

# The Wide Open Windows of *Cholera Street*: On the Light and Sound Leaking Through/To the Private Space

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## Öz

Inspired by the subaltern studies the purpose of this article is to examine how the dichotomy of private/public in Metin Kaçan's *Ağır Roman*<sup>1</sup> Novel is reproduced on the axis of the visual language used by Mustafa Altıoklar's cinematic adaptation *Cholera Street*.<sup>2</sup> The article is interested in the peculiar choice of slang usage and reads this as an invitation to blur the borders of private/public space that modern life demands to keep separate. In this sense, *Cholera Street* can also be regarded as a brilliant piece of social commentary, offering a vivid peek into the life of the "other" trapped in the peripheral neighborhood. This article unravels further how *Cholera Street* through visual film grammar and various metaphors sends strong critical messages about the silence of subalterns who often lack the means to speak for themselves and how the violation of privacy turns out to be a challenging act against the dominant order.

**Keywords:** Private/public space, privacy, slang, subaltern, *Cholera Street*

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# Mustafa Altıoklar'ın *Ağır Roman*'ı: Kolera'nın Sokağa Açılan Pencereleeri ve Mahreme/Mahremden Sızan Işık ve Ses Üzerine

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## Abstract

Maduniyet çalışmalarından ilham alan bu yazı Metin Kaçan'ın *Ağır Roman* kitabındaki özel/kamusal alan ikiliğinin romanın Mustafa Altıoklar tarafından yönetilen sinematik uyarlamasında görsel dil kullanımı ile nasıl yeniden üretildiğini incelemektedir. Yoğun argo içeren dil kullanımına odaklanan yazı, bu dil seçimini modern yaşamın kamusal alandan ayrı tutmayı talep ettiği mahrem alanın sınırlarını bulanıklaştırmak için bir davet olarak okur. Bu anlamda, bir kenar mahallesinde sıkışıp kalan "ötekinin" yaşantısına kulak veren *Ağır Roman* filminin toplumsal bir eleştiri içerdiği söylenebilir. Bu yazı, *Ağır Roman*'ın film grameri ve kullandığı çeşitli metaforlarla çoğu zaman kendi adlarına konuşma imkanı bulamayan madunların sessizlikleri ve mahremiyet ihlallerinin egemen düzen karşısında nasıl meydan okuyan bir anlayış haline geldiği ile ilgili ortaya koyduğu eleştirel mesajları irdelemektedir.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Özel/kamusal alan, mahremiyet, argo, madun, *Ağır Roman*.

*Recognizing the other is respecting the other,  
respecting the other is also the ability to understand  
their perception of privacy*  
Sıdıka Yılmaz<sup>3</sup>

In the aftermath of the 1980 military intervention, the political and economic realms of Turkey experienced liberalization through Turgut Özal's neo-liberal policies. The country went through crucial social changes as the new economic agenda of export-oriented growth and the free-market economy was adopted, and along with these developments, a significant amount of pluralism was also witnessed in terms of media. The introduction of Private TV channels and radio broadcasts and the improvements in communication channels resulted in an exceptional information flow. This new avenue of communication acted as a key stimulus for altering and enhancing civil society.<sup>4</sup> When we consider the social atmosphere of the time, it would not be wrong to define the 1980s Turkey as a period that marks a burst of narrative about private life. Nurdan Gürbilek aims to make sense of the dilemmas of Turkey after the 1980s, describes this period as a time that witnesses a proliferation in the narration of "private life", especially sexuality, which was to be spoken in relation to liberation and individualization. Rather than the corporate authority -that

wants to know insistently- it was the volunteer narrators -who responded with a great appetite to journalists who wanted to create new fields of news- that played an important role in this process as they found liberation and individualization possibility in expressing the details of their private lives. For Gürbilek, as a result, one of the most important words that the 1980s brought to Turkish was “private life”. With all the contradictions the term contained, it had to be named and defined as a separate entity. Only then public opinion can be formed about this new word. For her, it was what the 1980s did to Turkey.<sup>5</sup>

In this context, Metin Kaçan’s 1990s *Ağır Roman* novel stands out as a peculiar text that is written about 1980s Turkey and as a very good example of the literature on the Larrikin or underground literature. It is a text that dares to talk about the private space and the privacy of “the other”. What make this text unique for its time is the slang language it uses and its brave narrative. Localized language and obscene phrases are delightfully fed into lines at every opportunity, diligently working on being dirty and vulgar, and maybe from time to time, even immoral. Not only the novel, but also its cinematic adaptation *Cholera Street*<sup>6</sup> proves to be mirroring the changing atmosphere in Turkey and not altering issues regarding the silenced lives of the subaltern living in the isolated neighborhoods of Istanbul.

After this proliferation of words and narration about private life -burst of words- that has happened with the provocation of the media, a similar alteration has happened also in the realm of Turkish Cinema. According to Altan, the discourse of sexual content in Turkish cinema by a tone of eroticism in the 1990s began to form a new language, which is studied by scholars in great measure. In the transformation phase of Turkish Cinema, started in 1985 to this day, initially the female sexuality tried to take its place. By means of the social changes it has provided, only until the 2000s, it has enabled sexualities, which are described as “contrary or other” to be represented in films.”<sup>7</sup> As an appropriate example of this new language of Turkish Cinema Metin Kaçan’s *Ağır Roman* novel, which has been adapted to Cinema in 1997 by director Mustafa Altıoklar stands out. Casting Okan Bayülgen as Gili Gili Salih (the youngster who becomes the rowdy of Cholera) and Müjde Ar as Tina (the mature prostitute moved to the ghetto) and Mustafa Uğurlu as Reis (the gangster intimidating the neighborhood) the film is regarded as one of the most cult movies of Turkish film history.<sup>8</sup> The presence of a variety of marginalized characters can be read as a general reaction to the mild powdery pink atmosphere of *Yeşilçam* melodramas in its entirety.

Having basically glimpsed at the ecosystem of the time and the related political, economic and cultural circumstances that form the setting for the novel and its cinematic adaptation, one can say that the aim of this article is to unravel further what *Ağır Roman* novel and *Cholera Street* film is commenting on the politics of the subaltern which it eagerly hosts. Inspired by the theoretical literature on subaltern studies and trying to make sense of the private sphere of the “other”, the purpose of this article is to examine how the concept of “privacy” - as discussed in critical theory- in Metin Kaçan’s book is reproduced on the axis of the visual language used by Altıoklar’s film and its focus on private/public spaces of the setting. In relation to the sense of privacy that is often violated through the slang language in Kaçan novel, this article explores how the dialectic of private/public finds its reflection in its film adaptation. According to Sıdıka Yılmaz, privacy is an area of un-decidability. Where privacy begins and ends is not clear and always uncertain.<sup>9</sup> *Ağır Roman* novel is a powerful example of this uncertain nature. The ambiguous spaces, borders of these two areas are always in motion, constantly in dispute. This border shifting status of the concept can be traced in the visual touché of the film, which this article traces. In this sense, this article analyses the differences in portrayals of the dialectic of private/public in both Kaçan’s novel, constructed by the use of slang words, and Altıoklar’s film, through the visual grammar and spatial organization of the film.

