

Mercedes mon amour (1993)

Tunç Okan

OVERVIEW

In *Mercedes mon amour*, which he made 16 years after *The Bus*, Tunç Okan deals with an issue related to worker migration abroad again. The story on which the film is based belongs to one of Turkey's most important writers, Adalet Ağaoğlu. In 1992, Okan films the screenplay he wrote based on Ağaoğlu's novel. In terms of its cinematic narration, narrative structure and character depth, Tunç Okan's third film *Mercedes mon amour* is one of the remarkable films of Turkish cinema.

CINEMATIC STORYTELLING

Tunç Okan is a director who can effectively describe opposing concepts and situations with his cinematic language. In *Mercedes mon amour*, he also creates meaning by arranging the image in the frame and using the *mise-en-scène* and editing effectively. The shots showing the graphic relationships between Mercedes and trucks, or the state of the car both in the crowded traffic of the city and in deserted roads and nature can be given as examples. In the film, Mercedes appears as a character. Mercedes is one of the brands symbolizing the strength of German nation's industry and economy. It evokes concepts such as perfection, power, durability and robustness. Similar to Bayram, it changes and transforms during the journey. By the means of both the narrative structure and the cinematic narration, the transformation of the characters has been expressed in a convincing and impressive manner.

The film's narrative is edited in such a way that we learn about Bayram's past and relationships through the events he remembers during his journey, and the flashbacks that do not follow a linear sequence are intertwined within the plot.

In this film, the director has overcome the challenge of adapting a literary work without weakening the language of cinema. In this respect, this film is one of a few successful examples of Turkish cinema. Casting and direction are among the aspects of the film worth mentioning. I would like to emphasize that through his acting in the scenes where we hear his inner voice, and his convincing relationship with his car, İlyas Salman, who plays the main character Bayram, almost from beginning to end elevates the film all by himself.

CHARACTERS

Bayram	is in his thirties, cleaning worker in Germany.
Kezban	is in her thirties, Bayram's childhood friend and lover.

SYNOPSIS

Coming from a village in Ankara, Bayram has moved to Germany as a worker three years ago and he has bought his brightly colored car, the yellow Mercedes –or *Balkız*, as he calls it– that he had been dreaming of since his childhood. He plans to spend his annual leave in his village, visit his sick uncle for the last time, propose to Kezban and show off to everyone with his new car. Therefore, he sets off from Munich to Ankara in his yellow Mercedes. However, his journey does not turn out as he has hoped. As his car gets damaged, Bayram's past mistakes that he has aimed to cover up with the Mercedes are revealed. Bayram's journey is also a journey to his own past. When he arrives at his village, he sees that neither his village nor Kezban is there anymore.

PLOT

Solmaz's intention. Bayram has bought the Mercedes car that he wanted with the money he earned by working in Germany for years. He will go back to his hometown and show his car to the people in his village. Solmaz also wants to go to Turkey with Bayram and to carry the gifts she bought for her family with Bayram's car. That's why she flirts with Bayram and makes love to him in the back seat of the Mercedes. Despite their agreement, Bayram sets out without taking Solmaz.

Customs. After a long journey, Bayram arrives at the passport control point in his car, which he calls with a woman's name "Balkız". Officers are mean and grumpy. They make it difficult for Bayram. Meanwhile, a minibus scratches Bayram's car as it passes by. Bayram wants to file a complaint, but the minibus is long gone. Bayram begs the officers to get the permission to enter Turkey.

Bayram's recollections. As soon as Bayram has completed his military service, he has started working in an auto repair shop in Ankara without going back to his village. Kezban, his girlfriend back in the village, also came to Ankara to work with her brother. She visits Bayram. They take a walk in the park together. Kezban works as a cleaning woman and attends sewing classes in the evenings. Bayram talks about his intention to go to Germany.

What goes around comes around. As he enjoys himself thinking about how he tricked Solmaz and had a sexual relationship with her thanks to his car, Bayram gets into an accident. He falls into the creek on the side of the road to avoid hitting the oncoming truck. He tries hard and saves the car from where it fell. The men who came to fish are having a picnic there by the creek and they watch Bayram from afar.

