

# The City and the Stranger between Monetary Relations and Spiritual Heritage: Let's See, Which One Is Easier: Acting or Being?<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

This paper focuses on the rapidly-changing, hybrid face of Istanbul in light of the dichotomy between essential spiritual traditions and complex monetary relations and their ability to synthesise by means of intermediate forms. In this article, I ask the question of how the money economy has reformed the spiritual background of the city—which once was associated with the refulgent silhouette of the imperial periods—through the film *A Run for Money* (1999). This film depicts the complicated confrontation between past and future, between spiritual heritage and change, as well as between value and money. According to this film's scenario, one day, Selim, the stranger—the protagonist who plays a well-behaved and honest merchant—finds a bag of money and succumbs to its evil, changing his life entirely. This transformation thus reveals, not only the story of a man but also the socio-urban experience of the city.

*Key words:* The city, Spirituality, Money economy, Intermediate forms, Film.

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1) I would like to thank Dr. Graeme Gilloch and Dr. Bulent Diken at Lancaster University for their guidance in improving this paper, which was funded by Ministry of National Education, Turkey.

## Introduction: The Story

*A Run for Money*<sup>2</sup> is a Turkish drama which was directed by Reha Erdem in 1999. Even though there are three prominent characters in the film—Selim, Ayla (Selim’s wife) and Nihal (Selim’s neighbour)—, its chain of events mainly fictionalises around Selim, *the tragic hero*. Selim is a middle-class family man who spends his time equally between his store and his home. He has a men’s clothing store in Beyoglu—which is also known as Pera—and lives in a rented house. He dreams of being a homeowner; nevertheless, he never shows a tendency towards undeserved gain and unjust enrichment. He knows, as he himself mentions, that ‘money does not come easily.’ He does not make concessions on his established ethical principles about saving, honesty, and moderation. Metaphorically, all these make up the moral compass with which he guides his entire life.



**Fig. 1.** Selim in his store.<sup>3</sup>

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2) The original Turkish title is *Kac Para Kac*.

3) This and all other visual images used throughout this article were taken from the film, *A Run for Money*.

One day, however, his life changes when he enters a taxi cab. He finds a bag forgotten by the previous passenger. This bag is full of American dollars—enough money for him to change his life *entirely*. He oscillates between taking the bag for his own and maintaining his previous values. This may be interpreted as being an example of the primordial dilemma between worldliness and morality. Firstly, even though he attempts to find the owner of the bag, he is never able to do so. Then, he—albeit rather indecisively—keeps it. Eventually, he begins to exchange the dollars for Turkish liras. The more Selim spends, the more he loses his principles. He is consequently surrounded both by bad luck and destructive events. Since he cannot harmonise and normalise these two dialectical variables—worldly and spiritual practices—he is defeated by affective psychosis. This monetary test turns him into a stranger. At the end of the film, this stranger, who himself cannot resolve the contradiction between [dirty] money and a [clean] conscience, ends his life in a single tragic moment.

One could argue that *A Run for Money* should be seen as “a research film.” In this film, money is always at the centre of the frame/story, with Selim, the stranger, representing the experimental subject that is continuously forced to choose amongst different stimuli and variables—between money and spirituality, between tradition and modernity, between the past and the future. The director fictionalises and conducts the experiment, perhaps, in order to judge the experimental subject while the viewers observe *the director's* reactions towards the tests. And the laboratory—which is also one of the most seductive variables—is Istanbul itself. It is especially significant that, even though the film captures various towns and places in the city, it is mainly shot in Beyoglu.

## The Filming Location and its Meanings

Beyoglu, which is a very remarkable town in terms of cinematographic aesthetic and socio-historical experience, is a reference, not only to just another ordinary spatiality, but also to a catastrophic dilemma between earthly pleasures and spiritual life; between the secular Republic and the religious Empire; and between desires and values. Thus, Beyoglu has symbolic links that make the dichotomy concrete, obvious and analysable. It symbolises Europe and, at the same time, the ideal civilisation of Istanbul.<sup>4</sup> Yahya Kemal Beyatli, known as the *poet of Istanbul*, defines Beyoglu as an *ezansiz semt* [a district without a call for prayer].<sup>5</sup> He believes that those who grow up in that Westernised, degenerated district tend to be devoid of spirituality and Turkishness.<sup>6</sup> Similarly, according to Serdengeçti, although Istanbul has been in the hands of the Turks since 1453, Beyoglu remained as *a tumour* in the Empire's brain since it was the original entrance for Western imperialism to enter into Istanbul.<sup>7</sup> Ahmet Hamdi Tanpınar—another characteristic author who has written about Istanbul—also censures the culture of Beyoglu and depicts it as *a failed imitation of Paris*.<sup>8</sup>

Similarly, classical Turkish cinema portrays the district frequently as a place of sin, backsliding, seduction, prostitution, crime and consumption. Accordingly, Beyoglu is the first stop for those who want to make money. Also, innocent, untouched and dreamy girls who have escaped from their villages to make their dreams come true tend to bog down in Beyoglu. It is here where their relatives initiate their search first—in *the bright swamp* called Beyoglu which both attracts and drowns them.

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4) Bartu, *Who Owns the Old Quarters? Rewriting Histories in a Global Era*, 36-37.

5) Beyatli, *Aziz Istanbul* [Saint Istanbul].

6) *Ibid.*, 101.

7) Serdengeçti, *Mabetsiz Sehîr* [City without temple], 112-113; cited in Bora, *Istanbul of the Conqueror: The Alternative Global City Dreams of Political Islam*, 54.

8) Tanpınar, *Bes Sehîr* [Five Cities], 143.



**Fig. 2.** Selim walks through the dark, yet colourful, Beyoglu District.

From this point-of-view, Beyoglu can be interpreted as a place of confrontation and fragmentation between opposite characters, experiences and values. These are probably some of the reasons why the director preferred to capture the ambience of Beyoglu for the purpose of reflecting these urban dichotomies in particular.

