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RESEARCH ARTICLE

EMPTINESS AND SUSPICION: AN ANALYSIS OF THE FILM 'SES' WITHIN THE FRAMEWORK OF TRAUMA THEORY

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ABSTRACT

This article focuses on how the personalities destroyed by the military coup of September 12 are reflected in cinema. In this sense, after giving brief information about the military coup of September 12, and about Trauma Theory, we will focus on the film *The Voice*, which stands in a different place with its cinematography, which has created a separate place for itself among September 12 films.

Key words:

Trauma Theory, September 12 Coup, September 12 Films, Traumatic Personas.

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INTRODUCTION

The coup d'état on 12 September 1980 left deep scars in the collective consciousness of Turkish society, and its effects continue to be felt to this day. These effects will never become part of an individual's personal history if they cannot find a voice for themselves. So, art and artworks serve as significant tools for interpreting individual traumas within the discourse plane, providing us with an opportunity to understand the profound experiences. Artworks themselves confront their own traumas and, through expression on a discursive plane, enable us to engage with and address them. So, once individuals have addressed their trauma to the best of their ability, they strive to move forward with their new sense of self. This process also demonstrates the healing potential of the arts, while simultaneously providing unique opportunities for us to comprehend social phenomena through cultural products and their impact on individuals. From this perspective, Trauma Theory serves as a valuable tool that enables us to analyze works of art and social phenomena, often rooted in psychoanalysis. It also provides a significant opportunity to comprehend the lasting impact of events such as the 12 September Military Coup in Turkey. If individuals can express their pain through art, and if trauma theory is utilized as a method to illustrate these traumatic experiences in art analysis, then the examination of films

produced after the 12 September Military Coup, known as the '12 September Movies,' will provide valuable opportunities to comprehend the history of Turkish society. 12 September Films encompass a variety of movies that commenced production six years after the initial shock of the 1980 military coup, starting from 1986, portraying the traumatic experiences endured by artists during that period. Primarily, these films are categorized as 'homecoming' movies, depicting the challenges faced by those who were imprisoned and tortured after the coup as they endeavor to reintegrate into society upon their release. A common theme in these films is the alienation experienced by individuals who sacrificed themselves for society, only to find upon their release from prison that the very societal issues they sought to change had persisted or worsened. Those who endured years of harsh confinement paid a heavy price, becoming strangers in the society they sought to reintegrate into. Several years after the coup, the Özal government and its American monetary policies further exacerbated the sense of alienation. This is illustrated in the '12 September Films,' depicting the alienation felt by individuals who sacrificed themselves to prevent societal alienation, upon their return to a society that has changed in their absence. This sense of alienation, naturally, extends beyond the sociological realm. Torture endured in prison created profound voids in individuals' memories, presenting a significant challenge that must be addressed.

Failure to address these gaps could render our personal histories meaningless. So, individuals who have experienced trauma often grapple with flashbacks, attempting to comprehend the sudden emergence of painful memories. This characteristic of the traumatized psyche makes flashbacks and nightmares common elements in the '12 September Films'. If this traumatic experience is not processed, it can lead to profound emptiness and doubt in the mind, as illustrated in 'Ses,' which we analyzed in this study. Filmed in 1986, 'Ses' recounts the tale of a man subjected to blindfolded torture. The only thing capable of filling the traumatic void is the voice of his tormentor, echoing in his moments of agony. However, the sound alone fails to alleviate the man's suspicion, and the emptiness and suspicion he experiences ultimately envelop the audience as well. The first part of the study will delve into the details of the 12 September Military Coup. The conditions and severe damage caused by its impact will be explored in this section. The second part will elucidate Trauma Theory. As mentioned earlier, this theory offers extensive avenues for exploring social memory and personal trauma through artistic works. Understanding the theory and its implementation methods is crucial for analyzing 'Ses'. The intention was for the second part to be shaped by this awareness. The third part will delve into the analysis of 'Ses'.

