

# Recursive Hellscape and Abusive Authority

The Horror of Police Corruption in Can Evrenol's *Baskin* (2016)

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## ABSTRACT

Turkish horror films typically centre Islamic horror and Djinn narratives, but Director Can Evrenol's *Baskin* (2016) is one of the few post 2000s horror films to offer a sociopolitical rather than a religion-based commentary that is inextricable from notions of masculinity and policing. With a premiere at the Midnight Madness Film Festival in Toronto, Canada, this self-financed horror film from a television commercial director turned film director effectively put Türkiye (formerly referred to as Turkey) on the map for Western audiences as the 8th Turkish film to earn a theatrical release in the United States as of 2015. Horror is still a relatively new genre for Turkish film, with only four horror films produced during the Yeşilçam, or golden, era (1950s to 1980s) followed by a mini-boom occurring in the early 2000s. The opportunity to repress anxiety is disrupted if not prevented outright in *Baskin*. Enmeshed in polarizing tension between conservative and secular values, post-millennial horror in Türkiye mediates, represents, and responds to distinctly Turkish anxieties about justice, rights, and religion. In Turkish, 'baskin' means a raid, foray, incursion, or a descent and signals moral and institutional decay in *Baskin* as five police officers descend into hell after responding to a distress call from one of their units. This article explores how *Baskin* creates a scathing indictment against the misuse of force and power by Turkish police and of authoritative power in general through an analysis of symbolism, color, and allegory. These elements in turn mediate and inform a sociopolitical commentary on real-world antecedents in Türkiye, and most notably, the Gezi Park protests in 2013.

Director Can Evrenol's *Baskin* (2016) is notably one of the few Turkish horror films that deliberately includes English subtitles and which decenters Islamic horror and Djinn narratives, the subgenre that by far dominates the Turkish horror film landscape post 2000. With a premiere at the Midnight Madness Film Festival in Toronto, Canada, this self-financed horror film from a television commercial director turned film director effectively put Türkiye (formerly referred to as Turkey) on the map for Western audiences as the 8<sup>th</sup> Turkish film to earn a theatrical release in the United States as of 2015. As highlighted by a number of scholars, horror is still a relatively new genre for Turkish film, with only four horror films produced during the Yeşilçam, or golden, era (1950s to 1980s) followed by a mini-boom occurring in the early 2000s (Koçer 150; Özkaraçalar 249; Özgür 175). This resurgence un-coincidentally follows the re-election of the conservative AKP (Justice and Development Party), which has been in power since 2002. As astutely observed by Robin Wood, "one might say that the true subject of the horror genre is the struggle for recognition of all that our civilization represses or oppresses, its reemergence dramatized, as in our

nightmares, as an object of horror, a matter for terror, and the happy ending (when it exists) typically signifying the restoration of repression"(24), where in this case the civilization in question is Turkish rather than American. As I will argue, the inclination to repress anxiety is disrupted if not prevented outright in *Baskin*. Enmeshed in polarizing tension between conservative and secular values, post-millennial horror in Türkiye mediates, represents, and responds to Turkish anxieties about justice, rights, and religion. Many of the horror films being made up to

**Coupled with a wariness of paternalism and authority in modern day Türkiye, *Baskin* goes on to critique what Evrenol frames, quite literally, as a nightmare of toxic masculinity perpetuated in patriarchal systems of law and rule from which waking may or may not be possible.**

this point were remakes, adaptations, or outright plagiarism of Western horror films, like *The Exorcist* (1973)/(*Şeytan* 1974) as Turkish filmmakers emulated Western techniques. Now, many Turkish filmmakers, armed with technical know-how and experience their predecessors lacked, are forging new and innovative paths in horror. Recognizing a market inside and outside Türkiye, with *Baskin* Evrenol presents one of the first original Turkish horror films to offer a sociopolitical rather than a religion-based commentary, one that is inextricable from notions of masculinity and policing. In Turkish, 'baskın' means a raid, foray, incursion, or a descent (Google Translate trans.) and signals moral and institutional decay as well as institutional force in *Baskin* as five police officers descend into hell after responding to a distress call from one of their units. Evrenol creates a scathing indictment against the misuse of force and power by Turkish police and of authoritative power in general. These elements in turn mediate and inform a sociopolitical commentary on real-world antecedents in Türkiye, and most notably, the Gezi Park protests in 2013.

*Baskin*'s opening shot is pivotal as it introduces the film's protagonist, Arda (Berat Efe Parlar), and underscores his childhood ideal of heroism. In turn, this informs his choice to become a police officer as an adult. Ultimately, it serves to emphasize the discrepancy between this 'dream' and the consequences of that choice in a situation that is found wanting when held up to these ideals. Using a jib shot, the camera floats dreamily up, then laterally from right to left to reveal a variety of figures, books, and toys on a shelf before finally descending to a sleeping Arda (Fig. 1).

The subtle movement from right to left is destabilizing in that it inverts the way that viewers and readers in much of the world read text and visuals, from left to right. As such, Evrenol creates a subtle and unsettling sensation of feeling adrift and untethered to reality. Visually and metaphorically, the items on Arda's shelf emphasize his 'dreams' of justice, heroism, and leadership. For instance, Arda's encyclopedia depicts two images of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the founding father and former president of Türkiye (Fig. 1), and alludes to Turkish national pride and the secular values that characterized the republic "upon the dissolution of the Islam-oriented Ottoman Empire" (Sahinturk 95). By abolishing the Sultanate and Caliphate, Atatürk ushered in a new era that among other things gave women equal civil and political rights, emphasized free and compulsory primary education, and "replace[d] the Ottoman script with the Latin alphabet" (Smith 36). Doubtless, Atatürk represents leadership for the young boy, a man worth emulating. Notably, some of Arda's figures, like the teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles and an English language comic called *Red Kit: Chasing the Daltons*, provide anchor points to the values of morality, heroism, and justice that Western audiences will also understand. The protagonist of this comic is a cowboy who pursues the villainous Daltons in an effort to bring them to justice.

