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## Once upon a time in Turkey: the sex influx, gender inequality, and revisiting past pornographies

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### ABSTRACT

In Turkish cinema culture, something akin to a 'golden era' dates to the years 1974–1980. During this time, some of the most prominent figures in mainstream Turkish cinema, directors included, shot various sorts of sex films: almost half of the 1091 features shot during these years were designated as sex films. This article asks: how did this era end? What happened to its performers? What kinds of gendered realities appeared on-screen and off-screen? In what ways have these films reappeared in popular memory? In order to address these questions, the article introduces debates and testimonies concerning the sex influx and discusses how its materials are revisited today. In conclusion, the article points out some future research directions.

### ARTICLE HISTORY

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## Introduction

In Turkish cinema culture, something akin to a 'golden era' dates to the years 1974–1980. During this time, some of the most prominent figures in mainstream Turkish cinema, directors included, shot various sorts of sex films: almost half of the 1091 features shot during these years were designated as sex films.<sup>1</sup> Most of these fall under the category of softcore – a genre which, according to David Andrews (2006, 2), features less flexible spectacles, is rigidly heterosexist, and stresses extensive female nudity and heterosexual encounters while leaning on standardized forms of 'pornographic spectacles like strip-tease numbers, tub or shower sequences, modeling scenes'. This Forum piece addresses the erotic/sex influx films [*erotik filmler* or *seks furyası filmleri*], as they are known in Turkish, and the era itself [*seks furyası*] while exploring its gendered outcomes that became even more visible in its aftermath.

This era indeed sparks one's curiosity: it happened in a Muslim-majority country almost 50 years ago. Its primary years were during the reign of Nationalist Front coalition governments that included the Islamist National Salvation Party and the far-right Nationalist Movement Party. At the time, the sex influx was also discussed in terms of progressivity

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and backwardness, even becoming part of some leftist conspiracy theories. As Özgür Yaren (2018, 21) explains, many newspaper articles and news items have been very vocal about the gender segregation in theatres showing sex films and interpreted this segregation as a 'backward practice which should [have] been already overcome in 1970s Turkey'. The leftist conspiracy theories, on the other hand, were keen to define the influx as an instrument of Western cultural imperialism, locally imposed by 'the morally [hypocritical] conservative/right wing governments', to anaesthetize society and keep people apolitical and distracted.

Along with softcore pornography, some hardcore films were shot too (Özgüç 1988, 118; Yaren 2018, 4). Unfortunately, the fate of most of these films remains unknown, even today. As of 2022, there is a mixed picture: most of them are not available in any official physical or digital archives, but some of them can be found easily on various porn sites. Beyond their availability on the porn sites, what we know about their existence mostly originates from anecdotal evidence.<sup>2</sup> Last but not least, these movies escaped the era's censorship mechanisms, something that many political movies were unable to do.

Debates about this period, which is generally called 'the sex influx', have recently been revived by a new Netflix series, *The Life and Films of Erşan Kunter* (Erşan Kunter 2022). *Erşan Kunter* features the story of a film director who has just been released from prison where he was put by the military junta for directing sex influx features. The series concentrates on his conversion: he no longer wants to direct sex/porn movies but is eager to experiment with new genres. Although the series' release led to some debates around a long-forgotten era, it has been criticized for overlooking the struggles of female sex influx performers. Such neglect is not new, however; on the contrary, it reflects the continuity and perseverance of gender inequality.

This article asks: how did this era end? What happened to its performers? What kinds of gendered realities appeared on-screen and off-screen? In what ways have these films reappeared in popular memory? In order to address these questions, I introduce debates and testimonies concerning the sex influx and discuss how its materials are revisited today. In the conclusion, I point out some future research directions. To start with, I give a brief description of the sex influx films and the context in which they appeared.

