

# THE VERSES OF TWO POETS ON SCREEN; RHINO SEASON AND THE BUTTERFLY'S DREAM

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Everything that is moving and is fixed by the camera is beautiful: this is the technical and therefore poetic restitution of reality.

## **ABSTRACT**

*As a literary form, poetry was seen as a fruitful model for the creative process of the more lyrical side of experimental film practices. In this sense, most critics mainly concern with the aesthetics of visual narrations of films evaluating them as poetry. This paper aims to find out the answer of the question "how has cinema transformed poetry?" through the films Rhino Season and The Butterfly's Dream revealing the ways of their relations with poetry.*

**Key Words:** Poetry, Film, Narration, Visual Language

## **THE POETIC LANGUAGE OF CINEMA**

Cinema as an art work had to struggle against its commercial aspect for years. Since it is a technical invention and had served itself as a commercial medium at the beginning, it took time to manifest its artistic value and the universal nature of its language like other art forms. In 1948, Alexandre Astruc formulated the concept of the *caméra-stylo* ("camera-pen"), in which film was regarded as a form of audio-visual language, and the filmmaker, therefore, as a kind of writer in light. This concept opened the way of questioning the creator of film; its advocates maintained that film should be a medium of personal artistic expression and that the best films are those imprinted with their makers' individual signature. Then, film was evaluated as a personal language that makes its writer an artist as in literature and serves many options to the director (writer) of film in which he expresses himself. The creator can



write a biography, a novel and also poetries with his pen (camera) in line with his talent or preferences. Director creates a visual narration using a system of signs made of images like a writer uses words and sounds. This paper mainly aims to examine poetic cinema, which hasn't been sufficiently addressed in Turkish cinema so far, through two interrelated films about "poetry".

Poetic realism (*Réalisme poétique* in French) is a cinema movement that started in a period of socioeconomic turmoil following the Great Depression in France in 1929 and continued until the end of the 2nd World War. "Poetic Realism, which flowered in the early sound era, integrated poetic, non-narrative innovations into the conventions of narrative continuity filmmaking. The end result was a cycle of films that took some of the aesthetic concerns of those earlier movements and wedded them to traditional movie realism in a way that exhibits a socially conscious perspective while simultaneously remaining accessible to mainstream audiences." (Gloversmith, 2011) The movement valued the dreams destroyed by the war, and tried to capture the poetry of everyday life by reflecting dim environments and wet pavements in misty weathers with a lyrical framing technique. Thus, it wouldn't be wrong to assume that the poetic realism movement was basically based on the artistic movement in cinematography which was called "avant-garde" or experimental cinema between the years 1921 and 1931 and was affected by expressionism, futurism, cubism and Dadaism that dominated the art of Europe at the time.

French directors (Renoir in particular) such as Epstein who, in fact, described poetry by saying "Why tell chronological stories assuming regulated sequences of events and consecutively organized emotions and actions? Such phenomena (perspectives) are mere illusions. Life is not made up of small and large pictures properly lined up together. There are no stories. They never existed; there are only situations with no beginning or ending, no before and after", and built his film *La Glace a Trois Faces* (1927) in a way that would not allow the audience to think there is a particular "end"; Gance whose film *La Roue* (1922) is described as a symphonic poetry and who built his film *Napoleon vu par Abel Gance* (1927) with a poetic language that increases the power of imagination; Clair who, impressed by poets (Aragon, Valery, Apollinaire...) and, like all future surrealists, by *Dadaism*, used striking metaphors and visual gags, and created a poetry with hollow images according to the Dadaist poetry tradition in his film *Entr'acte* in 1924; and Vigo who "created a fairy tale within a special world, and transformed an almost ordinary fight and peace story into a masterpiece, into romantic aspirations and into a special song of freedom using crazy elements of comedy with a powerful lyrical beauty in surrealist scenes where reality is combined with poetic surrealism" in his film *L'Atalante* in 1934 (Makal, 1996: 38-60), had their names written in the history of cinema as directors who managed to "write poetries with their cameras used as pens". (Sinemager, 2017)

The movement then became the origin of the French New Wave and Poetic Cinema that would affect the cinema of many countries from Latin America to Australia, from the Far East to Iran. The movement which developed in France at the end of the 1950s focused more on the style and technical aspects of film rather than the subject, and, of course, on the director (auteur) who took this style and transformed it into a personal style. Primary representatives of this movement based on a creative film-making theory are Chabrol, Godard, Resnais and Antonioni Truffaut, all of whom shot films reflecting their unique languages just like authors would do.