### **How to Speak Cholerian? How to Hear the Private?**

As for the topic, set up in Cholera Street (*Kolera Sokağı* in Turkish) in the poor quarter, *Tarlabaşı* district and *Ağır Roman* novel tell the story of outcast inhabitants from different ethnic, cultural and religious backgrounds. The title of this novel also glimpses the reader about the characters as it plays cleverly with the polysemy of the Turkish word *Roman*, which means both “Gypsy-Roman” and “novel”. Also, together with the adjective “*ağır*”, (which means “heavy” or “slow” in Turkish), *Roman* is the designation for a special kind of street music, played by some of the novel’s characters.<sup>10</sup> The story is literally and symbolically “heavy” but at the same time frequently interrupted with a diegetic Roman music played by the gypsies, which allows the characters dance even though the conditions are oppressive, unfortunate and burdensome. *Ağır Roman* narrates the tragic story of a young car mechanic, the protagonist Salih, along with all the sub-stories of the side-characters. He is in the middle of an unlikely love story with the prostitute Tina, at the same time tries to protect the people of the neighborhood from the bullies. Finally,

he fails and commits suicide. This failure is not only a personal letdown but can also be read as a parallel catastrophe of the quarter itself.

Not only the word choices of the author are ingenious and is heavily imbued with Turkish slang, but also the characters included in the novel are, most of the time, from the marginalized; drug addicts, prostitutes, pick-pockets, jugglers, artisans, psychopaths and as the writes states in local jargon; “*Gafticiler*” (thieves), “*kevaşeler*” (skanks), “*pezolar*” (pimps) etc. Apart from the main characters, a homeless poet, a cross-dresser, a man who has a disfigured face full of burn marks, a mentally ill man, an insane hysteric wife, a self-cutting figure and characters who are somehow involved in events that can be considered taboo in most of the societies such as; same-sex relation, love affairs, bestiality etc. The choice of the slang, the creation of the marginalized characters and events gives Kaçan’s writings, in the words of Yıldız Ecevit, “a non-conformist, frequently vulgar, but overall extremely vivid and creative tone.”<sup>11</sup> All these visually rich depictions and characters are represented in the book very ingeniously allowing Altıoklar a rich arena for a cinematic representation. Through introducing such characters and exaggerated events, the novel narrates a curious way of existing as if telling a fantastic tale and positions the “other” and the subordinate in a mystical space. In the filmic adaptation Altıoklar visually uses fog that lands on the streets of Cholera to create this dream-like, but at the same time uncanny and vague, atmosphere (see Figure 3). Metin Kaçan in *Ağır Roman* uses slang language especially associated with low culture, which successfully sets up this vague mood and the feeling of otherness, as most of the readers are not familiar with the phrases and words of this unique parlance. A website that recommends 20 of the best books set in Istanbul warns the reader in these words: “Cholera Street was written in a language that is very local and full of slang, which makes the book difficult to read for the ordinary reader.”<sup>12</sup> Recalling such an ordinary reader, in an interview, Fuat Uğur asks a related question to the author: “Slang is a tool used when searching for answers to the question; is s/he from us or not? Am I wrong?” Kaçan answers as follows:

Every structure, formation, city, and street has its own slang. In order to preserve its integrity, it distinguishes itself from others by its language. In places where you do not know the language, you will be mistaken and will trip very easily. It’s because you are not vested with the life of that place.<sup>13</sup>

As if acknowledging this gap between the “ordinary” reader and characters of the novel, the film includes a narrator -the homeless poet- who describes the neighborhood and characters (with a voice-over sound) as if

guiding the spectator in the domain of the other in order not to “mistaken and trip easily”. The poet by mildly “translating” the parlance invites the spectator to the private lives of the inhabitants of Cholera Street. In order to exemplify the alienating effect the language creates I am quoting some of the phrases and words from the novel and the film<sup>14</sup> acknowledging that most of the phrases cannot be translated directly, but can only be adapted.

Manita (darling), gırlamak (hoax, dupe), gavat (pimp), gayme (money), hacamat etmek (injure with a cutting tool), lomboak (one that has a strange face and puffy, protruding eyes), şopar (naughty- Gypsy child), malbuşçu (Marlboro seller), zorba (bully), gaffici (conman- thief), covinolar (stylish, showy, fancy one), cıvır (woman), kevaş (prostitute), labunya- labuş (feminine attitude, passive male gay), şopdik (small child, baby), tatabacı, (chatty, talkative), kanka (blood brother, close friend), saloz (stupid), zamalifka (penis), papikçi (addicted - pill user), dalgametre (penis), tırsmak (to hesitate, to be afraid of), voli vurmak (to gain profits unfairly), krişı kırmak (shift away, to leave secretly and quickly from where you are), kalplerin rolantisini ayarlamak (make an adjustment of the heart), sotalanmak (stay in a hidden place, hide), zulalamak (to hide something), zıkkımlanmak (to drink alcohol), musluk (dildo), mazın kopartmak (find money), muhallebici muhabbeti (to flirt), manyelcilik yapmak (doing things that make a false impression about the cards in hand in a card game or gamble), acur güzeli (ugly man), açılmadan iade (dying virgin), eftamintokofti (in pretence, false) etc.<sup>15, 16</sup>

This slang used not only is foreign and alien to the reader but also explicit, vulgar and harsh which also represents the disruption of the avoided atmosphere of the dominant ideology. By being explicit, the language demolishes the clear-cut boundaries of private and public. Once understood, the language inhales the reader to the private lives of the characters, without giving any chance to resist entering in. Only by getting used to the slang words, the reader cannot preserve its integrity and stay in the safe zone that the public domain offers. But when the parlance is not mastered then the novel excludes the reader and shuts up. The gap created between the text and the reader is also working to carry the story to a more distant domain, -dream-like place of the “other- as the realm of the foreign is visually represented in the *mise-en-scene* of Altıoklar’s film as unknown, a foggy and ambiguous place. Kaçan in an interview says:

Slang is the language of the street that should be hidden. It also changes constantly as it needs to be kept secret. It adapts itself to the flow of life; it develops in its speed. I live in the streets, every person on the street leaves a new drop in the pool of that language.”<sup>17</sup>

So if one masters the tongue, both the novel, and the film invite one to the sphere of the private. Yet, it is not only about how to speak or understand Choleric or enter the privacy of the characters but also about the question “can really the Choleric be heard and understood at all?”

