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Nefesim kesilene kadar

Until I Lose My Breath

Emine Emel Balcı

Producer Nadir Öperli, Titus Kreyenberg. **Production companies** Prolog Film (Istanbul, Turkey); Unafilm (Köln, Germany). **Director** Emine Emel Balcı. **Screenplay** Emine Emel Balcı. **Director of photography** Murat Tunçel. **Production design** Meral Efe Yurtseven, Yunus Emre Yurtseven. **Costume** Manfred Schneider. **Make-up** Nimet Inkaya. **Sound** Jörg Kidrowski. **Editor** Dora Vajda.

Cast Esme Madra (Serap), Rıza Akın (father), Sema Keçik (Sultan), Gizem Denizci (Dilber), Ece Yüksel (Funda), Uğur Uzunel (Yusuf), Yavuz Pekman (brother-in-law), Pinar Gök (sister), Yavuz Özata (Ibrahim).

DCP, colour. 94 min. Turkish.

Premiere 6 February 2015, Berlinale Forum

Serap, a young woman whose mother is no longer around, works in a textile factory in Istanbul. She longs for her father, a lorry driver, to finally make good on his promise and rent a flat for the two of them. In the meantime, she lives with her sister and her husband. She does everything she can to make sure her wish comes true, saving her wages for her father and allowing herself nothing. Her stubborn perseverance almost reverses the standard parent-child relationship. The daughter is the one who cares and provides, looking after her father and giving him money. She chooses to ignore the fact that he always comes up with new excuses and lies and rejects the more realistic picture that her sister paints of him. Although the camera is always with Serap, we only get to know her and her life gradually, as well as how far she is prepared to go for her wish. This piercing tale of a father and daughter is also about the mixed set of feelings that flow together in existential human relationships – longing, neediness, lies, disappointment, illusion and anger – a mix described frequently, yet almost deceptively as love.

Anna Hoffmann

The reality we set for ourselves

Our dependency on the reality that we set for ourselves has always drawn my attention. The impulsiveness and ambiguity in the way we create our own morals, our own conscience, and our own gods has always made me ask questions. And the answers I found while writing about Serap and the others pushed me to make this film. Where does our dependency on the reality that we set start to dissolve? When, where, and how do we question our beliefs or the people we believe in?

In *Nefesim kesilene kadar*, Serap makes up a 'father' for herself. But the father does not really have an equivalent in practical life. I tried to make Serap realise this; the obstacles she faces on the way to reach her father are actually the ones she faces on the way to reach her own essence.

I tried to find out where Serap's loneliness comes from. It points to a society in which Serap and other women find themselves in the dark and stuffy back of a van, every morning. Through the story of Serap, I want to show my criticism of how we are totally alienated from the concepts of gender and family, which are always considered sacred.

Emine Emel Balci

"This story could take place in any city, in any country"

The title of the film seems to address the audience directly. Why is Serap losing her breath, what does she want to achieve in life?

Emine Emel Balci: The title of the film points at Serap's determination to stay alive. But it is difficult to give a simple, concrete answer to this question. While I was writing the screenplay, I wanted to set Serap free from any taboos, restrictions, and limits I myself might be having. I wanted to see what she would be capable of doing. I got Serap involved in things that wouldn't be appreciated; in this way I was able to criticise her community and the loneliness she is exposed to. This also gave me the chance to consider Serap as a human being with all the conflicts and grey zones in her character. She is very quiet, but she also has ambitions, she feels hatred, and she experiences complex urges. Although she evolves throughout the film and discovers certain dark sides in herself, for me Serap is still just someone who has ordinary goals in life and believes that one should advance in life.

It seems like you preferred to leave the city unidentified in your film. Other than a few details, you didn't use any defining characteristics of Istanbul. Is there a special reason for this?

I intended to shape the camera movements and framing according to Serap's life and needs. The city became insignificant as soon as I started to create a character that was living in closed spaces, disconnected from the city she lives in, solely focused on her work. This story could take place in any city, in any country. It was much more appealing to give clues about the city that Serap lives in through the soundscape, for instance.

In your previous short films and your documentary Ich Liebe Dich, female characters were your main focus. Nefesim kesilene kadar also revolves around a female character. Could we say that as a filmmaker you are more interested in women's stories?

The issues that I am familiar with and feel an urge to talk about primarily concern women. In a society such as Turkey, where patriarchy infiltrates many areas, it is inevitable that women are

overlooked, ignored and oppressed by the system. Even when you look at the relationships between individuals, the result isn't much different from the bigger picture. This is a situation I feel rather hopeless about, which is why I try to tell stories about issues concerning women's lives. But these issues are so multi-dimensional and peculiar that they could be told through a film with an all-male cast as well.