In 1965, Italian film director, writer and poet Pier Paolo Pasolini spoke at a conference and outlined his theory of a "cinema of poetry." Pasolini claimed that "cinema might be apt for exploring a 'poetic' style, because the medium has an "irrational nature". (Verstraten, 2012: 117) By "the irrational nature of cinema which is apt for exploring a poetic style", Pasolini emphasizes the power of cinema to fight against a logical and reasonable grammar system established for prose (and similarly used in the classical narrative cinema), and, in other words, implies that rearrangement of images with a new logic and reason may enable "poetic cinema" through a different path for each individual beyond these rules. This path is, of course, the one previously taken by auteurs such as Tarkovsky, Godard, Antonioni and Bergman, and by representatives of contemporary cinema such as Angelopoulos, Kim Ki Duk and Lars Von Trier by challenging the classical drama principles to tell their stories about people. Tarkovsky associates being a great director with his poetic narration; "In my opinion, only poets will have their names written in the history of cinema. "Auteur" cinema consists of poets, and all great directors are poets. What is a poet in cinema? An auteur is a director who creates his own world without recreating the reality surrounding him. That is "Auteur" cinema. (From his documentary "A Poet in Cinema")

Being defined as poets in cinema or, in other words, being able to present cinema as a visual text is both a source of prestige and a risky attitude for directors. Cinema long produced films that the audience could easily understand and that didn't offer any space for them to think or question what they watch. However, poetic films offer such spaces of meaning just like poetry itself. Poetry readers and film audiences enter into a creative process trying to fill in these spaces of meaning. What directors want is such participation of their audience into the meaning making process.

Fernández-Santos makes use of the concept of visual poetry "to name some movies which feature a special lyrical exaltation to represent feelings or reflections of proven intellectual depth, permitting the audience to transcend the surface of images and move to abstract territories." (ed. Planes Pedreño, J.A. & Pérez Díaz, P., 2015: 128) Examination of relevant studies indicates that in order to talk about poetic cinema, there needs to be a combination of a director with both technical competence and an intellectual depth, a socio-cultural infrastructure of the society that will provide the director with such an intellectual depth, and finally, an audience with similar features who will read and understand the outcome.

It seems, then, it is inevitable to consider these parameters in the analyses of the two films addressed in this paper. These poetically structured films of the cinemas of two countries (Turkey and Iran) which resemble one another in terms of their rich cultural histories and modernization stories provide us with important clues regarding their approaches towards poetic cinema. The term 'modernization' incidentally not used here actually forms the basis of the modern film narrative that poetic cinema feeds upon.

The second half of the 1950s and the 1960s were when the young adopted the attitude "create your own value" against the religious, moral and established social impositions in many countries around the world -and especially in France where poetic cinema was born within the modern film narrative-, when conventional rules of art were broken, and when radical changes occurred in every area of life along with the rapidly changing technology. The images in the films produced in these years were based on a philosophical thought, and one of such thoughts was Deleuze's inspiring film theory "time-image". Deleuze denies



Hollywood's classical movement-image and analyses representation of image in cinema through two regimes based on movement and time: *theorganic regime* and *thecrystalline regime*, respectively. "The organic regime is about the depiction of an image and is related to the movement-image of the classical cinema. The organic regime based on the movement-image involves localisable relations, actual linkages and/or causal-logical connections, whereas the crystalline regime based on the time-image describes an environment where images can be independent of each other and every image can change into one another"(Deleuze, G., 1997). That is, the crystalline regime does not seek for causality as the organic regime does. Unlike the antiquity philosophy in which time is chronologically arranged as the past-the present-the future depending on movement, Deleuze considers cinema as an activity flowing through fractions of non-chronological periods of time. Therefore, modernist films have an intransitive narrative which is interrupted by spatial and temporal fractions. For audiences who are accustomed to the flow of a linear dramatic narrative, it is hard to watch such films. Watching the logically following events, the audience does not think about how they actually follow one another. The audience transcends the narrative style and directly reaches the content. What matters is not "how"events flow, but "what"happens.

Images are presented in order to create a "harmony"or build an individual aesthetic that is meaningful alone just as poetries break the chronological order of language. Such an aesthetic is mostly built according to the preferences of the director, and thus, it is unusual.