Germane to an understanding of Arda's psyche, the police car in the foreground (Fig. 2) connects and extends values of justice, service, and security for the people, all of which are later undermined by the tight-knit and hypermasculine group of police officers with whom adult Arda (Görkem Kasal) serves.



**Fig. 1** | A toy figurine, miniature Turkish police car, and an encyclopedia featuring Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the founder of Türkiye as a modern secular republic (00:00:28. Raven Banner Entertainment, 2016).



**Fig. 2** | A toy gun hangs in the foreground against Arda's drawing of an altercation between police and 'bad guys' (00:00:30. Raven Banner Entertainment, 2016).

This is also foreshadowed by the foregrounding of the toy gun against Arda's drawing of a police car in the background while one man, ostensibly a 'bad guy,' shoots another man. Implicit here is the message that justice is problematically tied to violence, a theme that Evrenol makes readily apparent in his portrayal of police in the film. In essence, the scene establishes an uneasy tension between the ideals of law and authority and the ways they can be deployed to questionable, often nightmarish ends. In addition, the scene's use of 1980s synth loosely situates Arda's childhood during a period which was marked by an "oppressive political and social atmosphere created by the military regime" after the 1980 military coup in Türkiye (Suner 306). Coupled with a wariness of paternalism and authority in modern day Türkiye, *Baskin* goes on to critique what Evrenol frames, quite literally, as a nightmare of toxic masculinity perpetuated in patriarchal systems of law and rule from which waking may or may not be possible.

In 2013, Turks staged a peaceful protest at Gezi Park in Istanbul after, as Yeşim writes, the government planned to build a new shopping mall and residential complex within a replica of an Ottoman military barrack (808) in the park. This would have effectively erased one of the city's few green public spaces. Yeşim notes that public outrage from half the population was first in response to party corruption that allowed cronies to profit from political decisions about public space that ignored city planners, architects, and indeed, public consultation itself (808). Further, Amnesty International details the excessive use

of police brutality against peaceful protestors: “the use of live ammunition, tear gas, water cannon, plastic bullets and beatings” that led to more than 8000 injured people, at least three deaths, and many sexual assaults (“Turkey Accused” par. 2). In the short 11-minute version of *Baskin* (2013) that precedes the feature-length film, adult Arda (Gorkem Kasal) mentions to his police unit that he can’t get the image of the kid who lost his eye out of his head (00:01:00–00:01:04), and while the situational context for his comment isn’t made clear in the film, this moment cannot help but inform *Baskin*’s characterization of the police as dangerously hypermasculine and morally bankrupt. While the short was filmed *before* the Gezi Park protests, the overall political climate of government overreach is a significant precursor. Çakırlar points out that “the post-2011 period can be considered a turning point in the AKP’s rule as the party started to set forth an avert authoritarianism, anti-feminism, and conservatism in the aftermath of its electoral hegemony” (180). The values set forth in this ‘New Türkiye’ seem strikingly at odds with those of the republic’s founder, and in turn, *Baskin*’s young protagonist.

Significantly, Evrenol shot *Baskin* (2013) in a conservative part of Istanbul (“*Baskin* Interview” 00:36:18) shortly before the Gezi Park protests and the reported police brutality that took place there. One of its central images is the police logo literally tainted by spilled blood as the police flashers alternate between blue and red, colors that remain a consistent and symbolic part of the film’s composition (Figs. 3 and 4). Reading “Halk için emniyet adalet için hizmet,” or “security for the people, service for justice,” this guiding philosophy is visually marred by the spilling of innocent blood and made ambulatory as the motto is alternately washed in the oversaturated flashing of red and blue police flashers. In effect, the arrival of the police signals an urgency that is not cleanly codified in terms of offering aid. Instead, it indicates a nightmarish slippage from realism to surrealism in the film. While this first violent act is committed by a cult, the investigating officers are implied to be complicit in the violence even as they are positioned as future victims of it. Because the sacrifice of the sheep directly precedes the officers’ ‘raid’ on the building and their descent into hell, it is highly suggestive of their own moral descent. The film’s temporal proximity to the Gezi Park protests situates it as an indictment of how the protest was mishandled, especially as it is developed into a feature film several years after the protests. Evrenol’s consistent use of blue and red remains a hallmark of the feature-length production that becomes increasingly significant.

In the feature, viewers are introduced to *Baskin*’s (2016) five police officers as they have dinner at Yeşilvadi Restaurant (Fig. 5) before their night shift begins. The scene emphasizes their sexism, machoism, and abuse of power while foreshadowing their descent into hell. Yavuz (Muharrem Bayrak) is established early as an obnoxious, foul-mouthed, and bullying individual. He asserts that 70 percent of Turkish men lose their virginity to animals while in the army (00:08:54), threatens to copulate with his colleague as though he was a chicken (00:08:15), and perhaps most significantly, sees his own perceived sexual prowess as a mark of his own masculinity and superiority. He calls Arda, the Rookie of the group, an inexperienced city ‘boy’ and a



**Fig. 3 and 4** | After a dead sheep is thrown from above to land on the police van, its blood runs down the car door and the logo upon it (00:03:10. Vimeo, 2013).