Part One: Trauma is a state of confusion and fear experienced by the brain in the face of a sudden event. This sudden event can be a natural disaster, a traffic accident or even the social conditions of the country. If the social conditions of a country are full of sudden events every day and the people of that country do not feel safe or think that they can be tortured at any moment, this can really create a pressure on the psychology of a person. This pressure gains a new momentum with an unpredictable torture, and the experience of torture can cause irreparable wounds in a person's mental state. The events endured by Turkish individuals during the 1970s and 1980s inflicted these wounds upon their spirits. While Turkey's sociopolitical climate of that era claimed the youth of the 70s and 80s and jeopardized the prospects for the future, it also exposed children to the harsh realities of losing family members to custody, torture, or street violence. As the once mighty Leviathan, the State, intervenes with its sword to quell the chaos, it shows no regard for those caught in its path. Regardless of one's political allegiance, everyone bears the brunt of its actions. The traumatic history stemming from sociopolitical upheavals perpetuates a generation psychologically scarred, one that harbors deep distrust towards the State and scrutinizes its authority.

This article centers on the film *SES (The Voice)* that explore the aftermath of the military coup on September 12 in Turkey. Utilizing trauma theory, it conducts an analysis of the film, a novel approach within the Turkish academic sphere. The hypothesis posits that the events leading up to and following the September 12 coup led to a fractured collective psyche among the Turkish populace, with subsequent blame placed on the state for the resultant anguish and trauma. To grasp the trauma inflicted by the September 12 coup, it's essential to delve into the atmosphere of September 12, 1980. This entails contextualizing the 1980 military coup within Turkey's broader political history, considering it as the final military intervention, unless we also consider the post-modern coup of February 28. By the

late 1970s, the foremost concern for political parties in the country revolved around the economic crisis. During this period, Turkey's economy faced significant vulnerability due to a balance of payment deficit, largely stemming from heavy dependence on imports. The 1973 Oil Crisis quadrupled oil prices, making it exceedingly challenging to settle energy bills. As Western markets contracted due to the economic downturn, two-thirds of foreign exchange revenue went towards paying the oil bill. Rising energy costs coupled with ineffective economic policies led to soaring inflation rates, reaching 90 percent in 1979. Despite government efforts to mitigate inflation, the emergence of a sizable black market proved difficult to prevent.

The causes behind the third military intervention in Turkish history varied, spanning from escalating security issues and a corrupt political system to a faltering economy. Moreover, the rise of Islamic fundamentalism and the Kurdish separatist movement added further strain to the political landscape. Chief of the General Staff, Kenan Evren, felt compelled to assume control from civilian politicians due to these pressing factors. On September 12, 1980, at 4:30 am, the Turkish Military Army declared its assumption of power, citing the dysfunction of state institutions and highlighting the dissolution of parliament along with the abolition of parliamentary immunity.

Immediately following this declaration, all political parties and the two largest trade unions, Disk and Misk, were shuttered. The generals leading the coup asserted that their primary duty was to safeguard democracy from politicians and reform the political system. In pursuit of this objective, they not only disbanded the parliament and shut down political parties but also ousted all mayors and city councils. Authority was consolidated under Army Chief Kenan Evren, who also chaired the National Security Council. During that era, arrests occurred nationwide, indicating that the coup leaders had compiled an extensive list of suspects. Within the initial six weeks following the coup, 11,500 individuals were detained; by the year's end, this figure escalated to 30,000, reaching 122,600 within a year. This had two significant repercussions in the country: while the suspension of political party activities brought about a semblance of order, the pervasive sense of loss among the populace led to a humanitarian crisis nationwide. Those detained weren't solely terrorists; rather, they encompassed academics, journalists, prominent trade union figures, sympathizers of various political ideologies, legal experts, and ordinary citizens, many of whom were held indefinitely. Universities fell under the oversight of the Council of Higher Education, established on November 6, 1982, resulting in the dismissal of 300 academics that same year. Over the years, the heavy burden borne by the populace has left profound scars on their spirits. The statistics paint a grim picture of the September 12 coup. According to a 2012 report from The Grand National Assembly of Turkey, the military regime saw 650,000 individuals arrested, 14,000 stripped of citizenship, 30,000 forced into political exile, 300 deaths under suspicious circumstances, 171 fatalities due to torture, 299 deaths in prison, 14 deaths from hunger strikes, 43 suicides, and 937 films banned.

