UNDERSTANDING THE ABSURD 'INSIDE'

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Received: 03.06.2022 - Accepted: 01.08.2022

Kaptan, M. and Karaca, P. (2022). Understanding the absurd 'Inside'. *Etkileşim*, 10, 144-154. doi: 10.32739/etkilesim.2022.5.10.173

This study complies with research and publication ethics.

Abstract

Lost in a basement, or locked up in himself, a man contemplates the horror of his scandalous life. The more he struggles to see, the more he becomes ridiculous. His hatred grows of his inability to exist as a complete being. Anyone who sees Zeki Demirkubuz's Yeraltı (Inside) would be struck by his antihero character Muharrem who is coupled with the absurd. This is a socially frustrated individual who seems to defend the irrational and the absurd instead of the rational and commonsensical ideas of his age. For the spectator, the question of empathy arises at this level: How is an identification in empathy with an antihero possible? This study aims to assess the possibility of identification in empathy with another self through Demirkubuz's character Muharrem, inspired by Dostoevsky's novel Notes from Underground, by taking the German philosopher Wilhelm Dilthey's article The Understanding of Other Persons and Their Expressions as the reference point. Following Dilthey's thesis, we will argue that what seems contrary to commonsense and self-contradictory can be read and understood within an existentialist framework. This framework is presented by underlining some major paradoxes in Muharrem's way of thinking and behaving when facing the universal nothingness devoid of God.

Keywords: Zeki Demirkubuz, Inside, absurd, Dilthey, identification.

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YERALTI'NDAKİ ABSÜRDÜ ANLAMAK

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Gönderim Tarihi: 03.06.2022 - Kabul Tarihi: 01.08.2022

Kaptan, M. and Karaca, P. (2022). Understanding the absurd 'Inside'. *Etkileşim*, 10, 144-154. doi: 10.32739/etkilesim.2022.5.10.173

Bu çalışma araştırma ve yayın etiğine uygun olarak gerçekleştirilmiştir.

Öz

Yeraltında kaybolmuş ya da kendi içerisinde kilitli kalmış insan skandallara vesile olmuş hayatını seyre dalar. Görmek için ne kadar çabalarsa o kadar aşağılanır. Bütünüyle bir varlık olarak var olmayı başaramadıkça nefreti büyür. Zeki Demirkubuz'un Yeraltı filmi, absürd kavramıyla özdeşleşen anti-kahramanı Muharrem karakteriyle seyircisini afallatır. Sosyal anlamda tükenmiş bu karakter, rasyonel ve mantıklı fikirler yerine akıl dışı ve absürd olanı savunur gibi gözükmektedir. İzleyicinin baş karakterle kurabileceği empati seviyesi bu noktada sorgulamaya açılır: bir anti-kahraman ile empati kurmak nasıl mümkün olabilir? Bu calısma Demirkubuz'un. Dostovevski'nin Yer Altından Notlar romanından esinlenerek yarattığı Muharrem karakteri aracılığıyla empati duygusunun imkanını sorgularken kavramsal altvapıvı Alman felsefeci Wilhem Dilthev'in *Diğer İnsanları ve İfadelerini Anlamak* makalesi üzerinden kurmaktadır. Dilthey'in bu makaledeki temel argümanını takip ederek sağduvuva ters düsüvor ve kendisiyle çelişiyormuş gibi görünen fikir ve davranışların varoluşçuluk felsefesi çercevesi icerisinde anlamlandırılabileceğini savunacağız. Bu cercevevi, filmin ana karakteri Muharrem'in Tanrı'nın olmadığı evrensel boşlukla yüzleşirken içine düştüğü paradoksların altını çizerek oluşturacağız.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Zeki Demirkubuz, Yeraltı, absürd, Dilthey, özdeşleşmek.

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Introduction

It is a question of the greatest importance. Our actions everywhere presuppose the understanding of other persons; a great part of human happiness springs from the sharing of other people's mental states; the whole of philological and historical knowledge is based on the presupposition that this understanding of the singular can be raised to the level of objectivity (Hodges, 1969: 125).

