



35. Venice
International Film
Critics' Week

GHOSTS

Directed by **AZRA DENIZ OKYAY**





GHOSTS

WRITTEN & DIRECTED BY: Azra Deniz OKYAY

Drama / 90' / Colour / Turkey, France, Qatar / Turkish

PRODUCED BY: Dilek Aydın (Heimatlos Films)

COPRODUCED BY: Marie-Pierre Macia, Claire Gadéa (MPM Film)

CAST: Nalan Kuruçim, Dilayda Güneş, Beril Kayar, Emrah Özdemir

DOP: Barış Özbiçer

EDITING: Ayris Alptekin

ORIGINAL MUSIC: Ekin Fil

LOGLINE : During a day of nation-wide power surge, four characters from very different walks of life coincide through a web of drug trafficking in the ghettos of Istanbul.

SYNOPSIS

In Istanbul, on the verge of a country-wide power surge, four characters come across in a neighborhood undergoing the process of gentrification for the "New Turkey": a mother whose son is in prison, a young female dancer, a feminist artist, and a cunning middle man. Their stories intertwine during a drug deal, offering a roaring tale of the contemporary generation.





DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

I have started writing Ghosts 5 years ago about 4 characters in different parts of Istanbul. Within 4 years, my characters have changed as Turkey has changed. In 2019 with my producer Dilek Aydın, we decided that it was time to make this story into a film no matter what. I had to adapt myself to the constant changes happening in my country both in scriptwriting and during production, which I think helped to create the dynamism of this film, and became my own rebellion.

I wanted to make a film to talk about the main problems of my generation, about people getting poorer and being sent away from their neighbourhoods and about people who are struggling to express themselves freely. I wanted to tell a metaphoric story of a country sinking into darkness and I used a nationwide power surge to tell it. I've made this curvy, multi-functional, dynamic film which resembles a woman in my opinion.



DIRECTOR'S INTERVIEW

HOW WAS THE WRITING PROCESS FOR GHOSTS?

I started writing GHOSTS five years ago and it was originally about four characters living in different parts of Istanbul.

During these last five years, I had moments thinking that there couldn't be any more darkness in my country. I signed a petition for peace as a filmmaker. I was blacklisted by the government. Many filmmakers like me faced the risk of not being supported by their own state because of this. I realized I had developed ways to change my style and structure like a chameleon, and that I found ways to express myself on a more metaphorical ground.

From that point on many things changed, including my script. At the beginning, with some earlier drafts I received two awards at Crossroads Coproduction Forum at Thessaloniki Film Festival. The day I got these awards was the day Trump won the presidency in the United States. I said "Trump may have won, but so did I". From that small grain of hope, I was able to develop my script and my project.

HOW DID YOUR OWN VISION AND YOUR OWN EXPERIENCES INFLUENCE GHOSTS?

While things around me were changing at the speed of light, I wanted to archive the moment. Growing up, I was fortunate enough to travel regularly around Turkey with my architect and urban planner parents. This allowed me to encounter many different communities. In the mornings, I used to go to a French School, and in the afternoons I attended a public Turkish School, alongside the Turkish Romani community. This unusual educational background provided me with a unique insight into cultural diversity. This is a particular trademark of my multicultural birth city, Istanbul.

The film has partly been inspired by some of the girls I met in the ghettos of Istanbul, specifically in Sulukule. The character Didem is a young woman who doesn't have any chance without dance; yet is a woman who is afraid to make the same mistakes the other oriental dancers or girls from the ghettos made. As a young woman in a Muslim country and living under social oppression, I've understood this fear very well. I documented these similar individuals in my previous short film, SULUKULE MON AMOUR, which shows only some of the effects destructive gentrification can have on the lives of locals. For GHOSTS, I used the experience I gained while making my short documentary LITTLE BLACK FISHES, which intertwined three characters: an illegal Armenian woman living in Istanbul, a Turkish girl living illegally in Paris, and a French female photo reporter.

As such, GHOSTS drives from my own personal experiences. The film is about Istanbul's lost generation, beleaguered by the political, religious and economic uncertainties of the present society. Although they come from various, and sometimes wildly different subcultures, each character in the film is struggling for personal freedom and expression. They are all seeking to find and create their own rules and laws to survive in a modern and chaotic Turkey, unexpectedly coming together over certain actions and events, or not.

