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# THE *MIDNIGHT EXPRESS* (1978) PHENOMENON AND THE IMAGE OF TURKEY

Dilek Kaya Mutlu

Adapted from Billy Hayes's autobiographical book, the 'true' story of his five-year incarceration in a Turkish prison on charges of drug smuggling, *Midnight Express* is a film and phenomenon that never becomes dated. Released in 1978, it was a small movie yet a major commercial success and a critical favourite on an international scale. It won many awards, including two Oscars<sup>1</sup> and six Golden Globes.<sup>2</sup> It launched several Hollywood careers, most notably that of Alan Parker,<sup>3</sup> Oliver Stone and David Puttnam, has been shown on American and British televisions since 1980, and in 1986 was released on video. In 1998, a 20th-anniversary edition of the film was released on DVD. In 1998, David Panzer Productions even bought a script from Billy Hayes about the 'real' story of his prison escape. The new movie, *Midnight Express—The Return*, would also tell of Hayes's attempts to free a still-imprisoned friend in Turkey.<sup>4</sup> On 5 May 2000, *Variety* reported that the \$30 million movie 'Midnight Return', 'a sequel to *Midnight Express*', would be shot in the fall in Tunisia and that the producers were approaching Edward Norton for the lead role.<sup>5</sup>

Although there has been no new information about the sequel since then, *Midnight Express* inspired several other films in the 1990s as well. While *Return to Paradise* (Joseph Ruben, 1998) is described by critics as a *Midnight Express* for the 1990s,<sup>6</sup> *Brokedown Palace* (Jonathan Kaplan, 1999) is referred to as the female version of *Midnight Express*.<sup>7</sup> Both films depict young Americans jailed on drug-related charges in 'primitive' Third World prisons, namely in Malaysia and Thailand, respectively. Moreover, it is possible to read the video erotic thriller *Prison Heat* (Joel Silberg, 1992)

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as another, but very particular, reworking of the *Midnight Express* plot, this time with four 'sexy' American women in a Turkish prison. These are some cinematic examples pointing to the continuing significance of *Midnight Express* in the social memory of the West. Above these, the term 'Midnight Express' has become one of the most popular associations for Turkey,<sup>8</sup> and a code word expressing the 'thrill' of being jailed in the 'underdeveloped' Third World as a foreigner from the 'civilized' West.<sup>9</sup> Besides all these, 'forever embroiled in controversy', as Jeff Shannon begins his editorial review for amazon.com, *Midnight Express* is a phenomenon that surpasses the film *per se*.

This article focuses on the emergence of *Midnight Express* as a part of a broader project on the historical progress of the *Midnight Express* phenomenon. It considers the film's phenomenal popularity at the time of its initial release, which can also be forwarded as one of the historical determinants of its continuing appeal and significance. My primary concern is to investigate the contextual factors contributing to the film's 'event' status, particularly in the United States, reconstructing the social and discursive contexts in which the film was placed and viewed. This article contains three main sections. The first explores the making of the 'consumable identity' of *Midnight Express* through publicity discourses along with the production of the film. This is followed by an attempt to show that, although throughout the production stage the consumable identity and 'must-see' appeal of the film centred on the figure of Hayes, by the time of its release in the United States, the film meant much more than his 'true story' and that the marketing strategy followed during the distribution and exhibition stages played a crucial role. The second section examines the critical responses to and Turkish protests against *Midnight Express* in the aftermath of the Cannes opening and during the European screenings of the film, which had further enhanced its consumable identity by the time of its American release. Finally, the third section considers the timeliness of the film's subject matter and its close relevance to the social and cultural context of 1970s United States, particularly to the social debates on youth, drugs and counterculture, as one of the most obvious contextual factors contributing to the film's popular appeal and significance in that period.

