

Selamsız Bandosu (The Band of Selamsız) 1987

Nesli Çölgeçen

Overview

Selamsız Bandosu can be described as one of the best 'losers' films in Turkish cinema. There is even a metaphorical expression created in the movie which has turned into an idiomatic confession used by someone who tries hard to achieve something and eventually becomes so frustrated that s/he exclaims 'I'm like the Band of Selamsız'.

Selamsız Bandosu is a film based on the tension of desire and fear between the centre and the provinces, which is based on the development policies of the 1980s: the desire to be seen from the centre and the fear of punishment or even invisibility imposed by the centre constitute the main tension of the film. It is one of the rare films of its period looking at the town/country dichotomy instead of the village or the city, and was also the second film of Nesli Çölgeçen, who achieved an outstanding success with *Zugürt Ağa*, which enabled him to write his name in the history of cinema.

Visual Language

It is a film shot under the possibilities and conditions of the period and following the dominant trend in the cinematic expression and styles of the period. It has important features, especially in the use of costumes. To show the institutional inadequacy in the town of Selamsız, having the mayor Latif Şahin sit in the mayor's seat wearing the apron which he wears in his grocery store is a good example to show how costume adds importantly to the narrative. Adding a Süleyman Demirel hat to his costume to show that Tahir Ağa is a typical man of the period can be regarded as another example showing how cleverly costume was used in creating a narrative.

In terms of the shooting aesthetics, wide shots are regularly used to indicate that the town is a backwater, especially in the scenes around the railway tracks. In the scenes set in the town, camera movements such as pan and tilt are used to show the ruined, shabby and neglected fabric of the town. In particular, fragmented light is used to represent mental breakdown in Murat Sef's home scenes.

Characters

Latif Şahin The Mayor of the town of Selamsız.

Şef Murat A band leader who had an alcohol problem. He arrives in Selamsız in response to a newspaper advertisement.

Tahir Ağa Latif's political rival.

Hasibe The town's elderly spinster. She eventually falls in love with the band leader.

Antrenör The coach who runs the town's football team.

Summary

Latif Şahin is the mayor of the small town of Selamsız and is also the town's shopkeeper. One day, he reads in a newspaper that the President will be making a journey to Anatolia and his train will pass through the town of Selamsız. The town is an undeveloped place completely neglected by the centre. Believing that this event will create an opportunity for their town, the mayor gathers the members of the town council and tells them that he wants to organize a welcome in town which will cause the President's train to stop there. The council members are initially not very enthusiastic about the plan but they eventually agree to it and it is decided to establish a town band. The first thing to do is find a band leader, and because no-one in the town knows anything about the musical instruments used in a band or what is required for a band, an advertisement is placed in the newspaper and a band leader responds to it and arrives in the town. He is greeted with enthusiasm in the town and although he is disappointed when he learns that the town does not actually have a band, he immediately starts preparations to establish one. The necessary money will be found by holding a raffle. Money is obtained and a band is established. However, the band leader's alcohol problem and mental illness

from his past begin to emerge under the extreme pressure on him. Despite all the difficulties and various events, the band is established and the preparations for the event are completed. The whole town waits expectantly alongside the intercity railway line ready for the President to arrive. But the President goes through the town without even showing his face, just waving his hand from the window.

Story

Hearing the news At the opening of the film, we see children waiting around the train track. From the bundle of newspapers thrown towards the children from the train, we understand that the town does not have a station and therefore has no direct link with the country's centre. The children go to Latif Şahin's shop to sell the newspapers to him; he is also the town's mayor as well as one of its tradesmen. The mayor buys the newspapers from the children, reads a story in the news and excitedly gathers the town council.

Town council in a coffee house Most of the members of the town council are in the coffee house and others are in the mosque. Some are asleep in the coffee shop, some are playing games and some are preparing for prayers in the mosque. Nobody heeds the mayor's call, they all just carry on with what they are doing. It is possible from these scenes to understand both the problems in the institutional structure of the town and the level of influence which the mayor has on the townspeople.

Making a decision. Finally, the entire council convenes and the mayor tells them that the country's President is going to make a journey and that his route will pass through Selamsiz. Unfortunately, however, there is no station in Selamsiz where the President's train can stop. For this reason, mayor Latif tries to persuade the councillors who do not believe that this trip is very important for Selamsiz by giving examples of deputies in the past who stopped in the town because their train had broken down. Latif announces that they just need some way that will make the President's train stop, because if the President stops in the town, he will see the poverty there and will be able to initiate the construction of a school, hospital and roads that the town needs. To achieve this forced welcome for the President, it is decided to establish a marching band.

The arrival of the band leader in town The problem is that nobody in the town knows anything about a marching band. They know nothing about the musical instruments or the repertoire. So they first decide to find a band leader, and they place an advertisement in the newspaper. Although they are confident that many candidates will apply, only one person responds: Murat Şef. He arrives and is greeted with great enthusiasm in the town; all the facilities of the small town are put at his disposal. There is, of course, a small problem for the mayor but a very big problem for the band leader: the town currently does not have a marching band. Murat is disappointed, but he nevertheless sets about the preparations for recruiting musicians for the band.

