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Zeki Demirkubuz as a Creator of Meaning: A Critique of the Film *Hayat*

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Abstract

This article examines Turkish director Zeki Demirkubuz's *Hayat* (2023) and the influence of Fyodor Dostoevsky and Albert Camus on the film's narrative and characters. The central research question concerns how the intellectual worlds of these two writers shaped the construction of *Hayat*'s story and protagonists. Demirkubuz's primary aim in *Hayat* is to portray, in practical terms, the typical features of characters living through an existential crisis and to indicate the possible paths toward its resolution. Both Dostoevsky and Camus devote significant attention to the basic and shared manifestations of existential crisis, but they differ on the question of overcoming this crisis. In *Hayat*, Demirkubuz thematizes the Dostoevskian resolution while also incorporating Camus's conception of the absurd character. Viewed in this light, the director constructs a unique world of meaning; accordingly, he can be evaluated as an auteur in the sense of a **meaning creator.** This is the article's working hypothesis. To substantiate this claim, the article first outlines the intellectual frameworks of Dostoevsky and Camus and then subsequently analyzes *Hayat*'s narrative and characters in relation to them.

Keywords: Zeki Demirkubuz; Hayat (film); existentialism; Dostoevsky; Camus

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Zeki Demirkubuz as a Creator of Meaning: A Critique of the Film *Hayat*

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Introduction

In *Signs and Meaning in the Cinema*, Peter Wollen discusses two schools of auteur criticism- and, by extension, two kinds of auteurs. The first examines the director through the dimension of meaning in films, attending to content and the recurrent themes across works. Here, the focus of the school is that the director is treated as a creator of meaning. For such directors, style and *mise en scène* are secondary: films are not assessed purely on stylistic grounds. The other school evaluates directors as *metteurs en scène* who, through a distinctive filmic language, visualize a pre-existing text- whether a screenplay, novel, or play. In such cases, meaning is present *a priori*, because the film externalizes an already existing text. Whether a director qualifies as an auteur thus turns on whether they are primarily a master of staging or possess a style that permeates all their films. In short, in the first case, the principal object of inquiry is the shared motifs of meaning that pervade the oeuvre (the films are not purely stylistic, and meaning is *a posteriori*); in the second, the codified cinematic language that has become the director's own- i.e. style- becomes the primary object of criticism. In the

work of such directors, content is not subjected to semantic evaluation; it is treated as the expression of an underlying primary text in the director's own idiom. Wollen also notes that these boundaries can blur when classifying a director's work. He states in particular that some French critics drew a distinction between the auteur and the *metteur en scène* and even judged the *metteur en scène* superior to the auteur (Wollen, 2013, p. 62).

Against this backdrop, it is not at all a straightforward task for a critic to decide whether Zeki Demirkubuz is an auteur or a *metteur en scène*. Ever since his first feature, *C Blok* (1994), Demirkubuz has developed a film language recognizably his own in the way he treats his subjects: long sequence shots, image arrangements outside classical narration, static compositions at similar scales, low-key lighting, extended dialogues, and meticulous direction of actors. Yet what sets him apart is not only his stylistic preferences but also his existential orientation.

As can be gathered from the director's own reflections on his life, following his arrest and imprisonment for three years after the 1980 coup, Demirkubuz was profoundly influenced by the Russian writer Fyodor Dostoevsky and by the Algerian-born French writer Albert Camus, whose works he encountered during his incarceration. Nearly all his films exhibit a close engagement with the texts of these two figures, whose contributions are central to

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existential literature, which results in meaning-dense works. Demirkubuz asserts that his preference for narrator-driven narratives reveals an understanding of art that transcends a purely formalist orientation—namely, the reduction of artistic practice to style for its own sake[1]. If one ignores the blurred boundaries between auteurship and *metteur en scene*, it is possible to reduce Demirkubuz to merely a master of staging- either by referencing his literary adaptations such as, *Yazgı* (2001), adapted from Camus's *The Fall*, and *Yeraltı* (2012), adapted from Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground*, or by appealing to the distinctive cinematic idiom that pervades his oeuvre. However, both Dostoevsky and Camus serve as script-writing companions with whom the director crafts stories that reflect his own search for meaning. Viewed thus, Zeki Demirkubuz is, in fact, an auteur- a creator of meaning. The "things" he invokes when he says, "There are such things that, were I to tell them, they would make a novel[2]"- matters pertaining to the essence of life, irrespective of class, language, religion, or color, and unrelated to literacy- constitute the fundamental subject of his cinema; and the qualities he has acquired in parallel with his life impel him, through his films, to pose questions about this essence.

Hayat (2023), the director's latest film and the subject of this article, is such a work. In a sense co-written with Dostoevsky and Camus, this meaning-dense film becomes understood only when one carefully considers their answers to questions that existential philosophy poses

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within the existence–essence dichotomy: human desires and the world's indifference to them (the absurd), the struggle of the human being, as a conscious agent, against that absurdity; the question of choice, and, in line with those choices, the construction of the self- one's own essence- as something distinct from any object.

The primary aim of this article is to analyze *Hayat* based on the answers Dostoevsky and Camus offer to these existential questions and the differences between those answers, thereby rendering the film more intelligible. To this end, it first sets out the responses Dostoevsky and Camus proposed to the aforementioned existential problems and the divergences between them, and then, on that basis, analyses the narrative and characters of *Hayat*, given that it is a meaning-dense film. In this way, the shared world of meaning that prevails across almost all Demirkubuz's films may be traced through this particular work, and his meaning-dense cinema, as that of a meaning-creating auteur, can be more fully understood.