## Analytical Approach

Seeing as “fragmented life tends to be lived in episodes,”<sup>9</sup> *A Run for Money* can be analysed in three separate episodes which, in turn, implicitly create their own narrative fictions. These three episodes, which are used as a route map for the film’s analysis, refer to the chronological breaking-points of the story. The first episode focuses on Selim and his simple life *before the money*. He, in spite of some financial problems and unrealised dreams, is a merchant who maintains a moral lifestyle, cares

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9) Bauman, *The Individualized Society*, 160.

about having an honest income, respects labour, and listens to the voice of his conscience. The second episode begins with the scene in which Selim finds the money. This is the primary turning point for Selim. In the second episode, he vacillates between his moral and spiritual background and his future and earthly plans. And finally, the third and last episode, which represents the last period of Selim's life, begins after he appropriates the money for his own use. Nevertheless, he eventually comes to a bad end as a consequence of this decision.

Each episode indicates a different chronological period, all of which affect each other. More importantly, each of them is a reference to a transformation in consciousness and mentality about the city's money economy and morality. Within this frame, *A Run for Money* draws attention to the reality, not only of how the spiritual dimension of Istanbul has changed with its adopting a money economy, but also of how money does not bring perfect pleasure and happiness into the city and how the spiritual and material components of the city are not absolute, but flexible, unstable and ambiguous. On one side of the dialectic, there are the moral and spiritual doctrines which were bequeathed by the Roman, Byzantine and Ottoman Empires that ruled the city for nearly two millennia; whereas, on the other side of the dialectic, resides the money economy. It is with this context in mind that I look for answers to the following questions in this paper: has the spiritual atmosphere<sup>10</sup> that poets and travellers once described remained the same after the challenge of the money economy? How does the money economy manifest itself in light of the moral heritage of the city? Is it possible to classify and separate these contrasts in the city? In other

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10) According to *The Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality Report* (2010), there are 3028 active mosques, 40 churches, and 16 synagogues in Istanbul; also, according to *The Ministry of Culture Report* (2013), there exist 120 Islamic tombs, 109 Muslim cemeteries and 275 madrasahs (theological schools for Muslims) in Istanbul which were built by the Ottomans. Apart from these, other religious associations, communities, and orders are also active in Istanbul.

words, is it possible to experience them separately? Are they in conflict, or in harmony, with Istanbul? Are there any ‘intermediate forms’<sup>11</sup> that make them compatible and adaptable with one another? How do Istanbulites fictionalise and internalise this dialectic?

I argue that, in Istanbul, the conjectural dialectic between earthly pleasures and moral values does not turn into a real conflict; furthermore, I conjecture that all manners of dualism reflexively produce a common ground by fictionalising *intermediate forms* which are, themselves, able to both unify dilemmas and normalise deviances in the city. Nevertheless, there are some exceptional characters—Selim is one of them—who cannot find a compromise between profit and honesty, opportunism and value. They generally tend to either commit suicide or go crazy.

In the sight of the director, money is the best object with which to reveal the essence of the dualism between material and moral parameters. For this reason, I also prefer analysing the film mainly in the light of Simmel’s theory on the money economy. Money, according to him, arises as an indicator with which to define social and cultural—rather than economic—relations.<sup>12</sup> Thus, it is an extremely salient tool for producing a view and perception about metropolitan life.<sup>13</sup>

In this framework, I assert, as my second argument, that the money economy causes a *metamorphosis* in the fabulous, mystic and exotic portrait of the city. Hence, spiritual and exotic objects and metaphors, such as mosques, hamams and minarets, are no longer sufficient for describing the city’s image. I do not, however, claim that Istanbul has been entirely materialised and secularised in the hands of the money economy, consumerism or capitalism.

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11) This term is borrowed from Darwin’s theory of evolution: Darwin, *The Origin of Species*, 95.

12) Dodd, *The Sociology of Money: Economics, Reason and Contemporary Society*, 59.

13) Simmel, *The Philosophy of Money*.



**Fig. 3.** Close-up of hands and money.

What I do claim, though, is that earthly expectations and holy principles, even though not spatially and temporally segregated, paradoxically do not contrast with one another in modern Istanbul. This film also portrays the fact that Istanbulites ignore neither the inherited values of the city nor the rules of the money economy. Instead, they—except for the strangers—are somehow able to digest every contradiction and antagonism they are faced with. The stranger’s existence, however, is, in my opinion, an *exception* which destroys this reverse harmony. Besides, the price of having this role is a tragic loneliness—a loneliness both in believing and in acting. On the one hand, most Istanbulites have a strong and deep-rooted belief in the holy dimension of the city; on the other hand, this dimension can easily disappear into the background as soon as monetary relations come to the forefront. No matter what happens, they do not destroy each other permanently. Similarly, Istanbulites not only bless worldliness but also materialise moral values by using *intermediate forms*. Selim, the stranger to money, however, is one who cannot become an intermediate form.

Before analysing the intermediate forms which match up this world with that of the hereafter, it is necessary to state what I understand by the two

elements of *worldliness* and *spirituality*. Worldliness refers, in Selim's story, to mortality, impermanence, amusement and easiness; furthermore, it is full of seduction and feeds the human ego by creating a charm with regards to wealth, popularity, prestige, status, etc.<sup>14</sup> "It is (apparently) daring and transitory, proclaims its initiative and is acclaimed for it."<sup>15</sup> Spirituality, on the other hand, underlines eternity. Justice, perseverance, mercy and modesty are extensions of it. The differentiation between worldliness and spirituality can be realised in the movie's camera angles and views. In the film, most of the camera views are rarely at eye level; rather, the film is primarily filmed either from high or low angles. According to the allegory, low camera angles may imply worldliness, whereas high camera angles remind the viewer of *the divine eye* that watches everything from "upon high." The sharp tones and high-contrasts in colours in the film also highlight the same opposition.