Part Two: In the 1990s, there was a surge of memories and testimonials reflecting personal experiences before and after September 12.

These works, spanning both academic and non-academic realms, meticulously examine the period, often sidestepping its cinematic representations. While it wouldn't be accurate to claim that there are no studies on September 12 cinema in Turkish literature, existing analyses often fail to delve into the intellectual dimensions of the films. Instead, they typically provide superficial critiques and a general overview of the films' themes. However, cinema serves as a mirror of society's psychological state, sometimes offering a vivid portrayal or even suggesting solutions. It holds valuable insights into cultural memory, presenting narratives of the past in various ways, sometimes reconstructing events. Therefore, cinema should be regarded not as a factual account but as a fictionalized reflection of history.

In cinematic storytelling, the protagonist's narrative can function as allegories, wherein the tale of a victim-hero's trauma and subsequent recovery serves to both displace and facilitate a gendered reinterpretation of cultural memory concerning national identity and civic responsibility (King, 2012: 4). Artistic creation serves as a means to mend wounds by illuminating personal histories, compelling individuals to deeply reflect on what they may have overlooked during significant events. The underlying cause of flashbacks, nightmares, and repetitive compulsions, characteristic symptoms of trauma or what is termed post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), is primarily attributed to this latency. PTSD, as defined by Caruth (1996: 57), involves an overwhelming response to sudden or catastrophic events, often leading to uncontrollable, recurrent hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena. The fractured psyche in PTSD, resulting from external violence, highlights the most tangible connection between external and internal realms. As Joyce Carol Oates noted, "the past never yields to the future but, in fact, directs it, determines it, and is in turn preserved in it" (Oates, 1994: 17).

However, what if an individual harbors a black hole, a mysterious void, in their memory where past events are stored and given meaning? In other terms, what occurs if an event—whether it's a gunshot, stabbing, or car accident—elicits a profoundly shocking state that triggers an extraordinary reaction in a person's mind? In such instances, the mind functions differently; it temporarily shuts down to protect itself. However, this absence in the past presents a dilemma: certain memories lose their significance in someone's mind, prompting them to relive these memories repeatedly in search of the missing piece, leading to their detriment. This jolting event fractures the individual's personality and wounds their soul unless it is recollected, articulated, and acknowledged—not as a mysterious secret but as an undeniable facet of personal history, an integral component of one's identity. As individuals begin to express their experiences, a previously closed-off personality may undergo a transformation, albeit through a potentially prolonged and challenging journey toward redemption. This underscores the significance of narration, which seeks to ascribe meaning to past events and foster genuine comprehension of what transpired. Various art forms, notably film and literature, offer significant opportunities and a fertile ground for examining the inner workings of a traumatized individual's mind. Freud conducted the pioneering study on trauma through his works "Beyond the Pleasure Principle" and "Moses and Monotheism." He proposed a direct correlation between trauma and historical violence,

illustrating in "Moses and Monotheism" how historical violence can engender trauma that spreads contagiously across generations. Contrary to common belief, Freud argued that traumatic neurosis does not solely stem from a person's reaction to a horrifying event but rather emerges from "the peculiar and perplexing experience of survival" (Caruth, 1995: 60). The impact of a traumatic event induces a disruption in the mind's perception of time. Janet conceptualizes the memory system as the central organizing mechanism of the mind, categorizing all facets of experience and integrating them into broader frameworks of meaning (van Der Kolk and Van Der Hart, 1995: 159). He argues that narrative memory, a distinctly human ability, should be differentiated from automatic integration. Individuals construct the significance of their experiences through mental frameworks, which are comprised of narrative memory (Van Der Kolk and Van Der Hart, 1995: 160). Familiar occurrences seamlessly integrate into established mental structures, whereas unsettling or novel experiences may struggle to align with existing frameworks. Consequently, if integrating frightening experiences into existing meaning schemes proves challenging, the memory system stores these experiences differently, leading to difficulties in their recall under normal circumstances (Van Der Kolk and Van Der Hart, 1995: 160). Such memories become uncontrollable, and as Oates suggests, they can begin to influence our future behaviors. In Janet's terms:

—It is only for convenience that we speak of it as a —'traumatic memory.' The subject is often incapable of making the necessary narrative which we call memory regarding the event; and yet he remains confronted by a difficult situation in which he has not been able to play a satisfactory part, one to which his adaptation has been imperfect, so that he continues to make efforts at adaptation (Van Der Kolk and Van Der Hart, 1995: 160).

