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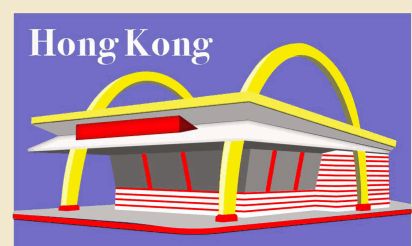
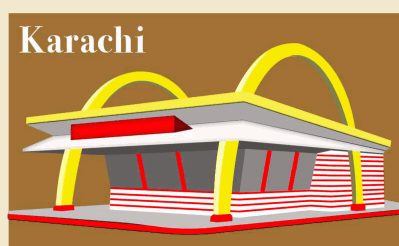
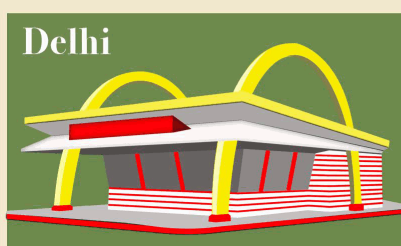
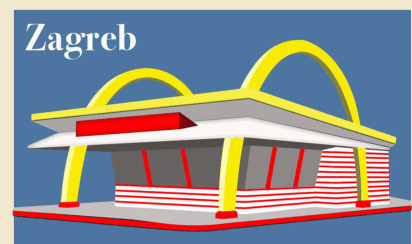
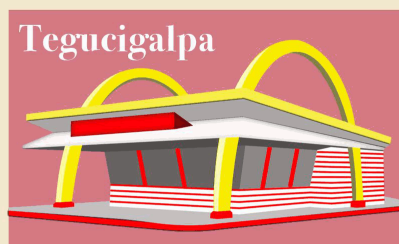
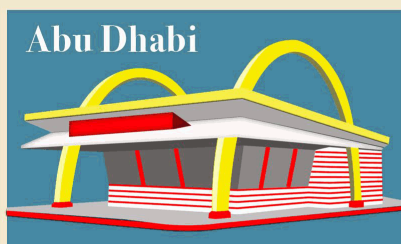
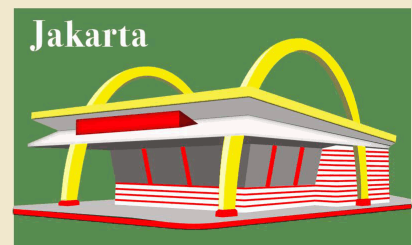
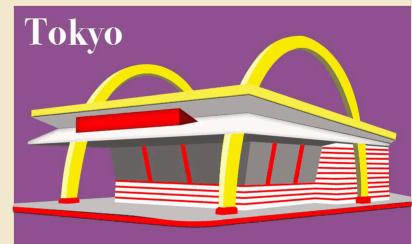
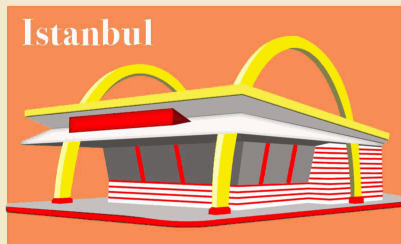
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Markets, Globalization & Development Review



The Big World – Reha Erdem and the Magic of Cinema

Andreas Treske

Abstract

Reha Erdem's latest film *Big Big World* (Koca Dünya) was selected for the "Horizons" ("Orizzonti") section at the 73rd Venice International Film Festival in 2016 and won a prestigious special jury award. The Venice selection is standing for a tendency to hold on, and celebrate the so-called "World Cinema" along with Hollywood blockbusters and new experimental arthouse films in a festival programming mix, insisting to stop for a moment in time a cinema that is already on the move.

Keywords

Turkey, Cinema, Venice, World Cinema, Reha Erdem

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Film Review

The Big World – Reha Erdem and the magic of cinema

A boy, not older than 16, carrying the lifeless body of a much younger girl on his back, runs out of a forest towards a street, holding out his hand to stop cars. Wearing a moustache like a young Errol Flynn, his mimic and gestures are desperate and helpless. Next, the boy on a motorcycle followed by images of the city at night. Against the light, in a mystic atmospheric forest, a girl runs, followed by the boy in the distance while a poetic voice in Turkish says: “If I say to the hole ‘you are my father’, if I say to the wolf ‘you are my mother, my brother’, you see, then where is hope?”