Setting up the band The town inevitably does not have sufficient funds to establish a band. They organize a raffle to raise the money needed to hire one. As a prize for the raffle, they put up a cow belonging to the mayor's political rival Tahir Aga: he loves this cow more than anything else and although he is angry at having to lose it, he sees a possible advantage in the positive reactions from the villagers which will be an election investment for the future. Even so, Tahir Ağa begins to turn people against the band and eventually the necessary money is not collected because some of the tickets have been given out on credit. The band leader now has an idea. There is enough money to buy musical instruments, but the musicians will be selected from the townsfolk and a band will be set up to learn and perform one or two songs within two months. When the band leader turns up with the instruments, the people again greet him with great enthusiasm. The instruments are distributed through trial and error to those who are believed to be able to play them, and thus a band is established.

The band starts rehearsals The town's football field is chosen as the most suitable place for rehearsals, but this creates a quarrel between the football team and the marching band. The members of the band are completely incapable of playing musical instruments which they have never seen before. Time is short; it takes days to get even a 'doh' from the band. Moreover, the whole town watches the rehearsals with laughter. The band leader starts to get nervous about the situation. The townsfolk even produce women from the town to soothe him. Gradually, the musicians begin to adapt to the situation and even enjoy it. They embrace the whole idea of the band and rehearsals start to get better and better. When the leader gives up, the band members get together to protect the team and get the job done.

The wounds of the past Unable to bear the stress of the situation, the leader reverts to his old problem and starts to drink again: he has an alcohol problem which he hides from everyone. He thinks that he is starting to have hallucinations constantly from the alcohol and it turns out that he had mental problems like this before. The town of Selamsiz also has wounds, wounds which are hidden in its name. The town took this name in the past because nobody ever greeted it while passing through. But this band will cure the wounds of both the leader and the town. That's why the band members rouse their leader. They keep watch over him and bring him to the head of the band again.

Lovers While all this is happening, the town's senior spinster Hasibe, who dreams of marriage, begins to turn her attention to the town's new band leader and she tries to get his attention at every opportunity. While he runs the band, Hasibe serves drinks and tries to support him in many ways and a rapprochement begins between them.

Frustration All the preparations are completed. There is a cow to be sacrificed. Uniforms are arranged for the band members and the leader. The band is actually able to play a tune. The mayor prepares his speech with great effort. The whole town gathers alongside the railway track. Even his rival Tahir Ağa stands side by side with the mayor. As the presidential train approaches, a red carpet is laid down and the band begins to play. All the townspeople are in a state of great excitement. But the train goes on by without even slowing down. All that can be seen is the President's hand waving in a window. The mayor runs after the train but cannot catch up with it. The band starts to play a local dance tune and all the people start to dance; the only person weeping is Latif Şahin, the mayor.

Themes

Tension between the centre and the provinces The main theme of the film is created through the tension between the provinces and the centre. The countryside is represented in the film as a boy trying to show himself to his father. The personal nature of the institutional functioning, such as the sarcastic inability of the council to convene and make decisions, makes the movie childish at the institutional level. The mayor taking his formal seat wearing his grocer's apron is shown as a funny situation which lightens the weight of the institution. The town council members are again excluded from the institution because of their ignorance of the musical instruments used in a marching band at official ceremonies ... in the town of Selamsiz. The difference and tension between the centre and the remote small town, in addition to the council scenes, are perceived by the audience with the scene of children waiting for the train to get the newspaper bundle at the beginning of the film. Even news from the centre hits the town second-hand – they have to read yesterday's news thrown at them from a passing train. This remoteness of the town, far from the city, desolate, forgotten and waiting for the state to see it and help its people take the film out of time. It is not a story which belongs to the past or to a specific geography. It is a story of anywhere out of the centre, adaptable to any space and time. Balancing the childlike local life, the grown-up centre does not show itself, it is so remote as to be invisible, but its longed-for presence creates an object of desire. It takes its place in the narrative as a structure which creates excess by its very absence. Its lack is what has made the provinces provincial. And the centre is inaccessible, like the disappearing train which the mayor couldn't catch up with, as he runs behind it in tears on the same railway tracks.

Development policies The story takes the effort to develop as its starting point. Although the railway passes through it, the town cannot get its share of the development brought by the Republic era. Although there are train tracks running through the town, the lack of a station has pushed it out of the Republican modernization and development programme. The film is set in the period when Turkey promoted a slogan of development, starting with the withdrawal of the state from the economic sphere, which is the period in which the new neo-liberal agenda began to be implemented. Another thematic element of the film is the tension created by development policies for remote towns.

The other's unchangeable fortune or disappointment The belief that the mayor has in the opportunity to change his town's ill luck, the town which his grandfathers tell about people passing through without even saluting, and Latif's ability to convince everybody about his plan, also affect the audience for a while. Even the audience shares his hope. Even though he knows deep down that it will not work, he still wants his town to be noticed. But the main feeling of the movie is one of total disappointment. Mayor Latif has done everything; everyone, even his rival Tahir Ağa, has done their best. But the provinces are the forgotten stepchild of the centre and even the audience is separated from the film by disappointment.