In summary, trauma can be defined as "the response to an unexpected or overwhelming violent event or events that are not fully grasped as they occur, but return later in repeated flashbacks, nightmares, and other repetitive phenomena" (Caruth, 1996: 91); or as "an injury to mind or body that requires structural repair" (Waits, 1993: 22); or as "a life-threatening event that displaces one's preconceived notions about the world" (Tal, 1996: 15); or as "a threat to life or bodily integrity, or a close personal encounter with violence and death" (Herman, 1997: 33); or as "a tyranny of the past" (Van Der Kolk and McFarlane, 1996: 4); or as "a disruptive experience that disarticulates the self and creates holes in existence" (LaCapra, 2001: 41); or as "a blow to the tissues of the body [...] or to the tissue of the mind [...] that results in injury or some other disturbance. Something alien breaks in on you, smashing through whatever barriers your mind has set up as a line of defense" (Erikson, 1995: 183). Traumatized individuals often adopt a different worldview; they lose confidence in everything, including family, community, humankind, and in a larger context, God (Erikson, 1995: 198).

Part Three: *Ses (The Voice)*, directed by Zeki Okten and released in 1986, tells the story of a man, Tarik Akan, who was released from prison after the military coup of September 12, 1980, and arrived at a fishing town. We can't find out his name during the movie. He is essentially a common representative of everyone who was like him in his time: a

left-wing activist who was tortured and imprisoned after the September 12, 1980, coup. The villagers greeted the man who came to the fishing town with strange looks. The man, who is trying to find a place to stay, has a physical disorder that is understood when looked at carefully, although it is not immediately noticeable at first. He cannot move his left arm. The man, sitting and resting in a village coffee shop, listens to a sound coming from the fishermen at that moment. When he looks back, he sees that a fisherman has killed an octopus he caught by hitting it against stones. Within the scope of trauma theory, we know that individuals who have a traumatic experience may experience flashbacks without knowing when they will come. Individuals who have stored the traumatic experience vaguely somewhere in their own minds return to those moments when this unknown memory suddenly surfaces with a trigger and they relive the same troubles. The hero of *Ses* experienced a similar thing when he saw the fisherman who killed the octopus and returned to those moments. Moreover, the octopus does not make any noise and stands completely defenseless in front of the one who is trying to kill him. This situation allows him to identify himself with the octopus again. In addition, throughout the film, voices are always the trigger for traumatic memories in his mind. As we can understand from the film's poster, the man experienced torture while blindfolded, and sounds remain the main trigger for him.

Nightmares are another element frequently encountered in the portrayal of the torture experienced in prisons after the 1980 military coup and the fragmented personalities created by them in films known as September 12 Cinema. The protagonists of these films often have nightmares of moments of torture in their dreams. The same is true in *Ses*. The man is having nightmares again in the motel room where he is staying. While watching the movie, we hear a number of sounds, such as sounds made by a set of chains or an iron door. However, it is not clear whether this comes from a dream or if it really comes from the hotel where the man is staying. Situations where reality blends with dreams, memories intertwine with the present, a person dissociates from their lived experiences, and there's a sudden mental departure after a traumatic event are common conditions encountered by individuals experiencing trauma. In this way, the director tries to involve the audience in a similar traumatic experience by positioning them somewhere between reality and a dream.



(9:55 Dream and reality blend together through sound, and the viewer is now part of this trauma.)

Moreover, these nightmares and the sounds we hear will appear several more times throughout the film. Recurring

nightmares and flashbacks are again another feature of traumatic consciousness. The emptiness that occurs with trauma disturbs the brain, and the brain constantly wants to close this emptiness with flashbacks. The brain that shuts itself off during a traumatic experience does not remember those moments, and this creates a latency. Latency is a gap in our personal history that needs to be filled, and that's why the mind constantly experiences flashbacks.



