

## Emin Alper (1974- )

### Biography

Emin Alper was born in 1974 in Ermanek, Karaman. He studied at the Ankara Science High School and entered Boğaziçi University's Civil Engineering Department. Because of his interest in social science, he retok the entrance exam two years later and transferred to the Department of Economics. After graduating, he completed his PhD at the Institute of Atatürk's Principles and History of Turkish Revolution: his thesis was about the History of Modern Turkey.

Alper first became interested in cinema, theatre and literature in his secondary and high-school years. He joined the theatre group at Boğaziçi University in order to be close to cultural and artistic activities. Alper experimented with screenplay at the university and became a member of the university's cinema club. He spent most of his time in the club and with friends who were working in the film industry. He published the magazine *Görüntü* in collaboration with several friends. He invited prominent directors such as Zeki Demirkubuz and Nuri Bilge Ceylan to give interviews and workshops.

Alper wrote the script of his first feature film while he was a student at Boğaziçi. Although he did not have an educational background in film-making, he was always passionate about it and he gained some experience by watching other film-makers while he was acting in their short films. His meeting with Seyfi Teoman was a big turning point for him: he appeared in the short film *Apartman* which was shot by Teoman. Alper made his own first short film, *Mektup*, in 2005; his biggest supporter was Seyfi Teoman. In the following year, he completed his second short film *Rifat*, which was awarded best short film at the 2008 Bucharest International Film Festival. Four years later, in 2012, his first full-length film *Tepenin Ardı* ('Beyond the Hill') was premiered; it received 24 awards including the Caligari Film Award at the Berlin International Film Festival. He directed two more full-length films in the following years *Abluka* ('Frenzy') in 2014 and *Kızkardeşler* ('A Tale of Three Sisters') in 2019. He received three important international awards for *Abluka*: the Arca Cinema Giovani, the Premio Bisato d'Oro and the Jury's Special Prize at the Venice Film Festival. In 2016, he was also given the 'best director' award by the Film Writers Association for *Abluka*. *Kızkardeşler* was selected to compete for the Golden Bear at the Berlin Film Festival. In all, his films won him thirty-five awards. He most recently directed a television series entitled *Alef* (2020).

Other than his writing, acting and directing career, he has also been a lecturer in Istanbul Technical University's Humanities and Social Sciences Department since 2003. He also writes articles for magazines such as *Tarih ve Toplum*, *Biririm* and *Mesele*.

Emin Alper is married and is a member of the Green Left Party.

### Filmography

#### As director:

*Alef* (television series) 2020  
*Kız Kardeşler* 2019  
*Abluka* 2015  
*Tepenin Ardı* 2012  
*Rifat* (short film) 2006  
*Mektup* (short film) 2005

#### As screenwriter:

*Kız Kardeşler* 2019  
*Abluka* 2015  
*Tepenin Ardı* 2012  
*Rifat* (short film) 2006

*Mektup* (short film) 2005

**As an actor:**

*Kelebekler* 2018

**As producer:**

*Tepenin Ardı* 2012

**Common themes which Alper has used in his films**

**Suspicion** Suspicion and the inner conflict of the characters about this suspicion which can turn into paranoia can be seen as a main theme of all of Emin Alper's films. This suspicion is created by using unknown, unseen enemies in his films.

In *Tepenin Ardı* Faik, the oldest member of the family claims there are bad people 'beyond the hill' who want to destroy their lives and he is obsessed with this idea. It makes him paranoid and he blames the *yörüks* for everything.

In *Abluka*, Kadir becomes more paranoid as the film progresses. He is betrayed by his trusted neighbours; his brothers are missing; he doesn't know who to trust any more and he begins to come up with conspiracy theories. He is suspicious of everyone, including his brother, and he trusts no one.

In *Kızkardeşler*, sisters are suspicious of each other. They don't want to give up the opportunity of living in the city, especially the middle sister Nurhan. On the other hand, Veysel, a young shepherd, has his own paranoias; he is scared of getting murdered by thieves and he also wants to go the city so that he can stop herding sheep. He asks Mr Necati for a job, but his extreme trust issues, combined with his lack of communication skills, creates a snowball effect which later results in him taking his own life.

