

## A Struggle to Change the World: Pelin Esmer's Documentary *The Play*

SERPIL KIREL

UNIVERSITY OF MARMARA

---

**ABSTRACT:** This article is about the important position that women's experiences occupy in feminist filmmaking, about women's images in the context of film production in Turkey, and about the function of various narrative styles in documentary films. Pelin Esmer's documentary *The Play* (*Oyun*, 2005) offers the opportunity to reconsider the importance of sharing intercultural works about women within the paradigm of a national and global audience (Kirel, 2009).

**Keywords:** film, feminism, documentary, stereotypes, counter-gaze.

**RESUMEN:** Este artículo aborda la posición decisiva de las experiencias de la mujer en la filmografía feminista, la imagen de la mujer en el contexto de la producción filmica de Turquía y la función de los diversos estilos presentes en el género documental. En esta línea, se argumenta que el documental *The Play* (*Oyun*, 2005), dirigido por Pelin Esmer, presenta la oportunidad de reconsiderar la importancia de compartir trabajos interculturales sobre mujeres dentro del paradigma de audiencias nacionales y globales.

**Palabras clave:** film, feminismo, documental, estereotipos, mirada subversiva

Pelin Esmer, the director of *The Play*, is a young Turkish female filmmaker whose wholehearted, direct, and elaborate documentary has both a subject and a narrative style worthy of analysis. It is an important production with real women who can take action with solidarity and who can speak out frankly when they have an opportunity to express themselves. *The Play* focuses on nine women living in the village of Arslanköy, near the city of Mersin in the Mediterranean region of Turkey. The social conditions of women in this region are more moderate than

those in Eastern Turkey, where social roles are more rigid for women than for men. *The Play* is a mature film that enables the audience to witness the experiences of these women by capturing a five-and-a-half week period during which they prepare an amateur theatrical production called *The Outcry of Women*. Beyond its cinematic qualities, the political discourse of the documentary is more striking in light of the world it portrays. By making the substantial process of solidarity and collective action visible, it serves to break down prejudices regarding Turkish women in rural areas, who, like their counterparts in some other parts of the world, are usually expected to be silent. Furthermore, along with its narrative style, theme, and relationship to its audience, *The Play* deserves to be discussed as an encouraging and inspiring example for Turkey. Its rich elements allow for various interpretations of the nature of documentary, reality, representation, and experience, as well as contributing to the visibility of women's experiences in media.

## 1. Being a Woman Director in Turkey

The insufficiency of women's presence in film production and the almost total absence of feminist film productions in Turkish automatically provide a basis for this study. *The Play* as a cultural product must be examined from a perspective that encompasses production practices that are different from those that are possible in countries with an established intellectual feminist tradition. Thus, the documentary will be explored in light of its own cultural milieu as well as the viewpoint of Western feminist theoreticians. In this context, identifying concepts of feminism as "transnational", "Western", and "local" becomes mandatory.

First, the male-dominated production dynamics of Turkish cinema must be summarized briefly if one is to understand the presence of women in documentary film production in this country.<sup>1</sup> In the framework of the feminist

---

1. Ruken Öztürk's analysis of female filmmakers in Turkish cinema between the years 1914 and 2002 is considerably useful. In that detailed analysis, 1990-2002 is the most "fertile" period for women directors in Turkey, with a ratio of 5.76%, even though only sixteen women directors produced 30 movies of the total of 521 movie productions. During the whole period of 1914-2002, of a total of 6035 movies produced in Turkey, only 96 were shot by 23 woman directors (Öztürk, 2004: 34). After the year 2002, when the research ends, even though the percentage is not certain, several names such as Selma Köksal, Berrin Dağcınar and Ela Alyamaç could be listed as women fiction film makers (Özgüç, 2008). In the case of Turkey, regardless of the content of their work, or whether they make feminist films or not, it is clear that the percentage of women directors has not increased much. According to the BSB (the Association of Documentary Filmmakers in Turkey), at present there are about 30 members who are female directors in the documentary branch (<[www.bsb.org.tr](http://www.bsb.org.tr)>). Additionally, there are some non-members of BSB in the documentary field. In Turkey the number of female filmmakers producing documentaries appears to be higher than women making fictional movies.

filmmaking process, the term “transnational feminism” (Suner, 2007) might be applied to international productions. When discussing production conditions in Turkey, Yeşim Ustaoglu said, “Turkish cinema has built a tight circle around itself, which does not easily allow outsiders to step in”. In the same interview she said, “I do not like to make a distinction such as man-woman or young-old. Everyone exists in the same system. The difference is in the feelings, in being you” (Colin, 2006: 131). We can accept her words as a critique of gender-based categorization of female filmmakers; however, one cannot deny the cultural context in which female filmmakers live and work. For instance, assuming it is possible to give a name to the gender orientation of Turkish cinema, Güchan (1992) calls it “purely masculine”. It is very clear that Turkish cinema, since its inception, has been a male-dominated industry, and its patriarchal characteristic has determined the content of its films. In this respect, the “world” of the movies has always been male-oriented, inevitably reflecting male views and preferences. Thus, until now, Turkish popular cinema has been dominated by a male point of view and the conservative gender representations emerging from that view (Kirel, 2005: 169). Given the historical background of Turkish cinema, the development of a feminist tradition in a culturally determined male-dominated industry has to be questioned.

