

**THE MIDNIGHT EXPRESS PHENOMENON: A HISTORICAL MATERIALIST
APPROACH TO THE RECEPTION OF THE FILM MIDNIGHT EXPRESS**

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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the Midnight Express phenomenon focusing on the film's reception by audiences in Europe, North America, and Turkey between 1978-2003. Using and enhancing the "historical materialist approach" to film reception developed by Janet Staiger, the thesis considers the historical determinants of the film's nationally and culturally differential readings in different periods and of the transformations in those readings.

The thesis argues that while Midnight Express was most likely read in the late 1970s as an attempt to reaffirm American social identity by projecting Turks as an instance of the negative Other, there has been an important shift in the reception of the film in the West during the 1990s due to the changes in the discursive contexts in which the film has been circulating. One does not observe any specific reference to Turkish prisons as a part of the issue of human rights violations in Turkey in the initial reception of the film by European and American critics, whereas these issues appear to be important constituents of a particular reception of the film in the West in the present. The thesis explains this shift by pointing to the constitution of a particular discourse on human rights violations in Turkey after 1980, and especially throughout the 1990s, which has become a part of the discursive repertoires of the Western audience. Therefore, the thesis argues that today, Midnight Express functions as a more legitimate political statement about Turkey in the eyes of some Western audiences than it had been in the 1970s. On the other hand, parallel to the increasing desire of Turkey to connect itself to the West, particularly to become a member of the European Union, one observes an immense increase in the belief in and defense against the negative effects of Midnight Express on Turkey's international representation since the 1990s. The historical and current discourses that audiences, both in Turkey and abroad, bring into play suggest that these audiences engage with Midnight Express by assuming or denying not only the subject positions constructed by the film text but also certain history-specific extra-filmic subject positions produced by other social and discursive formations.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Introduction

Midnight Express is the film adaptation of Billy Hayes's 1977 autobiography of the same title. Released by Columbia Pictures in 1978 as a Casablanca FilmWorks Production, the film was promoted as the "true story" of young American Billy Hayes (Brad Davis), namely his nightmarish years in a Turkish prison following his arrest at Istanbul Airport while trying to smuggle two kilos of hashish on his return to the United States in 1970. Besides being a commercial success, the film won eleven major awards and launched several Hollywood careers, most notably of director Alan Parker, screenwriter Oliver Stone, and producer David Puttnam.

The information above can be found in any film encyclopedia or film guide, which assumes the dominant text-based or production-based approach to films and their histories. However, the "story" of Midnight Express becomes much longer and more complicated once we take into account viewers who have hitherto been watching and commenting on this film. "Forever embroiled in controversy," as Jeff Shannon begins his editorial review for Amazon.com, Midnight Express is a phenomenon that surpasses the film itself, and that is the subject matter of this study.

Background and Rationale for the Study

Despite its popular appeal and commercial success, Midnight Express led to a controversy among French, British, and American film critics at the time of its initial release. While some critics appreciated it as a powerful "real-life drama," an "anti-drug film," and "courageous filmmaking," others criticized it for its "needless violence,"

“xenophobia,” “racism,” and “homophobia” (James 103). One of the most repeated arguments was that the film altered the facts in the book for “exploitive” and “manipulative” purposes. Not only some film critics who reviewed the film in 1978 but also Stone and Parker soon admitted that they altered Billy Hayes’s story considerably. Asked why the events in the movie did not correspond with those in the book, Stone replied: “We weren’t making a documentary.” The book “didn’t have the dramatic cohesion the film needed” (qtd. in Holden 77). Parker further stated that even the book might not reflect Hayes’s real experiences, emphasizing that his was to make a fiction “as powerful as possible” (qtd. in Horton 32). However, contrary to what Stone and Parker believed, the controversy surrounding Midnight Express, which persists even today, suggests that the film never has been simply a fiction or “just a film” for its audiences, either in Turkey or abroad.

While Midnight Express caused controversy in Europe and the United States in 1978, it became a political matter for Turkey. Highly offended, the government banned the film immediately due to its “anti-Turk” rhetoric and officially asked other countries to deny exhibition rights to Midnight Express. Besides the protests of Turkish communities in Europe and the United States, the film was viewed by the Turkish press as an ideological and political assault against the image of Turkey. A much wider negative response from Turkish audiences came in 1993 when the film was screened for the first time in Turkey on a private TV channel. The Turkish public has regarded Midnight Express as an “attack” on the image of Turkey before anything else and stayed sensitive to its possible negative “effects” on the West’s (mis)perception of Turkey. The Turkish sensitivity to the “power” of Midnight Express has never disappeared. Moreover, this

sensitivity has taken the form of a “Midnight Express syndrome,” which has been observed most recently in some of the Turkish reactions to Atom Egoyan’s 2002 film Ararat. Ararat, which deals with the 1915 deportation of Armenians from Van by the Ottoman forces, has been criticized and protested by some circles in Turkey on the grounds that it would become a “new Midnight Express.”¹

Midnight Express has occupied a significant place in the social memory of the West as well. Besides being one of the popular associations for “Turkey” and the Turkish people, the term “Midnight Express” has become a metaphor describing the “thrill” of being jailed in the Third World. Related to that, the film has also served as a pretext for other films in the late 1990s which depict young Western characters victimized and jailed in Third World countries on drug smuggling charges.² Today, Midnight Express continues to be shown on, at least, American and British televisions as well as circulating in the social sphere in the form of VHS tapes and DVDs. Moreover, hundreds of “viewer comments” about Midnight Express posted to web sites such as the Internet Movie Database, Amazon, and Yahoo from different parts of the world, including Turkey, North America, and Europe, show not only that the film maintains its popularity but also the Midnight Express controversy preserves its heat. It is especially the persistence of this controversy that makes the Midnight Express phenomenon worthy of study. What makes Midnight Express so controversial and why does the controversy still continue? How can a film text such as Midnight Express be so “pleasurable” and “unpleasurable” at the same time? These are some of the questions I explore in this study.

¹ See for example the article “The Same Old Trouble” in Turkish Daily News.

² See discussion in Chapter Five.

Despite the persistence of Midnight Express as a social phenomenon there is almost no academic literature on the film except for a few essays by Turkish scholars, which deal with the film on a textual basis and mainly with respect to the negative representation of Turks (Basutçu; Gönül; Zaim). There has been a significant amount of international work on ethnic and racial representation and Orientalism in cinema (Friedman; Bernstein and Studlar; Shohat and Stam). Although these issues are quite relevant to Midnight Express³, the film is not mentioned in the related literature, either. This suggests that Midnight Express as a film and as a phenomenon constitutes a rich but unexplored object of analysis not only for the study of ethnic and racial representation in cinema but also, and more importantly, for the study of film reception.

Problem Statement

This study approaches the Midnight Express phenomenon from the standpoint of the film's reception. The objective is to explore the film's historical and current reception by audiences in Turkey and abroad, utilizing film reviews, opinion pieces, and web-based viewer comments and using a historical materialist approach. As a requirement of this approach, the analysis seeks to address not only how audiences from different nations and cultures have understood and experienced Midnight Express at different times, but also, and more importantly, why they have done so. Depending on the argument that audiences do not encounter film texts in isolation, but within particular social and discursive formations, in the final analysis audiences' responses are interpreted in relation to the wider social and historical concerns and discourses of their time and place.

³ See Chapter Three.

By taking up that research this study will contribute to two theoretical fields within film studies. First, it will contribute to the literature on film reception by dealing with the specific reception of Midnight Express, which persists as a popular historical text in the social memory of the West and Turkey, but has not been explored enough until the present. One of the distinctive features of this study is that it takes into account the influence of national and cultural differences on a particular film's reception. Moreover, it provides an opportunity to test the use value of viewer comments on the Internet for the study of film reception. Second, although it is not the central goal, this study could make an original contribution to the international research on Orientalist films not simply through examining Midnight Express, which can be regarded as an Orientalist film, but more importantly by turning to the question of reception of such films among different audiences and cultures. As Bernstein notes, "one of the most interesting topics for further research" in the study of Orientalism in film "would be the reception of Orientalist films among different audiences" (11).

Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

Reception studies is mainly concerned with the relations between social readers/viewers and texts/films and it covers a wide range of research from reader-response criticism in literature, to ethnographic study of film and media audiences. It could be argued that reception studies follow the "culturalist" path opened in media studies by Stuart Hall's essay "Encoding/decoding" (1973), which presented an alternative model of text-reader relations. The model, with its emphasis on the limited power of the text in determining its reading and on the possibility of "negotiation" of and "resistance" to the "preferred meaning" during the "decoding" process, depending on the

reader's social formation (i.e. class position), had marked "a shift away from 'formalism' in the analysis of meaning" to "analyze meaning ... as socially situated" (Corner 278). Despite its limitations discussed by later scholars (Morley; Wren-Lewis; Grossberg 59-60; Bennett 219-20), Hall's "encoding/decoding model" served as a point of departure for audience research in the 1980s which attempted a broader understanding of the relationship between texts and audiences. The idea that a media text does not have a determinate meaning, or that it does not determine its reading alone, lies at the basis of the ethnographic studies on audiences since the 1980s. These studies shifted the focus of analysis from the study of the "meaning in the text" to the study of "contexts of viewing" and the meanings attached to the "act of viewing" by viewers.⁴

The ethnographic approach has been more visible in the study of television audiences than of films.⁵ In the case of films the turn to the audience has been parallel with the turn to history. In this respect, the study of film reception can be situated under the broader trend of "historicizing spectatorship" that has been continuing in film studies especially since the 1980s (Mayne 63). The attempts at "historicizing spectatorship" challenge the textual determinism of 1970s film theory and its hypothetical model of the spectator as a construct of the film text.⁶ By shifting the attention from hypothetical / implied / ideal "spectator" of the film to actual viewers as social and historical subjects, reception studies, as Judith Mayne argues, "expand [the] parameters [of analysis] beyond

⁴ For a review of some of those studies see Moores 32-43.

⁵ In addition, one of the earliest ethnographic audience studies belongs to Janice Radway who examined the significance of romance-reading in the everyday life of Smithton women.

⁶ The textualist approach, which is mainly associated with 1970s "screen theory," is motivated by ideological criticism. In this respect, it does not deal with the actual responses/readings of audiences but with the textual production of a position for reading or "spectating" (McDonald 190), which is also described as "the implied reader, the model reader or the preferred reader" (Bennett 219). For a fine overview and discussion of "screen theory" see Jancovich.

the individual film text” (68). Reception studies differ from textual studies of films in that, as Janet Staiger states:

reception studies is not textual interpretation. Instead, it seeks to understand textual interpretations as they are produced historically. As Jonathan Culler characterizes research in reception, it “is not a way of interpreting works but an attempt to understand their changing intelligibility by identifying the codes and interpretative assumptions that give them meaning for different audiences at different periods.” Another way of putting it is that reception studies tries to explain an event (the interpretation of a film), while textual studies is working toward elucidating an object (the film). (Interpreting 9)

It is possible to identify two major trends in recent studies of film reception. One assumes the historical materialist approach proposed by Staiger first in an article (“The Handmaiden”) then in a book (Interpreting), the other follows the ethnographic approach which is best exemplified by Jackie Stacey’s work on the reception of Hollywood female stars by British female audiences in the 1940s and 1950s.⁷ Although both approaches share the common goal of overcoming the limitations of the psychoanalytical theories of film spectatorship, they differ in terms of methodology.⁸ Rather than depending on data collected from actual audiences via ethnographic methods such as audience interviews, letters, and focus groups, the historical materialist approach analyzes, as Martin Shingler notes: “extra-cinematic discourses including film reviews, publicity and film journalism, institutional practices such as casting and cultural, social and ideological discourses circulating at the time of the film’s release or rereleases” (46). In this way, historical

⁷ Helen Taylor’s study on the reception of Gone With the Wind by female viewers and Jacqueline Bobo’s examination of the significance of The Color Purple for female black audiences are among other ethnographic studies conducted in the late 1980s. As a more recent ethnographic study of film reception see Austin’s essay on Basic Instinct.

⁸ However, there have been studies combining the two methods while studying the reception of a single film. See Barker, Arthurs, and Harindranath; and Barker and Brooks.

reception studies try to “reconstruct ... a film’s relation to social and historical processes” (Klinger, “Film” 108).⁹

Staiger’s historical materialist approach has informed several subsequent studies in the historical reception of films.¹⁰ Since this study will partially follow that approach in examining the historical reception of Midnight Express, it might be useful to have a closer look at Staiger’s work here. As has been stated above, Staiger’s approach does not aim to interpret the film text, but to provide a “historical explanation of the event of interpreting a text” (Interpreting 81). Therefore, instead of looking at the ideological meanings and subject positions produced by the film text “for hypothetical evidence of what spectators are doing” with the text, Staiger begins by examining the responses to the film at the time of its initial release (i.e. reviews in the press and/or scholarly articles). While interpreting these responses, she examines their relation to the “contextual discourses” (91-2) rather than seeking for a homogeneous fundamental structure lying beneath (i.e., structuralist analysis) or for the signs of a universal human psyche (i.e., psychoanalytic interpretation). Staiger considers the social and historical discourses that circulate within the society at the time of the film’s release as “contextual reading strategies available to a spectator” at that moment (89). By interpreting actual responses in relation to those history-specific discourses, Staiger “historicizes” “the interpretive activities” (91). In addition, one of the distinguishing aspects of the historical materialist approach is that it does not limit the frame of the analysis to a single time period. On the contrary, the analysis is widened diachronically to (re)readings of the film in different periods. The researcher thus investigates the historical changes or shifts in interpretation,

⁹ For an early example of that approach see Budd’s essay on The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari.

¹⁰ For a recent study using Staiger’s methodology see Shingler.

which are again explained in terms of changing and shifting social and historical, extra-cinematic discourses. Staiger remarks:

While surveying current audiences is an important activity, the meaning of the results requires historicization. Dialectical materialism insists that what is important is not the state in which the object appears, but the rate, direction, and probable outcome of the changes that have taken, and are taking, place as a result of the conflict of forces. ... History is necessary. (Interpreting 80)

Therefore, within the framework of a historical materialist approach, not only “the range of interpretive strategies available in particular social formations” but also “the historical transformation of that range” become the objects of analysis (Interpreting 80-1).

Although this is what Staiger mostly does when analyzing historical reception of individual films, she acknowledges that the analysis can be widened in many directions. She notes: “In the best of cases, the picture is widened in every direction – to other films of the same year, across cultures, races, nations (93).

There is a parallelism between Staiger’s historical materialist approach to the study of film reception and Tony Bennett’s approach to “popular reading,” which this study finds useful in developing its own argument as well. Bennett’s arguments also justify the necessity of the historical materialist approach. Bennett rejects “the conventional view of texts as ‘things’ which have ‘meanings’ which readers may variously interpret” (215).¹¹ He argues: “meaning is a transitive phenomena. It is not a thing – which texts can have, but it is something that can only be produced, and always differently, within the reading formations that regulate the encounters between texts and readers (218). “Reading formations” is the crucial term here. Bennett defines it as “a set

¹¹ Bennett argues that this is an assumption that is held both by the textual approach, which is concerned with the textual production of a position for reading, and the ethnographic approach that aims to confront the empirical reader. Although the latter emphasizes the variability of readings, it takes all these readings as the readings of the same text (214-20).

of intersecting discourses which productively activate a given body of texts and the relations between them in a specific way” (216). In this respect, the concept “reading formations” seems very similar to what Staiger calls “contextual discourses.” However, different from Staiger, Bennett describes the act of reading as a process of “productive activation” rather than an act of “interpretation.” Bennett continues:

The study of reading, as it has so far been developed, has been characterized by a marked one-sidedness. It has placed the reader into the melting pot of variability whilst retaining the text as a fixed pole of reference within the analysis. It is necessary, and high time, to place the text into the melting pot of variability too; to recognize that the history of reading is not one in which different readers encounter ‘the same text’ but one in which the text readers encounter is already ‘over-worked’, ‘over-coded’, productively activated in a particular way as a result of its inscription within the social, material, ideological and institutional relationships which distinguish specific reading relations. It has no meaning which can be traduced. (224)

For Bennett, it is an “empty-headed gesture” to state that “there are texts with ‘fixed properties’ which may, of course, be variantly ‘interpreted’.” In fact, he argues:

the text the critic has on the desk before him may not be the same as the text that is culturally active in the relations of popular reading. It is, accordingly, with the determinations which organize the social relations of popular reading that analysis must start if we are to understand the nature of the cultural business that is conducted around, through and by means of popular texts in the real history of their productive activation. (225)

Despite the differences in their terminology, Staiger and Bennett seem to emphasize the same point. While attempting to broaden the perspective of the analysis beyond “ahistorical” “Grand Theories,” and the ‘tripartite division of “preferred,” “negotiated,” and “oppositional” reading strategies’ (Staiger, Perverse 23), they do not mean that individuals can read texts in a totally free manner. Staiger particularly emphasizes that while shifting the focus of analysis from spectator as a subject position constructed by the film text to the viewer as social subject “constituted within a network

of discourses,” the project she proposes “ought not move to the opposite extreme of a radical subjectivity,” because, she continues: “To do so would be to repeat an idealist notion of the individual as maker of his or her own meaning (the transcendental subject)” (“Handmaiden” 20). Call it “reading formations” or “contextual discourses,” or “contextual reading strategies,” both Staiger and Bennett point to the intervention of history-specific, extra-textual discourses in the relations between texts / films and their readers / viewers. Therefore it becomes the researcher’s task to consider which discourses regulate the reception of texts / films, where, and when, as well as the act of reception itself.

Methodology

Informed mainly by the theoretical literature presented above, this study uses some methods of the “historical materialist approach” to examine the international reception of Midnight Express. Unlike what has been done so far in similar studies, this study widens the frame of the reception analysis not only diachronically from the time of the initial release of the film to the present, but also across different nations and cultures.

The study focuses on “interpretation events” in Turkey and “abroad”¹² at three key moments, which can be regarded as, in Staiger’s terms, “encrustations” (Interpreting 93) in the history of the international reception of Midnight Express, and conducts a historical materialist analysis for each moment. These moments are: 1978 (the year when Midnight Express was released abroad), 1993 (the year when the film was shown in Turkey on television), and 1999-2003 (the period of viewer comments on the Internet).

¹² The term “abroad” refers to mainly Britain, France, and North America throughout the study due to the source of the available materials. Although it is a problematic category, the term is also meant to refer to “the non-Muslim West” in general.

The research is largely based on primary materials as its data. With respect to the first two “encrustations,” the study examines the comments of film reviewers and critics in the press in English and French and opinion pieces and articles in the Turkish press. In the case of the third “encrustation,” viewer comments on three popular websites (Internet Movie Database, Amazon, and Yahoo) are taken as a basis for examination.¹³ In each case, the analysis does not simply contend with describing how viewers have understood Midnight Express in different moments and places, but relates these understandings to wider social and cultural concerns and “contextual discourses” or “reading formations” of their time and place. The study then considers the changing or unchanging meanings and functions of Midnight Express across time and nations/cultures and elaborates on the social and historical determinants of those changes or lack of changes. Following Bennett’s terminology, this could also be described as an attempt to explore different Midnight Express texts that have been “active” in Turkey and abroad during the three “encrustations” that are mentioned above and different “reading formations” that have been regulating those “activations.” As this methodology implies, the study is not interested in finding the “correct reading” of Midnight Express, but, to use Staiger’s terms, “the range of possible readings and reading processes at historical moments” and their relation to the historical, social, and discursive contexts in which they are produced.

¹³ The methodology followed in this study differs from that of Staiger in one respect. Staiger confines her research sample to film reviews in all moments whereas this study uses a different type of reception text, that is, viewer comments, for the period 1999-2003. Although the shift to a different type of text is partially due to problems of availability, this method enables the researcher to consider additional factors which might remain invisible in Staiger’s analysis.

Study Overview

As has been stated, the purpose of this study is to examine the Midnight Express phenomenon by focusing on the film's reception in Turkey and abroad and exploring it with the methods of the historical materialist approach. Chapter Two deals with the social and discursive context in which Midnight Express was situated at the time of its initial release. It attempts to account for the film's popularity as well as its becoming a social event in the late 1970s by focusing, first, on the industrial procedures and discourses of publicity through which the film was promoted, and second, on the relation of its subject matter to the social and historical context of the seventies. The third chapter, which focuses on the film text itself, offers a short narrative and textual analysis in order to underscore how the film produces certain meanings and pleasures in relation to other structures and discourses (e.g. classical Hollywood narrative, Orientalist discourse) that extend beyond the historical context of the 1970s. Chapter Four examines the initial reception of Midnight Express in Europe, the United States, and Turkey based on the reviews and criticisms gathered from newspapers and periodicals. Parallel to the amount of published material, the chapter gives more room to the film's reception abroad. After identifying the main axes of the debate on the film and discussing each axis separately, the analysis turns to the Turkish reception in the late 1970s. The fifth chapter points to the opening of a new stage in the screen life of Midnight Express with its TV airings starting from the 1980s. After a discussion of Turkish communities' responses to several airings of the film in North America, the chapter focuses on the public debate and reception in Turkey in the aftermath of the film's screening on Turkish television in

1993. In addition, the chapter presents an overview of the reflections on Midnight Express in cinema books and the film's recyclings and reactivations in other media texts, including film, in order to explore the status of Midnight Express in the social memory of the West in the 1990s and 2000s. Chapter Six discusses the current reception of the film based on Turkish and non-Turkish viewer comments on the Internet Movie Database, Amazon, and Yahoo. The chapter seeks to explain what makes Midnight Express meaningful and important to an international audience in the present by considering filmic and extra-filmic subject positions taken by viewers and discussing their relation to historical and current discourses which extend beyond the spaces of the film and cinema. The final chapter of the study is concerned with the results and implications of the research and suggestions for further studies.

CHAPTER TWO: THE EMERGENCE OF MIDNIGHT EXPRESS AS A SOCIAL EVENT

On December 14, 1978 the New York Times critic Janet Maslin wondered why Midnight Express, a movie “without stars or gimmicks or other obvious selling points,” was “among [the] season’s most durable hits” (259). “Released in October 1978 [in the United States], Midnight Express was an immediate success,” writes Riordan James. He notes: “Since the film had not been a big-budget affair or heavily hyped before its release, it was viewed by the Hollywood establishment as a dark horse made good, a little film with a message that proved all over again that such films could still succeed on their own merit” (102). Midnight Express was made at a cost of \$2.4 million (Nordlinger 21) and grossed \$35 million in the U.S. Neither Alan Parker, as the director, nor Brad Davis, as the leading actor of the film, was well known to the public at that moment.¹ However, it is the contention of this chapter that, although it was not marketed like a blockbuster, contrary to the impressions of the critics above, the box-office success of Midnight Express and its screen endurance were not random.

Robert Allen and Douglas Gomery remark that, in America, especially after the emergence of television in 1948, “movie-going ceased being a habitual activity and became a less frequent but more carefully planned outgoing.” In other words, they argue, “[g]oing to the movies” became “going to see a film” (157). However, as Martin Barker, Jane Arthurs, and Ramaswami Harindranath remark:

¹ Parker began his media career in 1968 as a director of television commercials. By the end of 1975, he had made only a fifty-minute fictional film (No Hard Feelings, 1973) and a full-length film (The Evacuées, 1975) both of which were for television. It was Bugsy Malone (1976), “a pastiche gangster musical with a cast composed entirely of children,” that established Parker as a feature film director. Midnight Express was his second feature (Wakeman 739-41). Midnight Express was Brad Davis’s first feature film as an actor (Farley 7).

In all kinds of ways, seeing a film is a social event. This means much more than that people very often go to the cinema in company. It includes the way people choose the right kind of cinema to see a film, the way they discuss it before going and afterwards, and –more trickily- the way their actual watching is permeated by learnt and shared ideas and assumptions, wishes, hopes and fears that arise from their social history. (27)

Once we conceive of film viewing as a social event, it becomes clear that the factors bringing audiences to the cinema to see a particular film may surpass the film itself. The placement of the film in general or of certain filmic elements in particular within the social and cultural circuit may be more effective than the film or the filmic elements per se. In this respect, approaching film as a social event necessitates the widening of the frame of analysis to allow for the social and discursive contexts in which the film is situated. This chapter deals with the emergence of Midnight Express as a social event by focusing on the industrial procedures and discourses of publicity and on the relation of its subject matter to the social and historical context of the seventies. Probably these factors (e.g. discourses of publicity and contextual discourses) do not account for the whole relation between Midnight Express and its social and historical surrounding. Nor do they exhaust its social attraction and reception. However, they are important because they constitute what Michael Budd calls “limits and pressures, the terms and conditions of possibility” in a film’s reception, whose specification is, as Budd notes, “an inescapably incomplete and speculative one” (41).

Discourses of Publicity

Stephen Heath remarks that “a film must never end ... it must exist ... [even] before we enter the cinema – in a kind of englobingly extensive prolongation” (qtd. in Klinger, “Digressions” 3). As Thomas Austin notes, “film texts do not simply precede moments of viewing, but are designed and positioned in the marketplace with those

moments in mind” (147). In this respect, marketing strategies, promotion and publicity, play an important role in the prolongation of the film’s existence past and future, in Heath’s sense. Barbara Klinger notes that the industry defines “a significant part of a film’s social circulation” by designing “a consumable identity” for that film through promotional activities such as posters, trailers, media spots, media stories on production, and interviews with stars (“Digressions” 5-9). Midnight Express was not promoted through star or director publicity, but, as will be discussed below, it had another powerful promotional element at its center. It could be argued that the “starred” and “fetishized” element in the design of Midnight Express’s “consumable identity,” especially in the beginning, was William Hayes himself – a man with a “true” story. However, the producers and the publicists of the film did not start from scratch in designing its consumable identity around the figure of Hayes. On the contrary, they built upon the discursive constructions of Hayes by the press, which dated back to the mid-seventies, and upon the popular appeal of his story, published in book form in 1977. In addition, the producers followed a wise marketing strategy during the distribution and exhibition stages of the film. By opening Midnight Express first in Europe, they enabled even the criticisms of and the protests against the film to turn into a kind of free publicity for its American release.

“Remember William Hayes ... ?”: Hayes and his Book in the American Press

Although it is assumed that the majority of the international audience learned the story of young American William (Billy) Hayes, who spent five years in a brutal Turkish prison for attempting to smuggle drugs before his escape in 1975, from Parker’s 1978 film, the promotion of that story in the American press dates back to 1976. The fact that

Lawrence Van Gelder begins his 1976 short note on William Hayes's forthcoming book in the New York Times with the question "remember William Hayes Jr. of Amityville?" ("Plaudits" 2), shows that the American press and public were already familiar with Hayes before the appearance of both the book and the film. However, I argue that the press played an important role in the transformation of Hayes's public image in a particular way during the publication of his book.

Hayes had already become a celebrity in America before his escape. On his arrival at New York's Kennedy International Airport on October 24, 1975 there were, he remembers, a hundred reporters waiting for him (Miller and Benet 108). As Clark Taylor noted, Hayes was not simply a celebrity but "the object of agents, publishers and film producers" (6). Upon his return Hayes appeared on many television and radio programs and gave interviews to newspapers. E.P. Dutton publishing company paid Hayes a \$25,000 advance on royalties for a book and Hollywood paid him \$35,000 for the film rights (Gupte, "The Movie" 1). At first, Hayes attempted to write the book by himself. However, when his agent found his fifteen page manuscript "hysterical subjective" (sic), a professional writer, William Hoffer, was brought in as co-author (Klein 31).² The book was completed in June 1976 and published in February 1977. It is my contention that these years mark the beginning of a chain of events that contributed to the promotion and eventually to the box-office success of the film in 1978. The news about, and the interviews with, Hayes, which appeared in the American press first due to the completion

² William Hoffer is also the co-author of the autobiographical book Not Without My Daughter that was made into a film of the same title (Brian Gilbert, 1991). The book and the film are about the story of Betty Mahmoody, an American woman who accompanies her Iranian husband to Iran and has terrifying experiences there.

of and then publication of his book, served to construct a particular image of Hayes in which the film would later invest.

Within the framework of movie stardom Christine Gledhill notes that “to achieve stardom means breaking out of the medium” (xiii). Similarly, Richard Dyer remarks that stars have “an existence in the world independent of their screen / ‘fiction’ appearances” (20). These remarks are parallel to Christine Geraghty’s definition of “star-as-celebrity” as a particular mode of stardom. Different from “star-as-professional” and “star-as-performer,” in the celebrity mode the star’s fame, Geraghty argues, “rests overwhelmingly on what happens outside the sphere of [his/her] work.” In other words, the star’s celebrity is constructed through an “emphasis on the private sphere” by means of discursive channels such as “gossip, press reports, magazine articles and public relations” (187-93). It could be argued that the American press operated on Hayes’s public image as if they were building a star image in a way that parallels the theoretical remarks of Gledhill, Dyer, and Geraghty on movie stardom. As is described below, the press gave Hayes not only a flesh-and-blood existence outside his book but also turned him into a “star-as-celebrity” by focusing on his private life while reminding readers of his story. Moreover, one of the common aspects of the press’s stories about Hayes’s private life was that they attributed to him several good characteristics as if they were trying to replace his previous image as a college-dropout and drug smuggler with the image of “the good boy,” attached to his family and doing well at school. Along with announcing that Hayes had finished writing his manuscript, titled Midnight Express, and would leave for Europe to visit publishers and promote British, French, and Spanish

editions of the book, Pranay Gupte from the New York Times wrote about Hayes and his family as follows:

All of them will be touring the West Coast next month – a gift to them from Billy Hayes, all expenses paid including a special bonus for Mr. Hayes Sr. in the form of a rented private plane to fly over the Grand Canyon. Mr. Hayes Sr. holds a pilot's license.

The Hayes family may also enjoy some additional good news: Billy Hayes said last week that a “good and very distinct possibility exists” that he may soon marry a career woman he met through a mutual friend in New York City.

“We are very, very happy together,” he said. “It's a change – everything has been a change and I am enjoying life to the fullest.” (“The Movie” 6).

In a similar manner, two months after the publication of the book Gelder wrote not only about Hayes's promotion tours in Europe, but, and more importantly, about his taking up courses in creative writing, macroeconomics and French at Fordham University. These were the “awakened interests” of Hayes “after a nightmare,” according to Gelder. He continued:

When the semester ended, Mr. Hayes had an A in English, an A in Economics, and a B in French.

Though the publication of “Midnight Express” and its requirement of promotional appearances made a heavy load of courses impossible this semester, Mr. Hayes nevertheless enrolled in courses in screenplay and filmmaking at the New School and in microeconomics at Fordham. (“After” 2)

The article also stated that Hayes had been talking to high school and college students about his experiences.

The press's “disciplining” and “corrective” attitude in the construction of Hayes's new image does not look random. The quotation below, which constitutes the opening statements of Gupte's 1976 review of the book Midnight Express, suggests that within the social context of 1970s America Hayes was a social type:

In the fall of 1970, Billy Hayes, a 23-year-old from Long Island, was one of several hundred American youths traveling through Europe and Asia. It was the thing to do at the time of the Vietnam War and the domestic troubles of the late 1960's. Most young men and women went abroad to clear their heads a bit, some on journeys of self-discovery. Billy Hayes, who had dropped out of Marquette University, had no particular ambition as

he roamed: He made friends and he used drugs. But suddenly one day in İstanbul , Mr. Hayes's sojourn abroad turned into a nightmare. ("Prisoner" 21)

In this respect, the press's emphasis on Hayes's return to school, and his happy life with his parents, was marked with an institutional and parental gaze, an ideological operation trying to replace Hayes's image as representative of the "counterculture" of the 1970s with a new image representative of the ideal American youth that the society was looking for.

The anonymous statements in the brochure enclosed with the twentieth anniversary DVD edition of Midnight Express suggest that the correction of Hayes's image continues until the present. The brochure reads that Hayes's decision to travel to İstanbul and smuggle hashish to sell in the United States on his return was motivated by his belief that that was "the best way to pay off his student loan." The brochure also states that Hayes decided to write the book in order to "repay his father \$30,000 spent in legal fees" during his imprisonment in Turkey. Furthermore, it continues, "as the book only generated a \$25,000 advance (which was split with Hoffer), Hayes sold the film rights to Columbia Pictures for a \$35,000 advance." The brochure is the only source where we get such information. The information constructs Hayes as a youth who chose the wrong way to achieve his positive goals and later did everything for his father.³ This issue relates to the victimization of Hayes that gained momentum with the making of the film. For the moment, I want to contend that the brochure continues the ideological operation that dates back to the seventies. It also exemplifies how discourses change through time depending on the historical and social contexts in which they are situated. In the seventies, as will be argued later in this chapter, frustration with the country, with social

³ In a 1983 interview Hayes stated that he "would still be procrastinating, were it not for publicity about his incarceration and escape and the resulting offers from publishers" (Klein 31).

rules and traditions, traveling abroad for self-discovery and adventure, using drugs and even smuggling them, could be understandable with regard to American youth of that time. In the nineties, however, these must look so unreasonable or inappropriate that the brochure invents a new socially acceptable reason for Hayes's action.

When the book Midnight Express was published in 1977 it received positive responses from critics. Gupte wrote: "what makes this book particularly intriguing and valuable is Mr. Hayes's account of life inside Turkish prisons, and how prisoners, particularly foreigners, are abused and maltreated" ("Prisoner" 21). Peter S. Prescott described the Turkish jail in the book as "the bunghole of the Western world" (89). For Beth Larsen the book was "an unremarkable account of an experience shared by many unwary world travelers who become entrapped in the seemingly arbitrary criminal justice systems of their host countries" (922). According to Jack Forman, it stood as "a graphic warning against using drugs in foreign countries" (131). Although it was the imprisonment that critics generally seemed to be interested in, they found Hayes's account of his escape most fascinating. Prescott compared it to a Hitchcock movie (89). Gupte referred to the public speculation that Hayes did not manage to escape by his own efforts as described in the book, but was helped by American operatives ("Prisoner" 21).⁴ The media space occupied by Hayes and his book as such must be effective in the popularity of the book and, eventually, of the film. The book became a bestseller by selling 30,000 copies from mid-February to the end of April in 1977 (Gelder, "After" 2). Later, Tyrmand reports, 'the New York Times "Special Features" serialized the book ... and the Chicago Tribune ran the book in installments' (1083).

⁴ The speculations over Hayes's escape had started before the publication of the book. In a 1976 interview Gupte asked Hayes if, as it was speculated, "the State Department and the Central Information Agency covertly helped him." Hayes responded that he did it alone ("The Movie" 6).