The primordial characteristic of these indications of a tradition of the cinema of poetry consists in a phenomenon which technicians define normally and tritely as "making the camera felt.".... Thus one feels the camera, and for good reasons. The alternation of different lenses, a 25 or a 300 on the same face, the abuse of the zoom with its long focuses which stick to things and dilate them like quick-rising loaves, the continual counterpoints fallaciously left to chance, the kicks in the lens, the tremblings of the hand-held camera, the exasperated tracking-shots, the breaking of continuity for expressive reasons, the irritating linkages, the shots that remain interminably on the same image, this whole technical code was born almost of an intolerance of the rules, of the need of unusual and provocative liberty, a diversely authentic and pleasant taste for anarchy, but it immediately became law, a prosodic and linguistic heritage which concerns all the cinemas in the world at the same time. (Nichols, 1976: 556-557)

Another element of poetic narration is that, although the purpose may differ from one director to another, the camera is left so still that characters and events may enter or exit the frame within a period of time that runs almost parallel to the real time. According to Pasolini "Obsessive still shots are also characteristic of Bertolucci's film, *Before the Revolution*. However, they have a different meaning than for Antonioni. The world-fragment, imprisoned in the frame and transformed by it into a fragment of autonomous beauty which refers only to itself, does not interest Bertolucci as it interests, in return, Antonioni."(1976: 542-558) For auteurs, long takes with a still camera not only create an aesthetic but also keep the audience awake, and thus active, by leaving them alone with the real time. "Existentialism", one of the most important matters of modern philosophy at the time, provides the audience with a certain time frame to question their own selves via the long takes that cannot be seen in classical narrative cinema. Similarly, it leaves the audience alone with an ontological inquiry by using extraordinary methods such as casting ordinary actors that the audience (subjects) who have become alienated and isolated in the modern world cannot identify with or closing the film with an open ending.



Cinemas of Iran and Turkey, each having its own modernization story like many countries, were also affected by this style in their search for a unique cinema language. Here, I will try to analyse these two countries' approaches towards poetic cinema through the films *Rhino Season* and *The Butterfly's Dream* (in order to limit the scope of the paper).

### POETICALLY STRUCTURED FILMS: *RHINO SEASON* AND *THE BUTTERFLY'S DREAM*

Two poetically structured films analysed here give us important hints through their narratives regarding not only their relations with poetry as visual texts but also the perceptions of the cinemas of the countries they represent of modern cinema –and of modernism modern cinema depends on. According to Sheibani, Iran's modernity as a non-Western country is highly related to its national and traditional history. He says "modernity is the philosophy behind all modernist exercises, including, for instance, modern artistic forms as well as modernized industry and architecture. Thus, modernity here signifies 'an ethos rather than a well-demarcated historical period', and continues with reference to Reza Baraheni who says "the essence of Persian culture could be found in its poetry. Poetry was not merely the most important art form in Iran; it was and still is deeply rooted in the Iranian mind, to the point where Iranians -even many who are illiterate- know the poems of Hafiz, Omer Khayyam and Rumi by heart and use poetic expressions in everyday speech."(2011: 20)

While Iran's modernization process is considered to take place without losing its connection with the traditional history, many historians argue the opposite for Turkey's modernization process. Such an argument paves the way for various political readings:

The making of modern Turkey however brought about a rupture with the Ottoman past, with the emergence of the nation-state, and in that context nationalism was situated in the process of making in direct relation to the process of state building. To a large extent, the republic indeed presented a radical break with the past, as it was nurtured by 'concepts and doctrines such as progress, laicism, nationalism, Comtean positivism and solidarism', owed a lot 'to the Enlightenment, the French Revolution and nineteenth-century scientism', and aimed as 'its ultimate consequence to create a modern Turkish state'(Kazancıgil 1981: 37).

For the young Turkish Republic whose national independence was under serious threat, it was not easy to provide security and realize the modernization projects under tough economic conditions. Therefore, all the reforms were made as quickly as possible. However, it would not be wrong to assume that that the cultural modernization of Turkey was realized without seeking a formula to bridge the gap between the past and the present and to unite the old and the new has brought along the problem of "originality" especially in the field of art today.

