

# Unfolding Turkish Reality

The two young Turkish filmmakers Orhan Eskikoy and Ozgur Dogan are already well known internationally with their social and political films about Turkish reality. Their latest film, *On the Way to School*, screened in the Joris Ivens competition at IDFA. DOX met the filmmakers last September in Turkey.

By Bernard Dichek

## Human Stories with Bite

By telling small human stories in a compelling observational way, Orhan Eskikoy and Ozgur Dogan are tackling some of the biggest issues facing Turkey today. The young filmmakers have made five documentaries in the last six years. Their films convey biting social and political commentary, yet they do so without the use of narration and usually without interviews. They simply let unfolding events speak for themselves.

In their most recent film, *On the Way to School*, the filmmakers provide insight into the tensions that exist between Turks and ethnic Kurds by focusing on an isolated village in south-east Turkey. The film portrays a year in the life of Emre, a novice teacher sent by the Turkish government to take charge of the village's one-room schoolhouse. As Emre speaks only Turkish and the students only Kurdish, the stage is set for the ensuing drama. Emre's enthusiasm gives way to frustration and loneliness while the children and their parents both resist and acquiesce.

Eskikoy and Dogan's previous films include *Each Dream Is A Shattered Mirror* (2001), which documents the ordeal of the family of a young man who was imprisoned for nine years because of political activity. In *Mothers and Children* (2004), the action takes place in the house of an elderly couple living by themselves in a rural village. The old-timers squabble and joke among themselves but their main preoccupation is waiting for phone calls from their married children who have moved away to the big city (Istanbul). The filmmakers weave the suspense surrounding whether or not the children will call on Mother's Day into both the climax of the film and commentary on the disintegration of family life as the younger generation migrates to the city.

## Filming for Little or No Money

Eskikoy, 28, and Dogan, 31, met while studying filmmaking in the Faculty of Communications at the University of Ankara. In their productions, Eskikoy serves as cinematographer and Dogan as sound recordist and editor. They share the directing credit. When asked how they collaborate as directors, they explain that through working closely together they have developed the same approach to documen-

tary filmmaking. "When we first started making films we hadn't had much exposure to films and we were mainly influenced by writers like Dostoevsky and Borges and the exiled Turkish poet Nazim Hikmet," notes Eskikoy.

*Each Dream* won first prize for documentaries at the Ankara International Film Festival in 2002 and was featured at IDFA. They have received some funding from the Turkish Ministry of Culture but most of their films have been made using their own resources. *On the Way to School* is their first feature-length documentary and is currently in post-production. The script was developed through their participation in the Greenhouse Project, an EuroMed Audiovisual development programme for emerging Mediterranean filmmakers. At the Greenhouse pitching session, their project caught the attention of Cara Mertes of The Sundance Documentary Fund. Citing their "sensitively nuanced script and striking visuals" she decided to award them with a funding grant. Additional funding was provided by the Jan Vrijman Fund and Pieter Van Huystee of the Netherlands, who is producing the film.

## Personal Connection to Stories

BD: *Where do you get the ideas for your films?*

Dogan: "Usually there is some way in which we are personally connected to the story and then we just try to follow the emotions involved. We began to film *Each Dream* when we heard that my brother was finally going to be released after being in jail for nine years. *On the Way to School* relates to my childhood. I spoke only Kurdish until a teacher showed up in our town when I was six. Orhan connected to the teacher's perspective as he has a good friend who went through the experience of being a teacher assigned to a Kurdish village."

Eskikoy: "Without a personal connection, access can be a problem as we found out when we made *Strike* which is about a hunger strike that took place in prisons in 2003 in which hundreds died. Trying to reach people involved was a problem. After that frustrating experience we looked for a subject closer at hand and came up with *Mothers and Children*. That film was spurred by the problem I was having with my mother who was always calling me but didn't seem interested in her own mother or father. Getting access to my grandparents (the film's protagonists) wasn't difficult."

## Governmental Suppression

**BD:** *In Every Dream there is no mention of why Coskun, your brother, was arrested and although he mentions being subjected to torture the entire subject is dealt with in only one terse comment that Coskun makes (“We encountered hard torture because we expressed our thoughts”). Why aren’t more details provided? Were you afraid to antagonise the authorities?*

**Dogan:** “It really wasn’t important what Coskun did. I never asked him though I understood from others that all he did was put posters up on walls. The issue we were addressing was the fact that the government won’t let you speak your mind. All Coskun wanted was to make the world a better place. He didn’t use a gun or anything like that. And if he did something without thinking it through, well, he was 18 years old at the time...”