Unbearable lightness of being yourself Even as the mayor chases the insentient train in tears, after a while the band starts to play a dance tune, and while the people are waiting for him, the formal

almost military line-up is replaced by people dancing. The people get rid of the tension created by trying to put on borrowed uniforms to show themselves to be smart and start to have fun on their own just by being themselves. In this way, their worries seem to have been lightened.

Character analysis

Latif Şahin (played by Şener Şen) Latif Şahin is a mayor who dreams of becoming a national deputy and who won the last elections of the town of Selamsiz and had just taken over as mayor from Tahir Ağa. He is married to an understanding and supportive wife and is also one of the town's shopkeepers. He has an understanding personality. He is mild-tempered but at the same time he is determined and successful in pursuing his dreams and making people believe in them.

Daydreamer Latif is a dreamer: he believes that the country's President will stop in Selamsiz and as soon as he stops, he will be very affected by the bad condition of the town and make moves to change it; and that after the President, the prime minister and the deputies will visit the town too. This is an extremely unrealistic fantasy, but as someone far from the rationality required by his position, he is unaware of it. This dreamy mood often makes him childish.

Enthusiastic All this imagination is accompanied by secret ambitions. He believes that this whole enterprise will provide him with a route to parliament. This desire actually prevents him from seeing the truth. He is not aware that he lacks the necessary institutional competence to be a deputy. His belief that all these enthusiastic dreams will come true when the President stops at Selamsiz makes him a pathetic yet sympathetic character in the eyes of the audience.

Believer One of his most important features is his ability to convince his fellow townspeople and even the audience of all his dreams, no matter how illogical they might seem. He not only persuades the whole town and the councillors, but also mobilizes and organizes the whole town to follow this dream path. He even succeeds in this despite the opposition of the town football team and Tahir Ağa. Everyone begins to dream his dream and work hard for him in order to achieve it.

Şef Murat (played by Ali Uyandıran) Murat is the leader of the town band who has an alcohol problem and a history of poor mental health. He arrives in Selamsiz in response to a newspaper advertisement. He is a mild-tempered, harmonious man. Probably he would be happy to receive attention from the townspeople which he hadn't received anywhere before, but his depression and alcohol problems emerge, despite his efforts to suppress them, as a consequence of the increased tension and pressure during the band practices. Gradually, a bond begins to form between him and the town: Selamsiz is actually like a second chance for him.

Wounded Despite all his politeness and humility, the audience perceives from his first appearance that Murat is a wounded and problematic personality. This is highlighted by the fact that he was the only person who responded to an advertisement to go to a town such as Selamsiz; the mayor had thought that more people would 'get off the train'. The fact that he is depicted looking through his old photographs in the lodgings where he has settled and watching the past with half pleasure and half sadness tells that there have been some wounds in his past.

Emotionally weak Despite all his goodwill and his efforts to adapt to the town, when things start to get complicated, Murat Şef's emotional state begins to create turmoil. The emergence under stress of the mental crisis and alcohol problem which he suppresses lets us position him as an emotionally weak character. We understand that he particularly avoids the bars in the town to which he has come for a second chance, because he has actually come to the town to use the opportunity well and to start a new life. But the fact that he immediately turns to alcohol under pressure and cannot get out of that pit on his own shows that he is emotionally weak.

Mental Disorder Another issue which emerges under pressure is that Murat has a mentally unstable personality. The first signs of this mental state can be seen at the beginning of the film from his actions as if conducting an imaginary orchestra but facing a blank wall. The disturbed thinking which alcohol causes over time add even more helplessness to the film's desperate narrative.

Tahir Ağa He is Latif's rival and his predecessor as mayor and is one of the town's notables. He is called the aga because he has land and animals. He likes to show off but it is obvious that he is inferior and ostentatious in many matters. The roots of Tahir Ağa's opposition and unwilling attitude to try for the change which the band is hoped to bring bear traces of village folklore.

Cunning One of the features of Turkish village folklore is that a man like Tahir Ağa is small-minded, cunning and calculating. His success in putting his own interests above all else and presenting these interests as the general interest, as well as thinking that this is not understood by others at all, puts him into tragicomic situations in the film. In order to underline this situation, there is a man who he embraced but who started to speak about him behind his back.

A man of the system Tahir can also be read as a sign of the dominant political tendency of the period. To depict this situation, a cow that he loves is put up as the prize in the raffle organized to find the money to establish a band, but his grudging acceptance of the enthusiastic reaction of the townsfolk is an example of his true character. This is not a well-intentioned gesture by a man who cares about what people think, but a calculated investment for future elections. It shows that he can use situations which he does not want for his own benefit. The public reaction against the idea of establishing a band makes the audience perceive the traditional attitude which is closed to innovations, and the dominant political structure of the period. A Süleyman Demirel hat is added to his costume as a visual element to support this image.



The band leader Murat selects suitable musicians from the townspeople



The President's train passes straight by the welcome party waiting for him



Latif Şahin stares despondently at the disappearing train.