Therefore, the significant and prestigious position of the cinema of Iran in the world cinema literature as a national and unique cinema is associated with the fact that it did not lose its connections with its cultural history and origin by many critics and authors. Sheibani says "It is evident that Iranian cinema has profoundly enriched by the original cultural archetypes", and explains the relation between poetry and cinema as follows:



Modernity and change were partly experienced through the poetic transformations that took place during the constitutional revolution and through the rise of new poetry. The next phase was a marriage of poetry with cinema, through which the concepts of modernity and change were to become more localized and better integrated popular culture. This newly incorporated poetic cinema borrowed the realism, symbolism and radical humanism embedded in Iranian culture and Persian literature. Although the influence of Italian neorealism and French poetic realist stylistics on Iranian directors was evident, their cinema was distinctively Iranian in its literary background....Moreover, Iranian readers and viewers are aware of its aesthetics. Poetry was not only the most popular aesthetic form, it was the language of philosophical ideas and socio-political commentaries throughout the ages. Iranian art films employ this deeply rooted poeticness. (2011: 3)

Although the Neorealism movement that has inspired all the cinemas in the world, including the cinema of Iran, in the 1950s and the 1960s has an effect on Turkish cinema (in that it was the starting point of the modernist film narrative which formed the basis of poetic cinema), this effect was quite limited. Apart from the New Turkish Cinema using narrative codes in 2000s, Metin Erksan was the only brave director of the time. The shots in Erksan's film *Sevmek Zamani (Time to Love, 1965)* are almost poetic. The film's credits accompanied by stationary scenes with no people welcome the poetic simplicity of nature, which is quite a new experience for the audience who are left alone with images of trees and their branches whose reflections on the water intertwine to form a net. Unfortunately, the film produced with a concern for visual aesthetics in Turkish cinema had the opportunity to be shown in theatres only twice, and then pulled from the theatres. In fact, it was not only the film itself but also the questionings and efforts which would bring a new style to Turkish cinema that were put aside to be forgotten in dusty shelves. Such efforts, as stated above, could only come out with certain directors in 2000s, and had the opportunity to be shown to wide audiences in festivals only. This explains why the two poetically structured films analysed here (which have almost ironic common grounds) will enable an evaluation of poetic cinema through the cinemas of two countries.

In *Rhino Season* (2012) directed by Iranian Kurdish Bahman Ghobadi, Turkish actors and actresses such as Beren Saat, Yılmaz Erdoğan and Belçim Bilgin are casted. The film many scenes of which were shot in Turkey tells the true story of an Iranian poet. *The Butterfly's Dream* (2013) is directed by actor Yılmaz Erdoğan and produced precisely one year after the *Rhino Season*. Erdoğan's wife Belçim Bilgin, who previously acted in *Rhino Season*, is the leading actress in *The Butterfly's Dream*. The film tells the true stories of two young poets (Muzaffer Tayyip Uslu and RüştüOnur) who lived in Zonguldak in the 1940s. The first poetic reference in *Rhino Season* lies in its original name *Fasle Kargadan*. The name of the film also reflects its subject which is "based on the true story of an Iranian Kurdish poet known by the pseudonym Sadegh Kamangar, the film's main character Sahel"(Auerbach, 2012) The film opens with the imprisonment of Sahel, a poet accused of writing political poems following the Iranian Revolution of 1979. The poet is bathed by people wearing special clothes as if he is a toxic substance, and his figure lying on the white marble water poured over him resembles a ritual of bathing the dead. Light beams floating in dark are like tiny bits of hope against the prison and the darkness of life. The imprisonment of Sahel is due to a man called Akbar, who is madly in love with Sahel's wife Mina. Akbar is the former driver of Mina's colonel father prior to the revolution. He witnesses the dates and love of Mina and Sahel as their driver. The usual meeting spot of the lovers is presented in the film as





a 3 dimensional labyrinth, rather than an aesthetic postcard, surrounded by the branches of trees just like the arms of an octopus that is ready to swallow them. The sexuality in the film is quite implicit, which is more likely to be seen only in Eastern societies, but as erotic as possible. One day, for example, Akbar finds Mina's lipstick on the backseat of the car where she sat before. He puts on the lipstick and licks it as if he is kissing her...Following the revolution, Akbar is assigned to a significant position. After a while, Mina, who does not requite Akbar's love, is also sentenced to ten years for aiding and abetting his husband. Akbar brings the couple who hasn't seen each other for a long while together with a sack over their heads and with their hands tied. Recognizing but not being able to see each other, the couple starts to make love; but Akbar pushes Sahel away by force and replaces him. When Mina realizes the situation, he rapes her. The high angle shot used in this scene reminds a deep dark well and looks just like a spider attack, which fits perfectly well with the following verses:

*"A spider arrives.  
And darkens the moment with its sticky saliva.  
It hunts you...and then leaves you.  
A spider, a real spider."*(as cited in Sözen, 2012)

Just like the spider in the poetry, Akbar destroys lives.

