

SEABURNERS

KUMUN TADI

directed by MELİSA ÖNEL



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Director: Melisa Önel
Script: Feride Çiçekoğlu, Melisa Önel
Cast: Mira Furlan (*Denise*)
Timuçin Esen (*Hamit*)
Ahmet Rifat Şungar (*Mehmet*)
Mustafa Uzunyılmaz (*Ali*)
Sanem Öge (*Basima*)
Edanur Tekin (*Sonya*)
Hakan Karsak (*Fehmi*)
Selen Uçer (*Selda*)
Co-Producer: M. Çağatay Tosun
Producers: Yamaç Okur, Aslı Erdem, Melisa Önel

Cinematographers: Julian Atanassov, Meryem Yavuz
Art Director: İsmail Durmaz
Editing: Özcan Vardar
Music: Erdem Helvacıoğlu
Sound Design: Umut Şenyol
Sound Recorders: Petar Krlev, Fatih Aydoğdu
Casting: Ezgi Baltaş
Colorist: Yiannis Zaharoyiannis
VFX: Ippokratis Chales
Assist. Directors: Armağan Lale, Nadide Karademir,
Ali Ayyıldız
Line Producer: Serkan Akkoyun
Assoc. Producer: İpek Kent

2014 • 89 min. • Turkey • Turkish, English • 1:1.85 • Color • Dolby Digital • DCP
World Premiere: 64th Berlin Film Festival (2014, Forum)
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SYNOPSIS

Between Istanbul's sordid neighbourhoods and a destitute border village, close to the city, Hamit, drives back and forth. He works for Ali, a charcoal dealer-cum-human trafficker, carrying charcoal one way and illegal immigrants the other way. Young and meek Mehmet helps the two in their dealings and is usually torn between them during their power struggles. Hamit feels stuck in this desolate village. Being subordinate to Ali and sharing a rundown room with Mehmet is not what he had expected from life. Once, he himself tried to escape, but failed to achieve the 'dream life', which intensifies his frustration. His only comfort is an older woman, Denise, a foreign botanist who works at the local research centre. They meet secretly in a cottage by the sea and make love to the crashing sound of the waves. Denise suspects Hamit but doesn't ask, and Hamit doesn't tell much anyway. But the sea is unforgiving and pressure builds up as a new group of refugees arrive and are unable to leave the village. Their relationship sways just like plants do in the harsh wind of the coast. And then, on a stormy night, Hamit decides to change his destiny.

COMMENTS FROM DIRECTOR MELİSA ÖNEL

THE SEA

The starting point of this film was the sea. The sea as a threshold, as a natural border, once perceived to be boundless, after which life ceased to be... Perhaps because of its' ever changing quality we are mostly unable to anthropomorphize the sea. Ships go down, people perish and the sea has nothing to say. Like a silent repository for all that has happened.

Collaborating with Feride Çiçekođlu we started gathering stories that we thought the sea brought together, in which characters were threatened by the sea; where the sea would be a threshold between the past, present and a future life. Stories of a man, Hamit with no attachment to place or family; a woman, Denise in transit and Mehmet, an apprentice to Hamit ready to flee the country intertwined with those of the refugees waiting to cross over to a new life.

Seaburners, refers to this journey between times, between desire and reality, the process of burning one's identity and past, dropping it into the vast sea, the big leap that these characters have to take.





COMMENTS FROM DIRECTOR MELİSA ÖNEL

CYCLES & DREAMS IN TIME

Time is treated cyclically in the film. The starting point is already the end. I was intrigued by the idea of the past, present and future interlocking, blurring the clear procession of events and creating associative layers of time.

In terms of narrative, the characters in the film are all in a way troubled by the past, present or premonition of the future, thus co-existing in different layers of time. Hamit's dream scenes are reflective of this. They are temporally displaced, whether they are fragments of memories or actual events of escape, deportation or drowning, the viewer does not know. His consciousness shifts between times.