According to Taburoglu, a Turkish sociologist, worldliness is a reference to an impatient, hasty and ephemeral culture which is formed as rapidly as it destroys itself.<sup>16</sup> Worldly characters know that they need to fit everything into this world and bring eternal and distant values together with finite and close desires. They do not want to wait and go far for this; rather, they desire the *here* and *now*.<sup>17</sup> For them, "any chance not taken here and now is a chance missed."<sup>18</sup> Bauman deals with this earthly perspective in the context of consumer society. According to him, this type of society "is perhaps the only society in human history that promises happiness in *worldly life*, and happiness *here* and *now*, in every successive 'now'—an undelayed and continuous happiness—."<sup>19</sup> As for

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14) Onluer, *Kalbin Hastalıkları* [Illnesses of the Spiritual Heart].

15) Lefebvre, *Everyday Life in the Modern World*, 24.

16) Taburoglu, *Dünyevi ve Kutsal / Modernlerin Maneviyat Arayışları*. [The Worldly and the Sacred: Spiritual Search of the Modern].

17) Ibid, 11.

18) Bauman, *The Individualized Society*, 156.

19) Bauman, *Does Ethics have a Chance in a World of Consumers?*, 167.

spirituality, even though it corresponds mostly with religious values, it can also find expression in non-religious feelings and impulses.<sup>20</sup> Furthermore, it can be revealed in everyday life as well as in organised rituals. In parallel with this particular nature of spirituality, Selim cannot be interpreted as being a complete “religious” character in the film. Rather, his relationship to spiritual and moral values is based mainly on his personal conscience and business ethics.

## The First Episode

The film begins with an image of an American dollar that drops out of the sky onto the ground. Synchronously, the opening scene is filled with the screams of seagulls, the characteristic sounds of Istanbul. Then, the dollar is seen on the ground, which is then taken by an unknown person just before the opening credits are shown. The credits are attached to some photograph-like frames with cross-cuttings. These frames display the fluid nature of the money passing from hand to hand every two seconds. The money in this scene flows in swift and staccato rhythms. Thus, the director reflects the constant, fluxing nature of money, which is one of the most dynamic characteristic of the city.<sup>21</sup> In this scene, money changes hands, but is always there! This is because it is an *actus purus*.<sup>22</sup>

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20) Simmel, *Sociology of Religion*.

21) Simmel, *The Philosophy of Money*, 515-517.

22) Ibid. This means a ‘pure act,’ and is extracted from Thomas Aquinas’s philosophy (Dubray, 1907). It also refers to an absolute, complete and perfect competence (Hancerlioglu 1976, 21). Interestingly, this concept, which refers to the existence of God, instead refers to money in modern urban life (Simmel 2004, 517). Money, just like God — or, to use the Aristotelian term, the Unmoved Mover (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2013) — is both a constant and fluid vehicle at the same time (Simmel 2004, 515).



**Fig. 4.** Money dropping out of the sky. This is a metaphor for God's sending a test.

The music that the director prefers to use during this opening continues for one minute. It recalls verbal forms of *Zikr*<sup>23</sup> to mind. The prologue, which is improved with the short, yet sharp, cuts and close shots, provides some clues regarding the mise en scène of the film. Accordingly, the theme of the film is money; its style is dynamic and fluid and its story is full of unpredictable surprises and details. The director does not apply cut-away shots in order not to paralyse the cinematic continuity; thus, he is able to hold the viewers' attention throughout the film. At the end of the prologue, the American dollar transforms into a Turkish lira; then, it appears in Selim's cash drawer. Finally, the money that dropped out of the sky and landed on the ground is now ready to be spent.

However, in this episode, Selim, the naïve stranger, does not really

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23) *Zikr* (or *Dhikr*) is an Arabic word meaning "remembrance (of Allah)." This is performed especially by those who have followed the Sufi path for many years. There are three types: practical *Zikr* (*Zikr-e Faily*), verbal *Zikr* (*Zikr-e Lisani*), and silent *Zikr* (*Zikr-e Khafi* or *Qalbi Zikr*). Verbal *Zikr* is performed with the accompaniment of some musical instruments. This is especially true of the *Mawlawiyya* and *Jarrahiyya* Sufi schools, which are both very common in Istanbul.

know the real meaning behind money's dropping out of the sky. He lives on a low income and has only realistic dreams in his honest and modest world. He is in this earthly world, but does not indulge in earthly pleasures. He does not have any interest and does not pursue any activities apart from running his own store and visiting a pastry shop. He routinely goes to the shop to eat puddings, which is his only pleasure. He has the courage of standing by his convictions. Indeed, he sees this personality trait as being semi-sacred. In other words, norms and principles are the centre of his everyday life; in other words, they are *untouchable values* for him. At this point in the film, the spiritual and traditional heritage of Istanbul may be a determining, strengthening and constructive factor in forming his value judgements.

The city has two-millennia's worth of heritage. This heritage was influenced by both Christianity and Islam. Its *aura* has permeated every corner of Istanbul. The city was not only the capital of the Roman and Byzantine empires, but also the central governing body of Orthodox Christianity.<sup>24</sup> In the eyes, not only of Christians, but also of Muslims, the city is holy.<sup>25</sup> It is for this reason that the city has repeatedly caused *holy wars* throughout history.<sup>26</sup> Mehmet II—the Conqueror—bombarded the city walls with *takbirs*<sup>27</sup> whilst Byzantine Christians begged for mercy by saying *Kyrie Eleison*<sup>28</sup> in 1453.<sup>29</sup> Consequently, in the eyes of the Ottomans, the city's capture was seen as a Muslim miracle;<sup>30</sup> that is

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24) The Greek Orthodox Patriarchate is still located in Istanbul.

25) It was holy because the Prophet Muhammad defined Istanbul as a city that will [must] be conquered. He said, "Surely, Kostantiniyye [Constantinople or Istanbul] will be conquered (by my community); how blessed the commander who will conquer it, and how blessed his army".

26) Crowley, *Constantinople: The Last Great Siege 1453*.

27) Takbir is an Arabic term that refers to the "Allahu Akbar," which means 'Allah is [the] greatest'.

28) Kyrie Eleison is an acclamation which literally means "Lord, have mercy" in Greek.

29) Fortescue, *Kyrie Eleison*, 115.