Getting pregnant as a result of the rape, Mina gets out of the prison and goes to İstanbul to start a new life. She is told that her husband is dead. However, Sahel gets out of the prison at the end of a 30-year sentence and goes to İstanbul to find Mina. The film which goes back and forth in time and tries to create a magical narration with the images entwines the story with the past and the future using a symbolic language that feeds upon poetry all the way. The director, who states that he loves animals more than humans, aims to present metaphors mostly through animal images in *Rhino Season*. "In *Rhino Season*, we see scenes similar to but visually more impressive than the scenes where turtles fall down in *Turtles Can Fly* (2004). Though turtles, which symbolize those who are 'not made for heights' and carry their homes on their backs but have no place called home, and which, in a way, imply not following dominant thoughts and ideas but trying to embrace a more independent perspective, are free as birds for a little while, they eventually fall down into the water one by one. Just like the inner conflicts of people living in exile who have lost their senses of belonging."(Sözen, 2012) In such feelings, Sahel tries to go on with his life between dream and reality in İstanbul without falling into the melodramatic clichés. He unknowingly has sex with Mina's daughter with whom she got pregnant as a result of a rape during her imprisonment. However, this coincidence is not used as a melodramatic motive in the film. According to Fainur, Ghobadi's film is more of "a tragic love story, a fierce indictment against the Islamist regime in Tehran, but most of all, a lyrical elegy replete with symbolical visions accompanying the poems on the soundtrack."(2012) Accompanied by the poet's poetries, the film ends with Sahel's going down in waters with his past (and with Akbar who is the leading actor of this tragedy) that is haunting him and prevents him to build a new life with Mina. Although the film is criticised for having excessive elements of symbolism by certain directors, it does justice to poetic film narrative as a visual text telling poetries. In other words, the cinema of Iran once more presents a unique attitude by combining the tradition of poetry with cinema.

*The Butterfly's Dream* opens with a promising scene for poetic cinema. The camera takes us to a coal mine in the 1940s with a sequence shot that lasts for a couple minutes. The



director, however, prefers to continue this sequence with a Hollywood style melodrama instead of a poetic reality, which is found to be surprising due to the fact that he is a poet indeed. Hoeij makes the shortest and the clearest explanation about the director's preference over the film's nomination for the Oscar Award: "A beautifully mounted period drama about love and poetry from Turkey."(2014) Regarding Yılmaz's expectation to win the award, the critic refers to the two films that he performs in, which is, of course, not a coincidence:

Two struggling poet friends in 1940s Turkey fall for the same girl in *The Butterfly's Dream*, a sumptuously mounted and well-acted period drama from Turkish actor-director and occasional poet Yılmaz Erdoğan. The film, in which Erdoğan co-stars as famous Turkish bard Behçet Necatigil, who was a teacher and something of a mentor for the two young and little-known protagonists, was the country's submission for foreign-language Oscar consideration this year. Though it did not make the shortlist, the film -- reportedly the most expensive Turkish production ever made -- did notch up 2.5 million admissions at home and turned the late leads into more famous poets in the process. Erdoğan, more famous stateside for his work as an actor for regional auteurs such as Nuri Bilge Ceylan (*Once Upon a Time in Anatolia*) and Bahman Ghobadi (*Rhino Season*), again proves he's not only an ambitious but also a very fine director in his own right. (Hoeij, 2014)

The critic states that, in a way, Yılmaz takes a different path than Nuri Bilge Ceylan, who is considered to be a representative of the New Wave movement of the Modern Turkish cinema with his film *Once Upon A Time In Anatolia*, or than Bahman Ghobadi even though he has quite a few thematic similarity with him. This may also bring into mind the question "Could this poetically structured film be a visual poem itself?"The answer can be found in the criticisms towards the film which suggest that there is an expectation in this regard. Cömert says: "Instead of whispering what the *Butterfly's Dream* is, Erdoğan makes a great show of it. The film loses its core, and the poet loses his grace. Not everyone is fascinated by a visual spectacle after all..."(2013)

The main concern here is not, of course, Yılmaz Erdoğan's preference to write a novel instead of a poetry through the language of cinema. Perhaps this paper is a silent will that there be more directors searching for a unique style in Turkish cinema following the discouraged director Metin Erksan, and a reproach against the fact that directors prefer to take the easy way out by choosing melodrama over poetic cinema even when the circumstances are convenient for it.





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