

Bilge Olgaç (1940-1994)

Biography

Bilge Olgaç was born to a poor family on 10 January 1940 in the Vize district in Kırklareli. She left school when she was in her final year at the Nişantaşı Girls Institute. She married Vecdi Bender in 1956 at the age of 16; he was one of her former production supervisors. She had a son by this marriage before they divorced. She found the only way to get out of a life with poor, divorced parents with many children was by getting married at the age of 16, even though she wanted to study but was unable to continue studying after secondary school; even so, she never gave up reading and writing stories by herself. Her living conditions did not change much after the marriage, but Bender was in the film business and he gave a story which she had written to Memduh Ün, one of the directors who made the most films in the period. He liked the story and took Olgaç on as his first assistant and this enabled her to get into the world of cinema. She started her cinema career in 1962 with *Kısmetin En Güzeli* working as Ün's assistant: the film was based on one of her stories. From Ün, she learned about scriptwriting and editing techniques. She also worked as an assistant alongside directors such as İlhan Engin, Halit Refiğ and Hasan Kazankaya. She was the fourth female director of Turkish cinema and continues to be regarded as the top female director of Turkish cinema today. Her first solo film was *Üçünüzü de Mihlarım*. She made important films which drew attention to social problems throughout her life. She made 37 films in total, the most important of which were *Linç*, *Kaşık Düşmanı*, *İpekçe* and *Gülüşan*. She died as a result of a house fire on 3 March 1994.

Olgaç's films can be divided into two halves. She made more 'men's films' in her early directing period. Generally, she had very few actresses in these films and said that she spent that period trying to make people forget that she was a woman. She made mostly violent movies dominated by men. She described the transition between her two periods by saying, "I was a young woman. First, they wondered if and what a woman could achieve. You could see the doubt in their eyes. I pretended to be aggressive by yelling and shouting. Later on I abandoned this attitude because people started to believe in me and trusted me. Since 1962, I have made 33 films, for many of which I wrote the screenplay".

In her second period, she made films which mostly drew attention to the problems faced by women. The most common characters in these films are women who are unaware and uneducated, men who never think that there is a problem with them and put all the blame on women (like the subject of infertility in *Gülüşan*), women who are not accepted by people due to the circumstances which they have had to endure (such as the women who are called prostitutes in *İpekçe*), characters who represent the feudal order (master characters such as those in *Gömlük*), and women who are aware and educated (such as the female characters who regard education as important and try to raise awareness, as in *Yarın Cumartesi*).

Her final film, *Bir Yanımız Bahar Bahçe*, was released after her death. It tells the story of a man, played by Halil Ergün who was imprisoned for eighteen years for a thought crime.

Filmography

As director:

- 1994 - *Bir Yanımız Bahar Bahçe* (motion picture)
- 1992 - *Kurşun Adres Sormaz* (motion picture)
- 1991 - *Umut Hep Vardı* (motion picture)
- 1990 - *Aşkın Kesişme Noktası* (motion picture)
- 1988 - *Yarın Cumartesi* (motion picture)
- 1988 - *Kızın Adı Fatma* (motion picture)
- 1988 - *Gömlük* (motion picture)
- 1987 - *İpekçe* (motion picture)
- 1987 - *Elif Ana - Ayşe Kız* (TV series)

1986 - *Üç Halka 25* (motion picture)
1985 - *Gülüştan* (motion picture)
1984 - *Yavrularım* (motion picture)
1984 - *Kaşık Düşmanı* (motion picture)
1975 - *Bir Gün Mutlaka* (motion picture)
1975 - *Şöhret Budalası* (motion picture)
1974 - *Tanrı Sevenleri Korur* (motion picture)
1974 - *Bacım* (motion picture)
1974 - *Açlık* (motion picture)
1972 - *Savulun Geliyorum* (motion picture)
1972 - *Kanlı Öç* (motion picture)
1972 - *Kaderin Pençesi* (motion picture)
1971 - *Üçünüze Bir Mezar* (motion picture)
1971 - *Yaban Ali* (motion picture)
1971 - *Kara Gün* (motion picture)
1970 - *İki Aşk Arasında* (motion picture)
1970 - *Merhamet* (motion picture)
1970 - *Linç* (motion picture)
1969 - *Kanlı Şafak* (motion picture)
1968 - *Öksüz* (motion picture)
1968 - *Dertli Gönlüm* (motion picture)
1967 - *Silahsız Dövüşelim* (motion picture)
1967 - *Kanunsuz Toprak* (motion picture)
1967 - *Garibanız Abiler* (motion picture)
1966 - *Zorlu Düşman* (motion picture)
1966 - *Nikahsızlar* (motion picture)
1965 - *Sokaklar Yanıyor* (motion picture)
1965 - *Krallar Kralı* (motion picture)
1965 - *Kanlı Buğday* (motion picture)
1965 - *Babasız Yaşayamam* (motion picture)
1965 - *Üçünüzü De Mihlarım* (motion picture)