The feminist movement that gained momentum in Turkey in the 1980s has been central in the intellectual background to women’s issues, both in public opinion and in the mass media. Associations such as the “Flying Broom”<sup>2</sup> (1996) and FILMMOR<sup>3</sup> (2003) have organized activities such as film screenings, workshops, traveling festivals, and information networks, all of which have contributed to that intellectual background. These organizations have been influential in the successful establishment of a “center” for women’s movie-making experience in Turkey. Historically, however, apart from the absence of female directors - a problem in itself - images related to women’s issues were also confused in the patriarchal imagination of Turkish popular cinema, particularly in the 1980s. Usually, films were made by male directors in a populist manner to respond to the new popular feminist wave by exploiting women’s bodies and pandering to the audience’s interests.

- 
2. “Flying Broom” was established in 1996 “with the aim of enhancing consciousness of gender equality, providing information and training to empower women, and contributing to the development of efficient policies for solving women’s problems that stem from inequality” (<[www.ucansuperge.org](http://www.ucansuperge.org)>).
  3. In 2003 FILMMOR (Filmmor Women’s Cooperative) was launched with a structure proposing “openness only for the participation of women” and listed the reasons for its existence as “to make cinema for women by women, to challenge, produce, dream, and act” (<[www.filmmor.org](http://www.filmmor.org)>).

## 2. Pelin Esmer and her Documentary Style in *The Play*

Before analyzing the documentary, some notes about director and producer Pelin Esmer's cinema career are in order. She was born in Istanbul in 1972. After studying sociology, she began her cinema career and worked as an assistant director in some co-productions.<sup>4</sup> After several collaborative experiences, Esmer made an experimental film called *The Snow* (*Kar*, 2002) and her first documentary, *The Collector* (*Koleksiyoncu*, 2002). Then she finished her first feature-length film called *10 to 11* (*11'e 10 Kala*, 2009). Esmer was the director, producer, and even the camera operator for *The Collector*. When she decided to make a documentary about her old uncle, who is a real collector, she preferred to record the complete documentary by herself so as not to disrupt the flow of real life (BÜKAK, 2005: 153-154). In spite of its very low production budget, *The Collector* gained attention when it was nominated for and won several national and international awards.<sup>5</sup> Following *The Collector*, Esmer made *The Play* in 2005. As a young Turkish female director, Esmer reached both local and global audiences and once again earned several national and international awards.<sup>6</sup> Her most recent film, *10 to 11* (*11'e 10 Kala*, 2009), has won several awards in some prestigious festivals.<sup>7</sup> She has changed her career path from documentaries to fictional films and has been trying to adapt the real life of her uncle, first filmed as a documentary, to a fictional feature.

The story of the production of *The Play* confirms Esmer's ability to capture details from real life. When she read what she called a "very insignificant" news article about a group of women who had gathered to perform a play in Arslanköy, Mersin, she wanted to meet the women immediately. This was the first step into making the documentary. In 2003, she traveled to Arslanköy to record the women during their preparations and rehearsals. She edited the documentary over the next two years. As with her first documentary, *The Collector*, she had a very small production group of three people, which helped to give *The*

- 
4. *Conversations Across Bosphorus* (documentary), *Cumhuriyet*, *Deli Yürek-Bumerang Cehennem* and *Gönlümdeki Köşk Olmasa* (fiction movies).
  5. *The Collector* won The Best Documentary award at the 3<sup>rd</sup> Rome Independent Film Festival (RIFF); at the 14<sup>th</sup> International Ankara Film Festival it was chosen 3<sup>rd</sup> in The Best Documentary category; and was also screened at 11 international festivals (Turkey, Greece, Denmark, Cuba, Germany, Italy and America) (<[www.lokomotifkamera.com](http://www.lokomotifkamera.com)>).
  6. Festivals where *The Play* has won awards: Tribeca International Film Festival (USA) "Best Documentary Director Award", Trieste International Film Festival (Italy) "Best Documentary Award", Creteil Women's Film Festival (France) "Best Documentary Award", Navarra Punto de Vista Film Festival (Spain) "Audiences' Prize", Nurnberg Turkey/Germany Film Festival (Germany) "Special Jury Award", and Vitoria New European Film Festival "Human Rights Award".
  7. *10 to 11* has won several awards already such as: Best Film in Golden Boll Film Festival (2009), Best Screenplay in Golden Boll Film Festival (2009), and Special Prize of the Jury in the Istanbul Film Festival (2009) (<<http://www.10to11.com/index.html>>).

