Sabiha in »Public Istanbul«

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The birth and development of the cinema is interwoven with the history of the metropolis, As the city of the 19th century transformed into the metropolis of the 20th, its visual representation evolved from still photography to moving images. Similarly, the coherence and connection of film with the city produces and reproduces the visibility of the woman as a public figure in the city.

Films of the 1920s such as *Metropolis* (Lang 1926) or *Sunrise* (Murnau 1927) portray women in urban public places as »public women«, seducing creatures even when they are not professional prostitutes. Both *Metropolis* and *Sunrise* each produce two distinct images of women: a motherly domestic figure and an uncanny »woman of the city«. Over the next two decades, this female duality continued to be portrayed on the screen either implicitly in romantic comedies, such as *Ninotchka* (Lubitsch 1939) or explicitly in *film noir,* such as Fritz Lang's *The Woman in the Window,* (1944) and *Scarlet Street* (1945). In each of these films, »woman of the city« appear as objects to be gazed upon by the viewer, women who stroll and wander seductively through the city. Even though the film industry produced the cinematic images of cities like Paris, Berlin and New York during the 1920s, the representation of women and their claim to subjectivity in metropolitan public space had to wait until well into the second half of the 20th century.

Istanbul, on the other hand, becomes a cinematic city only during the second half of the century. Istanbul's cinematic images reflect the modernization process and the impacts of migration from rural Anatolia to the city. In most of Turkey's 1950s films, Istanbul is portrayed as an indispensable element of its inhabitants' identity and as a challenge to its

newcomers. In Istanbul movies originating from this time, cabaret women are frequently present, similar to the 1930s and 40s genre of Mexican films known as *cabaretera*. In Turkish films such as *İstanbul Geceleri* [Nights of Istanbul] (Muhtar 1950) or *Yalnızlar Rıhtımıı* [The Port of the Lonely] (Akad 1959), only those women who work at cabarets are seen in urban public places at night. These »public women« pose a contrast to the motherly housewives who are safely at home while their men relish the urban night life.

Sabiha, protagonist in the film *Vesikaıi Yarim* (Akad 1968), is arguably the first female character who challenges this split (or female duality) between the housewife and the whore in films featuring Istanbul as a cinematic city. The film's title, *Vesikalı Yarim,* translated as »My Licensed Beloved«, refers to a »license« given to prostitutes and bar girls, enabling the authorities to trace and control the »public women«.

I have highlighted Sabiha as the main theme of this essay for several reasons. Firstly, Sabiha's role as a »bar-girl« (a prostitute to be picked up at a bar) codes here as a »public woman« and draws attention to the city's gendered cartography, decoding »public Istanbul« further. Secondly, the implicit controversy in the film's title, »My Licensed Beloved«, symbolizes a confrontation of public (license) with private (beloved). This confrontation suggests that Sabiha, embodying the coexistence and confrontation of public and private, is a promising agent of the metropolis. Finally, Sabiha has grown to be a vivid character in the collective memory of the city, especially since the film was revisited by Orhan Pamuk (*Kara Kitap* 1990) [The Black Book] and by a group of film scholars (Nilgün Abisel and others, *Çok Tuhaf, Çok Tanıdık* 2005) [So Odd, So Familiar] who have explored the reasons why *Vesikalı Yarim* has become one of Istanbul's most famous cult films.

Vesikalı Şehir [Whore of a City], a book I have written and named with reference to the film *Vesikalı Yarim* draws upon the film's heritage (Çiçekoğlu 2007). I contextualize the film among other films both from Turkey and elsewhere, where the city's image is identified with prostitu-

tion. As Sabiha is the first on-screen female character who violates traditional gender codes, I argue that Sabiha marks a turning point in the portrayal of women in public Istanbul. Sabiha is shown in transformation from a cabaret woman of enclosed spaces, to »a woman walker« of the city. This transformation is further emphasised, when in the final scenes of the film Sabiha is shown, akin to a *flâneuse,* »strolling aimlessly around« the city. Not only does Sabiha reverse the traditional female urban spatial identity from an image linked to enclosed interiors to one connected to exterior public spaces of social visibility; she also reverses her role as an object which is viewed or gazed upon, to a woman of subjectivity who instead gazes upon others.