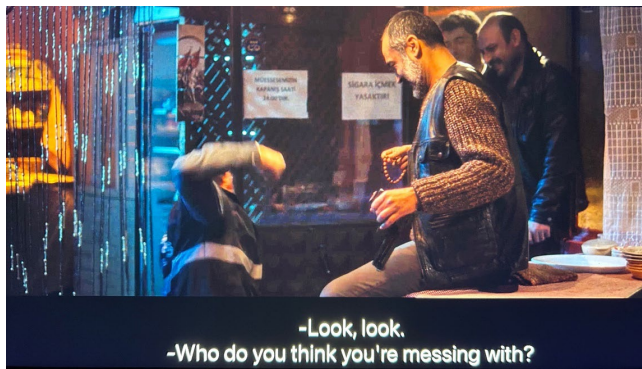


**Fig. 5** | Apo (Fatih Dokgöz) teases Yavuz about copulating with animals (00:08:15. Raven Banner Entertainment, 2016)

‘newbie’ while he himself is apparently “seasoned with brothels, whores, and what not” (00:09:17). Yavuz symbolizes a masculinity marked not by leadership or the protection of the public but rather by sexual dominance, power, and transactional relationships; at brothels, women must be compensated for intimacy. Yavuz wears a wedding ring, but his references to women suggests a devaluing of women at worst or at best, a need to perform masculinity to his colleagues.

Tellingly, Yavuz shares a sordid story about mistaking a trans woman for a cisgendered woman during a sexual encounter and decides to see the encounter through until the woman, who has not undergone reconstructive surgery, begins to self-pleasure. For Yavuz, the act then becomes ‘dirty.’ The significance here is twofold: on the one hand, the story is comical to the other men; Yavuz can laugh because as the person in control of





**Fig. 6** | Yavuz beats the helpless boy while the other officers laugh and encourage him (00:14:39. Raven Banner Entertainment, 2016)

the sexual act he understands his masculinity and his 'straightness' to be intact. On the other hand, when the young man who waits their table overhears and laughs while serving their coffee, Yavuz mistakes it for laughter *at* him. For Yavuz, being mistaken as homosexual is an insult to his identity and his masculinity. His aggressive reaction is to physically and verbally intimidate the young man, a situation the restaurant owner tries to de-escalate by deferentially apologizing on his behalf while the young man himself is afraid to speak. The scene highlights Yavuz's fragile masculinity and the certainty that those outside of his unit are truly outsiders and held to a different standard. They are civilians, subject to the rules the five policemen are not. The anxiety felt by the waiter and the restaurant owner reflect the potential severity of this reality. It is when Yavuz overhears the waiter mumble, "if only you weren't cops" (00:13:16), that the situation escalates. While the other officers initially try to deter him; squad leader Remzi (*Ergun Kuyucu*) invites Yavuz to do whatever he likes and assures Yavuz that it will stay between them. While the other officers look on and laugh, Yavuz proceeds to headbutt and beat the young man (Fig. 6).

Jarringly, Remzi laughs while holding *a* tespih or prayer bracelet, used to count repetitions of prayers in daily remembrance of Allah, in one hand, and a gun in the other. While he thumbs the tespih at various points in the film, its appearance here marks the dissonance between an ostensibly Muslim man who observes prayer and leads the others as they 'serve' justice, and the deeply flawed police chief he reveals himself to be. One is again reminded in this moment of the Gezi Park protests as an antecedent. Gardner observes that:

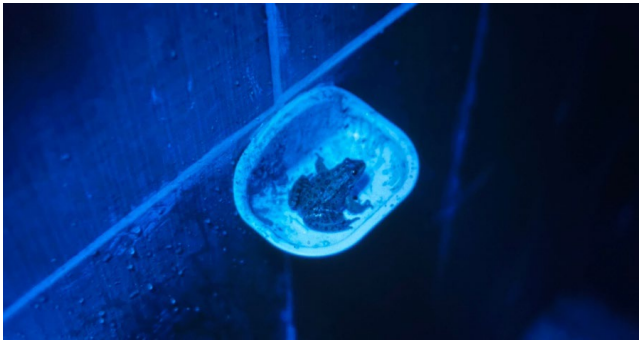
The levels of violence used by police in the course of Gezi Park protests clearly show what happens when poorly trained, poorly supervised police officers are instructed to use force – and encouraged to use it unsparingly – safe in the knowledge that they are unlikely ever to be identified or prosecuted for their abuses (qtd. in "Turkey Accused").

In *Baskin*, Evrenol resists an unproblematic identification with these bullying and vulgar men—Yavuz in particular—and invites the viewer to note the stark contrast between young Arda's dreams of heroism and the men from whom he is currently learning. Perhaps what is most significant here is not

that these men are evil, but that they are not. Where Yavuz is overly antagonistic, the others are complicit or at least passive. Arda and Seyfi (Sabahattin Yakut) in particular are the only two men who wear the full uniform, including a tie and a button-down dress shirt, suggesting a greater internalization of the responsibility that comes with the job they do. Seyfi feels literally ill at ease from the film's outset, suggesting that something about what they are doing and how they are behaving does not feel right. Even so, they see themselves as the 'good guys': Remzi, viewers learn later, has cared for Arda since his parents died in a car accident when he was a child. Further, a later, lighter scene in which the men sing along to a song on the radio features a sequence in which Apo improvises a rap about being called and quickly showing up where he's needed (00:20:26): pride in his position as an upholder of law is clear in this moment, although there is cognitive dissonance between how Apo sees himself, his role as a policeman, and his failure to intervene at the restaurant. My point here is that there is nuance to the behaviour of these men, which is especially important since viewers are later charged with assessing whether or not they deserve the fate that awaits them. Ultimately, they are victims within a system, operating under a framework in which they have far less agency than they imagine but in which they are still accountable for their actions.

In all of the stills above and still more to follow, the viewer cannot help but notice that the entire film's colour palette is dominated by amber, blue, red, or some combination of all three. These colors permeate the entire film from start to finish, with increased saturation of blue and red as the situation becomes increasingly horrific. Drawing on the red and blue flashers of the original short film, the feature length heavily leans on these colors and their association with police presence that is increasingly associated with coldness, authority, and heated violence. The most neutral of the colors, a warm amber, is not neutral at all: rather, it suggests an element of caution akin to what one might see on traffic signage. In the context of Yavuz's raised and amber-saturated fist, the color's resonance shifts: on the one hand, it wars with the cool authoritarianism of the police suggested by the blue saturation at his back. On the other, it extends to wash Remzi, Arda, and Apo in a warm glow that suggests comradeship and warmth despite the shameful abuse of power that is taking place (Fig. 6).