Mercedes star. He stops in a town for a meal. He waits by his car and tries to prevent a parked car from damaging the Mercedes. He does not have much money, so he only orders soup and yogurt. When he reaches his village in the evening, he will eat the food he misses anyway. When he is leaving, he realizes that Mercedes' star has been stolen. He holds the parking lot keeper responsible. The argument turns into a fight, but the people around separate them.

Gas station. Gasoline is low. Just as he runs out of gas, he reaches a gas station at the last moment. While the gas tank is filling up, he remembers the day he bought his car.

The day he bought the Mercedes. He wants to know on which day the Mercedes he likes in the gallery was assembled. According to Bayram's claim, workers worked poorly on Mondays and Fridays. The salesman explains this to his boss in a mocking manner.

Roast lamb. On the way, he sees a place that serves roast lamb and approaches it, but he passes it by. He has spent all of his money on the Mercedes. So, he has to be content with the cheapest food. He recalls the day when he was awaiting the train to go to Germany.

The train to Germany. The train departs. Bayram waves goodbye to those who go to Germany and wishes them luck. Despite the fact that his ticket was for two days later, he has arrived at the station in advance.

Safety of Balkız. Bayram sees cars and trucks that have crashed on the road. He worries about Balkız for a moment. He focuses back again. He remembers his childhood.

Bayram's love of cars. In his childhood, Bayram was fascinated by a brightly colored car that came to the village. While running excitedly behind the car with the other kids, he pushes Kezban and she falls. Kezban starts to cry. When Bayram stops and looks back, he realizes what he has done, but continues to run after the car.

Punishment. Bayram cannot stand the provocations and races with several cars. He makes dangerous overtakes. Eventually, the traffic officer pulls him over. Bayram has to pay a fine for speeding.

Veli. Veli, who brought Solmaz along to Turkey, had an accident with his car and overturned on the side of the road. Bayram sees him, but drives away without stopping. While trying to justify his indifference by saying "Who thought of me so that I should think of them?", he recalls his friendship with Veli. Veli knows the difficulty of living alone; therefore he invites Bayram to a gathering of friends so that Bayram does not feel lonely. Bayram was happy that someone has thought of him.

Istanbul. Bayram has arrived in Istanbul. He remembers Kezban and the promise he has made to her. He told Kezban that he would not forget her when he was in Germany, and that he would help her to move to Germany. Bayram considers his arrival to his hometown with the Mercedes as their shared success.

Losing parts. While pumping air into the tires of the car, he notices that the taillight has been broken. He wants to renew both the stolen star and the light, but gives up because he finds it expensive. He agrees to go to his village without a star or the light.

A ferry adventure. When looking from the upper deck of the ferryboat, Bayram cannot see his car. He starts looking for the Mercedes in a state of panic and fear. The place where he left the car is in the

opposite direction of the section he is looking for. He finds the Mercedes. From the upper deck, two teenagers race to hit the Mercedes with their spit. While Bayram is cleaning the traces of saliva with his handkerchief, a couple sitting in the car behind watch him with mocking looks in their eyes. Bayram remembers Kezban's words from a day when they went for a walk and her opposition to Bayram's desire to go to Germany. Bayram, who acts with the ambition of making money, is described as "lacking character" by Kezban. While Bayram is thinking about these, he begins to kick his car without realizing it. When he regains consciousness, he tries to clean the marks left by his kicks under the openly mocking looks of people around him.

Show of masculinity. Bayram admires a young woman he sees while he looks around unhappily. When she hears that Bayram is working in Germany, the woman, who didn't care about him at first, starts to show interest in Bayram. At the end of the talk, Bayram carries the woman's suitcases to the Mercedes and offers to drive her to her destination. When they get in the car, Bayram tries to hug and kiss the woman. The woman gets angry and quickly gets out of the car. At that moment, the door of the Mercedes slams into the truck standing next to it, and gets damaged. The woman takes her bags and leaves. The ferry approaches the pier. Trying not to harm it, Bayram struggles to drive the Mercedes onto the pier.