The Production and Marketing of Midnight Express as a Film

Midnight Express can be called an “exploitation film” in the sense that it invested in a “timely” subject matter that was already surrounded by “public curiosity,” as the previous section shows.⁵ The production team of Midnight Express consisted of Peter Guber from Casablanca Records and FilmWorks as executive producer, Alan Marshall and David Puttnam as producers, Alan Parker as director, and Oliver Stone as the screenwriter. The film would be a Columbia Pictures release of a Casablanca FilmWorks Production.⁶

Stone remembers that the offer of writing the screenplay came directly from Columbia and that Parker and Puttnam were skeptical of his inclusion in the project (James 96). Stone wrote the first draft of the screenplay in six weeks (Beaver 29). James argues that when writing the screenplay Stone not only “utilized the dramatic force of such classic prison movies as Cool Hand Luke [Stuart Rosenberg, 1967], The Great Escape [John Sturges, 1963] and Papillon [Franklin J. Schaffner]” but also “drew upon his own jail experience for motivation” (96). Lafeber notes that, after his return from Vietnam, Stone, like Hayes, was “arrested on the U.S.-Mexican border and thrown in jail after being charged with smuggling drugs” (93). Although Parker, Marshall, and Puttnam found Stone’s script “brilliant,” Puttnam expressed concern to him that “certain

⁵ Thomas Doherty describes three distinct, but sometimes overlapping, meanings of the term “exploitation” in the film industry and critical discourse. The first and oldest meaning refers to the advertising and promotion aimed at attracting the audience into the theatre (3). The second meaning relates to films that are assumed to respond to the audience’s expectations and values in a manipulative way (5-6). In its third usage the term “exploitation film” refers to “a timely picture with a clear promotional tie-in,” or to films whose “timely” and “sensational” subject matter are impressed by real occurrences that have already aroused public curiosity (7). I am using the term “exploitation” in relation to Midnight Express in this third sense.

⁶ All the people in the team were British except for Peter Guber and Oliver Stone. In this respect the film appeared to be a British film made by American financing.

sequences in his script, notably those featuring the Turkish prison warden, could not be satisfactorily transferred to film” and “even if they were ... they would never get past the censor.” Stone reconsidered the script, “especially those scenes dealing with homosexuality and threats of rape inside the prison” (Yule 71).⁷ Parker joined Stone in revising the draft and forming a coherent shooting script (Beaver 29).

The shooting of Midnight Express began in Malta in September 1977 and ended in fifty-three days in the absence of Stone (Walker 169, James 97, Griffin and Masters 94). An abandoned army barracks was transformed into İstanbul ’s Sagmalcilar Prison. The entire film was shot in Malta except for the establishing shots of İstanbul with which the film opens. “In order to authenticate the location as Turkey,” Beaver points out, “Parker sent another film crew to İstanbul (on the pretense of shooting a cigarette commercial)” where the shots of İstanbul were taken (35).⁸

Guber and Daniel Melnick, Columbia’s production head, supervised the shooting from Los Angeles (Yule 72). Parker explains that during the shooting they had a few problems with Columbia Pictures. Columbia did not want “the homosexuality in the shower scene” and the issue turned into a crisis when Parker, Marshall, and Puttnam insisted on keeping it. For Parker, the scene was “a very tender and beautiful moment in an otherwise relentlessly violent film” (qtd. in Yule 78). The crisis was resolved when

⁷ Stone’s script involved several alterations and additions to the story in the book. One of the additions was a rape attempt by the Turkish guard before Hayes kills him and escapes. The scene designed by Stone involved full frontal nudity. The script reads: “642. A hand reaches out of the steam and grabs Billy by the hair. A Grunt, off. 643. Billy, his eyes moving fast. 644. A flash of a huge darkened penis, fully erect uncircumcised cutting forward into the steam like a drill, detached from the rest of the body.”

⁸ A Statement by Neal Nordlinger suggests that the crew even did not consider applying to Turkey for shooting the film there: “Realizing the Turkish government would be less than sanguine about abetting a production so unflattering to the Turkish penal system, Puttnam and crew wrote a bogus cigarette commercial and got not only the requisite permission from the Turkish government but the help of the Turkish Police in shooting the material which would eventually frame the Maltese footage” (20).

“Melnick’s girlfriend liked the shower scene and the filmmakers were permitted to leave in it” (Griffin and Masters 94).

The publicity for Midnight Express had started with the publicity for the book itself. The press reviews of the book were declaring that the movie was already being planned. William Hayes was still the major promotional asset for the publicity of the film. Parker recounts that Guber visited Malta once together with Hayes and “a press junket of journalists,” and showed Hayes off to the press (qtd. in Griffin and Masters 94). A featurette showing Hayes walking around the set, which is included in the DVD edition of the film, was shot during that visit. Stills showing Hayes behind the bars of the prison used in the shooting of Midnight Express would later appear in the American press during the film’s American release. Besides using Hayes, Guber’s decision to open Midnight Express in Europe “to build awareness before bringing it to the United States” (Griffin and Masters 95) would add a new and more effective dimension to the publicity for the film. Midnight Express was first screened on May 18, 1978 at the Cannes Film Festival as a British entry.⁹ From that moment on, film critics, even more than Hayes, would play the major role in publicizing Midnight Express.

Beginning with its exhibition at Cannes, Midnight Express would become the subject of a controversy provoked by the press, which would become a part of its “consumable identity.” Andrew Yule recounts the press’s reception of Midnight Express at Cannes as follows:

Although the film was given a tremendous reception at its festival screening, the following morning the press seemed to turn against the whole enterprise, hurling question after question at Alan Parker about the excesses shown in the picture. At one point Alan

⁹ An article in Variety states that the film was shown at Cannes with some cuts, but it does not give any details regarding the issue. See “Turkish Envoy” 39.

was photographed yelling back defiantly at the marauding journalists, with David [Puttnam] caught in the background tugging away worriedly at his beard. (79)

The reaction to Midnight Express at Cannes could be explained in part by the fact that, as Beaver puts it: “The Cannes festival had had a long-standing policy of not screening films that might offend the “political sensitivities” of a particular country. Many argued that Midnight Express, in its one-sided attack on the Turkish penal system, had done just that” (32). Besides the controversy that followed the Cannes opening, the protests of the Turkish Government and of the Turkish communities in Europe during the screenings of the film contributed to the transformation of Midnight Express into an event. Shortly after the Cannes opening, the Turkish government banned Midnight Express in Turkey due to its “anti-Turk rhetoric” and on May 23 the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs released, through its embassies worldwide, a protest statement that asked other countries to prevent the film from being shown (Beaver 32; Çevik 133; “American Escapee” 15). Despite the Turkish Government’s efforts, Midnight Express was shown in several European countries such as Britain, Ireland, Germany, Holland, Denmark, Sweden, and Finland as a Columbia-Warner release. Hayes, Parker and Columbia publicist Bob Beerman joined some of the premieres in Europe to promote the film (“Deny ‘Express’” 38). However, it seems that the film’s popular appeal owed more to the controversy and protests than any direct publicity by the filmmakers. Frank Beaver notes: “Most likely because of continuing controversy and efforts to have the film banned, Midnight Express played to record attendance in the Netherlands, England, France, and Finland before opening in the United States in mid-October 1978” (32). Beaver’s observation is supported by Guber’s statement that “someone did try to burn down a cinema in Holland where Midnight Express was about to play, and it garnered a lot of publicity” (qtd. in Griffin and Masters

95). There would be similar protests even in later periods. In December 1978, an entertainment center in Australia would be evacuated due to a bomb threat, which would be associated with the reaction of the Turkish community there to the screening of the film. However, in opposition to the protests from the Turkish community, an Armenian students' society would distribute handbills encouraging people to see the film ("Hail" 6).

It was not always the Turkish Government or Turkish communities that reacted negatively during the European screenings of Midnight Express. A controversial opening occurred in Britain. The British premiere of Midnight Express was launched as a contribution to the activities of the British division of the human rights organization Amnesty International. In particular, the institution, as Variety put it, "was offered the premiere to raise funds for its work for prisoners." Variety reported that although the institution accepted the offer, the Executive Council subsequently "overruled the British division's acceptance of the premiere proceeds because the film was felt, could offend Turkey (sic)" and passed a formal statement which read: "To anyone who may have been hurt by the decision, we apologize without reserve" ("Amnesty Int'l" 44). Variety also reported in August 1978 that the Theatre and Film Control Board of Israel decided to ban the film on the grounds that it was "slandorous to a friendly country (in this case Turkey)." Although the Chairman of the Control Board denied any official pressure on their decision, Variety suspected the influence of "a circular letter sent by the Turkish Plenipotentiary in Israel to different personalities in the media, including members of the Board" ("See Pressure" 23).¹⁰ Similarly, as a result of the pressure from the Turkish community, Midnight Express was removed from exhibition in three theaters in France

¹⁰ The letter stated that, as Variety put it: "the film distorts reality and maliciously presents the Turkish people in a bad light."

(Çevik 133) whereas it was shown in Holland with some cuts. The Washington Post reported in August 1978:

Protests from Holland's 100,000-member Turkish community caused the distributors of the American movie "Midnight Express" to cut certain scenes from the film for Dutch release. They cut scenes in which the main character abuses Turkey and Turks in general, which Turkish organizations argued incite hatred and discrimination by portraying Turks as inferior. (Dalton and McLellan 2)

It must be noted that the existence of media space granted to these events, and the way they were presented by the press, must have been as effective as the subject matter of the events themselves in terms of contributing to the publicity for Midnight Express. For example, Variety reported in September 1978 that the Turkish Ambassador to Ireland wanted to prevent the screening of the film in Ireland by writing a letter to film critics and to the Minister for Foreign Affairs. The letter was published in Irish newspapers and quoted at length by Variety together with the comment that "it is the first time an ambassadorial protest has been lodged in Ireland about a screening."¹¹ Variety also added that Irish censor Dermont Breen 'reacted with surprise at the ambassador's comment on the film which he described as a "brilliant but shattering experience"' ("Turkish Envoy" 39). In fact by constructing an imaginary dialogue between contrasting responses, the press was also enabling the formation of the main axes of an international debate that would continue until the present. The press also constructed a dialogue between institutions and filmmakers. For example, three weeks after publishing a news story about the Israeli ban on Midnight Express, Variety reported Parker's comment on the ban during his visit to Germany to join the film's premiere there. "Parker stressed the film is not anti-Turkish," Variety wrote, and quoted Parker: "It is a criticism of the penal system

¹¹ The letter was interesting in that it did not criticize the film for misrepresenting Turkey. The ambassador argued that the film was "criminal, slanderous and likely to have a bad effect on the young people of Ireland." I will refer to that letter in the third chapter when discussing the Turkish reception of Midnight Express.

... and could have taken place in any number of countries. The film is basically about injustice" ("Deny 'Express'" 38).

As will be discussed in Chapter Four, Midnight Express received negative responses from European critics. Combined with the news reporting protests from the Turkish government and Turkish communities in Europe, the controversy surrounding Midnight Express contributed to the publicity of the film, in that by the time of its release in the United States in October 1978 Midnight Express had become a much larger event than the film alone would merit.¹² In this respect, it could be argued that, by postponing the film's United States release to October, Guber was not only able to avoid, as Beaver notes, the summer competition from box-office hits such as Grease (Randal Kleiser, 1978) and Jaws 2 (Jeannot Szwarc, 1978)¹³ (95), but also to build controversy around Midnight Express, which would become an important element of publicity for the film's subsequent releases and part of its marketing potential.

The two-page press advertisement for Midnight Express, which appeared in Variety a week after the Cannes screening, already bore the traces of a transformation in the film's publicity before its American release (See Figure 1). The fact that the advertisement was included in the press kit prepared and distributed by Columbia Pictures shows that this was a marketing strategy.¹⁴ The advertisement consisted exclusively of media spots garnered from television and the press.¹⁵ Under the heading of

¹² Turks' protests of Midnight Express continued during its America screenings as well. Furthermore the U.S. Catholic Conference "condemned" the film as "morally objectionable for Roman Catholics" due to its depiction of violence. The Conference argued: "All this gore seems hardly justified by the human rights plea of 'Midnight Express,' a plea which is seriously weakened by its slurs on the Turkish nation" (qtd. in "Catholics" 23). Midnight Express was rated R (Restricted) by The Motion Picture Association of America.

¹³ Grease grossed \$96,300,000 and Jaws 2 grossed \$50,431,964 (Sackett 258, 263).

¹⁴ I am indebted to Dr. Jeannette Sloniowski for making the press kit of Midnight Express available to me.

¹⁵ In fact, the theatrical trailer of Midnight Express informs that the film was shown to a special preview audience at Cannes. The media figures whose comments were quoted in the advertisement must be among

CANNES 1978, THE ACCLAIM BEGINS

“...it's impossible to imagine a more exciting film than *Midnight Express*...”

— Rona Barrett, ABC-TV

“As far as I am concerned it's impossible to imagine a more exciting film than *MIDNIGHT EXPRESS*. Several times during the film's swift one hour and 36 minutes, I found myself crying. Director Alan Parker handles the volatile material with impeccable skill, you are gripped right from the beginning and the suspense never lets up. Much of the film's power also rests with its actors.”

Brad Davis, as Billy Hayes, displays an unexpected depth and compassion. It's the sort of performance from which stars are made. I am certain that it's going to be one of the most talked about movies of the year, and an Oscar contender that stands a good chance of rivaling the cult status of “Cuckoo's Nest” because in its own way it again deals with the fundamental battle of man against mindless authority.”

— Rona Barrett,
ABC-TV

“Potentially the most explosive British film ever made, it is brilliantly made stomach-turning, frighteningly true tale. The film makes a star of Brad Davis. After *MIDNIGHT EXPRESS*, I doubt whether that cozy, unprovocative entity known as the British cinema will ever be the same again.”

— Margaret Huxman,
LONDON DAILY MAIL

“It has all the ingredients for one to shiver with terror. The acting is excellent. Brad Davis is a perfect Billy Hayes. He sometimes reminds you of James Caan, but being less of a household name, he is more credible. He is surrounded by remarkable actors like John Hurt, Randy Quaid and Bo Hopkins. And you have Susan, Billy's girl, who makes the escape possible and who is played by a young actress named Irene Miracle. You really have to see it spelled out before your eyes.”

— Robert Chazul,
PARIS FRANCE-SOIR

“A film that proclaims the resiliency of the human spirit, the power of the will to live. The performances shreek with authenticity and the shifting moods are conveyed with the precision and intensity that keeps the film consistently absorbing. There is a sense of honesty about the production, the burning desire to make a statement that fits it beyond the class of mere entertainment.”

— Arthur Knight,
HOLLYWOOD REPORTER

“The biggest bonus at this year's Cannes Film Festival is *MIDNIGHT EXPRESS*, an exquisite, emotional roller-coaster that emerges as a hymn to human survival. An artistic triumph of gut rendering tortured suspense, and the stuff that nightmares—and Oscar dreams are made of.”

— George Anthony,
TORONTO SUN

Midnight Express



MIDNIGHT EXPRESS

Columbia Pictures Presents A Casablanca FilmWorks Production of An Alan Parker Film *MIDNIGHT EXPRESS*
Executive Producer PETER GUBER Screenplay by OLIVER STONE Produced by ALAN MARSHALL and DAVID PUTTNAM Directed by ALAN PARKER

Based on the true story, of Billy Hayes from the book *MIDNIGHT EXPRESS* by BILLY HAYES with WILLIAM HOFFER

Figure 1. Press Advertisement for *Midnight Express*. *Variety* 24 May 1978: 10-1.

that preview audience. In other words, the statements might not be actual media spots, but comments obtained from those media figures during the Cannes screening. However, the style of the advertisement gives the impression that the statements are garnered from the media.

“Cannes 1978, Acclaim Begins,” the advertisement presented comments belonging to six media figures from England, France, Canada, and the United States, all of which were opinions approving of and praising Midnight Express. These media spots were also recycled in the theatrical trailer, posters, and press advertising for the film during its American release.

The turn from the image of William Hayes to critics’ comments in the publicity for Midnight Express during its distribution, and especially its release in the United States, was explicit in the theatrical trailer as well. The trailer opened with two media spots superimposed on the image track: “It’s impossible to imagine a more exciting film” (Rona Barrett - ABC TV) and “A colossal triumph” (Rex Reed – Daily News). The spots were followed by the statement, “[m]onths before its release it stunned and overwhelmed the special preview audience. It’s the movie they couldn’t wait to talk about. The movie is Midnight Express.” The trailer, and especially the statement “it’s the movie they couldn’t wait to talk about,” clearly point to the addition of a new aspect to Midnight Express’s “consumable identity.” They indicate that the discursive terrain constituted by critics’ comments were incorporated into the film’s promotion and that the impression that everyone was talking about Midnight Express, which the trailer aimed to create, became an important strategy in the construction of what Austin calls, the “must-see appeal” of the film.

The same strategy is observed in the posters and other press advertisements for the film. A comparison between the French and American versions of one of the posters for Midnight Express reveals the privilege attributed to the discursive terrain constituted by critics’ opinions in the promotion of the film in the United States. The two posters are



Figure 2. Poster in French for Midnight Express.
http://movieartofsweden.com/images/3210_picture.jpeg



Figure 3. Poster in English for Midnight Express.
<http://www.filmposterworld.co.uk/stock/midnightexpress.htm>

almost the same except for the statements placed in the top corner. In the French version the statement is anonymous and reads, “L’important est de ne jamais désespérer”¹⁶ (See Figure 2), whereas in the American version the statement is a statement by Tom Allen from Village Voice and reads: “Brilliantly made ... frighteningly true” (See Figure 3). Similarly, the advertisement printed in Village Voice included seven media spots, all of which praised the film (See Figure 4). I found only one type of advertisement, published in the Los Angeles Times, which did not involve critics’ opinions (See Figure 5).

It must be noted that publicity materials such as trailers, posters, and press advertisements constitute a particular body within the inter-textual network in which a film exists. Therefore, although I referred to the trailer, posters and press advertisements for Midnight Express mainly to point to the incorporation of the discursive terrain surrounding the film in its publicity, a closer look at the content of these materials is necessary. These materials do not simply advertise the film, but also play a role in the formation of, in Austin’s words, “expectations of, and orientations toward, the film” (147). Naturally, as a marketing strategy, the trailer, posters, and the press advertisements for Midnight Express referred exclusively to those critics’ opinions that approved of the film in some way. However, more importantly, these opinions seem to be selected in such a way that they would serve to “fragment” and “pluralize” the Midnight Express text. As Klinger notes, the fragmentation and pluralization of any film text during the process of promotion serve to “produce multiple avenues of access to the text that will make the film resonate as extensively as possible in the social sphere in order to maximize its audience” (“Digressions” 10).

¹⁶ “The important thing is to never despair” (my translation).

"THE MOST IMPORTANT FILM OF THE DECADE."

Tom Allen—*Village Voice*



Midnight Express

"IT IS SUPERBLY DIRECTED, MASTERFULLY ACTED BY A DEDICATED CAST, AND FILLED WITH MORE HONEST SUSPENSE THAN ANY JAMES BOND ADVENTURE"

Daily News—Rex Reed

"IT'S IMPOSSIBLE TO IMAGINE A MORE EXCITING FILM THAN MIDNIGHT EXPRESS. I AM CERTAIN THAT IT'S GOING TO BE ONE OF THE MOST TALKED ABOUT MOVIES OF THE YEAR"

ABC-TV—Rona Barrett

"MIDNIGHT EXPRESS HAS KIND OF A WAILING, ARID AUTHENTICITY AND ENORMOUS POWER. IT IS STRONG AND UNCOMPROMISING STUFF"

L.A. Times—Charles Champlin

"THIS SUPERIOR FILM WILL BE UP FOR ACADEMY AWARDS. MIDNIGHT EXPRESS MIGHT JUST BE THE MOST IMPORTANT FILM I HAVE VIEWED THIS YEAR"

Soho News—Bob Weiner

"BRAD DAVIS MAKES HIS FIRST FEATURE FILM A STRONG BID FOR INSTANT STARDOM"

Playboy Magazine—Bruce Williamson

"THE BIGGEST BONUS AT THIS YEAR'S CANNES FILM FESTIVAL IS MIDNIGHT EXPRESS, AN EXQUISITE, EMOTIONAL ROLLER-COASTER THAT EMERGES AS A HYMN TO HUMAN SURVIVAL. AN ARTISTIC TRIUMPH OF OUT RENDERING TORTURED SUSPENSE AND THE STUFF THAT NIGHTMARES—AND OSCAR DREAMS ARE MADE OF"

Toronto Sun—George Anthony

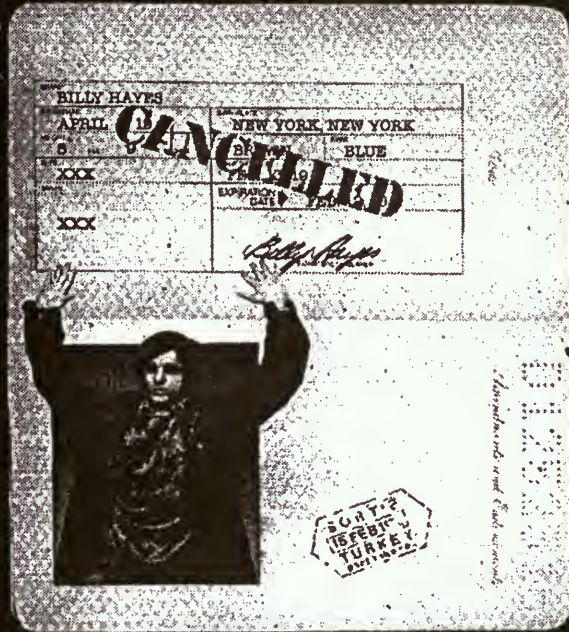
COLUMBIA PICTURES Presents A CASABLANCA FILMWORKS Production of

An ALAN PARKER Film MIDNIGHT EXPRESS Executive Producer PETER GUBER Screenplay by OLIVER STONE
Produced by ALAN MARSHALL and DAVID PUTTNAM Directed by ALAN PARKER Music Created by GIORGIO MORODER
Based on the true story of Billy Hayes from the book *Midnight Express* by BILLY HAYES and WILLIAM HOFFER Read the FAWCETT PAPERBACK

R RESTRICTED
Under 17 requires accompaniment

Figure 4. Press Advertisement for *Midnight Express*. *Village Voice* 16 Oct. 1978: 73.

Walk into the incredible true
experience of Billy Hayes.
And bring all the courage
you can.



Midnight Express

An ALAN PARKER Film MIDNIGHT EXPRESS Executive Producers: PETER GUBER and OLIVER STONE
Producers: ALAN MARSHALL and DAVID PUTTNAM Directed by ALAN PARKER Music Composed by GIORGIO MORODER

R

RESTRICTED
Under 17 requires
accompanying parent
or adult guardian

Original Soundtrack Album available from CASABLANCA RECORD AND FILMWORKS

Read the FINEST PAPERBACK



STARTS FRIDAY

WESTWOOD Crest 474-7866

HOLLYWOOD Paramount 463-3263

AND AT OTHER SELECTED THEATRES NEAR YOU

Figure 5. Press Advertisement for *Midnight Express*. *Los Angeles Times* 25 Oct. 1978: V13.

By means of critics' opinions, the press advertisements for Midnight Express highlighted elements such as Parker's "impeccable skill," or "superb directing," Brad Davis's "powerful" and "credible" performance as well as his being "a strong bid for instant stardom;" the "masterful acting" in general; the film's being "the biggest bonus" of the Cannes Film Festival, being "up for Academy Awards," and being "beyond the class of mere entertainment." However, much more emphasis was given to the "emotional" and "suspenseful" story. "Exciting," "explosive," "stomach-turning," "frighteningly true," and "shivering" were some of the adjectives that appeared in the quotations with regard to the film's subject matter. In this respect, one of the spots even compared Midnight Express with James Bond movies: "... filled with more honest suspense than any James Bond adventure." Similarly, the soundtrack was compared with the soundtrack of Hitchcock's Psycho (1960): "Not since the terrifying soundtrack of 'Psycho' has music meant so much to a film." One of the spots highlighted a specific scene with the words: "This is a harrowing film, with the most bizarre love scene I have ever seen. A moment of love so unforgettable." The spots did not give any specific information about the subject matter of the film, except for the statement, "a hymn to human survival." However, all of the advertisements included the information, printed in small fonts at the bottom, that the film was "based on the true story of Billy Hayes from the book Midnight Express by Billy Hayes and William Hoffer."

The picture presented above implies that Midnight Express could be read as a Parker film (i.e. auteur discourse), a Brad Davis performance (i.e. star discourse), a festival film / serious entertainment (i.e. art discourse), a suspense film / a thriller, and

even as a love story (i.e. genre discourse),¹⁷ which could be regarded as “multiple avenues of access” to the film text opened by the press advertisements through the employment of various cinematic discourses. Moreover, the film could also profit from the popularity of other texts in this era such as James Bond adventures, Psycho (Alfred Hitchcock, 1960), East of Eden (Elia Kazan, 1955), One Flew Over Cuckoo’s Nest (Milos Forman, 1975), with which Midnight Express was compared by critics, as well as from the similarity some of them saw between Brad Davis and James Dean. However, the form of the press advertisements more prominently suggests that these advertisements were aimed at creating the public opinion that Midnight Express was “the most important film of the decade,” as Village Voice critic Tom Allen’s statement reads, placed on the top corner in big fonts in some of the advertisements (See Figure 4). As the form of the advertisements implied and the trailer explicitly announced, “everybody was talking about it.” In fact, in one sense, Midnight Express would be “the most important film of the decade,” because, as examined above and explored more in Chapter Four, in Beaver’s words, “no other film of the 1970s generated the kind of uproar that accompanied the release of Midnight Express” (30, 32).

How effective was all that publicity on Midnight Express’s popular appeal in the United States? As Table 1 shows, Midnight Express, from the beginning, became one of the 20 top-grossing films despite the fact that it was released only in one city (New York) and 7-8 show case theatres.¹⁸ The film opened nationally on October 27 (“Catholics” 23).

¹⁷ In a 1973 article, Ronald B. Querry uses the term “prison movies” to denote “films which are primarily concerned with, or at least include significant scenes within, prisons” (181). This suggests that, in the 1970s, “prison film/movie” was recognized as a particular genre by film scholars. However, the absence/avoidance of the term “prison film” in the media spots for Midnight Express implies that “the prison” as a film genre had not become popular yet within the non-academic media discourse.

¹⁸ If one compares Midnight Express with movies that preceded it in terms of the number of weeks on the charts and the number of cities and theatres, then rank figures for Midnight Express look quite good.

Table 1
U.S. Exhibition Figures of Midnight Express

Week Ending By	Rank	Cities	First-Run Theaters	Show Case Theaters	Theaters (total)	Weekly Grosses (\$)
October 11	17	1	-	7	7	200,000
October 18	14	1	-	8	8	180,000
October 25	13	1	-	7	7	160,000
November 1	1	17	20	104	124	1,300,711
November 8	2	19	18	114	132	1,272,351
November 15	3	20	26	54	80	912,901
November 22	2	20	20	122	142	982,265
November 29	1	19	17	110	127	993,743
December 6	1	21	21	113	134	746,543
December 13	1	20	18	112	130	590,763
December 20	4	21	20	89	109	388,855
January 3	16	7	4	50	54	207,955
January 10	16	8	4	54	58	218,368
January 17	21	7	3	28	31	107,382
January 24	35	10	8	9	17	53,405

Source: "50 Top-Grossing Films." Variety (18 Oct. 1978 – 31 Jan. 1979).

Shown in 17 cities and 124 theatres, it became the box-office hit of the week with a weekly gross of \$1,300,711. Midnight Express remained one of the three top-grossing films for seven weeks, enjoying the first rank during the weeks ending November 29, December 6, and December 13. Its hit status was broken with the release of Superman (Richard Donner, 1978) in mid-December. By the end of January 1979 Midnight Express dropped to the 35th rank in terms of its weekly grosses.¹⁹ 1979, however, would be the year when Midnight Express would switch to another field for competition. By the end of January the film was nominated for eight Golden Globes, including a nomination for Best

¹⁹ Although in the bottom of the list, Midnight Express remained within the "50 Top-Grossing Films" up to the week ending May 2, 1979.

Picture. Midnight Express grossed \$35 million in the United States and it won two Academy Awards,²⁰ six Golden Globe Awards,²¹ and three British Academy Awards.²²

Contextual Discourses: The Social and Historical Context

This section focuses on the relevance of the subject matter of Midnight Express to the social and historical context of 1970s America as another factor that must be effective in the film's popular appeal at the time of its initial release. Klinger remarks that '[o]ne ramification of the promotion of a film's subject matter is that the audience is encouraged to locate the subject matter of the film ... in relation to their own lives under the category of "relevance"' ("Digressions" 13). In the case of Midnight Express, such an industrial "encouragement" was most obvious in a letter of thanks addressed to Columbia Pictures by the executive producer, Peter Guber from Casablanca Records and FilmWorks, which was published in Variety just before the nationwide opening of the film. One of the statements in the letter read: "A movie based on the true story of one American boy is apparently affecting the lives of many thousands."²³

Midnight Express was promoted as a "true story" in the posters and trailer as well. An advertisement in the Los Angeles Times read: "Walk into the incredible true experience of Billy Hayes. And bring all the courage you can" (See Figure 5). Similarly, the voice-over in the theatrical trailer of Midnight Express said:

He was a twenty-year-old American boy, plunged into a system he didn't understand, spoken in their language he couldn't speak. He was beyond the help of his parents and

²⁰ Best Screenplay Based on Material from Another Medium (Oliver Stone), and Best Original Score (Giorgio Moroder) (Dennis 885).

²¹ Best Drama Picture, Best Supporting Actor (John Hurt), Best Film Debut-Male (Brad Davis), Best Film Debut-Female (Irene Miracle), Best Screenplay (Oliver Stone), Best Original Score (Giorgio Moroder) (O'Neil 415-8).

²² Best Supporting Actor (John Hurt), Best Achievement in Direction (Alan Parker), and Best Film Editing (Dennis 885).

²³ See Variety 25 Oct. 1978: 14.

the power of the U.S. Government. And yet he thrived. His story is true and his ordeal is so incredible it will change you forever. The movie is Midnight Express.²⁴

The statement presents Hayes as a victim-hero who ultimately triumphs. Moreover its placement in the trailer suggests that American youth was an important group among the target audience of the film. That was also indicated by the image of defenseless young Billy Hayes (Brad Davis) included in press advertisements.

However, although the box-office success of Midnight Express can be explained in part, as discussed above, by being publicized as the “true” story of William Hayes, which was already in circulation by means of the book and its press reviews, and by the controversy and sensation built around it by the press and press advertisements, audiences’ attraction to the film cannot be explained only in terms of publicity practices and pure manipulation. The subject matter of Midnight Express and the social and historical context in which it was inserted, which is described below, suggest that the popular appeal of the film must also depend on its being a socially and politically timely movie.

While commenting on Midnight Express Alexander Walker argues: “Hayes was presented throughout the film as ‘victim’ – that and only that. Being young, American and abroad, the character fitted into the self-pitying neo-romanticism of the largest film-going age-group in America” (169-70). The issue of drug smuggling, which launches the action in the film, and its association with youth traveling abroad, must be another factor that made Midnight Express sensational at the time of its release. I would argue that at the time of its release in the United States Midnight Express became a part of the

²⁴ A similar statement was also placed on the back cover of the 1978 recording of the film’s score that was marketed during Midnight Express’s release in the United States.

discourses on the social problem of drugs and youth and that this was one of the most important factors that made its subject matter relevant to the lives of audiences, especially of American youth and parents in the 1970s.

Jerry Robinson's remark that is quoted below suggests that "drug culture" was an important ingredient of the life of many Americans in the 1970s:

The cynicism of Americans about their leaders and institutions and the feeling of helplessness on larger issues turned into an obsessive self-regard, which made social critic Tom Wolfe characterize the period as the Me Decade. The need for a greater exploration of the inner space of the American psyche led to the growth of numerous movements such as est and Transcendental Meditation. The sixties were just a prelude to the drug culture of the seventies. Forty million Americans smoked marijuana, twenty million tried cocaine, and filled forty-four million prescriptions a year of valium, not to mention seconal, tuinal, dexedrine, and qualudes. The 1960s refrain, "Turn on, tune in, drop out," in the seventies, became "Give me Librium or give me Meth." (8)

As the quotation above implies, "drug culture" was just a single expression of a much broader social youth movement, which was characterized by the disappointment with and the rejection of traditional values in the aftermath of the Vietnam War. Chrissie Hynde, who was a member of the youth generation in the 1970s, makes a similar point when describing her generation: "That was my generation! We were pot smokers, reading about mystical Eastern religions and taking a stand against anything that was establishment, rejecting all the values that had come before ... Our antiwar attitude was part of a rejection of our parents' values" (22).²⁵ Stephen Feinstein uses the term "counterculture" to denote the youth culture of the seventies. He explains that youth in that period rejected traditional values and turned towards a "hippie lifestyle" which involved sex, drugs, and rock 'n' roll as important elements. As a part of that lifestyle,

²⁵ Hynde was also one of the witnesses of the events at Kent State in 1970 in which student demonstrators protesting the Vietnam War were shot and killed by the national guard. This historical event exemplifies in a tragic manner the magnitude of the conflict between the American youth and the established order.

Feinstein notes, the use of drugs such as marijuana and LSD increased dramatically during the seventies (7).

A 1970 article in Weekly Reader, an American newspaper for children, reported that a “New York City Health Officials Report” estimated 25,000 teen-age heroin addicts in that period. The article informed its readers about the Nixon Government’s efforts and plans to deal with “the growing abuse of drugs by school-age youth.” The article mentioned making movies “warning of drug dangers” and preventing the “flow of drugs coming into [the United States] from Mexico and Turkey” among the plans of the American Government in the early seventies (“U.S. Tackles” 177). Although there is not any information to say that Midnight Express was a government supported film, one cannot ignore that it matched perfectly the government objectives described in Weekly Reader. The social and historical context described above suggests that Midnight Express could easily function like a cautionary tale of drug abuse and smuggling within that context. This aspect of Midnight Express is also justified by the fact that the film, its executive producer Peter Guber, and Casablanca Records and FilmWorks were rewarded by two law enforcement agencies in 1979. Variety reported that the International Conference of Police Association gave Guber “a special merit award for bringing home the dangers of drug smuggling” and The International Narcotic Enforcement Officers Association awarded Guber and Midnight Express the organization’s 1979 Award of Honor ‘for “offering an unusual opportunity to warn Americans of the dangers of breaking the laws of foreign nations” (“Hail” 6). An article in the Washington Post reported the motivation behind the award as follows: “The association representing some 200,000 officers worldwide, said the film ‘has reached millions of young Americans with

a vital message concerning the international drug laws and is of substantial assistance in the war against drug abuse” (Bruske and Racliffe 2).

As has been stated, Midnight Express was not only a socially but also politically timely movie, especially in terms of U.S.-Turkey relations regarding the issue of drugs. Throughout the sixties Turkey had been a part of the supply of illicit drugs circulating in the world, mainly due to its substantial crop of opium poppies, which were processed illegally in Western Europe and the United States (Shaw and Shaw 432). Alfred W. McCoy notes that Turkey was “the major source of American narcotics throughout the 1960s” (20).²⁶ In the early seventies it was estimated that 80% of the opium that entered the United States in the form of heroin was produced in Turkey (McCoy 280). When the Nixon government declared war on drugs, the United States attempted to convince Turkey to stop growing opium poppies through “a mixture of diplomatic pressure and promises of \$35 million in aid,” which finally led the Turkish Government to impose a total opium ban after the 1972 harvest (McCoy 73).²⁷ However, the ban lasted only two years and Turkey resumed its state-regulated poppy production in 1974 (McCoy 391).²⁸

²⁶ However, McCoy also notes, the raw opium produced in Turkey “never accounted for more than 7 percent of the world’s illicit supply” (20).