There are very few male characters in the film and they are inept, short-sighted or naive. Is your decision to depict men in this manner influenced by the fact that women are usually defined solely through male characters in Turkish films?

I'm sure there are certain faulty codes that influence the films we make. Female characters are either sanctified or turned into sexual objects as a result of a well-intended or sexist approach. It's true that I tried to break this tendency in my film. But I'm not only criticising men in my film. The status that men try to gain in this society is usually ludicrous. A kind of exploitation runs through masculinity and male bonding. However, in my film, I do not praise the women characters; they are also cruel to each other. This is also about accepting gender roles. It has traces in my life as well as in yours. We are talking about codes that are centuries old. But when making a film it may be useful to subvert customs to make problems more visible.

How did you decide to work with Esme Madra? How was the process of working together?

When I was developing my script, it was clear that the camera would not leave Serap's side. It was necessary to create a character profile strong enough to engage the audience to achieve such a form of narration. I first thought that I could work with amateur actors. But my desire to do long rehearsals, to play with the script and to describe the story world through a unique visual design inclined me to work with professional actors. I knew Esme and had watched her previous work. After our first meeting, we embarked on a long period of rehearsals. Esme is an unbiased and very talented actress. It was going to be beneficial for her to go through a process like the one I went through while I was writing the script. She visited many sweatshops, observed how people work and behave there. We worked together on the details of Serap's emotional and physical codes, and we had rehearsals with other actors in a very mixed schedule. This way we ensured the inner continuity of Serap's character. And at the end of this intense period of rehearsals, we both started shooting the film with the belief that Serap was a person who actually existed.

The camera usually watches Serap from different angles while staying very close to her at the same time. Was your main reason for using a hand-held camera in order to make the audience feel closer to Serap?

Serap is a character that is constantly in motion. She needs to be permanently available in the sweatshop. That is part of her job. The best way to shoot this was to use a hand-held camera. This choice was also beneficial for the creation of an insecure, uncanny atmosphere. The change of camera movements in relation to changes in the character would also make it possible for us to feel Serap's breathing with the hand-held camera.

The workshops and the people working there are depicted very realistically. Did you shoot these scenes in a real workshop with real workers?

There was a long period of research for the film. Although supporting roles, locations and the plot changed a lot through different drafts of the script, Serap and the sweatshop were always at the centre of the story. I visited textile factories and talked to the people I met there in an effort to understand the dynamics of this world. During these visits Murat Tuncel, the cinematographer, accompanied me and we took lots of photos to decipher the visual codes of this world. The textile industry is one of the industries where workers are exploited big time. There is a lot of competition and the work is intense, irregular, and insecure. Because of such factors we did not work in a real workshop. The workshop in the film was constructed entirely for the film. We found a location that used to be a workshop, which we changed according to our needs. We had a similar approach in the casting of female extras. We tried to cast women who were either actual workers, or had worked in a textile workshop at least once in their lives.

What was your reason for highlighting the issue of money in Serap's life so much?

Money disrupts everything it gets involved in. It quickly changes ethical perceptions and judgement. I thought the slipperiness of Serap's relationship with money might raise some questions in the minds of the audience.

The moment when Serap betrays Dilber is a turning point in the film. Does Serap become a more determined character due to the harm she causes her best friend?

Usually, certain disappointments and needs lie behind important decisions in our lives. Serap's situation is also like that. I hope that the ethical aspect of Serap's act will evoke some discussions about the difficulty of deciding who is more evil or hostile, and what purification or corruption means in our lives.

After Dilber's departure from the film, a young character, Funda, joins the story. Considering the end of the film, would it be fair to say that there is a circular relationship among Dilber, Serap, and Funda?

This circularity creates a dead-end feeling; it implies that life has turned into a vicious cycle. I introduced Funda to the story to reveal an important aspect about Serap's life. But when I thought about how the women in the structure of the film are each other's reflection or representation, I created Funda as someone who had the potential to replace Serap. I wanted to stir up a curiosity in the audience that would linger even after the film was finished, a wish to pursue the story further.

Source: Prolog Film

Films

2007: *Gölün Kadınları / Women of the Lake* (24 min.). 2008: *Bekleyiş / The Waiting* (13 min.). 2012: *Ich liebe Dich* (90 min.). 2015: *Nefesim kesilene kadar / Until I Lose My Breath*.



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Emine Emel Balcı was born in 1984 in Turkey. She studied Film and Television at the Mimar Sinan Fine Arts University in Istanbul. After working as an assistant director and screenwriter, she made her first short documentary in 2007, *Gölün Kadınları / Women of the Lake*. In 2011, Emine Emel Balcı took part in the Berlinale Talent Campus. *Nefesim kesilene kadar* is her second feature-length film.