Various misfortunes. While Bayram dreams of taking his Mercedes in its best condition and being welcomed with a lot of hoopla by his villagers, he encounters minor setbacks along the way that will spoil the appearance of his new car. After arguing with a truck driver and getting punched by him, he stops in front of a restaurant to eat.

The dirty trace in Bayram's past. While eating at the restaurant, Bayram remembers his conversations with his fellow villager Ibrahim who was waiting for his medical report in Ankara in order to go to Germany. Under the guise of being kind to Ibrahim, Bayram will send him back to the village and get the report from the hospital.

Why do they shoot horses? Bayram is moving toward his village. While dreaming of meeting Kezban, he turns the steering wheel to avoid hitting a tractor on the road, Mercedes somersaults and falls into the field next to the road. Bayram weeps as he looks at the condition of his car. He recalls his childhood, the day his uncle shot a horse, saying it was useless. That day, Bayram wept in that manner, too. He manages to start the engine with difficulty and gets back on the road.

The truth has been revealed. Bayram takes the dirt road leading to his village. He sees a recently built farm with a newly placed sign. He stands by a fountain, changes his shirt, and puts on a jacket. He looks at the engagement rings in his pocket; he will propose to Kezban. He meets a young shepherd tending sheep. Not knowing who he is, the shepherd tells him that through bribing Bayram got a fraudulent medical report for Ibrahim to replace him; when the truth came out, Kezban learned what was going on, then she married someone else; since an ancient city was discovered, there was an excavation in the village so the villagers moved away; and his uncle had died. Now, Bayram has no village to go, no Kezban to marry, no car to show.

THEMES

Longing for a better life. Starting in the 1960s, worker migration from Turkey and non-industrialized nations like Italy and Greece to nations with strong economies and employment gaps in Europe increased with people's longing for a better life. This longing included the desire to save money and own a house to secure the future, as well as to achieve a more comfortable lifestyle. The desire for a better life lies at the root of migration, not just to foreign countries but also to large cities domestically. In the film, the actions of Bayram such as living a modest life in Germany in order to buy the car he wanted; paying attention to talks on luxury apartments, but more importantly replacing Ibrahim from his village with a false medical report to go to Germany as soon as possible reveal that he is capable to do anything in order to achieve the life he dreams of, without questioning whether it is right or wrong.

Social status. Social status is one of the issues that the film tackles. Bayram is raised by his uncle since he has lost both his parents. From his early interactions with the village kids and his uncle, he gains knowledge of how power works. While his uncle is preparing to shoot an old and useless horse, Bayram tries to persuade him to stop; he begs, cries and when he fails, he curses his uncle and throws stones at him. While defending himself, his uncle says "Why do they shoot horses, Bayram... You have to leave what is useless to you behind". That day, he learned this from his uncle, albeit unintentionally, so without looking back, Bayram left Kezban in Ankara and deceived Ibrahim and went to Germany in order to raise his social status.

According to Akyüz and Dabak (2017: 88) who describe Bayram as a subaltern, "Bayram, who speaks but cannot be heard... as a subaltern, he could not find the right voice and the right listener". Bayram talks throughout the film; sometimes he interprets the past events, sometimes he quarrels with "Balkız" or tries to oppose those who rebelled against what happened to him and caused him trouble. He alone can hear these conversations. No one cares about what he says and some do not even respond. His car, which he had purchased while abstaining from basic needs, could not help him be heard either.

Thanks to his Mercedes, Bayram returns as a subaltern to the society which he believes he could be a part of. The conversation he had with the shepherd boy in the last scene is one of the scenes that best describes this. In this scene, standing next to his "wrecked" Mercedes, Bayram listens to his own story from the shepherd boy. The most striking moment is the moment when the shepherd boy says "I think I know who you are, but I cannot figure it out". As a subaltern, speaking but inaudible, Bayram no longer exists, he does not belong to that place, he only gains meaning on his journey. As long as he is on the road, similar to his wrecked Mercedes, he will be crushed under all his identities, especially his masculine identity, which creates a domain of power for him (Akyüz and Dabak, 2017:88).