*Play* a sincere narrative style. Some of her interviews provide insights into her production process. For instance, she was frequently asked, “Why did you choose a documentary style, instead of fiction?” Her answer: “Perhaps I shoot documentaries because I like real stories that might as well be fiction [...] Perhaps because of my interest in dramas and real life stories [...] In other words, it would be quite different to make nine actresses ‘act.’ It might have been a good movie, but the fact that it is real makes me more excited” (<[www.arslankoy.org](http://www.arslankoy.org)>). Obviously, her approach to filming is concerned with capturing reality. Her main purpose, however, is, as she says, to “produce a film” rather than “documenting” it. In Esmer’s own words, “What I wanted to do was not a documentary-like fiction, but a fiction-like documentary. When the line between the play and their real lives got blurred in time, it became a significant experience to watch the film take place between the lines of documentary and fiction” (<[www.kameraarkasi.org](http://www.kameraarkasi.org)>). In this respect, Esmer’s preference for making a documentary could be described as witnessing “actual” and “spontaneous” events in Arslanköy during rehearsals and performance of the play, titled *The Outcry of Women*.

As she herself observed, “the dramatic structure of reality” affected the narrative style of her documentary in many respects, particularly in her wish to portray the effects of the play production upon the women and the people around them in the village. Esmer’s own words summarize her point of view: “In my opinion, the most effective side is that these women could have been anywhere in the world; they even could have been men. I mean, I have never thought of them as village women of Mersin” (<[www.arslankoy.org](http://www.arslankoy.org)>). She goes on to underline and focus on the problem of illiteracy in rural areas, particularly of women, and their collective struggles to overcome its negative effects. As for the women’s purpose, Esmer sees the real motivation behind their production of the play as their desire to say, “We are here, too” (Yücel, 2005: 58).

Considering documentary filmmaking methods, *The Play* can be described as an “observational” documentary. According to Nichols (1991: 38), “The observational mode stresses the non-intervention of the filmmaker. Such films cede ‘control’ over the events that occur in front of the camera more than any other mode”. Furthermore, the observational filming style allows the spectators to hear and see the experiences of others as they occur (Nichols, 1991: 42).<sup>8</sup> In *The Play*, Esmer’s presence is rarely felt and only becomes noticeable to the

---

8. Bill Nichols (1991: 32-33) separates the dominant modes of documentary production into four categories: Expository, Observational, Interactive and Reflexive. Among these, the “observational” documentary model is made possible by the development of new mobile recording devices. Since the presence of the camera is unattractive, this method of working allows the director to shoot people more freely. This production method departs from the “interactive” documentary production mode in which the director is expected to participate directly in the filmed action.

audience when others address her during the shooting. Apart from these few instances, the director participates in the documentary only as an observer and listener and does not interpose herself, as judge or interpreter, to change the flow of events. As Esmer declared in other interviews, “I did not use a ‘candid camera’ sort of approach, and did not shoot any moment they did not want [...] I never asked them not to look at the camera. Thus, I am not in the film visibly, but of course I have a relationship with them throughout the shooting” (BÜKAK, 2005: 156). It is clear that Esmer carefully considers the effect of the camera during the shooting.

### 3. The Nine Women’s Presence in *The Play* and *The Outcry of Women*

As mentioned above, *The Play* focuses on nine women’s experiences during the rehearsals of the play *The Outcry of Women*. It begins with the primary school principal, Mr. Hüseyin’s announcement: “*The Outcry of Women* will be performed today at half past four in the afternoon, in the garden of the Arslanköy Primary School”. Mr. Hüseyin, holding a microphone, introduces the performers<sup>9</sup> both to the audience of the play in the village square, and to us, the audience of the documentary film. After the opening credits, the following words indicate that an unusual play is going to be performed in Arslanköy. We hear Ümmiye’s voice: “To me, life is a theatre. Everyone around me plays different roles. Also, I’ve performed all sorts of roles in my life. I worked as a maid; I played the maid to earn money for the family. I worked as a nanny. I played the nanny. To a certain extent, I become each of these characters”. Actually, Ümmiye and the others are very ordinary characters living in a village. They harvest the fields, cook, carry firewood, take care of their children, and so on. However, as we get to know them better and listen to their conversations, it becomes possible to share in their thoughts about theatre, about gender roles, and about how male-dominated dynamics have been established in the village. A critical analysis of the documentary reveals that they are aware of their contact with the whole country, or the whole world, through the camera (Yılmaz, 2006: 12). The director’s gaze travels around them to the village, the fields, the school, the hair-dressers, and the rehearsals.

