

Film Reviews

Coffee Futures/Neyse Halim, Çiksin Falim

Directed by Zeynep Devrim Gürsel, 2009, 22 minutes, color. Distributed by Documentary Educational Resources, 101 Morse Street, Watertown, MA 02472, <http://www.der.org>

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Coffee fortune telling involves interpreting the shapes formed by the residue inside the little cup out of which coffee is drunk and on the saucer onto which it is flipped over. Albeit an old custom, it is widespread in contemporary Turkey, performed primarily, but not exclusively, among women of different ages, social classes, ethnic backgrounds, and lifestyles. It is practiced in homes, workplaces, cafes, outdoors, practically anywhere. In *Coffee Futures*, Zeynep Devrim Gürsel, an anthropologist teaching at the University of Michigan, casts herself as a fortune seeker and films her encounters with about two dozen amateur fortune tellers. Their stories are about her personal life and future, more specifically her love and marriage prospects. But the fortune tellers also prognosticate on the outcome of Turkey's long-term struggle to join the European Union. The terms and tropes the fortune tellers deploy in discussing these futures are similar, and their shifts from one to the other are so subtle that the viewer often wonders whether they are talking about Gürsel, Turkey, or both. Interspersed among these prognostications, there is footage of political speeches addressing relations between Turkey and Europe and of events that have marked their troubled course.

In 2007, 48 years after Turkey began its efforts to join the European Union (EU), Mesut Yilmaz (prime minister of the country during the 1990s) said the outcome of the process "is a question that can only be answered by fortune tellers." But for those who practice it, fortune telling is a pleasurable part of everyday socializing rather than a means of access to what lies ahead: "We don't believe the future is knowable there." It is "a pretext," a "conversation starter." It "helps both sides to get to know one another." "We tell people what they want to hear, and pretend the messages are in the

cup to make our hearts light." The answers fortune telling provides are always tenuous and elusive, because while the future may be imagined, and to some extent influenced (while in the process), it is ultimately unpredictable: "Don't believe in fortunes, but don't be without them either," advises one of the film's protagonists. If the coffee patterns on the cup and dish are icons, what they represent is the multiplicity and contingency of the possible interpretive takes on the fortune seeker's present condition and on the courses of action and the relationships by which it may be transformed.

Gürsel provides no explicit information on what her interlocutors do besides coffee fortune telling, what her relation is to them, what, if anything, she asks them about her own or Turkey's future, and how she went about filming and editing. The viewer must go by what she sees. Fortune tellers interpret each shape in the cup on the basis of its form, but also its relative position within the gestalt it constitutes together with the rest of the shapes. Like Geertzian models, these configurations and the narratives to which they give rise are both descriptive and explanatory. "Neyse halim, çiksin falim," say the fortune seekers as they flip their cup. The phrase which constitutes the film's Turkish title means, "Whatever my condition, may it appear in my fortune," and implies that one's sense of one's condition may not always be accurate. Like a fortune teller, the viewer must interpret the images and stories by drawing their connections in the context of the film. For example, the viewer must situate Obama's portrait, followed by a picture of him and Sarkozy and a fortune teller's warning about someone who "doesn't step in, but he watches" within the context each provides for the other. The viewer must then relate these linkages to the film's central theme, which is the parallel stories about Gürsel's and Turkey's fortune. However, the viewer also resembles a fortune seeker in that, ultimately, she must assess the relevance of the stories addressed to her on her own. As Gürsel is repeatedly told, fortune tellers say what they see; the conclusions are up to her. One conclusion the viewer is likely to draw is that in the context which fortune telling and life constitute for each other, deferring final conclusions about the outcome of relationships, as well as the identities of those between whom such relationships transpire, is a sign of wisdom.