In the dominant culture, the “other” constantly wished to be eliminated or pushed aside; the subaltern always stays in the shadow, under the fog and treated as mute, voiceless. According to Roland Barthes, “the petit-bourgeoisie is a man unable to imagine the Other. If he comes face to face with him, he blinds himself, ignores and denies him, or else transforms him into himself.”<sup>18</sup> In contrast with the blind petit-bourgeoisie, this text shows, represents and creates meanings about the other using its own words, terms and idioms. Not only the characters of *Ağır Roman* are using slang language, but also the narrator of the book is not using a proper, legitimate Turkish. The narrator’s “defected” and “improper” usage of the language takes the novel in a subversive and alternative point in the history of contemporary Turkish literature. Kaçan, as the narrator, via the usage of the language of “the other”, involves himself in the story rather than positioning the narrator as someone who voyeurs the members of this particular group. Different than the texts written about gypsies in Turkish literature such as Osman Cemal Kaygılı’s *Çingenerler*<sup>19</sup> there is not a colonialist attitude or a petit-bourgeoisie desire to tame the violent gypsies - generally the woman- and civilize the “nature-oriented” minority. In contrast to this distanced positioning, the author through narrating the story using “Choleric” creates a subject position that is originating from the “other” itself. For Yağmur Coşkun *Ağır Roman* differs from most of the attempts in representation of the peripheries in the discourse of Turkish literature -like Orhan Kemal’s *Evlerden Biri-* in one important aspect:

It goes one step beyond representing the periphery (or, in Turkish, *kenar mahalle*), it often lets it speak for itself, or at least speaks in its language.<sup>20</sup>

*Ağır Roman* and the writer’s language have created reactions among the critics of literature world. Veysel Şahin explains that some argue that the slang used in the novel has damaged the literary taste and blamed for lacking aesthetics qualities, and on the other hand some others argue that the author has created a new language and aesthetics and has achieved something unique, which has not been done in the Turkish literature up to that point.<sup>21</sup> Despite all the criticism the point where Kaçan’s novel succeed was to give the subaltern a voice that has been long not heard, denied, ignored, skipped, disregarded, neglected and bypassed. For Özgür Taburoğlu, the urban poor



of the metropolitans, who are not even visible, does not have their own expression tools, equipment or mediums. That's why they are exposed to the representation of the one that has a cultural capital; the filmmaker, the advertiser, the humorist.<sup>22</sup> An external gaze portrays them. Although representations are always questionable, Taburođlu's rightful criticism is not one hundred percent valid in the case of Kaçan as he is described as a writer from within the community he portrays.<sup>23</sup> What Kaçan is doing here can be read as not a sole representation of the inhabitants that dwell on the periphery of Istanbul but as having an attitude that might open up possible political openings. In contrast to other works, he lets them speak for themselves in their own language. Regarding Kaçan's narration Coşkun writes:

The language the narrator uses is a mixture of poetic imagery, the local vocabulary of the periphery, and only occasionally a descriptive, all-knowing tone. Hence, the narrator melts his voice among the scenes he describes and surrounds the fictitious street of Cholera, leaving it very seldom, and only to trace a character or two when he does so. In a way, the narrator becomes Cholera Street itself.<sup>24</sup>

In the framework of subaltern studies<sup>25</sup> let's remember the well-known question of Gayatri Spivak "can the oppressed talk?"<sup>26</sup> The subaltern- which Antonio Gramsci defines as non-voiced, unrepresentative, non-expressive in its operating mechanisms in a society- considering that their voice is lost, Spivak's asks a very thorough question: can s/he really "talk"? Hüseyin Köse points out that the reason for the silence and muteness of the subaltern is not because of them being tongue-tied, and discusses this lack of voice in relation to their inability to represent themselves. He conceptualizes "the other" as subordinate, excluded, under pressure, suppressed and with impossibility in regards to political representation.<sup>27</sup> The inhabitants of *Cholera Street* are not "quiet" or "silent" as Necmi Erdoğan<sup>28</sup> describes, on the contrary, they are noisy and turbulent. For instance the character Gaftici Fethi, who describes himself as the Sexology Professor of Cholera Street from Open Air University, constantly wanders with a megaphone and shouts out loud "delicate" issues such as giving tips on lovers who wants to get married<sup>29</sup> or markets his pictorial sex encyclopedia shouting "if you do not want your son to be a fag, you must read this precious work". Even if the voices of the inhabitants of the street are exceedingly high, their voice is not heard in front of the dominant. By the slang -who is in, who is out- is defined and the community is formed. Their slang is not understood by the dominant, thus the inhabitants of *Cholera Street* are metaphorically and ironically forcefully sentenced to silence.

## Windows As Visually And Mentally Transparent Borders

The idea that life has a public and a private aspect has a central place in Western political thought at least since the seventeenth century. Especially with the book published by Jürgen Habermas in 1962 *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*<sup>30</sup> -in which the German philosopher explores the status of public opinion and its power in Western Europe representative democracy- the distinction between public sphere (German *Öffentlichkeit*) and private area, has been discussed by many circles and new public realm definitions and models have emerged. The establishing idea of the division of space corresponds essentially to two separate distinctions: the state's domain and the domain of home and family. Private life is shaped more by the sense of privacy and by being outside the state device, instead the public sphere is a kind of commonplace for everyone and is related to domination. Cumhur Aslan describes privacy as the name given to all elements that depend on individual-personal rights, and indicates an area where one can continue their vital activities and act exempt from the intervention of individuals, the state and others.<sup>31</sup> Modern life by distinguishing between public and private space, at the same time limits the relationship and communication that people will engage with one another. However, it can be said that in *Cholera Street* the lines are not drawn by such defined and clear boundaries and privacy is as if an area of undecidability. These lines are muddied by not only the intensive slang that dominates the conversations but also the spatial organization and the peculiar dynamics of the neighborhood that threatens the formal and stiff structure of the public. The privy, intimate and even confidential language entangled with the slang exceeds the space of the private and continuously spill over the street of Cholera. According to Arendt, in the modern world, these two fields are constantly intermingled in waves, in the flow of the life cycle itself.<sup>32</sup> In *Cholera Street*, just like Arendt's conceptualization, the setting particularly constructed as the domain of the "other" in front of the urban community and serves to confuse the borders of the private vs. public and distinguish itself from the rest of the world following by its own dynamics.