The visual style in which the camera follows the actors in this multi-character film also enabled me to move in and out of the space and time that the characters inhabit. Denise, as a botanist roams through deserted, timeless nature finding plants for dissection and preservation. Mehmet and Hamit stay in a shabby cottage at a charcoal furnace where the smoke and ashes, the remnants of things once existing, dominate the scene. On the other hand the refugees who are meant to move forward into their future and complete their journey are stuck in the village, in the present, surrounded by animals in a barn as though in a timeless zone of waiting.



COMMENTS FROM
DIRECTOR MELİSA ÖNEL

HAMİT & DENİSE AND THE MEN IN THE SCRIPT

When trying to build characters we focused on two unlikely characters that would come together. That was how we brought Hamit, a man in his late thirties with no deep attachment for anything, and a woman in her late fifties, a foreigner working in the field of science, Denise, together. The first scene we see them together is one of physical attraction followed by the harsh and silent light of the morning, Denise slipping out of the bed and leaving. The film doesn't aim to explain the relationship but to pick up from a place where complications, suspicions, expectations begin. We don't know their pasts, but follow them through their experiences in the present, trying to understand what Denise finds in Hamit and how Hamit regards Denise: A closure, a lover, or an opportunity? Whatever she stands for, her absence is a turning point for Hamit.

As for the other men in the film, Mehmet, Hamit's young apprentice and Ali, Hamit's boss, they act in a chain of hierarchy. Each character, although flawed and miserable in his own state, oppresses the weaker and the chain goes all the way down to the refugees. As men, they are not strong and they cannot steer their own course of life; this was what made them more interesting for me.



COMMENTS FROM DIRECTOR MELİSA ÖNEL

SENSES

I have always admired a cinema that creates a world of senses where image, montage, mise-en-scene and sound create a temporal and spatial world that invites the audience into feeling the experience of the character. Having a background in photography, my instinct while collaborating on the script was to look for images, colors and moments, which held the genesis of a story.

Seaburners, uses the associative nature of images to create a poetic structure. At times, the narrative is disrupted with such suggestive images like the uncannily lit forest at night, close-ups of plants or scenes following Denise in nature. These were deliberate choices to place the characters in an uncanny environment and in an uneasy relation with nature throughout the film.

As for sound design (Umut Şenyol) and music (Erdem Helvacıoğlu), we wanted to use these elements beyond the diegetic for expressing the mood of the scene, the characters' consciousness and as a connection between characters. We opted for cello-guitar and electronic sounds that blend into the atmosphere, trying to create an uncanny feeling. Sometimes it is a water drop that is accentuated or the sound of something burning, at times a drone lingers through the scene, over empowering the diegetic sound to create a filmic space.

COMMENTS FROM DIRECTOR MELİSA ÖNEL

CAMERA WORK AND MONTAGE

The camera work in the film is a dynamic one; one which follows the character, rather than one that leads or waits for the character to arrive. Most of the time, the visual space is the point of view of the character, a subjective space. With Julian Atanassov and Meryem Yavuz, the two DPs whose works I believe skillfully merged, we tried to keep this in mind, to discover and experience with the character. Not to be omnipresent.

When Denise goes into the knee-high reeds, we are in there with her, following an uncanny sound. In the same manner we follow her through the dark shore not knowing where she is heading. The same holds for Hamit, his repeated driving scenes in which we don't know the destination but are moving with him, leaving things behind each second, moving into the unknown space of the drama waiting for the character.

But we chose to do this not by isolating the characters but by always incorporating the surrounding, framing the nature with the characters, mostly with the use of wide lenses. Thus, we tried to keep the feeling that the characters are not only in conflict with one another but are always engaged with the nature that is bigger than anything and uncontrollable.

Montage was a long, creative, painful process where the film was recreated. After some trials with the editor, Özcan Vardar, we decided to chase a rhythm based on mood and a narrative structure that would weave itself into clarity by revealing more about the characters and chain of events as the film went on. Our primary focus was to create an atmosphere and then let the story unfold. In this sense editing was a very thought provoking process, dancing between images and story.





COMMENTS FROM DIRECTOR MELİSA ÖNEL

LOCATIONS AND NATURE

Because the film tries to pose nature as a character, at least as a force that the characters are surrounded with, it was important to pick spaces that were visually rich and open to metaphors. While location scouting, we paid attention to the presence of water, to depict it as an uncontrollable force in nature, like the reeds, muddy marshes, the longoz forest, which is a flooded forest, and the wild Black Sea.