## The sex influx films

For some scholars, Turkish film production clinging to sex movies resulted from various national and global crises, such as fragile coalition governments, a deteriorating economic outlook, political violence, and the global oil crisis of 1974 (Atakav 2013, 44; Yaren 2017, 1357). Conditions resembling a civil war on the streets and impoverishment of the population kept film audiences away from the theatres despite cheap and fixed ticket prices – which alone posed a great burden to the film industry. Similarly, import restrictions, as one of the coalition governments' responses to the economic crisis, caused a significant backlash on local film production and raw film import. For Yaren (2017, 1358), the situation worsened with the popularization of televisions in the mid-1970s. The final nail in the coffin was the arrival of colour film: shifting to this new technology meant associated extra costs, combined with the lack of know-how, resulting in the closure of many small production companies. The sex influx flourished in such an environment.<sup>3</sup>

Some aspects of this environment followed international trends of the time. For instance, as Giovanna Maina and Federico Zecca state, the introduction of television in Italy in the late 1960s and early 1970s, and the resulting loss in film theatre audiences, was one important reason for Italian movie producers to steer into sex movies (Maina and Zecca 2021, 121). Likewise, in the UK, economic instability accompanied by a massive rise in inflation and the introduction of television paved the way for the adoption of a similar strategy in British film production (Yaren 2017, 1362).

Returning to the Turkish case, according to director Yılmaz Atadeniz, imported films like the first *Emmanuelle* film (Jaeckin, dir. 1974) and sex comedies featuring actresses such as Gloria Guida and Edwige Fenech were blockbusters in Turkey (Öteki Sinema 2022). The audience demand for such films, combined with cheap local production costs and the aforementioned environment in Turkey in the 1970s, led to the production of many sex films.

According to available sources, there were two prominent types of pornographic films during the influx, especially after 1978 as production intensified: first, softcore films that were spliced with some other material; and second, hardcore films.

The softcore films were interspersed with pieces cut from 8-mm foreign porn films, and/or with block-sex pieces, and porn clips shot in Turkey with body doubles rather than the main actors/performers (Özgüç 1988, 116–117). Unfortunately, the details and information about these casting practices are often anecdotal, and questions concerning the hiring processes of body doubles and stand-ins remain unanswered. In terms of screening practice, the process was as follows: the projectionist used two different projectors. In one, the reel of the original movie was playing, while the second contained the block-sex reel. The projectionist then swapped the reels in specific scenes. This process, which is also often referred to as *şanzıman* [‘gearbox’], was followed for two reasons: to draw in bigger audiences and to avoid penalties and further legal problems following unexpected police raids. In the case of raids, projectionists handed over the original reels to the police.

Practices comparable to *şanzıman* existed around the globe, mostly originating from the necessity of avoiding legal obstacles while making profit. Italian producers were adding hardcore inserts to their softcore movies in order to sell them to companies in neighbouring France; the inserts could not have been used within their own country because of the institutional norms of the early 1970s (Maina and Zecca 2021, 127). As was the case with some Turkish films, these separate hardcore inserts were often shot from scratch, and with different actors than those in the original cast. There are more recent examples, such as the Malayalam soft porn of the 1990s, in which Indian filmmakers used extra reels edited out for avoiding censorship by the Central Board of Film Certification (Mini 2019, 58). Such vernacular mediations of pornography are important to note because they exemplify specific forms of pornographic content outside the North American context.

*Şanzıman* and similar practices were common and varied, as Yılmaz Atadeniz recalls in an interview with Metin Demirhan (Öteki Sinema 2022): once, an extra sex scene was added to one of his films by the performers (Behçet and Banu)<sup>4</sup> themselves in order to draw in a larger audience. Following Atadeniz’s memory, Demirhan reminds him of an incident heard from another director, Fikret Uçak, in which the projectionist mixed hardcore clips with one of Türkan Şoray’s movies.<sup>5</sup> According to Demirhan, this remix was so

well done that the audience really believed it was Türkan Şoray having sex. Similarly, Özgüç (1988, 117) emphasizes that *şanzıman* was done with many of Zerrin Egeliler's films, to the extent that even Egeliler was not certain how many such movies she had made in total.