²⁷ The Turkish Government had already announced in 1967 plans to reduce and abolish opium production. In order to facilitate the actualization of those plans, McCoy points out, “the U.S Government contributed \$3 million to build up a special 750-man police narcotics unit, finance research for substitute crops, and improve the managerial efficiency of the government regulatory agency, the Turkish Marketing Organization. By early 1972, Turkey had reduced its opium-growing provinces from twenty-one to four” (72).

²⁸ The 1970s were a tense period in terms of U.S.-Turkey relations mainly due to the Cyprus crisis, which is discussed in Chapter Four. In addition to the “Turkish resentment against the American failure to help in Cyprus,” Shaw and Shaw explain the reasons for the change in Turkey’s attitude towards poppy production as follows: “Many Turks could not understand why they were forced to bear the brunt of solving the American drug problem while the United States did nothing to curb the health-endangering tobacco crop in its own country and allowed American drug companies to manufacture and export far more drugs than could be used in legitimate medical activities. Since there was, in any case, no drug problem in Turkey, a majority of the population favored restoration of the poppy crop, and thus all parties in the 1973 elections joined in condemning the old agreement. One of the first acts of the Ecevit coalition government was to distribute seed and prepare the way for a resumption of poppy production, though under strict government controls to prevent illicit drug traffic.” (432).

The United States' drug war and Turkey's position in it were also referred to in some of the press reviews of Midnight Express during its screening in America. For example, in the Los Angeles Times Taylor wrote:

When Hayes was arrested, U.S.-Turkish relations were at a low point, partly due to bad feelings for the Nixon administration, and partly ... because we were trying to get the Turks to stop growing opium poppies. We also were openly critical of that government for not cracking down on drug offenders such as Hayes. (6)

The same issue is expressed in the film, too. In the first courtroom scene the Turkish prosecutor delivers a long speech, which almost summarizes the whole political context that is described above. The prosecutor requests a life sentence for Hayes so that Turkey can prove its decisiveness in cutting illicit drug traffic to the world. However, this point remains unnoticed since the Turkish dialogue is not subtitled or translated in the narrative. Yet, there is a moment in the film during which Hayes's girl friend, Susan, tells him that the American press had called Hayes "a pawn in the poppy game between Nixon and the Turks."

A particular reading of Midnight Express by the American press points to another aspect of U.S.-Turkey relations with regard to the drug issue. In The Los Angeles Times, Taylor argued that Midnight Express had "succeeded where international politics failed in calling attention to insufferable conditions in prisons around the world" and he pointed out that, as he put it:

Shortly after the Cannes screening - 43 days later - prisoner-exchange treaty talks between the United States and Turkey began and resulted in the release of at least a few of the 2,500 young Americans in foreign prisons on drug charges, but the screen drama clearly made a more telling impact and reached a wider audience than any previous political efforts. (6)

The same information was also printed on the back cover of the film's music recording²⁹ and put in the end of the film during the American release (Martin 21), indicating that this was intended as one of the popular readings of Midnight Express.³⁰ This reading implies that Turkey is not seen simply as a drug supplier, but also, and more importantly, one of the foreign countries where Americans are jailed on drug charges in primitive prisons. Moreover, it transforms the film into a political statement. In fact, Stone's script ended with an epilogue superimposed on the black screen, which was omitted in the film. The epilogue read: "The character named Bell is still inside. As are: (Roll the list of names)." This epilogue suggests that Stone meant the film to be a political statement that would directly make sense with regard to the context outlined above.³¹

The discussion above suggests that Midnight Express was a timely text, which could be activated on a number of axes with the social and political discourses of the period regarding Americans' or, more generally, the West's relation to drug abuse and drug smuggling. In this respect, Susan Griffith's statement below, which is quoted from a travel guide published in 1979, in the aftermath of the release of Midnight Express, provides an instance of reception that supports this argument. The guide is addressed to Western travelers to the East as its title, Travelers to the East Survival Kit, implies. Besides providing general information about various countries, the guide mentions drug related laws and procedures for each country under the sub-heading "Drugs." This

²⁹ The text on the cover reads: "On May 18, 1978 MIDNIGHT EXPRESS was shown to an audience of world press at the Cannes Film Festival... 43 days later the United States and Turkey entered into formal negotiations for the exchange of prisoners."

³⁰ Today the statement appears neither on VHS nor DVD editions of Midnight Express.

³¹ During the Golden Globe Awards night, Stone, upon receiving his statue, uttered the following words, which, as O'Neil describes, "were greeted with angry boos and catcalls from the audience": "The United States can't point a finger at Turkey because we're putting people in jail for being high. Every person should have the right to pursue his own happiness" (410). Variety interpreted Stone's words as an attempt to launch "a rambling polemic equating U.S. treatment of imprisoned drug users with the injustice depicted in Midnight Express" (qtd. in O'Neil 410).

provides further insight in the popularity of using and smuggling drugs not only among the Americans, but Westerners in general in the 1970s. However, more importantly, the quotation exemplifies the extent to which, within such a context, Midnight Express could function like a cautionary tale set in Turkey involving timely motifs such as travel, drugs, and smuggling:

There is only one word of advice on the subject of drugs and smuggling in Turkey; DON'T. If you find yourself tempted, just go out and see the harrowing film Midnight Express. Sentences of 20 to 30 years for possession are not unknown. (There is no legal distinction between soft and hard drugs.) Even if you are innocent, it will take a long time for your case to be heard, and you will be held in a prison where conditions may not be quite as dreadful as they are in Midnight Express but will by no means be luxurious. Another strange quirk of Turkish justice is that the prosecution has the right of appeal against any sentence thought to be too lenient. (45)

It must be noted that it is the narrative of the film that Griffith takes as the basis for her text and follows it in providing guidance to travelers to Turkey.³²

This section has mostly focused on the issue of drugs. However, as has been emphasized above, drugs were only a symbol for a much larger issue within the context of the 1970s: youth counterculture. Therefore, the implications of Midnight Express extend beyond drugs per se. One should note that Midnight Express became a box-office hit by pushing Animal House (John Landis, 1978) to the second rank. Animal House depicts several rituals of college life isolated from the adult world and parents. It is a youth film, in Peter Lev's words, "in favor of sex, alcohol, marijuana, and rock and roll" (99). While Animal House humiliates those young Americans who struggle to maintain order based on the principles of their parents/professors, Midnight Express sends the same young Americans to an "imaginary nightmare" in which they will reaffirm their parent's values.

³² The quotation can also be regarded as one of the earliest signals that Midnight Express would have an important place in the social memory of the West as one of the most popular images of Turkey.

CHAPTER THREE: MIDNIGHT EXPRESS AS A FILMIC NARRATIVE AND DISCOURSE

This chapter assumes a more text-based approach to Midnight Express in order to consider the meanings and pleasures it produces in relation to structures and discourses which are relatively not context-specific. It examines the narrative characteristics of the film and ideological meanings and subject position(s) it constructs for the spectator. However, since a skillful narrative analysis of the film has already been offered by Derviş Zaim, I present below a sketchy examination of the narrative and give more room to a textual analysis which focuses on the discursive work of the film text. Besides the analysis, the content of this chapter serves as a background for making better sense of some of the issues that are addressed in reviews of Midnight Express and viewer comments, which are examined in the forthcoming chapters (e.g. difference between the book and the film, specific scenes).

The Narrative and Character

Both the literary and cinematographic versions of Midnight Express basically tell the story of young American William (Billy) Hayes's imprisonment in Turkey for attempting to smuggle two kilos of hashish to the United States in October 1970. The book is presented as a true story and the film announces itself as being "based on a true story." The main dramatic event common to both versions of the story is that after spending three years in a "primitive" Turkish prison, fifty-three days before his release, Hayes's sentence is changed to life, leaving him no option other than "catching the

midnight express” –the prison slang for escape.¹ Although devised in different ways, both the book and the film depict Hayes’s physical and psychological suffering during his imprisonment from his perspective, which finally ends with his escape in 1975. The book and the film are different in several respects. Along with omitting certain relatively positive events (e.g. Hayes’s good relations with Turkish inmates, a homosexual affair with a Swedish one, the amnesty, pleasant days in the island prison, the escape adventure) and adding a few violent ones (e.g. Hayes’s beating and killing the Turkish stoolpigeon Rifki [Paolo Bonacelli] including biting out his tongue; several scenes of tortures of the Western characters; the attempt of the chief guard Hamidou [Paul Smith] to sodomize Hayes and his accidental death by a coat hanger impaling Hamidou’s head during their struggle), the film does not follow the chronology of the book. The major change to the chronology reveals itself in the placement of the section set in the lunatic asylum that appears in the early part of the book towards the end of the film. The original events in the asylum are also changed. Stone explains that this change was necessary for the creation of “dramatic cohesion.” He states: “I moved it [the lunatic asylum] to the end because I felt things should keep getting worse and that a lunatic asylum was the bottom line” (qtd. in Holden 77). In the book Hayes requests his transfer from İstanbul’s Sıgırmalcılar prison to Bakırköy Mental Hospital because he thinks he can easily escape from there. When his request is met, he spends several days in the mental hospital, but he cannot actualize his plan and returns to the prison. Moved to the end in the film, the lunatic asylum scene perfectly represents Hayes as physically and psychologically deteriorating.

¹ In the book Hayes thinks of escape since the beginning. In 1974 a general amnesty reduces his sentence to release in October 1978. However, Hayes prefers to escape rather than enduring imprisonment.

Asked why “scenes of extreme violence” were included in the film, Parker suggests that the change regarding the lunatic asylum was the main reason for those inclusions. He implies that the Hayes character had to bite Rifki’s tongue so that his movement to the lunatic asylum could be justified and that since he was in the asylum and psychologically and physically weak, he could escape only through a lucky and devine accident:

... biting out the prisoner’s tongue came from Oliver Stone’s original screenplay and the death of the guard [Hamidou] at the end I wrote whilst I was in Malta. Everything else is pretty graphically described in the book. The first decision that Oliver (Stone) and I made was that the book meandered in a number of prisons, and we wanted to keep all the characters in one prison. Therefore, we needed a reason why Billy Hayes went directly from the regular prison to section 13 for the criminally insane [the lunatic asylum]. There had to be an extreme reason for putting him into a lunatic asylum, and hence the tongue-biting. We were then faced with the problem of his escape. In the book he’s transferred to an island prison and escapes by swimming to a row boat. We weren’t in an island prison so he couldn’t swim anywhere. Because of his weak condition it was obvious that he could not effect his own escape. It had to happen as an accident. I thought it would be rather ironic that the guard who had caused him so much grief throughout the piece would be the one who took him out of prison and into freedom. (qtd. in Zito 8)²

Stone’s statement and Parker’s description, which is slightly complicated, not only explain the reasons for the inclusions and changes but also underscore that the cinematographic Midnight Express is a narrative structured according to the norms of “classical Hollywood cinema” (Bordwell, Staiger, and Thompson). The narrative develops through a set of cause-effect relations where the action arises mainly from the motivations and conflicts of the goal-oriented protagonist (Hayes) and ends with strong closure. The Turks function as the counter-force that creates conflict. The narrative resolution is strictly tied to Hayes’s struggle to overcome the obstacles and threats caused

² As soon as Hamidou dies, Hayes disguises in Hamidou’s (or another guard’s) uniform and walks out of the prison.

by the Turks and their power structures (e.g. the law and the prison). However, rather than engaging in an analysis and elaborate critique of those power structures, the film deals with them on the basis of a simple protagonist-antagonist relation, or, to put it differently, in terms of a life-death struggle between a hero (Hayes) and his sidekicks (Max [John Hurt], Jimmy [Randy Quaid], and Eric [Norbert Weisser]) and two major villains (Hamidou and Rifki). Moreover, all the characters in the film are consistent characters, in that the good characters (Hayes and his Western sidekicks) remain good and the bad characters (Hamidou and Rifki) remain bad from the beginning to the end of the narrative. Since Hayes is presented as a victim of the brutal and sadistic acts of the two major villains above, the spectator implied by the narrative not only identifies with Hayes, but also goes through a cathartic experience when he kills them one after the other and finally escapes.³

Based on the brief chronicle above, it could be argued that Midnight Express is a classical Hollywood narrative which successfully tells a moving action-thriller story while ensuring spectator pleasures such as identification with the characters and catharsis. However, this can only partially explain the film's popularity in that what is claimed to create pleasure here is not something solely specific to Midnight Express. Below I look at a more specific structure of pleasures, which, I would argue, the film activates.

³ It was reported that the audience watching the film in the theater in the late 1970s cheered when Hayes bit out Rifki's tongue (Kael 497; Yule 80).

The Discourse: Midnight Express as an “Eastern” and Orientalist Discourse

John C. Eisele, who has recently introduced the notion of “the eastern” as a genre in Hollywood cinema, describes a scene in George Méliès’ 1905 film The Terrible Turkish Executioner:⁴

An executioner leads his prisoners to a square and chops off their heads with a huge scimitar, then places the heads in a basket. As he dozes off, the heads pop out of the basket and back onto their rightful owners. The reheaded prisoners escape but not before giving their executioner a taste of his own medicine by slicing him in half with his own scimitar. The short film ends as the detached torso of the executioner frantically searches for his lower half. (68)

The film, Eisele argues, is one of the earliest examples of “the eastern,” that is, a group of Hollywood films “about the Middle East and its Muslim inhabitants, be they Turks, Arabs, or Iranians” which have a series of narrative elements in common. According to Eisele, “imprisonment or slavery, mutilation or the threat of amputation with scimitars, and rescue,” which summarizes the plot of The Terrible Turkish Executioner, are some of the elements that can be found in most subsequent films of the early period about the Middle East (68). Although Midnight Express is not among the more recent films that Eisele refers to in developing his argument, the film has almost the same narrative structure as Méliès’s 1905 film: a young American jailed in a Turkish prison and tortured violently by his Turkish warder finally manages to escape after killing the warder accidentally, yet violently.

Although, in developing the notion of the eastern, Eisele is mainly concerned with identifying the “narrative attributes that are prototypically found in easterns” (73) as well

⁴ I am grateful to Dr. Barry K. Grant for drawing my attention to Eisele’s article.

as categorizing them into several sub-genres,⁵ his analysis also outlines several ways in which the West “reaffirms” its own identity in easterns. One of the main implications of Eisele’s work is that the eastern, as a part of “Hollywood Orientalism,” invests in, as Eisele puts it, “the longstanding European tradition of using the East as a sounding board for the creation of myths of identity” (91). The narrative attributes of easterns, Eisele notes:

involve the creation (or the recreation) of an identity, a reconstitution of the self in conflict with another, which initially involves a dispossession. This is played out in various ways: as a separation from the homeland, as an abduction, or as a reduction (to slavery or imprisonment). In general, the dispossession is of the (European) self by the Arab other, which is (generally) overcome and the “true” self restored, reconstituted, or recast. (77)

Although Eisele’s discussion of the eastern is mostly limited to narrative analysis, his remarks concerning the genre are parallel to Edward Said’s elaborations on the Western discursive formation that Said names “Orientalism.”

Orientalism is, as Matthew Bernstein notes, “a strand of colonialist discourse” (2) and a Western system of representation, which constructs the Orient as an object of knowledge so that it can be appropriated by the West. In this respect, Said suggests that more than being an objective category “the Oriental” is a discursive construction necessary for the constitution of the Western subject as superior. Said stresses that Orientalism is not “an airy European fantasy about the Orient.” It is rather a “system of knowledge about the Orient” that strategically invests in the European historical struggle for hegemony over the Orient. In other words, as Said claims, “Orientalism depends for its strategy on this flexible positional superiority, which puts the Westerner in a whole

⁵ Eisele names those narrative attributes as “transgression,” “abduction,” “reduction,” “induction,” “seduction,” “redemption,” “revelation,” “reaffirmation,” and “mutilation.” The sub-genres that he identifies are “sheik,” “Arabian nights,” “foreign legion,” and “terrorist.”

series of possible relationships with the Orient without ever losing him the relative upper hand” (7).

Based on the short theoretical framework presented above with reference to Eisele and Said’s works, I argue that Midnight Express is an eastern, the discursive constructions of which are parallel to the Orientalist discourse. Using Said’s terminology, it could be argued that Midnight Express is a filmic text shaped according to “a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between ‘the Orient’ and ... ‘the Occident’” (2) where the relationship between the two is conceived only as “a relationship of power and domination” (5).⁶ Starting from the basic distinction between the West (Occident) and the East (Orient), particularly the Islamic Orient, the film reproduces the East as its Other and deals with it by “making statements about it,” “authorizing views of it,” or “describing it” in a way that serves to reiterate the old idea of “European [Occidental] superiority over Oriental backwardness” (3-7).

As several theoreticians and scholars have noted, the representation of the Orient on film dates back to the silent era (Bernstein 3, Eisele 68-71). The early films depicted foreign cultures as exotic, primitive, erotic, and dangerous lands where the Western heroes and heroines engaged in a variety of adventures. Orientalism in early cinema appears to be a strand of what Stam and Spence call “filmic colonialism” (634).

However, as Said emphasizes and Bernstein summarizes:

Orientalism is distinguished from colonialist discourse in part by its initial focus on North Africa and the eastern Mediterranean and more significantly by its basis in the historical threat that Islamic culture represented to western Europe. For the Ottoman Empire’s very existence had cast Islam in the Western eye as a symbol

⁶ Turkey was never directly colonized. However it was subjected to the economic and cultural colonialism/imperialism of the United States in the post-colonial period (Erdogan and Kaya [Mutlu] 47-9). In this respect, with some pushing, Midnight Express can also be regarded as a post-colonial text that represents the colonized from the perspective of the colonizer.

of “terror, devastation, the demonic” wreaked by “hordes of hated barbarians”; Orientalism served to control and domesticate such a fearful yet fascinating prospect. (2-3)

As a narrative set in Turkey, a Middle Eastern country where ninety per cent of the population consists of Muslim Turks, the emphasis on Islam serves as a distinguishing discursive strategy in Midnight Express as well. Throughout the course of the narrative various Islamic motifs (e.g. the mosque, headscarf, prayer call) emphasize the point that, like in any eastern, the locale is not only “not-America” (Eisele 73), but, more importantly, a Muslim country.

This emphasis on Islam as a distinctive aspect of the locale is most obvious in the beginning scenes. The film opens with an establishing shot of an urban space near the sea early in the morning. A huge mosque with a large dome and long minarets in the background dominates the frame. Although the image seen is reminiscent of typical tourist vistas of İstanbul, the foggy texture in gray and red tones, which is accompanied by a tense deriving score mixed with the cries of seagulls, give it a mysterious and unsettling atmosphere. On that scenery the film superimposes the titles “the following is based on a true story” and “it began on October 6, 1970 in İstanbul, Turkey.” This opening scene, more than simply introducing the locale as “not-America,” “Otherizes” it anxiously as a Muslim place, pregnant with danger.

Immediately after this scene the film introduces Hayes in a hotel room wrapping hashish plaques around his waist. In the following short scenes he is presented as a crazy young man preparing to leave İstanbul where he has been on holiday with his girlfriend Susan (Irene Miracle). As Hayes prepares for the departure in the air terminal and gazes around, a series of consecutive shots show other people in the terminal: (1) (Medium

shot) a shoe-shiner and, just behind him, a woman wearing a black headscarf and a policeman sitting side by side; (2) (close up) two old women wearing black headscarves; (3) (medium shot) a group of male and female passengers in modern Western clothes sitting and waiting; (4) (close up) a Turkish soldier walking; (5) (medium shot) a tea-man carrying tea in special small glasses on a special tray. These shots initiate the Western spectator, who is identified with Hayes, into a culture that is foreign to him/her. However, I argue that, beyond “describing” that culture, these shots construct a particular image of the Other in a very short time through carefully chosen symbols. In this respect, Hayes’s gaze/vision becomes the point of origin of a discourse which posits Turkey as the Other on a number of axes: the exotic Other (shoe-shiner, tea and tea-man, “arabesque” Turkish music on the sound track), the religious Other (women in black headscarves and their contrast with modern passengers), and the political Other (policeman and soldier).

The construction of the setting as the space of the Other continues after the introduction of Hayes’s girlfriend at the same air terminal. Hayes is seen in close up, gazing at the security guard at the passport control. Within the same frame we see, behind Hayes, a dark man with a dark moustache who wears the white cap that Muslim men usually wear when praying. The man is talking to someone outside the frame. He always remains within the frame, even after Susan enters the frame and starts talking with Hayes. The sequence concludes with the close-up of a policeman and another woman in black headscarf sitting back to back. The face of the woman is cropped by the frame. It could be argued that the film combines the black headscarf with the police uniform, which are the most repeated motifs throughout the sequence, and presents them as a short-cut symbol of the two faces of this “Otherized” territory, which support each other. The last

two shots mentioned above especially underscore that what is important for the discourse relayed by the sequence is not to know/understand the Other, namely the Muslim Turkish subject, or more generally the Easterner - not what he says or whom he is talking with (the man framed behind Hayes), or where she is looking at (the woman in headscarf whose face is cropped) - but rather how s/he “is (seen as) different” from the Western subject.

For the sophisticated audience familiar with Turkish history, the film presents Turkey as the Other in a more particular sense as well. As Hayes moves from the waiting hall to the washroom of the air terminal and tries to cool down there, the film bridges the Ottoman Empire and the modern Turkish Republic through a set of images on the walls of the washroom. Next to the mirror is shown an “Ata flag”⁷ combining the Turkish national flag with the image of Atatürk, the founder of modern Turkey. Seen through the mirror, on the sidewall there is a picture depicting İstanbul’s Bosphorus Bridge⁸ on which a small portrait of Sultan Mehmet II, the Ottoman conqueror of İstanbul (Constantinople) is superimposed.⁹ When the same picture is seen later in the same scene, this time not through the mirror, the portrait of the Sultan is replaced with the portrait of Atatürk. Although this replacement is not very precise, the juxtaposition of Atatürk’s image with the image of the Sultan through the mirror play can be read as a discursive desire to see Turkey not as a new modern regime, but simply as a continuation of the Ottoman empire or to see the Ottoman, the big historical Other of the West, in the image of the Turk regardless of the historical context.

⁷ Ata flag is a small size paper flag still used in the celebration of national days in Turkey.

⁸ In fact, the Bosphorus Bridge was built in 1973. Since the story in the film begins in 1970 this is a mistake.

⁹ Even if the Western spectator may not figure out that it is Sultan Mehmet II he/she can see at least that it is a Sultan due to the cap.

One of the promotional texts included in the press kit of Midnight Express suggests that the bridging of Ottomans and Turks as described above was not random. While recounting the history of Fort St. Elmo, the shooting location, the text draws an analogy between “the Knights of the Order of St. John of Jerusalem,” who successfully defended the Fort against “the Turks” in the historical “Siege of 1965,” and Hayes. It reads: “Now, once again the same site of that heroic defense is the location for “Midnight Express,” the story of one man’s fight against – the Turks!” As the statement does not distinguish between the Turks represented in the film and the Ottomans, the word “Turks” stands for Ottomans throughout the text as does the term “Turkey” for the “Ottoman Empire.” Furthermore, in the end, the piece not only equates Ottomans with Turks or Turks with Ottomans but also equates both with barbarism:

After completing production, the film company restored the Fort to its former appearance and it is a prison no more – the second and final Turkish occupation of Fort St. Elmo has come and gone, but without destruction and bloodshed this time. And “Midnight Express,” another story of a successful fight “against the odds,” has been completed” (“Against the Odds.”)

It could be argued that this “way of seeing,” which is already implicit in the washroom scene described above, serves as a basis for the brutalities that the Western characters are subjected to in the prison in the remainder of the film. Hayes is arrested by Turkish security guards just before boarding the plane to the United States during an occasional check due to recent hijack events. After an unsuccessful attempt to escape, during his cooperation with the Turkish police in their fight against the drug trade, he is put into İstanbul’s Sagmalcilar Prison. The remaining part of the film, which describes Hayes’s “hellish nightmare”¹⁰ in the prison, could also be regarded as the story of the sadistic, cruel prison warder Hamidou, another cinematic “terrible Turkish executioner.”

¹⁰ This is an expression used on the cover of the first video release of the film.

As Méliès's 1905 film shows, the image of the despotic and barbaric Turk in cinema dates back to the silent period. Moreover, as Simon Shephard's statement quoted below implies, this image even precedes the invention of cinema. Shephard points out that during the Renaissance period Ottomans as Turks represented one of "the infidel powers which neighboured and threatened European Christendom." He notes:

The word "Turk" was mainly used in two ways, as a generic name for an Islamic State with its own characteristic institutions of Government and military; and as a description of behaviour or character –the Turks 'being of nature cruel and heartless' (...) The idea of cruelty was probably produced by the Turks' distant foreignness combined with an absence from their lives of comprehensible Christian ethics, but more importantly by their military threat. (qtd. in Zaim)

It could be argued that Midnight Express invests in this historical image of the cruel, barbaric Turk, especially through the character of the chief guard Hamidou who clubs the prisoners throughout the film.¹¹

The Turkish characters in the prison also bear affinities to the Arab stereotype in other Hollywood films. This parallels Jack Shaheen's remark that Western moviemakers have had the tendency of "depicting Arabs and Muslims as one and the same people," in other words, projecting "all Arabs as Muslims and all Muslims as Arabs" (4). In another study focusing on the Arab image in the media, Allen L. Woll and Randall M. Miller argue that the Arab image has been used as "a metaphor for anti-Western values" since the silent era. They note:

The movie Arabs ... have appeared as lustful, criminal, and exotic villains or foils to Western heroes and heroines. They represent a religion, Islam, supposedly at war with Judaism and Christianity and a religion at war with Western concepts of political economy and order. (179)

¹¹ Kamil Aydın notes that "the appalling prison conditions and the ill-treatment of prisoners by the Turkish security forces" also appear as popular motifs in Western detective fiction set in Turkey, especially in the second half of the 20th century (89).

However, with regard to the representation of Arabs in Hollywood films, Eisele points to an important shift in the 1970s. He argues that before the Arab character could be the hero, the identification character, as well as the villain, whereas the 1970s witnessed the ‘development from “identification with” to “disidentification against” the Arab other.’¹²

Midnight Express depicts the Turkish characters in stereotypic terms as being primitive, dirty, irrational, unreliable, and cruel, which is reminiscent of the Arab stereotype. Another characteristic attributed to Turks is sexual perversity, which becomes more explicit in Hamidou’s attempt to sodomize Hayes towards the end of the film.¹³ While the film affirms Hayes as a heterosexual, most explicitly in the scene where he declines Eric’s homosexual advances, it attributes homosexuality negatively to the Other, to the Turk. Susan White uses the term “Hollywood Orientalism” to refer to Hollywood’s tendency “to conflate Eastern culture with corrupt sexuality, a degraded or treacherous femininity and male homoeroticism” (qtd. in McLean 132). Shohat notes that one of the recurrent images in postcolonial films has been the figure of the “Arab rapist” from whom a Western or non-Western woman is rescued by the Western hero (39). In Midnight Express the “Arab rapist” is replaced with “Turkish sodomite,” but the film’s fantasy space is still parallel to that of Hollywood Orientalism in terms of sexuality.

As opposed to the Turkish characters, the Western characters are depicted as good victims, namely British Max, American Jimmy, and Swedish Eric. The dialogue between

¹² Eisele particularly points to the emergence of a sub-genre in that period, which he names “the terrorist subgenre,” in which “the Arab is almost without exception antagonistic and his pure evil is counterpoised with the pure good of a European hero, or more often an American” (71).

¹³ Aydın remarks that in addition to brutality and savagery, sexual perversion is one of the major constituents of the Turkish stereotype in travel literature and detective fiction of the 20th century. Films such as Lawrence of Arabia (David Lean, 1962) and Midnight Express introduced that stereotype to a mass audience. Aydın notes that the origin of the emphasis on “Turkish interest in perversion such as sodomy” lies in “the sensual and exotic representation of stories of the [Ottoman] harem” described in travel accounts (100).

these characters and Hayes function like a filter through which the spectator apprehends prison life, as well as Turkey and the Turkish legal system from a particular perspective. Moreover, Hayes's over-voice communicating the content of his letters, in which he describes his negative impressions and feelings to Susan intermittently, almost functions like a commentary. Since the implied and actual reader of the letters are Western subjects, these letters make explicit that, parallel to the Orientalist discourse in general, the discourse of the film enunciated by the Western subjects constructs a particular image of the Other to be consumed by the Western subject. In this respect, another important character in the film is Hayes's father (Mike Kellin), who visits his son in the prison and struggles to get him out. While the spectator perceives life inside of the prison from the perspective of Western inmates, s/he gets additional views about the life outside in Istanbul through the Father's viewpoint. Consider the following dialogue between Hayes and his father:

Hayes: Where you staying, Dad?

Father: The Hilton

Hayes: How do you like it? İstanbul?

Father: Well, it's an interesting city... Tell you the truth, I think the food is lousy. The crap they sell in these little restaurants. I went out to eat in one of them last night, and I had to run to the damn toilet... You should have seen the toilet.

Hayes: You mean you got toilets?

Father: Yeah, with real toilet paper and you don't have to use both sides... So now I'm eating at the Hilton every night.

This dialogue implies that the Western discourse does not simply construct Turkey as its negative Other. More importantly, in doing so it constructs itself as the positive. In other words, the negative image of Turkey or the Turk, or the Easterner more generally, attains its meaning only from its opposition to "the clean" Westerner or West in general, and to the American in particular.

While the Western characters are placed at the point of discursive origin, as described above, the Turkish characters are ripped of their discourse by avoiding subtitles for the Turkish dialogue. The lack of subtitles positions the spectator as Hayes and implies that the film addresses the Western subject as its spectator. This mechanism is parallel to Springer's observation regarding the action-adventure genre set in the third world:

Action-adventure films ... contribute the convention of placing a Western, usually male, protagonist in the center of third world settings. ... These films ... typically position the spectator in the role of cultural outsider by virtue of techniques that encourage identification with the protagonist ... they are concerned with constructing white Western male subjectivity. (167-8)

The avoidance of subtitles for Turkish dialogue appears to be one of the most effective techniques that function the same way. Along with reducing the Turkish speech to unintelligible sounds for the Western spectator, other discursive elements such as the Muslim prayer call and Turkish traditional songs are recontextualized as barbaric cries through their juxtaposition with the acts of violence at several moments of the film. Moreover, the film encodes the Turkish language not simply as a foreign language, but as a negative attribute suggesting inferiority and primitiveness, in that it is used to mark the process of dehumanization that Hayes goes through. After spending several months in Section 13 for the criminally insane, Hayes is visited by Susan in a special room. The first word Hayes spells as he sees Susan is a Turkish word, "çıkart," meaning "take it off," which Hayes repeats. As Susan unbuttons her shirt and presses her naked breasts onto the glass partition that separates the two, Hayes begins to masturbate while spelling certain words in Turkish. While Susan cries, the spectator shares her pity for Hayes who has almost lost his humanity, and, more importantly, become the Turk, the Other.

Along with the negative associations attributed to the Turkish language, the discourse it produces is encoded as a false and threatening discourse. This argument can be supported by a brief look at the character of Rifki and his diegetic fate. As a stoolpigeon, Rifki is the only Turkish character in the prison who speaks both in Turkish and in English. Throughout the film his discourse does nothing but cause physical harm to Hayes, Max, and Jimmy. Finally, when he denounces Max, which leads to his brutal punishment by Hamidou, Hayes goes mad. He beats Rifki to death, blinds his eyes with his fingers, and bites out his tongue and spits it out. On a metonymical level the eyes (medium of vision) and the mouth (medium of speech) that have become the target of Hayes's revenge can be regarded as sources of discourse.¹⁴ In this respect, this cathartic scene can be read as the punishment and elimination of the "corrupt," "wrong," and "dangerous" voice/discourse of the Other as well as his access to the language of the Western subject. Moreover, the film explicitly announces that the vision and the discourse of Turks are defective in a more general sense through the speech Hayes offers in the Turkish courtroom after his sentence has been changed to a life sentence:

"So now it's time for me to speak ... What is crime, what is punishment? It seems to vary from time to time, and place to place. What's legal today is suddenly illegal tomorrow because some society insists it's so; and what's illegal yesterday is suddenly legal because everybody is doing it and you can't put everybody in jail ... I spent three-and-a-half years of my life in your prison, and I think I paid for my error ... I just wish you could be standing where I am standing right now ... because then you would know something you don't know Mr. Prosecutor, mercy. You would know the concept of a society is based on the quality of that mercy, of its sense of fair play, its sense of justice. But I guess that's like asking a bear to shit in a toilet... For a nation of pigs, it sure is funny you don't eat them. Jesus Christ forgave the bastards, but I can't. I hate you, I hate your nation, I hate your people. And I fuck your sons and daughters because they're pigs, you're a pig, you're all pigs."

¹⁴ Rifki is already blind in one eye so he already has defective vision.

While the long speech of the Turkish prosecutor in which he explains why Hayes should be given a life sentence (i.e. to prove to the world Turkey's determination to eliminate drug smuggling so that the international criticisms directed toward Turkey on drug related issues could be eliminated) has not been translated and treated simply like a scary voice, Hayes offers his speech without any interruption. The Turkish judge does not even ask for its translation. He simply says, "My hands are tied from Ankara," which is translated for Hayes. The judge appears to be the only sympathetic Turkish character in the film, but he proves to be impotent. The selectivity of the film in terms of translation of the Turkish dialogue outside the prison suggests that the Western subject constructed by the film does not want to hear the Other's discourse unless what he says affirms the Westerners' vision.

Eisele remarks that in general all Easterns, independent of their representation of the foreign land as a hell or heaven, end by "reaffirming the allure of the West, the dominant culture" (86). Midnight Express ends with Hayes escaping from the prison by disguising himself as a guard. A written statement superimposed on the screen reads that he crossed the border to Greece on October 4, 1975 and arrived home at Kennedy Airport three weeks later. Black-and-white stills depicting Hayes's happy reunion with his family and Susan at the airport close the narrative. Parallel to what Shohat calls a "colonial rescue fantasy" in which the white man rescues himself or the white woman from the cannibal Other (39), Hayes, in the end, rescues himself from the sadistic, sodomite, corrupt Turk and the film reaffirms the cultural superiority of the West, particularly of the United States, from its Hilton to its laws and families.

The analysis above underscores the film's Orientalist discourse, which affirms the superiority of the Westerner by constructing the Muslim Easterner as inferior on a number of axes (e.g. food, prison system, legal system, everyday life and social relations), as one of the channels of pleasure for the Western spectator. By seeing on the screen an image of the Other as "lacking," the spectator, who identifies with Hayes, can affirm his/her fullness. A theoretical framework such as this enables the researcher to situate Midnight Express within a broader body of works and connect its discourse to a historical discursive trend. However, it disregards the specificity of Midnight Express as a text among so many Orientalist texts. In other words, the analysis above suffers from a problem that is inherent in Said's theory of Orientalism itself, which does not give room for the possibility of difference within Orientalist discourse.