(25:55 Scenes in which we hear voices blending reality and nightmare recur throughout the movie.)

The man begins to have a slowly developing love with a woman (Nur Sürer) he met in a fishing town and they start walking around the town together. Their goal is to buy a village house for the man. The two, who often spend time with each other, go for walks together and watch the sea. For the man, this can also be seen as an effort to return to "normalcy". After all these painful experiences, living in a small town means returning to a normal life. Of course, this relationship also reveals a contradiction: one of the most common features of cinema, called the September 12 Cinema, also appears in *Ses*. People from all walks of life were imprisoned and tortured during the military coup, and their traumatic experiences were often portrayed in films within the realm of leftist thought. Those who are in the Left movement of the 70s, on the other hand, are greatly disappointed by the life they see after they get out of prison. In *Sen Türkülerini Söyle* (You Sing Your Folk Songs) (Ugur, 2016), there is a situation similar to what we observed in the analysis we conducted for the film *Ses*. The woman whom the man falls in love with actually represents the bourgeois culture that the man opposes. Her mother watches American programs, and the cities or towns where they live are undergoing rapid transformation. In *Ses'* scenario, these and similar details are presented to us, emphasizing that all the suffering and torture experienced are futile, and that society has transformed into what the left-wing movement once opposed.

As the movie progresses through its script, starting from the 51st minute, it gains new momentum, leading us to the point where we understand why the film is titled *Ses* (the Voice). While the man is eating dinner at his usual restaurant, he hears the voice of a man (Kamran Usluer) sitting with his family at the next table. This voice is the same as the voice of the man who tortured him while blindfolded during his prison years. But he had never seen him, he had only heard his voice. But regardless, this voice takes him back to the moments when he was tortured again, and the man's

characteristic voice is so similar to his own tormentor that there is no room for doubt.



(36:00 The two begin to spend a lot of time together)



(51:00 The man believes that the voice coming from the table behind him is the voice of the individual who tortured him.)

Moreover, the man laughs about how his wife suffers from burns on her skin due to excessive sunbathing. This story of the owner of the voice shows us how happy he can be in the face of suffering.



(51:09 The voice at the next table laughs at his wife's suffering.)

Nauseated by this sound he hears, the man sees the owner of the sound get up from the table while washing his face and starts looking for him in the town. His girlfriend, who sees him, also runs after him. But they will not find the owner of the voice. The next day he finds the man on the beach. The owner of the voice behaves cruelly not only towards his wife, but also towards his children, and this makes it more likely that he is the torturer. Another day, he sees the owner of the voice, this time swimming in the sea far from the shore. He is also on a fishing boat. He drives the boat towards him. The film does not show exactly what happened to us at this stage.

Then we understand that he forcibly put the owner of the voice on a boat and took him to a deserted historical church. The owner of the voice is sitting defenseless in the middle of the church, blindfolded, stripped as if being tortured. After enduring uncontrollable suffering during the six years he spent in prison, akin to the octopus he saw on the beach, the man seized the opportunity to transition from the role of victim to that of hunter.



(1:06:36 The owner of the voice was forcibly detained, blindfolded, in the middle of the church.)

However, we are still not completely sure whether the owner of the voice is this torturer. The man also wants to be sure, so he closes his eyes and asks questions to the owner of the voice and checks whether it is the voice he hears. The owner of the voice, of course, says that he does not know the man. He claims to be an accountant in a company. But the man seems sure. Because of the anger in the voice of the owner of the voice and the snarling sounds he makes with hatred, he is sure that he is his own tormentor and does not believe him. The owner of the voice asks the man what he wants from him. In response, the man expresses his payment for his 'Youth'.



(1:09:22 The owner of the voice asks the man what he wants from him The man replies, 'My youth'.)