The second influx type comprised hardcore movies. As much as their fate remains uncertain today, their contents are also contested. For instance, while Yaren (2018, 4) argues that hardcore film sex scenes were simulated,<sup>6</sup> Agâh Özgüç (1988, 118–119) paints a completely different – and detailed – picture. According to him, the sex was not simulated, and the first female hardcore porn performer was Zerrin Doğan, who earned this title with a film called *Öyle Bir Kadın Ki* [*Such A Woman*] (Yurter, dir. 1979), directed by Naki Yurter, in which she and her partner Levent Günsel 'have displayed all details of ... sexual intercourse, even to the point of "ins and outs," just like in films shot abroad'<sup>7</sup> (Özgüç 1988, 118). *İyi Gün Dostu* [*Fair-Weather Friend*] (Yurter, dir. 1979) had the same director and performers. This time, Doğan and Günsel were having sex in a pool. Another performer that Özgüç points out is Dilber Ay. One of her movies, *Şeytanın Kölesi* (Figenli, dir. 1980), is also mentioned in this piece. He highlights different hardcore scenes from different films, where Ay performs fellatio, has an FMM threesome, masturbates on a bathtub faucet, and has sex with other women.

As Yaren (2018, 5) notes, these sex films can be considered 'utopian fantasies' of the 'loser' or the 'downtrodden', because their narratives were built upon the socioeconomic and cultural fault lines of 1970s Turkish society. However, they also inadvertently articulated sex-positive female sexuality. As the films were chiefly addressed to young men of lower socioeconomic and different cultural backgrounds, hypersexual portrayals of such men and their ultimate overcoming of bourgeois men by 'having' their lustful women were common. Still, such overtly sexual, rich bourgeoisie women, who were actively seeking casual sex – without sacrificing their 'moral standing', as Yaren (2018, 23) puts it – were something new. Overall, for him, these compensatory fantasies, permitting rural working-class men to take revenge on the Westernized modern bourgeoisie, favoured alternative portrayals of sex-positive female sexuality. However, the gendered consequences of the era, which I will be scrutinizing in the following, prove that such unwitting articulation of female sexuality was somewhat limited off-screen. All in all, just before its annihilation, the Turkish sex influx, which commenced with Italian-style sex comedies, had extended to hardcore material with its own vernacular discourse. In what follows, I look at the aftermath of the sex influx, asking what happened to its performers:

The producers, performers, and writers of the sex influx were all men, why it is me alone to take the burden of the shame? (Samyeli 2013)

It was officially the military coup on 12 September 1980 that marked the end of the sex influx (Yaren 2017, 1356). This end did not, however, indicate only the banning of films, halting their production, and so forth. Filmmaker and actor Osman Cavcı (2022), for example, writes that all producers, directors, writers, actors/actresses, and even stand-ins involved in sex movies were rounded up at a temporary police station in a commercial centre in Beyoğlu, Istanbul. Cavcı bases his claims upon the testimonies of film-set workers whom he had met throughout his career in Green Pine.<sup>8</sup> According to witnesses' accounts, many were beaten, some were even subjected to foot whipping, and the

women were humiliated in various ways while being interrogated. For instance, female performers were asked to confirm their identities by looking at their films on a portable movie screen. Regardless of the veracity of these details, police raids, closing theatres, seizing videocassettes, and taking people into custody were common (Özgüç 1988, 119–120).

Moreover, actresses' participation in the sex influx continued to haunt them throughout their lives, let alone their careers. As mentioned, most of the public debate around the sex influx has overlooked its gendered outcomes, despite perpetual outcries from actresses and feminists. The sex influx having vanished, female performers continued to be labelled 'sluts'. Some, like Seher Şeniz, committed suicide, and some, like Feri Cansel, became victims of femicide. At best, they have moved to other cities or abroad, necessarily disappearing without a trace. Meanwhile, male actors – and directors – have been able to continue their careers as esteemed artists/directors while having few problems regarding their 'notorious' past.