On Dostoevsky and Camus

Both Dostoevsky and Camus are central figures in existential philosophy; however, they diverge because they answer a fundamental question differently: is the human merely an object among others, or a self-determining subject? To clarify this issue, it may be useful to expand on the underlying question. Accordingly, every object has both essence and existence. *Essence* denotes its defining properties while *existence* refers to its concrete presence in the world. The

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central question here is which comes first- essence or existence? Within existential philosophy, this question occupies a crucial place. Believers in God typically argue that God created the human being in accordance with the divine idea of the conception of humanity in Himself; thus, essence precedes existence, i.e., being. Others, even when not religious, postulate an immutable human nature and again conclude that essence precedes existence. From the standpoint of existential philosophy, however, the situation is reversed. The human being differs from other objects, and for humans, existence precedes essence. Humans first exist, and then, as conscious beings, construct their own essence. In a sense, unlike other objects, humans do not have a fated essence imposed upon them in advance. They instead shape their own destiny through actions (Bezirci, 2003, pp. 7–8). For example, Sartre describes the human being as a *being-for-itself* (*être-pour-soi*) in that the being possesses determinate consciousness, a conscious being distinct from being-in-itself (*être-en-soi*) (Timuçin, 2004, pp. 319–320). In this being, existence precedes essence: the subject, though it is mortal and left utterly alone, constructs their essence through choices while struggling against every kind of physical and social challenge presented to them.

Among existentialists there is, precisely regarding this struggle, methodological divergence. Hence one speaks of two strands of existentialism. One is comprised of Christian

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theistic existentialists such as Kierkegaard, Barth, Jaspers, Scheler, and Bergson - with Dostoevsky often placed here. The other includes atheistic philosophers such as Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Sartre, with Camus, as a writer, usually aligned with them (Bezirci, 2003, p. 12). The basic difference between these two existential discussions is not easy to summarize, but it can be posed simply: when a conscious subject confronts the world's indifference to his desires and wishes to constitute the self while struggling, are they ultimately alone – or can they seek aid and refuge from God? If so, what kind of God is this, and how does the human being know this God and seek refuge in Him?

In fact, this question exposes a tension at the heart of existentialism itself. For any belief in God entails the acceptance that humans were created with an essence corresponding to God's own conception of humanity and, therefore, that essence precedes existence. This contradicts existentialism's initial premise that essence is not *a priori* but *a posteriori*. Any acceptance of God implies, in a Hegelian sense, that humans are a construct - the slave, being the outward manifestation of Absolute Reason, through dialectical relations first with the physical world and then with the social environment, by his own will, becomes a godlike individual. He builds his essence and integrates his existence (Kojève, 1980). Of such a human being, as God's servant, it may be argued that he is ultimately a construct; that his essence already exists *a priori*, and that it is disclosed only through his actions. These claims constitute the very

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substance of the basic debate between religious and atheistic existentialism.

This dilemma is also particularly clear in Kierkegaard. Within modernity, which is marked by the division of labor that emerges with extreme specialization and in this new order where reason is elevated as the fundamental criterion, it is impossible to achieve self-realization through a one-sided development. In a world where reason is severed from sensibility, and concrete existence is treated as central, the individual swept along by this order ceases to differ from any object. In such conditions, the human, condemned to fate, flounders around within the constraints presented to him, and essence is socially constructed long before existence. In such an order, "everything must attach itself to something so as to become part of a movement; people are determined to lose themselves in the totality of things, in world history, as if under an enchanted spell" (Blackham, 2002, p. 13). Kierkegaard argues that only by breaking with this order can the human construct an essence for his own existence and become an individual. This requires unifying the intellectual, the aesthetic and the religious without separating them one from another and not in abstraction under the supremacy of the intellect, but where they truly exist: under the primacy of the ethical. Living ethically is to place oneself in boundless surrender beyond fortune and misfortune. It also means making decisive choices, and the attention shown to this absolute, in its proper place, brings forth in the thinker's existence the

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aesthetic as subordinated to the ethical, so much so that the thinker, in effect, turns himself into a work of art (2002, pp. 10–11).

Kierkegaard's postulation in fact speaks of an ethical domain grounded in the divine. The discovery of this domain, and one's transposition of oneself into it, is the discovery of God and salvation, enabling the construction of the true human: - the conscious individual. For Kierkegaard, finding the good through divine grace carries with it the acceptance that the right already exists in advance; Dostoevsky's stance is, to some extent, similar. To cope with existential crisis, Dostoevsky's characters ultimately seek refuge in God - a fundamental motif that passes from the author's own life to his characters and sharply circumscribes their room for action. For this reason, Mikhail M. Bakhtin speaks of the self-consciousness (self-knowledge) of Dostoevsky's characters (Bakhtin, 1999, p. 48) In a similar manner to Kierkegaard's ethical "upper" sphere in which the aesthetic, the intellectual, and the religious are unified in the individual, it is a holistic process of self-realization and self-construction in the struggle of life. Bakhtin notes that Dostoevsky does not construct his heroes from a singular trait or small distinctive feature in the author's field of vision; rather, he incorporates all features in their entirety into the hero's own field of vision and makes them part of the hero's own consciousness. What emerges, then, is a pure self-consciousness in its integrity not as an object of the author's field of vision, of what he imagines and represents in his imagination on behalf

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of the hero, but as something belonging to the hero's own consciousness (p. 48). This self-consciousness is realized when a character in existential crisis – falling into the absurd, defined by Camus as the discovery of the world's indifference to human desires - ultimately accomplishes deliverance by taking refuge in his God. The absurd is overcome upon meeting God, and existence thereby attains essence, or what Bakhtin calls self-consciousness.