Most of the time, Alper's characters face trust issues. Many characters find themselves in a situation that even those who should be their allies might be unreliable, which creates confusion and paranoia. He creates inner conflict in all of his movies by using the paranoia and suspicion of the characters.

**Poverty** In all three major films, Alper's main characters are either from a poor village or they are from the outskirts of a city. He tells stories of people who struggle and who have difficulties simply in living. He uses poverty to foment conflict between characters. At the same time, the theme of poverty gives his films a political edge.

In *Tepenin Ardı*, Although the story is shaped around the landowner Faik and his family the elements that create the conflict are based on class conflicts.

In *Abluka*, Even though the movie is already detached from time and space, it is a story that takes place in the back and poor places. Younger brothers execute stray dogs for a living.

In *Kız Kardeşler* are concerned with the sisters who, conflict with each other to leave the village and live in the city due to the poverty and impossibility they live in.

**Uncanniness** In Alper's films, reality and illusion are mixed, which creates an uncanny society and environment for both characters and audience. This confusion between reality and illusion is created by using the characters' own psychology. Many of his characters have quirks and mental illnesses; some of them are probably schizophrenic and during his films we get to experience those characters mixing up fantasy and reality.

in *Tepenin Ardı*, Zafer, the oldest son, is struggling with mental illness and he sees severe hallucinations. He imagines a group of soldiers in disguise urging him to join them. Although the nomads, who are supposed to be behind the hill, seem to be the cause of the uncanny, this feeling actually stems from the mood of the characters.

In *Abluka*, some scenes are just creations of the paranoid characters' minds. In the film universe, the audience is also left to grapple with a doubt about the reality of the scenes. This is used in Alper films

as a dramaturgical element to make the audience a partner in the political world of uncanny and doubt.

In the film *Kızkardeşler*, the mountains where Veysel worked as a shepherd, the village squeezed between those mountains, the changeable nature of the relationships, the inability to hold on to the houses that sisters go to as maids strengthen the feeling of uncanny in the film.

**Family** All of Alper's films are centred around either a whole family or siblings. He creates a three-dimensional relationship between family/siblings. In his films, Turkish politics are discussed within the family. The family can be accepted as a small nation:

*Tepenin Ardı* is a film about Turkey; it tells a story about three generations of men coming together. This film explores masculine relations and crises within the family, which can be read as a critique of Turkey.

*Kız Kardeşler* tells a family story about three sisters who have had to return to their village after being sent to the city by their father.

*Abluka* tells the story of Kadir and his brother Ahmet, who was released from prison after many years. In other words, Alper has always focused on the theme of the family in his films; he has especially preferred giving leading roles to brothers.

However, the family which is portrayed by Alper in his films is a kind of uncanny and dysfunctional family. In *Tepenin Ardı*, all the members of the family cause harm to each other in some way even though they look as if they care for one another. All the characters have selfish motivations which result in murder, rape, wounding and physical harm.

**Hegemonic Masculinity and Violence** Alper draws parallels between masculinity, crisis and violence. His characters try to overcome these crises by using violence and abuse not only against the people around them but also against nature and animals.

For example, in *Abluka* and *Tepenin Ardı*, dogs are shot and killed by the main characters. In his films, masculinity is criticised by the characters' ways of understanding gender roles; male characters put themselves above everything: women, children, nature, animals. There are also hierarchies between men in terms of age. The relationship between masculinities can be read as a map of the Turkish political climate.

*Kızkardeşler* stands in a different line from the other films of Alper in this respect. Although we see hegemonic masculinity and hierarchical relations between men in this film, the film does not base its main theme on them.

**Politics** In Alper's films, politics are one of the main themes, but the political message is hidden within a gothic format. Particularly in *Tepenin Ardı* and *Abluka*, he presents Turkish politics in a dystopic way by transforming it into a gothic element.