Therefore, the burden of the sex influx's 'national shame' was put solely on women. Gözener (2022) argued that all the 'sins' of the sex influx, which had always fed upon female bodies' exploitation, were associated with the women who had already come off worst. In other words, as she quotes from the cinema writer Murat Tolga Şen, it was women who were buried under the sex influx's wreckage. To have a more profound understanding of this burial, it is helpful to refer to personal accounts. As a response to the release – and the supposed carelessness – of *Erşan Kurneri*, certain interviews of and testimonies from female actresses were brought forward again (Güngör 2022). These accounts give firm ideas about the horrors of the sex influx's aftermath that female performers were subjected to. For instance, Zerrin Egeliler, also known as 'the queen', once said that she hated everything about sex and nudity after taking part in 'those films'. Arzu Okay, who wanted to go into business following her career in the sex influx, could not find a storefront to rent because people were not comfortable seeing her as a shop owner. Although she went to France in the end, she was opposed to carrying the burden alone. In her words: 'The producers, performers, and writers of the sex influx were all men, why it is me alone to take the burden of the shame?' (Samyeli 2013). In the same vein as others, Karaca Kaan tells of being humiliated and defamed. Her past career in sex movies continued to haunt her, and she relatedly had several unsuccessful marriages. In an older interview (Davran 1999), she mentions how one of her husbands saw naked photographs of her in a paper and 'went nuts'. In the end, she had to leave Istanbul, dye her hair, and try to start a completely new life somewhere else. According to the interviewer, Kaan was still 'flashing with anger':

These were made by famous directors like Yılmaz Atadeniz, Çetin İnanç, Aram Gülyüz, why does nobody call them sex influx directors? [...] Karaca comes by the door, sees the man, undresses, and starts having sex ... Who wrote these? It's like I've made the movie, bought it, shot it, directed it, sold it, and made people learn sex. [...] I didn't even make money that much; it was always the producers. But it was me who couldn't walk outside alone. People were always like 'ah look at the sex star.' Humiliation and defamation, the gazes on the streets as if I was hanging around without underwear ... (Davran 1999)

Beyond the inequalities stemming from the performers' gender, journalists also highlight the presence of conservatism – and the contradictions it involves – both in terms of the

films' audience and coalition governments. For example, columnist Simay Gözener (2022) points out that thousands had watched the movie *Parçala Behçet* [*Tear Apart Behçet*] (Gülgen, dir. 1972) just after participating in Friday prayer in Konya. Similarly, journalist Güngör (2022) argues that there was a silent consensus between producers and the censorship committee. According to this consensus, several scenes were cut before sending films to the committee: state officials knew this process very well and simply ignored it.<sup>9</sup> In sum, the women of the sex influx were excluded from daily life in a society where patriarchal pressures were strong, along with contradictions being abundantly present. The influx was a cardinal sin to forget, and the women were the personification of this sin. However, the sex influx is not considered 'wreckage' today; with the prevalence of porn video aggregator sites such as Xhamster and Xvideos, some of the buried films of the era have found their place under 'Turkish', 'retro', and 'vintage' categories and tags. Moreover, today, some segments of Turkish society have arguably more positive attitudes concerning porn, while new online platforms like OnlyFans provide safer and – relatively – more stigma-free spaces for sex work and the creation of pornographic content, which I will address in the following sections.

### Revisiting the sex influx within contemporary online pornography

Digital archives and video sharing platforms have had significant positive consequences on the availability of vintage and retro pornography (Larsson 2021, 27). Although one might speculate about these films' popularity, as Larsson (2021, 28) quotes from the historian David Church, there is a distinguishable interest in bygone porn. Pornography, whether softcore or hardcore, from the sex influx is no exception. Some films from the era can be found easily on video aggregator sites under 'vintage' and 'retro' categories, along with the marker 'Turkish'. They are arguably popular, too: according to Murat Tolga Şen, the names of actresses/performers such as Zerrin Egeliler and Arzu Okay were amongst the most searched Turkish names on Google in the early 2010s.<sup>10</sup> Browsing through sites like Xhamster, Xvideos, and Xnnx is also telling: the videos' views range from 500,000 up to 10 million. For example, the film *Şeytanın Kölesi* (Figenli, dir. 1980), which could be translated as *Devil's Slave*, had 7472 million views at the time of this writing.