*Baskin* suggests tension between younger generations of Turkish men (Arda) and the toxic elements of patriarchy that underwrite the attitudes of the older ones. In the context of Turkish cinema, Evrenol undermines the ideological project of 1970s Turkish horror films, which he describes as patriarchal, macho, pro-religion, and pro-nation ("*Baskin* Interview" 00:20:30–20:30:35). Aslan points out that men in the films made in this period tend to be the head of blue-collar labourers, police or "public saviours," who are strong, brave, and problem-solving (qtd. in Serarslan et al. 178). Serarslan et al. elaborate that in the wake of a growing feminist movement in Türkiye in the 1990s, films in the 1990s and early 2000s centered men in ways that emphasized violence and sought to soothe men's egos and a sense of weakening authority in a changing social landscape in which women were rejecting traditional roles (178–179). Further,



**Fig. 7** | After vomiting and washing his face, Seyfi recoils in disgust when he observes a frog in the soap dish (00:13:38. Raven Banner Entertainment, 2016).



**Fig. 8** | Meat sizzles on a grill while the confrontation between Yavuz and the waiter escalates (00:14:45. Raven Banner Entertainment, 2016).



**Fig. 9** | Slightly earlier during dinner, the police eat their meal while in the foreground, the grill seems to sizzle beneath them (00:9:02. Raven Banner Entertainment, 2016)

while Bikiç notes that Turkish horror after 2000 has a negative or hostile attitude towards women (482) and that it fuels a “male-dominated sexist discourse” that is “excessively conservative and even bigoted” (Dogan qtd. in Serarslan et al 483), I would stress here that *Baskin*, which has an almost entirely male cast, relentlessly undermines this vision of masculinity and emphasizes the harm that it does at an institutional, personal, and even spiritual level. Evrenol asserts that “although it’s very male-oriented, *Baskin* is about the anti-male in Turkish society; that

was my intention, at least. I tried to make those cops as macho and sexist and Turkish as possible... *Baskin* is also about sexuality and a kind of anti-macho idea” (“Exclusive Interview”). Evrenol stresses that until the 1980s and 1990s, law stipulated that it was unacceptable to create a negative image of the police in film, or to insult them (“*Baskin* Interview” 00:41:13). The original law Evrenol is likely referring to was, according to Smith, established in 1934 and stipulated 10 criteria filmmakers should avoid, including propagating religion, attacking the state, propagating social and political ideology which contradicts the national regime, and contradicting moral and national values (64-65). “Censorship in Turkey has been a matter of policing from the very beginning and it has been one of the major ways in which the state has intervened in the distribution and exhibition of films” (Erdoğan and Kaya qtd. in Smith 64). As a case in point, Evrenol confirms that onscreen depictions of alcohol and smoking were routinely pixelated, sexual dialogue un-translated, wounds blurred (“*Baskin* Interview” 25:41-26:02). In this context, *Baskin* is a film that boldly transgresses lines of propriety around body horror, policing, sex, smoking, and language in a way that would have been shocking or perplexing to Turkish audiences unfamiliar with such extreme depictions. *Baskin* unapologetically explores the dark underbelly of these taboo subjects, a task to which horror is well-suited. Historically, this is a genre which is often dismissed out of hand as low-brow or crass, but which has the potential to be evocative and subversive. Horror is a genre of the nerve endings, capable at its best to shock viewers out of complacency.

Significantly, the scene in which Yavuz beats the server marks the moment where the men’s action and inaction alike lead them irrevocably on a journey to hell, suggesting punishment for their abuse of power and their machismo. The waiter’s beating is juxtaposed with cuts to Seyfi vomiting in the bathroom outside and seeing a frog in the soap dish, then to close-up shots of meat cooking on a grill inside the restaurant. Together, this trifecta of images creates an ominous warning of things to come (Figs. 7, 8, and 9).

Evrenol explains that frogs, which appear inexplicably and in large quantities in the film, “are doom bringers in mythology. In *Baskin*, they lead the cops to their doom in their nightmarish journey. They symbolize the film getting off its tracks” (“Making a Feature”). That the first appears in a soap dish suggests that these police officers are corrupt, with metaphorical ‘dirty hands’ that cannot be washed clean. The cut to cooking meat emphasizes not only the growing intensity and amplification of Yavuz’s heated assault, but also a disruption of positive connotations of cooking and eating juxtaposed with the cold, dirty blue space of the bathroom. What the viewer sees cumulatively is unpalatable. Further, the earlier shot at dinner (Fig. 9) contextualizes what follows: while the men eat in the background, meat is thrown on the grill in the foreground. As such, it appears that the five men are themselves on the grill as the flames lick up around them. Bars from the window in this separate room give the impression that it is the policemen who are jailed or trapped. To my mind, this is not only foreshadowing of the trap that awaits but also an indication that the men are themselves beholden to an institution and ideology they cannot escape.





**Fig. 10** | As the police travel to Inceagac, a 180-degree camera roll turns the scene upside down, suggesting a transition to hell (00:21:14. Raven Banner Entertainment, 2016)



**Fig. 11** | After their van is rocked by an unseen individual on the way to Inceagac, the officers see a mass of frogs writhing on the side of the road (00:25:10. Raven Banner Entertainment, 2016).

Instead of Sufi mystics who spin gracefully in long, white skirts to loosen the ego, open the heart, and become centered in Allah's presence, Baba's followers cling to earth, darkness, and pain.