In this illustrated essay, I will scan the narrative of *Vesikalı Yarim* with still images to show Sabiha's transformation. Additionally I will compare Sabiha with her cinematic contemporaries – women faced with the city and the male gaze, such as *L'Avventura* (Antonioni 1960), *Mamma Roma* (Passolini 1962), *Cléo 5 à 7* (Varda 1962) and *Klute* (Pakula 1971).[1]

From the fringe to the center of Istanbul

The opening scenes of *Vesikali Yarim* are located at the city's fringe, where even in the 1960s vegetable gardens were part of Istanbul's urban topography. The dialog between a group of men, as they load up a horse cart, reveals the romanticized and traditional nature of their relationships which are based on mutual trust. We understand that the gardens and the horse cart belong to Halil's family. Halil (played by İzzet Günay) is por-

1 While this essay is limited to films from the same period (mainly the decade of the 1960's), my book Vesikalı Sehir covers the entire history of modernization in Turkey, focusing on the recent Turkish cinema and discussing in detail the films since the 1990's. All pictures in this text are taken from the book (Çiçekoğlu 2007).

trayed as a charismatic character and a natural leader. Halil will later introduce himself to Sabiha (played by Türkan Şoray) as an authentic İstanbulite, born and raised in İstanbul. We get to know Halil more intimately when he arrives at his shop, where he greets his father and tends to a customer. Throughout this sequence of scenes, the film builds an association between the city's peripheral fringe and the realm of the familiar, predictable and safe. The Turkish music heard in the background further conveys an atmosphere marked by locality.

The change from day to night and the accompanying transition in music, from (traditional) Turkish to modern jazz, highlights the (spatial and cultural) differences between the city's periphery and center. Halil and his friends have made plans for a night out and go to the city center instead of the local pub. The division of urban space into fringe and center is further marked by the division of the public space into exterior and interior. Once the men decide to enter a bar, as they are attracted by a Turkish song, we are led to an inner space where Halil will meet Sabiha.

Orhan Pamuk has revisited this scene by playfully reproducing it in his novel The Black Book. Galip, the main character in the novel is searching for his wife Ruya when he meets Turkan in Beyoğlu, Istanbul's central entertainment district. Here, it is important to remember that Sabiha in Vesikalı Yarim is played by Türkan Şoray, an icon of Turkish cinema.

Pamuk recognizes the iconic beauty of Türkan Şoray as he recreates the cinematic scene in his novel with both admiration and irony:

»The woman in the leopard-skin dress must be Türkan, Galip decided; as she ambled toward him, she looked almost graceful. She was probably the closest to her original: she had arranged her long blond hair to fall over her right shoulder.

›Do you mid if I smoke? ‹ she asked, with a lovely smile. A filterless cigarette appeared between her fingers. ›Could I trouble you for a light?‹

Galip lit her cigarette; her head disappeared behind a thick cloud of smoke. The music died and in the strange silence that ensued, she emerged

like a saint from the mist; staring into her huge black long-lashed eyes, Galip thought, for the first time in his life, that he might be able to sleep with a woman other than Rüya‹.« (Pamuk 2006: 143)

In Turkish, most names have meanings and each name has masculine and feminine versions that differ from each other. *Sabih* means beautiful, while Sabiha means a beautiful woman. As Orhan Pamuk has brilliantly recalled, Sabiha's sudden appearance, which mesmerizes Halil, has turned into an iconic symbol of desire for men during the past half century in Turkey. With particular reference to the idea of sexuality represented by this scene, why this scene has become an iconic one is further explored *Çok Tuhaf Çok Tanıdık* (Abisel et. al 2005: 13-14).

Reminiscent of sexuality but remaining only a (teasing) promise, Türkan Şoray's face is an icon of beauty; her eroticism is out of this world, too distant to be real, too misty to be accessible. Uninhibited sex associated with modern urban life remains visible but, in the image of the idealized woman represented by Türkan Şoray, inaccessible. Sabiha's name, an old fashioned Ottoman name of Arabic origin, is also poised by inaccessibly. In a later scene, Halil asks Sabiha if »Sabiha« is her real name; she laughs at the question, responding that Sabiha is no choice for a nickname. Thus, not only her inaccessible beauty but even Sabhia's name becomes a symbol of the traumatic modernization process in Turkey.[2] After spending time together in another bar, Sabiha takes Halil to her home, in Hamalbaşı, located in Beyoglu, or Pera, »the other side« – as it was called in the late Ottoman and the early Republican period – meaning the non-Muslim part of the city. Halil lives in another part of the city, Koca Mustafa Paşa, in the old city. Halil and Sabiha's neighbourhoods are connected by the Galata Bridge. Since the bridge's two halves are raised during the night for ships to enter the Golden Horn, making it impossible to cross to the old part of the city, Sabiha asks Halil to stay with her. This is how their love affair begins. As the story continues, Halil and Sabiha become separated rather than connected by the bridge. Throughout the film, the bridge becomes a meta-