The car as a phallus. The crisis of masculinity creates the need to constantly emphasize the domain of masculinity and requires other tools to fill the distressing lack of power. Guns, cars, women function as substitutes for the crisis in the traditional male-dominated society. In *Mercedes mon amour*, too, "the subalternity created by being on the road, being without a place, lacking time and listeners, and not belonging anywhere, breaks his (Bayram's) masculinity and puts him in crisis" (Akyüz and Dabak, 2017:87). It would not be wrong to say that Bayram's masculinity crisis started in childhood, when he lost his mother first and then the horse. However, Bayram "has a substitute that will reorder this broken masculinity: the yellow Mercedes" (Akyüz and Dabak, 2017:87). He establishes his relationship with women, men and vehicles through his yellow Mercedes: with the car he constructs in his mind as a substitute for his masculine identity. Mercedes has become his phallus. He had a sexual relationship with Solmaz because of his car, and he anticipated having a sexual relationship with manicurist Ayfer through Mercedes as well.

Mercedes and truck, Mercedes and ferry, Mercedes and donkey, Mercedes and horse. With this bond he has created between the vehicles, Bayram continually tries to reclaim his masculinity because every bond he creates has the appearance of a power relation. Enquiries of masculinity such as racing, competition, comparison and determining one's own situation according to the situation of the other, are among the mechanisms that Bayram frequently resorts to (Akyüz and Dabak, 2017:88).

Of course, Bayram is not the only one who replaces his car with his losses in the domain of masculinity. In the film, especially the drivers of the vehicles we see along the road, truck drivers, men behind the wheel of other private vehicles, and even the young archaeologist driver of the minibus decorated with flower images, do not leave Bayram alone in the status race and the show of power they enter with their vehicles.

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Bayram is in his thirties, a worker in a car factory in Germany. The character of Bayram is handled with its good and bad sides and contradictory traits. As the film unfolds, Bayram –whom we initially sympathize with as a worker, a "migrant", who went to Germany to work due to difficult living conditions in his homeland and managed to buy a car there with his efforts– turns into a character whose faults and bad sides are revealed and we understand the reasons why he behaves this way. On the one hand Bayram admits his mistakes; on the other hand he tries to legitimize them. This is his process of transformation. As Bayram transforms, our opinion about him also changes and begins to take a more realistic shape. "We witness Bayram's worst nightmares and strongest desires, as he goes by talking to himself or with his car along the way. Bayram's desires and fears are shaped around his car" (Akyüz and Dabak, 2017:87-8). Bayram is a sexist, ambitious, selfish and shameless character. However, he is also a person who makes the crimes of this society visible with his deprivations, with what he learns from his environment and the injustices he suffers. "He is like the stepchild that the masculine system produces but never embraces and humiliates every time" (Akyüz and Dabak, 2017:88).

Sexist. Bayram thinks that women will want to have sex with him thanks to his car. He has sex with Solmaz in the back seat of the Mercedes. What Bayram said about Solmaz also reflects his perspective on women: "Long live Balkız; thanks to you, we made Solmaz take off her panties. I haven't even seen tits for years." He shows the same attitude to Ayfer, whom he sees on the ferry and admires. When he intends to pick up the woman, he has the following thought: "If she knew that the Mercedes down there

is mine, she'd lie right under me." Expressions such as "make someone take of their panties", "lying right under" are discourses produced by masculine ideology. Bayram has an illusion that women will admire him because he owns a Mercedes, and that they will show it by having a sexual relationship with him. He doesn't think such things about Kezban. But he is determined to impress her with his Mercedes and persuade her to marry him.

Selfish. Although Bayram promised to take Solmaz to Turkey with his car, he sets out without taking her. In order to take Ibrahim's turn and go to Germany as soon as possible, he bribes officials for changing Ibrahim's health report. He has easily deceived people who trusted him.