Gürsel as a person and Turkey as a personified entity are seen as analogous to each other. Each is endowed with a self that is relational, divided, perpetually caught in the ambiguities of desires mixed with reticence or fear and usually misunderstood. And both hold fortunes that are ultimately unpredictable: “You reach out for this and you turn from it as if you both desire it and reject it,” “You feel misunderstood,” “When you get your wish, it will no longer be what you wished for.” The relationships by which such selves are produced and transformed are imaged after heterosexual romance. The “very, very good catch” and the “very well connected man” appearing in two cups may pertain to either Gürsel’s prospective husband or to Europe as Turkey’s prospective “husband.” Sometimes the marriage game is construed as one in which women have to measure up to men’s standards: “Even if he approves, he never says he approves a hundred percent. You never know where you stand.” Usually, however, it is portrayed as an exercise in egalitarian rivalry which must give place to cooperation: “You are constantly playing tug-of-war,” “You are waiting for him to make the first move, and he is waiting for you,” “To come together, lovers have to make an effort.”

Gürsel’s prospects and those of Turkey are not only analogous, but also intertwined. Her fortune as well as that of the fortune tellers and the Turkish politicians is contingent on the nation’s fortune and more specifically, on the outcome of its relationship with Europe. In turn, however, the latter is contingent on the value people like those who appear in the film place on this relationship and on what economic and political reforms they are willing to bear to secure entry into the EU. Indeed, to the extent that the relationship between fortune telling and Turkey is metonymic, fortune telling is not only a means of prognosticating on the country’s future, but it is also a prognostication on the collective self.

In one scene, a fortune teller looking into Gürsel’s cup says, “There is an image of you in their heads. A single category.” The comment may refer either to the complexity of her identity, which others fail to acknowledge, or to essentialist and Orientalist representations of Turkey as a homogeneous entity. The film itself contests such representations by emphasizing Turkey’s internal differences exemplified by the differences between its protagonists. Turkey’s diversity is also highlighted by the fact that the film’s exterior scenes clearly point to Istanbul, a dazzlingly diverse, complex, and very touristic city, connecting Asia and Europe. In contrast, the interiors may have been shot anywhere in Turkey. Clearly, however, the stories by which the film is constituted are similar. Interestingly, their similarity is due to their shared underlying assumption that sameness

and difference do not preclude, but rather contain one another, and that the same holds for singularity and plurality, passivity and activity, elusiveness and clarity, tradition and modernity, identification with and distance from one’s nation, as well as for fortune telling and formal political discourse.

The film effectively challenges Orientalizing views of Turkey or the Middle East, and especially stereotypes that construe women from this region as passive recipients of men’s actions, as lacking interest and knowledge in national and international politics, and as needy of Euro-American guidance toward liberation. Moreover, it is a fine example of recursive ethnography. Rather than engaging with fortune telling as an object of representation, it models itself after the fortune telling sessions by which the film is constituted, activating the viewer as interpreter of narratives against which her own assumptions about subjectivity, agency, and knowledge become visible and relativized. In the tradition of cinema verité or direct cinema, it constitutes itself as a mirror not of reality, but of the parables and metaphors through which people situate themselves in relationships, which enable or necessitate exploring the hidden aspects of reality and imagining the future.

Coffee Futures has been screened at several film festivals as well as political, cultural, and academic institutions in the United States, Turkey, Europe, and Australia. It received the 2009 Special Jury EurActiv Award for Debating Europe Nationally. A great teaching tool, it is bound to enlighten the minds and lighten the hearts of those engaging with visual ethnographic discourse, but also a variety of other subjects, including politics, personhood and subjectivity, as well as gender relations and knowledge practices in Turkey and the Middle East cross-culturally.

Ghosts and Numbers

Directed by Alan Klima, 2009, 67 minutes, color. Distributed by Documentary Educational Resources, 101 Morse Street, Watertown, MA 02472, <http://www.der.org>

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Following the crash of the Thai *baht*, and the accordant 1997 Asian Financial Crisis, many Thais migrated from rural areas to Bangkok. They abandoned farm life by necessity, and some survived by vending lottery tickets in the streets. With portable ticket cases worn around