

## INTERVIEW WITH YEŞİM USTAOĞLU

DIRECTOR OF "CLAIR OBSCUR"  
A FEATURE FILM SUPPORTED BY EURIMAGES

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**YOU'VE MADE A FEATURE EVERY FOUR OR FIVE YEARS SINCE 1994, MOST RECENTLY "TEREDDÜT" ["CLAIR OBSCUR"] (2016) ABOUT THE PSYCHOLOGICAL WOUNDS OF TWO VERY DIFFERENT WOMEN. FROM THE FIRST, "İZ" ["THE TRACE"] (1995), YOU'VE WON AWARDS AND YOU RECEIVED YOUR FIRST INTERNATIONAL AWARDS AT THE BERLINALE, FOR "GÜNEŞE YOLCULUK" ["JOURNEY TO THE SUN"] (1999). THIS LONG TRACK RECORD IS UNUSUAL FOR A WOMAN FILMMAKER. WHAT FACTORS MADE YOUR SUCCESS POSSIBLE?**

It's my patience, my stubborn patience. I've never had a problem because I am a woman. With my team and others I've worked with it has always been very good, respectful on my side and theirs. I've had more problems with the system and in the press when I've made feature films with political themes, because of what I've said.

I knew this would happen. "Journey to the Sun" was maybe the first film made in Turkey in the Kurdish language. It had official permission, but

no distributor picked it up for a long time and it's not yet been shown on television channels. So we distributed it ourselves, all over the country. Later on, there were similar difficulties with "Bulutlari Beklerken" ["Waiting for the Clouds"] (2004), about the exile of the Greek population during the First World War and the memories of a woman who remained here. Maybe I attracted more anger because I said all these things as a woman. But it wasn't a problem.

**DID IT MAKE A DIFFERENCE THAT YOU STARTED TO MAKE MOVIES QUITE LATE?**

I studied architecture and worked as an architect and in my twenties I was able to make my short films with my own money. Finally, I felt ready to make "The Trace" in 1993, when I was in my thirties. And then I quit working as an architect.

**WHAT MADE YOU SHIFT FROM ARCHITECTURE TO FILM?**

I love both. But I was more interested in human beings and I really wanted to be more free. When

you're studying, it's beautiful; you can dream and design anything. But real life has lots of rules, very strange rules, and working with the clients didn't work for me. I really wanted to hear my own voice and, of course, explore everything to do with the human being, human character. Cinema has everything: music, colour, composition, nature, location, sound, whatever. It's imagination, it's a dream.

### WHO WERE YOUR INFLUENCES AS YOU MOVED INTO FILM?

Of course, the whole amazing cinema history. And lots of things from my childhood, what I read. I read a lot and am strongly influenced by literature. I love poems and try to describe images in poems.



"Clair Obscur"

Observation is a big influence too. I like to tell this story about "Araf" ["Somewhere in Between"] (2012), about a young girl who works at a bus station on 24 hour shifts. I was doing "Pandora'nin kutusu" ["Pandora's Box"] (2008) and travelling on the highway, and we often stopped at a huge bus station. One time, about five in the morning, there was a young girl serving us and she was extremely tired. And I saw her eyes, their tiredness, their dead look. Her gaze was so pure, so fragile, so tired and the whole story of "Araf" started with that. It was an impressive moment. I love such a thing: to observe, to feel, to be inside, then to go back in again.

Anything about the human being influences me: identity, selfishness, love, life. The metaphor of water and its uncertainty is a kind of obsession. We live in such an uncertain society. All these things, especially water, are my nervous system.