Esmer, with her camera, represents a significant and extraordinary role model for the women. In this context, her experiences in the village are worth mentioning in a more detailed way. For instance, when the director arrived at

---

9. Since 2001, the group has performed plays such as the *Mangy Donkey*, *First Country*, *Then Veil*, *Woman’s Suffer*, *Stoned Almonds*, *Traditional Village Play* and *The Outcry of Women* (<[www.aksiyon.com.tr](http://www.aksiyon.com.tr)>).

the village to meet the women, she did not want to record anything for a few days. She only wanted to get to know them, their village and their lives, closely. She wanted to avoid conveying the impression that she was from the city and had come to observe them (<[www.arslankoy.org](http://www.arslankoy.org)>). Moreover, the first night of her stay, the women sewed a “şalvar” (local women’s pants) for her; then Esmer wore her şalvar during the shooting. She notes that the şalvar “became a symbol for making all of us equal” (<[www.arslankoy.org](http://www.arslankoy.org)>). Culturally, wearing pants is accepted as one of the most common characteristics of urban women’s dressing style, whereas the şalvar belongs completely to rural areas in Turkey. The essential point here is that a spirit of communication was established after that first mutual effort at cultural contact.

The name *The Play* is worth analyzing for its cultural meanings. First and quite simply, a theatrical drama is called a “play.” “Play” in Turkish also refers to the activities of childhood, as in English. This point raises the possibility that the “play” might be a tool for creating an alternative sphere for human beings beyond responsibilities, against all that is “serious”. This alternative sphere might sometimes run counter to the dominant power, the system, or things represented by power. According to Söalp (2002: 13), play is “the space-time of rendering changes into experience, seeing the possibility of experiencing changeability”. In this context, the title of the documentary not only refers to a theatrical play, but also to the act of playing. In that respect, the nine women in Arslanköy could be seen as women breaking free from the rigid rules and expectations of being a woman in the village. We can admit all their struggles and efforts as a cheerful rebellion and a celebration of solidarity. The women through the act of performing begin to understand their own realities more analytically. Considering the concept of “play” in these terms, Türkoğlu (2002: 34) underlines the relationship between the audience and the play: “The audience is not constantly in the spectators’ position. [...] If someone keeps on watching something, then that image has something that fits into the viewers’ own reality”. Hence, play becomes a very important resource for facing reality, both for spectators and, more importantly perhaps, for the players, as a self-reflexive process that links their reality and its representation. Through the process, ultimately, they manage successfully to create and stage a play inspired by their own life experiences, despite the fact that they were not initially aware of that intention. In other words, as they start to name, identify, understand, and criticize themselves, then they begin to realize the male-oriented/male dominated world they have been living in.

It is very clear that the intersecting layers of *The Play* and *The Outcry of Women* were planned and edited successfully. Certain life experiences of almost everyone in the group were represented in *The Outcry of Women*, although not all of them were. As Ümmiye points out, “The important thing is not the part that belongs to me, nor the part that belongs to you; the important thing is to be able



to tell, to recite the lived experiences of our village, and of other villages”. They aimed not to show everything, but to represent what they had been experiencing as women in a rural area. It is a “representation” and they are very much aware of it. Thus, *The Outcry of Women*, created and shaped by the women’s own experiences, focuses on some important issues, such as illiteracy, oppression, forced marriage, giving birth, motherhood, lack of communication in marriage, sexual problems, and violence. In the village, traditional social relations and expectations dominate, while generational conflict is one of the biggest problems for women in their social lives. Obviously, the purpose of the women was not simply to spend their spare time acting or having fun together. During the rehearsals, when they express their lifetime experiences, they confront both themselves and their families, and they start to speak up and express themselves without any hesitation. The first screening of the film was held in the village on March the 8<sup>th</sup>. The nine participants in the documentary attended the screening together with their families. After that screening, *The Play* and the “players” were invited to several national and international festivals, such as the Istanbul Film Festival and San Sebastian Film Festival (<[www.radikal.com.tr](http://www.radikal.com.tr)>). The positive changes in Arslanköy in terms of constructing more equal social relations, and enabling a better communication between men and women are not solely the beneficial effects of *The Play*. Even before the documentary was made, the experience of the theatre helped the women significantly to realize important aspects of their lives. It should be recognized, however, that the positive and transformative energy of the director throughout the filming of the documentary helped to effect positive changes in the village.

#### **4. Analyzing *The Play* as a Documentary in Terms of Feminist Filmmaking Practices**

*The Play* might be read in light of some of the essential arguments of feminist film criticism in reference to the nature of reality, representation, and the usage of film language. In “Theories and Strategies of the Feminist Documentary”, E. Ann Kaplan (1988: 80) disputes the accepted representations of reality and suggests using the cinematic apparatus as a new way of changing the audience’s expectations and assumptions about life. Furthermore, the documentary film constantly refers not only to “profilmic” events, but also to the “real world” in general (Kuhn, 1994: 129). In this respect, we can place *The Play* somewhere between reality and representation.

In the context of feminist filmmaking practices, not only the content of films has been discussed, but also cinematic preferences and priorities. For instance, Kuhn (1994: 129) warns us about the use of a voice-over in documentary film.