Homi Bhabha has argued that the theory of Orientalism "could be extended to engage with the alterity and ambivalence of Orientalist discourse" (71). Reading the notion of "the stereotype" in terms of Freud's account of fetishism, Bhabha suggests that the negative Orientalist stereotype, as a category, is much more unstable and ambivalent than Said's theory allows (74). He argues that stereotyping is "a much more ambivalent text of projection and introjection, metaphoric and metonymic strategies, displacement, over determination, guilt, aggressivity, the masking and splitting 'official' and phantasmatic knowledges..." (81-2). Instead of using psychoanalysis, as Bhabha does, a consideration of Midnight Express within the social context of 1970s American culture, as I have done in the previous chapter, would also highlight the ambivalence of its discourse towards the Other as well as pointing to one of the distinguishing aspects of the film among other Orientalist texts. As has been argued in Chapter Two, at the time of its

release in the United States Midnight Express could also be read as a cautionary tale. Moreover, Hayes can be seen as a stereotype of 1970s American youth who enjoyed a hippie lifestyle, used drugs, travelled abroad for self-discovery or adventure, resisted their parents' values... The film sends him to an imaginary nightmare in which he would learn how to "be a good boy" and then reunite happily with his family.¹⁵ This is also the very point where the film's ambivalence towards the Other becomes most explicit.

There is a scene in the film where Hamidou clubs a group of Turkish child prisoners on their feet as he has done to Hayes before. Hamidou beats the children in front of his own sons, who are the same age as the other boys, and then asks, addressing his sons: "Have you seen what happens when one is not a good boy?" Although this sentence is spoken in Turkish, without subtitles and therefore inaccessible to the Western spectator, its message implicitly echoes through the entire film. In this respect, another dominant subject position that the film constructs is that of the "Father"¹⁶ - but there are two fathers in the film. Therefore, the film still leaves room for the identification of the Western spectator with Hamidou (the Other), despite all his negative attributes. In other words, in the film's imaginary, the East, in Robert Young's words, "operates as both poison and cure" for the West (140). What is represented as the "poison" throughout the narrative, the "terrible Turk" (Hamidou), becomes the "cure" of the Western subject: The Turk teaches Hayes to affirm the Father's rule. Based on that, borrowing Young's words about Orientalism in general which is parallel to Bhabha's views, it could be argued that Orientalist discourse in Midnight Express does not simply "misrepresent the Orient," but

¹⁵ This is not to say that the filmmakers intended Midnight Express as such. I am saying rather that the film allows such a reading.

¹⁶ There is a strong family subtext in the film symbolized by emotional dialogue between Hayes and his father.

“represents the West’s own internal dislocation, misrepresented as an external dualism between East and West” (139-40).¹⁷

¹⁷ I am indebted to Dr. Jim Leach for his suggestions and comments on a broader version of the section on Orientalist discourse in Midnight Express.

CHAPTER FOUR: INITIAL RECEPTION OF MIDNIGHT EXPRESS

This chapter examines initial reception of Midnight Express in Europe, the United States, and Turkey by focusing on the reviews published in the press between 1978 and 1979. It begins with an analysis of thirty-four reviews collected from European and American newspapers and periodicals and continues with an analysis of five reviews/opinion pieces that appeared in the Turkish press.¹ Although limited, the response of the Turkish authorities abroad, which was reported in the foreign press, is also considered.

Reception of Midnight Express by the European and American Press

The earliest review of Midnight Express was published in Films Illustrated in January 1978, three months before the film's first screening at Cannes. The review consisted of brief notes about the filmmakers, the main actor, and the subject matter of the film and was written by an anonymous author from a neutral standpoint. What is important about that review within the framework of this study is that it conveys one of the earliest media constructions of the film's "preferred" meaning. The review read: "The new film ... is a telling indictment of the plight of thousands of young people – jailed for long periods for relatively minor drug offences - in filthy jails around the world" (185). This preferred meaning was parallel to Parker's intention, declared in "an open letter to his crew shortly before he began directing Midnight Express," which the reviewer quoted in detail. The last paragraph of the letter read: "In short Midnight Express is a film about hypocrisies of drug offence penalties, brutalities of prison life, the nearer verges of

¹ The limited number of reviews and opinion pieces in the Turkish press must be due to the ban on the screening of the film in Turkey.

insanity, growing up and, above all, about never losing hope” (185). Parker also stated in an interview: “Drug penalties around the world are inconsistent, and I think it valuable that we debate that, examine it, and consider its implications” (qtd. in Umberger 66). Remembering that youth jailed outside their countries for drug offences was one of the social problems of the seventies, it could be argued that the author’s and Parker’s statements positioned Midnight Express as a timely social problem film, which looked at the problem from the standpoint of youth.² However, as is examined below, the majority of the reviews that appeared in the French and British press in the aftermath of the Cannes screening (May 18, 1978) and London opening (August 10, 1978), and in the American press in the aftermath of the American opening (October 5, 1978) read into the film other meanings as well.

Thirteen of the reviews were published in newspapers and twenty-one in periodicals. However, publication in a newspaper or periodical does not seem to have had a significant effect on the nature of the reviews. Overall, there were eight affirmative and twenty-six critical reviews. Almost all of the reviewers, whether affirmative or critical, agreed on the film’s artfulness and Parker’s skillfulness. The deviation of the film from the book was also an accepted fact among them.³ The reviews diverged especially on the basis of the subject matter of the film, or, to put it differently, in terms of their reading of preferred meaning(s) of the film and the way the filmmakers dealt with Hayes’s story. It is possible to identify four issues that form the main axes of the Midnight Express debate that was constituted by those reviews: the message of the film and its implications,

² As the reviewer remarked, Midnight Express was “a young film,” in that the filmmakers were all in their thirties and the actors in their twenties or early thirties (185).

³ For the most detailed critical comparisons of the book and the film see Lehmann-Haupt, Sarris, Ansen, and Kael.

representation of violence, representation of sexuality, and the film's popular appeal. Though they are not mutually exclusive and jointly exhaustive, below I examine the four issues separately for the purpose of keeping the analysis focused and clear.

The Message: “Universal” or “Racist”?

A.D. Murphy's review of Midnight Express in Variety appears to be the first one among the film's reviews published in the aftermath of the Cannes screening. It also appears to be the single American review that appeared before the film's American opening. Following the Cannes screening, the film was reviewed mostly in French and British newspapers and periodicals. These European reviews, as well as Variety's review, suggest that critics generally disliked and/or disapproved of Midnight Express especially in terms of the filmmakers' approach to the subject matter, which was, in the critics' words, “racist,” “xenophobic,” or “prejudiced.”

Remarking that “acceptance of the film depends a lot on forgetting several things,” Murphy described Midnight Express as a “muddled and moralizing screenplay which, in true Anglo-American fashion, wrings hands over alien cultures as though our civilization is absolutely perfect” (27). While Murphy argued that Turkey is “no more guilty of penal corruption and brutality than, say, the U.S., U.K., France, Germany, etc.,” the French film critics Bernard Bolan from Cahiers du Cinéma and Hubert Niogret from Positif called Midnight Express “in effect, if not in intention,” “racist.” Although Bolan acknowledged that the film had the function of warning the West, especially youth, against the multiplicity of international laws, he named its representation of “the Other,” namely the Turks, as being “racist.” He wrote: “These Turks are not Turks but the

abstract and undifferentiated signs of the Other [inspiring] hatred” (29).⁴ Niogret appreciated the film’s intention, which he interpreted as follows: “to show the injustice in some justices that sentence someone to life for a 3000-dollar smuggling because he has become a pawn in a political chess game.” However, Niogret continued, the film contradicted its intention by celebrating Hayes’s criminal acts while depicting all Turks as being “vile brutal sadists.” Moreover, Hayes’s courtroom speech, “I hate your nation, I hate your people,” according to Niogret, marked the moment when the film turned into “the discourse of an unsupportable racism” (92). Similarly, Bruno Villien, who reviewed the film in the French journal Cinématographe, associated it with “anti-Turk racism” (79). Later, in October, another French critic Fabien Gastellier argued in Jeune Cinéma that although “one would like to believe in Parker that he made that film to denounce the life conditions of all the prisoners of the world,” in the end what he produced was “a product of manicheism and absolute fascism.” In particular, Hayes’s courtroom speech that, in Gastellier’s words, “spit on a people” more than “accusing a repressive mechanism of justice,” was, according to Gastellier, “a racist discourse as a whole” (42). A distinguishing aspect of the French reviewers among others was their explicit use of the terms “racist” and “racism” and discussion of the film mainly on the basis of the issue of race. Although I did not have the opportunity to search the French newspapers due to availability problems, a Turkish researcher, Kemal Çevik, had noted that Midnight Express was framed as a “racist” film in Le Matin (05.19.1978), Le Nouvel Observateur (09.11.1978), Télérama (09.16.1978), Le Canard Enchaîné (09.20.1978), and Le Monde (09.19.1978) as well (132-3). The sensitivity of the French press to Midnight Express’s “racism” might be explained in terms of France’s political history, social structure, and

⁴ All translations from French are mine unless otherwise indicated.

legislation. At least, the prohibition of racism by the law and the multiplicity of anti-racist associations formed by ethnic groups in France (Çevik 131-2) highlight that “racism” had been established as a serious matter within the social and political consciousness of France.

Although he did not use the term “racist” or “racism,” the British critic David Robinson from the Times described Midnight Express along similar lines. He identified “nationalist hatred” to be the film’s “most unappealing aspect” and noted: ‘The Turks are characterized by the hero [Hayes] as “a nation of pigs” and the film only supports the thesis’ (“Cannes” 11). Robinson reiterated the same argument when he re-reviewed Midnight Express after the London opening and added a new term into the critical vocabulary about the film: “xenophobia.” He wrote: “Though the film is hardly likely to promote the Turkish tourist industry, it seems less dangerous to the Turks than to Anglo-Saxons, who will find their own worst and most fearful xenophobia reinforced” (“Picking” 7). Philip Bergson from Times Educational Supplement was another British critic underscoring Midnight Express’s “racism.” He described the film as “a supremely negative epic ... spiced with an unc customary dash of racism” (12). Finally, independent of the issue of racism, Barbara De Lord from Films and Filming questioned the morality of the film, “if there was one”:

Alan Parker showed that his heart was in the right place ... but unfortunately never seemed to have made up his mind where the right place was. The film diffuses its anger against too many targets to be effective, seeming to end up saying that drug laws are all wrong, Turkey is a bad place, prisons are nasty and it’s OK to kill people to get out of one. The morality of the film remained highly dubious despite the skill with which it was made. (26)

I came across only one affirmative review published before the film's American opening. Written for the Sunday Times by an anonymous author, the review does not seem to be simply aimed at affirming Midnight Express, but more importantly at defending it against the French and British critics' accusations of racism:

"Midnight Express" is not, repeat not (as one French newspaper claimed) a fascist picture. It is not, as one British critic alleged at a seminar last week, a meretricious piece of work ... In fact, as Parker himself hopes and believes, "Midnight Express" ... is a film about injustice. What upset the French when it was shown at the Cannes Festival was a splenetic outburst by the prisoner facing a life sentence in which he describes his Turkish prosecutors and jailers as "pigs." Some of us, reflects Parker, might have used even harsher terms in the circumstances: "But he wasn't referring to the Turkish people as a whole, only to those responsible for their bloody awful legal system. ("Alan Parker" 35)

The quotation above highlights the formation of the first controversy around the issue of racism - and more importantly the influence of the European, especially the French, critics on that point: "Is Midnight Express a racist film or a good-intentioned statement about injustice as a universal theme?" As will be seen later, the controversy would gain new directions with the reviews in the American press. Moreover, the quotation shows the extent to which Midnight Express could produce controversial or even contradictory readings.

From the standpoint of the affirmative reviews, most of which appeared after the film's American release, Midnight Express was a film with a political message with universal appeal. Like the quotation above, other affirmative reviews that appeared after the film's American opening interpreted Midnight Express as a film about injustice, particularly as a "crime versus punishment" story or as being about related themes such as "mercy," "emancipation," and "human resilience." According to E. Perchaluk, who reviewed Midnight Express in Independent Film Journal, the film was "possibly the best

movie about crime and punishment and people and politics since “Z” [Costa-Gavras, 1969]” (46). Rob Edelman argued in Films in Review:

Midnight Express is certainly no travelogue for Turkey, which is depicted as little more than subhuman ... But Midnight Express is a film with a message: at first, Hayes is an irresponsible kid who “never takes anything seriously”; he learns from his suffering that the quality of a society is based on how it determines what is crime and punishment, and how mercifully it metes out justice. (635)

Charles Champlin from the Los Angeles Times, agreed that the courtroom scene was “the weakest” scene of the film because it was “unconvincing as fact,” and “unpersuasively said” (11). Nevertheless, he defended the film by pointing to the imbalance between the crime and the punishment:

There is never any suggestion that Hayes is innocent. He was guilty and got caught and was prepared, like any well-taught American boy, to pay the price. But what a price it became. (1,11)

Hash smuggling is a fool’s game there or anywhere else, but it is also an item of American faith (inconsistently observed when it comes to drugs) that the punishment ought to fit the crime, as it did not in Hayes’ case. (11)

As will be seen later, the Americanist rhetoric which is explicit in Champlin’s statements was another criticized aspect of the film itself. Late in January 1979, the French critic Janick Beaulieu reacted to the criticisms of racism in his review in Séquence by using a more politicized rhetoric. He argued that since the entire film was seen from Hayes’s viewpoint one could understand his aggressiveness in the face of the “absurd situation.” The film, according to Beaulieu, dealt with the universal problems regarding prison conditions, penal codes, and injustice. Therefore, he argued, rather than “desiring to destroy the film,” and “before yelling at Turkish, British, and American racism,” “we should humanize our own penal institutions” (41).

In addition to the affirmative readings above, Midnight Express was appreciated as a cautionary tale. Vogue critic Rex Reed, who presented Midnight Express as “a haunting story – especially, because it’s true,” noted:

The film holds interest because it shows how much more terrible was the punishment than the crime, and it ends up serving a warning to all kids who think it’s a kick to smuggle drugs out of countries where they are easily obtainable. If the film acts as a successful deterrent, it has served a large purpose. (62)

Even Christian Science Monitor reviewer David Sterritt, who described the film as “one of the most relentlessly grim movies in memory” and complained that the violent events made the viewer “feel more exhausted than enlightened,” argued that “Midnight Express cannot be ignored” because: “it has a cautionary value – it is hard to imagine anyone contemplating the most minor or causal involvement with drug traffic after witnessing the awesome wages of Hayes’s law-breaking” (26).⁵ It seems that the filmmakers did not mean Midnight Express to be a cautionary tale. As has been stated, it is more likely that it was intended as a critique of the harshness of the punishment imposed upon young Americans jailed abroad on “minor” drug offences. However, although the filmmakers tried to look at the issue from the standpoint of “young boys,” the film’s interpretation as a cautionary tale suggests that it could also be read from the perspective of “fathers.”

Despite the existence of affirmative reviews such as the above, Midnight Express mostly garnered negative criticism from American critics as well. John Coleman from New Statesman noted: “Man’s inhumanity to man, the illogic of various courts and judiciaries, are daily TV fare, after all. An unpleasant piece of work, of dubious intent” (191). The film was criticized especially in terms of its depiction of the Turks or, more

⁵ Sterritt’s review appears to be the only review that one can call “ambivalent.” The film’s capacity to cause ambivalence, even in a conservative mind, which is implicit here, might have contributed to its popular appeal.

generally, the non-Americans. However, although the American reviewers criticized the film along the same lines as European critics did, most of them avoided the term “racist” or “racism” and preferred the term “xenophobic” or “xenophobia.” Moreover, they used less sophisticated and more ironic rhetoric - even vulgar in some cases. Newsweek critic David Ansen emphasized “the film’s eagerness to arouse the worse xenophobic fantasies” by building sympathy for Western characters while depicting, “all the others - prisoners and guards alike - ... as little better than animals” (81). Pauline Kael from New Yorker called Midnight Express “anti-Turkish” and argued that Parker worked in “xenophobic terms” by “indicting a whole people on the presumption that the brutality of prison guards represents the national way of life” (499). Peter Biskind also referred in his review in Cineaste to the “xenophobia” of the film and pointed out the depiction of Americans as “essentially innocent and good-hearted,” and “the rest of the world” as “irredeemably corrupt” (45). All three critics referred to Hayes’s denunciation of Turks as “a nation of pigs” in particular. Biskind wrote:

Every Turk in the film is either a creep or a sadist, and when the put-upon hero, an All-American kid ... delivers an impassioned harangue against all things Turkish (Turkey is “a nation of pigs”), we’re supposed to applaud. Indeed, after two hours of beatings, knifings, and general mayhem inflicted on clean-cut Billy Hayes ... by fat foreigners, the impulse to run to the nearest McDonalds is almost overwhelming. (44)

Avoiding both the terms “racist” or “xenophobic,” the New York Times critic Christopher Lehmann-Haupt interpreted Hayes’s denunciation of the Turks as “a nation of pigs” as his “waging what verges on a Holy War against the people of Turkey” (247). Similarly, another critic from the New York Times, Janet Maslin, described Hayes’s courtroom speech as a “grotesque tirade” and criticized the film’s “prejudice” in depicting Turks while affirming Hayes’s negative acts (e.g. drug smuggling, tongue

biting, killing the chief guard) (1). Village Voice critic Andrew Sarris ironically pointed to the film's potential of functioning as a cautionary tale for, as he put it, "young Americans who have been indoctrinated by the drug culture that the only pigs in the world reside in these United States" (71), whereas Judith Martin from the Washington Post questioned the film's capacity to function as a cautionary tale since Hayes did not seem to get anything from his imprisonment "except that Turkey is 'a nation of pigs.'" Martin argued:

That ignorance of the law is no excuse, even if it's compounded with stupidity, is the unmistakable moral to be made from "Midnight Express" ... But it doesn't seem to have been the point intended by the filmmakers. With not only the obvious viewpoint of the person who had the experience to go on, lurid atrocities have been added to fashion what seems intended to be a tale of outrage at the barbaric treatment of a normal American boy. (21)

Gary Arnold, another critic from the Washington Post, argued, "the story might also be interpreted as an ironic study of American cultural chauvinism during the period of the Vietnam War." Arnold criticized Parker's "sensationalistic" depiction of Hayes as "a cherubic victim of Turkish barbarity" and remarked:

Where does Parker's fanatical animus against the Turks originate? Does he hold a grudge because of Lawrence of Arabia, perhaps? ... "Midnight Express" has already been banned in Turkey and may cause both Columbia and the Motion Picture Association a good deal of embarrassment. At the very least, Columbia might drop the boastful epilogue, in which the filmmakers take credit for inspiring a prisoner-exchange treaty between Turkey and the United States that resulted from several years of diplomatic negotiation. "Midnight Express" sets a new standard in shamelessness. (6)

It must be noted that the reviewers who criticized Midnight Express, whether they are French, British, or American, did not mean that the film was not about injustice, harsh punishment of drug offences, hard life conditions in some prisons around the world, and the value of mercy, or that it was not a cautionary tale. Rather it is implicit in their

arguments that they took those as the manifest meanings “preferred” by the film text and the filmmakers. The interpretations of those critics could be regarded, to some extent, as ideological readings bringing to light what was “latent” in Midnight Express.⁶

Nevertheless there appear to be certain national differences in the content and style of reviews. First, as has been stated, the selection of the vocabulary is remarkable (i.e. “racist” / “xenophobia” / “cultural chauvinism”). Second, probably because Midnight Express is the story of an American youth, American critics appear to be self-critical in their arguments. While French critics tend to evaluate the film on the basis of concepts and issues that extend beyond the United States and Americans, American critics are more inclined to self-criticism. In other words, American critics not only criticize Midnight Express but also the United States. This self-criticism is quite understandable within the social context of 1970s America, but I will dwell upon this issue after examining the other axes of the debate. For the time being, it might be useful to remember the question that, at some point in their study of the reception of Crash (David Cronenberg, 1996), Barker, Arthurs, and Harindranath have asked in order to point to the possibility of “a new approach to the idea of a ‘national film culture’”: May there be “characteristic ways of understanding and responding to films within different countries?” (24) Although it is too early to offer a clear answer to that question within the framework of this study, the differences between the French and American reviews mentioned above point to the question’s significance.

⁶ Textual analysis, as Annette Kuhn describes, is an “ideological reading” which attempts to reveal how the text naturalizes the operation of ideology that structures it. The ideological reading, Kuhn notes, deconstructs the text and then reconstructs it to bring to light that which was previously hidden (77). Although they do not exhibit either the length and detail or the sophistication of the textual analysis used by scholars in film studies, these critics’ arguments seem to operate on a similar ground.

Representation of Violence

In the open letter he wrote to his crew shortly before beginning to shoot Midnight Express Parker stated that it was his intention “to make a very violent, uncompromisingly brutal film” and that, to achieve that, he was working for “a slightly stylized, powerfully graphic quality documentary with a bizarre theatrical edge.” Parker noted: “I would like the audience to be shaken and shocked that such things happen, almost to the point of disbelief – but never to lose them” (qtd. in “’78” 185). In the end, Midnight Express is a very violent film. Gilles Gourdon explained that the film was proclaimed, on big posters, to be “the rudest film that had ever been shown within the official selection of the Cannes” (27). Lawrence O’Toole’s review in Maclean’s suggests that the violence in the film had worked as Parker planned (i.e. producing belief in the unbelievable), at least for some of the viewers:

It must all appear so histrionic, especially to a culture inured to viewing the rest of the world from remote control. It does seem incredible that human beings treat each other the way they do. But there are Gulags; there were pogroms. Midnight Express violates the safety and sanitation of our sanity. Is it controversial simply because the West has always refused to suspend its disbelief?

To understand what happens to Hayes is to understand the value put on life by other cultures. (66)

In this respect, O’Toole described Midnight Express as “an explosive essay on emancipation.” The continuous brutalities surrounding Hayes and the Western inmates throughout the film, and their graphic quality, appeared to be one of the most influential elements in viewers’ emotional engagement with the film. O’ Toole put this as follows: “Emotionally, the volume’s so high and the story so speedy you feel you’ve been raped by it” (66). Edelman wrote: “Only a person with a hard soul would fail to be moved by Midnight Express” (635). Similarly Reed noted:

It will be a rare audience that can sit through his [Parker's] movie [Midnight Express] without feeling emotional outrage. The brutal conditions inside Turkey's fortress-like Sagamilcar (sic) Prison are so clinically detailed that it often requires a strong stomach to keep one's eyes on the screen; but the torments, the homosexual assaults, and the insanity whirling around the inmates only serve to underscore the resiliency of the human spirit. (62)

However, not all critics were so impressed by the graphic violence in the film. It was especially the American critics who criticized the representation of violence and prison brutalities in Midnight Express. In this respect, the issue of violence appears to be another axis included in the debate by American critics after the film's American opening. The majority of the reviewers complained about the alterations and additions to the film which rendered it much more violent than the book. Lehmann-Haupt noted that the alterations made the film "excessively violent" and "racist" and created a sense of "disbelief" in the viewer (78). Generally, the critics found torture and revenge scenes, especially the scene in which Hayes bites off the tongue of Rifki, too excessive. Sarris noted that the scene was the most talked about, disturbing scene during the Cannes festival (71), whereas Kael remarked that the scene was cheered by the audience during the screening (Kael 497). Ansen ironically pointed to the "deftness" of Parker: "When Billy explodes at the informer Rifki in a scene of flamboyant violence, it's hard not to cheer him on as he bites off the villain's tongue" (81). As is implicit in Ansen's remark, according to critical reviewers, the violence in Midnight Express mainly served to "manipulate" the audience and "exploit" their emotions and fears.

However the reviewers were not critical of the amount of violence per se, but rather of the film's ideology regarding the relation between violence and criminality or innocence. In particular, reviewers criticized the film's affirmation of Hayes's brutal acts by demonizing the Turks. In other words, several critics found the filmmakers' approach

to the notion of “criminality” within the framework of the film biased. In this regard, Biskind interpreted Midnight Express as “an enormously violent, sado-masochistic fairy tale wedded to a new version of a favorite national theme: the American innocent abroad” (44). He especially elaborated on the sadomasochistic “subtext” that he observed in, to put it in his own terms, “this tale of persecuted innocence.” He argued: “The masochistic fantasies of martyrdom establish Billy’s innocence. If he did do anything wrong, surely the punishment exceeds the crime. He’s more sinned against than sinning, and each blow he endures justifies his own resort to violence” (45). Edie Baskin’s review in USA Today was parallel to Biskind’s remarks. Baskin called Midnight Express “manipulative” and explained:

When his sentence is suddenly and outrageously lengthened by 30 years, the viewer feels his terror and anger and wishes him well in anything he has to do to get out of the clutches of these Turkish fiends. As he makes his way out of the prison, or when he brutally deals with a loathsome informer, we feel for him and excuse his excesses because they are motivated by sufficient cause. (64)

Similarly, Steve Umberger noted in his review in the Humanist that the viewers did not get any information about Hayes, or any other character, except that he was a victim, and that this enabled a strong identification between Hayes and the viewer, as follows:

Because the film is kept clear of all but the most urgent details, we are the ones who are stripped and humiliated at airport customs. It is our son who is sentenced to four years and, later, to life, for an offense that would draw a fraction of that in this country. When Hayes is strung up and beaten senseless for borrowing a blanket, we flinch with the blows. When he unleashes an insane ballet of fury and fist on a cellmate-informant, it is no less our release. We find ourselves becoming, right alongside the protagonist, edgily alert for the Midnight Express (“prisonese” for escape). The people on the screen are shaped almost exclusively by the effects of the story’s developments on them. So we are not just able to experience those effects, we are unable - and unwilling - to resist them. (66)

We do not have any primary information about why Parker wanted to make, in his own terms, “a very violent film.” Puttnam noted that it was because “Parker was coming

off Bugsy Malone (1976), and his greatest desire was to prove he didn't just make kiddies' films" (qtd. in Yule 90). However, looking beyond personal and psychological reasons, it must also be noted that violence was not something uncommon to American cinema in general in the seventies. David Slocum notes, "the 1960s and early 1970s was the golden age of American film violence" and explains: "Cinematic expressions of the counterculture challenged classical Hollywood genres and their underlying cultural myths, like that of the masculine hero. Through the exaggeration of formulaic images of aggression, productions increasingly mirrored cultural preoccupations with violence" (7). Although one cannot deny that Midnight Express experiments with violence, it cannot be put in the same category with the films implied in Slocum's statement either. As the critical reviews point out, more than being an expression of the counterculture, Midnight Express turns into a cautionary tale, in other words, into a criticism of the counterculture. In this respect, the reviewers implicitly argue that the film treats violence in an ideological but apolitical way. Slocum points out that film critics' responses to the "unprecedentedly violent images," of the sixties and seventies varied: "some celebrated the stylized renditions of gore as breakthroughs or as appropriate to the moment, others saw them as necessary cultural documents, still others derided the films as base and indicative of a decline in both Hollywood cinema and U.S. society" (7-8). Midnight Express involves some "unprecedentedly violent images" but the reviewers' responses to those images do not fit in any of the categories above. Umberger pointed out that Midnight Express had a hybrid character in terms of genre and style: "Express is not a Hollywood slicker (Marathon Man [John Schlesinger, 1976]) or an individual statement (Nashville [Robert Altman, 1975]). Nor is it a character study or a documentary, though it enmeshes

elements from all four” (66). One should add that the film mixes aestheticism (e.g. beautiful, artistic imagery) with violent content as well. This hybridity may also produce contradictory responses, including responses to the representation of violence.

Representation of Sexuality

The sexual politics of the film was another issue that was debated. The shower scene in which Hayes politely rejects the homosexual advances of his Swedish cellmate appeared to be the most controversial topic among the reviewers. The affirmative reviews generally did not mention anything about the sexual politics in the film except to note the omission of the homosexual relationship from the book. Stone’s script kept the scene almost as it was in the book, but Parker preferred to change it in order not to put the audience’s identification with Hayes under threat (qtd. in Zito 8). As has been mentioned in Chapter Two, even the altered scene had led to a crisis between the filmmakers and Columbia. The omission of homosexuality had also been criticized by the real-life Hayes. He mentioned to Rolling Stone critics Chris Hodenfield and Angela Gaudioso: “Columbia is gonna (sic) hate me, ... but I think it’s the only copout in the movie. It was forced upon Parker by the studio executives” (18).

The reception of that shower scene by the reviewers was varied. Some of the reviewers pointed out to “homoeroticism,” or “romantic perversity,” as an important aspect of the film rather than interpreting the elimination of the homosexual relationship as a deficit. For example, Time critic Richard Schickel noted that Midnight Express was “one of the ugliest sadomasochistic trips, with heavy homosexual overtones, that our thoroughly nasty movie age has yet produced” (111). He identified a homosexual tone in the film as an indicator of some kind of “perversity”:

From the first gorgeously modeled shot of Billy stripped before his captors to the hazy sequence of him and a friend doing yoga exercises behind bars (so reminiscent of the nude wrestling scene in Women in Love [Ken Russel, 1970]), to the final farewell kiss Billy bestows on yet another mate before his escape, we are in the possession of a perverse romanticism, or should one say romantic perversity? (111)

Schickel criticized the filmmakers' aestheticization of the "squalor," "brutality," and "homosexuality." According to him, beyond the intended message that "the punishments meted out to youthful amateur drug smugglers in some corners of the world are absurdly harsh," the film offered "a larger and more dubious implication, which is that the straight world is one large Turkish prison devoted to the vicious abuse of homosexuals who, undaunted, convert suffering into beauty by finding ways to redeem squalor with stylishness" (112). While Schickel implicitly referred to the filmmakers as homosexuals, as the statement suggests, Kael argued that Midnight Express was the product of the filmmakers' "sodomasochistic and homoerotic imaginations." She even compared the film to "a porno fantasy about the sacrifice of a virgin" (496). According to Kael, among so many brutal scenes, the shower scene, which she called "Billy-the-pure scene," served simply as an "interlude to tease [the viewers]." Kael offered an ironic description of the aestheticism and eroticism in the scene:

Suddenly a steaming sauna appears in a patch of sunlight in the middle of this foul dungeon, and an amiable Swede is giving Billy a lyrical scrubdown. The Swede kisses Billy solemnly and the music rises for a triumphal wedding celebration, but the marriage isn't consummated: with a Madonna smile, Billy gently – one might say with polite regrets- declines the offer. (497)

Similarly, in his review for the Sunday Times, Perchaluk pointed to the distinctiveness of the "shower scene" from the "prison squalor." He stated that the scene was filmed "in a steamy, pretty, romantic way." However, he argued that the "whole scene might have been lifted from some classy softcore stuff" (46). While Perchaluk did not comment on

the sexual politics of the film, Kael remarked that the film presented sex among Western prisoners as “whimsical, tender friendships,” whereas Turks were presented as “sodomites.” Similarly, Biskind argued that Midnight Express “pits homophilia against race.” In addition to confirming Hayes’s being an “All-American” heterosexual boy, Biskind noted, “the film flatters its gay audience by associating homosexuality with gentleness and civility, while linking the Turks’ penchant for sadism to a serious case of homophobia” (45).

In a slightly different direction, BFI Monthly Film Bulletin critic John Pym criticized Parker for “playing the whole story as a fairy tale” and characterized the film, from its score to visual style, as “artful commercial veneer” lacking any “authentic tragedy.” For Pym Midnight Express was “a loose, glossy and curiously apolitical picture which treats its relentless brutality with the same fastidiousness with which it so coyly skirts such issues as homosexuality and institutionalized sodomy” (139). Finally, Ansen, who dealt with the ideological implication of the omission of homosexuality, interpreted it as the indicator of the filmmakers’ “feeling” that, as he put it, “we could sympathize with a hero given to biting another man’s tongue off ... but not with one given to physical affection for a man” (81).

While there were so many references to the shower scene, another fabricated scene in which Hayes masturbates during Susan’s visit in Section 13 did not garner much comment from the reviewers. The scene was taken simply as the confirmation of Hayes’s heterosexuality. Even Perchaluk, who appreciated Midnight Express, considered the scene as a “forced” one and remarked: “A visit from his girlfriend, who bares her breasts so Hayes can masturbate on the other side of a glass partition, leaves him a new man

again. Although a powerful statement about eroticism as needs and about the condition of the character at the time, it must invite titters as well as tears” (46).

It must be noted that the French reviewers did not mention anything at all about the film’s treatment of homosexuality. Another important point is the variety among American responses (e.g. Schickel, Kael, Biskind, and Ansen). This seems to be parallel to public debate on homosexuality in the United States in the seventies. Peter N. Carroll notes that 1970s United States witnessed the rise of “gay liberation” and the “demand for homosexual rights” (290, 294). The New York City Police’s invasion of a “homosexual bar” in the summer of 1969 causing a fight between the patrons and the police marked the beginning of, in Carroll’s terms, “gay militance” in the United States. Carroll recounts:

In subsequent years, numerous municipalities enacted ordinances extending equal protection to homosexuals, and a gay rights bill lingered in Congress. Gay lobbyists met with Carter’s aide Margaret Costanza to seek the right to serve in the military, FBI, CIA, and the State Department, the first official homosexual delegation to be greeted at the White House. Though Carter rejected the pressure, he acknowledged the legal rights of gays. “I don’t feel that society, through its laws, ought to abuse or harass the homosexual,” he stated on Father’s Day 1977. (290)

However, as will be discussed later, the 1970s also witnessed the rise of criticism of liberalist vision both on the Right and the Left (Carroll 318). Opposition to homosexuality as a part of the rejection of the “liberalization of moral values” and “celebration of old American values” was one of the elements constituting the discourse of the conservative New Right (Carroll 326-329). Therefore, not only the American reviewers’ attention to the representation of homosexuality in Midnight Express, but also the divergences among the views are quite understandable within the framework of the conflicting discourses on homosexuality in 1970s United States.

The Film's Popularity

The adjectives “manipulative” and “exploitative” were as common as the terms “racist,” “xenophobic,” and “violent” in the critical reviews of Midnight Express. Baskin noted that the film, in his words, “manipulates the audience and the audience loves it” (63). Critics particularly referred to the contribution of the alteration of the events in the book, and fabrications of new ones, to the film’s manipulation and exploitation of the viewer. Sarris argued that the important thing was not the discrepancies between the book and the film per se but the point that there was a “pattern to those discrepancies.” He explained:

Everything has been hyped and hoked up to intensify feelings of helplessness and self-pity. And no opportunity has been lost to depict the Turks as fat, greasy, brutal, and perverted. Midnight Express is thus a thoroughly ignoble and exploitative film that may just possibly hit the commercial jackpot because of the curiously intoxicating feeling of villains and victims, pure and unalloyed, and one should never underestimate the potential popularity of one-sidedness. (71)

Other critics also explicitly called Midnight Express an “exploitation film.” the Sunday Times critic Matthew Hoffman wrote: “Alan Parker has made a surprising and interesting film; but unfortunately it is only an exploitation film: exploiting the audience’s fascination with fear and oppression, but giving back no more than the thrills of vicarious travel” (38). Similarly, Robinson argued that the film “simply narrows horizons, confirms the audience’s meanest fears and prejudices and resentments” (“Picking” 7). Maslin argued:

“Midnight Express” offers its audience the vicarious thrill of sharing Billy’s depravity without making the viewer feel compromised. And when this nastiness is over, the movie becomes reassuring, reminding the crowd that there’s order in the world - or steak and ketchup and the Istanbul Hilton, as Billy’s father sees it - after all. No wonder this titillating but painless version of a nightmare has its admirers. (1)

Be it affirmative (i.e. emotional impact, identification) or critical (i.e. manipulation, exploitation), the opinions mentioned so far outline some possible reasons for the popularity of the film. However, two critics especially emphasized that Midnight Express owed its popular appeal to its capacity of offering something to everyone. In other words, they implied that the film constructs not a single but multiple subject positions, which are not purely textual but social. Kael described the film as an “all-purpose fantasy” satisfying youth, parents, and liberals: She explained:

For those who are part of the drug culture (which is by now almost the national culture), it can serve as a confirmation and extension of their fears ... What could be more satisfying to students and young dopers than this intoxicating view of the horrible pitfalls of smuggling dope –an ultimate romantic horror show ... Confinement in foreign prisons constitutes the martyrdom of the drug culture, and it’s about the only part of that culture which the movies had missed until now. (499)

Besides being “a full-scale fantasy for the drug culture,” Kael continued, Midnight Express was “the cautionary tale that parents have been waiting for”:

Here, at last, is the movie that puts Vietnam behind us. It has been a long time since middle-aged people could say to their kids, “You don’t know how lucky you are to be Americans, safe and protected” ... Midnight Express ... is a there’s-no-place-like-home story, of a very peculiar variety. Hysterically sensual on the surface but with basic honor-thy-parents-and-listen-to-them glop at the center, it manipulates cross-generationally. (499-500)

Finally, according to Kael, the film might have “a special appeal to liberals” since the epilogue constructed it as a worthy contribution to the initiation of prisoner exchange negotiations between Turkey and the United States (500).