### HOW DO YOU CHOOSE THE STORIES YOU TELL?

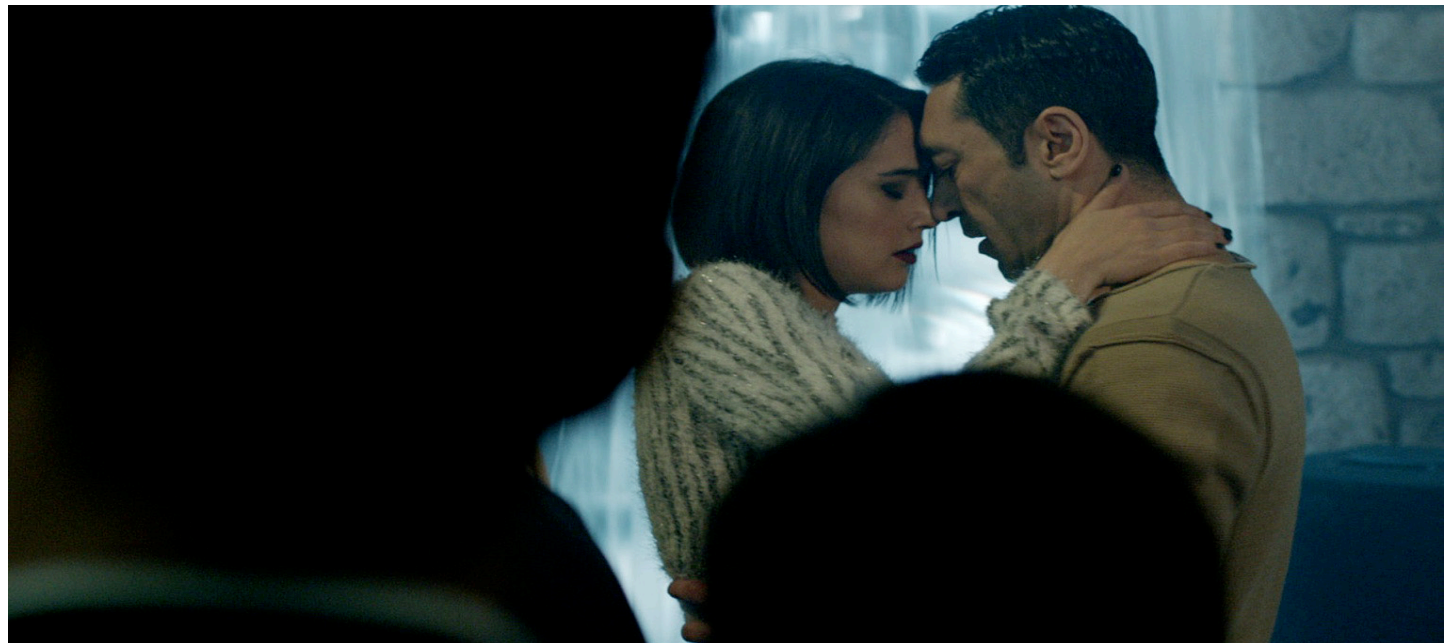
There's always a kind of story behind the work. Something like the girl at the bus station moves me, leads me in. When I'm in, something attaches to me. Then the long process starts. "Journey to the Sun" started with an amazing picture of the Kurdish area. With "Waiting for the Clouds" I read about a woman who had died recently who had been adopted by a Turkish family during the deportation. Her name and identity were changed,

and when she was dying she started to speak in a language nobody understood. I was from the same area, Trabzon in the north-east. And everything started to come to me again, my knowledge about those areas. And I wrote it down.

I am very keen to talk about women as well, strong female characters. Not to describe them just as the victim or to create them as a secondary character. When I did "Araf", for instance, it was so important for me that the protagonist was a young woman trying to make a life and she had to pay for this but was still on her feet. It has a very painful miscarriage scene and she becomes dissociated. The miscarriage and therapy scenes

were very difficult to shoot, but a big pleasure. We did it.

In "Clair Obscur", when I started to write about the main character and the therapy scenes with the psychiatrist, I realised that I had to concentrate on the psychiatrist, too. So I started to describe both characters like a two-woman dance. Of course, I did a lot of research, for around a year, to understand the characters' psychology, the technical information about how the doctor behaves, how therapy works with communication, body language. I learned myself and then taught the actors. We met many times with a psychiatrist, a psychodramatist, as a patient, as a doctor. The actors have to trust themselves. But we kept the real concentration and emotion to explore on the set.



"Clair Obscur"

### **YOU REALLY ENJOY WORKING WITH ACTORS?**

I love it. I think that this is the key thing. I don't leave things till we're on set because you have to know what you're doing. You have to know the characters and their emotions, to bring out the performance, from really deep inside.