In a study on Dostoevsky, Georg Lukács offers striking observations about the problem of existence that sets the limits of self-consciousness in his characters, focusing especially on *Crime and Punishment* and its protagonist, Raskolnikov. In Lukács's view, Raskolnikov is an instance of Russia's later, more impassioned defense of the Napoleonic ideal after the second half of the eighteenth century, already long tested and faded in Europe, and of the heroic narrative bound up with that ideal that accompanied the rise of the bourgeoisie. The basic question, in essence, is this: Is a Napoleonic recklessness that deems all means permissible for ascent, tenable? Russia modernized later than continental Europe, and did so under the Tsar through a repressive, brutal capitalist transformation. Writing amid the harsh transformation after 1860, Dostoevsky makes Raskolnikov the test case of this question. Through a hero who murders a wealthy pawnbroker as a way to overcome the poverty he endures, and the existential crisis into which such poverty has plunged him, Dostoevsky depicts a Russian society caught

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up in a time of great change, when capitalism was advancing and the magnanimity of Orthodoxy was being cast off with the past and asks: Is it possible for a person to rise as Napoleon did, and, if it is, is it psychologically possible to bear the weight of the moral boundaries thereby transgressed? According to Lukács, the answer Dostoevsky gives through Raskolnikov is deliberately ambiguous (Lukács, 1979, pp. 181–192). Still, if one considers the hero's surrender under the pressure of conscience and, in exile, his refusal ever to let go of the Bible, one may say that to overcome the existential crisis into which he Has fallen-driven by the external motivation stirred by the Napoleonic ideal - he sought refuge in God, a God who had been cast outside the social sphere and, hence, outside concrete life. While, in accordance with the demands of the age, he rebels and struggles – driven by external motivation - against the constraints and limits of his time and place in an effort to confer meaning upon his existence and to construct himself, Raskolnikov proves unable to bear the moral burden of his deeds. He is driven into a still deeper existential crisis, and, like other Russians of his time, resolves it by taking refuge in the God of the Orthodoxy he had long buried within himself.

The experiment that Lukács attributes to Russian modernity and capitalist transformation, also clarifies the remedy Dostoevsky - as a theistic existentialist - proposes for overcoming this crisis. Salvation lies in harmony, in genuine harmony among real people. For Dostoevsky, in a world where people can recognize and love one another, no impediment of civilization is

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insurmountable. Hence, what is fundamental are generosity, humility, charity, conscience, and love - that is to say, God; and in Dostoevsky's last novel, *The Brothers Karamazov*, Alyosha enjoins precisely this, almost like a prophet. It is precisely at this point that Dostoevsky and Camus diverge. The method of overcoming existential crisis - the recipe for salvation that distinguishes existentialists from one another - is where Dostoevsky and Camus part ways. The similarity of their characters consists only in their having fallen into existential crisis. Their stories that contain this crisis are similar; yet the path they choose out of it separates Dostoevsky from Camus. The question, then, is: What shared features can be discerned in the character of these two writers - who, although they lived in different times and places, each depict figures in existential crisis - and in the stories that render these figures visible? Such an answer is crucial for revealing the worlds in which each writer, belonging to a different strand of existential thought, constructs his own characters and narratives.

According to Camus, the onset of existential crisis, a form of alienation, exists in a rupture grounded in the tension between human being and life, between the human being and the world. It is the world's indifference to human desires that produces this rupture (Camus, 1955, pp. 16, 21). At such a moment, life and the world cease to be familiar, and "suddenly, in a universe deprived of dreams and of light, the human being feels like an outsider to the world. He is now

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a helpless exile, for he lacks both the memory of a lost home and the hope of a promised land. This separation between the human being and life, between the actor and the set, is, in the strict sense, a feeling of the absurd" (p. 5). This feeling of the absurd is alienation, and it yields practical manifestations of the crisis into which it plunges the human being. For instance, Meursault in *The Stranger* exemplifies these manifestations most starkly. His attitude toward his mother's death; his relations with his boss and colleagues; his stance toward local tradesmen; his relationship with his girlfriend, Marie; the apparently motiveless murder he commits; and what he experiences in prison together layout, concretely, highland alienated, absurd character lives. What he thinks after killing the Arab (fellah), whom he provokes in order to have a reason to do so, exemplifies the effort to overcome the existential crisis generated by absurdity and alienation: a deep desire to tear down the sets.

> …At that moment everything began to sway. A heavy, harsh gust rose from the sea. It was as if the sky had split from end to end to rain down fire. My whole body tightened, and the hand holding the pistol clenched. The trigger gave; I felt the smoothness of the grip beneath my palm. And there, in that sharp yet deafening sound, everything began. I shook off the sweat and the sun. I realized I had shattered the day's balance, the extraordinary silence of the beach on which I had been happy. Then I fired four more shots at the body lying there, the bullets lodging without leaving a trace. And it was like knocking four quick times at the door of unhappiness (Camus, 1989, p. 59).

The desire to tear down the sets - the effort to transcend the everyday, the sameness that drives one mad - is in fact an expression of the wish to construct oneself in place of an imposed fate. Concerning the moment when a person discovers - like Truman - the stage sets of the

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sameness that suffocates them, Camus says: “the feeling of the absurd can strike a man in the face at any street corner”. The instant one senses the tension that produces the rupture between the human being and the world, i.e., the absurd, one becomes utterly alone and a stranger. What, then, does a person experience in the process that leads to this rupture? Ali Osman Gündoğan summarizes this as follows in *Albert Camus ve Başkaldırı*: “The monotony and mechanicalness of life are the first harbingers of the absurd. The passage of time as a deadly process and the uncertainty of the future are the second. The third is the human being’s feeling, in this world, of being alien to others and opposed to them, and the deep sense of solitude he experiences. Lastly, it is the realization that death is a necessary and inescapable end, and with it the truth that everything will come to an end” (Gündoğan, 1995, p. 64).