We also wanted Hamit and Mehmet's spaces to be different, unrelated to the fluidity of water. Since they and their boss Ali provided transit for the refugees but were stuck themselves, the charcoal furnaces were an ideal setting for them, with fire, ashes and smoke, with things burning and wasting away.

It was important for the film to start from Istanbul, to have a fragmented, chaotic view of it and then to move to the village where time is slow and spaces are vast.

Working on the script from a visual standpoint, I tried to keep in mind the link between people, locations and overall nature. Many times I had Terrence Malick in my mind and his way of working with images. Especially the way he portrayed nature and his characters' interaction with it during his early films.

After all, characters are in a state of movement, transition, and flux; what remains at the end is the nature.

COMMENTS FROM SCRIPTWRITER FERIDE ÇİÇEKOĞLU

The scriptwriting story of *Seaburners* is a chronicle of journeys. In the beginning there was nothing except the locations; words came afterwards. I remember during our first trip to the Black Sea coast with Melisa asking her how she imagined the first image of the film. She said it was the viewpoint of the sea, the shore as seen by the waves. We wrote numerous drafts during the four years it took to complete the film and the one thing that never changed was that first image: The viewpoint of the sea.

THE SEA

As in any film, and may be more so in this case, the scriptwriting process was a pilgrimage of negotiation, confrontation and reconciliation; a collaboration where the image and the word clashed during each new trip. Each trip to locations yielded new clues about our main characters, sometimes to be swept away as if by the harsh waves of the sea during the next trip. Our characters kept on changing; sometimes they grew, demanded more space, and there were some who gave up, quitting the story. Only one character survived as it had met us in that first trip and that was the sea.





THE VILLAGE

One other aspect of the script that survived from initial to final stage was being a story about borders and thresholds. This is not only because of the plot, the village we chose to be the meeting place of our characters is itself a threshold both spatially and time wise. It is swept by the harsh waves of the Black Sea spitting back corpses, by the tides of the river breeding rare botanic specimens and by the smoke of the charcoal burnt from the wood of the forest. It is a passageway of antique smugglers and illegal immigrants as well as botanists and researchers. It is where the past and the present meet, just as it is where our main characters meet, each at a threshold in life.

NON-ISTANBUL

Later drafts of the script required images of non-Istanbul and these made the film richer than our original vision. Places of transition, uncanny passageways, nowhere and everywhere; non-places which characterize our age and nourish a contemporary sense of non-belonging... These images represent the way the city is seen by the refugees and illegal refugees especially. The richness of almost tactile and haptic sense of transience of this imagery surpasses words and for these I am really grateful to Melisa, our director and to Meryem and Julian our cinematographers.

HAPPY ENDING

Whether any of the characters in the story will be able to cross the border – to a different country or to a new stage in life – remains to be seen for the audience, but the happy ending of the scriptwriting process is the film itself: A poetic contemplation between life and death.

COMMENTS FROM COMPOSER ERDEM HELVACIOĞLU

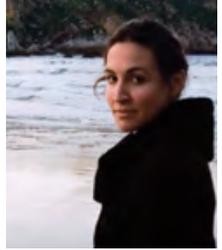
SUBTLETY & THE SOUNDSCAPE

The two major characteristics of Melisa Önel's *Seaburners* are subtlety and the soundscape, both of which are the driving forces of the work visually and sonically. To compose for a cinematic work with these characteristics, I realized that I needed a new strategy, a fresh perspective. Based on my previous experiences and experiments as a composer and record producer, I knew that limiting oneself was the key to freedom and creating fresh ideas. I decided to use only one unique, hybrid instrument for the whole soundtrack, the Togaman GuitarViol, an instrument where modern technology is combined with the timbral characteristics of cello and guitar. With the help of various software programs, plugins and hardware fx processors, the timbre of the Togaman GuitarViol was transformed to capture the sonic atmosphere of the movie. At the beginning of the movie, the instrument became the symbol of tension through the creation of long drones, at the end a tragic moment in life through the creation of sad melodic motives. The music composed through the GuitarViol was meant to be a part of the soundscape, another element of the sonic environment, like the the sound of the wind through leaves, the rumble of the waves on the sand, the thunder at a distant land. As a result, the GuitarViol became a part of the music, the music became a part of the soundscape, the soundscape became a a part of the tragic story and all became the *Seaburners*.