After a certain period of time passes, the man's girlfriend arrives at the church. He sees the owner of the voice, naked and blindfolded, crouching in the middle of the church. However, he cannot see her. The owner of the voice reiterates that the person he is looking for is not himself. The woman goes out in fear and encounters her boyfriend. She asks him, "who is this guy?". The man says to the owner of the voice, "come on, tell him who you are," but the owner of the voice is too cold to speak. When it is evening, they light a fire in the church; the man is sleeping in a corner and has nightmares again.

Meanwhile, the owner of the voice tries to convince the woman that he is not the person they are looking for. The woman does not speak at all, and the owner of the voice constantly begs her. Finally, as soon as the owner of the voice says, 'Speak, please, a human voice, please,' the man wakes up screaming from his nightmare. The man and his girlfriend leave the church, and the woman asks him: 'Are you sure it's him?'. Her boyfriend is sure, but she has doubts and suggests that they should go to the hotel and investigate the man. In the morning, they are still at the church. The man is walking around the church, still trying to decide what to do. At that time, his girlfriend arrives and states that the owner of the voice is "telling the truth". She went to the hotel and investigated the man. And the movie ends with this uncertainty.



(At 1:20:00, the movie concludes ambiguously after the woman acknowledges the correctness of the voice's owner.)

At this stage, considering the man's condition from the framework of trauma theory, it indicates that the gap formed in his mind during the torture period could not be filled again, the latency experienced could not be eliminated despite everything we know. The fragmented personalities of traumatic individuals mainly want to fill this gap. However, in *Ses*, this gap continues to exist with great suspicion.

CONCLUSION

During the tumultuous years of the Cold War, Turkey found itself politically torn between the Soviet Union and the United States of America, resulting in numerous casualties daily in street demonstrations and student movements. Alongside Turkey's political unrest, economic crises plunged the population into despair. From this perspective, despite its Americanist leanings, the September 12 military coup brought an end to social uncertainty. However, this does not serve as a justification for the coup but rather acknowledges its role in quelling social unrest. In this context, the military coup of September 12, 1980, stands as a pivotal moment in recent Turkish political history. Despite the disappearance of social uncertainties, political activists from both ends of the political spectrum have not been exempt from the hardships endured during their time in prison. Regrettably, the deaths and tortures following the coup have associated the military takeover with a collective consciousness in Turkey characterized by death and torture. Additionally, as previously mentioned, the monetary policies enacted by the initial civilian government established after the coup, influenced by its Americanist orientation, steered society towards values contrary to those prevalent before the coup,

aiming to hinder the emergence of a leftist political faction. Those on the left side of the political spectrum are the most disillusioned in society. All the values they opposed were adopted by society a few years after the coup, and political activists who paid a heavy price experienced rapid alienation. The films that began production 6 years after the military coup, known as September 12 Films, represent the artistic outcome of this reckoning. In addition to artistic reflection, these films also play a significant role in the healing of traumatic processes. From this perspective, art possesses undeniable power in combating trauma. Traumatic experiences are sudden, painful, and incomprehensible events that result in breaks in the mind, problems with memory retention, and gaps in individual cognition. Art serves to fill these gaps and articulate them on a discursive level. Considering all this, the vital role of cinema art becomes apparent. Of course, there are numerous September 12 films, and some of these have been analyzed in our book within the framework of trauma theory. In this article, we analyzed one of them, the film 'SES.' One of the key conclusions we've drawn is that the sense of emptiness and doubt depicted in the film 'SES' persists within the individual, and peace remains elusive until this void is addressed. In order to highlight the feelings of emptiness and doubt emphasized particularly in the film "Ses" parallel to the experienced alienation, we divided our study into three parts. In the first part, we explained the 12 September Coup and the political climate it created. In the second part, we elaborated on the general characteristics of trauma theory. In the third part, we examined the mentioned film to explore how a traumatic mind is represented in cinema. As a result, we can state the following: as long as humanity exists, pains, troubles, or societal events that create trauma will always exist. These troubles are an inseparable part of life, just like the joys experienced. Based on our past experiences, it can be said that a world without traumas is not possible. In this case, it is up to us to cope with our traumas, to make them a part of our personal history, and to rebuild our personalities with them and art plays a very important role in this rebuilding process.

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