For Camus, there are moments when the sets collapse. One wakes and leaves the house, boards the tram, works fixed shifts, eats, and then sleeps again; the days pass in the same monotony and then, one day, amid a jaded weariness tinged with astonishment, the question “why?” arises. Within this dull sameness, as the days flow uniformly, time carries the person away. One day the person feels that he is carrying time, living by leaning on an indeterminate future: tomorrow, next year, when I have a good job, as I grow old. This is a meaningless inconsistency, for the future on which one leans brings death. Death is certain, and at that

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moment - at that instant - one sees oneself as the property of time. It becomes an enemy, the thing that consumes and discards him. Then one step further is taken, and the person begins to be alienated. Amid the density of the world, one sees how inhuman everything else is and, for that reason, how it eludes grasp and understanding. One recognizes how superficial habit-encrusted apprehension of external objects has been, and is shaken by a profound awareness of the falsity of the surrounding sets and of one's solitude within that falsity. People, too, begin to appear thus. The others, in all their mechanicalness and uniformity, begin to exude something inhuman as well; and finally death - until then seen only in others and borne witness to, impossible to experience - stands before him as a mathematical fact. One becomes conscious of death as something that time will, in the end, prove. Moreover, it is the flow of time using us as its chattel that makes one feel this; and, at the end of all this, a great rupture begins from everything outside oneself. That rupture is the absurd. Confronted with this irrational experience, the human being feels within themself a desire for happiness and for reason; but the world answers this call with unreasonable silence. This moment of encounter is the absurd, and it is the starting point for virtually all existentialists (Camus, 1955, pp. 10–12). The cause of existential crisis is this absurd. It is what prevents the human being from realizing himself by constructing an essence of his own:

> From Jaspers to Heidegger, from Kierkegaard to Chestov, and from the phenomenologists to Scheler -

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> though they may be opposed to one another in method or aim, whether on the plane of logic or of ethics - the entire family of thinkers who converge in their earlier aspirations have insisted on blocking that easy road which renders everything intelligible and on rediscovering the true paths that lead to truth. Here I assume that these ideas are known and lived. Whatever they want or may have wanted, they all set out from this indefinable universe in which contradiction, opposition, suffering, and impotence reign. Their commonality lies precisely in these themes, explained only up to a point. And it must be said of them that what truly matters are the conclusions to be drawn from all these discoveries (1955, pp. 17–18).

For believing, theistic existentialists, the path followed after the discovery and exhibition of the absurd differs from that of atheistic existentialists and thus from Camus. Camus explains this divergence in terms of two fundamental components of the absurd. The absurd is not simply an examination of a single event or impression, and the symptoms in question are not a partial expression arising from some particular event or impression. It is a universal reality born of the encounter between a situation and a determinate fact, or between an action and the world that exceeds it, and of the rupture that ensues. The absurd concerns both components of the encounter. It arises from neither one nor the other, but from their confrontation. The way to overcome the existential crisis caused by the absurd is not to eliminate either component. If the absurd is the world's indifference set against the human being's boundless desires, then the absurd can be neither without the human nor without the world. Eliminating either amounts to the disappearance of the absurd, not its transcendence. Hence, for Camus, the first property of the absurd is its indivisibility. There is no absurd outside human thought; therefore, when the human being dies, the absurd dies as well. Nor is there any absurd beyond this world. To negate

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the world does not transcend the absurd; it signals its disappearance (1955, pp. 22–23). What matters first is to perceive the symptoms of this indivisible composite. To live with these symptoms is like living in a desert encircled by impenetrable walls. The real struggle begins the moment one steps into this place, and that is what matters (Camus, 1955, pp. 16–17). As in the image of the three quarters covered stony desert in which Daru lives in "The Guest," a story from *Exile and the Kingdom*:

> …suddenly cities would end, grow, then vanish; people would pass through here, love one another or fight one another mercilessly, and then die. In this desert no one - neither himself nor his guest - mattered. Even so, Daru knew that none of them could truly live outside this desert (Camus, 1958a, pp. 97–98).

Therefore, what is fundamental is to overcome the absurd by taking both of its components into account - to revolt against the world that produces it. Within this framework, Camus speaks of two kinds of suicide. The first is physical suicide, namely the elimination of the self; this, signifies the removal of one of the absurd's basic components (Camus, 1955, pp. 3–8). The other is the elimination of the world, which he calls philosophical suicide; it involves the attempt to surmount the absurd by means of God and it is precisely this which theistic, religious existentialists realize.

> If I were now to confine myself to existential philosophies, I would find that, without exception, they counsel escape. By a curious line of reasoning in a closed universe limited to the human, proceeding from the absurd that rises upon the ruins of reason, they deify what oppresses them and discover, in that which enfeebles them, a ground for hope. This forced hope is religious in all of them (Camus, 1955, p. 24).

For this reason, the absurd person is godless, and to carry their absurdity through to the

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end, they must rely on their actions. These are concrete and observable acts. Humans are recognizable in practical – i.e., behavioral - terms. To know a person is possible only by looking at the totality of their actions and their consequences. One cannot be defined by what crosses the mind or stirs the heart; actions disclose both. We must, then, attend to actions. On this basis, Camus identifies three fundamental traits of the absurd character. The absurd person knows how to live freely and with passion and, as a result, revolts; only thus can they overcome the existential crisis they undergo and realize themself, constructing their essence. The absurd person is free because they regard all imposed meanings, and the ends grounded in them as obstacles. They renounce captivity and no longer believe the lie that life has an attainable, predetermined purpose. By breaking the encirclement of prejudices unconsciously believed and socially imposed - the habit of living "for tomorrow" (first do military service, then become an engineer or a civil servant, a family man, etc.) they perceive their meaninglessness and lives by filling the day - without leaning on tomorrow. This brings about a life of passion. One who has ceased to live in deferral to tomorrow, who has transcended imposed meanings and the siege of purposes, can live passionately. This is to carry life beyond imposed meanings; and it is precisely this that makes living more meaningful. To live life to the most is, in line with a "morality of quantity," to do justice to the day, to the now, through action in wakeful consciousness. Camus, thus, describes a totality of actions shaped not by impositions but by

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one's own choices, and the consciousness those actions confer. And thus, one passes to the final stage: revolt**.** This is the terminus, and for a mind continually self-aware, present moments chase one another; within these successive presents, one lives freely and with passion (1955, pp. 38–48).