30) Mansel, *Constantinople: City of the World's Desire: 1453-1924*, 27.

why contemporary Istanbul was defined as *Islambol* (where Islam abounds) for years.<sup>31</sup> This background has largely formed the architectural and social character of the city.<sup>32</sup> The spiritual aura of the city is so powerful that, in spite of some minor transformations, even the secular Republican regime could not destroy it entirely.



**Fig. 5.** Silhouette-shot: Selim as a shadow under the spiritual atmosphere of Istanbul.

Selim also conforms to the atmosphere. Even if he has very limited opportunities, he is content with what he has. As stated, he has modest desires, but never resorts to illegal and unethical solutions. He has some debts that must be paid. He knows that he has to work hard and that there are rigid rules of commerce which he has to comply with and always

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31) “Few people consistently used one name for the city. Other names, epithets and abbreviations include: Stambul, Estambol, Kushta, Gosdantnubolis, Tsarigrad, Rumiyya al-kubra, New Jarusalem, the City of Pilgrimage, the City of Saints, the House of the Caliphate, the Throne of the Sultane, the House of the State, the Gate of Happiness, the Eye of the World, the Refuge of the Universe...” (Mansel 2006, xi).

32) Bora, *Istanbul of the Conqueror: The Alternative Global City Dreams of Political Islam*, 29-45.

refrains from harming people. The director wants to test Selim because the test is an eliminative element that determines whether he will be loyal to what he believes in.

The message is loud and clear: a value that is not tested is not a real value and cannot maintain its own existence. In other words, the test itself works as a measure of the sincerity and resistance of the value. It forces people—including Selim—to pick one out of the two contradictory choices in such a way that it gathers every kind of duality around itself. For this reason, the test carries the risk of the person's losing everything as much as it is designed to be a promise of happiness. In this game-like fiction, the director takes on the task of being a *tester* throughout the film. He plays the role of God. The camera, just like God's Eye, monitors, controls, tests, corners, grants, advises, asks, and, ultimately, judges.

The test in the film starts with small provocations, such as Nihal's flying skirt and the 100 American dollars. On a sunny day, Selim takes his daughter to a public children's park. In this sequence, the Hagia Sophia, the Topkapi Palace, the Golden Horn, the Halic dockyard, and the Galata Tower—which are the first places that come to one's mind when one thinks about Istanbul—are captured by means of different camera angles and a deep focus. Istanbul highlights itself as soon as the depth transcends the narration. Thus, the director reflects Istanbul as much as he can without blurring and distorting the city. It can also be claimed that the shot primarily aims to emphasise the familiar landscape of the city as well as to take Selim hostage in the depth of its focus.

Selim reads a newspaper on a bench in the park. First, Nihal comes and makes advances on him. Afterwards, however, children's shouts are heard. At that moment, their parents break up the fight and ask them why they are fighting. One of the children says, "I found money!"; another one claims, "No, I found it!" At first glance, nobody knows how much money they have found. "How terrible! You should not fight over a few

coins,” says one of the parents. But later, they realise that it is not a few coins, but a one hundred dollar banknote. According to Selim, they should look for its owner; the two other women who preached to the children not long ago, on the other hand, now attempt to appropriate the money for themselves. This demonstrates the common tendency for money to alter one’s moral strictures; the more money, the more it gains strength and dominance over morality. At the end of the sequence, Selim, who does not join the others in haggling over the bill, is criticised by Nihal for being “so honest.”



**Fig. 6.** The future of the money is perhaps the future of these people.

An innuendo is made here about women as well. The three women in the park play the devil’s advocate, whereas Selim—the only man—refuses the “opportunity.” More obviously, what this scene implies is that women have more of a tendency towards earthly pleasures than men do in the city. This argumentative implication is depicted, not only in this scene, but also throughout the film. Accordingly, women are portrayed as weaker, worldlier, and more seductive than men. In other words, women are not evil themselves; nonetheless, they are reflected as being roads

towards evil. That is why Selim is tested both by women and money. He passes this small test but may go astray after being confronted by more serious tests. In the last instance, no one has a “stable” and “pure” existence. This is what the film aims to underline, and what the God-like director tries to prove and manifest. Now, it is high time to learn the difference between “being a good person” and “behaving well.” As Selim tells his apprentice, “let us see, which one is easier: being or acting.”

## The Second Episode

The thunder and rain which are depicted on a relatively common day in the film imply that something extraordinary is about to occur. Selim closes his store. He tries to hail a taxi, but it drives straight past. Why? Because the director, as can be seen at the end of the scene, fictionalises and seals Selim’s fate in this way. Because he cannot take a taxi, he goes to the pastry shop. He eats something there and then leaves. The rain finally subsides; this time, however, he does not intend to go home by taxi. But a taxi, as if *wanting* to take him, stops in front of Selim. A man (AR<sup>33</sup>) gets out of the taxi and Selim gets in. As soon as the taxi moves, the previous passenger (AR) starts to run after the taxi. It is apparent that AR has forgotten something important in the taxi. Selim finds what AR forgot. It is a brown briefcase full of banknotes. He looks first at the briefcase, then into the eyes of AR, who is still running. The camera captures the details of their nervous faces and scared eyes.

According to these details, which are illuminated using a technique that reminds us of Film Noir, it is easily understood that Selim is confused and that AR is worried. The scene shows how the money

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33) We, the viewers, never learn the exact name of the man. According to a report in a newspaper that Selim reads, the previous taxi passenger’s initials are “AR.” Interestingly, ‘ar’ is a Turkish moralistic word which literally means “chastity.”

changes hands. This “easy money” refers to a difficult test that Selim will now have to pass. AR falls behind. Selim suddenly takes the briefcase and gets out of the taxi in order to give it back to its owner. He looks for him, but cannot find him. Indeed, he is not even sure if he really wants to find him. Nearly 450,000 American dollars is now in Selim’s hands. The real test between earthly possibilities and spiritual norms arises at this stage. The differentiation between these two dialectical antitheses reveals itself in the differentiation of camera angles. Accordingly, after Selim finds the briefcase, it is felt as if he is pursued by the director – like God – *from above* by means of high camera angles. Since nothing in his life will remain ordinary, natural, or standard from now on, eye-level camera angles are not used as much as the others throughout the rest of the film.