In the film inhabitants tend to use the public space as their own private spaces. Not only the vision and mind in *Cholera Street* is visualized blurred by the fog all the time, (See Figure 3) but also the borders of public and private are in ambiguity, two binary terms always pass into each other. People sit on the doorsteps, drink at the street, sleep and gossip, dance and celebrate, play and chat, even make love; especially in cars... How can one make sense of living together and avoiding clear fragmentation of the space and what

this ambiguity connotes in relation to the minority community represented in *Ağır Roman*? Oskay exemplifies this through the relation one has established with home decorations and goods at houses writing “when we look at the household stuff, we see that they have become public spaces that we offer ourselves to others.”<sup>33</sup> In Cholera the situation is the reverse. The *mise-en-scene* of Cholera street is comprised of armchairs put out in front of the barber salon in the style that is associated with a middle-class interior space, young people in a heated conversation settled in stairs, carpets laid on the streets, bed sheets hanging from balconies, baskets swinging down the street from the windows... The street, full of home decoration items, is the space that host intimate acts, conversations that is usually associated with the domestic space for the urbanite.

In order to depict this dialogue among private/public spaces in the film, the visual symbol of “window” can be discussed. The windows of *Cholera Street* are never shot and always transparent. They lack curtains, allowing light, sound and the whole atmosphere of the public come inside without any filter. In this sense, the transparency and borderlessness of the community are visually expressed by a *mise-en-scene* that invites the fog, wind, sound,

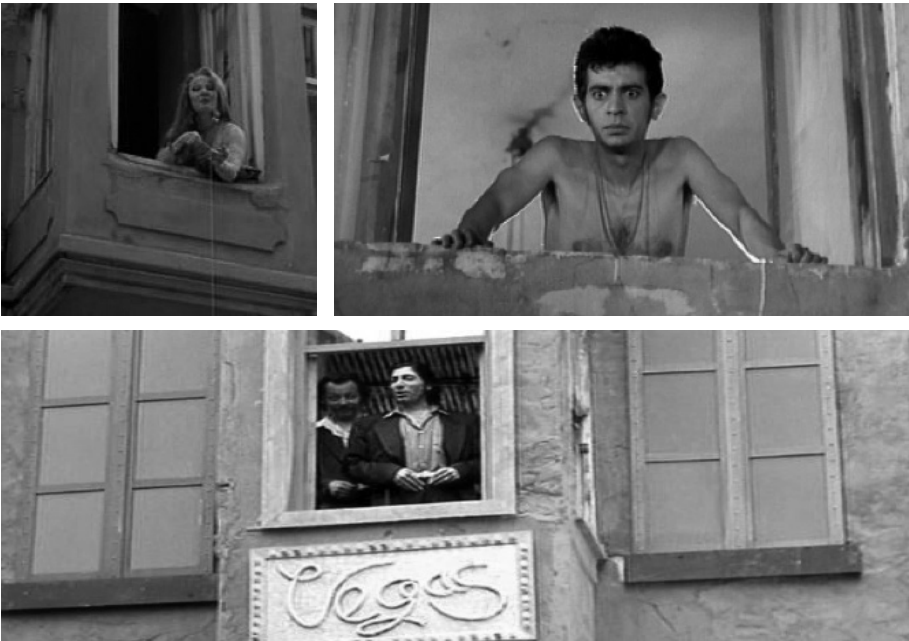


Figure 1. Windows of *Cholera Street* as powerful metaphors that questions the borders of privacy

and dust of the street to the indoors through the unclosed balcony doors, see-through net curtains, broken window glasses and thin walls that does not isolate the sound. *Cholera Street* and its non-filtered windows become an oxymoron in itself.

In this sense in order to interpret the symbol of the window, visiting Thomas Keenan's work entitled "Windows of Vulnerability" could be meaningful.<sup>34</sup> Keenan conceptualizes the private and public sphere by the metaphor of the window basing on the opposition of sight and light. According to Keenan windows are barriers between private and public. Light passes through the window and brings otherness to the private space, like the filmic sound and the dialogues coming from the street and filling in the bedroom and vice-versa. According to Keenan "public" represents otherness. However, in *Cholera Street*, the public is used as in the domestic sphere of the other. The integrity of privacy does not fully protect its function and boundaries in this area. The built-in concept pairs intertwine such as; interior/exterior, individuality/massiveness, private/public, privacy/anonymity, self/other, active/passive, exhibitionism/voyeurism. The subjective experience becomes ambiguous, unclear and open to multiple meanings. "Everything is heard through the transparent walls of the home spaces of the poor," writes Nazmiye Kete<sup>35</sup>. In *Cholera*, the relation is mutual. The widely open windows allow every hue, cry, street light and music to the inside and vice-versa every quarrel, sound of sexual intimacy pours out to the street.

In one scene, the spectator watches Ali Abi, the respected member of the community, returning home at night from a love affair. A neighborhood resident greets him, but he does not answer her back. He goes home and enters the house quietly not to wake up his household. Though tiptoeing to make no sound, the screams from the street reveal his late arrival to the house. While he is preparing to get into his bed he is accompanied by the reproachful outcry of the drunken woman; "Ali Abi! Say Hello! Ali Abi... Did we call your bird chicken? What have we done, Ali Abi? So, Ali Abi, was it good, Eleni?" In the scene, just as the lights of the street lamps easily enter the dark bedroom, the voice of the woman fills the privy space. This boundary sentiment as a cultural percept can be considered in relation to privacy. Just like in this sequence, in *Cholera*, the neighborhood itself is almost entirely depicted as an interior private space. While Istanbul, representative of the power and public space, the neighborhood as a whole -with all its complexities- depicted as a boundaryless private space of the other that one abstains to enter. Although commonly private space is associated with the domestic space and described

as the domain of the woman<sup>36</sup> here the street itself both with its inside/outside spaces and transparent borders symbolically positions itself against the public sphere and therefore hierarchically regarded secondarily.