In *The Play*, nine women speak for themselves, making it possible for the audience to see their experiences without the “guidance” of an overriding voice. On the subject of voice-over, Mary Ann Doane (1986: 341) reminds us of Pascal Bonitzer’s critical questions: “Who is speaking?”; “Where?”; “In what time?”; and “For whom?”. These crucial questions apply also to the making of a feminist documentary about women’s experiences. In this sense, Welsch (1994: 166) follows Bakhtin’s interpretation about dialogue and states:

For women making, participating in, or viewing women’s documentaries, dialogue can occur between filmmakers and participants or viewers, among the film participants or between them and viewers, among viewers, and within a viewer. These multiple dialogic exchanges are possible because viewers are encouraged to respond to the films and because filmmaking practices are chosen with dialogue in mind. For instance, rather than relying on the seemingly omniscient voice-over of many traditional documentaries, feminist documentaries have often favored interviews and on-screen discussions.

Keeping in mind these theoretical approaches, the use of voices in *The Play* can be analyzed. From a technical point of view, Esmer uses voices to connect different scenes. However, *The Play* through the entire production process is concerned with the establishment of “dialogue”. In this sense, the whole performance process includes a “dialogic” triangle between the women, the director, and the audience. The effect of this comprehensive dialogue is one of the most important parts of the documentary. The experiences of all the women and the transference of experience are the crucial points of the documentary. Patricia Erens (1988: 556) points out that filmmakers should consider the message “The personal is political” while documenting the everyday lives of ordinary women. Furthermore, she declares that by allowing individual women to tell their life stories, filmmakers not only restore the voice of women, but in some cases they create positive role models, as well. Focusing on the functions of feminist documentary filmmaking within the historical and cultural context of the 1960s and 1970s in the United States in particular, Lesage (1987: 14) says, “Feminist documentary film-making is a cinematic genre congruent with a political movement, the contemporary women’s movement”. She treats the feminist documentary aesthetic as a part of the contemporary women’s movement in America. Moreover, Laura Mulvey summarizes two general principles that influenced feminist film culture:

- 1) changing the content of cinematic representation to present realistic images of women, record women talking about their real-life experiences, and mix consciousness-raising and propaganda.

2) concern with the language of representation and cinematic process led filmmakers to using aesthetic principles from the avant-garde tradition. (in de Lauretis, 1994: 141)

Unfortunately, feminist filmmaking that embodies these principles has still not become an established tradition in Turkey. In this sense, cinema has not been used as a strategic medium for studies of women as it should have been. Thus, Esmer's work has to be seen as an important step toward establishing a new tradition among the filmmakers.

It might be useful to recall the well-known comments of feminist theoreticians on the necessary characteristics of feminist films. As Claire Johnston (1999) points out, many women filmmakers seek ways of breaking down the traditional borders between documentary, experimental, and fictional genres by using new forms and narration techniques (see also Erens, 1988: 561). Thus, the aim of projecting women's experiences can be realized substantially through the making of documentary films. "Making visible the invisible" is a significant step in filling the vacancies and deficiencies of the representation of women in media. Kuhn (1994: 71) adds:

But the activity of making the invisible visible can also work at the level of film production itself, through an examination of the place of films within the contexts in which they are produced, by looking at the question of how films are put together in the ways they are, the kinds of social relations involved in that process, and the relationships between modes of production and the formation of textual structures and operations foregrounded by a feminist perspective.

Thus, the nature of the representation of women in feminist films is a functional guide for criticizing the film's text in a general manner. Furthermore, the production dynamics of films are a vital part of the analysis. In that context, in order to maintain a "counter cinema" Johnston (1999) suggests that advancing collective work would be a major step forward. Gaining and sharing skills would become a significant challenge to the male-dominated film industry. Such an expression of solidarity (sisterhood) among women might provide a self-sufficient alternative practice against the rigid structures of male-dominated cinema. This strategy might be formulated to include the notion of film both as a political device and as an entertainment instrument. According to Johnston (1999: 39-40), "Our 'collective' fantasies must be released": instead of voluntary or utopian perspectives, a collective cinema production must emerge. Therefore, to create a counter cinema, consciousness and a conceptual foreground have to be established. Hence, in its production style, structure, and content, *The Play*

provides a model for counteracting a significant deficiency in the Turkish film community.

From a technical perspective, the mobile digital camera has made a positive contribution to the creation of this counter-cultural sphere. As Süalp (2004: 664) points out, “While the anti-media organizations are considered as agents for expression of political discourse, the struggle for information and societal civil rights, a number of common exchanges might be observed in every kind of video experience”. Furthermore, Ilyasoğlu (2001: 27), in noting the importance of women’s narrations, suggests using the oral history method for collecting the history of women’s lives. According to her, the oral history method provides the opportunity to reach new areas of knowledge about women, such as social experience, history, and information about “how things have happened”. These attempts also make women “visible”. Advanced recording techniques and digital cameras are appropriate for collecting and sharing first-hand knowledge about women and for establishing a new counter public sphere through the revelation of women’s experiences.