Wittgenstein (1972) claims that religious propositions are part of our *Wetlbilt*¹ which, if expressed metaphorically, are like a riverbed: our fundamental standpoint in life through which experience flows. Some assumptions like the religious ones are solidified so that they cannot be doubted; they constitute our system of reference. We are born in a certain form of life, and we live or act upon these forms so that they form a fixed axis in our lives. Therefore, it is meaningless to evaluate religious propositions as reasonable or unreasonable because as Vasiliou (2001: 46) mentions such conceptions are not brought about by reasoning and they are rather a conversion or persuasion into proper reasoning, which is not itself affected by reasoning but by one's upbringing. In other words, one is first introduced to certain religious attitudes toward life then one creates his theoretical attitude.

Absurd beliefs are similar to religious beliefs as they cannot be evaluated as reasonable or unreasonable. We believe it is more fruitful to discuss the absurd within a polyphonic narrative, in our case, through cinema. If language enables us to reach others to communicate, the cinematic narration seems to be the best way for this end: cinema has the power of presenting other 'language-games^{2'} while an argumentative order has only access to presenting the logic of only one *Weltbild*. Though the structure and the content of an idea in a visual narrative and an argumentative style may be the same, cinema opens up new forms of thinking that we would have ignored if they were presented in an argumentative essay.

At this point, we would like to introduce philosopher Wilhelm Dilthey's account for the possibility of identification with another self³ through movies. Although Dilthey does not mention understanding the religious beliefs of other-selves, we think we can create a parallelism between his aesthetics and Wittgenstein's arguments about *Weltbild* in *On Certainty*.

Dilthey's Sympathetic Understanding

Dilthey defines human studies as "the whole group of studies which have as their object the reality of history and society" (Hodges, 1969: 157). The study of human sciences should be different from the study of natural sciences be-

¹World-picture in English.

²See Wittgenstein's concept of language-games for further information.

³Speaking with Wittgenstein's terms, we can also use the words "identification with another *Weltbild*".

cause there is a shared identity of nature between ourselves and the object of our studies which is the thoughts and doings of other-selves. Therefore, with human beings (or with other-selves) we can gain knowledge of not only their external movements and changes but also the motives of their actions and the produced meanings. This kind of similarity cannot be found between human beings and physical objects. Dilthey calls this process the sympathetic understanding. (Dilthey, 1977)

Let us disclose this term of sympathetic understanding: Dilthey argues that every lived experience, including all the inner states, processes, and activities that we live through, form a part of our history of mind yet we are not aware of these experiences until we express them in some way, through words or gestures. Even with a direct introspection we cannot analyze or examine our experiences because as Hodges puts it; "the stream of psychic events passes so swiftly, each thought or feeling melting so inexorably into its successor, that it is impossible to get a steady view of what is going on in ourselves" (Hodges, 1969: 13). It is only by the intermediary of these expressions that is introspection aided by expression, that we can know our ideas and feelings. In other words, "expression is indispensable to self-knowledge since only by it can our view of ourselves acquire either clarity, or stability, or depth" (Hodges, 1969: 13).

It is necessary to explain further the term "expression⁴" since Dilthey's aesthetics is based on the interpretation of "expression" of the historical context of man's inner life. The expression does not just include feelings or ideas but also it is a symbol of language, law, or anything that makes a mark in one's inner life. Palmer (1969: 112), suggests the following reading for the term expression: "*Ausdruck* could be translated perhaps not as "expression" but as an "objectification" of the mind -knowledge, feeling, and will- of man."

We find this approach plausible: the verbs "to express" or "to objectify" can be used interchangeably since when one expresses their lived experience, the elements of their inner life corresponding to this experience are extracted and are put in front of oneself as an object of study. And when it is objectified, it is no more an expression of a purely personal reality but of a social-historical reality. The reality that is accessible by the objective mind is thus a reality shared by other minds. Therefore, expression, other than enabling self-knowledge, allows us to get the knowledge of other minds. This is where Wilhelm Dilthey's argument of "identification with another self" begins.

The Possibility of Identification with Another Self

The mental life of other-selves is accessible only through the way they express themselves. So, to clearly understand the meaning of their mental life, a corresponding experience in my mind should be evoked. The possibility of

⁴ This term is called *Ausdruck* in German.

this evoking experience is due to some kind of psychological law that Dilthey defines as such (Hodges, 1969: 113).

But we understand individuals by their affinities with one another, and the common factors which they share. This process presupposes the relation between human nature in general and individuality, which, based on the general, branches out in the multiplicity of mental existences.