The film starts with a sequence, which sets up the diegetic space and the general rules of the world that is going to be narrated. Making love although this act is associated with inner space and privacy, the sounds from the street is filling in the bedroom of a prostitution house and vice-a-versa; the sounds of the couple making love is seemingly to be heard by the crowd. The low camera is situated under the bed where one sees the woman's fetishized feet and legs. She is cleaning herself with a cup of water indicating that she has finished her deal. The spat they started ends up by the woman throwing the cup to the man. The cup misses its target, flies out of the window and the water she washed herself leaps out of the cup and spills down from the main character Gili Gili Salih's head. The characteristic Roman musicians accompany the confused hero and -private space public space without regard- the music fills the air. Semi-naked woman and man stand in the balcony quarreling with the now wet and angry hero (Figure 2). The sexual body and its peculiar privacy are commonly read through the dialectic of the law (religion-morality)/sin (the violation of it). Here, the transparent windows do not function in the paradigm of law / sin dialect. The windows belong to the house of prostitution and do not works to protect and guard the secrets of private life and the character's sexuality. In contrast, it invites the public in. Not only objects are exchanged between the public and private space, (like the cup thrown out of



Figure 2. Thanks to the characters shown in this way, from the first scene, the film suggests that the private will be shared with the public/audience without regarding this exhibitionist act as a privacy violation.

the balcony) but also conversations travel between borders. In one scene, Tina gazes at the dancing group down the street. One of the dancers screams up and calls the woman down to the fun. Tina shouts back as follows: "I am so tired, I have banged all night"<sup>37</sup> There is no hesitation shouting out loud such a relatively privy toned sentence. The borders both visually and mentally are transparent which presents a curious way of perceiving the world. Who are the stranger and other? Who is from the homely and familiar? What to left outside, what to include to the inside, domestic domain... These are all in ambiguity, which poses a critical stand in the understanding of borders and identities and the idea of belonging and community.

The borders between private and public life are not only questioned via the powerful visual of windows that let the sound, light, and fragments of public to trespass to the private sphere but also the slang word choices of the characters that invite the listener to an intimate zone.

The street, which is not as much a public sphere as a common square<sup>38</sup>, is like an extension of a balcony (See Figure 2). Just like the clotheslines stretching from one balcony to the other that mingles, and the laundry left get mixed, the sound, light, color, and privacy in *Cholera Street* blend in each other and tangle (See Figure 1). Kaçan's semi-naked characters at the balcony, just like the intoxicating words he used when he was describing them, stretches the mental limits of confidentiality and the ideas assigned to privacy and private order. All these examples and visual depictions have a challenging potential. Through the concept of "Imagined Communities" Benedict Anderson<sup>39</sup> argues that a nation is a socially constructed community that is imagined by the public who share a common language - background and perceive themselves as part of that group. In this sense, in the film the members of the Roman community, as a minority in Istanbul, is represented as if they are a big family living in the limited space assigned to them apart from the rest of the society. The minority groups are usually excluded from the main area of the home/country or pushed into isolated, restricted areas. In this context, with their slang and open windows, the inhabitants of *Cholera Street* lack definite mental borders of limitation and constraint. It is likewise with the visual depiction of curtain lacking wide-open windows. This kind of a representation when considered via the understanding of Benedict Anderson's "imagined community" can be read as having a critical potential against the uncontested ideas assigned to the domains of public/private. Anderson claims that on the basis of the community, one has defined as a nation, there lies something imaginary. Based on the assumption that people who share a common language, past, religion,

and culture have the same opinion.<sup>40</sup> Thus, in imagined communities, people are convinced to live and act together. For Gill Valentine our understanding of space, the boundaries of space and idea of who the place belongs depends on the same imaginary ideals.<sup>41</sup> In this context, when one thinks about the symbolic ownership assigned to public/private domains one should refer to the feminist space policy and its critics on gendered spatial organizations. Mary Wollstonecraft<sup>42</sup>, one of the well-known names in the liberal feminists of the 18th century, in her work entitled “A Vindication of Rights of Women” (one of the earliest works of feminist philosophy) argues that important work is being done on the public domain where the mind is valid, on the other hand woman is being associated with secondary desires and limited to private realm. This both hurt women’s reputation and prevents them from developing critical skills. According to her, mind is the same in every human being. In a more contemporary discussion, Aksu Bora<sup>43</sup> argues that this concept pair (public-private) is one of the ideological structures on which all this thought history is based on. If there are two separate areas, these two areas use two sets of rules. Hence, two forms of power and two separate power centres must be assumed. The private domain is governed by emotions, accepted inequality and informal relations yet, the public domain is the domain of justice, rationality, responsibility, accountability, equality and formal relations. In parallel Duygu Çayırçiođlu<sup>44</sup> also writes in most societies, the in-home and familial domains are considered in the world of women, the public and political worlds belong to the men. The gender of the private area is always feminine. In the houses kitchens are assigned to women; the living room where the television was watched, the newspaper was read and the political debate was held was established as a public space for men. In the same room, women talk about emotional relations among themselves while men can talk about sports, business, life, and politics. Therefore, as Bora<sup>45</sup> discusses; women are a-parted and left behind from social power and property. This secondaryization of the woman is supported by the idea that they are active in private domain and legitimized by their re-production deeds. Because of gender-based division of labour and the exclusionary structure of public space, they made it easier for them to get trapped in private space of the house. When thought in this framework, one cannot talk about such a fragmentation in the spaces of the protagonists of *Cholera Street*. In this line of thought, Serazer Pekerman, in her book *Film Dilinde Mahrem* examines films centered on women who are trapped in a corner on the public arena, who do not have a peaceful house of their own; or who do not know how to get out of a male-dominated houses. According to Pekerman, in these films, one follows women who are brave

enough to break their comforts for the sake of their independence, and instead of staying in the safe zone assigned to them they get out of the house and fall on the roads.<sup>46</sup> The ideal place for the woman in the mainstream media is the house, the domestic space that is clearly and cleanly separated from the public and the domain of the male. Yet in *Cholera Street* one does not come across to peaceful houses and families that will be happy forever, and woman trapped in kitchens, and windows that are tightly shut with thick curtains.<sup>47</sup> Woman of *Cholera Street* is not trapped behind the “safe” mainstream spaces of the private space, in contrast -together or alone- they dance-drink at night on the streets and hangout from the balcony with their nightgowns and use the “street slang” of man.

In this sense, the film could be regarded as presenting a possible political opening as it offers ways of thinking beyond these mentioned divisions supposedly inscribed in cultural forms and ideas forcefully attached to private/public spaces. In the film, the violation of private space seems to turn out to be a challenging act against the dominant order and established ideas regarding gendered spatial organization and the life of minority groups at the periphery. *Cholera Street* calls for an alternative way of seeing the constructed nature of space divisions by narrating its tale with slang and visualizing borders as confusing, imagined, foggy and vague which presents different ways of being at inside/outside at public/private space. Therefore the film puts in question the internalized bonds associated to those spaces and regards them as “imaginary” and vague.