COULD YOU COMMENT ON THE POWER SURGE, WHICH IS AT THE HEART OF THE STORY?

The power surge is the main metaphor of my film and it represents the current and overall socio-political situation in Turkey. The film starts in the morning with the power-outage and gradually darkens. Yet, GHOSTS always shows characters full of light and hope, like these young people dancing or bringing light into a LGBT home concert. I believe that the young generation will always find a way in the gloom.

Sometimes, living in this country feels like we exist and do not exist at the same time. My characters are facing issues that are bigger than them, sometimes they feel invisible and they have to act imperceptibly. Hence I eventually called this film GHOSTS.

With this film I want to bring the audience into the darkness of modern Turkey, so we can try to find the light together.

YOUR FILM TACKLES CONTROVERSIAL ISSUES, YET A BIG PART OF THE FILM WAS SHOT IN THE STREET. HOW DID THE SHOOTING GO?

During the shooting, we had to face many issues but we also experienced a miracle. We decided to shoot in a dangerous area of Istanbul, Güleusu, which was formerly inhabited by Kurdish political groups. Many young people who grew up there were sent to prison for setting fires or throwing molotovs in the streets. Although they had prevented many production teams from entering their area in the past, we were able to work with the residents. The neighbourhood immediately accepted us because they knew we were talking about urban regeneration, and also because they felt close to our characters. Gökhan, a resident who spent his teenage years in prison, even worked in the production and was our bridge with the neighborhood. We were just two young women (me and my producer) who wanted to shoot our film, and the people who lived there were just eager to help us.

This happy relationship couldn't prevent a police-raid during the shooting, even though we had all the permits. In this particular scene, we wanted to recreate a lot of chaos in the main street of the neighbourhood. Extras were running around with torches, trash bins were set on fire, some other extras were breaking into shops. Of course, it had all been carefully planned. Thinking that the riots started again (which in a way shows that the scene was realistic), the local police force and even the head of the terror department came to the set with 6 armoured vehicles and many armed men. They were incredibly surprised that these two small women were behind all this havoc. They were immediately relieved and put their guns down.

YOUR FILM ALSO PORTRAYS SEVERAL WOMEN, ALL OF THEM REPRESENTING A DIFFERENT ASPECT OF CONTEMPORARY TURKEY. WHAT WAS THE REASON BEHIND THIS CHOICE?

Like Karin Karakasli, Armenian WOMAN writer said, «I'm trying to fill the blanks of censored and deleted stories of women". Along the process of writing, I encountered many different women in Istanbul who were coming from different walks of life and I wanted to bear witness to their struggles, conditions and aspirations. While developing these characters and their stories, I ended up composing this landscape of contemporary Turkey, thus naturally touching to different social and political dynamics. Overall, I was inspired by women around me, who no matter what try to bring light into the darkness. This is a film like a hand-woven carpet. Every character and story served as a pattern of its own and created this domino effect film, with which I want to promise the audience hope and light just like this new generation does.

AWARDS

2020 | Venice Film Festival
Lauréat: Grand Prize Critics' Week

2020 | Thessaloniki International Film Festival
Human Values
WIFT

2021 | Casablanca Independent Film Festival
Best Directing
Best Actress

2020 | Warsaw International Film Festival
Young FIPRESCI

2020 | Antalya Golden Orange Film Festival
Best Film - Best Director
Best Editing - Best Supporting Actress
Best Supporting Actor

2021 | Engelsiz Film festival
Audience Award National
Feature Film Competition

FESTIVALS

Venice Film Festival
2020

Sao Paulo International Film Festival
2020

Karlovy Vary International Film Festival
2020

Karlovy Vary International Film Festival
2021

Ghent Film Festival
2020

Munich Film Festival
2020

Stockholm International Film Festival
2020

Warsaw International Film Festival
2020

Seville European Film Festival
2020

Taipei Film Festival
2021

Shanghai International Film Festival
2021

Jerusalem Women's Film Festival
2022

PRESS REVIEWS

“An impressive feature debut. From its first frames, Ghosts upends expectations.”



“Turkish director Azra Deniz Okyay breaks out with an excellent debut film featuring a cross-cutting narrative, a deserving winner of the Grand Prize of the Venice Critics’ Week.”



“An aesthetically convincing feature debut which, while its overall atmosphere seems quite bleak and pessimist at times, still maintains some shimmer of hope for the future, an aspect which is possibly the movie’s biggest asset.”