Despite the difficulties in identifying the exact demographics of these films' audiences, they are certainly international. One can find comments ranging from praising actors' and actresses' sexiness to inquiring after their identities ('who is she?', 'what's her name?') in different languages such as Turkish, English, and Arabic. It is, of course, impossible to know how many of such views involve masturbation, as porn spectatorship comes with different motivations (Attwood et al. 2018), but user comments show that this vintage content is very popular and being responded to with great excitement. The most recent comment about *Devil's Slave*, written in Turkish, expresses how the author fancies the performer, Dilber Ay. The other three comments, written in English, are as follows: 'Love to fuck this Turkish lady's hairy pussy', 'great one.. thx', and 'not bad nice tits there'. Some viewers also ask for the longer and/or uncut versions of the films in question.<sup>11</sup> It is common to find similar comments, presumably made by straight male viewers, on sex influx films. On the one hand, 50 years later, these videos are being revisited by millions, including viewers outside Turkey. On the other hand, this reflects the trend of sex influx movies' monetization without justice being done to their female performers.

The recirculation – and thus the revisiting – of sex influx films is important yet unexplored academically. The scatteredness of the material, varying censorship mechanisms of the current Islamist government, and – partially in relation to that – the lack of key companies such as Private and their privateclassics.com as in the Swedish case (Larsson 2021), which would keep the material more or less organized, and definitely more available, aggravate any sorts of exploration. Likewise, the ill fate of some of the female performers prevents more in-depth inquiry involving their voices.

I nevertheless find the sex influx's online 'resurrection' important. Contemporary perceptions of porn and the sex work that it involves are certainly different than they were in the 1970s, despite the supposedly hyper-regulative policies of the Islamist Justice and Development Party (JDP), which has been the ruling Turkish party for the last two decades. As one example, the mass protest against JDP's censorship policies back in 2011 was remarkable, with almost 40,000 people holding pro-porn banners such as 'don't touch my porn!', 'no porn, no three kids', 'don't touch my porn or I'll make advances to you', and so on. It was one of the cornerstone events through which the pro-porn stance has arguably made its way into mainstream politics. In addition, as noted in an *Independent Turkish* article on 6 June, 2022, today women can make money from pornographic content creation and sustain themselves in safer and more profitable ways than the women making films during the sex influx. For instance, many Turkish women use OnlyFans for making money due to financial difficulties from the recent economic crisis. However, social media influencers like Merve Taşkın and/or models such as Ebru Polat, who do not seem to have those kinds of difficulties, also openly advertise their OnlyFans accounts.<sup>12</sup> Although OnlyFans' current unblocked status could change in the near future, as well as occasional online 'slut shaming' targeting OnlyFans creators every now and then, for now, they are able to make money without being excluded from daily life like their sex influx counterparts. Such cases also weaken the ideas around the efficacy of JDP's hyper-regulative policies for cracking down on the internet. They also offer opportunities for a more positive, just, and equal portrayal of the sex influx's women. Most importantly, albeit being disorganized, sex films' reappearance on video aggregator sites means much easier access to sex influx films for both international and local researchers.

### Clearing the wreckage

On the one hand, the sex influx and its aftermath are disturbingly perfect examples of the prevalent gender inequality in Turkey spreading over time. Academic work can be helpful in clearing the so-called wreckage in favour of the sex influx's stigmatized women – but, as mentioned previously, this is challenging labour because it concerns people who have already passed away, been killed, or have chosen to disappear.

As Larsson (2021, 35) warns, the recirculation of bygone porn also comes with risks such as 'feeding into anti-porn activists' arguments about pornography [that] become even more ruthless, violent, and degrading'. Even though the representation of women in the sex influx should not be monolithically considered, an important part of it remains problematic (Atakav 2013, 45). Such representation adds more complications to the subject by further reinforcing existing gender inequalities.

On the other hand, the sex influx and its online revival, along with the changing contemporary landscape of online sexual platforms like OnlyFans, may provide new

perspectives. For example, a subtle academic investigation can contribute to and motivate archivists to construct proper – both physical and digital – archives. Current debates on sexuality in Turkey can also benefit from looking back at the era when perceptions of female nudity were different than today. Appreciation of female performers and their courage was a stance I came across during my ongoing research among Turkish porn consumers (Asman 2020). This stance can indeed grow more popular and pronounced, as it rests firmly on the political and cultural fault lines of contemporary Turkey. In the same vein, these sorts of academic endeavours can positively affect cultural policies in favour of (the sex influx's) women in the post-JDP era.