In analyzing *The Play*, the “invisible” but “assumed” social conflict between urban and rural women has to be understood within the Turkish socio-cultural context. As Özbay (2002: 16) indicates, the place of village women as “other” is important in the analysis of the status of women, especially as they deal with the impossibility of having rights or of improving themselves to the level of urban women. Özbay (2002: 44) underlines the importance of experiencing the public sphere for “the other” women and she adds that whenever we understand “the other” women, it will become possible for them to find the solutions for their problems. The division of the public and the private spheres has always been used both as an explanation of the obedience of women and as an ideology that establishes their position (Davidoff, 2002: 190). Given the focus of this article, some features of the public sphere and women’s experiences might be reviewed very briefly. Although there are several theories on the nature of the public sphere, in this article only the women’s experiences in the public sphere are detailed. Köker (2004) points out that the democratic potential of togetherness and the states of conversation that are created in women’s public spheres are valuable for creating an alternative public sphere for women themselves (Özbek, 2004: 460). Furthermore, Köker (2004: 546) indicates that such a public sphere can arise only through conversations. On the other hand, Özbek (2004: 466-467) emphasizes that it is not only common use that makes a place public. A public sphere should be available for every member of society and it must be of value in resisting as much as possible the pressures of bureaucratic hierarchy, materialization, and “the tyranny of the private”. It is to be considered as a significant transformation when the women of Arslanköy transfer their experiences into a theatrical event,

choosing to express their problems through the play, which they performed in the village and later at universities and festivals.

The concept of “feminist counter-cinema” is considered to be an important component of feminist theory. Kuhn (1994:172) insists:

Feminist counter cinema is not a matter simply of a set of films which embody matters of expression and/or formal strategies that may challenge those of dominant cinema, or which construct a specifically ‘feminine’ cinematic language [...].

and

The logic of dominant cinematic institutions works in the final instance towards the production of dominant meanings. Dominant institutions of film production, distribution and exhibition cannot, for the most part, accommodate alternative or oppositional textual practices.

It is impossible not to agree with Kuhn’s argument. Her emphasis is important in establishing that the produced film is not to be taken merely as a film text. The paradigms of the circumstances in which a film is produced must also be taken into account as much as the period and circumstances (historical, social, emotional, and physical) when it is released. Therefore, in order to analyze the film as a text and its effects on the audience, the complete conditions of the screening place and time and the situation of the viewers must also be considered. Identification is another important aspect of the relationship between the documentary and its audience. Identifications are more directly related to “what is represented in the image” in the documentary, and for that reason, “a film about a woman’s life and her work as a mother may bring about forms of recognition in female spectators of themselves or their own everyday lives” (Kuhn, 1994: 130).

Beyond all the theoretical arguments, the responsibilities of female documentary filmmakers in structuring their filmic language have to be discussed more precisely. Reliability is essential for evoking identification and trust for what is presented as “real” in documentary films. Therefore, feminist filmmakers have to consider that the capacity of documentary films to represent reality is larger than that of fictional films in terms of the audience’s expectations and what they are willing to accept. Feminist documentaries have to focus on the examples that have the potential to create awareness and consciousness among audiences, not to dictate or persuade. Beyond production, it is important to have the documentary released. As the spectators of feminist films are more engaged with feminist issues and already sensitive towards women’s matters, it is essential to search for and find the methods to reach an audience outside that engaged

circle. The limited distribution and screening possibilities for documentaries (for example, thematic showings and festivals) have to be reconsidered in a multi-dimensional way. *The Play* is an important achievement in that it was screened in movie theaters in Turkey along with other popular films.<sup>10</sup> *The Play*, with its fluent narrative style and interesting real characters, managed to attract a large audience, and brought a welcome change in audiences' expectations about documentaries in Turkey. Moreover, in the context of feminist film criticism of documentaries, it provides another set of meanings for evaluation. By means of its alternative narrative style, content, and production mentality, we can think of *The Play* as an independent women's documentary film. Although Esmer does not define herself as a feminist filmmaker, clearly the content and filmic language in this documentary are entirely compatible with a feminist filmmaking strategy. Considering the lack of a well-established feminist filmmaking tradition in Turkey, she constitutes an important development.

## 5. Conclusion

*The Play* offers an inspiring message about rural women's solidarity. In a small Mediterranean village, nine women come together to confront the male-dominated, rigid social roles and cultural expectations in a very unusual way. They manage to complete a theatrical play called *The Outcry of Women* and perform it in their village. The nine women, and then the documentary made by Pelin Esmer, challenge stereotypical perceptions of rural women and establish a new and uncommon image: the brave and intelligent village woman as a positive image in life and in the media. Indeed, *The Play* is a documentary about the cheerful rebellion of nine rural women in Arslanköy, Mersin, through the possibilities of drama. At the beginning of the documentary, the director introduces us to the village in general, using a long zoom in. Then she reveals the purpose of the characters, to focus on each women acting in the play, one by one. Apart from the introduction in the first scene, the emphasis is not on the performance of the play itself, but on the preparations and rehearsals before the performance. The film starts on the play's opening day: we meet the women first and the details of the production process of the play are shown through flashbacks. The production process of the documentary was also an important experience for the director and for the nine "players" of Arslanköy. By the time

---

10. *The Play* had a box-office of 7,962 tickets (30<sup>th</sup> Nov. 2007) (Temel Verileriyle, 2008: 30), followed by the release of a DVD version of the documentary by a prestigious video company in Turkey.

the shooting was over, all involved realized that they were not much different from one another.