The director aims to change Selim’s life radically; therefore, each scene has tense, challenging and fragile moments. At the same time that Selim is rewarded, AR is punished. Here, Istanbul is thus depicted as a city in which one person’s gain may refer to another person’s loss. This affirms Bauman’s thought:

Life is a hard game for hard people, so the message goes. Each game starts from scratch, past merits do not count, you are worth only as much as the results of your last duel. Each player in every moment is playing for herself (or himself).<sup>34</sup>

In the urban game, AR needs to lose the briefcase in order for Selim to find it. The fiction that is written by the God-like director simultaneously affects the lives of Selim and AR. Ironically, it is performed by the testees themselves, who do not know each other. In other words, those who are tested are indeed the test themselves. Likewise, “it is decisive that city life has transformed the struggle with nature for livelihood into

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34) Bauman, *Does Ethics have a Chance in a World of Consumers?*, 56-57.

an inter-human struggle for gain, which here is not granted by nature but by other men.”<sup>35</sup> Since metropolitan people test each other more frequently—as compared to people from small towns—, it can be claimed that, in contrast with Simmel’s argument,<sup>36</sup> inter-human contact is more intensive (yet also more anonymous) in metropolises. This paradox is more understandable in more intimate and complex cities like Istanbul.

As for Selim, in spite of the money that has just fallen into his hands, he means to live in his own world. He does not yet behave like a “miser” or a “spendthrift.” Undoubtedly, if he had been a miser, this money could have made him powerful.<sup>37</sup> Instead, as long as he attempts to appropriate the money, he is daily overwhelmed by a psychosis. While Selim tries to escape, the camera continues to pursue him. He tries to hide the briefcase somewhere where nobody—including the director—can find it. He cannot talk to anybody about what he found, nor can he explain how he is now at a knife’s edge. On the first day after he finds the briefcase, his daughter asks him a very simple but speculative question: “Did you earn a lot of money today?” The close shot in this scene focuses on Selim’s face, which is absolutely anxious, rather than happy. Seemingly, his modest, trustworthy, safe and calm life will now give way to a cryptic, sneaky and dangerous one.

The relationship between Selim and the money is highly hesitant and inconsistent because the briefcase is as threatening as it is powerful to him. The reality of the briefcase causes him to suspend the reality of his values. He does not spend the money; he does not dare appropriate it, either. The director is continuously on alert. Whenever Selim attempts to touch the briefcase, the director implicitly marks the act as an *inner pollution*.

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35) Simmel, *Simmel on Culture: Selected Writings*, 182.

36) *Ibid.*, 183.

37) Simmel, *On Individuality and Social Forms*, 179.



**Fig. 7.** High camera angle: Selim and banknotes.

For instance, in one scene, which is one of the best metaphorical expressions in the film, Selim breaks an angel bauble when attempting to pull the briefcase out from under the nightstand. He tries to fix the bauble, which symbolises purity and holiness; after gluing the bauble together, though, he puts it amongst the banknotes on the table. This is the first time opposite elements come together in the same place at the same moment. Selim looks at both and hesitates. Why does he hesitate? Perhaps he needs more time to create an *intermediate form* between the past—which is shaped by his values—and the future—which is dominated by the banknotes. He looks for a way out in order to purge himself of the seductive promises and restrictive traditional norms. One day, he learns that this money was stolen by AR, who is actually a bank teller. But will it now be easier for Selim to spend it? According to Kardos and Castano's quantitative research,<sup>38</sup> on the one hand, people find it morally reprehensible for one to spend dirty money but, on the other hand, dirty things may create a kind of charm and the necessity to

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38) Kardos and Castano, *Money Doesn't Stink. Or Does It? The Effect of Immorally Acquiring Money on Its Spending*, 383.

*be cleansed.*

Since [people] think about moral dirt just like a real physical stain, they behave as if they could get rid of the immorality through a parallel physical removal. In fact, physical cleansing has been shown as an automatic response for immoral thoughts or actions.<sup>39</sup>

Perhaps, in an attempt to clean the money, Selim opens a bank account and keeps the money in a safety deposit box. He is aware that he needs to postpone the problem and gain more time; otherwise, he knows that his moral background will be destroyed by this maddening dilemma. But, how long can he wait? Furthermore, this passive waiting that he initiates may increase his passion for the money;<sup>40</sup> therefore, he must make a decision without any further delay.



**Fig. 8.** It is time to make a decision under the plane tree.

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39) Nemeroff and Rozin, *The contagion concept in adult thinking in the United States: transmission of germs and interpersonal influence*; Zhong and Liljenquist, *Washing away your sins: threatened morality and physical cleansing*, cited in Kardos and Castano, *Money Doesn't Stink. Or Does It? The Effect of Immorally Acquiring Money on Its Spending*, 384.

40) Simmel, *On Individuality and Social Forms*.

The act of making a decision is like playing a game of chance in which nothing is certain. The “day of reckoning” in Selim’s life occurs in the 37<sup>th</sup> minute of the film. In this scene, he is seen in the courtyard of a mosque. An azan is heard in the background. He, in forlorn silence, leans against a plane tree. At the same time, a kitten draws near to him and meows as if trying to tell him something. In other words, the God-like director, perhaps for the last time, wants to remind him of his values by marking the figures of the mosque, azan, nature and the kitten. Meanwhile, the plane tree should not be seen as a coincidence because it is one of the most essential symbols of the Ottoman Empire itself. It is, as a plant, a long-lasting and durable tree. Its roots are strong, its boughs are broad, and its trunk is large. In this respect, it may be associated with the notion of spirituality and steadfastness. That is probably why the director highlights it.

Selim is swamped with the dilemma between what he feels and what he desires, between his soul and his intellect. It is obvious that he cannot achieve “an intermediate form”—something which may have given him a chance to be both a spiritual and worldly man at the same time. Since the intellect has an intrinsic tendency to connect with the money economy,<sup>41</sup> it should be expected that Selim would prefer to appropriate the money. Finally, he affirms Simmel’s argument. He suddenly turns back and kicks the kitten. He makes a decision there and then. There is no way back for the stranger.