Consequently, the absurd character does not deny eternity; rather, eternity does nothing for them. They are not without longing for it; but prefer courage and reason. Courage enables one to live without dependance on others, getting by with what one has, while reason traces one's own limits. One knows the boundaries of one's freedom, chooses to live in a world without a guaranteed future, and is conscious of one's own mortality. Hence, one continues throughout life to live out this adventure. This is the field of action. Yet this world, which is governed by a morality of quantity can also prevent one from discriminating among the consequences of acts. For a person who acts merely to give each day its due, without regard for the boundaries of any meaning, purpose, or judgment, the line between good and bad grows indistinct. For such an absurd character, for example, there is no difference between killing and not killing. As Ivan Karamazov says: if God does not exist, everything is permitted "…if there is no virtue, there is no law: everything is permitted" (as cited in Camus, 1956, p. 57). And Caligula exemplifies precisely such a character when he says, "I live, I kill, I wield the intoxicating power of a destroyer. Compared with this power, God's is but a child's game"

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(Camus, 1958b, p. 72). On this basis, Camus terms the kind of revolt that emerges at the end of a life lived in freedom and with passion under sustained absurdity 'metaphysical revolt'. Such a character takes personal pleasure as fundamental and makes happiness their sole aim. They do not render an account of their actions, for this is not a world that requires this; they live as they wish and act as they please. What matters, then, is that humans confer life's value upon life themself. True revolt takes both the human being and the world seriously; it is the name of the common good, justice, and measure. It acts out of love. It loves both humanity and the world yet not for the sake of prescribed juridical limits imposed from without. The person who revolts is, like Dr. Bernard Rieux in *The Plague*, someone who takes their own conscience as criterion and, even without a belief in God, fights self-sacrificially so that people will not die (Camus, pp. 112–120). Camus summarizes this condition in *The Rebel* as follows:

> …the person who dedicates himself to his ongoing life, to the home he has built, to human dignity, dedicates himself to the earth as well; and from it he reaps a harvest that yields seed anew, thereby greening the world again and again. In short, those who know how to rebel against history at the right moment are those who fulfill its necessities. To rebel against history, as René Char says, requires an inexhaustible tension and a calm suffused with pain. Yet true life is where this opposition meets. Life is this very opposition: an understanding that glides upon radiant volcanoes, the frenzy of justice, the tempering intransigence of measure (Camus, 1956, pp. 302–303).

In short, revolt requires acting persistently, despite everything with love and affection, with a lucid yet ineluctable conscience, with goodness and rectitude. Yet here the boundaries between Camus's framework and Kierkegaard's ethical sphere, which counsels boundless

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religious submission, or between Camus's position and the grace of God to which Dostoevsky takes refuge to escape the nothingness and meaninglessness engendered by the absurd, are often indistinct. The difference between making the human being the source of love, affection, goodness, justice, and measure - the point of departure, and positing God as such concerns belief. Perhaps for this reason, Dostoevsky makes this contradiction the basic motivation of the characters he creates. The contradiction between Ivan (Ivan Fyodorovich Karamazov) and Alyosha (Alexei Fyodorovich Karamazov) is just such a contradiction; the basis of the tension Raskolnikov experiences is this same contradiction: the meaningless void born of the absurd; the actions undertaken amid the numbness and sense of impunity produced by the persistence of that void; the ensuing moral reckoning; and, at the end of that reckoning, the seeking refuge in divine grace. Unfettered actions, and the effort to find in them their agent and their ground. And finally, in whatever form it assumes, the human search is for meaning - love, affection, conscience, justice, and measure.

Dostoevsky's tragic life - perhaps, as Freud explains with the Oedipus complex, his attachment to his mother and the fury he felt toward his authoritarian father, whose murder at the hands of his serfs gave rise to a guilt that opened in his soul the wound of a masochistic torment (Dostoevsky suffered from epilepsy, which Freud links to this tragic life; Freud, 1997, pp. 234–255) - is, so to speak, what he calls God; in parallel with the allegory Camus proposes

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when he says, “there are no more deserts, no more islands. Yet our need for them makes itself felt. If we wish to understand the world, we must go off its course…” (Camus, 1979, p. 105). Camus, who wrote most of his essays from Algeria, from the heart of the desert, does not hesitate to call “human” the being who, like a sensitive scale, can weigh the difference between good and evil, measure and excess, justice and injustice. Accordingly, he constructs his characters by drawing on both forms of the absurd. Nonetheless, mindful of what carrying this feeling to its utmost consequences would entail, Camus sees “measure” - the human being who takes their own conscience as criterion - as the way to overcome the existential crisis; he ties his entire challenge to a human-centered revolt so that the human being, as a conscious being, may construct themselves - their essence. Dostoevsky, by contrast, recommends not revolt and defiance as a means to escape existential crisis but rather renunciation of self and turning toward God, like Alyosha:

> Yes, here lies the mysterious essence of Dostoevsky’s philosophy and, at the same time, of Christian morality: the divine secret of happiness. The individual attains it by renouncing himself. He who lives his life, who sets store by his own personality, will lose it; whereas he who passes beyond himself will attain immortality not in the future, but in the present that is one with eternity. Resurrection within the wholeness of life, indifference to all individual felicities… (Gide, 1925, p. 150).

The person who takes refuge in God attains the eternity of the good, the right, love, and charity. The fundamental formula of integral happiness is this act of refuge. In this way Dostoevsky, taking as his basis the individual’s tragic collapse, points to God as the sole harbor

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of refuge and, through the characters he constructs, seeks to revive the Orthodox faith that Russian modernity had entombed in concrete and to present it as a hope of salvation. From Zverkov in *Notes from Underground* to *The Idiot*'s Prince Lev Nikolayevich Myshkin, from Ivan in *The Brothers Karamazov* to Alyosha - held up in the same novel as a figure of deliverance - virtually all of Dostoevsky's characters are figures who strive, in constructing self-consciousness, to overcome existential crisis. For these characters, salvation lies in God, the guarantor of the unity between reason and the sensible sphere that modernity has shattered. The good, the right, justice, measure, love, and charity are possible only in eternity and with God.