“Creating her own cinematographic language, Ghosts in an unfiltered review of the « New Turkey.»”



“Shot with a fluid intimacy by cinematographer Baris Özbiçer, Oyay's film gathers momentum and an increasingly punk energy as it goes, as she shows the rich tapestry of a city that despite its surface problems also has a thriving underground alternative scene.”



“Ghosts” is a multi-layered work – expressive and terrifying, this debut is centered both on helplessness and on persistent hope, which is inherent to the inhabitants of Istanbul.”



‘Ghosts’ Director Azra Deniz Okyay on ‘Istanbul’s Lost Generation’ in Venice Prize-Winning Debut



CLICK HERE TO READ THE INTERVIEW

RELEASES

WORLD PREMIERE | **VENICE FILM FESTIVAL, VENICE CRITICS' WEEK** | **SEPTEMBER 2020**

UNITED KINGDOM, IRELAND, TURKEY, ITALY, DENMARK, NORWAY, SWEDEN, FINLAND, ICELAND | **MUBI - DIGITAL** | **APRIL 17, 2021**

SPAIN | **CONUNPACK - THEATRICAL** | **MAY 14, 2021**

EASTERN AND CENTRAL EUROPE | **HBO - DIGITAL & TV** | **SEPTEMBER 12, 2021**

GERMANY | **ANTIHELD FILMVERLEIH - THEATRICAL** | **OCTOBER 7, 2021**

SWITZERLAND | **SISTER DISTRIBUTION - THEATRICAL** | **OCTOBER 28, 2021**



PRODUCTION COMPANY

Heimatlos Films is founded by Dilek Aydin & Erkal Taskin in Istanbul and London in 2017 in order to create homeless films that tell universal stories. They produced shorts 5 different shorts in 2 years that won countless awards and still travel to festivals. Later the company started producing documentaries and the first documentary they finished MIMAROGLU: THE ROBINSON OF MANHATTAN ISLAND was recently selected to Visions du Reel's Burning Lights competition for 2020 edition. GHOSTS by Azra Deniz Okyay is the first feature the company takes on as the main producer. They continue to develop and produce shorts, documentaries and features.

BIOGRAPHIES



DIRECTOR'S BIO & FILMOGRAPHY

Born in Istanbul, Azra Deniz Okyay started photography at the age of 12, and became an assistant at 14 of the photographer Dora Gunel. After finishing high school in Lycee Francais Pierre Loti of Istanbul, she moved to Paris to study Cinema at Sorbonne-Nouvelle University where she had her Bachelor's and Master's. She worked in Michel Gondry's Partizan Production company. She returned to Turkey in 2010 and became the first female director at Depo, an advertising production company in Istanbul. She made various shorts and music videos. Her works on Video-Arts were selected in international exhibitions and galleries.

GHOSTS, 2020, feature film

SULUKULE MON AMOUR, 2016, Short-Documentary

LITTLE BLACK FISHES, 2013, Short fiction



PRODUCER'S BIO & FILMOGRAPHY

Born in Ankara, Dilek Aydın finished Film Studies at Boğaziçi University and had her Master's Degree in Film and Television at Istanbul Bilgi University. She attended Karlsruhe University of Arts during her Master's, and studied Media Art for a year. Returning to Turkey, she started working mainly in production, while developing and creating her own shorts. In 2017, she co-founded Istanbul-based Heimatlos Films, a production company that aims at producing homeless universal documentary and fiction films.

GHOSTS, 2020, feature fiction , dir. Azra Deniz Okyay

MIMAROGLU, 2020, feature documentary, dir. Serdar Kökçeoğlu (Turkey & USA co-production)
premiered at Visions du Reel 2020

ON HER OWN, 2020, feature documentary, dir. Dilek Gökçin (in post-production)

REACTION, 2020, short fiction, dir. Evre Ertaş

AS IF I NEVER EXISTED, 2020, short fiction, dir. Murat Emir Eren

A FINE LINE, 2019, short fiction, dir. Mirjam Orthen (Turkish-German co-production)

FOOD FOR A FUNERAL, 2019, feature fiction, dir. Reis Çelik (premiered at Tokyo International FF, main competition 2019)

AD INFINITUM, 2018, short fiction, dir. Murat Çetinkaya

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