### **The Third Episode**

Selim starts to exchange the dollars. He is, initially, so enthusiastic that he desires to do and buy everything that he could not before. From this

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41) Simmel, *Simmel on Culture: Selected Writings*, 176.

standpoint, he is just like the spendthrift—Simmel’s character.<sup>42</sup> Seeing as the money is worthless, the nature of the money makes Selim more than a spendthrift. The money is worthless because it was gained *easily*. As Simmel underlines, what the money makes worthy is its distance from the actor.<sup>43</sup> Accordingly, its value is primarily contingent on the effort one invests and “the difficulty of [its] attainment.”<sup>44</sup> Selim, though, obtains the money accidentally and without even doing anything for it. As one of Selim’s friends notices, “it is easy to spend money that is earned easily.”

He does not senselessly give his money to the world; instead, he uses it for senseless purchases: “The pleasure of waste depends simply on the instant of the expenditure of money for no-matter-what objects.”<sup>45</sup> For instance, one day, he buys a painting for his friend, Ahmet. Later on, although he learns that they were defrauded by the seller, he does not regret the purchase. Similarly, on another day, he buys a dress for Nihal despite the fact that he does not like her. He merely aims to experience an instantaneous pleasure. For Selim, “the attraction of the instant overshadows the rational evaluation either of money or of commodities.”<sup>46</sup> Therefore, he focuses only on what the vitrine promotes, not on its cost. He consumes his life as if it was the last day that he would live; consequently, he suspends his values for as long as he exchanges and uses the money. In fact, Selim’s strangerhood is based, not on his possessing money, but purely on his not knowing how to spend or use it.

He believes that he and his family must stop being tenants. In an attempt to climb the social ladder, he starts to frequent a luxurious pastry shop.

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42) Simmel, *On Individuality and Social Forms*, 179.

43) Simmel, *The Philosophy of Money*, 259.

44) Simmel, *On Individuality and Social Forms*, 69.

45) *Ibid.*, 182.

46) *Ibid.*



**Fig. 9.** Selim and Ayla are in a luxurious restaurant.

Furthermore, he wants to replace his house's old furniture with new, more fashionable furniture. In the eyes of Simmel, "his appreciation of its worth swells at the instant that money is transformed into other values."<sup>47</sup> This transformation can also be evaluated as a sort of cleansing act, or as an exchange between dirty money and clean objects. By this means, he hopes to keep his secret without being obliged to confess it. That is why Selim uses his purchasing power with all of his strength.

Ahmet: The issue is not to make life unendurable. Won't we all end up in the same place? Shrouds have no pockets!

Selim: You are absolutely right. Cheers! (Laughing)

Ahmet: Something has come over you, Selim. You are more relaxed, easier. I think because you understood that spending money makes you feel better.

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47) Ibid, 183.

This, however, is not true. Nobody knows what Selim really keeps and feels. Each step that he takes towards worldliness produces more needs, which, as Lefebvre posits, seems like a *well-defined gap*.<sup>48</sup> Needs and earthly pleasures are continuously re-stimulated as soon as they are fulfilled and consumed.<sup>49</sup> Since “every pleasure attained arouses the desire for further pleasure, which can never be satisfied,”<sup>50</sup> no matter how much money Selim spends, he can never completely fill in the gap that he has created. This is due to the fact that “desire desires itself”<sup>51</sup> and continuously “re-emerges from its ashes.”<sup>52</sup> Hence, Selim, the stranger astray, is unable to stabilise himself in the liquidity of society; moreover, his earthly pleasures—just like his spiritual values—merely remain as an incomplete scenario, as a vain attempt, and as a utopian promise.

The nature of money is open to change. Almost everything, including spirituality, can be measured and calculated in the change—so much so that even the most abstract values can be reduced to a changeable cost.<sup>53</sup> Just like in Selim’s life, everything is re-fictionalised around the existence of money.<sup>54</sup> In addition to this, he “reckons with his merchants and customers, his domestic servants and often even with persons with whom he is obliged to have social intercourse.”<sup>55</sup> Selim supposes that his newly-found money will make him more active and dynamic; however, *he is drawn into an uncertainty in which everything is grey.*

Eventually, Selim does not feel safe anymore, even in crowded streets. The crowds in the city are not an opportunity for him to hide; instead, they make him feel like he can be easily hunted down. He escapes from policemen and customers as though they know his secret. He feels like he

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48) Lefebvre, *Everyday Life in the Modern World*, 79.

49) *Ibid.*

50) Simmel, *On Individuality and Social Forms*, 185.

51) Lefebvre, *Everyday Life in the Modern World*, 117.

52) *Ibid.*, 118.

53) Simmel, *Simmel on Culture: Selected Writings*, 176.

54) Simmel, *On Individuality and Social Forms*, 154-155.

55) Simmel, *Simmel on Culture: Selected Writings*, 176.

is being watched all of the time—especially by AR. The camera is always on his back. The director turns all of Istanbul's corners and backstreets into places of threat and confrontation in Selim's daily life. Selim uses his money as a shield against external threats; nevertheless, the things that he buys with the [dirty] money makes his life more miserable. The message is obvious: dirty money does not bring with it peace and happiness.



**Fig. 10.** Selim swallows the money in order not to be caught!

Balance and harmony in his familial relationships, which are seen by him as being holy values, are, in due course, deformed and, eventually, destroyed. Even though Selim once had little money, he, nevertheless, had an organised life; whereas now, even though he has more money, he has a much more labyrinthine life. In other words, his simple and easy life is now tangled and complicated. The money, which is the spider that spins his life,<sup>56</sup> pushes him into a labyrinth which does not have any exit. On the one hand, he has to fulfil his wife's expectations;

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56) Frisby, *Georg Simmel*, 101.

on the other, he has to resist Nihal's immoral proposals. He once believed that, if he could pay out money and give everyone what they want, all of his problems would be solved.<sup>57</sup> Selim pays, but nothing is solved. Just as the relationship between money and happiness is not symmetric, the more dilemmas, qualms and anxieties in the stranger's life, the more money he has to pay in order to deal with them. "The 'it' (money) to be spent is the hoped-for reward for days filled to the brim with nerve-wrackingly hazardous choices and many sleepless nights haunted by the horrors of false steps and wrong bets."<sup>58</sup> For this reason, what money can buy is not happiness itself but its unrealised promise.<sup>59</sup> Money does not resolve Selim's strangerhood; rather, it underlines his reality itself—so much so that money, which is seen as a kind of magical formula, turns, with time, into a curse which invites dark days into the protagonist's life.