About *Hayat*

Writing at around the same period as Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, in his short story *What Men Live By?*, states that the human being can live only through mercy, love, and charity (Tolstoy, 1918, pp. 9–33). Like Dostoevsky, he gives voice - through both a lament and a proposal - the emotional and intellectual world torn asunder as Russia gradually capitalized after 1861 (the year serfdom was abolished by the Tsar). In the post-1861 era, as Russian society strove to modernize, it lurched under the shock of a transformation that, at the Tsar's behest, evolved toward a rigorously formal, concrete, and Westernizing way of life that privileged reason over the Orthodox faith by which it had hitherto ordered its world. Although Tolstoy was branded a

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reactionary after the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution by Proletarian Culture associations (Proletkult) for invoking God as a path to deliverance, his novels in fact depict precisely this convulsive period of transition (Lenin, 2006, pp. 223–225). It is no accident that, for both Tolstoy nor Dostoevsky, God figures as the unifier of what has been torn apart; the calamities follow from His forgetfulness or refusal. Whether on the social or the individual plane, the sole way to overcome the experienced fragmentation is to return to God. This is possible only through values that belong to Him - and the most important of these is love, as the film score of Krzysztof Kieślowski's *Three Colors: Blue* (1993) Zbigniew Preisner's "Song for the Unification of Europe"[3] - proclaims: "now, these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love." Where love is, there is God. This is also the foundation of *Hayat*. For in this film what begins with absurdity ends with Dostoevsky's God: with love.

Hayat is Demirkubuz's most recent film, released in 2023. Its narrative can be divided into three interrelated parts. Each part possesses a self-contained story connected to the others, and these stories are constructed to depict the other component of absurdity - the world, which is the agent of existential crisis - and to show how the crisis of existence experienced within that world is overcome. In this way, the film is structured so that, in its first two parts, through story and character, it presents the inseparable components of absurdity - the tension between

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the human being and the world - and, in its final part, it shows how that tension is surmounted under the sign of revolt. The first part renders Rıza's world; the second, Hicran's; and the third portrays the overcoming of absurdity beneath the shade of the tree of God by means of that tree's fruits: conscience, mercy, and love.



Figure 1: *Hayat*, 2023.

To begin with, it is worth noting that Rıza and Hicran, the film's two main characters who are roughly the same age, are to be married by arrangement, and on the surface the story turns on this arranged marriage. Hicran is the second child and eldest daughter of a farmer in an unspecified village of an unspecified town. Rıza, by contrast, lost both parents when he was young; he was raised by his grandfather and now makes his living working in his bakery. The grandfather wishes to marry him to Hicran, the daughter of Mehmet, his son's former army friend. Rıza, although he has never met Hicran, falls in love with her at once upon seeing her photograph and agrees to the marriage; but immediately after the engagement Hicran flees to Istanbul to stay with her aunt and then disappears. Although Rıza seems to accept this flight, he

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cannot reconcile himself to it, and the film's first part, starting from here, focuses on his life. In this way the director, by showing Rıza's life - his monotonous, tasteless days, all alike, suffused with hopelessness to which he has resigned himself - renders the absurdity and each of its components - Rıza and his world - visible.



Figure 2: *Hayat*, 2023.

Brought up and educated by his grandfather, having done his military service and acquired a trade, Rıza merely passes the time, merely going through the motions. Having grown up, gone to school, completed his service, and taken up a profession, he was about to take care of the next item – marriage - and then continue his life in the same pattern; but with Hicran's escape, the absurdity to which he had submitted like a docile sheep (His very name underscores this condition: 'Rıza' means resignation or acceptance, while 'Uysal' means docile or compliant—together suggesting a character marked by submission to fate) becomes unbearable. "There are moments when the sets collapse," says Camus (Camus, 1955, p. 10), and this is just such a

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collapse of the sets. This is also why what begins as indifference to Hicran's departure, and the breaking of the engagement, turns into a pursuit that will end in murder. This is because Hicran is, for him, a hope for overcoming an existential crisis he cannot name. The source of the love he feels for her may be nothing more than a photograph (his encounter with that photograph is a symptom of the feeling of the absurd that may confront anyone at any street corner) (1955, p. 9), but its ground is this hope of deliverance. Love is a deliverance. It is the way to shatter the sameness and to overcome the malaise induced by the familiar and the habitual. As Rıza emphasizes years later namely, in the film's final part while, in a tea garden, recounting to Hicran what his grandfather had told him about arranged marriage, that photograph appears as the hope that, by ending his submission to a now-unconcealable meaningless world and the existential crisis that submission produced, would lead him out of nothingness into consciousness:

> One evening I was heading out to meet some friends. My grandfather stopped me at the door and pressed a photograph into my hand. 'Have a look,' he said, 'she's the daughter of your late father's army buddy. Think about it if it makes sense to you, if you like her, let me know.' I said, 'Are you kidding, Grandpa? Who chooses a girl like this nowadays who picks a wife from a photo?' 'And where else do you pick her from?' he said. 'I don't know,' I said, 'you meet, you get acquainted, you go out a bit, you talk. There's such a thing as civilization.' He answered, 'If people could really know each other just by seeing and meeting, no one would ever be deceived, no one would ever divorce, no contract or partnership would ever fall apart.' 'You think it over,' he said, 'and if you don't want to, I'm not going to force you to marry.' I took the photo but was embarrassed to look at it in front of him. On my way back from the coffeehouse that night, it came to mind. I took it out and looked at it under a streetlamp. That was the first time I saw your face there, under that lamp. For the first time, something seared inside me. I felt a pain in my gut. I couldn't

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sleep till morning that night. I kept thinking about you. Three days later my grandfather came and asked, 'Well, what do you say? Shall we ask for the girl's hand?' 'Right away,' I said. 'She's very beautiful; there's something different about her. Who wouldn't want to marry a girl like that?' But I couldn't say, 'This girl's eyes look far off; they don't see what's near. She would never see someone like me. And even if she did, she wouldn't want me anyway.' How could I have said it? (*Hayat*, 2023).



Figure 3: Hayat, 2023.