2 The »nationalization of the language« was a process initiated in the Kemalist Turkey of the 1930's and continued in the 1960's after the military junda of May 27th, 1960. The language was subjected to a forceful modernity by extracting from it all the words that were Arabic, Persian or French in origin. Thus "Sabiha" becomes a ridiculously old-fashioned name in the late 1960's for those who supported this forceful modernity from Ankara, the capital of the republic, while for others it is a reminiscence of what was beautiful and authentic in Istanbul with its Ottoman heritage.

phor of both a link and a division between tradition and modernity[3], further conveying Halil's identification with the city's fringe and Sabiha's with the city center, as a central theme of the film. Modernity, represented by the city, is accessible to Halil only through Sabiha, the agent of modernity since she belongs to the city center. Halil's view of the city from the distance, as he sits on a bench thinking about Sabiha, both at the beginning and at the end of their relationship, reestablishes this theme of inaccessibility.

From enclosed interiors to open exteriors

Enclosed interiors and open exteriors form a second duality, similar to the urban duality formed by the city center and its peripheral fringe. Together these dualities construct the atmosphere in which Sabiha's transformation from a prostitute to a housewife takes place. At home, Sabiha becomes a motherly figure once she removes her make-up. Halil is first surprised by this change but gradually becomes accustomed Sabiha's new visage, and insists she stay at home. Sabiha gives up working at the bar and fulfills her new role as housewife. She waits for Halil to go shopping and enjoys putting groceries in her kitchen cupboards. She emphasizes her joy by telling Halil that before his arrival, her apartment was just a shelter, now it is a home. At this stage in the film, we witness

3 The use of Galata Bridge as a metaphor and a symbol of the link/division between tradition and modernity has been a favorite theme in Turkish literature. Among the best known examples are Fatih-Harbiye (Safa 1931) and Cevdet Bey ve Oğulları [Cevdet Bey and His Sons] (Pamuk 1982). Thermer critizes westernization by symbolically dichotomizing the two neighborhoods as symbols of tradition and modernity: Fatih from the historical peninsula and Harbiye which was beyond the Pera district. The latter is the first novel of Orhan Pamuk which was written in the tradition of family saga, his only novel which has not been translated, by his own choice.

a second change in Sabiha's persona. Stepping out of her former social visibility as a »public woman«, we see Sabiha wearing a headscarf for the first time as she walks through the market. Sabiha's headscarf, which she wears outside of the house, now distinguishes her as belonging to a

man; she is no longer allowed to be an object of public gaze. A scene in which a street vendor suggests that she should buy a gift for her husband, emphasizes Sabiha's new role. She buys a cigarette case for Halil from the street vendor and she gives this to Halil at a waterfront restaurant. The sea and the ships, next to the restaurant, draw attention to their sense of discovery. »Whatever we do together, it is the first for me« Halil says. A departing ferry in the background, however, sets a tone of uncertainty and we sense that their relationship in their new public sphere is a transient one.

In the following scene Sabiha learns from a friend that Halil is already married. In distress, she takes a long walk at the waterfront. Questioning her relationship with Halil, and considering separation, we find Sabiha, once again, alone and without her headscarf in a public space. When in Halil's domain, however, Sabiha covers her hair, accepting the rules of patriarchy, like Halil's wife and his mother who appear in later scenes as background figures in interior (household) spaces. When Sabiha finally makes a journey to Halil's neighborhood to find out whether he is really married, she again wears a headscarf since she has stepped back into his

domain. The familial and traditional atmosphere conveyed by Halil's father playing with his grandchildren, possibly Halil's children, evokes a sense of loneliness and helplessness in Sabiha. The visual atmosphere of the scene and the sad tone of the music emphasize Sabiha's melancholy mood further.

Still refusing to believe that he is married, Sabiha approaches Halil, but when she sees him from a distance, she decides to leave. Halil follows and once he reaches her, begins questioning her. Annoyed, Halil tries to understand what has happened to Sabiha. »Going out without telling me, strolling around aimlessly… What does all this mean?« he asks. Implicit in this statement is the expectation that a woman should notify »her man« if she intends to spend time outside of the house in the city's public spaces by herself without a legitimate reason. »Strolling around aimlessly« does not qualify as a reason; after all, why would a woman want to »stroll around aimlessly« all by herself?