It is obvious that here Dilthey presupposes a regularity in the structure of human nature where our mind has a common ordered system⁵. If we accept this premise of an objective mind, the second step that follows is the re-living or reproduction of the experience of the other-self that is, 'I' re-experience the feeling belonging to the other self's mental history through their expressions. This projection of other people's feelings into my consciousness is called "transposition of myself". And we argue that sympathetic understanding lies in this transposition as it means perceiving the other person as possessed of an inner life essentially like my own, and so rediscovering myself in another one. For instance, we understand the motives behind Ophelia's suicide when we read *Hamlet*, but it is not so because Shakespeare has written a list of Ophelia's feelings and thoughts but because we put ourselves mentally in Ophelia's position and understand the consequences by reliving her situation. This is what Dilthey calls "imaginative reliving".

Imaginative Process of Understanding for Identification

To which of the immortal goddesses Shall we award the highest praise? I seek no dispute, But I will give it To the perpetually moving Ever new, Strange daughter of Jove, His darling child Imagination. Goethe "Meine Göttin" (*Kalliope*, 2020).

⁵ In that sense, we think, Dilthey is close to a Kantian critique of human reason as he talks about an objective mind, shared by all the individuals and which "contains in itself a factor common to the I and Thou. Every square planted with trees, every room in which chairs are arranged, is intelligible to us from our infancy, because every square and every object in the room has had its place assigned to it by the common human activities of planning, arranging and value-determining. Though Dilthey, unlike Kantian inherent understanding of objective mind, talks of a historically constructed human nature as the source of the objectivity, they both believe in the existence of common elements shared by all human minds. Dilthey, himself notes that "This is a matter of further developing the whole Kantian-critical attitude, but in the category of self-interpretation instead of theory of knowledge, a critique of historical instead of pure reason" (Ferrara, 1991: 96).

At this point, Dilthey's theory of meaning should be mentioned because, to understand a work of art, one should, first of all, interpret it. And the key point in the understanding is the possibility of universally valid hermeneutics: the analysis of understanding takes its place beside that of inner experience, and both together indicate to human studies the possibility and the limitation of universally valid knowledge in them. This means that the expression of inner experience and its understanding by another self is both possible and limited. It is possible because it gains an objective validity when put into words since the meaning of these words depends on words: "The immeasurable importance of literature for our understanding of mental life and history lies here, in the fact that only in speech does the inner life of man find its complete, exhaustive, and objectively intelligible expression" (Hodges, 1969: 127). This citation means that to grasp the meaning or the expressed lived experience in these literary works of art, one should follow some rules formed by the objective mind which we could name hermeneutics. On the other hand, it is limited because of the rules that these meanings are given to us. In other words, the rules of language put the limitation. Yet, interpretation is not just a logical process depending on the rules but an imaginative one too and in that sense. it overcomes the rules of expression as Hodges (2013:28) puts forth: "There is something which cannot be reduced to rule, and which Dilthey calls an element of "divination". It cannot be caught like a technique, but only caught by infection from interpreters of genius. Thus, if both the artist and the interpreter (reader or spectator) are genii, the identification between the two selves would be at the highest level. Moreover, a good interpreter can even see things that the artist himself was not conscious of.

Appeal to the Absurd in Yeraltı (Inside)

For Camus, the notion of the absurd is man's relationship to the world, it is a notion about the human condition. In *Sisyphus,* he explains that the absurd is "the confrontation of this irrational factor and that wild longing for clarity whose call echoes from the very depths of man" (Camus,1955: 7). In a sense, it is a contradiction between the will of man and the world. As Gaston Hall (1960: 27), explains absurd is "the sense of irremediable banishment to the alien, sometimes to hostile surroundings. It is limitless desire destined to limited satisfaction, hunger for life condemned, without appeal to die". Therefore it would not be erroneous to claim that when we accept the human condition as absurd it would be meaningless to search for common sense, it would be hard to analyze our feelings and our ideas through rational arguments since they stand for man's consciousness of the irrationality of the world and the faith of man.

Muharrem in the *Inside* can be described as an absurd character as he presents human nature as irrational, capricious, and limited, he expresses a pessimistic human condition that is universal, or in other words, which does not refer to a specific place or time to urge his tragic existence. He knows that he is alien to this world, which in return, is hostile to him. The movie starts with these words: "When you remembered what happened, you suddenly covered your face with your hands. When your soul finally rebels, shaken by shame and horror, you burst into tears" (Demirkubuz, 2012, 0:01:33). Our anti-hero *Muharrem* defends the irrational and absurd throughout the film as the opening words give us a hint of it.