These are the first few seconds of the trailer to Reha Erdem’s latest film “Big Big World” (Koca Dünya) from 2016. The Turkish film was selected for the “Horizons” (“Orizzonti”) section at the 73rd Venice International Film Festival in 2016, and won a prestigious special jury award.

The film is about two orphaned siblings, Ali and Zuhail, who take shelter in a forest outside of a city to which they cannot return. They have committed a crime.

The forest serves as an isolated and almost deserted island. The sibling’s apparent longing for adventure, freedom and dreams turn out to be embedded in a background of violence and oppression. These are the main themes of hope and fairy tales.

Erdem said of his film, “Human beings carry their history of thousands of years inside their cells. When we are first born to this world, even before we start to learn, our bodies know a lot more. That’s the inherited knowledge, which comes from the atoms that form our cells. From the first time we take a breath, this is how this big world embraces us. Yet this miraculous thing, the human substance, is so much more than the atoms it is made up of and all of us need another kind of embrace after we are born. That’s the embrace of a mother/father. The child that is devoid of it, no matter how well he is cared for, starts his life bereft and weary” (Festivalscope 2016).

For Erdem, “that place” is where we grow spiritually. We acquire the necessary knowledge about our relationship to the world and ourselves as humans in it. We are able to relate the outside world to our inner self, trying to find order within us.

Erdem continues: “The children who never tasted that ‘embrace’ end up walking harsher and crueler roads in this life. Their souls shatter and their bodies bruise. This film is about a sister and a brother who never tasted that embrace, and their struggle to hold on to life

somehow. It ponders on the possibilities of getting out of that miserable, non-human pit one falls into in the struggles against fate, no matter how 'clean' he is. It tries to witness believe that, by holding on to faith and love, there is always a glimmer of hope through faith and love for those who do not give up on their desire to get out of there away" (Festivalscope 2016).

Erdem is interested in creating "a tale that cannot be told, not with spoken or written words, and telling it with the help of the inspired and passionate magic unexpected cinema" (Festivalscope 2016).

For Erdem it is only the old masters of "grand" cinema, the cinema of Mizoguchi, or Satyajit Ray, Bergman, Welles, or Bresson and many others in the film canon, who are able to be such gifted storytellers.

"Big Big World" is the eighth theatrical film from Erdem. After studying cinema and plastic arts in France, he came back to Turkey and wrote, directed, and produced award-winning art-house films. His first films "A Ay" (1988) and "Kac Para Kac" (1989) have already placed him in the top tier of Turkish film directors along with Nuri Bilge Ceylan, Semih Kaplanoğlu, Zeki Demirkubuz, or Yeşim Ustaoğlu. Erdem is an important part, in fact a forerunner, of a remarkable, new, and independent Turkish cinema of the 1990s and the 2000s, which gained worldwide recognition with awards at prestigious film festivals, such as Nuri Bilge Ceylan's multiple successes in Cannes.

In contrast to many directors of this Turkish new wave, the cinema of Erdem is not a realistic cinema, even when he embeds his stories in the real world. His films "Beş Vakit" (2006) or "Kosmos" (2010) are cinematographic poems that play on the margins of the real Turkey of today and a magical, fantastic world of imagination.

In many instances, the cinematography of his longtime companion and collaborator Florent Herry (SBC) reframes place and time unusually present but distant with image composition, which is underlined by Erdem's directing style and the duration of single shots. It seems the images are kept standing a moment longer than the narrative would require, therefore creating a diverse sensibility for time and space, one that even recalls Deleuzian time-images. Time becomes present, magically here and now. These are the characteristics of a current movement in cinema called "World Cinema", one developed out of diversity a cinema beyond cultural borders, not streamlined to the single, all-encompassing narrative structure that Hollywood has been marketing since its inception.

Perhaps because of Erdem's love of cinema, or perhaps as a result of his early French education, it is difficult to locate Erdem's film language and narrative style as 'Turkish'. His cinema overcomes the borders of its sociocultural setting and becomes something bigger,

something more transnational through its overlap with the poetic and fantastic.

“Everything I’ve lived through, everything I’ve seen, everything I’ve experienced - my motivation, my reasons and my inspiration - to make this film was easy and driven by my imagination” (Dobroiu 2016).