Moreover, *The Play* proves that it is possible to use the documentary to capture women's experiences and share them in a significant way. Regarding the content and production facilities of cinema in Turkey, *The Play*, with its women, the director, the producer, and the nine women in the film, has the potential to break down prejudices derived from the cultural differences between urban and rural women. In that context, cultural elitism and distinct differentiation of "urban" and "rural" women has been criticized and discarded by the documentary, through the confrontation between "local" and "global" experiences in the media. In *The Play*, the production definitely proceeds as a means for the transmission of experience among women. In the process, the phase of confrontation enables women to observe and celebrate their lives from a different perspective. Above all, change is inevitable after the women's theatrical experience. Women in Arslanköy came out of their own geographically and culturally restricted world and met the external world. Esmer's contribution to the process is an "experience transferring bridge" of feminist<sup>11</sup> cinema practice across which previously invisible women were able to become visible. In *The Play* all the experiences related to being a woman, including motherhood, gender, violence, lack of communication, identity problems, marriage, and female-male relations, are dramatized by nine women in a theatrical production, and Esmer as a female director, editor, and camera operator allows us to see them as we otherwise never would have seen them.

Thus, *The Play* helps to break down the stereotypes and traditional role models of rural women and shows that another world for them is possible. That kind of responsibility fits into feminist film practice. Above all, the documentary offers an amazing experience, to witness the change brought about by women coming together with other women. In the light of this change, the question is, what constructs conservative femininity and masculinity and leads to the acceptance of given role models? Media culture perpetuates the idea that life should remain as it is. *The Play* with its unique, positive tone proves that lives may change when women get together. With regard to the relationship between the representation and the artistic work, a strong link toward unity has emerged between the text and performance. Rather than using the professional acting techniques of the theatre performance, "real people" perform essentially their own roles, thereby gaining a mutual experience. By sharing their problems,

---

11. I am using the term "feminist" intentionally, although Pelin Esmer does not define herself as a feminist director.

women constitute a common consciousness through their performances and come to understand the experiences of one another.

Compared with the fictional film, the documentary has a unique power: the real lives of real people occupy documentaries, whereas representations of reality performed by professionals occupy fictional films. In spite of the struggles involved, the nine women chose to represent themselves in their performances. *The Play* is such a distinct example of an “alternative voice”, in the light of local conditions in the village and customary male-domination in the film industry. When one analyzes the production conditions of films, it is important to note the gender and nationality of the filmmaker. To succeed in the struggle to create a feminist counter cinema against the dominant Hollywood-oriented filmic culture, it is necessary to reach for international appeal (Kirel, 2006: 66-67). Feminist cinema has to adopt dynamic production and distribution attitudes to resist every kind of limitation imposed on women. When focusing on the global and international appeal of movies in general, the fact is that “local is political”, therefore, boundaries must be expanded to reach as many audiences around the world as possible. The problems of women are hardly ever local, even if they have seemed to be. They result from the restrictions imposed on women by patriarchal, ideological powers throughout the world; they appear in a thousand faces in the West and the East; and they are felt in the global experience of us all.

## Works Cited

- COLIN, G. D. (2006): *Cinemas of the Other-A Personal Journey with Film-Makers from The Middle East and Central Asia*, Bristol, Intellect Books.
- DAVIDOFF, L. (2002): «Bazı ‘Eski Koca Masalları’na Dair: Feminist Tarihte Kamusal ve Özel» in DAVIDOFF, L. (ed.) (2002): *Feminist Tarih Yazımında Sınıf ve Cinsiyet*, (Yayına Hazırlayan: Ayşe Durakbaşı), İstanbul, İletişim Yayınları. 189-264.
- DOANE, M. A. (1986): «The Voice in the Cinema: The Articulation of Body and Space» in ROSEN P. (ed.) (1986): *Narrative, Apparatus, Ideology: A Film Theory Reader*, New York, Columbia University Press. 335-348.
- ERENS, P. (1988): «Women’s Documentary Filmmaking: The Personal is Political» in ROSENTHAL A. (ed.) (1988): *New Challenges for Documentary*, Berkeley, University of California Press. 554-565.
- GÜÇHAN, G. (1992): *Toplumsal Değişme Ve Türk Sineması*, Ankara, Imge.
- ILYASOĞLU, A. (2001): «Kadınların Yaşam Tarihi Anlatılarına Kadın Çalışmaları Alanından Bir Bakış» in ILYASOĞLU, A.; N. AKGÖKÇE (eds.) (2001): *Yerli Bir Feminizme Doğru*, İstanbul, Sel Yayıncılık. 15-37.