Biskind attributed the popular appeal of Midnight Express to its capacity to create “consensus” among people of different age groups, of political positions, or of sexual preferences by presenting race as a common ground they can share. Biskind put it as follows:

If films can be categorized as left (attack the reigning consensus), right (mobilize an assumed consensus against the enemy), or middle (create a consensus), *MIDNIGHT EXPRESS* is a consensus film aimed at picking up the pieces of the 60's. It gathers in the young by holding up the standard of the drug culture, the old by presenting a moving reconciliation between Billy and his father, the left by throwing in a nasty CIA agent who helps out in Billy's arrest, and the right by portraying the American consul as an ineffectual milktoast unable to protect an American in trouble. *MIDNIGHT EXPRESS* defines a common ground on which both generations, both friends and critics of America, can get together, and that common ground is race. Whether you're young or old, a peacenik or a patriot, gay or straight, if you're white you're OK. *MIDNIGHT EXPRESS* draws a straight line between Us and Them, between civilization and barbarism. (45)

As has been stated before, for American reviewers, responding to Midnight Express meant responding to 1970s American culture as well.

At this point it might be useful to have a brief look at the socio-historical context in which these reviews were produced. The 1970s were a period of disappointment and pessimism for Americans (i.e. humiliation brought by Vietnam, distrust and disbelief in leaders and institutions). The youth optimism of the 1960s, which believed that the world could be changed "through politics, through music, through love and peace," was lost and gave way to a "move towards the self" (Garrett 5). Increasing drug use, the rise of transcendental meditation, and traveling abroad were some of the expressions of this movement. Tom Wolfe characterizes the 1970s as the "Me Decade" (Robinson 8), whereas Christopher Lasch describes 1970s American culture as "narcissistic culture." Narcissistic culture was, Lasch argues, an outcome of capitalism and its political ideology, welfare liberalism, "which absolves individuals of moral responsibility and treats them as victims of social control" (218). The liberalist vision that Lash describes is exemplified in the following statement by American Vice-President Hubert H. Humphrey, whom Carroll characterizes as "the last great symbol of American

liberalism”:⁷ “The moral test of government is how it treats those who are in the dawn of life, the children; those who are in the twilight of life, the aged; and those who are in the shadows of life, the sick, the needy and the handicapped” (qtd. in Carroll 318). However, liberalism could not fulfill its promises and gave way to “social distrust of liberal economics and the expansion of government bureaucracy” (Carroll 326). Carroll notes, “frustrated by the failure of government policy, critics from the right and the left -- for decidedly different reasons -- joined in denouncing the liberal vision” (318). The repudiation of liberalism in both circles resulted in the rise of “the new community populism” and its rival “the New Right.” The major difference between the two was that, as Carroll puts it:

Unlike the populists ... the New Right condemned the liberalization of moral values. Appealing to single issue voters opposed to gun control, abortion, homosexuality, pornography, and the ERA, this vocal minority promised to restore a world of simple virtues, an old America based on family, church, and the work ethic. (326-7)

Peter Lev has argued that many American films of the 1970s expressed “conflicting positions on the question of social change.” He raised the question as follows:

Should American society move toward openness, diversity, and egalitarianism, welcoming such new developments as the counterculture and the anti-Vietnam War movement? Or should America change by refusing to change, by stressing paternalistic authority and traditional morality? (xi)

Midnight Express is not among the films covered in Lev’s book, but it could be stated that its position is definitely closer to the position that Carroll describes as the New Right, which supports the “change by refusing to change.” At first look Midnight Express seems to support the liberalist vision, in that it treats Hayes as a young man who made a

⁷ Hubert H. Humphrey died on January 13, 1978 (Carroll 317).

mistake, but who is nothing more than a “victim of the social control.” It involves a minor critique of liberalism, especially by implicitly pointing to the inability of American authorities to overcome bureaucracies and help Hayes, who himself looks like a product of American “cultural narcissism” as a young man enjoying a hippie lifestyle. However, the film’s critique turns into the celebration of the position of the New Right, in other words the celebration of old American values in the face of liberalism. It is implicit in the critical reviews of Midnight Express that American critics are critical and cynical of this ideological vision, which surpasses the film. Especially the cynicism observed in their reviews can be considered as a sign of their refusal of celebrating the film’s optimistic faith in a “best-again” America.

Reception of Midnight Express by the Turkish Press

As discussed in Chapter Two, the Turkish Government banned Midnight Express immediately in 1978 due to its “anti-Turk” rhetoric and, complying with the orders of the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Turkish ambassadors in Europe and the United States attempted to prevent the film’s screenings in several countries by sending letters to the censorship boards of those countries as well as to personalities in the media. Although limited, a few articles published in Variety provide insight on the content of some of those letters. For example, the letter sent by the Turkish ambassador to Israel asked for a ban on the film on the grounds that it “grossly distorted reality and maliciously presented the Turkish people in a bad light” (qtd. in Variety, “See Pressure” 23). As mentioned in Chapter Two, another letter that was sent to the Irish film censorship board and to film critics sought to block Midnight Express’s screening in that country on the grounds that it

was “criminal, slanderous and likely to have a bad effect on the young people of Ireland.”

The Turkish ambassador to Ireland called Midnight Express “malicious” and argued:

The writer, producer and director of the film have greatly erred in their judgment in making it and thus have rendered a great disservice to public order, international law and good taste of decent people all over the world.

I would not hesitate to place the distributors of the film in that category also. They are promoting crime, drug abuse and furnishing a bad example for the youth of the world. (qtd. in Variety, “Turkish Envoy” 39).

These two examples suggest that there was no uniformity between the letters.

Moreover, they tried to make their message justifiable not only in the eyes of Turkey but also to the institutions whom they addressed. As another example, Ahmet Ersoy, the Press Counselor of the Turkish Embassy in New York, wrote to Christian Science Monitor in reply to an article by David Sterritt that had been published in the same magazine. He stated that “‘Midnight Express’ does not recount “brutal experience based on facts” but rather based on misinterpretations and outright fabrications of the hashish smuggler.’ Moreover, he argued that the producer’s “purpose aimed at carrying Mr. Hayes’ allegations to the extreme by insulting a nation as a whole, its social institutions, and a way of life” (26).

Since it was not possible to see Midnight Express in Turkey in the 1970s due to the ban, a limited number of opinion pieces about the film appeared in major newspapers as well as in a few journals. It must be noted that the responses to Midnight Express did not appear in the form of film reviews or film criticisms but as opinion pieces published in newspapers or in journals that were not related to film. Parallel to the film’s becoming a political event for Turkey in the international arena it became a news event in the domestic press. Besides several short news reports on the screenings of Midnight Express in foreign countries and Turkish communities’ protests there (Turkay 24), there appear to

be two opinion pieces on the film published in the Turkish press in 1978. Both of the pieces were written by non-film journalists: Ali Sirmen from Cumhuriyet (Republic), which represented the moderate Left, and Ergun Göze from Tercüman (Interpreter), which represented the nationalist Right (Çevik 132). A Turkish graduate law student in France, Kemal Çevik, also appears to be influential in the formation of an interest in and reaction to Midnight Express in the Turkish press.

Göze's article appears to be highly motivated by a letter he received from Çevik, which he quotes in the article. The letter points to the contrast between the prohibition of racism in French Law and Midnight Express's screening in France. Çevik stated that he had submitted a petition against the film to the French Prosecutor's office arguing that France should ban it based on its laws. Çevik wrote to Göze: "I watched the film. It is really maliciously made. All the scenes insult both our religion and nation. In my opinion this film wastes all the expenses that our state has made so far to publicize [Turkey]" (qtd. in Göze 4).⁸ However, Göze noted that Çevik's complaints did not make him "angry" at all because, for him, it was normal that the film "insulted" Turkey. Göze pointed out that the "insults that had been made to Turkish language, Turkish religion, Turkish music, Turkish values and traditions, and Turkish history by Turkish people in Turkey" were more offensive than those of Midnight Express. Göze explained:

An unsuccessful filmmaker [Alan Parker] who did not have any relation to Turkishness has made a film. He is a type of person who is ready to show even his mother's sexual relations in order to become successful. "He has made a film that

⁸ In 1979 Çevik also wrote an article evaluating the exhibition of Midnight Express in France with respect to the anti-racist laws in that country. He argued that the film was "made with the purpose of degrading Turks" and that, therefore, its screening in France was incomprehensible. Implicitly referring to Hayes's denunciation of Turkey as "a nation of pigs," he remarked: "The films criticizing the state systems of Russians, Americans, Europeans, Chinese, and Africans are shown [in France]. However, one does not find in any of these films expressions such as "Russians are dogs," "Chinese are animals," "Americans are a nation of robbers"" (133).

is disadvantageous to Turkey...” Why would I become angry; I would not expect the enemy to pray for us... “He has insulted [Turks]...” What about the insults that have been addressed to the Turk so far in his own motherland? Which one do you think is more tragic? (4)

Ultimately Göze stated: ‘the whole of Turkey has been moving in a “Geceyarısı Ekspresi [Midnight Express]” in darkness ... since the Tanzimat.’ The term “Tanzimat” refers to the period between 1839-1878 during the Ottoman Empire, which is considered to be the beginning of the Westernization movements in the history of Turkey. In the quotation above Göze implicitly criticizes the celebration of Western culture and lifestyle under the concept of Westernization, which he assumes to be in contrast with Turkish culture and values. In this respect, it seems that for Göze Midnight Express was simply a reflection of the “true face” of the West, which Turkey had been trying to imitate for years. Göze’s response is also representative of the Turkish conservative nationalist Right’s attitude towards Westernization and its defenders. Therefore, what we have here is not an interpretation of the film Midnight Express, but its activation within a specific historical discourse. The film, activated as such, is seen simply as a product of the West, or in Göze’s words, of the “enemy,” which, as he means, should not be trusted and envied or imitated. To put it differently, according to Göze’s discourse, if the West is the enemy Westernization is betraying the country. Some context may be necessary to make sense of Göze’s response.

The tanzimat (reorganization) reforms, especially those associated with the Young Ottoman movement among Western-oriented intellectuals in the 1860s and early 1870s, and later the efforts of the Committee of Union and Progress, known also as the Young Turks (1907-1908), sought to modernize the Turkish state through the adoption of Western political institutions, including a centralized government, an elected parliament,

and a written constitution⁹ (Metz 26-8; Pope and Pope 32-4). However, it was after the establishment of the modern Turkish Republic by Mustafa Kemal (Atatürk) in 1923 that Westernization became a mass movement –although imposed from above. As Heinz Kramer notes:

Tanzimat policies in the mid-nineteenth century and the later efforts of the Young Turks mainly aimed at modernizing the superstructure of the state and some of its institutions, but the Kemalist reforms went to the cultural roots of Anatolia's population by abolishing the religious foundations of the state and eradicating most of the cultural symbols by which these foundations were expressed in everyday life. (3)

Several revolutionary changes were made within the framework of the modernization movements of the 1920s and 1930s. The abolition of the Caliphate, abolishment of traditional religious schools and establishment of a secular system of education, the outlawing of fez and its substitution with the Western hat, encouragement of Western clothing for men and women, adoption of Western (Gregorian) calendar and alphabet, declaration of a secular state, adoption of civil, commercial, and penal codes based on European models, and the endowment of women with the vote and the right to hold office were among the major Kemalist reforms (Metz 37). Accompanied by several other novelties in every field from education to art (e.g. music, opera), these reforms meant the distancing of the country from its Islamic and Eastern past and tradition in order to make it closer to contemporary Western societies. As Binnaz Toprak remarks: "Taken as a whole, these reforms aimed at destroying the symbols of Ottoman-Islamic civilization, and substituting them with their western counterparts" (qtd. in Kramer 3-4). In this

⁹ In 1876 Sultan Abdulhamid II who came to the throne with the approval of Midhat Pasha, "a reformist minister sympathetic to the aims of the Young Ottomans," promulgated a constitution based on European models, which "created a representative parliament, guaranteed religious liberty, and provided for enlarged freedom of expression" (Metz 26). However, the sultan dissolved the parliament within a year and led the empire through a repressive regime until 1908. The constitution and the parliament were restored in 1908 with the efforts of the Young Turks, composed of young officers and students who were educated in Europe or in Westernized schools (Metz 27).

respect, as Ilkay Sunar and Sabri Sayari rightly suggest, “the Turkish Revolution was primarily a revolution of values, a cultural revolution that radically changed the legitimating system of symbols supportive of political authority” (168-9). These developments caused several polarizations around dichotomies such as domestic/foreign, Eastern/Western, and traditionalism/progressivism that have continued until the present in the cultural arena and especially among Turkish intellectuals. In this respect, it could be argued that Göze’s arguments discussed above represent the traditionalist and regressive discourse of the Rightist circles on Westernization of Turkey.

On the opposite side, Atilla Dorsay¹⁰ from Cumhuriyet, which has always represented the Left-oriented progressive Turkish intellectuals, proclaimed Midnight Express as “prejudiced” negative propaganda “seeding hostility” against the Turks, which “must be backed by international anti-Turk forces and organizations, notably the Greeks and the Armenians.”¹¹ However, preserving his socialist and intellectual position, Dorsay also argued that although the film “exaggerated” the conditions of Turkish prisons, it would be “wiser and more radical” to attempt to improve these conditions rather than contending with “getting angry” about such works. (“Geceyarısı” 157). Dorsay’s argument is parallel to some of the French critics’ perspectives described above. Dorsay also expressed his fear that the film could be used by certain circles in Turkey to propagate their “hostile” attitude toward the West and Westernization. (“Geceyarısı” 158). Although Dorsay did not name anyone explicitly, one can see that he was implicitly referring to people like Göze and rightist media like Tercüman. According to Dorsay, one should distinguish between the West represented by the “capitalists” who “exploited the

¹⁰ Today Dorsay is among the most well known Turkish film critics.

¹¹ In order to support that opinion, Dorsay referred to the public rumor that all the spoken Turkish was marked with an Armenian or Greek accent. This point will be discussed in more detail in Chapter Five.

century-old hatred and hostility into a commercial product” in order to “make money” (i.e. Columbia pictures and the filmmakers) and the West represented by the “neutral” and “honest” critics and intellectuals who “saw and criticized the racist and fascist aspect lying beneath the film’s veneer.” Dorsay appreciated the serious criticism of Midnight Express in Western newspapers and journals and commented: “Here is also the West: Neutral view, objective criticism” (“Geceyarısı” 158). While Dorsay implicitly described Midnight Express as a product of a capitalistic mentality, Osman Türkay from Varlık (Existence), a journal which was similar to Cumhuriyet in terms of its political basis, received the film as the discourse of the “imperialist” West defaming “underdeveloped countries,” namely the Asian, African, and Middle Eastern countries (24).

A critique of Americanism and capitalism is implicit in both Dorsay’s and Türkay’s arguments. Moreover, one observes traces of Eurocentricism as opposed to Americanism in Dorsay’s response. For Turkey, Westernization had meant solely Eurocentricism up to the end of World War II, whereas during the Cold War era it meant Americanism. During this time, the Turkish government announced the United States as “the major friend” mainly for its economic and military aid and struggled to provide the country with a new image by taking the United States as an ideal. For the leaders of the period, “Americanization,” which became the new form of Westernization, especially starting from the 1950s (Belge 862), meant military and economic power, capitalism, prosperity, and individual freedom.¹² Parallel to the developments taking place in the

¹² World War II left the world with two major powers, the US and the Soviet Union. The Soviets’ becoming a threat to the territorial integrity of Turkey and United States’ mission of saving the world from Soviet expansion and communism resulted in the first major economic aid to Turkey, 400 million dollars, in 1947 within the framework of the Truman Doctrine (Armaoğlu 151-62). In 1948, Turkey signed an agreement of economic cooperation with the US in order to be included in the Marshall Plan, which was the result of the US decision to support the economic development of European countries whose economies were damaged during the war and who were under the threat of communist propaganda (Armaoğlu 165-

political arena, Americanism and the American way of life were becoming fashionable in the everyday life of Turkey as well, mainly through the influence of Turkish popular magazines and Hollywood movies.¹³ These were the two channels through which Turkish society was made familiar with the appeal of the American way of life. This multifaceted process of Americanization, which dates to the present, “created a split in Westernization as an ideology that was more or less homogeneous [up to the 1950s]” and Americanization as commercialization met the reaction of “pro-European Westernists” (Belge 862-3). One observes the traces of this reaction in Dorsay, who can be described according to this historical framework not only as a moderate Leftist but also a “pro-European Westernist.”

Since Midnight Express was banned in Turkey, critical response to the film in the late 1970s was limited. The picture presented above suggests that while the film was received by Turkish official institutions and Turkish communities abroad simply as a harmful misrepresentation of Turks, on the inside it activated old debates and historical discourses that went far beyond. Although restricted to a few articles, the debate over the nature of the West and Turkey’s relation to it bears the traces of the ideological polarization and conflicts at a political level in Turkey, which reached a climax in the 1970s (Sunar and Sayari 179). The responses suggest that, treated mainly as a representative of the West in general or American capitalism in particular, Midnight Express served as a ground for (re)considering the West and Turkey’s never-ending

68). Turkey’s Americanist foreign policy reached its peak during the reign of the Democratic Party (1950-1960). The general policy of the Democratic Party is described in the political history of Turkey as making Turkey “a Little America” (Oktay 78). Celal Bayar, the president of the period, explicitly announced during a public speech in 1954 that “Turkey will be an America of a population between thirty million and fifty million in the utmost thirty years or perhaps less than thirty years” (103-4).

¹³ Every aspect of the life in the United States from politics to love and the American way of life appear to be one of the main focuses of Turkish popular magazines of the 1950s (Mutlu). More than 90% of yearly film imports to Turkey in the 1950s were American movies (Erdoğan and Kaya [Mutlu] 50).

project of Westernization as well as the meanings of the terms “West” and “Westernization” themselves.

CHAPTER FIVE: THE MIDDLE YEARS

This chapter sketches the Midnight Express phenomenon in the 1980s and 1990s in three parts. The first part refers to the opening of a new stage in the screen life of Midnight Express with the television airings of the film in North America and Europe, including Turkey, and focuses on the responses of the Turkish press in the aftermath of the 1993 HBB broadcast in Turkey. The second part deals with Midnight Express's inclusion into film literature. It examines Stone's, Parker's, and Puttnam's responses to the criticisms of the film in interviews and authors' views of Midnight Express in cinema books. Finally, the chapter presents an overview of the reactivations of Midnight Express as a film and as a cultural artifact in different media environments such as travel guides and tourism books, news reports, and visual media.

Midnight Express on Television and the Turkish Reception

On September 21, 1980 Americans watching the television networks CBS and NBC after 10 p.m. were witnessing a presidential debate between John B. Anderson and Ronald Reagan at the Baltimore Convention Center, but those who were watching ABC were following the dreadful story of an American youth in a Turkish prison, in other words Midnight Express. Tom Shales from the Washington Post explains that on that night, ABC decided to broadcast Midnight Express instead of the Baltimore debate "on the grounds that without the participation of President Carter it wouldn't be much of an event" (1). Shales writes:

How right they [ABC] were. It's just too bad ABC had such a dreadful movie as an alternative. Viewers had to decide whether to be locked up with Anderson and Reagan and the stiflingly rigid debate format or with this very dumb American

kid who tried to smuggle several pounds of hash out of Turkey and was sentenced to forever in the hoosegow for his trouble. (1)

The event even became a joke between President Carter and journalists the next day.

When a questioner asked Carter his opinion about the Baltimore debate, Carter replied jokingly: “How do you know I didn’t watch Midnight Express?” (qtd. in Smith 8). It is not possible to know exactly how much ABC’s broadcast of Midnight Express on the night of the Baltimore debate added to the popularity of the film and to its consolidation in the social memory of Americans. However, one can, at least, say that when ABC purchased distribution rights for Midnight Express from Columbia Pictures in 1980, it actually marked the beginning of a new period in the social life of Midnight Express. From now on the film would be shown on television networks repeatedly, especially in North America and Britain, and, thereby, would be recycled for new generations.¹

For the Turkish audiences living abroad, television broadcasts of Midnight Express were not less problematic than its initial release in movie theatres. Several showings became a little Midnight Express event, in that wherever the film was broadcast protests from Turkish communities followed. The type of protests varied from protest letters to official suits. For example, when ABC showed Midnight Express for the fourth time on July 22, 1984,² the nonprofit Federation of Turkish American Societies filed a \$300 million discrimination suit against ABC and Columbia Pictures over the showing of the film. The suit, as John Carmody from the Washington Post reported, contended that ABC and Columbia presented the film as a “true” story; it claimed that the showing of the film “served to aid and incite” discrimination against the 300,000 Turkish Americans

¹ Today Midnight Express still continues to be shown regularly at least on British television (Stone).

² Carmody reported that the film “finished 11th in the prime-time averages for that week with an 11.4 rating and a 22 percent audience share” (14).

living in the United States; and that the film is “an attempt to insult and dehumanize the Turkish people as dirty, inferior, sexually perverse and morally corrupt” (14).

A similar but more detailed event occurred more recently in 1999 in Canada due to the History Channel’s airing of Midnight Express on December 26, 1998.³ On January 6, 1999, in a letter addressed to the Secretary General of the Canadian Radio and Television Commission (CRTC), a Canadian/Turkish citizen described his disappointment with the History Channel’s broadcast of Midnight Express on the grounds that it conflicted with Canadian laws “designed to prevent the dissemination and propagation of hate literature.” According to the author of the letter the film “should be banned from public broadcasting (sic) because it promotes blind hatred against mostly (sic) peaceful and friendly people of Turkey.” He/she argued:

It [Midnight Express] is an utterly racist movie in that it specifically targets Turkish people not necessarily those individuals who supposedly inflicted torture and unusual punishment for the crime. I am certainly not aware of any studies that there is more torture in Turkish detention centers than jails of other nations. However, it is widely believed at least in North America, that jails in Turkey are far worse than the jails of other nations. This film feeds this racist stereotype that is not based on facts but is created by fictions like Midnight Express and other anti-Turkish propaganda. Even if there were instances of illegal behavior or torture by some prison guards and injustices taking place within the Turkish judicial system, how could this justify insulting a whole nation of some 70 million people in the crudest of terms and calling them “a nation of pigs”? Even if there are instances of torture/corruption within the legal/penal system of Turkey most people in the nation would strongly condemn such behavior.

Regarding the same television airing, the First Councilor of the Turkish Embassy sent a letter of complaint to the President of the History Channel as well. The letter was also forwarded to the Canadian Broadcast Standards Council (CBSC). Referring to numerous complaint messages they had received from Turkish Canadian citizens, the

³ A detailed report of this event is available online at <http://www.cbcs.ca/english/decision/990617c.htm>. All the quotations relating to this event are taken from that report.

Councilor requested the prohibition of any future broadcasts of Midnight Express on the grounds that the film not only “offends” those citizens but also “impedes the advancement of the harmonious social and cultural mosaic of Canada.” Later, unsatisfied with the response of the History Channel, which mainly stated that Midnight Express “was not intended to be a slur on the Turkish community or people” and that “the brutality and harshness Hayes encountered in the Turkish prison was portrayed no differently than American prisons are depicted in such programs as Oz (1997-2003, Showcase), and films such as Un Zoo la Nuit / Night Zoo (Jean-Claude Lauzon, 1987) and The Shawshank Redemption (Frank Darabont, 1994),” the First Councilor requested that the CBSC “refer the matter to the appropriate Regional Council for adjudication.” Consequently, after reviewing the film and all the correspondences between the parties, the CBSC’s Ontario Regional Council concluded that Midnight Express does not violate the relevant clause of the Code of Ethics of the Canadian Association of Broadcasters (CAB), which reads as follows:

Recognizing that every person has a right to full and equal recognition and to enjoy certain fundamental rights and freedoms, broadcasters shall endeavor to ensure, to the best of their ability, that their programming contains no abusive or discriminatory material or comment which is based on matters of race, national or ethnic origin, colour, religion, age, sex, marital status or physical or mental handicap.

To justify the decision, the Council officials argued that “the discriminatory perspective” of the film “does not target the Turkish people or nation,” but the “injustices perpetrated by the jailers, the lawyers and the judges.” More importantly, they stated that “this perspective of the system is a legitimate political point of view, one protected by freedom of expression and artistic license.” More specifically, referring to the complainants’ claims in the letters, the Council noted:

There is no assessment made by the screenwriter, the director or the film's characters about the Turks or Turkey in general. It is a story of penal injustice. When Billy Hayes screams in the courtroom "I hate you, I hate your nation, I hate your people", he does so in anger and bitterness for the lengthy sentence handed to him when he had hoped to be free in 53 more days ... The context is the prison, not the country. The comments are directed at the keepers, not the people. The film is a drama, not a documentary.

The decision and the explanation of the Council implicitly claim that Turks have misread Midnight Express. The correspondences above show that despite the twenty-year interval the film can still cause a controversy, which is almost identical to the controversy in the late 1970s. Is Midnight Express a personal artistic statement about injustice and prison or a racist attempt to despise a whole nation? It seems unfruitful to debate whether the Council or the Turkish complainants are right, or, to put it differently, to struggle to decide which party is reading the film correctly, because, as Bennett argues, meaning "is not a thing –which texts can have, but it is something that can only be produced, and always differently, within the reading formations that regulate the encounters between texts and readers" (218). The Council's reading of the film mainly as a legitimate political and artistic statement about the Turkish prison is not random, in that it is connected to a historical discourse on the problems of democracy and human rights in Turkey.⁴ The reading of the Turkish parties are not random either, but are shaped by other historical discourses produced in the Turkish context as well. This will become clearer in what follows, where I turn to the Turkish responses to Midnight Express in the aftermath of its broadcast on Turkish television. However, first I shall refer briefly to a review of the film by Dorsay, who appears to be the only critic who had been able to see and review Midnight Express before its broadcast on Turkish television. After watching

⁴ This issue is discussed in more detail in Chapter Six.

the film in Paris in 1981 as if it was a “mission” and “responsibility,”⁵ Dorsay proclaimed it as purely “racist” and as “the most serious and successful attempt of the West against Turkishness” (“Bir Irkçılık” 159). He wrote:

This is a malicious and scandalous movie in the most literal sense of the word... It assaults and curses a whole nation in an unprecedented impertinent way through the mouth of an American stray drug smuggler... A country could be criticized, a society could be criticized, the beliefs, traditions, laws, and legal practices of a society, which appear to be wrong to foreigners, could be criticized. However, could a society be depicted as a shameful, corrupt, and degenerated ‘herd of pigs’ with all of its individuals and officials from its prison-warder to its lawyer, from its judge to its prisoner? (“Bir Irkçılık” 159)

One observes that there is a strong similarity between Dorsay’s response and the Turkish responses referred to above.

Although some clips of Midnight Express had been shown on the state-run television channel TRT (Turkish Radio and Television) in the fall of 1991 on the 32. Gün (32nd Day) news program (Altınsay 74-5), the film was aired on Turkish television as a whole and without cuts for the first time on April 6, 1993 on the private channel HBB (Scognamillo 131).⁶ Since the film was banned before, HBB’s broadcast became a news event in some of the major Turkish newspapers. The broadcast was announced in Milliyet (Nationality) and Cumhuriyet (Republic) under the titles “The Anti-Turk Film” and “A Document Against Turkey” respectively, whereas Tercüman (Interpreter), known for its conservative rightist and nationalist attitude, did not mention anything regarding the film. Both Milliyet and Cumhuriyet welcomed the broadcast on the grounds that the Turkish public would “finally” be able to see that “controversial” film about which they “knew

⁵ Dorsay confessed that he rejected seeing Midnight Express for years and that he attended the screening in Paris by surrendering to his curiosity. He added that he watched the film as if it was a mission or a responsibility (“Bir Irkçılık” 158).

⁶ Television broadcasting in Turkey started in 1968 under the monopoly of Turkish Radio and Television Corporation established in 1964 by the government. With the end of the TRT’s monopoly on radio and television broadcasting in 1993, private broadcasting stations and channels mushroomed (Metz 284-5; Kramer 22). HBB, which broadcasts no more, was one of those private channels.

nothing apart from its title.” However, both papers were quite clear in their opinion about Midnight Express. Milliyet introduced the film as “prejudiced, exaggerated, and fanatic” negative propaganda against the Turks, which had preserved its “sensation” for years and added that finally “we will ... witness how they maligned us” (“Türk düşmanı” 21). Cumhuriyet used a more political discourse. Parallel to its leftist political position it argued, “it is not possible to deny the prisons where thousands of political prisoners were kept and tortured before and after 1980,” but added, “one should not ignore the fact that, beyond being a critique of torture, the film [Midnight Express] has the purpose of an international assault on Turkey.” Moreover, according to Cumhuriyet, Midnight Express was not simply a film that “maligned” Turks, as Milliyet claimed, but, more importantly, it was “racist” (“Türkiye Aleyhinde” 10). As the vocabulary and statements in these sentences imply, Cumhuriyet’s discourse was almost the same as the discourse of the French critics in the late 1970s.

On April 6, 1993, Midnight Express was shown on HBB in prime time. Despite the lack of information about ratings the film received, a short news report in Hürriyet (Freedom), the largest paper of the 1990s, provides insight into the magnitude of the public interest in the film. The piece read that HBB made a revenue of 3.5 billion Turkish Liras (\$368,000)⁷ out of the commercials broadcast⁸ during the showing (Yülek and Semercioğlu 25). It was also reported that during the showing the telephones lines at HBB were jammed due to numerous calls from audience members.⁹ Cumhuriyet reported that they received many reaction calls from audiences in the aftermath of the showing. According to the newspaper’s summary of the audience responses, some of them rejected

⁷ Inflation adjusted value of 3.5 billion TL in 1993.

⁸ HBB broadcast 60 commercials that lasted 18 minutes in total.

⁹ See “Geceyarısı Ekspresi’ne Halktan Büyük Tepki.” Cumhuriyet 7 April 1993: 10.

the film's content on the grounds that it was "unreal, prejudiced, and exaggerated," whereas others claimed that the film "reflected only a very slight portion of the realities in Turkish prisons" ("Geceyarısı Ekspresi" 10). The image of the audience constructed by these accounts is not much different from the one suggested by Turkish responses that have been examined so far in this study. However, it must also be noted that, especially with regard to Cumhuriyet, the newspaper (re)produced an audience discourse that was almost the same as its own discourse on Midnight Express. In other words, the papers did not simply express audiences' responses; they discursively constructed a Turkish audience who was supposed to react to Midnight Express in a particular way as well.

Two days after the broadcast Hürriyet described Midnight Express as a film "full of insults to Turkish society" and presented the opinions of a few guards from Sagmalcilar prison, where the film is set, about the film. According to Hürriyet's account, two of the newspaper's reporters had watched the film together with the guards and then interviewed them. The newspaper quoted the guards describing the film as a "scandal" and not only condemning the way the story is presented but denying its real life occurrence as a whole. Totally corrective in their approach, as one might expect, the guards listed several contradictions in the film as proof of the film being "unrealistic" (Yülek and Semercioğlu 25). This media event organized by Hürriyet indicates that the media itself built a sensation around Midnight Express. The event can be considered as a particular media exploitation of the film. One witnesses in this event the transformation of Midnight Express into a commodity that can be marketed by the Turkish media.

Besides the short news stories examined above, two opinion pieces were published in the aftermath of the HBB showing of Midnight Express. Both Doğan Heper

from Milliyet and Yalçın Pekşen from Hürriyet appreciated the HBB's contribution to the elimination of the ban on Midnight Express as well as to the ending of the film's "myth." However, both were critical of the "biased" representation of Turks in the film as well. Pekşen criticized the film's tendency to show Turks as "idiot creatures" at every opportunity while treating the main American character as untouchable. In an ironic manner, he underscored the film's value as a cautionary tale:

Americans should rather thank Turkey because, afraid of falling into the hands of Turks, many young Americans have stayed away from drugs and become pure family children and, by exploiting third world countries like Turkey, they have become sons who make their parents proud. (24)

As implicit in the quotation above, Pekşen seemed not to take Midnight Express seriously. Implicitly, rather than producing a reverse hate literature on the film, like most of the Turkish responses did, he preferred to reserve more room for self-criticism in his article. He explicitly suggested that the fifteen-year ban on the film was nonsense. In addition, he pointed to absurdities in Turkish films such as Berlin in Berlin (Sinan Cetin, 1993),¹⁰ which according to him did "from inside" what Parker, who was "supposed to be a man of the Armenian and Greek lobby," had done "from outside" (24). The last statement also underscores the "absurdity" of the popular discourse that blames Greeks and Armenians for Midnight Express.

The other author, Heper, wrote in a much angrier manner. He argued that, more than pointing to some "crookedness" in Turkey, Midnight Express attempted to "disgrace" Turkey and the Turks and he suggested that the film might be "the only film which targeted and despised a whole nation." Related to this, Heper described the film as an explicit "nasty conspiracy aimed at Turkey" and as "a product of the Crusader's

¹⁰ The film depicts the story of a tradition-bound immigrant Turkish family in Germany.

mentality.” He compared the treatment of Turks in Midnight Express with the treatment of Muslim nations by the Christian West in more recent events including the European Union’s resistance to Turkey’s admission to the community. Heper quoted the following statement by Jacques Delors, the president of the European Union Committee, regarding Turkey’s membership: “The European Union is a Christian community. Turks cannot enter” (2).

Although in different ways, both of the opinion pieces mentioned above referred to the Turkish rumor that Midnight Express was supported by some foreign sources antagonistic to Turkey, most notably the Greek and Armenian lobbies abroad. The denunciation of Parker as “the man of Greek and Armenian lobbies” (referred to by Pekşen) appears to be an ultimate expression of the Turkish people’s emotional investment in that rumor. As some of the Turkish responses examined so far in the study show, this rumor has been circulating since the initial release of the film. Therefore, it is necessary to think about the possible determinants of this situation.

