished entirely from his geography. Despite this, there are no sufficient foreign-language academic papers on it. This study, which on the one hand tries to meet the deficit, on the other hand, seeks an answer to the question of how cinema, childhood, memory, and the country construct each other.

**Keywords:** Countryside, Childhood, Memory, Nostalgia, Ahmet Uluçay.