Why indeed, if not for prostitution? In 1960s, not only in Turkey but in Italy a woman walker in the city must have been a conspicuous sight. In the iconic scene from Pasolini's film *Mamma Roma* (1962), we see the protagonist, Mamma Roma, »strolling around aimlessly« as men accompany her, joining her and then disappearing, their place immediately taken by another, against the glittering night lights. Mamma Roma, played by Anna Magnani is an example of the impact the modernization process can make on women. Roma, having quit her family and her

homeland ventured into the city, left with no other choice but to street-walk and work as a prostitute. Rome's urban landscape functions as a (somber) backdrop to Mamma Roma's story as she witnesses the death of her son, a price she pays for the un-motherly life she has led in the city. Now that Mamma Roma has roamed the city's streets at night, working as a prostitute, she is unable to fulfill her former role, having lost her rights as mother. This metaphoric scene illustrates how the female *flânerie* carried a strong connotation of prostitution even in the 1960s, not only in Turkey but also in Italy.

Sabiha violates the spatial codes of urban gendered cartography

Halil finally returns to his home. When his son opens the door and announces the arrival of his father, Halil retreats back to his traditional home at the fringe of the city. His wife suddenly appears from behind a curtain together with their daughter. Halil's wife is portrayed as available, ready and submissive at all times. She asks no questions, makes no comments, let alone any criticism. She prepares the bed and she asks if he is hungry. In response, Halil merely nods a negative no as he looks out of the window from his suffocating room, gazing in the direction of the city, which is both invisible and inaccessible to him. His parents come in, he greets them with respect and he resumes his duties. He stays with his family but this becomes a form of exclusion rather than inclusion for him.

While Halil is excluded from »public Istanbul«, Sabiha walks into the heart of the city, traditionally a male environment. Sabiha's alienation in this male environment is emphasized in the final scene of the film in which she walks directly towards the camera. In spite of her loneliness, her mood does not suggest submissiveness. On the contrary, her subversive attitude is pronounced as she fixes her gaze upon the spectator, demanding subjectivity.

In this respect, Sabiha is a stronger character than, for example, the character played by Monica Vitti in Antonioni's *L'Avventura* (1960). Vitti's character has been looking for a lost friend, in the company with the friend's lover. Attracted to each other during the search process, Vitti and the lover make love in the outskirts of the city. Once back in the city, Vitti finds herself surrounded by men who seem to be aware of what she has just done. Not only has she betrayed her friend, but she has openly expressed her desire for a man, by making love with him in the public city. The condemning stares Vitti receives from the men in the city imply that her behavior is unfit and socially inacceptable for a woman, reminding her of the »sin« she has just committed. Vitti looks away, avoiding the spectators' gaze and the men's belittling stares, conveying herself as a more timid character than Sabiha, who in the final scenes of *Vesikalı Yarim* returns the spectators' gaze, by staring directly into the camera.

As an urban character, Sabiha may also be compared to Cléo, the famous protagonist in Agnes Varda's film *Cléo 5 à 7* (1962). At the beginning of the film, Varda portrays Cléo (played by Corinne Marchand) as a beautiful singer searching for consolation from a fortuneteller while she is waiting for the results of medical tests to learn if she has cancer. In later scenes, Cléo strolls along the streets with her wig and her high-heels, aware of being perceived as a beautiful woman even though she might be on the verge of death. Later in the day, Cléo discars her wig, and she begins to enjoy the city, looking instead of being looked at. Finally she meets a soldier who might also be on the fringe of death as he is leaving for war to Algeria the next day. Together, they collect her medical test results and though the possibility of death still looms, Cléo now faces life with more courage since she has found someone to share her fate with.

Cléo, whose transformation »from feminine masquerade to flâneuse« (Mouton 2001), has led to her analysis as a cult character, is useful in comparing Sabih's final stroll in the city. In the final scenes of *Cléo 5 à 7*, Cléo happily faces her new lover in a romantic symmetry that creates a contrast with Cléo's previous loneliness as a *flâneuse*. Sabiha's stroll towards the camera, in contrast, a lonely venture into the heart of the city, leaves a stronger impression of Sabiha as a *flâneuse* than Cléo's romantic happiness does. I argue that Varda's protagonist, Cleo, therefore strikes greater similarity with a wanderer in search of a man, than a true *flâneuse's* aimless walk through the city.

Whether the protagonist Bree Daniel (played by Jane Fonda) in the film *Klute* (Pakula 1971) is a free woman of the city, or just another prostitute living in New York (Giddis 1973, Gledhill, 005) has been debated in several essays. In analyzing this question further, it is noteworthy that »Klute« is not only the film's title, but also the name of the heroic male character who supposedly saves Bree Daniel from a life of prostituton. It is obvious that the film's title reflects Pakula's favoritism towards the male character, Klute, instead of the female character, Bree. The film ends with a final shot of Bree Daniel's empty New York apartment where she lived as a prostitute, implying that Bree has left the metropolis for the peaceful country life together with detective Klute.