All these different examples prove that there is a diversification of public sexual discourse in Turkey on a par with the changing landscape of online sexual platforms and other media. The existing research on the sex influx, with the exception of Yaren's recent work, lacks a similar level of diversity. It either possesses a moralistic tone and accentuates the women's victimization, like in Özgüç's case, or it presents less-nuanced feminist analyses that bypass in-depth explorations of distinct articulations of female sexuality and possible female pleasures involved, which Yaren mindfully calls attention to. As clearly articulated by Paasonen (2009, 598), researching local contexts of porn outside North America not only means the diversification of the understandings of the genre and how it develops and is regulated; it also gives room for more diversified ways of potential feminist engagements with it. Hence, the most important outcome of such an academic investigation would be a more sex-positive feminist engagement with the sex influx, which at the same time could be the most efficient way to 'clear the wreckage' and free the women and their legacy that were buried under it.

## Notes

1. Yet it is noteworthy that some of these were sex comedies, which, despite the name, featured few to no sex scenes. The production of titles that could be considered softcore – and also hardcore – was heightened after 1978, although it was present prior to that.
2. According to Özgüç (1988, 120) many movies were seized by the authorities following the coup. Also, not all researchers have explained how they got their hands on these films in the first place. For example, Özgür Yaren, who has a couple of articles on the subject, never details how he was able to retrieve these films. Two films that are mentioned in this piece are listed on IMDB: [https://www.imdb.com/title/tt2198167/?ref\\_=nv\\_sr\\_srsrg\\_0](https://www.imdb.com/title/tt2198167/?ref_=nv_sr_srsrg_0) (*Şeytanın Kölesi*) and <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0292399/> (*Öyle bir kadın ki*). Lastly, some of these films were aired on Eros TV, a channel that was available on D-Smart, a Turkish satellite television provider until 2011. Some journalists also claim that the movies found their way back into circulation in the 1990s through the popularization of VCDs (Oylum 2019).
3. It is worth mentioning that the previous tax regulations, which favoured domestic productions over foreign films, made the Turkish movies even more profitable. (Yaren 2017, 1360).
4. The 'Behçet' mentioned here is Behçet Nacar, but Atadeniz does not recall Banu's surname, let alone is sure about her first name. However, the content of the piece is not clear from the interview. Atadeniz only mentions that it was 'an intense sex scene' and that he did not shoot himself.
5. A Turkish actress, writer, and film director, who is also known as Turkish cinema's 'Sultan'. She was never involved in the sex influx. Moreover, she had her own 'no kiss, no sex' rule in the movies.

6. Although Yaren claims sex was even simulated in hardcore movies, his take on the hardcore movie *Büklüm Büklüm* is interesting: 'It (*Büklüm Büklüm*) presents explicit oral sex and dildo scenes, yet male penetration *seems* to be simulated' (2018, 4; emphasis added).
7. It is remarkable that Özgüç does not designate Günsel as the first male hardcore performer.
8. A metonym for mainstream Turkish cinema. It comes from a street name in Beyoğlu where most of the film studios were operating.
9. This process is not the same as the block-sex practice, which means adding hardcore porn clips to the movies (Yaren 2018).
10. Murat Tolga Şen claimed this in a television programme. The footage can be found on YouTube in Turkish: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GJMZxqBQFr0&t=211s>.
11. As an example: <https://tr.xhamster.com/videos/turkish-loop-13758307>. I was not able to identify this film, but it features Dilber Ay.
12. Although OnlyFans remains unblocked as of November 2022, similar attempts are not always tolerated. A recent attempt occurred in Ankara, when a group of female students from ODTÜ/METU (Orta Doğu Teknik Üniversitesi/Middle East Technical University) set up a website called Odtufans back in August 2022. The website was immediately blocked, and a disciplinary proceeding was ordered by the university administration.

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