

The strangest places will do.

Yıldız Palace seems to have had an auditorium. I went there (or maybe it was in one of Çelik Gülersoy's prettied-up Kiosks) to see a screening of *The White Sheik* with Rudolph Valentino, a charity gala affair. I sat in the private auditorium of one of the richest businessmen in Istanbul who is also a collector of rare Hollywood films and watched Jacques Tourneur's *Out of the Past* against a background of the Bosphorus. I saw Claude Chabrol's rarely-shown *Alice où la dernière fugue* in different porno cinemas of Beyoğlu. The film happened to have Sylvia Kristel in it, but was otherwise a perfect exercise in surrealism without any undressing. My very first film – Walt Disney's 1960s reissue of *Fantasia* – was screened at Emek, the grand old Pera cinema which still manages to survive in the same grand old way. And in my particularly film-hungry adolescence I watched *Battleship Potemkin*, for want of something better, so many times in the Cinematheque of Istanbul that it became like visiting a tiresome old uncle who advises you on political correctness.

I imagined the odd Ottoman aristocrat who had seen his first silent film in Yıldız – Sultan Abdulhamit had a passion for crime novels being read to him – shifting uneasily on the gold brocaded sofa, shared with the millionaire film fan Robert Mitchum's world weariness, shivered in the sexual heat of the porno theatre getting a taste of the contrast which is more stimulating than the usual fare there. And I have always felt good in Emek which may or not may remind us of "our life's poverty in its imitation" of movie palace glamour. I even remember old Uncle Potemkin fondly.

The very names of Beyoğlu cinemas tell the tale; "Place-

FATİH ÖZGÜVEN

*The movie houses
of Beyoğlu*

Names: The Place”, as Proust put it. Lale (Tulip), Yıldız (Star), Mülen Ruj (Moulin Rouge), Saray (Palace), formerly Cine Luxembourg, formerly Gloria, Lüks (luxurious), formerly Eclair, Emek (labour, its owners mainly, a family who had made their fortune in the silk trade), formerly Melek (angel; it seems to have had Liberty angels for decoration), Pek (Silk), Sine Pop (a particularly silly 1970s renaming), formerly Yeni Ar and Ar (Decency, strangely enough), Yeni Melek (the New Angel), Şık (Chic), Rüya (Dream), Sümer (Sumeria - a touch of archeology?), Alkazar, Atlas (the Greek demigod, but also Damask cloth), San (Renown), formerly And (Pledge), Tan (Dawn), Süreyya (Soraya), Konak (Palazzo), Venüs, As (Ace) and Elhamra (Alhambra).

They reflect their owners' aspirations and illusions, but also a society's dreams in general. While Tulip, Palace, Soraya, Palazzo are nostalgic for a fairy-tale Istanbul, Moulin Rouge, Luxembourg, Gloria, Eclair are indeed Paris. Luxurious, Silk, Angel, Chic, Venüs are promises of the good life with sexy overtones. Decency is stodgily middle-class. Star is almost generic. Pledge, Dawn, Atlas, Renown, Ace are attempts at earnestness, “pledges” of honesty, badges of no-nonsense businessmanship, virility that seeks to distance itself from the “effeminacy” of cinema-going; “Look, this is just a business!”.

Alkazar and Alhambra are obvious tributes to a Thousand and One Nights mentality rediscovered through the cinema, à la Casablanca and Kismet. Sumer is an oddity, if it was not a salute to Atatürk's Republic and to its cultural values. Emek of course is the ultimate capitalist's dream. It highlights labour in a way that suits its owners. The word “emek” enjoyed a strong political revival during late 1960s, and throughout the 1970s, nobody ever stopping to think about the contrast between the cinema and its name. Emek, with its “E” on a plaster of paris medaillon still crowning its majestic screen was never food for political thought and subject of sociological speculation. Did cinema itself protect it from that?

Today Emek is still Emek. But most of the survivors of cinema-house glamour of my time are phantoms of their former selves. Lale, the Tulip, is only reminiscent of the pudding shop of the same name today. Elhamra shows soft porn, a travesty of the

harems it promises. Alkazar, a militant hard porn cinema for a long time, has recently become an art cinema and holds on to its name for nostalgia's sake, a chic thing to do these days. Sine Pop, it seems, is too lazy to change its name and its awful projector; it is "decency" gone dotty. Sweetly, Rüya is still Rüya, a porn theater, a fallen angel clinging to its – however wet – dreams.

The phenomenon of the multiplex emerged in mid-1980s to the cry of "American films are invading our screens!" They were, for better and worse. Old cinemas were divided and subdivided. Multiplexes more or less coincided with the appearance of international hotels and shopping malls, a recent phenomenon in Istanbul. Almost all of these places have their own "plexes" with fancy, untranslated or not-meant-to-be-translated names like Capitol, Carousel, Prestige, Cinemax, Princess or simply Movieplex. Film titles themselves go untranslated. Once Turkish translations of foreign titles were famous for being baroque exaggerations (as in *The Devil's Victims* for *The Razor's Edge*, *Thou Shalt Not Kill!* for *Friendly Persuasion*), entertaining mistranslations (Like a Stranger for *Not as a Stranger*) and unexpected gems (*The Queen of Gamblers* for *Breakfast at Tiffany's*). Nowadays it is *Feeling Minnesota* for *Feeling Minnesota* or *Bound* for "*Bound*", even *The English Patient* for "*The English Patient*", the ultimate in literal-mindedness. Very cool.

"Cinema-house glamour of my time", "survivors", "phantoms"... Don't get me wrong. I am not one of those sour-grapes cinema lovers for whom everything gets worse and worse along the line; films, cinemas, actors, action, stories, sights, sounds, even "Alaska" the traditional ice-cream sold in Istanbul Cinemas... No. I have too great a faith in the foolish romance between the city and its cinemas for that.

Somewhere in this city as in every city, this very minute, there is someone sitting entranced in the dark looking up at a screen, helplessly in love with the distances yet at the same time strangely at home in their city, this city.