When compared with Sabiha, who gazes at the spectator, as if into the heart of the city, Bree Daniel hardly qualifies as a woman who claims subjectivity and public visibility. Bree has quit the city for the country, exchanging her loneliness for the protectiveness of a man. Bree Daniel is portrayed as a character who submissively accepts the traditional female role; much more so than Mamma Roma, who at least faces her tragic fate. It is noteworthy that Bree Daniel was identified as a subversive character and as a free woman by some film critics of early 1970s, showing that we owe much to the 1980s for our deeper understanding of women and the city.

The idea of *flânerie* as a gendered concept emerged at first in the 1980s through the publishing of Janet Wolff's article, »The Invisible

Flâneuse: Women and the Literature of Modernity« in 1985. Since then the gendered nature of *flânerie* has been further analyzed by Buck-Morss, (1986, 1989), Wilson (1992) and Parsons (2000). In her 1985 article Wolff regards the »public women« in Baudelaire's city – the prostitute and the *passante* – not as actors of *flânerie* but as commodified objects of the male gaze, through which the diametric opposition to the position of the *flâneur* becomes apparent (Wolff 1985). After almost a full century of its original appearance in the urban terminology, *flânerie* once again became an object of critical interest in the late twentieth century, and was the focus of feminist critiques of »hegemonic modernism« (Parsons 2000: 39).

In spite of these extensive theoretical discussions, representations of women frequently continue to follow the conventions of the 1920's. In recent films from the last decade like *Dark City* (Proyas 1998) and *Sin City* (Rodriguez, Miller 2005) we can still identify the division of female characters into mother and whore, reflecting also the division in the male consciousness. In both of these films, the virgin, a naive woman in search of protections is dichotomized by another seducing female persona who has associations with the socially inacceptable nighttime city wandering.

With the feminist critique of Wolff, it was a revelation that even Benjamin positioned women as objects of gaze with respect to *flânerie*. In the meanwhile, in cultures like Turkey the discussion in the 1980s and 1990s focused on veiling and whether veiling could be seen as a facilitator in women's social visibility. Though arguable, it has been asserted that veiling allows women to participate in the city and should therefore be seen as an agent of modernization (Göle 1996).

Ugur Tanyeli has recently claimed that *flânerie* exists neither for men or women in Turkish urban community as »strolling around aimlessly« has traditionally been considered an unusual activity. Tanyeli argues that the conceptual dichotomy of public space and private space is an invention in Turkey, a dictionary novelty rather than a creation within the practices of daily life:

»So we cannot still talk about the *flâneur* but only groups of *flâneurs* This demonstrates that the members of ›groups of *flâneurs*‹ have not yet individualized themselves and that furthermore, members of social class to which particular *flâneurs* belong to, are reluctant to play the role of the public man or woman.« (Tanyeli 2005: 222)

I disagree with the non-gendered tone of this statement equalizing ›public man or woman‹ but I argue that the *flânerie* is gendered in Turkey as elsewhere and may be even more so due to the shifts of modernity.

Let me finish by summing up the premises and references in this essay, upon which I elaborate in my book. I start with the basic premise, that cinema and metropolis are dual products of modernity, both vitalized by movement, one reflecting the other (Bruno 2002). I refer to *flânerie* (Baudelaire, Benjamin 1973) in the context of modernity revisiting the concept with a critical interest concerning women in public spaces (Buck-Morss1986, 1989; Wolff 1985, Wilson 1992).

Conceptual dichotomies such as »traditional/modern« (Göle 1996) and »public/private« (Tanyeli 2005), as well as their urban spatial connotations such as fringe and center, enclosedness and openness, interior and exterior (Abisel, et al.) are some of the critical concepts that I analyze. Finally, the »woman walker of [the] metropolis« (Parsons, Mouton) is central to my argument and serves as the critical concept, rereading the history of films both from Turkey and internationally, all the way from the 1926 film, *Metropolis* (1926) and *Ninotchka* (1939) to *Dark City* (1998) and *Sin City* (2005).

As a result, it may be argued that the public visibility of women in the city is an essential dimension of urban analysis. Films are a rich source, revealing the representation of women in the city and the reasons for the immense delay in the introduction of *flâneuse* as a public figure. Since *flânerie* of women has resonated as prostitution in male consciousness, the representation of the woman as a public figure in films of the city was possible only in the second half of the 20th Century. In this respect, Sabiha from Istanbul, who is among the female protagonists streetwalking the cities in the 1960's, still gazes at us as a pioneer of female *flânerie* on the silver screen.

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