As screenwriter:

1994 - *Bir Yanımız Bahar Bahçe* (motion picture)
1992 - *Kurşun Adres Sormaz* (motion picture)
1991 - *Umut Hep Vardı* (motion picture)
1990 - *Aşkın Kesişme Noktası* (motion picture)
1988 - *Yarın Cumartesi* (motion picture)
1988 - *Kızın Adı Fatma* (motion picture)
1988 - *Gömlek* (motion picture)
1987 - *İpekçe* (motion picture)
1987 - *Elif Ana - Ayşe Kız* (TV series)
1986 - *Üç Halka 25* (motion picture)
1985 - *Gülüştan* (motion picture)
1984 - *Kaşık Düşmanı* (motion picture)
1974 - *Bacım* (motion picture)
1974 - *Açlık* (motion picture)
1972 - *Savulun Geliyorum* (motion picture)
1972 - *Kanlı Öç* (motion picture)
1972 - *Kaderin Pençesi* (motion picture)
1971 - *Üçünüze Bir Mezar* (motion picture)
1971 - *Yaban Ali* (motion picture)
1971 - *Kara Gün* (motion picture)
1970 - *İki Aşk Arasında* (motion picture)
1970 - *Merhamet* (motion picture)
1970 - *Linç* (motion picture)
1969 - *Kanlı Şafak* (motion picture)
1968 - *Öksüz* (motion picture)
1968 - *Dertli Gönlüm* (motion picture)
1967 - *Silahsız Dövüşelim* (motion picture)

1967 - *Kanunsuz Toprak* (motion picture)
1966 - *Nikahsızlar* (motion picture)
1965 - *Tehlikeli Adam* (motion picture)
1965 - *Sokaklar Yanıyor* (motion picture)

As producer:

1971 - *Kara Gün* (motion picture)
1970 - *İki Aşk Arasında* (motion picture)

Direction Team:

1965 - *Tehlikeli Adam* (Assistant Director) (motion picture)
1963 - *Bire On Vardı* (Assistant Director) (motion picture)
1962 - *Kismetin En Güzeli* (Assistant Director) (motion picture)

Awards:

1970 - Adana Golden Boll Film Competition, Best Director Award with *Linç*
1970 - Adana Golden Boll Film Competition, third prize in the Best Film Category for *Linç*
1984 - 21st Golden Orange Festival, *Spoon Enemy*, Best Screenplay Award and Third Prize in the Best Film Category
1985 - Women's Film Festival, France, *Spoon Enemy (La Chambre de mariage)* Grand Prize and Press Special Award in the Best Film Category

Themes

Women Olgaç was very aware of the discrimination against women, so the subjects which she addressed in her films often drew attention to the problems which women experienced, especially in her second period. Despite the pressures of her time, she helped to raise awareness of and attention towards women's issues. She also showed significant courage by dealing with such issues at a time when there was almost no female perspective in Turkish cinema. In 1980, Olgaç handled social change, the inequality of the social order and social pressures and violence against women in films such as *Gülüşan*, *Gömlek*, *Umut Hep Vardı*, *Kaşık Düşmanı* and *Yavrularım*. In films such as *İpekçe*, she depicted extraordinary women who experienced and suffered the consequences of being outside the values of society; in *Kaşık Düşmanı*, she questioned patriarchy in relation to feudal values, and in *Gülüşah* she dealt with the issue of *kumalık*, which is an important problem for women in Anatolia, together with the problems of jealousy and infertility.

Social inequality and education The themes which she explored in her films were mostly social change, the inequality of the social system, and social oppression and violence against women. The subject which she most wanted to draw attention to was not the oppression of women as such, but the disruption of the social order and the inequality which it created. She saw this as a result of ignorance and she tried to raise people's awareness by including these issues in her films. In her view, the most important things to avoid being pressured by society over were education and awareness. She thought that the most important thing for people to have better living conditions should be the awareness and education of the whole society, males and females.

Hunger also has a theme which questions the social order: she criticized the feudal order and the differences between classes and also the fact that a woman can be bought and sold like a possession in the feudal order.