### **HOW DO YOU CHOOSE YOUR ACTORS?**

I search and talk everywhere and get a lot of help too, from casting agents. I do many auditions. But

I accept intuition, too. With Ecem Uzun ("Clair Obscur"), I saw her and talked to her and I knew that she was brilliant.

Some cast members are local people from the actual location. I love to work with non-actors and then to combine them with professionals. You can have amazing, brilliant combinations. Generally, when non-professionals and professionals are together they love each other.

### **YOU'VE BEEN A PRODUCER AS WELL AS A WRITER/DIRECTOR, SINCE 2004. WHY DID YOU BECOME A PRODUCER?**

"Journey to the Sun" was made by an advertising company, but then it became bankrupt and I could not protect the film. So I decided to establish my

own company and to produce my own films. This brings me a huge freedom to do my own thing. But I have very good, very strong colleagues to do all of the administration and management work, and I always train up some young people who work with me.

### **ARE THERE DISADVANTAGES TO BEING YOUR OWN PRODUCER?**

Sometimes during "Clair Obscur" I was overloaded. While I was on set I had to think about things like whether the money had arrived or whatever. I had to think about some management work too

and it made me so tired, especially later on during post-production. I think this time, on "Left Over", I will delegate much, much more to my colleagues.

#### **AT THE BEGINNING OF "CLAIR OBSCUR" YOU LIST A LOT OF DIFFERENT FUNDERS.**

Turkey has difficulties funding our cultural foundation. There is no other local funder, so we have to go elsewhere. Everything depends on the script, of course. If the script doesn't work, forget it. And it takes time to build a strategy, to get good partners and bring them together, then organise the financing from those countries and spend the money there, too. Then, if one of the partners drops out, we have to plan from the beginning again with another partner in another country. It's tiring, it's really tiring.

She doesn't want to bring up another selfish person in this system, where even though they are well educated and in a good position with work, they are still enslaved. She has a breakdown. It questions who we are and how we live, how we destroy everything around us and how we can survive this. When the coronavirus came, I was surprised and got sidetracked a little bit, going deeper and a little bit further.

#### **DO YOU THINK ABOUT WHAT WILL HAPPEN AFTER THE CORONAVIRUS?**

We have to. A new world is here and we don't know what to do, how we'll be in the future. We had just about financed "Left Over", but everything has stopped now. I don't mind.



"Clair Obscur"

#### **AND THAT GOES BACK TO WHAT YOU SAID AT THE BEGINNING ABOUT PATIENCE, DOESN'T IT?**

Exactly. And these days there are other ways. Each time I work, I try to think about these.

#### **WHAT IS "LEFT OVER" ABOUT?**

It's very strange. I've been writing it for about two years. The script is almost done, but I'm revising it occasionally still. It is about a woman who is a poet and has a six-year-old child and a husband.

The system itself had some difficulties before the coronavirus. People like to see more accessible things, "easier" things. The video-on-demand (VOD) platforms are a dilemma. After its theatrical release "Clair Obscur" was picked up by Netflix International and I was concerned because I believe it is not a film for online. It's for cinema, for live audiences.

But cinemas are shut now and I think that will continue for a long time. The system doesn't know how to continue, how we can get together again, what festivals like Cannes will be like.

We cannot go back to the same life that we had, doing things so fast. This kind of lifestyle brought us the coronavirus and will bring similar things, on and on. So we have to think about how to live and how to organise our lives, with simplicity and protecting nature. Climate is going to be the major thing. Agriculture will be more important.

## WHAT KEEPS YOU GOING?

My desire. It's always pushing me to do a new film. But if I don't believe it's something I must do, if I don't believe what I say, if I don't feel it, I don't touch it. I have to really feel and live inside it and then I love to do it. That's why it takes time.

Whenever I finish something, of course, I feel quite content. But when a moment comes to me – the "Araf" example is good, with the eyes – that desire comes back to me again. I don't do other things. I teach, often. I used to teach in the university but not anymore. I don't do any advertising either. I only live with my films, contained, minimal, light, but I want to live like that. This is how I live.

*"The opinions expressed in this interview are those of the director concerned and in no way reflect the official position of the Council of Europe or the Eurimages Film Fund."*