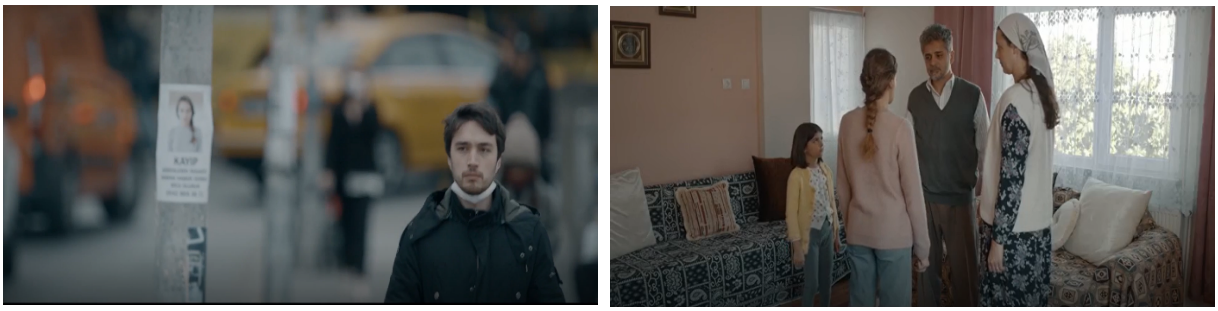




Figure 4: Hayat, 2023.

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The “something different” in Hicran that Rıza points to is the disposition of a Sadean character who acts according to the absurd’s morality of quantity, seeing no difference between committing murder and not committing it. For her, breaking the engagement is, in fact, a way to transgress the bounds of the world imposed upon her. As the child of a farmer, once she has grown up and become a young woman, she refuses, unlike the others, to marry a husband deemed “suitable” for her and to settle down, like her mother, into a life of husband and children. Precisely for this reason she says she does not love her mother much, whom she regards as submissive, someone who accepts everything. Yet these are not the boundaries of traditional life and the social impositions woven together within it. For Rıza is a handsome young man with steady work, and Hicran is not being forced to marry someone she does not like. The problem is that Hicran does not want to do what has always been done - marry and continue a life in which one day is the same as the next. Her whole concern is to scale the walls of the absurd, to realize desires to which the world obstinately refuses to respond, to live and, in doing so, to step outside the life it imposes upon her. “Travel,” says Camus, “is stamped into us; it tears down the stage sets of a life we have accepted for one reason or another and sets us free” (Camus, 1979, pp. 58–59). This is precisely what Hicran does. Aware that she has been turned into an object, she goes to Istanbul to stay with her aunt in to tear down the sets erected around her own consciousness, and thus takes the first step toward dismantling these interior

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sets. When Rıza, in order to find her and keep alive the hope he has lost, sets out for Istanbul, we begin to witness Hicran's new way of life a life that is of great importance for portraying metaphysical revolt, that is, the Sadean world of the absurd acting according to a morality of quantity. Like Sade, who held that in life only the inexhaustible law of desire should be adopted as a maxim (as cited in Camus, 1956, p. 41), Hicran, in her Istanbul life, turns toward metaphysical revolt. She begins living with two men she met online, both pimps (Ferit and Yılmaz), and, by engaging in prostitution, sets about "living for the day," that is, doing whatever she pleases without regard for the consequences of her acts.



Figure 5: Hayat, 2023.

All of this pertains to the film's second part, which begins precisely with Rıza - after a long pursuit - killing not Hicran but Ferit, the real pimp. The principal reason Rıza does not kill

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Hicran is not merely his love for her. For him, Hicran still remains a distant ray of hope for escaping the dark world from which he longs to emerge, and that light is his deliverance. His desire to find her is closely bound up with this, not as many assume, with wounded pride over the broken engagement or with having been deceived. As Hicran returns to her village, Rıza goes to prison; and Hicran now decides to live within the boundaries of the absurd world that encircles her, submitting to it. She is ready to do whatever is asked of her. She resigns herself to her father's tyranny, her mother's meekness, and that village house. After a time, she even agrees to marry a retired teacher (Orhan) who is proposed to her. She does this not to escape her village, the gossip, her father, or her mother, but to live within the walls of the absurd and to bow to a world that remains indifferent in the face of it - yet it does not work. She looks upon Orhan with revulsion, and Orhan, in fact, knows the reason for this revulsion. What he says during a dinner they have out is meant to show as much, and that evening - precisely because he lives in the kind of world he describes - he realizes that he can no longer continue with a wife who feels disgust toward her own existence, toward existence as such. Orhan speaks of pulling up stakes together and going elsewhere, and Hicran, although she loves him very much, asks him why he wishes to leave the place they are in:

> Sometimes something nags at me - will a whole life pass like this, always the same, always in the same place, with tomorrow already set, reliving the same things over and over… Sometimes I wake up and see that this morning is yesterday's morning. Yesterday's morning is tomorrow's, and that one is a morning

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> next year. Afternoons are the same, evenings too. Sometimes my head gets so muddled I think I'm going mad. 'Look,' I say to myself, 'I'm thinking the same thing again, but that was last night; now it's who-knows-what day of the month.' A completely different day two months ago was the same and two years ago as well. And two months from now it'll be like this, two years from now too. Never mind it's complicated. It gets me down; it has nothing to do with you (*Hayat*, 2023).