Muharrem is a public officer, and he goes to work by bus. One day, while commuting, he starts howling. Other passengers are shocked as expected but *Muharrem* continues howling. When he arrives at work, his inner voice speaks to us:

If a wise man is not cruel to himself, he cannot be proud of himself either. But for me, I feel no pity for myself because of my boundless pride. I contemptuously despise myself. And I think everyone feels the same for me. (Demirkubuz, 2012, 0:12:18)

Though absurd is related to irrationality, it has its logic. In existentialist literature like Camus, Kafka, or Dostoevsky, the absurd is not presented just for the sake of absurdity but to introduce the reasoning behind it. *Muharrem* defends what seems contrary to human sense like hypocrisy or violence, for most of the audience, he seems to pursue an absurd kind of life. His monologues and dialogues seem to be full of contradictory ideas, yet all these are told for a reason: to show the limit of human reason. In other words, the reason behind the defense of absurdity is to introduce the paradoxes that human reason seems to be unable to solve.

When his three so-called intellectual friends of his are planning to meet to celebrate another friend's, *Cevat*'s publication award, *Muharrem* is left outside. We soon understand that they do not want to invite *Muharrem* because he bluntly talks the truth even if he knows he will regret it afterwards. But when *Muharrem* insists to be present at this celebration meeting, *Sinan* confronts him: "Were not you the one who speaks of Cevat as a thief and a fraud and now you want to come to the dinner given in honor of the man?" (Demirkubuz, 2012, 0:16:14). But *Muharrem* does not give up. He reminds him that *Cevat* stole *Sinan*'s father's memories to write them in his awarded book. But *Sinan* looks like he made peace with him when he got the award.

It is known that Demirkubuz's inspiration in creating *Muharrem* is Dostoevsky's famous character, the underground man. Dostoevsky wrote *Notes from Underground* as a reaction to Chernyshevsky's *What is to be Done?* which, as Fanger (1967: 180) argues, "with his doctrines of rational self-interest was simplifying the nature of man. Dostoevsky, "through his extreme spokesman, was complicating it, while Chernyshevsky was reducing psychology to a scheme, Dostoevsky was proclaiming it an irreducible class" (Fanger, 1967: 180). In the *Notes from Underground*, Dostoevsky's paradoxical arguments present what the Russian men of the 1840s thought they knew what human nature was. Later in the novel, Dostoevsky challenges them by pointing out that man is irrational with a limited reason and rejects both being categorized and following materialistic and scientific solutions proposed by the European enlightenment. We can identify that the cause of *Muharrem*'s pain in the 21st century does not fall far from the values of enlightenment: being aware of the self-defeating premises of the enlightenment and being conscious of the evil (the human will for destruction and cruelty), the underground man pushed himself to separation and loneliness in his underground world. His monologues concretize this feeling: when he is irritated by some noise coming from his neighbors, he starts throwing potatoes at their window. He talks to himself: "A secret fight started between me and everything. But I am not a person who would take a step back and ignore it. I had to do something to stop the hysteria that suddenly comes with nausea" (Demirkubuz, 2012, 0:25:38). Or again he is uttering that he wanders in dark places with an unquenchable craving for all that is ugly and shameful.

About Human Nature and a Godless Universe from an Existentialistic Perspective

Kierkegaard claims that reason has its limitations therefore it is not capable of understanding and evaluating everything. Hence paradoxes begin at the point where reason "reflects upon its nature" and realizes its limit. Therefore, the paradox is involved in the definition of reason. Gregory Schrufeider (1983: 72), puts this argument more explicitly in his essay *The Logic of the Absurd*: "…reason must admit that there are matters it cannot understand….it should know its limitation…A naïve reason which has not come face to face with paradox cannot know itself… because paradox is the limitations of its nature."

For instance, *Muharrem* cannot understand why man sometimes wills to act against his interest and wants to do things that are harmful and destructive for himself and others. Or why does man love chaos or would he be bored when provided with everything because there would be nothing left to strive for? For example, *Muharrem* decides not to attend *Cevat's* dinner to celebrate his recent publication award. Yet, he shows up at the diner before all the other invitees. He is not of course told that the meeting time was changed. Frustrated, he thinks his friends set up a trap. When everyone arrives, his mood changes suddenly and he confesses he feels blessed as if these people are his saviors. He says he almost forgets he was offended a minute ago. As expected, he utters offensive words for Cevat and leaves the dinner alone to make a point: he does not care about them.