As for the torture, I have no problem describing exactly what was done to him. Coskun didn’t want to talk about it but I learned from a friend of his who was arrested with him that they were subjected to electrical shocks, beatings and cold water. But as horrible as the torture was, it lasted for short periods. For my whole family, our entire lives were changed forever, especially my father who became deeply embittered and my sister who lost her chance to get a university education. Focusing on the torture would have been a distraction. And our family is just one of thousands whose entire lives have been upended. When I visited Coskun in jail, I always saw mothers who were waiting outside crying. I could see that the same thing happening to us was happening to many other families”.

## Avoiding Manipulative Effects

**BD:** *In On the Way to School is Emre the teacher, a hero or an anti-hero?*

**Eskikoy:** “He’s just an average sort of guy. We chose him because he’s the kind of person who is very open with his feelings. The way he walks around talking to himself at times is the way he is. We didn’t need to interview him to be able to show that he didn’t want to be there and that he felt alone in the village. Or to see how the lack of communication between him and the villagers eventually led him to become fed up with teaching them.”

**BD:** *How did you determine the visual style? Much of the film seems to be filmed from the distance. Often we see Emre from behind and far away, and the camera is largely static.*

**Eskikoy:** “We tried to show how Emre was a stranger in the village and let the camera style reflect this. When he did meet with the villagers, we simply didn’t want to be too close or to interfere. There’s usually no need for the camera to move. I want the camera to be like an eye that catches whatever is happening in front of the position it is in. We prefer to avoid visual effects or music or anything that is manipulative and overshadows what is happening in front of the camera.”

**BD:** *The children come across in a very innocent way. They show no self-consciousness about being filmed. How did you achieve this?*

**Dogan:** “One reason is that for the children the teacher is the absolute authority. So when he is in the room all of their attention is focused on him and we are of no importance. They also have had little contact with cameras and media.”

## Impact of Films

**BD:** *Why did you want to make this film?*

**Eskikoy:** “We were curious about Kurdish children and wanted to understand what they are going through. Telling their story is a way for us to better understand them and get others to understand their situation. There are about eleven to fifteen million Kurds in Turkey today. They don’t have the right to be educated in their language, no TV stations or schools of their own. Their culture is completely unrecognised.”

**BD:** *What impact do you think your films have?*

**Eskikoy:** “In the case of *Mothers and Children*, no impact at all. My mother still is unable to do anything about improving my grandparents’ condition and she still doesn’t leave me alone. As for *On the Way to School*, maybe it will get a discussion going about the Turkish education system and the problems faced by Kurds. ☒

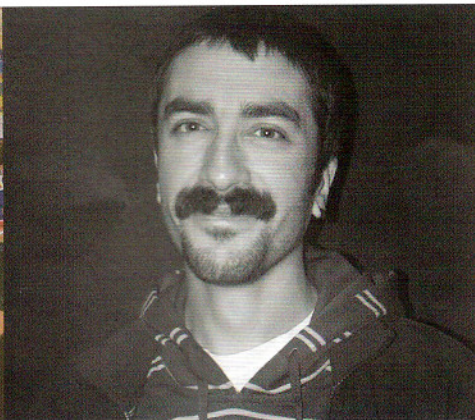
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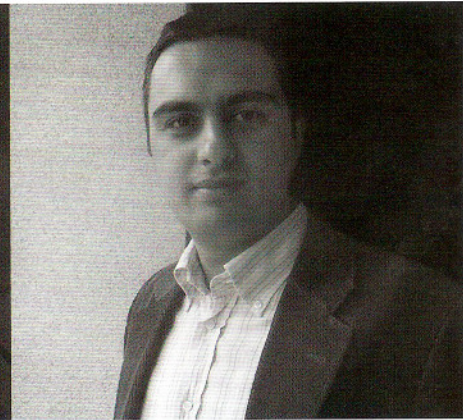
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*On the Way to School* (2008).



Ozgur Dogan.



Orhan Eskikoy.