The story of the two orphan teenagers, expressively played by Berke Karaer and Ecem Uzun, explores the forest as nature with magical touches. Florent Herry’s camera work contrasts the pure and saturated beauty of the mysterious forest, with its snakes, frogs and spiders, with the cold, harsh existence and social demands of their real lives in today’s modern Turkey, Istanbul. When Ali (Berke Karaer) learns that Zuhale (Ecem Uzun) is going to be married as the second wife of the man who claimed her from the orphanage, his reaction is violent and forceful, forceful and brutal. Ali frees his sister and escapes with her into the forest. Naturally the camera follows the two as they step into the opening of a seemingly fairytale dream world amongst the trees. But Erdem is not glamorizing their flight and subsequent adventures at all. He is rather consistent with the themes of adolescence and “in-betweenness”, a subject he revisits in many of his films.

As Güleğül Altıntaş has argued, Erdem’s films seem to be in a dialogical cycle, investigating conflicts of humanity with culture (Altıntaş 2014). The transition to adulthood reflects the exploration of identity in which an internalization of oppression takes place. The experience of growing up is a passage through the prospect of freedom and the danger of entrapment. The gain of power by overcoming the passage to adulthood is always connected with the loss of some other kind of power (Altıntaş 2014). In “Big Big World” only the forest can reflect the poetic time of holding on to childhood and, simultaneously, create an expression of presence while Istanbul – the city – becomes redundant. Of course, it is only logical that this idyllic setting and the external needs of the characters invite disturbance, chaos and finally eventually their destruction. Ali has to go out of the forest, and therefore interact with the outside world, while Zuhale has to stay. The outside world intervenes and takes advantage of Ali in the person of a fortune-teller (Melissa Akman); Zuhale is pregnant.

Erdem’s themes are very clear, sometimes repetitive, but he never tires of continuing his exploration of the longing for togetherness, happiness and freedom and the struggle with the world outside the bond of the orphans. Even while recalling the mystery and magic of the forest, Erdem does not imply that this special fortress will last forever; rather, he points to its loss as well. There is no isolated, deserted bastion somewhere that could protect freedom and happiness from the outside world. The forest, this haven, does not and cannot exist.

The fact that Erdem's "Big Big World" gained a special recognition in Venice in 2016 is standing for a tendency of a widespread established "high" film culture to hold on, and celebrate the so-called "World Cinema" in a popular mix between Hollywood blockbusters and new experimental art-house films, insisting to stop for a moment in time a cinema that is already on the move.

The 'grand' cinema Erdem himself reminds us of through both his visual style and references in interviews appears more or less framed as "world cinema" in order to categorize and stabilize a diverse and dynamic range of individual artistic practices.

With the global digitalization of our national and international audiovisual cultures, the "actual" cinema has already moved onto mobile devices, and a widespread network of moving images is accessible any time and anywhere on today's global map.

Cinema and the culture surrounding it is evolving and flourishing outside its once historically established location. The spatial ordering of cinema seems to be in crisis.

"The place of cinema, understood as a medium, a cultural institution and a canon of films, is in doubt – a problem which the concept of World Cinema appears to solve by proposing new modes of spatial ordering" (Hediger 2013).

The main competition winner of Venice in 2016 was Lav Diaz's four-hour film "The Women Who Left", a story about a woman who wants to take her revenge after 30 years of wrongful imprisonment. Both Erdem's and Diaz's films invite the audience to the cinematographic pleasure of collective immersion. Sitting in the dark theater with its big, colorful screen, it is an isolated island of audiovisual dreaming.

One of the frontrunners of the 2017 Oscar nominations, Damien Chazelle's musical "La La Land" opened the Venice Film Festival. In all the euphoria with the film surrounding the return of the Hollywood musical by a young director who had proven his virtuosity with the film *Whiplash* in 2014, there seems to be a feeling of mourning for cinema, of its great times, its domination, its misery and irritation. Musicals are long gone, especially in mainstream cinema, and similar to Diaz's longing for time and Erdem's magic of the place, the cinema of Venice in 2016 appeals to the passing dreams of its history, of "auteurs". It is here where Erdem's films are calling the audience to return to the magic of a place called cinema.

In one of the interviews after the screening of "Big Big World", when Reha Erdem was asked what his next film would be about, he expressed a resignation from his main themes by simply stating 'it will be definitely something else'. Is he going beyond the passage?

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