

Chapter 15

Historical Epic as a Genre in Popular Turkish Cinema

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ABSTRACT

*Cinema, born as a part of entertainment industry, became an independent industry in the first half of 20th century. The film genre, which had a notable role in the industrialization of cinema, is not only a cinematic fact but also a social case including several economic, cultural, and ideological tools. The historical epic, which is one of the major film genres, emerged with the medium itself. Despite its Italian origins, the historical epic has remained largely American because of Hollywood's financial and technological possibilities. As the spectacular nature of this genre has been more visible than historical realities, these films have become notable parts of the entertainment industry. This chapter examines the historical epic as a film genre in popular Turkish cinema and its place in Turkey's entertainment culture and industry, particularly observing its prototype, *The Conquest of Constantinople (1951)*, then evaluating its advanced example, *Conquest 1453 (2012)*.*

INTRODUCTION

The economic continuity of cinema, which was born as a part of entertainment industry, is mostly based on film genres. Despite the notable role of film genres for the industrialization of cinema it cannot be confined in this way. Beside the difficulties of defining and classifying the term, the film genre is not only a cinematic fact, but also a social case including several economic, cultural and ideological issues.

In the context of genre theories, the historical epic, which is considered as a major film genre (Neale, 2000, p. 51), emerged with the medium itself. Despite its Italian origins produced during

the silent era, this genre has evolved in American film industry, because of Hollywood's financial and technological possibilities. Especially in 1950s and 1960s, during its golden era, the term 'epic' was used for large-scale films, produced with contemporary high technological tools using historical, mostly ancient world settings. In these films, the spectacular nature has been more visible instead of historical realities or specificities. Historical epics, with their nation centric form, have obtained international visibility and success throughout film history (Burgoyne, 2011, p. 2) and have become notable part of entertainment industry.

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-4666-6190-5.ch015

This study aims to observe the historical epic as a film genre in popular Turkish Cinema and to refer to its place in Turkey's entertainment culture and industry. In the background, such definitions of the term 'genre' will be looked over from theoretical perspective. Then the 'historical epic' will be focused as a film genre, reviewing definitions and summarizing its evolution throughout film history. Subsequently, the historical epic will be examined in popular Turkish cinema reviewing the genre's prototype *Istanbul'un Fethi (The Conquest of Constantinople)* released in 1951. Consequently, its advanced example *Fetih 1453 (Conquest 1453, 2012)* will be analyzed in the light of Vivian Sobchack's essay "'Surge and Splendor': A Phenomenology of the Hollywood Historical Epic" in order to observe Hollywood historical epics' influences on the film.

BACKGROUND

The applicability of the term "genre" to entertainment in general and to cinema in particular, firstly requires some definitions: The word "genre" is originally French and means "kind" or "type". When we talk about film genres, we are simply indicating certain types of movies. The science-fiction, the action picture, the comedy, the romance, the musical, the western are some genres of fictional storytelling cinema. However, it is quite difficult to classify film genres with a scientific precision. (Bordwell and Thompson, 2008, p. 318) At this point the important fact is to remember about the limits of genres' classification. So while a film may typify a particular genre, it may contain elements of others as well. (Dick, 2005, p.184) Meanwhile, another difficulty comes in defining what a genre is. Barry Keith Grant (2003, p. xv) makes a definition of genre movies, as commercial feature films which, through repetition and variation, tell familiar stories with familiar characters in familiar situations. He also mentions about their role in establishing the popular sense of cinema as

a cultural and economic institution, particularly in Hollywood¹ where a huge industry based on mass production has evolved.

Although the film genre had a notable role for the industrialization of cinema, it cannot be confined in this way. Therefore film genre is not only a cinematic fact but also a social case in which several economic, cultural and ideological relations may be observed (Akbulut, 2010, p.324). In this regard, Christine Gledhill (2011, p. 223) in her essay "Rethinking Genre", puts the concept in a wide cultural perspective and suggests rethinking genre in its triple existence as industrial mechanism, aesthetic practice and arena of cultural-critical discursivity.

As Sarah Berry-Flint (2004, p.36) indicates, genre theory was marked by two contradictory definitions in 1980s: Social ritual and ideological tool. Within the approaches about ideological interpretation of genre, Judith Hess Wright (2003, p. 42) writes that genre films produce satisfaction rather than action, and fear rather than revolt; and she emphasizes that they serve the interests of the ruling class by assisting in the maintenance of the status quo. According to Thomas Schatz (1981, p. 31), genre films celebrate the most fundamental ideological precepts, "Americanism" with their formulaic narrations. In addition, as a social ritual, they serve to stop time, to maintain our culture in a stable and invariable ideological position. Steve Neale (2003, p.179), who criticizes Rick Altman's ideological approach which treats genres simply as vehicles for capitalist or dominant ideology, points out the charges of reductivism, economism and cultural pessimism. Michael Ryan and Douglas Kellner (1990, pp.76, 77), who examine Hollywood from historical and critical perspectives, noted that genre films have been some of the most powerful instruments of ideology and they secure a sense of object constancy by providing a sense of repetition and familiarity. In addition they are also the most fragile forms to the effects of social change, because of their closeness to social ideology. For example, after the cultural radicalism of

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