In addition to the existence of the Greek-Armenian names in the cast, the Armenian dialect observed in the Turkish spoken by some of the Turkish characters in the film appear to be the main sources of this rumor. It has even been argued that the main financial support in the making of Midnight Express was provided by Greek and Armenian lobbies in the United States (Altinsay 74). Although some contemporary facts suggest that Midnight Express is actually important in some Armenian circles even today,¹¹ some Turkish people’s belief in a Greek-Armenian conspiracy behind the film seems to be mainly a reflection of the historical mutual distrust between Turkey and

¹¹ Margaret R. Miles states that Midnight Express “according to Dr. Nayereh Tohidi is a cult film for Armenians in Los Angeles” (214). As another example, “Midnight Express” is the name of “the popular daily TV program” on Armenian television. See <http://www.arm-cinema.am/Aboutus/>

Greece, the roots of which date back to the Ottoman era and early Turkish republic.

Kramer offers an adequate explanation of the reason for this never-ending mutual distrust:

Modern Greece bases its national identity to a large extent on the Hellenic and Byzantine past in Asia Minor, which had mostly ended by the time of the Turkish (Ottoman) conquest of Anatolia, and the successful struggle against the Ottoman yoke, which in the Turkish view is coterminous with the acceleration of the decline of the Ottoman Empire. The Republic of Turkey owes its existence, among other things, to a war of independence in which Greek occupation troops in western and central Anatolia were the main enemy. What is for the Turks the birth of their state is for the Greeks the “Anatolian catastrophe” and the definite end of some kind of neoimperial ideology, the megali idea.¹² Thus each modern state links its very existence and an important part of its national identity to events that have been disastrous for the other. (164)

Midnight Express was released during a period in which the historical disputes between Turkey and Greece had reached a climax due to the Cyprus crisis, which ended in Turkey’s invasion of northern Cyprus in 1974 and the establishment of the Turkish Federated State of Cyprus in 1975 in the northern region of the island (Kramer 165; Metz 53-4).¹³ Later in the 1980s Turkey and Greece had another serious crisis due to Greece’s attempts to extend its territorial claim around the Greek islands in the Aegean Sea from six miles to twelve miles and the rejection of this claim by Turkey (Metz 297-8). In addition to the Cyprus problem, another issue that emerged in the 1970s and continued in the 1980s was related to the Armenians. The 1970s witnessed several attacks by Armenian “terrorist” groups on Turkish agencies and representatives outside Turkey. The attacks were seen by certain Armenian circles as a “revenge for the massacres of Armenians during World War I.” As Metz notes, while Armenians “regard these killings

¹² Meaning “great idea,” megali-idea refers to the historical idea which dates back to the 18th century and which envisions the invasion of several regions including Cyprus, Istanbul, and Anatolia and the re-establishment of Byzantium by Greeks with Constantinople (Istanbul) as its capital.

¹³ In 1983 the state was constituted as the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus. However, no other country except for Turkey has officially recognized it so far.

as systematic genocide, ... Turks claim they were the unfortunate outgrowing of deportations intended to prevent Armenians from assisting the invading Russian armies” (358). More than intending a simple revenge, the best known of the Armenian terrorist organizations, the Armenian Secret Army for the Liberation of Armenia (ASALA), formed in 1975, “advocate by violent means the establishment of an independent Armenian state in eastern Anatolia” (Spencer 145).

Based on this historical framework, one can make sense of the Turkish perception of Midnight Express as a conspiracy of the Greeks and Armenians both in the 1970s and 1990s. Moreover, with regard to the situation in the 1990s, one should also consider the fact that, as is already explicit in Heper’s article, these were the years when Turkey’s attempts at becoming a member of the European Union (EU) gained momentum and the relationship with the EU became Turkey’s “most important foreign policy concern” (Kramer 181). Turkey’s Western orientation had shifted from the United States to Western Europe especially starting from the mid-seventies due to the disappointment with the United States during several stages of the Cyprus crisis.¹⁴ As an associate member of the European Community (EC)¹⁵ since 1963, in 1987 Turkey applied for full membership. The EC deferred considering new members, including Turkey, until 1993. However, as Metz observes, “[Turkey] was disappointed in 1992 when the EC agreed to consider membership applications from Austria, Finland, Norway, and Sweden without making a decision on Turkey’s long-standing application” (295). Besides the factors such

¹⁴ In 1964 the American president Lyndon Johnson warned the Turkish government against invading Cyprus. After the 1974 invasion the United States imposed an arms embargo on Turkey between 1975 and 1978. As Kramer notes, “[b]ecause the fate of the Turkish population on Cyprus is an undisputed national cause in Turkey, the Turks felt let down by their American ally and Turkish reliance on the Americans was severely undermined” (224). In response to the American arms embargo, the Turkish government “suspended United States military operations at all Turkish installations” (Metz 299-300). The crisis ended in 1978 after the United States ended the embargo (Kramer 56).

¹⁵ Until November 1993 EU was known as EC (Metz 425).

as Turkey's underdeveloped economy compared to European standards, high rate of population growth, and problematic domestic policies (i.e. military coups and human rights violations), one of the main reasons for the EC's "reluctance to act on Turkey's application" was the unresolved issues between Turkey and the already EU member Greece, most notably the Cyprus and Aegean Sea problems (Metz 295-7). Turkey has had a bad record of human rights primarily because of "repeated evidence of serious violations of the civil and political rights of prisoners held since the 1980 military coup" (Spencer 148). It is especially in this regard that Midnight Express becomes more problematic to Turkey in the 1990s since it constructs very negative images regarding Turkish prisons as well as the justice system. The Turkish response to the film combines the two obstacles on the road to EU membership, namely the problems with Greece and the West's negative perception of human rights in Turkey, as if they were the two faces of the same phenomenon.

Midnight Express also became the subject of a few scholarly articles by Turkish authors in the 1990s. All of these articles anxiously attributed enormous power to the film to shape current Western attitudes toward Turkey. This is understandable within the historical context described above, especially with regard to the EC/EU membership. It could be argued that in the 1990s, Turkey, as a country actively seeking full membership in the EC/EU, had to convince the West that it is not the Turkey of Midnight Express. At least this seems to be the motivation behind most of the responses to Midnight Express in the 1990s. According to Mehmet Basutcu, the film "has imposed a negative and injurious idea of Turkey on the minds of people who don't even know where the country is!" (16). Basutcu considers Midnight Express as the film that transformed "dreams" of and

“enchantments” with Istanbul, Turkey, or the East, reflected in literary works such as A Thousand and One Nights and Orient Express and in films such as Topkapi (Jules Dassin, 1964), From Russia with Love (Terence Young, 1963), and Tintin and the Blue Oranges (Philippe Condroyer, 1964) into “the stuff of nightmares” (18-9). He comments:

Should we accept that a rotten seed be planted in the soil of a collective heritage, of a heritage that is mythical and legendary? The answer should be clear and unambiguous, and that was the quasi-total opinion of the Western critics -- at least of the more serious-minded among them -- when Midnight Express was first released. But the seed had indeed been planted and the noxious weeds continue growing, still today. (19)

Similarly, Haluk Şahin attributes enormous power to the film. He states that a Turk or a person from Turkey has always been regarded as someone from “the land of Midnight Express” by Westerners, especially Americans, and that this has had very bad effects on Turkey and Turkish people over the past twenty years. He refers to Midnight Express as a “cursed Hollywood passport ... branded upon ... all citizens of Turkey.” He writes:

Some of my American friends decided not to come to Turkey because of Midnight Express. They were afraid they too might have found themselves in a similar nightmare. A Turkish prisoner who spent 15 years in an American jail wrote to me last year that he is being denied parole because the wardens believe he still has not atoned for the sins of Midnight Express. “What we are doing to you is nothing compared to what your people did to that American boy,” he was told ... Talk to any Turk in the US and you will hear his/her version of the Midnight Express nightmare. The damage is lasting and extensive. Further, it is regenerative: the movie is still being shown on television and at student cinema clubs. Americans are still being told not to go to Turkey – the land of Midnight Express (“Midnight” 21).

According to Şahin, Midnight Express was a “Hollywood lie” that was “obvious” for Turks. He especially stresses the “unintelligible” Turkish spoken by “Armenian and Greek actors” as a proof of the reality that, as he puts it, “this was not Turkey.” However, he thinks that the film has certainly made other people believe in its representation and

led them to “hate or despise the Turks they had never met” (“Midnight” 21). Şahin explains the long-lasting effect of the film, especially the threat it poses to Turkey’s EU membership, as follows:

Turkey is still “the land of Midnight Express for many. For human rights groups, journalists, intellectuals and others still come to Turkey with preconceived images branded in their minds by this film. And perhaps so do the officials of the European Union who refuse to admit Turkey ... Midnight Express is but one case. Turkey may have the strongest army in the Middle East, but it has been proven powerless against a fictive attack far costlier than a bombing. And, 20 years later, the bombs are still falling! (“Midnight” 22)

Received as an ideological “assault” against the image of Turkey, the Turkish sensitivity to the “power” of Midnight Express has never disappeared. As a country targeting full membership in the EU and trying to improve its image by making the necessary adjustments, Turkey stayed alert to Midnight Express throughout the nineties. As late as 1999, when Sony attempted to use Midnight Express DVDs as a part of its promotion campaign for Sony DVD players, TÜSİAD (The Association of Turkish Industrialists and Businessmen) protested to Sony by sending letters to the central branches of the company. Combined with the support of the Turkish press, the protest soon turned into a national campaign inviting people to boycott all Sony products in Turkey. Consequently, Sony had to remove Midnight Express from its list of promotional films not only in Turkey, but around the world.¹⁶ The initiation of the protest campaign by the major Turkish business organization can be considered as the best expression of the importance given to Turkey’s EU membership in the 1990s and the extent to which Midnight Express was considered to be a continuing obstacle on that road. As Kramer notes, for the Turkish business elite, like other Western-oriented groups, “there is no viable alternative to joining the European Union” (94). Besides the fact that for TÜSİAD

¹⁶ For details see Tamer.

EU membership means primarily increased economic opportunity, its full meaning goes beyond that. For most Turkish political and business elite, as well as Turkish common people, the EU membership is, as Kramer observes, “a matter of Turkey’s being recognized as a member of the West and as a European state. The EU membership, they believe, is synonymous with the acknowledgment of the standards of contemporary civilization for Turkey” (183).¹⁷

Midnight Express According to its Makers and Cinema Books

In spite of the criticisms it garnered, the box-office success of Midnight Express, in Mathews’ words, “helped jump-start the Hollywood careers [of its makers],” most notably Stone, Parker, and Puttnam. Especially with regard to Stone’s career, critics have argued that Midnight Express not only made him a favorite screenwriter, but, more importantly, established his vision as a director in subsequent films such as Salvador (1985), Platoon (1986), Born on the Fourth of July (1989), and JFK (1991). Dowell remarks that “the movies Stone has directed have followed a common pattern first seen in Midnight Express: the ordeal and testing of a young man” (418), whereas James argues that with the success of Midnight Express Stone realized and demonstrated in his subsequent films as a director that “the perfect vehicle for his particular talents was taking a passionate true story and making it into a riveting film,” with his particular vision, which James describes as follows: “He always felt that nonfiction was by nature more important than fiction, but he loved the artistry and power of good prose.

¹⁷ As another example showing TÜSIAD’s desire for EU membership, one can refer to their concern with with, in Metz’s words, “the widening economic inequalities between regions and social classes,” which they have “perceived as jeopardizing Turkey’s chances of entering the European Union” (277).

Nonfiction was the truth, and the truth needed to be told; but it was fiction that had the power to move people to tears and, equally important, to action” (103).

Similar to Stone’s career, Parker likewise authored several well-known films after Midnight Express such as Fame (1980), Shoot the Moon (1982), Pink Floyd: The Wall (1982), Birdy (1985), and Mississippi Burning (1988). However, since Midnight Express garnered a lot of criticism at the time of its initial release, Stone and Parker inevitably had to reply to those criticisms throughout the 1980s and 1990s almost every time they were interviewed. The questions addressed to the filmmakers in those interviews focused mainly on four points: the film’s deviation from the book in general, the omission of homosexuality, and the inclusion of excessive violence in particular, and racism. Both Stone and Parker defended the necessity for the changes they made to the book emphasizing that they had to build up a coherent and powerful fiction out of the book’s story, which was more dispersed in terms of characters and locations (qtd.in Zito 8; Horton 31; Holden 77). Parker explained in 1986:

We started with the book which was ghostwritten for Billy Hayes by William Hoffer. Billy Hayes had been in prison, escaped, and came to America to find that he was an incredible celebrity. He started telling stories to the press that supposedly happened to him, but in fact did not. Many of these incidents happened to others in prison. Also, time plays tricks on memory, so the truth was moved a little bit to one side when he came back. William Hoffer then wrote this account into a novelized version, and so truth was moved a bit further. Then Oliver Stone wrote the original screenplay and he moved the truth further. Finally, when I made the film, I contributed my bit and moved the truth even further. So the story moved a long, long way from the original events. But never at any point was it ever anything other than a film. The studio [Columbia Pictures] made us put on the ads the line “based on a true story” to lend a kind of credibility that apparently helps bring an audience into the cinema. But to me it was a piece of fiction. After that, I made the story as powerful as I possibly could. (qtd. in Horton 31-2)

With regard to the omission of homosexuality, Parker explained that “[he] didn’t ... want to lose one half of the audience’s sympathy for that character [Hayes] because they thought he was gay. Which he wasn’t” (qtd. in Zito 8). It was the accusation of Midnight Express’s racism that was most “upsetting” to Parker. He pointed out: “... it wasn’t intended that way. I wish that I had put somewhere in the film a line that said, ‘If you think this is a terrible place, it could be in Northern Ireland, or a dozen other prisons around the world’ ... It is not against the Turkish people” (qtd. in Zito 8). In another interview, in response to a question referring to the scene in which Hayes calls Turkey a “nation of pigs,” Parker stated:

In retrospect, now that I’m older, I see it was a mistake, but I did it for all the right reasons. I thought I was making a film about injustice. Mind you, the comment was in character for Billy Hayes since he had suffered so much. But I should have been smart enough, intellectually and politically, to balance that remark. It wouldn’t have taken much to do so. (qtd. in Horton 32)

However, toward the end of the 1980s Parker argued: “I am immensely proud of [Midnight Express], and much of the criticism has since been seen to be alarmist nonsense. It’s one of the most important films in many young people’s lives, and I stand by every frame of it” (qtd. in Yule 81).

Stone’s responses to the charges of racism in Midnight Express appear to be more consistent than those of Parker. Stone admitted that “the complaints are legitimate”; “the Turks were right”; “it was [his] “fault,” but he excused himself by emphasizing his being young then (qtd. in Mackey-Kallis 12, James 103). In one of the interviews Stone explained: “I think that there was a lack of proportion in the picture [Midnight Express] regarding the Turks. I was younger. I was more rabid. But I think we mustn’t lose sight of

what the movie was about. It was about the miscarriage of justice, and I think it still comes through” (qtd. in Kagan 39-40).

Stone and Parker appear to be self-critical in their retrospective statements about the film, but they still defend the idea that the preferred meaning of the film was about injustice, as some of the affirmative reviews of Midnight Express claimed in the late 1970s. Besides the explanations of Parker and Stone, the biggest “confession” came from the producer of the film, David Puttnam. In the 1980s and 1990s Puttnam described Midnight Express to interviewers as a faulty, but necessary “career move” (qtd. in Yule 80). He explains:

I discovered too late that Billy [Hayes] had, shall we say, a much more ‘complex’ background than I’d been led to believe ... At the time it was supposed to be the story of a basically good boy who behaved stupidly and brought inordinate punishment on himself. I think we filmmakers were conned over that one. I went into shock -- I thought it was a really good, well made picture until I saw it with an audience -- and then I suddenly realized that as much as anything else, we’d been ripped off. We thought we’d made one film, but in the end we’d made exactly the film Columbia Pictures wanted us to make, a very commercial film where the audience is actually on its feet saying ‘Go on!’ during the scene in which Billy Hayes bites the tongue off one of his captors. We thought they’d be under their seats, but instead they were cheering! That’s the depth of misjudgment I realized I was capable of. (qtd. in Yule 80).¹⁸

Puttnam’s retrospective comments about Midnight Express appeared in the Turkish media as well. Alper Cem quoted Puttnam’s speech to the International Herald Tribune in which he described Midnight Express as a “film of sin” (11) which he had to make to become a well-known producer and actualize his “ideal project,” Chariots of Fire (Hugh Hudson, 1981). Puttnam noted, as Cem quoted, “I admit my sin in this film [Midnight Express], but I think I paid my penance through Chariots of Fire” (12). As another example, İbrahim Altın say from Aktüel, one of the most popular Turkish magazines of

¹⁸ Putnam, in his book Movies and Money, adds that the audience response he witnessed in the theater made him “very cautious about the use of violence” in his subsequent films (5).

the nineties, interviewed Puttnam in 1991 during the San Sebastian Film Festival. In this interview Puttnam recalled Midnight Express as an “extremely simplified film” involving “deep inconsistencies” and “showing the events as black and white” (75). However, Puttnam added that the reaction of the Turkish government to the film was “hysterical” as well. He noted: “They [the Turkish government] could invite us and show the real situation. Moreover, they could provide us with the opportunity of making a new film that would reflect realities.” Puttnam also stated that he would like to come to Turkey and express these ideas there (76).

In the 1980s and 1990s Midnight Express was also included in several cinema books as a film that the authors considered as “brutal” (Horsley 50; Hirschhorn 315), “manipulative-exploitative” (Horsley 50; Coursodon and Tavernier 749; Peary 272) “racist” (Horsley 49, Hirschhorn 315; Coursodon and Tavernier 749; Hoberman and Rosenbaum 198; Matthews 550), and “homophobic” (Dowell 417; Hoberman and Rosenbaum 198; Peary 272; Matthews 550). Jake Horsley mentions that he was “knocked out and bowled over by it” when he first saw Midnight Express at the age of fourteen and for years considered it a “great movie,” but now he sees it as “a nasty, brutal, unrelenting (though well-made) exercise in sadomasochism and audience exploitation” (49-50). Clive Hirschhorn describes Midnight Express as a “brutal” and “racist” “melodrama” with “Turkey as the chief villain” (315). Referring to accusations of racism, Peary Danny writes: “surely American tourists didn’t flock to Turkey after this movie [Midnight Express]; surely U.S. college freshmen didn’t hope for Turkish roommates or apply for a Turkish exchange program. The wrong impression many viewers got is that such prisons are peculiar to Turkey and not found all over the world”

(272). French critics Jean-Pierre Coursodon and Bertrand Tavernier have expressed that they are aware of the “exhausting” problems with Turkish prisons, but they see Midnight Express as lacking in “perspective,” and involving “over-dramatization” and “over-valorization of individual heroism (which, a little abusively, can be called racist),” as if the filmmakers are “interested in Turkish prisons because an American fell in” (749).

One observes a strict parallelism between the statements above and the critical reviews of the film in the late 1970s. However, the particular emphasis on the problems of Turkish prisons by Coursodon and Tavernier is something new. One observes the traces of a particular international discourse on Turkish prisons, which, I argue, took shape after the 1980 military coup in Turkey, and especially in the late 1980s and 1990s. The critical reviews of Midnight Express at the time of its initial release did not mention anything specific to Turkish prisons because, I argue, Turkish prisons had not been discursively constituted in the West yet.¹⁹

Midnight Express in Other Media

Despite the efforts of the Turkish government, Turkish communities abroad, and the Turkish media, Midnight Express became one of the most popular associations with the word “Turkey” in the eyes of the West. A major proof of this is that one often meets, although corrective in approach, references to this film in travel guide sections on Turkey, in books of travel memories, or tourism articles about Turkey. They all communicate the message that Turkey is not Midnight Express. The Alternative Travel Directory: The Complete Guide to Travel, Study and Living Overseas reads: “Toss Midnight Express out of the window ... The Turks are friendly, generous, kind,

¹⁹ I elaborate more on this issue in Chapter Six.

hospitable and outgoing” (qtd. in Izon 7). Similarly Mary Lee Settle in Turkish Reflections: A Biography of a Place states: “The Turks I saw in Lawrence of Arabia and Midnight Express were ogrelike cartoon caricatures compared to the people I had known and lived among for three of the happiest years of my life” (xii). The way Rick Steves refers to Midnight Express, in Europe Through the Back Door: The Travel Skills Handbook for Independent Travelers, even associates a typical Turkish view of the film: “Many Americans know Turkey only from the thrilling but unrealistic movie Midnight Express. The movie was paid for, produced, and performed by Armenians and Greeks (historically unfriendly neighbors). It says nothing about the Turks or Turkey today” (447).

Besides these examples, the term “Midnight Express” has exceeded Turkey and become a code word expressing the “thrill” associated with the idea of being jailed in any Third World country, suggesting that Midnight Express has consolidated an important place in the social memory of the West. Consider the following examples. When the Canadian journalist Ken Hechtman returned home to Montreal after spending a week in jail as a prisoner of the Taliban in 2001, he stated that, as CBC-TV reported, “he holds no grudge against his captors. He even sympathizes with them.” Hechtman said: “Absolutely they’re [Taliban] being demonized. People are expecting me to come out and tell these Midnight Express type horror stories and I don’t have any.”²⁰ Similarly, another Canadian journalist, Murray Hiebert, who spent a month in a Malaysian prison in 1999, expressed on his return to Canada: “Beyond the loss of freedom and dehumanization of

²⁰ Alison Smith. “Journalist Ken Hechtman heading home to Montreal.” Sunday Report, CBC-TV. December 2, 2001 (Broadcast Transcript). Available in Canadian News Disc.

it, with guards all over you all the time, I was treated well ... Nobody whacked me upside the head. Nobody screamed at me. None of that stuff. It wasn't Midnight Express."²¹

During the 1990s and 2000s, Midnight Express as a film was recycled or reworked in the visual media as well. For example, in The Simpsons (Matt Groening, 1989) TV series, in the "Treehouse of Horror II" episode, first aired on January 21, 1991, Homer is caught at a Moroccan airport trying to smuggle souvenirs taped around his chest, which reminds the viewer of Hayes's arrest at the Turkish airport. As another example, in The Cable Guy (Ben Stiller, 1996) the scene where Jim Carry visits his friend in prison and opens his shirt and presses his chest to the glass behind which his friend sits, parodies Susan's visit to Hayes in prison in Midnight Express. Besides these parodies, Parker's film was adapted to ballet and performed in the 2001 Hong Kong Arts Festival by the Danish company, The Peter Schaufuss Ballet.²²

It seems that Midnight Express also became a source of inspiration for other films as well. In 1998 David Panzer Productions even bought a script from Billy Hayes about "the real story of his prison escape and his friend's release" (Miller and Benet 108). On May 5, 2000 Variety reported that the \$30 million movie Midnight Return, a sequel to Midnight Express, would be shot in the fall in Tunisia and that the producers were approaching Edward Norton for the lead role (Dawtre). The new movie, which is also referred as Midnight Express-The Return,²³ would tell of Hayes's attempts to free a still-imprisoned friend in Turkey. However, there has been no new information about the film since then. However, Midnight Express served as a pre-text for other films in the nineties

²¹ "In Brief." Halifax Daily News. October 20, 1999. 10.

²² For a review of the ballet see NG, Kevin.

²³ For a brief note about the movie under this title see <http://www.filmfestivals.com/cannes99/html/best/best104.htm>

such as Return to Paradise (Joseph Ruben, 1998) and Brokedown Palace (Jonathan Kaplan, 1999) both of which depict young Americans jailed in Third World countries, Malaysia and Thailand respectively, on drug-related charges. Critics reviewed and evaluated both films in the nineties with direct reference to Midnight Express. While Return to Paradise is described as a “Midnight Express for the ‘90s” (McKay 2; Carr 4), Brokedown Palace is referred to as “the female version of Midnight Express” due to the fact that the main characters were female (Johnson 4). In this respect, it could be argued that these films and their reviews constructed what John Cawelti calls a “supertext” of what can be regarded as a prison-action sub-genre in film (qtd. in Telotte 6). Westerners traveling to the Third World, drugs, imprisonment, and bad treatment wrapped in the themes of innocence and injustice appear to be, in Cawelti’s terms, “the most significant characteristics or family resemblances” among the films that can be evaluated in relation to this supertext (qtd. in Telotte 6). The statement below from Jeff Strickler’s review of Brokedown Palace not only provides insight to the formation of this sub-genre or “supertext” in the nineties, but also suggests that it can even be named as the “Midnight Express supertext”:

All movie characters traveling to a developing country should be required to watch Midnight Express. Then they would know what we know right from the start of their movie: Because they are so naïve, they are going to get tricked into carrying drugs, caught by the police and sent to a dark prison that has cockroaches the size of beagles. Such is the not-at-all surprising fate awaiting the protagonists in Brokedown Palace. (10)

Besides these examples, it is essential to remember Midnight Express when considering the erotic thriller Prison Heat (Joel Silberg, 1992). The film tells the story of four young American women who fall victim to corrupt Turkish border guards during a holiday trip and consequently are jailed in Turkey on a drug trafficking charge. The film

details the young women's brutal treatment, including rape, by the chief warden who is another cinematic "terrible Turk" as well as by a lesbian prisoner, and facing the threat of being sold to the harem of an Arab sheik. In the end the four women kill the villains and escape. Although the film seems to be intended as a "simple" erotic action-adventure movie, one can see that it heavily invests in the memory of Midnight Express as well as in the Orientalist imaginary including "the sensual and exotic representation of stories of the harem" that dates back to early European travel accounts (Aydın 100). Prison Heat does not hide that it is a fantasy film that allows the spectator even to identify with the Turkish guard. It could be argued that the film itself "rapes" the women through constructing a gaze that perversely allows the spectator a voyeuristic position from which to view them. Combined with the extreme exhibitionism of the female characters, there is both a sadistic and masochistic subtext in this film. Since Midnight Express appears to be Prison Heat's main pre-text, one can argue that what we have here is an activation of a subtext that filmmakers read into the Midnight Express text.

Prison Heat was not released in theaters, but was aired a couple of times on the Showtime network in the United States in 1999.²⁴ An incidence that occurred during that time suggests that the Turkish community's response to the film was not much different from their response to Midnight Express. The broadcast of Prison Heat was protested by the Association of Turkish Americans on the grounds that it degraded Turks. A letter sent to the chairman of the Showtime network, which asked for the removal of the film from broadcasting, reads:

This film [Prison Heat] has a pornographic slant and its plot is a distinct rip-off of Midnight Express, a film that all Turks find extremely offensive ... Over the past month the A... of T... A... A... (sic), a non-profit organization dedicated to

²⁴ I do not have any information regarding the present.

addressing issues of concern to Americans of Turkish descent and Turks living in the US, has received a large number of complaints about the film. One scene that is especially odious and degrading to our nation and culture is where American women are raped in front of the Turkish flag and a picture of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, founder of the Turkish Republic. Both carry enormous emotional value to us and they are displayed in this fictional scenario in a way that ingrains them in minds of the viewer in connection with such a disgusting crime. Undoubtedly, the plot revolves around the “evil” nature of the Turk, personified by the jail warden and other officials. While the movie does not make a claim to authenticity and while we are fully aware that it serves a specific audience with a taste for obscenity and vulgarity, as ethnic Turks we feel it is insulting and hurtful. The film plays on malignant stereotypes against Turkey created by ethnically insensitive and inherently racist circles. (qtd. in Yavrucuk)²⁵

The reaction of the Turkish viewers of Prison Heat, which in the end is attributed to the whole Turkish community in the United States as well as to all Turks, is representative of a particular type of response among some Turkish circles, especially Turkish communities abroad, which can be described as “the Midnight Express syndrome.”

The issues and facts as described in this chapter confirm “Midnight Express” as a phenomenon that goes beyond the film both for the West and Turkey. While some kind of Midnight Express related imagery, imagination, and projections continue to be recycled or (re)produced in the Western context, to Turkey “Midnight Express” has become an ambiguous expression standing for all the domestic and foreign obstacles, both real and imagined, to its self-realization as well as to its connection to the West. In this respect, it is not a coincidence that as late as 1996 Burhan Özfatura, the Mayor of İzmir, one of the three largest cities of Turkey, chose Anti-Geceyarısı Ekspresi (Anti-Midnight Express) as the title of the Turkish film that he wanted to be made. The film

²⁵ An internet review of the movie by a non-Turkish author reads: “I’m fairly certain that any Turk that watches it [Prison Heat] will be outraged. Not one Turkish character was portrayed with any redeeming features. Did we go to war with Turkey and no one told me about it? I mean, you don’t make an entire country look bad unless you plan on dropping bombs on them or something.”

For the full-text, see <http://www.badmovieplanet.com/inferno/archives/prisheat.html>

would depict “the real characteristics of the Turkish people.”²⁶ This project has never been actualized, but one can say that some circles in Turkey have been awaiting an “Anti-Midnight Express” for three decades.

²⁶ <http://www.turkey.org/news/t210896.htm>. 04.26.2003.

CHAPTER SIX: CURRENT RECEPTION OF MIDNIGHT EXPRESS: VIEWER COMMENTS ON THE INTERNET

This chapter examines the current reception of Midnight Express based on the viewer comments¹ on three popular web sites: the Internet Movie Database (IMDb), Amazon, and Yahoo. These are web sites where one can find a variety of information on films, whether exclusively (e.g. IMDb) or as a part of a broad content (e.g. Amazon and Yahoo).² They also enable their visitors to share their opinions about films by allowing them to post their comments regarding any film to the relevant pages open to public reading. Within the framework of the rapid extension and immersion of the Internet into social life, especially since the mid-nineties, obviously these three sites are not the only ones where one can find viewer comments. Today, including numerous minor web sites on film, such cyber environments constitute an alternative public space where people discuss films and, thereby, provide additional research material for current reception studies.

Viewer comments as a type of audience-produced text can be compared to Hollywood “sneak previews” used by the industry, especially after World War II, to evaluate audience reactions to particular films (Handel 3-11). As a type of industry-based audience research, the sneak preview method consisted of showing a print of the finished film in a major theater to a paying audience and distributing “preview cards” among the audience after the screening; the audience were, as Handel puts it, “invited to jot down

¹ The terminology regarding the material changes from site to site. IMDb uses the term “user comments” whereas Yahoo denotes it by “user reviews” and Amazon by “customer reviews.” I prefer to use the term “viewer comments” as a general category for denoting such texts in general. First, the term “viewer comments” suggests that the subjects who have written to those sites are considered in terms of characteristics broader than being solely “users” or “customers” of the sites. Secondly, it implies a difference from journal and press reviews.

² Amazon also sells VHS tapes and DVDs.

their opinions of the picture and to mail the card to the producer” (8). Although viewer comments on the Internet are not connected to any film producer or industry in particular and they become public as soon as they are posted, the interaction they encourage between the viewer and the film bears affinities to that of the sneak previews. However, the major difference between the two is that, as an outcome of being open to public reading, viewer comments not only enable an interaction between the film and the viewer, but also a virtual dialogue among the viewers themselves. As a consequence of this, as will be seen in the course of the chapter, they constitute a much richer communication and, more importantly, conversation environment.

However, despite the new routes they open, the nature of the viewer comments, partially dependent on the nature of the cyber environment itself, imposes certain restrictions on reception research in general and the research informing the present chapter in particular. The viewers identify themselves only by their proper names, nicknames, or codenames and by their current city and country of residence. Therefore, it is not possible to consider gender and age factors. Moreover, with regard to this study, one cannot say that the country of residence is the same as the nationality of the viewer. For example, some of the Turkish viewers have written from the United States, Germany, Belgium, and Britain and a few American viewers have written from Turkey. In some cases, especially with regard to the viewer comments on Yahoo, even the country from which the viewer has written remains obscure. However, in all cases, the viewers express explicitly or implicitly whether they are Turkish or not. This picture encourages the researcher to deal with the viewer comments on the basis of the dichotomy of Turkish /

non-Turkish while acknowledging that this means treating a heterogeneous group of viewers as one single body only in terms of their being non-Turkish.

The earliest comments on IMDb and Amazon date back to December and November, 1998 respectively, and to January, 2000 in the case of Yahoo. The research sample in this study includes all of the comments posted to the three sites up to April 29, 2003 and consists of 223 comments, 60 (27%) of which are written by Turkish viewers and 163 (73%) of which are written by non-Turkish viewers. The non-Turkish viewers are mostly from North America, with the United States as the leading country. A minor non-Turkish group consists of viewers from Europe, the majority of which are from Britain. Besides these groups, a few viewer comments have been posted from Australia, Greece, Indonesia, Brazil, Chile, Jordan, New Zealand, and Japan. There is not a considerable difference between the three sites in terms of the issues raised in viewer comments. However, there is a clear difference between the viewer comments on Yahoo and the ones on IMDb and Amazon in terms of the mode of arguing, vocabulary, and interaction between the viewers. Viewer comments on Yahoo are more in the form of viewers' responses to each other and some of these are quite vulgar. The direct address, personal and/or national insults and slang that are common to the comments on Yahoo set apart the viewer comments on that site from the ones on IMDb and Amazon. There appear to be mainly two types of motivation for the viewers in posting messages to those sites. The first is to evaluate Midnight Express through a personal reading of it and the second is to debate an issue that has been raised by other viewers. In other words, viewers do not solely respond to the film text, but also to each other's responses. These responses constitute forums and interactive debates on issues that extend beyond the film text.

It must be noted that a reception analysis informed by this sample would not exhaust the international reception of Midnight Express in the 1990s or the present, but only provide insight into a partial and particular instance of it. Besides being English-speaking viewers with access to the Internet, the viewers considered here in terms of their comments share a particular characteristic that distinguishes them from others: they write to web sites, which means that they share the desire to make their opinions public or to take part in a public and international debate. In addition, what we have access to through these comments are not flesh-and-blood audiences but discourses³ that “exist” and that are socially significant. The viewer comments construct a particular discursive space in which a set of meanings about Midnight Express and beyond are made and circulated. This space can also be compared to billboards, which are, as Lawrence Grossberg remarks, “strategic installations – a fixed address for temporary lodgment.” They are “neither authentic nor inauthentic,” but they “open up a space for many different discourses and practices, both serious and playful, both institutional and guerilla.” The productivity of billboards lies in the characteristic that, as Grossberg notes: “They manifest complex appeals that draw us down certain roads, open and close alternative routes, and enable us to be located in a variety of ways at different sites and intersections where we can rest, or engage in other activities, or move on in different directions” (“Wandering” 313). In what follows, I try to identify and examine certain “roads” and “crossroads” in a complex discursive space in order to figure out what makes Midnight

³ As the audience research literature shows, the “real audience” is already a problematic concept. For example, Ien Ang, who has analyzed audiences’ reasons for watching Dallas based on the letters she obtained from “real people,” suggests that, no matter what data collection method is used, “what people say or write about their experiences ... cannot be taken entirely at face value ... they must be read as texts, as discourses” (qtd. in Stacey 71). Similarly, Staiger notes: “Reporting, whether through a crafted ethnographic interview or a published review, is always subject to the problem of retrieval, as well as to language, schemata, or representations of the subject that mediate perception, comprehension, and interpretation” (Interpreting 80).

Express meaningful and important to an international audience in the present. For the purposes of preserving viewers' mode of arguing and editorial consistency, viewer comments will be quoted verbatim throughout the chapter. Spelling and grammar mistakes will be kept as they are in the originals.