## Characters

In Alper's films, family members who are living in rural areas or the city suburbs are the main characters. They hide many things from each other, which causes tragedy and also creates an uncanny environment. Also, the characters have invisible enemies in the films about whom it is difficult for the audience to decide whether they are true or imaginary. Although these enemies never appear, they play a significant role in the films. His characters often come from poor, lower-class families and face severe living difficulties.

**Older characters** In Alper's films, there is always one older member of the family who usually determines the tone of the film. All of the other characters and the relationships between them are positioned according to this character. Nusret in *Tepenin Ardı* and the older brother in *Abluka*, father Şevket in *Kızkardeşler* are good examples; they both dominate the others and the relationship between them. Their beliefs – it does not matter whether they are real or imaginary – become real for the others. They force them to accept them. These characters symbolise power. They are often obsessively focused on their masculinity. Alper examines men's desire for women, which can be seen in scenes such as Nusret's sexual assault on Meryem in *Tepenin Ardı*.

**Adolescent characters** In Alper's films, there is always one adolescent character. These adolescents are often unreliable and immature and they make life more difficult for those around them with their childish but violent behaviour. Characters such as Caner in *Tepenin Ardı* and Nurhan in *Kızkardeşler* are good examples. They are usually copying the older member of the family but transform the power which belongs to the older characters into a new form which usually involves anger and violence. These characters enable us to understand different forms of power relations.

**Character with mental illness** In Alper's films, there is one character who can be accepted as mentally ill or, as in *Abluka*, can lose their mental health during the film. This character enhances the stories' uncanny and paranoid tone. The big brother in *Abluka*, the father Faik in *Tepenin Ardı* can be given as an example. Although she is not the main character of the film, the director did not neglect to add a character with mental illness to the village in the movie *Kız Kardeşler*.

**Enemy** In Alper's films, there is always one invisible enemy about whom characters talk, fight, search for and make plans for, but neither the other characters nor the audience can ever be wholly sure whether this enemy is there or not. These invisible enemies are the source of the fear which is used by older characters to exercise their power.

In *Tepenin Ardı*, The Yörüks are made hostile as the source of the film's main conflict.

In *Abluka* the supposed counter-forces organized against the system are also the triggering factor of the conflict.

For *Kız Kardeşler* the enemy is the geography that they cannot escape even though they want to go out. Sisters become enemies to each other from time to time.

**Weak characters** Female characters are depicted as weak characters on whom masculine power can be practised; they are often the object of a powerful man's desire. In his first and second films especially, there is only one female character who can understand better than a man what is happening around them but cannot articulate herself.

Cinematography of the director

**Establishing and wide-angle shots** Alper uses a lot of establishing shots between scenes. He cares strongly about the locations for the shooting. He likes to find the locations early in order to set up the story by capturing the environment more precisely. He thinks that location is one of key elements for creating an atmosphere. He has also frequently used the technique of wide-angle shots in his films. Transitions from one character to the other are made quickly, but what these characters have done during these transitions is not fully understood, which increases the tension. Long, silent scenes and sudden transitions from a third-person perspective to a first-person perspective also increase the tension.

**Tracking** When characters are walking, Alper places a tracking camera behind them and follows them, so the viewers feel as if they are walking behind them like members of the group. Sometimes this creates mystery by not showing too much, and some scenes feel as if they belong to a thriller film.

**Uncanny camera work** Alper uses irony in terms not only of the story but also the camera work. Although the characters are unaware of particular situations or threats or even the truth, the audience knows the truth behind them by means of camera movements and focus.

**Character-centred shots.** This technique is when the camera focuses on one person no matter who is talking. Alper gives a great deal of attention to casting as well. His dialogues are very natural and involve accents. Every character speaks with a different accent because Alper wants to keep locations and ethnicities unknown for the audience. He wants to make his films feel timeless and universal, showing events in the films which might be from the past, the present or the future.

**Colour** Alper says that he never worked with the same art director more than once, but his films are not drastically different because of that. Although it can be argued that *Abluka's* colour palette is darker than that in other films, it can also be said that he often uses muted tones in his films.