



Ozpetek, Ferzan (b. 1959)

by Luca Prono

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Thanks to the critical and box-office success of most of his films, the Turkish-born Italian director Ferzan Ozpetek has helped make the portrayal of gay lives acceptable and even commercially desirable in Italian cinema. Openly gay himself, Ozpetek has challenged the celluloid closet that silenced or, at best, marginalized queerness in Italian film.

As Elliott Stein concluded in 2008, Ozpetek's "oeuvre has been marked by a masterful handling of actors, often in densely populated ensemble stories involving characters from different backgrounds and sexual preferences."

Ozpetek was born in Istanbul on February 3, 1959. He traveled to Italy to attend college in 1976 and has made his home there ever since.

Ozpetek completed a university degree in film history at Rome's Sapienza University. Subsequently, he studied art history and costume design at the Navona Academy and then qualified as a director at the Accademia di Arte Drammatica "Silvio D'Amico."

After a short collaboration with Julian Beck's Living Theatre, Ozpetek began his career as an assistant director in the early 1980s, working with important Italian directors including Massimo Troisi and Marco Risi.

In 1996, Ozpetek directed his first movie, *The Turkish Bath (Hamam; also released as Steam)* which received excellent reviews at the Cannes Film Festival and became an immediate, unexpected hit. It was distributed in more than 20 countries.

The film anticipates the major narrative and stylistic techniques of the director's future works, as well as his characteristic themes. It paved the way for an award-winning career that has earned Ozpetek international recognition.

Reflecting the fact that he maintains both Turkish and Italian citizenship, Ozpetek has described himself as "a man with two passports and two cultures." Indeed, his films express both his Turkish heritage and his Western cinematic training and interests.

Most of Ozpetek's films employ both the conventions of 1950s Italian melodrama and the multiple storytelling of the Oriental tradition. In addition, most of the director's works address geographical, cultural, sexual, and historical dualisms.

Their main characters typically embark on a journey of self-discovery, often initiated by the death of a friend or a relative, which will lead to their attempt to reconcile themselves with what they initially thought of as irremediably opposed realities.

The themes of self-discovery and of bridging social and cultural differences give Ozpetek's films a chorus-



Ferzan Ozpetek in 2010.
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like dimension and shed light on the diverse lifestyles and communities of contemporary Italian society. Among these groups is the glbtq community, which the director never portrays as a separate entity, but as located within and interacting with the larger Italian society.

In *The Turkish Bath*, the Italian architect Francesco and his estranged wife Marta are forced to negotiate the impact of Turkish traditions on their lives as Francesco travels to Istanbul to restore an old *hamam* (Turkish bath) that he has inherited from an eccentric aunt.

The space of the *hamam* leads Francesco to explore his homosexuality and his wife Marta to discover it, a revelation that deeply transforms both their lives.

Harem (Harem Suare, 1999), a historical drama set in Ozpetek's native country, follows Safiye, the favorite concubine of Sultan Abdul Amid II, who, upon the death of her son, sets out on a journey from the decaying splendors of the Ottoman Empire to the small theaters of provincial Italian towns where she is displayed as an exotic remnant of a dissolved culture.

The film, based on an original script by Ozpetek, in collaboration with Gianni Romoli, earned critical acclaim at numerous film festivals.

Although the contrast between Italy and Turkey does not feature prominently in Ozpetek's other films, the presence of the Turkish actress Serra Yilmaz in most of them constantly recalls the director's double heritage.

His Secret Life (also released as *The Ignorant Fairies, Le fate ignoranti, 2001*), *Facing Windows (La finestra di fronte, 2003)* and *Saturn in Opposition (Saturno contro, 2007)*, are all set in Rome, Ozpetek's adoptive city. Although each is distinct, these films all make thematic points through the comparison of homosexual and heterosexual relationships.

In *His Secret Life*, after her husband is killed by being run over by a car, Antonia starts investigating his many secrets. The upper-class widow's ordered and conventional life is turned on its head when she discovers her late husband's long-term relationship with a working-class man, Michele. After an initial mutual suspicion, Antonia is soon included in Michele's circle of friends, an experience that eventually empowers and emancipates her.

Described as Ozpetek's most complex and affecting work, *Facing Windows* focuses on the friendship between Giovanna, a working-class mother in an increasingly unhappy marriage who enjoys a secretly-reciprocated love for her handsome neighbor, and an elderly man suffering from amnesia who can only recall apparently inconsequential events of his youth under Fascism. As the character's mysterious past and his passionate love affair with another man emerge, it becomes clear that the choices that Giovanna has to make in the present closely parallel those made by him sixty years earlier.

Saturn in Opposition returns to an entirely contemporaneous setting to explore the relationships within a closely-knit, yet extremely heterogeneous, circle of friends centering on a gay couple, Lorenzo and Davide. When Lorenzo suddenly enters a coma and dies, the group has to come to terms with the void left by his death.

The success of these films, all of which won prestigious awards, established Ozpetek as a leading Italian director.

The disappointing *Sacred Heart (Cuore sacro, 2005)*, focused on a woman who renounces a corporate career to care for the poor, and the noir *A Perfect Day (Un giorno perfetto, 2008)*, which is Ozpetek's first film not based on his original story idea, represent a partial departure from the director's other films. While they continue to investigate divergent social realities, they do not contain significant gay subplots.

However, the director's most recent film *Loose Cannons (Mine vaganti, 2010)*, which received a Special Jury Mention at New York's Tribeca Film Festival, returns to homosexuality as a major force behind its narrative. The film is set not in Rome but in the provincial Southern Italian town of Lecce and adopts a more farcical tone than Ozpetek's previous films.

A chain of misunderstandings is set in motion when the Cantones' younger son Tommaso returns to visit his conformist family, where he intends to announce his desire to study literature and to come out as gay. However, he is preempted by his older brother Antonio, who announces his own homosexuality and thereby throws the family into disarray. Caught in the middle of this family crisis, Tommaso has no choice but to continue pretending.

Ozpetek displays considerable skills in scripting and directing multifaceted films whose characters, although numerous, are fully explored in their different identities. Ozpetek's gay characters, in particular, come from all walks of life and contribute to the visibility of homosexuality in all Italian social, cultural, and geographical contexts.

Ozpetek's films have been the subject of retrospectives at the Museum of Modern Art in 2008 and at UCLA in 2010. In 2008, the director was presented a medal of merit by the President of Italy for his contributions to friendly relations and communication between Turkey and Italy.

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About the Author

Luca Prono holds a Ph.D. in American Studies from the University of Nottingham, where he taught courses in American culture and Film Studies. He has published articles on Pier Vittorio Tondelli, Italian Neo-Realism, and American Radical Literature, as well as on contemporary representations of homosexuality in Italian films.