Pleasurable without Reservation: Identification, Absorption, and Suspense

Midnight Express was released in VHS format in 1986 and, as stated in Chapter Five, the film has been broadcast on television since the beginning of the 1980s. In addition, in 1998 a 20th Anniversary Edition of the film was released in DVD format. Although the comments suggest that today audiences mostly watch Midnight Express from its DVD and VHS editions, several viewers recollect having encountered the film before either in a movie theater during the late 1970s or more recently on television.⁴ This confirms Midnight Express as a film continuously in circulation, in other words a film that never becomes past.

35% of the non-Turkish viewer comments posit Midnight Express as a very pleasurable text without any reservation. They describe the film with expressions such as "great," "powerful," "masterpiece," "the best movie ever made," "one of the best prison movies," "the best prison movie ever made." The main source of pleasure appears to be the viewers' strong identification with the main character, Billy Hayes. Although some of the viewers acknowledge that it is hard to identify with Hayes in the beginning because he is a criminal, particularly a drug smuggler, the "misfit" between the crime and the

⁴ A sixteen-year-old viewer from Canada states that she has seen Midnight Express for the first time in her English class at school (Yahoo eddie hills girl, Canada, February 9, 2001. "I loved it soooooo much.").

punishment makes them take side with Hayes,⁵ or, to use the words of a viewer, “become” Hayes: “this is a rare breed of movies where you actually care about the characters ... You forget you are watching a movie and you are totally involved ... You become Billy Hayes. You feel his pain, his hope, his hate, his alienation, his loneliness, and his longing for freedom.”⁶ As the following quotation shows, even a female viewer fully identifies with Hayes: “My heart when Billy Hayes got caught at the airport was pounding more than the heartbeat on the film ... When he escaped I was with him every step of the way and stood up and cheered when he kicked his legs in the air.”⁷

The viewers emphasize “suspense” as an important characteristic of the film, which contributes to their identification with Hayes and absorption into the diegesis. The film’s reliance on a true story, Brad Davis’s performance as Hayes, the musical score, and the fact that the Turkish spoken by the guards is not subtitled appear to be the principal filmic elements creating this “suspense.” Referring particularly to non-subtitled Turkish and the musical score as sources of suspense, a viewer from the United States expresses his/her absorption into the diegesis as follows: “you feel like you’re right there with him [Hayes] in prison.”⁸ The importance of the visuals and the sound track is also implicit in another viewer’s statement, “you feel like you are right ‘there’, in Billy’s shoes, ... and right there in Turkey – you can almost smell the place.”⁹

Non-Turkish viewers also consider Midnight Express to be a film with important messages. One of the most popular readings of the film is that it functions as a “warning”

⁵ For a striking example see Internet Movie Database Adelaide, Australia, May 10, 2001. “Interesting true story.”

⁶ Internet Movie Database anonymous, May 9, 1999. “Go to the video store right now and rent this movie.”

⁷ Internet Movie Database Janice Matthews, January 20, 2002. “I forgot how to breathe.”

⁸ Internet Movie Database Pelrad, Calgary, April 12, 1999. “Be sure to watch this on an empty stomach.”

⁹ Amazon anonymous, September 20, 2001. “Not an accurate adaptation of the book, but still excellent.”

against, as an American viewer puts it, “messing with drugs in a foreign country.”¹⁰ This appears to be the type of reading that is most popular among viewers and it suggests that Midnight Express can still function as a cautionary tale as well as implying that drugs are still an important issue in the West, especially in the United States. In this regard, a viewer from the United States explains: “I watch this film at least once each year, as a reminder to myself not to get busted for drugs in a foreign country.”¹¹ Although viewers may interpret the film’s message in more general terms such as arguing that it “shows how messed up life can get if you get caught for any offense in a foreign country,”¹² an emphasis on us/them or domestic/foreign remains.

Comments such as these implicitly affirm Midnight Express as a filmic narrative that works perfectly according to the principles of “classical Hollywood cinema” (Bordwell et al.), enabling strong identification with the main character and absorbing the spectator into the diegesis through characterization and narrative development, as well as through the “subordination of visual and aural style to the demands of narrative exposition” (Jenkins 103). Remembering (from previous chapters) Stone and Parker’s “intentions” to create a powerful drama or fiction, one can argue that Midnight Express works as such even today.

Politically Incorrect, Yet Pleasurable

Another way of reading Midnight Express among the non-Turkish viewers bears affinities to the critical response to the film in Europe and the United States in the 1970s. This type of reception distinguishes between Midnight Express as an “artistic” product

¹⁰ Amazon anonymous Texas, United States, September 21, 1999. “A Powerful Motion Picture Experience.”

¹¹ Amazon anonymous Houston, United States, April 28, 2000. “Healthy Deterrence.”

¹² Yahoo joncocco130, January 10, 2003. “Serious Review!”

and as “politics” and exhibits awareness of the ideological meanings that the film produces. The viewer comments in this category admit that Midnight Express is “good as a film” but they find the film’s representation of Turks politically incorrect and describe it through adjectives ranging between “prejudiced” and “racist.”¹³ A viewer from the United States argues:

how come ALL Turkish characters in the movie are ugly dumb sadistical perverts ... Even in the 1950s anti-communist era movies you come by sensible russian spies or pretty russian girls, along with nasty Igors and Ivans. This racist element was perhaps flourished in Oliver Stone’s mind, to provoke the public interest and sympathy on a drug smuggler by trashing a relatively unknown nation, betting late 70s drug relaxed public would love it.¹⁴

Another viewer comment underscores the difference between watching Midnight Express in the seventies and in the present, or watching it as a young person, then as an older one noticing its “racist” implications: “I’ve see “Midnight Express” several times since it opened its first theatrical run. When I saw it in the theater I was so caught up in the story that I didn’t pay too much attention to its bargain-basement racism. Today, it’s so heavy handed and obvious I’m amazed I could have missed it.”¹⁵

However, the same viewer above also notes that the film “can be an enjoyable non-think action movie” as long as one does not take it “too seriously.” In fact, Midnight Express is still a pleasurable text for the majority of the non-Turkish viewers who point to the film’s political incorrectness. This is what makes their responses different from the responses of the Turkish viewers examined below. A viewer from the United States writes: “the movie was great, except ... that all Turks are portrayed as filthy, sadistic, or

¹³ A word that is often used to describe the film’s treatment of Turks is “demonization.”

¹⁴ Amazon anonymous, Illinois, United States, June 30, 1999. “A True Story?”

¹⁵ Amazon soul_survivor Seattle, Washington, United States, October 30, 2000. “Entertaining, but don’t take it too seriously.”

idiotic,”¹⁶ whereas a viewer from Canada writes: “I can still watch and enjoy this movie (although I’m not sure “enjoy” is really the right term, but anyway...). But only if I shut out its demonization of all things Turkish - which is of course, not entirely possible.”¹⁷ Another viewer explains, “the film is “so touching that I couldn’t get it out of my mind for several weeks,” but s/he adds, “I think it should be less racist against Turkish public.”¹⁸ Similarly, rather than totally denouncing Midnight Express, some viewers acknowledge that the film might be offensive particularly for Turkish spectators. “This film is a classic and enjoyable if you’re not Turkish,” reads a comment posted from the United States.¹⁹ Similarly, another viewer from the same country, who writes under the title of “Extremely xenophobic and manipulative ... so help me God I loved it!”, comments: “if you can watch this movie without being offended, ... I think you are in for one of the most harrowing, intense, and ultimately uplifting dramas ever.”²⁰

Offensive

For Turkish viewers Midnight Express is truly an offensive film, as some of the non-Turkish viewers have argued. Almost all of the comments posted by Turkish viewers fall into the same category with the comments posted by non-Turkish viewers which emphasize the film’s political incorrectness. However, Turkish viewers do not exhibit any sign of pleasure in Midnight Express “as a film” and they are very defensive. With a few exceptions, they admit that Midnight Express “may be” a “good” or “excellent”

¹⁶ Internet Movie Database Jon San Antonio, Tx, United States, October 10, 1999. “Another nightmare-producing classic from Angel Heart director.”

¹⁷ Internet Movie Database Ron Stewart Mississauga, Ontario, Canada, August 30, 2001. “Very good movie, but did they have to demonize an entire nation?”

¹⁸ Yahoo adelais1837, March 25, 2002. “Favorite.”

¹⁹ Internet Movie Database chthon2 Orlando, United States, April 14, 2003. “Great, But Stereotyping and Not Completely True.”

²⁰ Internet Movie Database kanerazor, Berkeley, California, United States, February 9, 2003. “Extremely xenophobic and manipulative...so help me God I loved it!”

movie artistically, but they totally disapprove of the way the filmmakers handled the subject matter. A viewer explains the reason why the Turkish audience cannot deal with the film in artistic or purely filmic terms as follows: “if you see a portrayal of your cultural life so inaccurate, so biased and so full of hostile and outrageous judgementalism, you would probably not care too much about great directing, great acting..would you? the movie is not brilliant in those terms either..but that’s why we are not very happy with that movie.”²¹ In a similar line, a female viewer who presents herself as a short-film director comments: “It [Midnight Express] may be good if you take it as film grammar and camera handling and else but it just humiliates my country, my people, my culture and it is one of those crappy movies showing us like one 3rd world country with fat, tanned religious homo rapist people who are losers...”²² These two quotations summarize the reception of Midnight Express by Turkish viewers on the three web sites in general. One observes a strong continuity between the discourse constituted by these comments and the critical discourses that have been described in previous chapters with regard to the Turkish reception of the film. The repetition of the same themes in viewer comments suggests that audiences do not simply originate ideas but draw from already established discursive repertoires.

Turkish viewers consider the film to be an inaccurate representation of Turkey and her people and attempt to correct the perceptions that they assume the film creates.²³ A viewer comment that exemplifies the sensitivity of the Turkish viewers to the representations constructed by Midnight Express and their emotional investment in

²¹ Yahoo msaltuk30, Turkey, February 28, 2001. “why do Turks hate that movie so much?”

²² Internet Movie Database Gülay Onan İstanbul, Turkey, December 7, 2002. ‘Lesson 1: The Horrible Way of Using “Cinema”.’

²³ Only an anonymous viewer refers to Midnight Express as a film more generally “cursing Islam and Muslims” rather than Turkey or Turks. See Yahoo mariam gold, July 26, 2002. “Read this, only for adults.”

correcting these representations is reproduced in Appendix A. In addition, “women in Turkey are not in that black dress that makes you see only their eyes;”²⁴ “Istanbul is not an ugly city ... neither the law courts and the prisons are like that in Turkey;”²⁵ “Turks are not barbarian;”²⁶ “I live in Turkey, so the country depicted in the movie must be somewhere around mars”²⁷ are some of the simplest corrective statements that one can come across within the comments. However, as implied by the last quotation in the previous paragraph, what viewers actually complain about is that Midnight Express “mistakes” Turkey with certain Muslim Third World countries that are assumed to have a bad image in the eyes of the West. More specifically viewers argue that Turkey is not Iran or Afghanistan, or, in more general terms, an Arab country.²⁸ An anonymous viewer from the United States writes: “The movie tries to convince its audience that Turks act, dress, and look like a cross between the Klingons and Osama Bin Laden. This is a gross misrepresentation. The majority of Turks are Europeanized, secular and mediterranean looking.”²⁹ It could be argued that while Turkish viewers criticize the way the film “Others” Turkey and Turkish people, they create their own “Others” through a similar process. Corrective readings are also observed in non-Turkish viewers’ comments. These are mostly written by foreigners who have been to Turkey or Americans on duty in Turkey. Similar to the situation in travel notes and tourism books (described in Chapter Five), these viewers simply state that they have seen Turkey and that it is not Midnight

²⁴ Internet Movie Database F. Engin Palabıyık Istanbul, Turkey, December 31, 1998. “A good movie that is full of lies!”

²⁵ Amazon Pelin Ozis Istanbul, Turkey, February 9, 1999. “Human Rights or Propaganda?”

²⁶ Yahoo onurpolat 2001, Turkey, August 17, 2001. “Turkish is not Barbarian.”

²⁷ Yahoo gungor s, Turkey, September 01, 2001. “Just a terrible propaganda.”

²⁸ Amazon Dennis Istanbul, Turkey, March 30, 2000. “Nice try! This is the very stupid and worst film!”

Amazon Ahmet, Turkey, February 26, 2000. “The one star goes to Oliver Stone.”

²⁹ Amazon anonymous New York, United States, September 23, 1999. “extremely biased and full of complete misrepresentations.”

Express, from the physical characteristics of her people to the geography and moral values. As an example a Canadian viewer writes: “I have been to Istanbul and it is a beautiful place and I can exactly say that there is no similarity between the people in the movie and in the real Istanbul ... I recommend to the people who haven’t seen Turkey, go there if u can. U will find history, beauty and most of all hospitality.”³⁰

In addition to the comments above, the Turkish viewers either explicitly or implicitly claim that, more than being simply “inaccurate,” the film “lies.” Pointing to the absence of any Turkish actor in the cast, the unintelligible Turkish spoken by the characters representing Turks, and the inauthenticity of some of the Turkish names, viewers try to convince foreign viewers that there is nothing Turkish in Midnight Express. It is also very common among those viewers to emphasize the difference between the book and the film and, more importantly, to emphasize that Stone and Hayes have already “confessed” that the story in the film is not completely true.³¹

For the Turkish viewers the movie as such is implausible and unacceptable and it could only be regarded as the anti-propaganda of foreign circles that are supposed to be “hostile” to Turkey. While a viewer contends that, “it’s only the frustration of some nations who still hate Turks because of manipulated history,”³² others name the Greeks and Armenians as the forces behind the film. “This film is an obvious result of the greek and armenian lobbies in the US. It is simply an anti-propaganda tool against a nation,” proclaims a viewer.³³ Similarly, another viewer states: “This is a terrible propaganda of

³⁰ Yahoo bonnissel Canada, January 24, 2001. “Very Important.”

³¹ One of the viewers even remembers having seen a “confession” speech by Hayes on the news. Internet Movie Database Onur Boztas Austin, Texas, United States, December 20, 2001. “Really good movie but a true story.”

³² Yahoo muratturker, Turkey, May 23, 2000. “What a stupid movie.”

³³ Amazon anonymous Istanbul, Turkey, May 10, 2001. “FANTASY.”

the Armenian lobby in the USA against Turkey. The whole purpose of the movie is to create a bad reputation of Turkey and Turks ... So the Oscar goes to the Armenian lobby.”³⁴ It is also commonly pointed out that the Turkish characters in the film are played by Greek actors and the spoken Turkish reflects an Armenian accent. Although this seems to be true of some of the actors listed in the cast, it is impossible not to notice the excessiveness and exaggeration in the Turkish viewers’ responses. For example, an anonymous viewer writing from the United States declares all “actors and actresses”³⁵ as “Greek and Armenian whom are known to hate Turkish people.”³⁶ Another viewer even declares that the film “was produced by two fanatical Armenians who hate the country [Turkey].”³⁷ The rumor of the Greek support behind the film seems to be popular even among some viewers who are not Turkish but happen to have “Turkish friends” and know Turks. An anonymous viewer from Switzerland interprets almost every characteristic of the film with reference to some “Greekness”:³⁸

We know that the Greek Government (longstanding historical rivals of Turkish people) financed this film, and the movie has been filmed in Greece. (And also all the Turkish characters in the movie were dubbed by Greek people, they all talk Turkish like in a comedy as a Greek person who live in Turkey). When you watch this movie you see why the Greeks financed this film, and used it to their benefit, without thinking whatever it was the results. Insulting and slandering a nation, and all its citizens ... The Turks ask sometimes to you as “with your behaviour – Do you want to get some grape or your reel objective is to beat the vineyard keeper?? When you watch this scandalous racist film, you will see very clearly,

³⁴ Amazon anonymous Turkey, August 27, 2001. “A terrible propaganda.”

³⁵ There is only one main female actress in the film and she is Irene Miracle.

³⁶ Amazon anonymous California, United States, February 4, 1999. “I didn’t like it.”

³⁷ Internet Movie Database KH California, United States, January 19, 1999. “Is this the truth?”

³⁸ Whether the viewer is Turkish or not is ambiguous. The only information about the viewer’s identity is that s/he writes from Switzerland. Although the viewer seems to know Turks and some Turkish cultural elements so closely that one suspects s/he is a Turk, the following statement which reflects an external’s position opens room for the possibility that he is not Turkish: “I live in Switzerland and have a lot of Turkish friends, and I know this unbelievable racist film and its evil goal touched all the Turkish people very deeply.” In any case, it is the content and style of the viewer’s argument rather than his/her national identity which is primarily important here.

that Alan Parker, Oliver Stone and all other Greek financiers wanted not to form a real movie, or a work of art, but all they wanted was to BEAT the Turks...³⁹

To persuade foreign viewers that Midnight Express is simply propaganda from the nations who “hate” Turkey, one of the viewers uses a different method; he⁴⁰ writes: “just think we switch the roles some Turkish director shoots a movie about usa where he has never been and never seen but heard of from a radical russian or lets say radical arab who hates usa. You think this movie reflect the real thing.”⁴¹ In a similar line, a female viewer describes Midnight Express as “a real Leni Riefensthal movie,” explaining that Riefenstahl “directed the most influencing [and] greatest movies ... for HITLER, for NAZISM.”⁴²

Also implied by these responses, for the Turkish viewers, Midnight Express is not simply an “inaccurate” filmic representation of an incident in Turkey, or of Turkey in general and Turkish prisons in particular. It is rather a conscious effort, as the viewers put it, to “humiliate the Turkish nation” as a whole,⁴³ “insult all its individuals,”⁴⁴ or “despise the word ‘Turk’” in general.⁴⁵ The quotation below explains why the viewers regard Midnight Express as an “insult” to the Turkish nation in general rather than a particular criticism of certain institutions such as the prison system. Under the title “why do Turks hate that movie so much,” a viewer states:

³⁹ Amazon anonymous Zurich, Switzerland, October 11, 2002. “Shame for Alan Parker!!!!”

⁴⁰ Whenever the name of the viewer reveals his/her gender I use the gender articles “he” and “she.” Otherwise I use the expression “s/he.”

⁴¹ Amazon Atilla Erel New York, United States, March 4, 2001. “Don’t watch unless you want to hate the Turkish people!!!!”

⁴² Internet Movie Database Elisabeth Berg Istanbul, Turkey, August 27, 1999. “A LENI RIEFESTABL movie... MIDNIGHT EXPRESS!”

⁴³ Internet Movie Database Kaan Bür Istanbul, Turkey, June 22, 1999. “Awfully bad scenario, awfully bad movie.”

⁴⁴ Internet Movie Database ertanasan Istanbul, Turkey, March 20, 2000. “Excellent...”

⁴⁵ Internet Movie Database Marijuana Istanbul, Turkey, April 22, 2002. “This movie is a scandal.”

Because, under the disguise of portraying the terrible conditions of Turkish prisons, the movie makes every effort to portray Turks as disgusting creatures. The movie portrays everything Turkish as weird, inferior, brutal, meaningless, dishonest, sexually pervert, uncivilized. More than once it calls Turks a nation of pigs who don't eat pigs. Let alone a good Turk, there is no single Turk in the whole fucking movie that you would call a normal humanbeing. As I say, the whole discourse of the movie, for two hours, never stops cursing to anything Turkish.⁴⁶

Controversy 1: Fiction or Documentary? Prison or the Nation?

Turkish viewers' "passionate hatred" of Midnight Express must have surprised the non-Turkish viewers who found the film fine and emotionally involving to such an extent that the question of whether or not the film humiliates the whole Turkish nation has become a hot debate among the viewers. Other than vulgar reactions such as "all you Turks have come to purposely find this movie and trash talk about it cos you're all pathetic,"⁴⁷ some of the non-Turkish viewers have taken Turkish viewers' reactions seriously and defended Midnight Express either by pointing out that it is not a documentary but "only a movie," especially a mainstream Hollywood movie, and/or that it is confined to the prison context. This appears to be a typical form of Western reading of Midnight Express, in that the viewers' response is almost the same as the CBSC's Ontario Regional Council's response to the official complaint of the Turkish community to the film's broadcast on Canadian television (discussed in Chapter Five).

With regard to the film being "only a movie," a fiction, an American viewer explains:

I cannot understand why anybody would interpret any fiction as political allegory and take it seriously. Who goes to a movie theatre in search of 'the truth'? This movie was made in the seventies, but the political situations have changed since then, and so the general American xenophobia. I don't think any American viewer

⁴⁶ Yahoo msaltuk30, Turkey, February 28, 2001. "Why do Turks hate that movie so much?"

⁴⁷ Yahoo kell ukuk, February 13, 2002. "To #49."

nowadays would go see this movie and then be led to think all Turkish people are pigs.⁴⁸

Similarly a viewer from Canada, who considers Midnight Express to be a “primarily fictional prison drama” and “a great film,” wants to ensure Turkish viewers that Midnight Express “in no way represents a depiction of Turkey or its people for [him].”⁴⁹

A few viewers writing to Amazon further point out that more than being limited to Turkey, the judgments or messages that Midnight Express produce are universal. In other words, they suggest that Midnight Express is, as a viewer puts it, “a good movie, with good intentions.”⁵⁰ A viewer comment posted from the United States reads: “I believe anyone with an I.Q. higher than doorknob’s understands that Mr. Hayes’ experience was extremely isolated and does not reflect an entire nation and its people.” The viewer argues that the film is more generally “about one man’s trials and tribulations in a foreign penal system.”⁵¹ “This is a great movie for people all around the world, those who fight for the human rights,” says a viewer from Brazil,⁵² whereas another viewer argues: “I don’t think that this movie was bashing any country in general. It let us know that one country’s definition of crime and punishment may differ from another.”⁵³ Widening the perspective further, a viewer writes: “Forget all about the anti-Turkish and pro-American remarks and view this film as a story of one man’s fight to achieve his goal of escaping and survival.”⁵⁴

⁴⁸ Internet Movie Database Vincent Yeh New York, United States, January 31, 1999. “it’s a movie, folks, not a National Geographic report...”

⁴⁹ Internet Movie Database DanB-4 Ontario, Canada, October 17, 1999. “Gritty, Gross and Downright Fabulous.”

⁵⁰ Amazon Peter Rouleau Rockville, Maryland, October 9, 1999. “Slanted, yes, but why?”

⁵¹ Amazon anonymous Florida, United States, November 30, 1999. “Get real.”

⁵² Amazon anonymous Brazil, January 26, 1999. “Human rights.”

⁵³ Amazon dj-diezman, March 22, 2000. “MERCY PLEASE.”

⁵⁴ Yahoo spaceodds, July 30, 2002. “Strong, Brutal and Magnificent.”

The statements above can be considered as different “preferred meanings” that viewers assume the film intends. However, the most popular reading of the film is that it is a prison movie before anything else and that the film’s representation of Turks is restricted to the context of the prison. A viewer from the United States notes: “The controversy over the movie depicting Turkish people as pigs is ridiculous. Their in PRISON! What would you expect to find in prison, nuns and priests? It’s like saying Turks who saw The Shawshank Redemption think all Americans are like the warden.”⁵⁵ However, it must be noted that the viewers who emphasize that the context is the prison do not suspect the truthfulness of the representation of the Turkish prison in Midnight Express as the following examples imply: “This movie has nothing to do with the country or Turkish people. It is definitely not a propaganda. It describes exactly what happens in the Turkish prisons. Tortures which are applied even to Turkish prisoners.”⁵⁶ Another viewer offers a more elaborate argument:

The film is not representing the whole Turkey, it is simply representing the Turkish jailing system that was indeed very, very fucked up and perverse. You have to remember that this is a true story, and most of the events in the film did happen to Billy Hayes. I don’t know why you Turks hate this movie so much, maybe you’re scared of seeing the truth about what used to be a fascist country. I’m sure it’s a lot different and a lot better now.⁵⁷

The main point of these comments is that, as a viewer notes, “it seems like it’s [Midnight Express] writing the Turks in a bad light because the film is self contained in the prison and jail cells and court rooms. It never goes out.”⁵⁸ This statement implies that the negative impression that the film may create is simply the result of its being confined to the prison, which is an unfavorable place by definition, and that if the film had

⁵⁵ Internet Movie Database scm769 Dallas, TX, United States, February 4, 2000. “Dark, Intense Tale.”

⁵⁶ Yahoo panterauk, October 19, 2001. “Read me why.”

⁵⁷ Yahoo nostradamus64, February 10, 2002. “A superb movie.”

⁵⁸ Amazon Alci Rengifo Elpaso, Texas, United States, January 3, 2000. “A Riveting Motion Picture.”

depicted settings outside of the prison the image constructed would not be so bad.

However, the Turkish viewers and some of the non-Turkish viewers argue that the problem with the film is, on the contrary, the very point that it “goes out.” In other words, these viewers insist that the film despises the whole Turkish nation. In this regard, a viewer who says that he actually appreciates Midnight Express as an “artistically well made” film argues:

[Midnight Express] goes out of its way to make everything negative about the country and culture. Only the “Western” characters are good and attractive, and the folks selected to play the Turks are corrupt, physically ugly and basically sub-human. The exterior scenes in Turkey itself have a grayish tint, implying the land is a hell-hole, and even the near-universally acclaimed cuisine gets a black eye.⁵⁹

Referring to the information s/he received from “a Turkish-American friend,” the same viewer also stresses that contrary to the claims that Midnight Express “couldn’t really prejudice the viewer,” it leaves “a sore, anti-Turkish taste in mouths,” at least for Americans. The viewer explains: “Keeping in mind that Americans are generally ignorant of the ways of many foreign nations, this film continues, even today, of being the only source of information most Americans have about Turkey.” Based on that, s/he argues that although it is “cinematically effective” and “wonderfully made,” ‘there’s a disturbing side to MIDNIGHT EXPRESS that makes it mildly resemble a contemporary “Jude Suss”, or THE ETERNAL JEW.’⁶⁰ A similar perspective is also implicit in a question

⁵⁹ Internet Movie Database Cinemanly, February 4, 2002. ‘A Contemporary “Jude Suss”.’

⁶⁰ Mick Martin and Marsha Porter describe Jud Suss [Veidt Harlan, 1940] as a film that is “infamous as the most rabid of the anti-Semitic films made by the Nazis under personal supervision of propaganda minister Joseph Goebbels.” The film, in their words, ‘depicts “the Jewish menace” in both symbolic and overt terms in a story about a wandering Jew who enters a small European country and nearly brings it to ruin’ (578). While Martin and Porter remind that “any serious student of cinema should see it as an example of the medium’s enormous power to proselytize” and rate Jud Suss with two stars, they give Midnight Express four and a half stars out of five and comment: “Midnight Express is not an experience easily shaken. Yet it is a film for our times that teaches a powerful and important lesson” (719).

addressed to Stone and Parker by an anonymous viewer: “HOW WOULD YOU FEEL IF AN ANTI-SEMITIC FILM BECAME SO FAMOUS??”⁶¹

Based on the different views of Midnight Express described above, one wonders whether the viewers are referring to the same film. It could be argued at least that viewers deal with Midnight Express not as a single major text but as one consisting of certain subtexts. For the moment, the disagreement between the viewers looks like a dilemma. I will dwell more upon the discrepancy between the viewers’ readings above at the end of the chapter. Below I turn to another and bigger controversy that is observed in the viewer comments in all three sites.

Controversy 2: (Do) “People Believe in This” (?)

As already implicit in some of the arguments above, what really matters for the Turkish viewers is not Midnight Express itself, but that “people believe in this movie” or that some people, lacking any prior knowledge about Turkey, may take the film as a truthful representation of the country in the present. An anonymous viewer writing to Amazon from Britain points out:

anyone who have some background education and international experience in life, LIKE YOU PEOPLE, i.e. getting on the net, reading comments, searching books, etc. can understand the deviations in the film from the facts and purpose of making such a movie; BUT unfortunately, when this movie comes on screens anywhere else in the world, most of the people on our planet with a low knowledge of that nation and with a lack of judgmental capacities do and will continue to think how disastrous people the Turks are and how horrible a country it is to live in. That is what disappoints the Turks and the people who know the real Turks.⁶²

Similarly, “most people unconsciously associate a stigma with both Turkey and her people after watching this movie for the first time,” says a Turkish viewer writing from

⁶¹ Amazon anonymous, April 9, 2001. “DEAR ALAN PARKER AND OLIVER STONE.”

⁶² Amazon anonymous London, United Kingdom, November 8, 2000. “Hollywood as usual.”

Belgium,⁶³ whereas another viewer from Istanbul, who expresses that he personally enjoyed Midnight Express as a film, argues: “I just can’t stand the thought that the people who watch this movie really believe that this really is a movie about Turkey, even if they are Americans, you know.”⁶⁴ A viewer goes even further and declares: “being Turkish, I simply cannot accept the fact that this movie is around, “free” for people to view. I cannot think of a better way of creating a horrible impression of Turkey in the minds of those who do not know much about the place.”⁶⁵ The same excessive sensitivity to the influence of Midnight Express on foreign people is also observed in the quotation below, in which a viewer describes his/her disappointment with a cab driver in Washington and points to the danger of Midnight Express in the eyes of the Turkish people:

Just about a week ago I was questioned by a cab driver in washington dc based on his knowledge about Turkey – which was nothing but midnight express. I was disturbed and totally disgusted with his ignorance. How could a man in his sane mind make judgments based on hollywood productions? The Turkish hate this movie with a passion. Any other viewers here should try to understand that Turkey is a developing country trying very hard to advertise itself and try to shed off the barbaric image the ottoman empire left it with. A movie like the midnight express could evoke a lot of prejudice and hatred against Turkey –especially for those who could not even tell if Turkey was a bird or a country.

As discussed in Chapter Three and Four, the attribution of enormous power to Midnight Express in influencing Western attitudes towards Turkey has always been an important element of its reception by the Turkish critics. The conception of the film as such persists in the viewer comments as well. One wonders if this is a Turkish myth constructed around the film, or, to put it in different terms, if the ignorant and naïve Westerner represented by the cab driver in the quotation above is a reverse stereotype constructed by the Turkish audience. I have come across only one viewer comment on all

⁶³ Amazon mahirilgaz Leuven, Belgium, February 5, 2003. “Great acting.”

⁶⁴ Internet Movie Database Marijuana Istanbul, Turkey, April 22, 2002. “This movie is a scandal.”

⁶⁵ Amazon anonymous IN, United States, November 12, 2000. “Ridiculous.”

three web sites which totally confirms the Turks' vision. Written by a viewer from the United States, the first comment consists of a single sentence: "I don't think that I'll be visiting Turkey soon..."⁶⁶ However, it is not possible to refute the idea totally, either. Some of the viewer comments suggest that the film produces certain specific impressions regarding "the Other," if not only the Turks. A few viewers who seem to be strongly impressed by the "message(s)" of the film treat Midnight Express like a documentary on the prisons and laws in other countries, but most notably in Middle Eastern or Third World countries, including Turkey. In this regard, a viewer from England comments that Midnight Express is "about what happens when you try to import drugs into a land where the laws are very strict" and it "shows how other countries prison systems work."⁶⁷ Other viewers make similar points in more specific terms. While a viewer from the United States regards the film as "a true story that doesn't hide what a third world prison is all about,"⁶⁸ another interprets it as a powerful message-film teaching Westerners about breaking the law in a Middle Eastern country. He writes: "This film is so good that it should be required viewing for anyone between 15 to 35 who is planning a trip to the Middle-East as a warning of what can happen if you violate a foreign country's laws."⁶⁹ Again referring to the Middle East in general and to Turkey in particular, another viewer reads the "message" of the film as "how a foreign country can be very barbaric. Especially when it comes to dealing with prisoners from other countries who violate their laws." The same viewer notes that although Stone may have made some changes to Hayes's true story, "he ultimately got the point across about how the Turkish deal with

⁶⁶ Amazon anonymous Wisconsin, United States, January 17, 2002. "WOW!"

⁶⁷ Internet Movie Database paul.brookfield Preston, England, April 25, 2000. "A powerful movie."

⁶⁸ Yahoo eat your wheaties fast United States, September 11, 2000. "One of my favorites."

⁶⁹ Internet Movie Database Ralph DeMattia Gaithersburg, Maryland, June 25, 2000. "EXCELLENT-EXCELLENT-EXCELLENT!"

prisoners and how inhumane their laws really are ... What he [Hayes] did was wrong, and yes, he had to be punished. But not punished in such a barbaric way, and then used as a political scapegoat by a very barbaric and repressive Middle Eastern society.”⁷⁰ As this viewer shifts the frame of his argument towards the end from the prison and the legal context to the Middle Eastern society in general, another American viewer likewise ends up hating the Middle East:

This [Midnight Express] is a great description of what a Middle Eastern prison is like. Everyone’s giving this bad reviews obviously because they must be from the Middle East. I hate the Middle East, it’s just worthless place that does nothing except attacking America! It serves no purpose at all! Glad to be an American!⁷¹

As the viewer statements, “[Midnight Express] really makes you think what you would do if you were stuck in a Turkey Prison”⁷² and “this movie is as close as you can get, without actually being in a Turkish prison,”⁷³ suggest, there are also viewers who receive Midnight Express almost like a documentary on Turkish prisons both in the past and in the present. A few viewers even extend their negative impressions to Turkish people in general. “This is exactly what is Turkey and Turkish people, ofcourse not every turkish, but in general”;⁷⁴ “the Turks [commenting] below are just pissed off, ignore them and watch this film, it really does represent Turkey well”;⁷⁵ “having talked to some of them [the Turks] on Internet chatrooms, I can confirm they are as weird and perverse as this film portrays them as.”⁷⁶ These are some of the exemplary statements. As a more elaborate example, consider the following quotation: “Ignore all the comments from the

⁷⁰ Amazon Christopher Dalton Kentucky, United States, May 23, 2001. “A clear definition of how barbaric people can be.”

⁷¹ Yahoo mr doctor01 United States, May 05, 2002. “Good film and Turkey sucks!”

⁷² Yahoo joevitan, September 28, 2002. “Emotional Rollercoaster.”

⁷³ Amazon anonymous APO, AE United States, August 7, 2001. “Impressive.”

⁷⁴ Yahoo asmar82, April 04, 2001. “BEST MOVIE EVER!!!!!!”

⁷⁵ Yahoo public image limited2003, February 03, 2002. “A great movie.”

⁷⁶ Yahoo wapoijif 2001, February 05, 2002. “Su-fucking-perb.”

Turkish cunts below me who don't like it [Midnight Express] cos they feel that their fucked up country is being too correctly represented ... From the TRUE story of Billy Hayes, this film shows how fucked up Turkey is through the rigged and faulty Turkish jails to the filthy streets and perverse men there.”⁷⁷

These provocative statements suggest that more than producing strong effects on the foreign audience who do not have any prior knowledge about Turkey, Midnight Express serves to activate certain negative impressions and feelings about Turkey already formed in the audience. Taken as a whole, the non-Turkish viewer comments suggest that the film does not “inject”⁷⁸ certain negative images and ideas about Turkey into the minds of viewers, but rather helps activate certain history-specific discourses – to use Bennett’s term “reading formations,” through which the viewers can reactivate Midnight Express. This also means that viewers do not read the film solely by assuming the subject positions constructed within the film text but also by (re)assuming certain extra-filmic subject positions produced by other social and discursive formations as well. This is justified especially by the point that (as discussed below), many of the non-Turkish viewers consider the film to be a truthful representation of Turkey, particularly its prisons and justice system, mainly by referring to the general problems of human rights and democracy in Turkey that surpass Midnight Express itself. In other words, it is not the film’s discourse that creates a “truth” about Turkey, but rather it is certain history-

⁷⁷ Yahoo Karen 27uk, February 02, 2002. “Absolutely superb.”