### **Beyond Borders of Public/Private: *Cholera Street* as the Space of the Carnival**

Like the peculiar local language used by the characters that could be regarded as distancing the reader and spectator from the diegetic world of the story and likewise the ambiguous borders set up between the public and private domains, one can say that the film presents a world that oscillates between reality and dream. Slang as a particular type of language, tries to evade the traditional and moral laws of the dominant which become a way of representation that resists the language of the symbolic world. Slang is to escape social taboos, as mainstream language tends to shy away from evoking certain realities. So for the mainstream, this domain is foreign, alien and maybe can be regarded as fantastic and surreal. Not only the exaggerated visuals or figures that could be regarded as fantastic recalls the domain of the surreal, but also the representation of the world of the Roman’s having foreign rituals, traditions





Figure 3. Altioklar visually uses fog that lands on the streets of Cholera, to create this dream-like but at the same time uncanny and vague atmosphere.

and a different kind of language is making the film dream-like. *Cholera Street* is visualized with an ever-present fog. Also, the presence of many addicted or alcoholic characters that is influenced by the drugs and the presence of their way of perceiving the world via point of view shots make the world subjective like dreams. In the film, there are many weird and unique characters and the way they are visualized creates a kind of carnival-like space that distances the film from images of *Tarlabaşı* one used to see at Istanbul.

In this context, it could be meaningful to borrow the concepts of “carnival” and “carnavalesque” that is defined by Bakhtin in his essay “Rabelais and His World: Carnival and Grotesque”<sup>48</sup>. For him, the structure of the Carnival - from the medieval period- has a potential to question the authority. Carnival time is a time of excess, where the popular creative energy is given full expression in the form of costumes, masks, songs, dances etc. During the carnival, the hierarchy is not only suspended but inverted: the village idiot becomes king, sinners become priestly. It is a space-time governed by what Bakhtin terms “the grotesque body” and the “laughter”. Bakhtin challenges the one-dimensional seriousness of the official culture of the order and praises the unofficial ambivalence culture in these words: “the principle of laughter and the carnival spirit on which the grotesque is based destroys this limited seriousness and all pretense of an extratemporal meaning and unconditional value of necessity. It frees human consciousness, thought, and imagination for new potentialities”<sup>49</sup>. In this sense the carnival consciousness- a counter-ideology- has an emancipatory power that gains its power through the transgressed acts of the grotesque body and the liberating act of laughter. It is the time where all the repressed placed in the mind appear. In this sense, based on this conceptualization I find this period of time described by Bakhtin similar to the dreams in which the unconscious and the repressed is visible and to the mood and setting created by *Cholera Street*. For Bakhtin, the carnival time is not only a reversion of the dominant order but it is the culture

in itself where people unify under a new rule, which is based on lack of rules. In this sense, the rules, traditions, and rituals of Cholera community are as if always in a carnival. Their totality and being is carnivalized. The dominant ideology, the urban style living, and capital order that aims to limit or even eliminate the “other” is not valid for *Cholera*, because it is as if always it is in a celebration of all that might be considered as criminal, illegal, sleazy, ugly and immoral, etc. The origins of carnival for Bakhtin depended on having an opposing experience to that of the elite’s feasts during medieval ages. In this sense the origins of *Cholera* is seemingly opposing the petit-bourgeoisie way of living. Whatever is prohibited in the elite life of the ruling class is allowed, reversed, parodied and mocked at *Cholera Street* that carries the realm of the film far from the reality. In the film one watches scenes where the harsh reality and painful experience of the characters are accompanied with the excessive laughter and slang. According to Lachmann; Eshelman and Davis<sup>50</sup> Bakhtin describes a cultural mechanism that operates by the “conflict between two forces, the centrifugal and the centripetal. It is precisely the latter that tends towards the univocalization and closure of a system, towards the monological, towards monopolizing the hegemonic space of the single truth. This centripetal force permeates the entire system of language and forces it towards unification and standardization; it purges literary language of all traces of dialect and substandard linguistic elements and allows only one idiom to exist.” In this sense, one can say that the centripetal force (in this case the city as the hegemonic space) countered by a centrifugal one (the people of Cholera) that promotes ambivalence, ambiguity and transgression via the use of slang, laughter, grotesque body and organization of space: situated at the periphery of the city. Carnavalesque can be described as a radical tool that resists the assimilation strategies of the power structures and the ruling party and can be used as an adjective to define the people of Cholera and the film itself.

To sum up one can say that, in the gripping heart-stopping drama set in the carnivalesque underworld of 1980s Istanbul in *Ağır Roman* novel, Kaçan offers up critical commentary on a variety of themes such as the cultural corruption in Turkey, social injustice, disrupted suburban life, minorities, strict gender segregation, ethnic discrimination, social stratification and so on. Of all these themes, maybe none is better developed than that of the issue webbed around the silenced voice of the subaltern that speaks straightforwardly to and from the heart of Istanbul’s periphery. In this sense, this essay, inspired by subaltern studies, aimed to listen to the voices of Kaçan’s fictional characters of *Ağır Roman* novel that are trapped by their peculiar slang language which defines

them as having “no-voice” with the reason of their otherness. Similarly the cinematic adaptation of *Ağır Roman: Cholera Street* by Altıoklar, is also having a similar critical perspective likewise the book is presenting on the issue of the “other” that is singled out as different and narrated through the context of this isolated Cholera Street. In this sense, by presenting a partly formal discussion, this research tried to consider questions regarding the street that, on one hand has its own attractive peculiar aura, on the other hand, has an intoxicating effect just like its name suggests. On this basis the article asked questions such as a) how the filmic elements serve to create the “marginalized” world of the other/subaltern b) how one can read the dominant usage of slang and its critical potential to represent the life on the periphery c) how private/ public domains intertwine each other through visual metaphors and how blurring these divisions challenges ideas forcefully attached to these orders and act against the dominant order. After considering such questions I can say that *Cholera Street* should be regarded not only as a story of the Roman community but about a film of the subordinated who are left alone with their own difficulties of poverty, violence, injustice, sexual desires, hypocrisies, religious-ethnic and sexual discriminations. It is about the mundane lives of the misfits in an isolated street that is represented away from the public domain of the city and seems to be existing in their own privacy that is just like a carnival. Their loud voices are heard but not considered, partly understood and mostly disregarded. Although ignored subalterns are not powerless and has tactics and a huge repertoire of deflective practices against the law. By reading the novel, poetically writes Coşkun “we finally hear the periphery speaking, and we finally are shown the inner dynamics of the life in that distant world. Finally, we start to understand the violence, which is normally no more than an ‘epistemic murk’ to us ‘civilized’ audience.”<sup>51</sup> So both the novel and the film can be considered as a chance for the reader/spectator listen to the ones at the periphery who constantly invites the public to question its own way of considering privacy. *Cholera Street* calls for an alternative way of seeing the constructed nature of space divisions by narrating its tale with slang and visualizing borders as confusing, imagined, foggy and vague which presents different ways of being at inside/outside at public/private space (See Figure 3). Therefore *Cholera Street* puts in question the internalized bonds associated to those spaces and regards them as “imaginary” just like Benedict Anderson suggests.