Their journey to the village of Inceagac in response to a distress call becomes a journey to hell, along which the officers continue to anchor their masculinity to performative shows of strength and sexual dominance that soon give way to helplessness. For instance, despite the fact that Seyfi has been sick all evening, he insists on driving and is insulted by his colleagues' suggestion that he rests in the back of the van. To do so would be considered weak and perhaps effeminate. Later, they are forced to stop the van as they are harassed by persons unknown who hit the van, and Yavuz threatens them in terms that are gendered and are charged with sexual violence: "You bust our balls, we'll rip your balls off!" He shouts, following up with a vulgar promise of sexual penetration (00:24:30–00:24:33). In other words, harassing the police will result in violent retaliation that attacks virility and is assaultive as well as feminizing. Yavuz has already established that being penetrated is coded as weak and submissive, which becomes symbolically significant later as notions of masculine authority and sexual virility are inverted to undermine both.

The camera does a 180-degree camera roll as the van travels past it on the way to the village, literally and figuratively

anticipating the world turned upside down (Fig. 10). Solidifying the fact that reality has given way to a surreal hellscape, Seyfi observes that the road is unfamiliar although he knows the town they are travelling to, and that they have been driving for what feels like 10 years (00:23:45). Time and space appear to have subtly shifted. Evrenol's use of amber, red, and blue in this shot are natural rather than oversaturated, but this indication of a reality that is grounded quickly gives way. One of the most prominent visual signifiers that the men are entering a different, hellish reality is the increasingly use of saturated reds and blues. As a case in point, the men see a swarm of frogs—Evrenol's symbol of doom—bathed in blue light on the side of the road (Fig. 11), and later, in the buckets of villagers they encounter on the way. The warning signalled by the single frog in a soap dish is amplified here, especially since the van's amber light flashes ominously in the background.

Shortly after, as they drive on, Seyfi fails to see a bloody man standing in the center of the road, which causes them to run him down and to veer into a lake before they can cross the upcoming bridge. While Evrenol does not overly situate the film in a distinct religious framework, this failed bridge crossing evocatively calls to mind the Sirat bridge. In Islamic eschatology, this is the bridge over hell that *every* soul must cross to reach paradise on the other side; one's ability to do so depends in part on good deeds, faith, prayer, and moral conduct, with the crossing being swift for some, harder for others, while still others slip into hell. After a time, with transformation and personal growth, some may eventually pass, suggesting the recursive, rather than linear, testing of a person's worth. This notion is applicable to the five police officers, who find themselves symbolically resurrected from the lake and in hell rather than paradise. Based on their deeds, they all have varying levels of work to do.

Considering the import of the job the men do symbolically and perhaps politically, it is significant that the distress call the unit receives leads them to an abandoned and decrepit Ottoman-era police station (Fig. 12) that represents institutional rot and a sense of justice and morality that has long since departed or been corrupted. They are led by an unwilling local who later runs off, saying "Fuck the police" (00:43:00) to emphasize the lack of trust in and respect for them. A wide shot reveals the station washed in the impotent flashing blue and red of an empty police car belonging to another unit. The viewer later learns that they, and many other people, are being tortured and butchered by a cult in the dark recesses of the building. As such, the source of the 'distress' call is a decaying symbol of law and order that is tainted by the hidden obscenities occurring within it: the butchering, exploitation, and implied consumption of said bodies serves as an allegory for the ways in which bodies are consumed and manipulated to serve ideologies and authority figures. When the squad finds a single surviving officer, incoherent and repeatedly smashing his head on the wall, he has no identification and is ineffectual: instead of taking action, he attempts to erase what he has seen as he smashes his head. Rendered inarticulate, he is stripped of both his vocational authority and his identity. As a bastion of law and order itself in ruin, the blood covered and filthy station is marked by a literal descent into darkness (Fig. 13). After its time as a police station, it briefly became a stable,

and the animalization of those inside becomes a key motif: the police and prisoners are robbed of their humanity and shepherded like sheep for worship, or for sacrifice. Allegorically, the ostensible choice between mindlessly following authority or becoming fodder from flesh becomes clear. For all their state authority, these men are symbolically bodies subject to the will of the state, as they and others become bodies to be used at the will of Baba (Mehmet Cerrahoglu), the leader of the cult who resides in the station.

When the men ultimately find themselves chained at the mercy of cult leader Baba, the film escalates in dread and body horror in ways that destabilize identity, power dynamics, and masculinity. Baba (meaning father in Turkish) positions himself as a spiritual leader, as a shepherd offering insight to the world beyond the worship of power while instead focusing on what is beyond. He asks Yavuz for his name and Yavuz responds, “we are the goddamned law!” Yavuz’s use of the word ‘we’ indicates an attempt to situate himself as part of a select police collective with authority and state protection rather than as an individual, an attempt which Baba strikes down: “do you think your law is here?” (01:09:45–01:09:58). As the most outspoken, vulgar, and arguably violent member of the group, it is significant that Baba singles him out. Baba claims that “the human soul is corrupt. It only worships power. It keeps searching for new things to worship” and then asks Yavuz: “Are you ready to stop worshipping power and unite with us? Give up your worldly eyes and open your eyes to what’s beyond? Open your heart to me, son” (01:10:19–01:11:16). Baba means this literally: he cuts out Yavuz’s eye with a knife and licks the blade (Fig. 14). Baba makes clear that humanity, and these police in particular, are already tainted by an illicit lust for a power that he robs from them, but despite his suggestion that not seeing physically will open Yavuz’s ‘eyes’ to the divine, it is a violent act done against his will under a new, inverted patriarchal authority that has little to do with organized religion. In one fell-swoop, Baba demonstrates how fleeting and transitory power is. The cult’s religious beliefs are in many ways ambiguous and unanchored in a real-world context. That said, the deliberate maiming runs contrary to Islam’s central tenet to neither inflict or reciprocate bodily harm on oneself or others. It also inverts Sufism’s (a spiritual path within Islam) focus on purifying the heart. This is not to suggest that Evrenol’s film is a critique of Islam or spirituality. Indeed, its use of religious or spiritual allegory is more fluid, inviting comparisons to a spiritual journey of self-transformation, accountability, and resistance against those who would position themselves as authority figures in a spiritual context and a literal one. In this sense, Baba’s actions as well as the police’s resonate as morally untenable for secular *and* religious audiences. Türkiye is a secular country, but Islam is the predominant faith.