From the perspective of the Enlightenment, if a man behaves in a disapproved manner, it is because he is not educated but once he is taught, he can make the difference between good and bad. Yet human nature is absurd and cannot be analyzed by rational arguments. With *Yeraltı* (*Inside*), Demirkubuz presents human nature as something working for its destruction, striving for suffering and irrational choices. *Muharrem* utters many times that he does not understand the reasons behind his actions and goes deeper as he realizes what is valuable to him. Yet at the end of the film, he accepts he cannot change who he is and should make peace with himself.

From an existentialistic perspective, man is free to choose his actions since there is not a preceding essence in man's nature that ascribes that man acts by rationality, but human will and impulses play an important role in life. Moreover, they make it impossible for man to be classified under any characteristic schema. In other words, where the reason is not the essence of man's choice there would not be just one possible choice that is decided within the heuristic perspective of reason but there are many possibilities for the future choices of man which are most of the time seem to be absurd.

Another existentialist concept we can find when reasoning about the motives of absurdity in *Yeraltı* (*Inside*) is the consciousness of being forlorn or of living in a godless universe. Guignon (1993: 29) explains the difficulty of holding these three beliefs simultaneously:

If God is all-powerful and He nevertheless allows suffering, then it is hard to see how He could be good. But if God is truly good and suffering occurs, then it is hard to see how He could be all-powerful. It seems, then, that one of the three beliefs has to be abandoned.

Muharrem accepts suffering. Furthermore, he accepts that man actually like making others suffer just for the sake of enjoying himself. Therefore, in a world devoid of God's existence, the absurd lives that man would pursue do not sound meaningless since there is not a divine primary cause that orders for the good and rational.

Conclusion

W. Dilthey mostly chooses to analyze literary works among all forms of art because the inner life of man is described most accurately through words and the mental life of other-selves is accessible only through the way they express themselves. But we think that cinema conveys better the inner life, the *Inside*. We believe that Zeki Demirkubuz's *Yeraltı (Inside)* constitutes one of the best examples of Dilthey's argument. *Muharrem*'s monologues play an important role throughout the movie and occupy more place than the actual events and narration. In addition to that, *Muharrem* is an anti-hero and an absurd character. Dilthey's concept, "transposition of the self", in other words, the projection of other people's feelings into our consciousness is useful to answer why or how the spectator could identify with such an absurd hero. *Muharrem* opens himself and his mind to the spectator while this last one is trying to see *Muharrem*'s mental history by shifting their ground, by getting into his own *Weltbild*.

We understand the motives behind Muharrem's self-destructive behaviors

not because Zeki Demirkubuz wrote a list of *Muharrem*'s feelings and thoughts in a systematic argument and reflected it on the screen, but because we put ourselves mentally in *Muharrem*'s position and understand the consequences by reliving his situation. Such films show us forms of thinking that philosophical requirements on the character of thought, mind, and world may lead us to ignore (Diamond, 1995: 24)

We explained that this identification is possible through what Dilthey calls "imaginative reliving" and it depends on the imaginative faculty of the reader, in our case, the spectator. *Yeraltı* (*Inside*) puts forth a profound vision of the nature of man and the human situation. The drama of *Muharrem*'s life is similar to our dramas; the tragedy of his life resembles the one we live. Although Zeki Demirkubuz's inspiration *Notes from the Underground* was written in 1863, Dostoyevsky had seized the pain of the post-modern man.

The existentialist perspective of this movie invites us to think about what we want to do with ourselves. Are we able to reinvent ourselves? By revealing an underground man torn by meaninglessness, Demirkubuz shows that being a man is neither that simple nor that obvious. *Muharrem* discovers that reading from books has nothing to do with the world around them. *Muharrem* is pointing to us why man consciously chooses what seems absurd to human reason but is very understandable when human nature is read through the existentialistic point of view of a universe devoid of God.

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Ethics committee approval: There is no need for ethics committee approval.

Conflict of interest: There are no conflicts of interest to declare. *Financial support:* No funding was received for this study. *Author Contribution Rate:* Merve KAPTAN (50%), Pinar KARACA (50%)

Etik Kurul Onayı: Etik kurul onayına ihtiyaç bulunmamaktadır. *Çıkar çatışması:* Çıkar çatışması bulunmamaktadır. *Finansal destek:* Finansal destek bulunmamaktadır. *Yazar katkı oranı:* Merve KAPTAN (%50), Pınar KARACA (%50)

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