One day, Selim learns from a newspaper that AR has committed suicide. Then, in a state of panic and fear, he gets into his *new* car and runs over his daughter's puppy. Interestingly, a few days prior, Selim bought the car and the puppy by using the dirty money, which, in turn, brought him this bad luck. The evil of the money does not only affect him, but also everyone who comes into contact with him in any way. Selim, once upon a time, thought that the money had the power to solve all kinds of problems and to heal all of the injuries in his life. What he experiences now, however, falsifies what he believed before. Money inflicts incurable wounds on his life. At the end of the film, Selim—either consciously or unconsciously—commits suicide by leaping from a balcony just after he is caught with Nihal by his wife and daughter.

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57) According to Simmel, "money is completely detached from the person and puts an end to any further ramifications. When one pays money is completely quits, just as one is through with the prostitute after satisfaction is attained" (1971, 121).

58) Bauman, *The Art of Life*, 21.

59) Ibid.



**Fig. 11.** The End.

In the city in which there is no room for solidity, escaping from the fate of the stranger requires having a liquid body and a flexible mental condition—somewhat like that of being water, gas or smoke. Intermediate forms, although they have some negative associations, refer to this type of fictional *adaptation* process. They are negative because they justify playing all opposite roles at the same time. The stranger, however, is only allowed to play an ambiguous role and who does not even move one single step further. While the stranger is one who anchors himself, intermediate forms refer to a pragmatist, multiple-dimensional route which the stranger cannot utilise.

### **Conclusion: Intermediate Forms and Living in the Purgatory of the City**

The first message that these three episodes give is that monetary relations and spiritual experiences cannot easily be isolated and separated from one another. Nevertheless, Selim cannot harmonise the contradictory variables between worldly desires and spiritual regulations without

experiencing any internal conflicts or qualms; that is perhaps why the stranger cannot spend the found money with as much pleasure as he desires. Although “flexibility is the slogan of the day,”<sup>60</sup> he cannot internalise a world in which everything is replaceable and casual enough to be transformed into a totally different value.

I elaborate upon this problematic issue in the light of the concept of ‘intermediate forms. These forms, which are positioned between worldly and otherworldly issues, between materiality and spirituality, between principles and desires, and between wealth and value, are directly associated with the adaptive tendency of modern Istanbulites. Intermediate forms are, in this context, different from Darwin’s theory in that they are not a reference to transitions between various paradigms. Instead, intermediate forms contain within themselves every kind of contrast and contradiction at the same time. Although there are continuous tides between opposite poles, they never turn permanently into one another. These tides, which are indeed mental conditions, occur at any moment reflexively. Their *raison d’être*, or their *telos*, is to find and fix the missing links that break inner harmony. Thus, in virtue of intermediate forms, the antinomies, conflicts, and paradoxes which are found in the city are experienced as if they are component parts of one harmonic whole. Here, everything is, as Lefebvre highlights, “ostensibly de-dramatized; instead of tragedy there are objects, certainties, ‘values,’ roles, satisfactions, jobs, situations and functions.”<sup>61</sup> This structure, which may be interpreted as a mental solution for remaining healthy in the city, does not allow people to face, struggle, or rebel against themselves. According to the film, intermediate forms are like skeleton keys. As mentioned earlier, if strangers (like Selim) are not able to use intermediate forms in order to pass the test and become saints, they are

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60) Bauman, *The Individualized Society*, 24.

61) Lefebvre, *Everyday Life in the Modern World*, 65.

obliged either *to go crazy* or *to commit suicide*.



**Fig. 12.** A frame from the film. An angel bauble and money: Is it contrast or harmony?

In Istanbul, places of earthly and spiritual experiences and practices are not restricted by spatial and temporal borders. Spirituality can freely maintain its own existence by touching and challenging worldliness. In other words, spiritual experiences in Istanbul are performed in the middle of an actively-living public space in which earthly life is constantly tested; further, they are not embedded merely in symbolic moments and rituals. On the other hand, generally, the money economy does not use any repressive or destructive method and does not suppress; rather, it transforms the spiritual atmosphere of the city. Keskin ignores this strategy of the money economy. According to him, “the modern individual has little time for praying or attending church or mosque; therefore his new religion is capitalism, which can be understood as a form of religion without a God.”<sup>62</sup> This tremendous claim, which deals with religion and capitalism separately, puts the money economy in the

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62) Keskin, *The Sociology of Islam: Secularism, Economy and Politics*, 4.

place of religion. If so, then why are believers able to obey the power of money at the same time? And while doing this, why do they maintain the rituals which derive from their beliefs? I think that the modern liquidity of life overlaps everything without replacing anything. It is perhaps for this reason that, today, urbanites, as well as the values which they are liable to hold, are all open to everything. As detailed before, the stranger, on the other hand, cannot become two characters at one time. His tragedy stems from his indivisibility and inflexibility.

As has already been highlighted, in Istanbul, contradictions and contrasts between opposite elements live side-by-side each other spatially. Since this may cause some social and mental problems, Istanbulites try to integrate themselves into *in-betweenness* by designing and producing intermediate forms in which they do not need to prefer earthly pleasures over spiritual/moral values, or vice versa. With time, this reflexive production turns into an unconscious habit or defensive reaction. In the end, not only their habits, but also their own beings transform into intermediate forms. In this sense, I think, Simmel is right in pointing out that “the human being is a dualistic creature from the very beginning, but this does not affect the unit of his or her actions; in fact, they only prove to be powerful as the result of a multiplicity of elements.”<sup>63</sup> The forced unit owes its own existence, I think, to intermediate forms. They, albeit artificial, are the formulae for being physically happy and having a mentally healthy life.