I would point out that Baba’s own overall goal, if any, is unclear, and his preaching extends to those that follow him and not to himself: All of Baba’s followers are inarticulate and thus voiceless. Most who are visible are also missing eyes or teeth; they recoil and seem to feel Yavuz’s pain as his eye is carved out. Baba himself is whole, and thus clearly not subject to his own ideology of seeing the divine by giving up worldly organs. As the police are tortured and killed, the scene centers around Baba’s



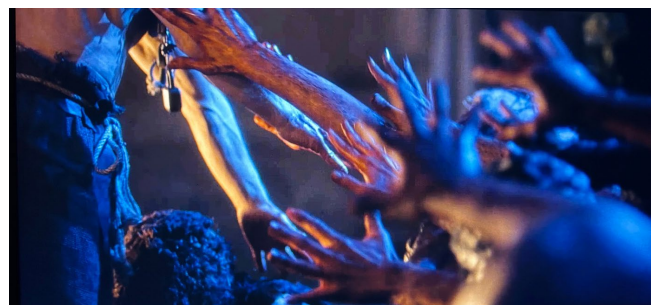
**Fig. 12** | An abandoned squad car sits outside the abandoned Ottoman-era police station of Inceagac. (00:40:30. Raven Banner Entertainment, 2016).



**Fig. 13** | The officers descend into the bowels of the station, an allegory for their descent into hell (00:49:15. Raven Banner Entertainment, 2016)



**Fig. 14** | Baba licks Yavuz’s blood from his knife after digging out Yavuz’s eye (01:12:32. Raven Banner Entertainment, 2016)



**Fig. 15** | Baba’s congregation reach for him with shaking, desperate hands (01:18:34. Raven Banner Entertainment, 2016)





**Fig. 16** | Arda straddles an incapacitated Baba (01:26:22. Raven Banner Entertainment, 2016).



**Fig. 17** | After beating Baba to death with a stool, Arda rips off his soiled and bloody police shirt (01:28:06. Raven Banner Entertainment, 2016).

The notion of inescapable fate is reiterated by the many moments that are marked by a hand—Baba's hand—reaching for Arda in his nightmares as a child and in his dreamscapes as an adult.

monologue about fate, faith, and the right way forward, which is uninterrupted by any dissenting voice. Evrenol opines that “when there's a monologue and some guy preaching, it's frightening” (“Exclusive Interview”), indicative as it is of authoritarianism. This fear resonates in a cultural and political context given that to this day in Türkiye, opinion is polarized around the rule of President (former Prime Minister) Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's AKP Party, its pivot away from secularization, and its hostility to those who critique or oppose it. *Baskin* condemns corrupt policing while also indirectly calling into question leaders and systems that facilitate corruption and encourage the silencing of opposing voices. Baba's goal is supposedly a connection to the divine, but the reality is a soiled group of wretched humans who follow Baba blindly in a literal and figurative sense, who crawl and writhe over one another like the damp applause of skin on skin (Fig. 15). They are washed most frequently in blue light, an indicator of cool authority that echoes the uniform of Turkish police: navy blue with lighter blue undershirts. Here, they are subject to Baba's authority. Their behaviour and appearance mirror that of a mass of frogs the men encounter on their way to the station, which also clamour over one another and symbolize doom. Baba's followers are, notably, binary opposites in terms of behaviour and movement to the Turkish whirling

dervish. Instead of Sufi mystics who spin gracefully in long, white skirts to loosen the ego, open the heart, and become centered in Allah's presence, Baba's followers cling to earth, darkness, and pain.

This particular scene strikingly undermines Yavuz's toxic masculinity and perceived superiority, but in ways viewers are encouraged to sit with in discomfort. The punishment is disproportionate to his deeds or his words: he is literally and forcibly damaged and penetrated by Baba's knife. Penetrative threats, as I've outlined above, are Yavuz's default in the film to assert his authority and masculinity. Here, his greatest fear is realized as he becomes the penetrated rather than the person penetrating, yet it doesn't read as vindication for the viewer. Worse still, Baba forces him to copulate with a female follower clad only in a grass skirt and wearing an animal skull, which inexplicitly results in an almost immediate impregnation and the birth of some unspeakable offspring. There is a sense of legacy here, a perpetuated cycle of birth and death that centers around death, force, and violence, and the act of forced copulation recalls Yavuz's earlier story of sexual prowess in the restaurant. However, here Yavuz is coded as little more than a breeding bull copulating with a woman who is similarly coded as animal. For both characters, humanity is erased, but for Yavuz, sexual agency, institutional authority, and bravado are also stripped bare. He exists now in the service of Baba's pleasure, so to speak. As Evrenol elucidates, the more he approached the police as sexist and macho, “the more the evil they confronted became kind of sexually ambiguous and sexually deviant” (“Exclusive Interview”). Earlier in the film the men joke about the sexual deviance of using animals for sexual release, a deviance that is significant here because Yavuz and the female worshipper/prisoner are simply tools to be used to some esoteric purpose. Notably, insofar as *Baskin* critiques a toxic masculinity that shelters behind institutional authority, it is significant that the most overtly sexist and aggressive character is forced to cede control, identity, and self-respect. As a genre, horror has often leaned on misogynistic representations of women and a graphic assault and rendering of their bodies, and while *Baskin* is not free of such associations, it pointedly forces identification with male characters who are subjected to sexual or mutilating violence. Indeed, one of the first disturbing tableaux in the station features a naked, blood and dirt-streaked woman who appears to be penetrating an equally filthy man from behind while his face is forced into excrement. Insofar as the ‘evil’ here is sexually ambiguous, I would posit that it serves to emphasize many male characters as passive, rather than active agents, and that all individuals are potential victims of abusive power. As craven as Yavuz is, his suffering and death are unjustified, as is the torture and murder of the rest of his unit.