⁷⁸ The Turkish viewers’ theory about the influences of Midnight Express is reminiscent of the “hypodermic needle” or “magic bullet” theory of media effects of the 1920s and 1930s. The early mass communication research conceived of the media as a “hypodermic needle” or “magic bullet” that injects its “messages” directly into the minds of “individuals” and produces strong effects (Morley, Television 45; Severin and Tankard 192; Lowery and De Fleur 22).

specific extra-filmic discourses that re-create Midnight Express as a truthful or plausible representation in the 1990s and present.

Extra-filmic Discourses, Popular “Activations”

The first extra-filmic discourse by which viewers activate Midnight Express is that Turkey is a country where human rights are continuously violated. A viewer from the United States notes: “... it [Midnight Express] exposed the sickening and notoriously corrupt prison system Turkey had (has?) at the time of this event. Anyway, it should be of no surprise: Turkey is not necessarily known for its human rights advocacy!”⁷⁹ The reports by Amnesty International appear to serve as one of the main sources to which viewers refer in order to underscore the violation of human rights in Turkish prisons. An anonymous viewer argues: “the recent complaints by Amnesty International on the alleged continued use of brutality and torture in Turkish prisons, reflects how the movie wasn’t made for nothing.”⁸⁰ It must be noted that for these viewers the identity of the prisoners who are subjected to torture and the type of crime (e.g. ordinary prisoner / political prisoner) for which they are in prison do not matter. What matters is only the existence of torture. Another source of information for the viewers regarding the bad events in Turkish prisons is the media. For example, a viewer from Jordan writes: “It is horrible even to think what people go through in the notorious Turkish jails even today - last December 2000, 30 prisoners chose to set themselves alight rather than go on. I can understand why.”⁸¹ This comment exhibits a typical decontextualization of the event it mentions, in that the viewer interprets the protest of the political prisoners who have been

⁷⁹ Amazon anonymous California, United States, August 10, 2001. “Movie tells it like it is.”

⁸⁰ Internet Movie Database Lupin-9, January 12, 2001. “Deja vu.”

⁸¹ Amazon anonymous Amman, Jordan, January 29, 2001. “Awesome!”

the members of a radical leftist group, defined by the Turkish government as an illegal terror organization, as on the same level with Hayes's case in Midnight Express. Through the tragic act they have chosen or have been forced to commit by group leaders, as some sources have claimed, these political prisoners were refusing to quit community life in the prison and stay in the private, modern, one-person cells constructed within the framework of certain reforms in the Turkish prison system. In other words, they were not protesting physical torture but an authoritarian decision, which they may have interpreted as a restriction on their "freedom" in the prison. This explanation is not intended to defend or condemn any of the sides in this event, but rather, to stress that in taking all media representations about Turkish prisons as being the same, the viewers may be mystifying the issues of prison conditions and human rights in Turkey rather than providing a criticism of it.

Turkey's human rights problems have also come to the surface with the country's application for EU membership. This is also an extra-filmic discursive text to which viewers refer. A viewer from Italy writes: "This is a real story, which denounces how wrong is the Turkish justice system and continuous violation of human rights. Turkey is now trying to become member of European Union, so let's hope that it will be member of this union only when human rights are fully respected."⁸² Similarly a viewer from Canada notes: "I agree that Turkey has become modernized rapidly over the last 30 years. But look: Turkey's human rights issues are still problem to this day and EU is still pushing Turkey to get rid of the death penalty in its penal code before it can join the EU."⁸³

⁸² Internet Movie Database esteban1747 Rome, Italy, March 10, 2003. "An American in a jail of Turkey."

⁸³ Yahoo kvasir postia Waterloo, Canada, May 23, 2002. "Awesome Movie, Must See!"

Besides the discourses on prison conditions in Turkey, the country's political history, which is marked by several military interventions, is mentioned by the viewers as a continuous problem of democracy. As an example, a viewer from the United States argues: "Turks logically do not like it [Midnight Express] because it harms their country's "democratic" look. But what type of democracy is the one, where the military can overthrow a government????"⁸⁴ A very similar comment is offered by another viewer from Greece as follows: "Although Turkey is one of the most modern muslim states around, it always had its problems since the country tries to establish a democracy via military violence."⁸⁵

Related to the human rights and democracy issues, another discourse that is activated has to do with the problematic historical and current relations between Turkey and Armenian, Greek, and Kurdish minorities. The statement below by a Greek viewer from the United States exemplifies how the film may activate a multiplicity of discourses and how it may be transformed into a map of the viewer's imaginary:

It has been said that the scenario did not follow the book. This doesn't detract from the truth in that turkish society is solely based on corruption, bribes, and despite what turks say is still rooted in the islamic traditions of centuries past. Also, if turkish jails are so wonderful, why were there all those prison revolts some months ago, with many inmates dying from hunger-strikes or being murdered? Maybe because they're even worse than what the movie showed? As a final note, I tend to agree with the main character's courtroom speech, it hit the nail right on the head. And I do not forget the missing POWs [prisoners of war] from the 1974 turkish invasion of Cyprus, some of whom are still languishing in turkish prisons.⁸⁶

This type of response looks like a mirror-image of the Turkish discourse that constitutes Midnight Express as propaganda from Greek and Armenians. As the viewer above

⁸⁴ Amazon anonymous NJ, United States, December 11, 2002. "Superb Movie."

⁸⁵ Amazon Giovanni, Greece, August 20, 2001. "An unforgettable experience. Davis & Parker deserved Oscars."

⁸⁶ Internet Movie Database idinos New York, United States, February 9, 2002. "Excellent movie."

incorporates the Cyprus invasion by the Turks into his response, several reviewers likewise refer to the issue of Armenian “genocide.” A viewer from Canada who thinks that Midnight Express “accurately depicted them [Turkish people] as pigs” argues:

Turkey publicly denies freedom of expression, freedom of thought, etc. And similar events continue to occur in their prisons. I believe 100% that the things that went on in Midnight Express did in fact occur and the Turkish people should admit it, along with admitting their committing of the Armenian Genocide, that killed 1.5 million out of 2 million Armenians living at the time.⁸⁷

Similarly, a viewer from the United States writes: “Turkey is a country that DID commit a Genocide against its Armenian citizens in 1915 and has been roundly condemned for denying it. It’s no wonder that unfavorable reviews are on the basis of Turkish paranoia rather than the merits of the movie.”⁸⁸

The historical roots of the discourse, which is marked with a mutual distrust between the Turks and Greeks / Armenians have been described in Chapter Five. Although the problem of Kurds, as another issue, is a very old one, dating back to the early years of the Turkish Republic, it gained momentum with the emergence of the Partiya Karkaren Kurdistan (PKK - Kurdistan Workers Party) in the 1980s under the leadership of Abdullah Öcalan. The Turkish Government has associated the party’s activities with terrorism throughout the 1990s. Besides the suppression of the Kurdish people in Eastern Anatolia as part of the government’s and military’s continuous fight with the PKK problem, the frequent imprisonments of members of the Kurdish nationalist party Halkın Demokrasi Partisi (HADEP - People’s Democracy Party), established in 1995, have brought the Kurdish reality in Turkey to international

⁸⁷ Internet Movie Database wh00t Canada, March 17, 1999. “Amazing movie, a must-see for all.”

⁸⁸ Amazon anonymous Boston, United States, December 25, 1999. “Turkish paranoia.”

attention.⁸⁹ Traces of this historical context, and the discourse framing it as a human rights and democracy problem can be seen in the viewer comments. Moreover, it is observed that this issue is combined by the viewers with the much older Greek and Armenian issues. A viewer from the United States argues, “To understand the true character of Turkey, you MUST see this movie [Midnight Express]. Maybe after viewing this movie you’ll understand what the Armenians, Greeks, and nowadays the Kurds are going through in dealing with these people so-called ‘turks’,”⁹⁰ whereas another viewer from the same country states: “I ... find the pro-Turkey sentiments amusing – Turkey has hardly been a shining light for the rest of the world to follow, especially considering the ongoing human rights abuses of their Kurdish minority.”⁹¹

The issue of human rights in Turkey, especially the prison conditions, has turned into a debate independent of Midnight Express, both between the Turkish and non-Turkish viewers and among the non-Turkish viewers themselves. The arguments that Turkey has made progress in the field of human rights and that violation of human rights and bad prison conditions are not Turkey-specific, are forwarded in opposition to the opinions above. For example, referring to the claim that the rights of Kurds are not respected in Turkey, a viewer from the United States who has “lived in Turkey for four years” argues:

It is the Kurdish terrorists that WERE being fought against, and anyone who sided with them. Americans can’t really criticize anyone about doing this because many Native American were brutally massacred just for standing up to the Federal government. Just a note, the fighting is basically over. Abdullah Ocalan was captured in Kenya, and the terrorism has basically stopped.⁹²

⁸⁹ For a historical review of the Kurdish reality in Turkey see Pope and Pope 245-79.

⁹⁰ Yahoo svahe Los Angeles, United States, April 26, 2000. “A Must See!”

⁹¹ Amazon Noctem California, United States, November 24, 2000. “Powerful.”

⁹² Amazon Rimmer Dall Istanbul, Turkey, December 6, 2000. “It shouldn’t be offensive.”

Another viewer from the United States has even done research and posted the findings to the site. The list he presents, which is quoted below, involves items questioning the validity of the criticisms directed at Turkey's treatment of human rights and minority rights. Moreover, it implicitly emphasizes that Turkey is not "that kind of Muslim country":

- there is a big anti-Turkish propaganda in usa by Armenian and Greek origin americans (which hurts American interests sometimes)
 - Turkey only predominantly muslim and democratic country in the world.
 - Turkey recently abolished death penalty (which is still in use in some states in usa) and had some good improvements in civil and minority rights.
 - The Armenian genocide has not been proved by historians yet.
 - public opinion in turkey about America is second best in all muslim countries with 58 percent
- last word: don't believe everything you see on tv look for other sources.⁹³

Turkish viewers also respond to the criticisms by underscoring the West's violation of human rights. For example, they point to the history of British imperialism,⁹⁴ "missing and torture cases" in Greece,⁹⁵ and the prisons being "bad places" all around the world. In this respect, a viewer suggests that not only are the prisons bad places in general but also man's torture of man is not confined to the prison:

Turkish prisons are bad places just like American, Greek, Armenian, Russian prisons. You turn the TV on and watch Israelis kill Palestinians, watch the cops beat black men in South Africa, watch the racist people in America. It is not fiction. It is real. So if anyone claims this film represents the truth, I recommend them watch TV and see the real *Midnight Express*. Better than Alan Parker's adaptation!⁹⁶

⁹³ Amazon Marcos NH, United States, November 11, 2002. "what is the truth?"

⁹⁴ Yahoo msaltuk, Turkey, February 10, 2002. "Karen, you are a racist cunt."

⁹⁵ In this respect, a viewer refers to Costa-Gavras' *Missing*. Amazon seckin25 Istanbul, Turkey, April 4, 2000. "So so movie.. But very racist."

⁹⁶ Amazon Cem Ceboglu Istanbul, Turkey, November 26, 2000. "*Midnight Express* and *Midnight TV*."

Interpretation versus Activation

The analysis offered in this chapter suggests that the international reception of Midnight Express is an event marked by a continuous interchange between “inside” and “outside” the film text, or, more properly, between the film text, society, and culture. The reception-event constituted by these comments supports Bennett’s ideas regarding the popular reading of texts (described in the Introduction). Viewers’ differing but patterned responses to Midnight Express suggest that viewers’ relations to the film text are not simply in the form of interpreting textual meanings, but rather of “activating” the text within particular “reading formations,” historical and current discourses, that “regulate their encounters” with it. Therefore, it is unproductive to approach the different and, even, opposing readings and evaluations of Midnight Express by the viewers in terms of the “correct reading” / “incorrect reading” dichotomy. Instead, the differences need to be approached as an outcome of differing reading formations.

Based on this framework, it could be argued that non-Turkish viewers describing and defending Midnight Express as a pleasurable prison movie activate it within their reading formation including other mainstream movies in general and prison movies in particular.⁹⁷ While this type of reception activates Midnight Express through other cinematic discourses, many of the viewers activate the film through not only extra-filmic but also extra-cinematic discourses. In this regard, the discourses constituting Turkey as the murderer of Greeks and Armenians, as well as the Turkish viewers’ (re)construction of a reverse discourse about these groups as “the enemy,” appear to be the most extreme case. With regard to the Turkish viewer comments, one observes that particular

⁹⁷ It is remarkable that the film was defined as a suspense film or thriller in the 1970s whereas today it is referred to directly as a prison movie. This is one of the indicators of the point that the inter-textual network in which Midnight Express is situated today is not the same as that of the 1970s.

discursive repertoires, in other words particular ways of arguing, have been formed around Midnight Express. Moreover, the medium in which these arguments are expressed implies that these comments also contribute to the creation of “writing repertoires” or “writing formations” regarding the film in the present. If the viewer comments partially represent a more general audience then, one can say that there have not been any major changes in the discursive repertoires of the Turkish audience from the 1970s to the 1990s and the present. However, it seems that the desire to gain approval as a Western country, and therefore resistance to Midnight Express, is much more “passionate” than it was in the 1970s. On the other side, with respect to the non-Turkish viewers, in addition to the persistence of old arguments, one observes a considerable effect of the recent discourses on human rights and minority rights in Turkey, mainly constructed by media representations, on the film’s present reception as a work of truth.

CHAPTER SEVEN: CONCLUSION

Our argument is not that 'the text itself' is somehow 'there' ... but unknowable, but that there is no 'there' in which its existence might be posited other than the varying reading formations through which its actual history is modulated, and that, therefore, to seek to produce a knowledge of it is to chase a chimera.

Tony Bennett and Janet Woollacott
Bond and Beyond: The Political Career of a
 Popular Hero

When film studies was established as an academic discipline in the 1960s, it mainly consisted of the study of “auteurs,” their films, and film movements (Turner 196). This approach is quite reasonable once we consider that film had long struggled to gain acceptance as a distinct art form and film studies as a distinct academic discipline. While noting that in the beginning of the 1970s film history was still regarded as the history of films, Robert Allen writes: “not all films, of course, just those films a teacher could nominate with a straight face as ‘art’ in defending his or her course to a colleague in art history or literature” (347). “Auteurism” remained the dominant concern of film studies until the mid-1970s. The period after the mid-1970s, which Allen describes as “the reign of high theory” (347), can also be seen as a period of “reinvention” in film studies mainly due to the shift in the focus of analysis from the notions of “film as an aesthetic form” and “auteur” to the notions of “film as text” and “textual spectator.” The concept of “spectator” does not refer to any actual viewer, but to a subject position constructed and interpellated by the film text. Despite its revolutionary effects on film studies, the concept of the spectator has been criticized on the grounds that it was an abstract and ahistorical notion, which is unable to account for the way actual viewers – historical subjects – read

texts. As a part of this criticism, the 1980s witnessed, especially among feminist media scholars, a shift from the concept of spectator to actual viewer/reader, which was also imported to film studies in the late 1980s and 1990s. Besides the concept of spectator, “text-oriented” film scholarship itself has attracted several criticisms. For example, in 1992, Rick Altman forwarded the concept of “cinema as event” as a “new way of thinking about cinema,” which would overcome the limitations of the “text-oriented” approach (2). The treatment of cinema as a series of self-contained texts divorced from material existence, the limitation of the treatment of the audience to the experience of film viewing, the consideration of contemporary culture in so far as it constitutes the subject matter of a film are among the main characteristics of text-oriented scholarship that Altman has criticized (1). A recent edited volume on cinema, Reinventing Film Studies (Gledhill and Williams), which, as Robert B. Ray remarks in his online review, “offers an implicit motto – Historicize!,” is parallel to Altman’s project of “cinema as event” in that it brings together various articles exploring socio-cultural dimensions of films and cinema as well as film studies rather than dealing with films solely on a textual basis.

The work presented in this study shares several aspects of those current developments, or attempts at “reinvention,” that has been going on within film studies. Throughout the course of this study I have attempted to historicise a film, Midnight Express, by expanding the parameters of the analysis beyond the film text to the social, cultural, and discursive contexts in which it was situated and received by different national audiences. My analysis particularly focused on different reception events around the film at different moments between the late 1970s and the present, and it suggests that

audiences' engagement with Midnight Express cannot be considered independent of the social and historical structures and of other texts. The historical and current discourses that audiences bring into play when reading the film text suggest that these audiences are not merely the subjects of the Midnight Express text, but subjects of other texts and discourses as well. Moreover, the nature of the discourses brought into play by different audiences of Midnight Express suggest that the film owes its continuing popularity and currency not simply to its controversial subject matter and its representation, but to the unresolved discursive disputes elsewhere, both within the same nations and cultures and across different nations and cultures.

Many of the conclusions of this study have already been presented within the chapters. However, it is necessary to reemphasize some major implications of the study. As has been argued in Chapter Two, the initial release of Midnight Express coincided with the American social debates on drugs, youth, counterculture, and declining traditional values, including American ideology. Within this historical context, combined with a wise publicity and marketing strategy, the timeliness of the “true” story of an American college student imprisoned in a foreign country for drug smuggling not only made it a socially relevant film for 1970s American society but also opened the way to the film's becoming, in Susan Bluestein Davis's words, “the cinematic touchstone for a generation” (57). Although the tense political relations between the United States and Turkey at the time of the film's release (e.g. Cyprus crisis, arms embargo, illicit drug traffic, debates about prisoner exchange) provide a suitable ground for the formulation of conspiracy theories, there is more historical, social (see Chapter Two and Chapter Four), and textual (see Chapter Three) evidence to think that Turkey and Turks in Midnight

Express were the projections of a more general Other that was necessary for the reaffirmation of the Western, particularly American, identity, especially in such a period. The critical reception of the film at the time of its initial release, both in the European and American press, also supports my argument. One observes that, especially in the United States, to debate Midnight Express was to debate 1970s America. In this respect, I argue that, when considered within the social context of its production, Midnight Express underscores more Americans' inner social conflicts in a particular period than being a political assault on Turkey or Turks, nor a story about injustice in which Turks play the major villains.

However, films do not carry their contexts inscribed on their surface. Therefore, since Midnight Express, as a mainstream narrative, projects that inner conflict as if it is an outer conflict between an American hero and Turkish villains, the Turkish government simply took the film as being "anti-Turk" rhetoric. The Turkish government's reaction to Midnight Express, including its ban on the film, needs to be historicized as well. In particular, this reaction needs to be considered within the framework of the long history, or, one could say, "tradition," of censorship in Turkey. An examination of this history is beyond the scope of this study. However, a short note on the sensitivity of Turkish film censorship towards national, ethnic, and racial representation in films up to the late 1980s could provide enough background to make sense of the Turkish government's reception of Midnight Express. Turkish films and foreign films were both controlled according to the seventh article of the 1934 'Regulation about the Control of Films and Film Screenplays,' which was executed with minor revisions until 1977. The article consisted of ten criteria, which required that a film should avoid: (1) the political propaganda of a

state, (2) degrading an ethnic community or race, (3) hurting the sentiments of fellow states and nations, (4) propagating religion, (5) propagating political, economic and social ideologies which contradict the national regime, (6) contradicting national and moral values, (7) opposing the military forces and reducing the dignity and honor of the military forces, (8) being harmful to the discipline and security of the country, (9) provoking crime, (10) attacking the state (Erdoğan and Kaya [Mutlu] 54). Nezih Erdoğan and Dilek Kaya [Mutlu], who have examined the reports of the Turkish Board of Censorship¹ on American Films imported to Turkey between the early 1950s and early 1970s, note that “these reports do not only betray a vigilance for the [filmic] elements ... which appear as a threat to ‘Turkishness’, but also a certain conception of spectatorship with respect to what cinema is capable of in representing ‘reality’” (55). “The reports,” Erdoğan and Kaya [Mutlu] explain, “suggest that the Board’s criteria are built on the understanding that the spectator may mistake fiction for reality.” This was such a big concern for the members of the Board that, even in the case of some films that did not have any claim to authenticity, they “demanded ... that the fictitiousness of the narrated events be underscored (for example, by adding a written statement or voiceover or both)” (55). This governmental mentality explains why, in the late 1970s, the Turkish government had been so hysterically against Midnight Express, which not only contradicted a certain idea of “Turkishness” but also claimed to be a true story.

Although the Turkish communities’ responses to the film look as hysterical as that of the Turkish government, these responses need to be evaluated in relation to the dynamics of community life abroad as well. However, both types of responses, in effect,

¹ The Board consisted of the representatives of five state institutions. These institutions are the Ministry of the Interior, the General Staff of the Army, the Ministry of Tourism, the Ministry of Education, and the Police.

contributed to the transformation of Midnight Express from an American event to an international event. Compared to the reactions of the Turkish government and Turkish communities, the responses to the film by the Turkish press in the late 1970s exhibit a relative coolness. This may be partially due to the fact that it was not possible to see the film in Turkey.² In 1978, Midnight Express came to Turkey as a rumor, as a complaint about the West. Since it was not possible to discuss the film, the press discussed the West. While the rightist press incorporated Midnight Express into its critical and regressive discourse on Westernization, leftist intellectuals such as Dorsay dealt with it through an anti-Americanist but Eurocentrist discourse.

The references to Midnight Express in current media texts such as tourism-related books, films, TV programs, and news reports suggest that the film has become a part of Western cultural imagery, social memory, and popular culture. The treatment of Midnight Express in those texts varies from parodic recyclings of motifs from the film to reworkings of its plot in new films. This also suggests that the social meanings attached to Midnight Express cannot be addressed merely in terms of the question of the film's representation of Turks. However, the statements about Midnight Express in cinema books of the 1980s and 1990s suggest that the film was coded as a manipulative and racist work by the critical Western cinema discourse. The critical reception of the film in the late 1970s appears to be the major determinant of the meanings attached to Midnight Express in this discourse. However, despite the persistence of some themes from the late 1970s, this study, particularly Chapter Six, suggests that there has been an important transformation in the international reception of Midnight Express during the period after 1980 and especially the 1990s as a result of the changes in the discursive space in which

² In this respect, the change in Dorsay's responses before and after seeing the film is remarkable.

the film has been circulating. One does not observe any specific reference to Turkish prisons and the issue of human rights in Turkey in the initial reception of the film by Western critics, whereas these issues appear to be important constituents of its current reception. As discussed in Chapter Six, this is because several media representations have constituted a particular discourse on human rights violations in Turkey especially after 1980, which have become a part of the discursive repertoires of the Western audience. It could be argued that today Midnight Express functions as a more truthful political statement than it had been in the 1970s. This observation also has an implication regarding the use of the historical materialist approach in reception studies. It suggests that by using only film reviews or scholarly texts the reception analysis might be confining itself to institutional discourses on cinema (e.g. film criticism) and that reception researchers should also look for ways of incorporating relatively unorganized and uninstitutionalized reception texts. In this respect this study suggests that viewer comments on the Internet could be a new resource for the study of film reception.

For the Turkish audience, the Midnight Express text in the 1990s was not the same as in the 1970s. As the presentation of the 1993 HBB screening of the film by the Turkish press implies, the Turkish audience encountered Midnight Express within a particular space of sensibility constructed around the film by previous Turkish reactions. With regard to the reception of Midnight Express by Turkish audiences in the 1990s and the present, this study suggests that the corrective attitude has been continuing, but in a more passionate way. One observes that parallel to the increasing desire of Turkey to connect herself to the West, especially to become a member of the EU, Midnight Express has been received as a more powerful and dangerous representation of the country and its

people. Moreover, as the debates observed in the viewer comments show, today Turkish audiences not only defend themselves against the discourse of Midnight Express, but also against other extra-cinematic discourses which are incorporated into the reception of the film in the West. However, it must be noted that, while trying to correct certain impressions, especially those given by Midnight Express, some of the Turkish viewers, in fact, reproduce the discourse of the film by projecting certain Muslim and Third World countries (e.g. Iran, Afghanistan) as their Other. This situation also points to a problem with Said's theory of Orientalism, in that it implies that Orientalism is not confined to the West. At least it could be argued that the West/East dichotomy that lies at the core of the theory of Orientalism does not provide much room for accounting for the complexity of identity-related issues, especially in Muslim Middle Eastern countries such as Turkey, which underwent an intense process of Westernization.

The corrective attitude of the Turkish audience toward Midnight Express is parallel to Robert Stam's observation on the corrective approach in most studies of ethnic and racial representation in cinema, whether they are about Arabs, blacks, or Asians. These studies, Stam remarks, have generally been 'devoted to demonstrating that certain films, in some respect or other, "got something wrong," whether on narrowly historical or biographical grounds, or on the grounds of probability and verisimilitude.' (251) The Turkish response to the representation of Turks in Midnight Express is not an exception to that. Stam also notes that 'debates about ethnic representation often break down on precisely this question of "realism" and "accuracy," at times leading to an impasse in which diverse spectators or critics passionately defend their version of the real.' (251) Although the international debate on Midnight Express has surpassed the film text, it still

exhibits a pattern similar to the one Stam describes. However, as is also implicit in Stam's arguments, engaging with the question of representation merely on the basis of a reality/non-reality dichotomy or sociological or historical accuracy/inaccuracy overlooks the always already constructed nature of reality, be it in the film or in the eyes of its readers. Attempting to show the "errors" or "distortions" of an assumed reality about a nation, an ethnic, or racial group, the corrective approach ignores the role of the processes of imaginations, projections, and discursive practices in the construction of "the truth" about the group under question. Using Mikhail Bakhtin's ideas, Stam reminds us that every film, like every artwork, never is a direct reflection of the real, but a "mediated version of an already textualized and discursivized socio-ideological world" (252), and that therefore it may be more productive for critics to be concerned less with the representation, that is film's "fidelity to a preexisting truth or reality," than with its "specific orchestration of discourses in relation to a theme" (253). Chapter Three, which shifts the focus of analysis from the accuracy/inaccuracy dichotomy to the Orientalist discourse relayed by Midnight Express, has partially attempted to overcome the limitations of the corrective approach. However, this study also shows that Stam's suggestion also needs to be extended to the study of reception. It could be argued that the historical materialist approach proposed by Staiger, which has been influential on this study, follows such a promise by dealing with audiences' responses not in terms of a correct/incorrect reading dichotomy, but as particular expressions of history-specific discourses, and by attempting to determine which discourses regulate audiences' encounters with texts, where, and when.

As already stated, this study does not exhaust the historical and current reception of Midnight Express, but offers a partial map of the particular reception events that have left their traces. Like most reception studies, it bears the problem of ignoring unexpressed experiences and discourses that have not been constituted as well as excluding the marginal responses to Midnight Express. I have come across only one viewer comment that can be considered marginal compared to the other viewer comments (see Appendix B). The comment is based on the argument that Midnight Express is a gay film. The acknowledgment of homosexuality as a subtext in the film is confirmed not only by the initial reception of the film, but also by the fact that one can find an entry for Midnight Express in a book entitled Sexuality in World Cinema (Limbacher 964-5) which describes it only with respect to its treatment of homosexuality. Moreover, one can come across reviews of the film written from a gay perspective on web sites constituted for gay culture.³ In this respect, further study of Midnight Express could address its reception by gay audiences.

There have been other Hollywood films that have caused controversies with their representations of particular countries, such as Thailand in Anna and the King (Andy Tennant, 1999) and Iran in Not Without My Daughter (Brian Gilbert, 1991). A comparative study of the reception of these films, including that of Midnight Express, could examine the nature of the controversies around these films and explore further the effect of national and cultural differences not only on the reception of films but also on the formation of controversies.

Finally, this study points not only to the possibility but also, and more importantly, to the necessity of two further studies of film reception. One would be on the

³ For example, see http://www.geocities.com/gaylibrary2000/midnight_express.htm.

reception of Yol / The Way (Şerif Gören, 1982) and Duvar / The Wall / Le mur (Yılmaz Güney, 1983). Both films are associated with the name of Yılmaz Güney, who has always been the most well known Turkish film director outside Turkey.⁴ Yol depicts the sad story of five Turkish prisoners during a one week-leave from the prison,⁵ whereas Duvar details the brutalities of prison life for a group of child prisoners in a Turkish prison. Both films were banned in Turkey until the 1990s. Since both films offer representations of Turkish prisons, either partially or totally, from the perspective of a Turkish director, a comparison of the reception of these films in Turkey and/or abroad with the reception of Midnight Express would enable a (re)consideration of the implications of this study from a new and broader perspective. The other study that needs to be done would be on the reception of Ararat. As stated in Chapter One, the debates on Midnight Express have been reactivated in Turkey with the making of Ararat. Although some social and critical circles have condemned the film as “a new Midnight Express,” several media figures have been inviting the Turkish public to be patient, more tolerant, and open minded as well as to be “wiser.” Şahin, who has described Midnight Express as “a fictive attack far costlier than bombing” in the late 1990s (“Midnight” 22), argues in 2001 that, based on the historical “experience of Midnight Express,” “nothing should be done” to Ararat. Believing that angry and crude reactions would contribute to the publicity of the film, Şahin invites the Turkish public to follow a wiser strategy this time: to be calm, wait quietly, and even announce that the film will be shown in Turkey

⁴ Güney wrote the screenplay of Yol, but it is said that Gören directed the film based on the orders he got from Güney who was in prison during the shooting of the film. Moreover, Güney took a leave from prison and edited the film in France (Erdoğan and Göktürk 560).

⁵ John Wakeman states: “Güney gained permission to make this searing condemnation of Turkish society by presenting it to the authorities as a favorable reflection on the liberal prison system (an appealing prospect in the wake of Midnight Express ... that had projected a barbaric image of Turkish prison life)” (407).

("Ararat"). It would take another chapter to offer a thorough discussion of the Turkish responses to Ararat so far. However, an overview of some of the responses and developments suggests that a much lengthier reception study, which will inevitably (re)consider the Midnight Express phenomenon, will be awaiting its researcher: A Turkish film producer, Sebahattin Çetin, has recently purchased the exhibition rights for Ararat. Although the official procedures have not been completed yet, the film is expected to be shown in Turkey in September-October 2003 ("Ararat' Türkiye").

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APPENDIX A – CORRECTIVE TURKISH VIEWER COMMENT (IMDb)

Marijuana (heroin7979@hotmail.com)

Istanbul

Date: 22 April 2002

Summary: This movie is a scandal

I live in Turkey. I speak Turkish. The book I'm reading now is the Turkish translation of Ulysses. I'm a rocker. I listen to some American and English bands, which most of the American and English rockers have never heard of yet. And by the way I'm one of the best science-fiction authors and song writers of all time, you'll hear about me in a few years :) Also I'm a funny guy, better than most stand-up comedians. I'm from Turkey.

We, the Turks, are modern people. We have the best poets, stand-up comedians and barbers in the world! Beautiful girls, sun, snow, shadows and dust: The most beautiful city of the world: Istanbul! (or call it whatever you want, Konstantinapolis or something)

Most of the Turkish women don't hide their hair like most Arabs do. And they are beautiful! (So are the Arabic and Indian girls, or all women let's say) When a few years ago you asked me about the beauty of Indian girls, I would say "Well.. You know.. Easterners.." I was a kid then. As fascist as a kid! (Or AS HIS OR HER PARENTS! The hidden thoughts..) But we surely have some beautiful girls here. (By the way I'm in love with one of them. Green eyes.. Blond.. But she does not love me. And I'm afraid, she never will :((()

This movie is a scandal. There's nothing about Turkey and Turkish people in this movie. I'm not talking about the usage of light or things like that, which are also 'not so well-done', I'm only talking about the 'meaning' of the movie. This movie is disgusting. They despise the word 'Turk' in this movie. My beautiful mother is a Turk, my funny father is a Turk, my beautiful and funny sister is a Turk, all my friends are Turks, all my lovers, all the people I see everyday, in the bus, in subways, in night clubs and bars, they are Turks, those nice people, THE PEOPLE I mean, not Turks, actually they are human beings, human beings.. After seeing this movie I just don't believe in anything in those Hollywood movies about South American countries or whatever.. And the anger of my youth whispers to my ears: "Make movies like this about US and some European countries!"

Or should I say other European countries?! You know, United States is in Europe, or isn't it? After all Turkey is an Arabic country! :)))

Most people which comment on this movie in these pages are Greek people. I just don't understand why.. Most probably these are fascists and most Greeks don't think in that way. I guess this is the truth, because we the people in Turkey don't even think about Greek people and actually we don't care, except few people who are interested in politics. Newspapers seldom write something about Greece. The only thing which may interest us can be their art, their history or the scientific improvements they make.

Or maybe the Greek girls.. (OK, don't misunderstand this now! :))))

This is a movie about Turkey and that's why I wrote about some facts about Turkey when I commented on this movie. I personally enjoyed this movie when I

watched it, the sounds the so called 'Turkish people' made and everything! But I just can't stand the thought that the people who watch this movie really believe that this really is a movie about Turkey, even if they are Americans, you know ;) This is unacceptable! An insult to Turkish, the language that our poets use, the language of Orhan Pamuk's or Yasar Kemal's books. An insult to the most beautiful (and yes, the most dangerous, but not in that way) city of the world, an insult to Istanbul.

Disgusting.

And you really believe in this s***, don't you?

Well, well, well, my droogies!

APPENDIX B – MARGINAL RESPONSE (IMDb)**troy-32****Chicago, Illinois****Date: 29 February 2000****Summary: Billy was a gay boy!**

"Midnight Express" is definitely one of my guilty pleasures. It's almost impossible not to get caught up in this movie. Brad Davis' weakness as an actor actually works to the movie's advantage: his feyness and vulnerability seem to be exactly what this intensely masochistic movie wants. The scene where Davis is standing there naked with his arms wrapped around the back of his head is such a fantasy! And you wonder if maybe the actor enjoyed doing it... This movie was one big shot of cheap gin, full of homoerotic melodrama, with Giorgio Moroder's kinetic, haunting, gay disco beat. The movie's love theme was kind of strange, though, because, even though it's emotionally effective, its culmination comes during Billy's rejection of his blonde friend in that turkish sauna. Like they would have sexy hot water for their prisoners! The movie wants to have it both ways, which is annoying because "Midnight Express" is such a gay movie. And Billy was undoubtedly a gay boy in a Turkish prison!!! But he had to be virtuous for the audience - that's why he drools over smashed nipple and spits out someone's tongue! Don't ask, just watch it! The filmmakers saw potential in having a good-looking young American male become a prisoner in a dirty foreign country. They really didn't even need the biography to do it, either. They just had the idea and pumped it full with exploitable possibilities. I read the book, and the movie strays every time, which isn't the worst thing, I guess. It also has one of the most intense, memorable scores ever, so much that it often seems like the movie is a function of the music. I wonder if any of the music ever got played in discotheques... It's definitely crowd-pleasing, for those in the mood. (the movie and the music) Anyway, it's almost impossible to tell whether or not these people were completely serious in what they were trying to do with this movie. But I could watch this movie again if I felt a need to be stirred.

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