## Notes

- 1 Metin Kaçan, *Ağır Roman* (İstanbul: Metis, 1990).
- 2 Mustafa Altıoklar, (director) *Ağır Roman - Cholera Street* (1997)
- 3 Sıdika Yılmaz, "Her İletişim Bir Mahremiyet İhlalidir ve her Mahremiyet İhlalinin bir Haber Değeri Vardır," in *Medya Mahrem: Medyada Mahremiyet Olgusu ve Transparan Bir Yaşamdan Parçalar*, ed. Hüseyin Köse (İstanbul: Ayrıntı, 2011), 132.
- 4 Begüm Burak, "Turkish Political Culture and Civil Society: An Unsettling Coupling?" *Alternatives Turkish Journal of International Relations* 10 (1) (2011): 60-64.
- 5 Nurdan Gürbilek, *Vitrinde Yaşamak-1980'lerin Kültürel İklimi* (İstanbul: Metis, 1993), 18-19.
- 6 In order to prevent any confusion, I am using the original title "*Ağır Roman*" to indicate Metin Kaçan's novel, and the films English title "*Cholera Street*" to refer to Altıoklar's film.
- 7 Zeynep Altan, "Yeni Medyada Eşcinsel Mahremiyet ve Toplumsal Okunuşlar: Türk Sineması Örneği," in *Medya Mahrem: Medyada Mahremiyet Olgusu ve Transparan Bir Yaşamdan Parçalar*, ed. Hüseyin Köse (İstanbul: Ayrıntı, 2011), 226.
- 8 According to Burçak Evren, Turkish cinema goes into one of the greatest crises of its history after television, when the foreign companies gain the rights to establish companies and distribute in Turkey, due to the amendments made in the Foreign Capital Law. Giant American companies not only bring their newest films to Turkey at the same time as Europe but also blocks all the ways of national cinema by getting distribution and demonstration rights. In this sense, *Ağır Roman* is also important in attracting more audiences to the movie theaters than in American films to initiate a socio-economic change. Burçak Evren "Türk Sinema Tarihine Genel Bir Bakış," in *Temel Verileri ile Türk Sineması 1996-2000* (İstanbul: Cine Türk Web Sitesi Yayını, 2006), 19. In this sense, *Ağır Roman* has an important place also in revealing the change in the structure of the audience.
- 9 Yılmaz, "Her İletişim," 139.
- 10 Access date: 30.09.2017, [https://wikivisually.com/wiki/Metin\\_Kaçan](https://wikivisually.com/wiki/Metin_Kaçan).
- 11 Yıldız Ecevit, *Türk Romanında Postmodernist Açılımlar*, (İstanbul: İletişim, 2004).
- 12 Access date: 01.10. 2017, <http://www.weloveist.com/20-best-books-set-istanbul>, 01.10.2017.
- 13 Fuat Uğur, "Metin Kaçan'ın Son Röportajı" *Aktüel*, 2013. Access date: 01.10. 2017 <http://www.aktuel.com.tr/kultur-sanat/2012/11/21/yasadigim-olaylarin-intikamini-yazarak-alıyorum>.
- 14 Sample dialogues quoted from the film that uses the peculiar terminology and phrases of *Kolera Street* in its original language: "O bin tılsımlı anın çarşafından ağır ağır geçirirken hayatını, Bilemezdi üç tekerlekli bisikletin karanlığa takla atacağını." "Ölümüne tav oldum kevaşeye", "Alem göt olmuş", "Ruhum calkanalıyor be", "Ulan delikanlının en yakın arkadaşı tekerlek olur mu?", "Leyn güzelleş be oğlum şimdilik ölümüne kadar ayaktasın", "Manitalar gece güzelleşir". "İmparatorlar sigaralarından babacasına çektikleri dumanı üflerken... ağır ablalar esrarı daha kallavi götürmek için zıvanalar hazırlamaktaydı." "Ulan yine koftiden Taksim atıyorsunuz ha!", "Ruh kemikten ayrıldığı vakit darbukacı Balık Ayhan

üzerine örtü koyduğu darbukayı çaldıkça Kolerada yaşayan softaların tüyleri diken diken oldu”, “Zaman ki sana hasta olmuş, incelikli haytasın.”