Arda is the only survivor of the encounter with Baba's cult, but his victory is fraught as his trauma, anger, and horror loom large while shattering his sense of self and to some extent, his ideals. After disarming Baba, Arda frees himself and beats Baba to death with a stool (Fig. 16).

The moment before Arda commits this first and only violent act for survival is juxtaposed with the moment after, illustrating his triumph but also the loss of his identity. In the first medium shot, the visual weight falls on Arda's shirt and his affiliation with

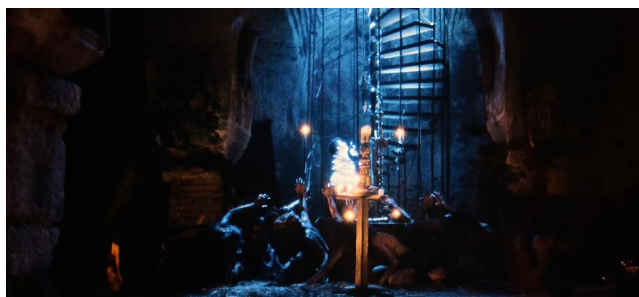


the Istanbul police force as he sits atop a stunned Baba. As Arda repeatedly smashes a stool into Baba's head offscreen, the shot remains tight on Arda's reaction as he is increasingly soiled with Baba's blood. The kill is visceral, personal, and is a triumph in that it allows Arda to both get vengeance and escape. However, his freedom comes at the cost of his youthful idealism and its connections to his identity as an officer of the law. In the extremity of his loss and horror, Arda rips open his soiled shirt (Fig. 17) a tacit rejection of his vocation and the pejorative associations with it that Evrenol weaves throughout the film.

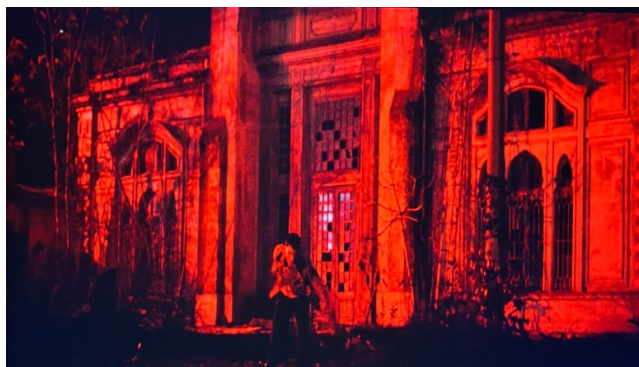
Visually, as Arda is lit from the right with blue light, this moment recalls the obvious symbolic resonance of the authority, and perhaps responsibility, of wearing police blues. Although in dream/nightmare sequences Remzi is positioned as a father figure to Arda who literally gives him the key to Baba's undoing, it is clear that the patriarchal system that offers him guidance from Remzi, his unit, and finally Baba all end in disaster, trauma, and violence. From here, the film's end is fraught with a central question: is escape from the systems in which we are so deeply entrenched possible?

Arda's escape from the abandoned building is coded as hopeful, yet this reading is anything but definitive. As he ascends to the surface, a wash of light shines on him from above, and although Baba's cult members tentatively reach out to him as a new potential leader, Arda rejects the call of authority and power and thus contradicts Baba's earlier assertion that the human soul only worships power (Fig. 18). A key light shines from above, illuminating Arda in a wash of white light that suggests his purity and goodness. Unfortunately, this impression is short lived. After all, Baba is first introduced as he descends into the cavern using the same staircase, suggesting that evil and corruption are literally and figuratively 'top down.' Further, rather than emerging into the light, Arda is greeted by a hellscape that is saturated in red and which amplifies the film's nightmarish atmosphere and bloody violence (Fig. 19). A medium, shallow-focus shot of Arda laughing in shocked disbelief at his survival with the decrepit police station in the background literally foregrounds the horrific legacy of corrupted institutions that leave a mark on the people who are a part of them or who become victim to them, even if the institution itself is literally behind them: it continues to loom (Fig. 20). Arda is visibly soiled by blood; the evidence of his descent into trauma and violence is clear, marked early in his life by the death of a childhood friend, then his parents, and finally his adult colleagues, and it contradicts the wholesome connotations of policing presented in the film's opening sequence.

Shortly after this juncture, as Arda stumbles down the road and out of Inceagac, the film reveals that he is the man their police van runs down earlier in the film as it happens again and viewers witness it from Arda's perspective. This final sequence in *Baskin*, in which the police van again veers off the road and into a lake before it can cross the bridge ahead, is perhaps the most contentious and ambiguous as it invites the viewer to consider if fatalistic, cyclical violence can be remedied in the film's narrative (Fig. 21). In the final shot, the light returns to more realistic shades, suggesting an anchoring in reality. As such, it is possible to read this as a confirmation that the five men have been freed by Arda's actions after an unknown number of hell loops; after



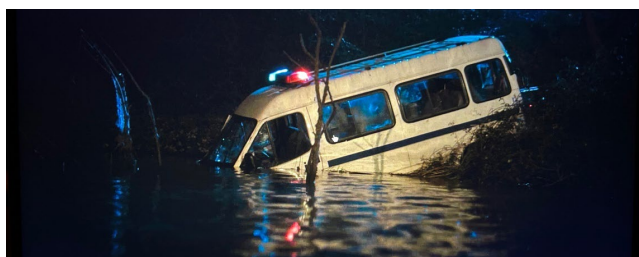
**Fig. 18** | Arda focuses on the light above as he ascends while Baba's body lies broken in the foreground and his followers reach to Arda to guide them (01:28:52. Raven Banner Entertainment, 2016).