- JOHNSTON, C.** (1999): «Women's Cinema as Counter Cinema» in **THORNHAM, S.** (ed.) (1999): *Feminist Film Theory: A Reader*, New York, New York University Press. 31-40.
- KAPLAN, E. A.** (1988): «Theories and Strategies of the Feminist Documentary» in **ROSENTHAL A.** (ed.) (1988): *New Challenges for Documentary*, Berkeley, University of California Press. 78-102.
- KIREL, S.** (2005): *Yeşilçam Öykü Sineması*, İstanbul, Babil Yayınları.
- (2006): «Küresel Seyircilik, Hollywood ve “Öteki” Sinemalar Bağlamında İran Filmlerinin Konumlandırılması», *İletişim (Galatasaray Üniversitesi İletişim Fakültesi Dergisi)*, 4: 51-69.
- (2009): «Pelin Esmer'in *Oyun* Belgeseli Çerçevesinde Kadın Deneyimlerinin Aktarılmasında Belgesel Filmin Yeri», *Ki-Kültür ve İletişim-Culture & Communication*, 12 (1): 127-159.
- KÖKER, E.** (2004): «Saklı Konuşmalar» in **ÖZBEK M.** (ed.) (2004): *Kamusal Alan*, İstanbul, Hil Yayınları. 539-550.
- «Köy Okulu'nda Tiyatro Yapan Ya da Sosyoloji Okuyup Film Çeken Cesur Kadınlara Dair» (2005): *BÜKAK*, 9: 154-162.
- KUHN, A.** (1994): *Women's Cinema-Feminism and Cinema*, London, Verso.
- DE LAURETIS, T.** (1994): «Rethinking Women's Cinema: Aesthetics and Feminist Theory» in **CARSON, D.; L. DITTMAR; J. R. WELSCH** (eds.) (1994): *Multiple Voices in Feminist Film Criticism*, London, University of Minnesota Press. 140-161.
- LESAGE, J.** (1987): «Political Aesthetics of the Feminist Documentary Film» in **BRUNSDON, C.** (ed.) (1987): *Films For Women*, London, BFI.
- NICHOLS, B.** (1991): *Representing Reality*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press.
- ÖZBAY, F.** (2002): «Evlerde El Kızları: Cariyeler, Evlatlıklar, Gelinler» in **DAVIDOFF, L.** (ed.) (2002): *Feminist Tarih Yazımında Sınıf ve Cinsiyet*, (Yayına Hazırlayan: Ayşe Durakbaşı), İstanbul, İletişim Yayınları. 13-47.
- ÖZBEK, M.** (2004): «Kamusal Alan-Özel Alan, Kültür ve Tecrübe» in **ÖZBEK, M.** (ed.) (2004): *Kamusal Alan*, İstanbul, Hil Yayınları. 443-499.
- ÖZGÜÇ, A.** (2008): *Turkish Film Guide (1917-2008)*, Ankara, The Ministry of Culture and Tourism Press.
- ÖZTÜRK, S. R.** (2004): *Sinemanın Dışıl Yüzü*, İstanbul, Om Yayınları.
- SUNER, A.** (2007): «Cinema without Frontiers: Transnational Women's Filmmaking in Iran and Turkey» in **MARCINIAK, K.; A. IMRE; A. O'HEALY** (eds.) (2007): *Transnational Feminism in Film and Media*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan. 53-70.
- SÜALP, T. A.** (2002): «Oyun, Oyunu, Oyuna, Oyunda, Oyundan» in *Oyun*, İstanbul, Mentalklinik. 9-13.

- (2004): «Kamusal Alan, Deneyim ve Kluge» in **ÖZBEK, M.** (ed.) (2004): *Kamusal Alan*, İstanbul, Hil Yayınları. 653-675.
- Temel Verileriyle Türk Sineması* (1996-2006), İstanbul Organizasyon, 2008.
- TÜRKOĞLU, N.** (2002): . «Suda Oynar Balıklar» in *Oyun*, İstanbul, Mentalklinik. 34-38.
- YILMAZ, D.** (2006): «Oyun: Torosların Bilge Kadınları», *Yeni Film*, 11: 11-13.
- YÜCEL, Ş.** (2005): «Pelin Esmer: Derin Bir Değişime Şahit Oldum», *Altyazı*, 42: 58-59.
- WELSCH, J. R.** (1994): «Bakhtin, Language, and Women's Documentary Filmmaking» in **CARSON, D.; L. DITTMAR; J. R. WELSCH** (eds.) (1994): *Multiple Voices in Feminist Film Criticism*, London, University of Minnesota Press. 162-175.