Ambitious. Bayram is a kid in the village that no one cares about except for Kezban. Maybe being pushed around by other kids, growing up without parents, and his uncle shooting the horse that Bayram loves made him ambitious. It is his biggest dream to get everyone's admiration and to return to his village – where he left as an invisible person– in his Mercedes. Only in this way, he will be saved from being a subaltern and an uncared person. Because of this, he even betrays people who treat him well. It is also because of his ambition that he races with the drivers who provoke him along the way, and becomes aggressive when his car is damaged. His ambition makes him arrogant. When he gets angry with the police who wrote the ticket for violating the speed limit, he complains under his breath: "Could that cop ever buy himself a Mercedes! He became an officer, what of it!"

Shameless. He is aware of his bad behaviors, but does not feel shame or guilt for them. By finding excuses to legitimize his behaviors, he prevents them from creating a moral burden on himself. Instead of criticizing himself while leaving Solmaz, he blames her: "What a stupid woman! What did she think, just because she put out once I'm going to carry all these packages, suitcases, televisions?"

Although he sees that Veli's car has crashed on the road, he drives past without stopping. "This Veli is stupid indeed. Why did you let a stranger woman into your car when you have all those kids and stuff with you? If you hadn't, maybe you wouldn't have an accident". Instead of helping Veli, he legitimizes his behavior of ignoring the accident with Veli's "stupidity" in taking Solmaz to Turkey with his car. However, it was Veli who invited Bayram to a gathering while he was in Germany so that he would not be alone. He also justifies his departure without Solmaz with these words: "In this world, isn't everyone for himself? Who thought of Bayram so that Bayram would think of others in this life?"

Kezban is in her thirties, she is Bayram's childhood friend and lover. Kezban is a conscientious, smart, content, honest woman who earns her living with her labor.

Conscientious. While the kids of the village take Bayram in their midst and shower him with stones, Kezban tries to protect him and she is also hit by the stones thrown. Later this friendship turns into a love affair, but with the ambition of making money Bayram leaves Kezban behind and goes to Germany. Kezban later finds out about Bayram's betrayal in order to go to Germany. He does not forgive Bayram for committing such a treachery; she takes Bayram out of her life and marries another man.

Smart. Kezban comes to Ankara to work. While she is working as a housekeeper, she decides to take a sewing class in the evenings. Later, while working in a clothing factory, her boss calls her to clean his house. Kezban, who says, "I am not his maid," leaves the factory and begins to work as a cleaning worker at a bank.

Content. Kezban is afraid that Bayram will go and forget her. When Bayram returned from the military service, he found a job in Ankara and started working without even coming back to the village. That's the reason she is worried that Bayram will go to Germany. She tries to make him give up: "Bayram, what do we need Germany for? Your job is fine, and I'm here too...". But Bayram wants more: "Every man for himself Kezban... What can we do, this is the way; you will walk and never look back". After these words, Kezban accuses Bayram of having a lack of character.

REFERENCES

Akyüz, S., Dabak, B. (2017). "Erkekliğin Yol Hali: "Sarı Mercedes" ve "Otobüs" Filmlerinde Erkeklik Kurguları" (The Road State of Masculinity: Masculinity Fictions in "Mercedes Mon Amour" and "The Bus") *Fe Dergi* 9, no. 1: 80-91.



Cleaning worker Bayram shows his Mercedes to Solmaz.



Bayram arrives in Turkey with his Mercedes.



The love between Bayram and Kezban begins in their teenage years.



Military service is over, Bayram has started to work. Kezban visits him.



Bayram tries to protect his car from dangers along the way.



The masculinity in crisis aims to repair itself through racing.



Masculinity is tested: "If she knew that the Mercedes down there is mine..."



The perfection of "Balkız" is not permanent. In addition to Bayram, Ayfer also makes Mercedes pay.



An unsettling journey.



Bayram dreams of being greeted with a hoopla his village.



Misfortunes come one after another. Bayram takes a punch to the eye, Mercedes gets a crack in the windshield.



The evening Bayram deceived Ibrahim.



Bayram never imagined "Balkız" like this.



The great disappointment.



There is no village he can go to, no beloved he can reunite with, no manhood he can mend.