This is the point at which both transcendental experiences land on Earth and physical desires are sanctified. Here, the tension of being both a moralist and a miser at the same time can be dispelled through the promise of a perfect life. On the one hand, however, his “modern mind has become more and more calculating”<sup>64</sup>; and, on the other hand, he can

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63) Simmel, *Simmel on Culture: Selected Writings*, 187.

64) *Ibid*, 177.

experience material life in the garb of mythology or asceticism.<sup>65</sup> This may be defined as the “spiritualization of money”<sup>66</sup> and *the materialisation of spirituality*. In this context, working and earning money are themselves simultaneously performed as forms of worship—<sup>67</sup> so much so, in fact, that money itself can be both a measure of values and a value of measures.<sup>68</sup> This mechanism is, nonetheless, in need of intermediate forms so as to maintain its continuity because they have the complementary power of filling in all necessary mental gaps in the slippery and imprecise relationship between money and value. Selim—the stranger—, on the other hand, appears as an uncontrollable, faulty, and uncanny threat to this planned mechanism.

Intermediate forms have more than one God. They consume earthly affairs as an ecstasy of worship and recklessly bless whatever they need to bless for the sake of delighted moments. Namely, in contrast to Keskin’s thought, I think that the money economy sees spiritual/moral values as a vital requirement that needs to be satisfied; therefore, it does not aim to fight against them; on the contrary, it stimulates people to fictionalise “intermediate forms” because they are able to fill every kind of gap between the money economy and the spiritual life of the city. Intermediate forms attach importance to believers and temples as much as to vitrines, entrepreneurs, and profit margins in order to maintain their existence without any impediment. Shopping malls, high-security luxury

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65) Taburoglu, *Dünyevi ve Kutsal / Modernlerin Maneviyat Arayışları* [The Worldly and the Sacred: Spiritual Search of the Modern], 11.

66) Simmel, *The Philosophy of Money*, 198.

67) It is a quite interesting and partially new situation to find these characteristics, which are normally peculiar to Protestant ethics, in Istanbul’s Islamic tradition. According to Sufi philosophy, the phenomenological world, which is mortal and deceptive, should not be sanctified. Moreover, this world is considered as a place of trials and tribulations because of its being full of events, objects and relationships which seduce, perturb and oppress the human mind and soul. Worldliness is, in this sense, dealt with as a socio-psychological barrier to bliss, goodness and beauty.

68) Goodchild, *Capitalism and Religion: The Price of Piety*, 128.

estates, and skyscrapers are supported with places of worship while these temples are filled with chain stores—so much so that, even sanctity can be brought to consumer-like believers as a material service. In the world of intermediate forms in Istanbul, moral values are “in stock” as if they were products to be displayed in vitrines.

Leyshon and Thrift point out that money, on the one hand, draws everything together and, on the other hand, creates a new distance between people.<sup>69</sup> According to them, money not only produces liberty but also threatens the moral order. Nevertheless, this liberty is, just like what Selim experiences, mostly for the purpose of consumption. It is the endless whisper of endless desires and dissatisfactions. As for the threat, it is, as stated before, not based on conflict, but on harmony and affinity. The colour of intermediate forms is grey, which contains within themselves almost all the colours of the material and spiritual worlds. This is somewhat similar to a protagonist’s playing the roles of a particular play at the same time. Accordingly, “when an actor takes on an established social role, usually he finds that a particular front has already been established for it.”<sup>70</sup> Notwithstanding his having to play opposite roles, he is able to digest all these characterisations. In other words, “what one was yesterday would no longer bar the possibility of becoming someone totally different today”<sup>71</sup> because “in its contemporary liquid-modern rendition, belonging to one entity may be shared and practiced simultaneously with belonging to other entities in almost any combination, without necessarily provoking condemnation or repressive measures of any kind.”<sup>72</sup> Individuals in the city are approved as long as they have disposable identities that are easy to abandon and have an ideal biodegradability.<sup>73</sup> The stranger, on the other

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69) Leyshon and Thrift, *Money/Space: Geographies of Monetary Transformation*, 36.

70) Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, 37.

71) Bauman, *Does Ethics have a Chance in a World of Consumers?*, 175.

72) *Ibid.*, 23.

73) Bauman, *44 Letters from the Liquid Modern World*, 16.

hand, is one who can never be approved of and, thus, one who always stays outside this category.

Although intermediate forms make the identity of Istanbul (and, by extension, Istanbulites) flexible, they also make it ambiguous. For this reason, researching its identity is as abortive, vain and frustrating as defining the colour of a chameleon. As Perousé explains, the identities of Istanbul are abstract, vague, multiplex and coincident;<sup>74</sup> in addition, they are continuously in construction, destruction, adaptation and reconstruction by means of intermediate forms. In this process, urbanites who cannot adapt to the rhythm of the process alienate themselves due to opposite variables, such as earthly desires and spiritual regulations. Selim is merely an example of one of them. He is a *loser* because he is unable to be a part of the *greyness*, which has a high *biodegradability*. He can neither reach *oneness* in his own mind nor suspend the plural and disputed whispers that he hears just after he finds the briefcase. That is to say, Selim settles in the middle of the purgatory that is Istanbul. He does not overcome the fictional game called “being an intermediate form,” which acts as a mental and behavioural antibody which strengthens the digestive system against tough dilemmas in society. In fact, intermediate forms and the condition of strangerhood are revealed, not only in Selim’s tragedy or in the Istanbul in which monetary relations and spiritual values concur, but also in other stories and cities in which different dichotomies come out under the influence of global changes. In this sense, every city and story tends to produce their own distinctive intermediate forms. I think it seems that the issue of how the money economy affects spirituality will not be understood unless intermediate forms and the conditions of strangerhood are analysed in the context of spatial and urban extensions.

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74) Perousé, *Istanbulla Yuzlesme Denemeleri: Ceperler, Hareketlilik ve Kentsel Bellek* [Essays on Istanbul: Peripheries, Movement and Urban Memory], 41.

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