DIRECTOR MELİSA ÖNEL



Melisa Önel was born in Izmir in 1980. After studying International Relations at Tufts University, she completed her Master's degree in Film Studies at Istanbul Bilgi University. A filmmaker and a photographer, Önel is a member of the photographers' initiative RecCollective. In the past two years, her work has been exhibited in many international exhibitions including "Uncanny Encounters" (Istanbul Modern Art Museum 2011), Photomed (Sanary, France, 2011), "Not a Lens But a Prism" (Portugal, 2010), "Women Who Run with the Wolves" (Stimultania Gallery, Turkish artists in Strasbourg, 2009). Her first short film *Omega Fox* (2007) was selected to the Hisar Short Film Selection, a collection of the ten best short films of the year in Turkey. Her medium length documentary *Me and Nuri Bala* (2009) received Best First Documentary award at the 46th Antalya Film Festival. *Seaburners* is her first feature film.

FILMOGRAPHY

- Seaburners (Kumun Tadı, 2014, 89 min.)
- Me and Nuri Bala (Ben ve Nuri Bala, 2009, 42 min.)
- Omega Fox (Omega Tilki, 2007, 14 min.)

ABOUT BULUT FİLM

Founded in 2007 by producers; Yamaç Okur, Nadir Öperli, Enis Köstepen and director Seyfi Teoman. Bulut Film aims to produce films loyal to the director's artistic vision, and is interested in fresh styles and experimental narratives. The company develops its own projects, is involved in co-productions and also provides production services for international productions. Their films include Seyfi Teoman's *Summer Book* (Nomination for European Film Awards Discovery Section, 2008), *Dark Cloud* (Toronto 2010), Seyfi Teoman's *Our Grand Despair* (Berlinale Competition 2011), Emin Alper's award winning first feature *Beyond the Hill* (Berlinale Forum 2012, winner of Caligari Film Prize, and Best Film in Asia Pacific Screen Awards), Aslı Özge's *Lifelong* (Berlinale Panorama 2013), Zeynep Dadak and Merve Kayan's debut feature *The Blue Wave* (Berlinale Generation 2014) and Melisa Önel's debut feature *Seaburners* (Berlinale Forum, 2014). Bulut Film producers; Nadir Öperli is an ACE producer, Enis Köstepen is an EAVE producer and Yamaç Okur serves as the vice-president of Film Producers' Association of Turkey.

ABOUT YEDİ FİLM

Yedi Film is an independent production company founded in 2011, with the aim of producing feature films, TV series, documentaries and providing line production services to international projects. M. Çağatay Tosun's *When Derin Falls* was the first production of the company, followed by a co-production in Melisa Önel's debut feature *Seaburners* (Berlinale Forum, 2014).

FILMOGRAPHY

2014 *Seaburners* (Kumun Tadı) by Melisa Önel (co-producer)
2013 *When Derin Falls* (Derin Düşün-ce) by M. Çağatay Tosun

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FILMOGRAPHY

2014 *Seaburners* (Kumun Tadı) by Melisa Önel
2013 *The Blue Wave* (Mavi Dalga) by Zeynep Dadak and Merve Kayan
2013 *Lifelong* (Hayatboyu) by Aslı Özge
2012 *Beyond the Hill* (Tepenin Ardı) by Emin Alper
2012 *In Flames* (Yangın Var) by Murat Saraçoğlu (co-producer)
2011 *Our Grand Despair* (Bizim Büyük Çaresizliğimiz) by Seyfi Teoman
2009 *Dark Cloud* (Bahtı Kara) by Theron Patterson
2009 *On the Way to School* (İki Dil Bir Bavul)
by Orhan Eskiköy & Özgür Doğan (co-producer)
2008 *Summer Book* (Tatil Kitabı) by Seyfi Teoman

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MELİSA FATMA
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KORBAĞI DE BULUTSULAR