It is only Orhan, a retired literature teacher, who knows what Hicran has lived through. He knows, and because he does not live that way himself, Hicran does not understand Orhan. The reason she looks at him with revulsion is the literary tirade Orhan delivers about what she has lived. Orhan does not live the absurd; he merely knows it, and for Hicran he, too, is a set piece like the others. Hicran leaves Orhan and returns to her village; lying in bed with a fever, she dreams, just before their separation, of Rıza's arrival at the house she shared with Orhan. While Rıza, who has come only to talk, is shown into the house and seated in the living room, Hicran asks what he would like to drink. Rıza asks for water, and when Hicran, after much searching, brings him a glass filled to the brim, she finds that Rıza has fallen asleep where he sits in the living room. The very same dream is seen by Rıza at the beginning of the film, as he continues to live despondently in his former dark world following Hicran's flight: Hicran comes to Rıza's house to talk; Rıza invites her in, asks if she would like something to drink; and when, after a long search in the kitchen, he brings the glass of water she wanted - filled to overflowing - he finds Hicran asleep where she sits. One may say the overflowing water belongs to lives that cannot be contained by their vessel. It is a transgression of the boundaries drawn by the

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absurd, and, as absurd characters, both are struggling to find a way. With that dream, Hicran asks her mother about Rıza, whom she has been thinking about for some time. Her mother tells her that Rıza has been sending her letters from prison, that he has started a business elsewhere and, because he will be moving, wishes to see her one last time. What has been scripted by the dream is about to come to pass. Hicran and Rıza meet in a tea garden. Rıza, believing that his intention to marry and, indeed, the hope of deliverance he discerned in Hicran cost her her life, asks her forgiveness (*helallik - to "make things right," so that nothing remains between you in this world or the next*) and returns to her the photograph his grandfather had given him. Faced with this conscience, mercy, and love, Hicran breaks down; beneath a great tree near her house, just like the water that overflowed the glass, she cries out to the world everything she has been holding inside. The film's end and the path of revolt begins from here. Briefly: Rıza is at the mosque for the Eid prayer. When it ends, he comes home. Hicran is preparing breakfast. They look at each other, eyes gleaming with conscience, mercy, and love, and exchange holiday greetings. What the absurd has torn apart, God brings together. Thus, under the shadow of God, Demirkubuz also tells us what kind of revolt he proposes for the absurd. Everything is just as Dostoevsky proposes: the solution is to take refuge in God's grace. Where there is love, there is God.

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Figure 6: Hayat, 2023.

Conclusion

Dostoevsky is a Russian, and the protagonists of his works are Russians who, from the latter half of the nineteenth century onward, have been uprooted - deprived of God by the Tsar, whom they regarded as God's scepter on earth - and forgotten their raison d'être. Confronted with the demands of the new capitalist world, these people are helpless; lacking a God to whom they might flee from the difficulties they face, they are unhappy amid ruthless competition rather than in a world of modesty and contentment. Dostoevsky perceives that the transient gratifications promised by this new world cannot deliver the Russian from the deep void in which he has lost himself. Therefore, as Stefan Zweig observes, his heroes are in constant search

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to escape the existential crisis into which they have fallen; yet in that search they do not enter relations with the concrete but temporary promises of the new world; they strive to transcend it and to attain true happiness. This is not the place where they can settle, found a home, or succeed. Their quest is for eternity, for eternal happiness. To reach it, they wear themselves out regardless of their existential limitations and are merciless with themselves. Their minds are fixed on eternal happiness and serenity. Their eyes are empty because they do not see this world; their gaze turns inward, for they know that the eternal happiness and serenity they seek are concealed within their own existence. They wish to feel themselves and life not their superficial appearance in this world, but that inner state, which is infinite, mystical, cosmic, indeed divine. What matters to them is not to learn about life or to master it, but to feel eternity in their hearts. For this, they never shrink from renouncing themselves (Zweig, 1930, pp. 146–147). Because the reward is eternal happiness, serenity, and union with God.

Thus, the characters of *Hayat* are typical instances of the Dostoevskian figure as summarized by Zweig. Confronted with the world's indifference, the banality of life, and the slippery ground of social happiness - at once transient and perpetually out of reach - and sensing this, they do not shrink from wasting themselves to overcome the ensuing existential crisis and render their lives meaningful. The film's stories concern these characters' quest for eternal happiness and serenity. Leading separate lives, they join in the reality of love, of loving and

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being loved and, to attain eternal happiness and serenity, risk everything, renounce themselves, turn their backs on the world and the ephemeral, and in the end they succeed. This success is divine, since it is achieved in defiance of the transient, against and despite its indifference. Hicran attains the eternal happiness and serenity from which she had been separated and for which she longed thanks to Rıza's divine love and his submission to it; and Rıza, for his part, receives the reward of submitting to the divine by being united with her.

The analysis of *Hayat* demonstrates that Zeki Demirkubuz, through his engagement with Dostoyevskian faith and Camusian absurdity, constructs a unique cinematic language that situates him within global auteur traditions while retaining his distinct national identity. Demirkubuz's cinema, while rooted in Turkish socio-cultural contexts, embodies transnational flows of influence—literary, philosophical, and cinematic—that cross borders and resonate with audiences beyond Turkey. In this sense, *Hayat* enriches the study of "minor cinemas" by showing how Turkish film culture participates in larger conversations about existence, morality, and authorship. The case of Demirkubuz underscores the importance of examining not only local artistic traditions but also their intersections with international philosophical discourses. Ultimately, Demirkubuz can be seen as an auteur whose work bridges national cinema and

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world cinema, making his films central to ongoing debates about the future of global screen studies.

In conclusion, considering all these analyses of plot and character, it is possible to say that in this film, too, Zeki Demirkubuz, as an auteur who creates meaning, shapes his work within the horizon of Camus's and Dostoevsky's influence and constructs it through a perspective that is distinctly his own. In this respect, analyzing the director's other films as well within the world of meaning he seeks to build - one shaped by the impact of these two writers - would be highly important, and indeed advisable, for demonstrating that he is an auteur who creates meaning.

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ENDNOTES:

[1] https://zekidemirkubuz.com/bu-ise-el-yordamiyla-basladim-yaptikca-bir-sey-ogrendim/

[2] https://zekidemirkubuz.com/bu-ise-el-yordamiyla-basladim-yaptikca-bir-sey-ogrendim/

[3] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2v_Vtjo1kUg&list=RD2v_Vtjo1kUg&start_radio=1

[4] [Editor's Note]: There have been some English language studies on Zeki Demirkubuz's filmmaking in the past like Atam (2009), Akser (2015), Raw (2017), Liktor (2019), Guven (2025) and Aydin and Erkaslan (2025). The authors' contribution is unique end provides new insights into a growing literature on the director's filmography.

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