**Fig. 19** | The exterior of the abandoned Ottoman-era police station is drenched in red light (01:29:41. Raven Banner Entertainment, 2016).



**Fig. 20** | Arda falls to his knees, laughing hysterically in shocked disbelief that he has escaped (1:29:53. Raven Banner Entertainment, 2016).



**Fig. 21** | As the van veers into the water for the second time, it is notably empty; the men are not inside as they are in the first iteration of the hell loop (01:31:29. Raven Banner Entertainment, 2016).



**Fig. 22** | After the police van veers into a lake, Arda's dream sequence ends after he is rescued from the water by a huge, god-like hand (00:35:12. Raven Banner Entertainment, 2016).

**What is striking at the end of the film is thus not the ambiguous recursiveness—or possible cessation—of the hell loop, but the relentless will to resist fear, oppression, and corruption that especially Arda embodies.**

all, the men are no longer in the van as they are in the first iteration the viewer witnesses. My reading is more cynical: perhaps, and more likely, the shot is temporally positioned in the timeloop *after* the men have already reached the abandoned Ottoman police station to start the hell-loop anew. Shot with a handheld camera, the effect is a destabilization of the reality suggested by subdued ambers, blues, and reds. Further, it mirrors the earlier 180-degree camera roll shot in terms of a color palette misleadingly reminiscent of reality.

While it is tempting to read the final shot of the empty van as evidence of escape, the overarching impression is more cynical and is afforded considerable weight via esoteric (at least to a non-Muslim audience) Islamic symbolism: the van still fails to cross the bridge (perhaps the Sirat Bridge), and a smiling photo of the 5 officers previously seen secured above the rear-view mirror floats desolately on the surface of the grimy water in the front of the van; the happy moment is a moment lost, frozen, perhaps dead. Together, these elements are suggestive of a renewed descent into hell. Further, earlier Baba tells four of the five police officers, who are literally in chains and thus captives of fate, that hell is not a place you go; it is a state that is carried inside. The innate corruption suggests that until they individually do the transformative work, they are doomed to veer off course and into hell again and again. When he asserts that “the human soul is corrupt. It only worships power” (01:10:19), in essence, Baba warns that a hunger for power is recursive and

inescapable. Nevertheless, as stated above, the film resists a clean ending in this regard that leaves space for viewer interpretation.

The idea of inescapable fate is deployed to ambiguous ends in *Baskin*. At the restaurant, a hooded figure that viewers later come to understand is Baba delivers a bucket of meat and spectrally looms behind Seyfi in the restaurant bathroom mirror: his presence haunts the edges of reality and dreaming. Given the context of human butchering that takes place at the Ottoman station, the cooking of this meat on the grill takes on incrementally ominous connotations as it suggests the consumption, literally and figuratively, of bodies and perhaps souls. The notion of inescapable fate is reiterated by the many moments that are marked by a hand—Baba's hand—reaching for Arda in his nightmares as a child and in his dreamscapes as an adult. Even after Arda escapes the lair of the cult, his ascension is interrupted by a close-up shot of Baba's bloody hand, shakily reaching for him despite the fact that Arda killed Baba. *Baskin* suggests that corruption, intimidation, and fear must be confronted again and again, as part of the human spirit and in general. While most of the reaching-hand imagery throughout this film is bloody and threatening, the sequence following the van's first plunge into the lake is a dream sequence in which Arda finds himself drowning in deep water until a giant, surreal hand reaches to save him (Fig. 22).

The blue hues here seem to suggest divine intervention, especially with a diffuse key-light illuminating the scene from above, but the hand in question still belongs to Baba and is both ambiguous and ominous. The authoritative power that offers ‘a hand up’ may not be benign. Arda is named after his father *dreams* his name, suggesting predetermination. Interestingly, *Arda* means light, warmth, or a divine figure (“Variations and Nicknames”). When the viewer meets Arda, he is understood in the context of his childhood books, toys, and heroes, putting him in the best possible position to save himself and possibly



the others, or to break the cycle. It is worth pointing out that the dream/nightmare sequences are complex and nuanced in this film, but a thorough examination of them is beyond the scope of this article. I suggest that the power of this film is not in determining whether the ending solidifies a case for escape or endless entrapment, but rather in the indomitable spirit of resistance in the face of control, intimidation, and oppression.

Yavuz notably resists Baba's imperative to 'open his heart' and while his body may be used to some evil purpose against his will, his will resists until the end. Similarly, although Baba slits Remzi's throat, an act that robs him not just of life but symbolically of voice as well, Remzi is able to speak to Arda in a final dream sequence, during which a literal 'key' to defeating Baba is now accessible inside Remzi's torn throat. It is significant that Baba is covered in chains and locks, and when Arda somehow transposes the dream key into his current reality to attack Baba with it, Baba is disarmed. What is striking at the end of the film is thus not the ambiguous recursiveness—or possible cessation—of the hell loop, but the relentless will to resist fear, oppression, and corruption that especially Arda embodies.

The 'key' to this resistance is associated with having, and using, one's voice in times of political, social, and personal upheaval. Again, it is taken directly from Remzi's 'voice box.' An open denouement forces viewers to sit with discomfort and uncertainty; it prevents the comforting closure provided by clear endings in which struggle is resolved. The beauty and horror here rests in a liminal space of discomfort that invites viewers to reflect on notions of agency and resistance in the face of corrupt cycles, but it is, for all its horror, a position of hope. As Bikiç observes, cinema has "the potential to reshape social life" and to confront and process the real pain, memories, and experience that delineate social memory (480). The film's ambiguous ending also suggests to viewers that they have a choice in terms of what they see, what it means, and perhaps, what can be done differently. ■

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