The screenplay for *Birgün Mutlaka* was by Yılmaz Güney and the film is significant as it was the first political film in Turkish cinema: "The purpose of this semi-documentary film showing social mass movements is seen as reflecting the relations and contradictions between various segments of society and workers, students and labourers, and looking at the war of life with a new eye" (Scognamillo, 1988, p.117). This film is important because it reveals Olgaç's political attitude, but it encountered serious difficulties with the censorship of the period and its release was delayed. In *Gömlek*, Olgaç again questioned the feudal order, the problem of landlordship and the issue of bride money, and in *Yarın Cumartesi*, she focused on the importance of education; she believed that the liberation of women can only be achieved through awareness and education.

Male-centred films Olgaç was the first director of *Üçünüzü de Mıhtım* in 1965 and was the only female director of that period. In 1970, she directed *Linç*, starring Demir Karahan, Fatma Karanfil, Süheyl Eğriboz and Ali Şen and won many awards with the film. Among her award-winning films were *Nikahsız*, which is about a young man who tries to rescue his lover from a brothel, starring Yusuf Sezgin and Selma Güneri, *Dertli Gönlüm* which seems to have been inspired by Dostoyevsky's *White Nights*, and *Merhamet*, starring Sadri Alışık and Suna Keskin, which was an adaptation of a story by Stefan Zweig. *Linç* was adapted from Kerim Korcan's novel of the same name: it is set almost entirely in a prison and all of the characters except one are male.

Rural life Her films are mostly set in towns and villages outside the big city. Olgaç's film-making was based on the *Yeşilçam* tradition. She made a name again with ambitious films such as *Üç Halka Yirmibeş*, *İpekçe* and *Kurşun Adres Sormaz*. During her mature period (1984-1994) she directed a total of twelve films, and in *Kaşık Düşmanı* (1984), *Gülüşan* (1985), *Yavrularım* (1985), *Üç Halka Yirmibeş* (1986) *İpekçe* (1987) and *Kızın Adı Fatma* (1988) we see Olgaç handling women's problems in rural life.

Characters

It is difficult to see similar characters being frequently repeated in Olgaç's films. She produced a wide variety of different narratives in approximately 41 films and over two distinct periods. Basically, however, it is possible to talk about three character types: those who support and maintain the system, those who oppose the system, and those who are used as a weapon between the two.

Those who insist on maintaining a system These characters are the ones who profit from the system, whether they are in the city, in the village or in a prison, whether male or female, old or young. They generally have a cunning nature. They manage to protect their interests without getting their hands dirty. They have the ability to manipulate with their own cunning those who want to benefit from the power. The Ağa in *Açlık*, the chief guard in *Linç*, the villagers in *İpekçe*, Mestan, who kidnapped a girl to be his wife in addition to his two wives in *Gülüşan*, and when all the women in the village had died in the tube explosion, the men in *Kaşık Düşmanı* who wanted a woman from the state to continue the system.

Those who challenge the system These characters form the other side of the conflict; they challenge all this corruption in their own way and want to change the system by their own efforts; they are often the main characters. These characters often fight against powers which seem impregnable. They represent honesty and fairness and are generally lower-class; they are characters who are somehow excluded from the system. Even though in *İpekçe* the title character could not find a place either in the village or in the city, she did not give up the life she knew was right, Arap Kadir tried to disrupt the existing unjust and corrupt system at the expense of his life in *Linç*, and Meryem, who did not submit to the Ağa even in her own impossible situation in *Açlık*, can be given as examples of these characters. At the same time, Gülüşan, who is blind in *Gülüşan*, the main character who is a prostitute in *İpekçe*, Meryem, who was sold from poverty to the landlord in *Açlık*, and the women who are excluded from society because they are assumed to be infertile in *Gülüşan* are all in some way involved in challenging the system.

Secondary characters There are intermediate characters in Olgaç's films who neither defy nor support the system. These characters are often used as weapons by the antagonists on either side. They do not have any character depth, but they mediate the story to show how cunning an antagonist is. Usually, it is they who are punished instead of the antagonist. Like the prison governor in *Linç*, they often have some complex and want to show how strong they are. Sometimes they do not realize that they are being used by the antagonist, as is the case in *İpekçe*.

Olgaç's cinematography

Bilge Olgaç's films are mostly set in towns and villages rather than in big cities. One of her assistants said that the most important thing for her was the fiction: she believed that cinema started in fiction and editing. She was interested not only in the *mise-en-scène* but in everything from the décor to the costumes. She attracted the audience's attention with her striking camera and editing techniques in all her films.