- 15 Hulki Aktunç, *Türkçenin Büyük Argo Sözlüğü (Tanıklarlarıyla)* (İstanbul: YKY Yayınları, 2015).
- 16 Filiz Bingölçe, *Kadın Argosu Sözlüğü* (İstanbul: Metis, 2001)
- 17 Fuat, *Metin*.
- 18 Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers, (New York: The Noonday Press, 1957), 152.
- 19 Osman Cemal Kaygılı, *Çingeneler* (İstanbul: Destek Yayınları, 2011).
- 20 Yağmur Coşkun, “A Wretched Heaviness, Metin Kaçan: The Case for Translation” *Bosporus Review of Books*. Access date: 25.10.2017, <https://bosporusreview.com/why-you-should-read-a-wretched-heaviness/>
- 21 Veysel Şahin, “Sosyolojik Açıdan Ağır Hayatın Ağır Roman’ı ve Metin Kaçan” *Mecmua: Uluslararası Sosyal Bilimler Dergisi*, 1(2), (2016), 15-18.
- 22 Özgür Taburoğlu, *Nazar: Başkası Nasıl Görür?* (Ankara: Doğu-Batı Yayınları, 2017) 264.
- 23 Michael Reinhard Hess regards Kaçan’s *Ağır Roman* and *Fındık Sekiz* novels as having lots of autobiographical details as the writer grew up in Dolapdere and even have a gang called *Beyaz Eldiven* in his youth. Michael Reinhard Hess “The Turkish Car Novel on a Trip: *Fındık Sekiz* by Metin Kaçan”, *Wiener Zeitschrift für die Kunde des Morgenlandes* (95) (2005), 88.
- 24 Coşkun, *Wretched Heaviness*.
- 25 Defined as having a Post-colonial, anti-imperialist, post-structuralist and critical tendency Subaltern Studies represented by historians such as Dipesh Chakrabarty, Gayatri Spivak, Samit Sarkar and Gyan Prakash, emerged in India between 1982-86 aiming to write the history of the silenced groups; the subalterns, is based on “the understanding of history from below.” Ludden, David “A Brief Study of Subalternity” *Reading Subaltern Studies: Critical History, Contested Meaning and the Globalization of South Asia* (2002). In Turkey, Subaltern Studies (*Maduniyet Çalışmaları* in Turkish) was initially recognized in Necmi Erdoğan’s research-which is later published as a book entitled *Yoksulluk Halleri: Türkiye’de Kent Yoksulluğunun Toplumsal Görünümleri* and conceptualized and translated to Turkish as “Poor Subalterns” (*Yoksul Madunlar* in Turkish).
- 26 Gayatri Spivak, *Madun Konuşabilir mi?* (İstanbul: Dipnot, 2016)
- 27 Hüseyin Köse, *Gözdeki Kıymık: Yeni Türkiye Sinemasında Madun ve Maduniyet İmgeleri* (İstanbul: Metis, 2016), 13-15.
- 28 Necmi Erdoğan, “Devleti ‘idare etmek’: Mâduniyet ve Düzenbazlık”, *Toplum ve Bilim: Osmanlı: Müktedir ve Madunlar* (83) (2000), 9-12.
- 29 The original tip of Gaftici Fethi is “Efendim, manita “seni seviyorum, evlenelim” ayakları yaparsa önce yüz mumluk ampule yarım metre mesafeden bakın sonra gözlerinizi ampulden ayırıp manitanın gözlerinin içine dakin. Eğer hâla cıvırın gözlerini görüyorsanız onunla hemen evlenin.”

- 30 Habermas, Jürgen, *Kamusalın Yapısal Dönüşümü* Çev. Tanıl Bora, Mithat Sancar (İstanbul: İletişim, 2000).
- 31 Cumhur Aslan, "Türkiye'de Özel Alanın İfşası ve Mağduriyet Halleri: 'Deniz Baykal' Örneği", in *Medya Mahrem: Medyada Mahremiyet Olgusu ve Transparan Bir Yaşamdan Parçalar*, ed. Hüseyin Köse (İstanbul: Ayrıntı, 2011), 225-246.
- 32 Hannah Arendt, *İnsanlık Durumu*, trans. B.S Şener, (İstanbul: İletişim Yayınevi, 1994), 13.
- 33 Oskay, as cited in Sıdıka Yılmaz, "Her İletişim Bir", 132.
- 34 Thomas Keenan, "Windows: Of Vulnerability" in *The Phantom Public Sphere*, ed. Bruce Robbins (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 1993), 135
- 35 Nazmiye Kete, "Yoksulluk, Mahremiyet ve Ölüm İlişisini Medya Üzerinden Okumak," in *Medya Mahrem: Medyada Mahremiyet Olgusu ve Transparan Bir Yaşamdan Parçalar*, ed. Hüseyin Köse (İstanbul: Ayrıntı, 2011), 72.
- 36 Duygu Çayırıcıoğlu "Sinemada Kamusal/Özel Alan Örneği: Demir Leydi," *Fe Dergi* 6, 1 (2014), 69.
- 37 The original lines are: "Çok yorgunum, tüm gece abinle tepistik!"
- 38 The idea of the public is also challenged via the interesting visual depiction of the Polish poet Adam Mickiewicz's handless bronze statue. Pickpocketing and stealing is a way of living at *Cholera*. To apprehend the act as regular and mundane is also a way of commenting on the categories of ownership. Just like the space that is not fragmented in the world of *Cholera*, the exchange of the objects that are passing from the public to private or vise-versa, is only a matter of action. The niches, overhangs of streets are like the drawers of the characters. For example, Salih instead of using his own home for a cache hides some money and knife under a statue in a common square. When he needs them, finds them back in this hidden place. In another scene one sees Salih trying to cut the hand of the bronze statue of poet Adam Mickiewicz that is situated in the garden of the museum. Salih melts the hand of the statue and uses it to renovate an old American car. The meanings are transforming like the ideas attached to objects in *Cholera Street*. Mickiewicz is also a minority that has lived in Turkey. Although he is valued and given importance by the state (his home is turned into a museum) the powerful image of the statue that is missing hands is proposing a critical comment. The cut hand of the poet might be read as representing his inability to write anymore as a minority.
- 39 Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism*. (London: Verso, 1991).
- 40 Anderson, *Imagined Communities*
- 41 As cited in Serazer Pekerman. *Film Dilinde Mahrem: Ulusötesi Sinemada Kadın ve Mekan Temsili*. İstanbul: Metis (2012) (21)
- 42 Mary, Wollstonecraft, *The Vindications: The Rights of Men and The Rights of Woman*. Ed. D.L. Macdonald and Kathleen Scherf. (Toronto: Broadview Literary Texts, 1997).

- 43 Aksu, Bora, "Kamusal Alan Sahiden 'Kamusal' mı?," in *Kamusal Alan*, ed. Meral Özbek (İstanbul: Hil Yayın, 2004), 529.
- 44 Çayırçioğlu, *Sinemada Kamusal/Özel Alan*, 69.
- 45 Bora, *Kamusal Alan*, 531.
- 46 Pekerman. *Film Dilinde Mahrem*, 21
- 47 Unlike heroines of Pekerman who reads the fictional woman character who leave their homes for independancy, Ceyda Kuloğlu's striking research that focuses on the case of displaced Kurdish woman in Turkey, focus on real actors who can not leave home and their neighborhood for several reasons, which cab be defined as "neighborhood imprisonment" which is worth mentioning in this context. Ceyda Kuloğlu, "Coping Strategies of the Kurdish Women Towards Deprivation Situations After the Conflict-Induced Internal Displacement in Turkey," *International Journal of Business and Social Research*, 3, no 5 (2013): 163.
- 48 Mikhail Bakhtin. *Rabelais and His World*. trans. Hélène Iswolsky. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984)
- 49 Bakhtin, Rabelais, 49.
- 50 Renate Lachmann; Raoul, Eshelman; Marc, Davis "Bakhtin and Carnival: Culture as Counter-Culture. Cultural Critique", no 11 University of Minnesota Press (1989): 116.
- 51 Coşkun, *Wretched Heaviness*.