### **'Remember William Hayes . . .?': Hayes and his book in the American press**

Stephen Heath remarks that 'a film must never end . . . it must exist . . . [even] before we enter the cinema—in a kind of englobingly extensive prolongation'.<sup>10</sup> Publicity, promotion and marketing strategies play an important role in the prolongation of a film's existence past and future. During this process, as Barbara Klinger notes, the industry also defines 'a significant part of the film's social circulation' by designing a 'consumable identity' for it through promotional activities such as posters, trailers, media spots, media stories on production and interviews with stars.<sup>11</sup> It could be argued that the most powerful promotional asset for the publicity of *Midnight Express*, the 'starred' and 'fetishized' element in the design of its consumable identity, especially throughout the production stage, was Hayes himself—an American young man with a sensational 'true' story. Moreover, the promotion of this story in the American press dates back to the mid-1970s, to the preparation and publication of the

book *Midnight Express*. The fact that Lawrence Van Gelder begins his 1976 note on William Hayes's forthcoming book in the *New York Times* with the question 'remember William Hayes Jr of Amityville?'<sup>12</sup> shows that the American public was already familiar with Hayes.

Hayes had become a celebrity in the United States before his escape. On his arrival at New York's Kennedy International Airport on 24 October 1975, there were, he remembers, a hundred reporters waiting for him.<sup>13</sup> Hayes was not simply a celebrity but 'the object of agents, publishers and film producers'.<sup>14</sup> Upon his return, he appeared on many television and radio programs and gave interviews to newspapers. E. P. Dutton publishing company paid Hayes a \$25,000 advance on royalties for a book and Hollywood paid him \$35,000 for the film rights.<sup>15</sup> At first, Hayes attempted to write the book by himself. However, when his agent found his 15-page manuscript 'hysterically subjective', a professional writer, William Hoffer, was brought in as co-author.<sup>16</sup> The book was completed in June 1976 and published in February 1977. During that period, the news about Hayes and the interviews with him in the American press did not simply re-introduce him to the public, but, and more importantly, constructed a particular image of him in which the film would later invest.

While describing Hayes's after-prison life, the American press operated on Hayes's public image as if they were building a star image. One of the common aspects of the media's stories about Hayes's private life was that they attributed several good characteristics to him as if they were trying to replace his previous image of a college-dropout and drug smuggler with the image of 'a good ol' boy', attached to his family, happy at home, and doing well at school. Along with announcing that Hayes had finished writing his manuscript and would leave for Europe to visit publishers and promote British, French and Spanish editions of the book, Pranay Gupte from the *New York Times* wrote about Hayes and his family as follows:

All of them will be touring the West Coast next month—a gift to them from Billy Hayes, all expenses paid including a special bonus for Mr. Hayes Sr in the form of a rented private plane to fly over the Grand Canyon. Mr. Hayes Sr holds a pilot's license.

The Hayes family may also enjoy some additional good news: Billy Hayes said last week that a "good and very distinct possibility exists" that he may soon marry a career woman he met through a mutual friend in New York City.

"We are very, very happy together," he said. "It's a change—everything has been a change and I am enjoying life to the fullest".<sup>17</sup>

In a similar manner, two months after the publication of the book, Gelder wrote not only about Hayes's promotional tours in Europe, but, and more importantly, about his taking up courses at Fordham University. These were the 'awakened interests' of Hayes 'after a nightmare', according to Gelder. He continued:

When the semester ended, Mr. Hayes had an A in English, an A in economics, and a B in French.

Though the publication of *Midnight Express* and its requirement of promotional appearances made a heavy load of courses impossible this semester,

Mr. Hayes nevertheless enrolled in courses in screenplay and filmmaking at the New School and in microeconomics at Fordham.<sup>18</sup>

The institutional and parental gaze and the disciplining attitude observed in the press stories such as the above are not random. Within the social context of 1970s American culture, which will be discussed later, Hayes was seen as a social type, a representative of the counterculture youth enduring a 'hippie' lifestyle. 'That was my generation!' writes Chrissie Hynde, a member of 1970s youth, '[w]e were pot smokers, reading about mystical Eastern religions and taking a stand against anything that was establishment, rejecting all the values that had come before'.<sup>19</sup> In this respect, it is impossible not to see the ideological operation behind the media's picture of Hayes, which is nothing more than the projection of a social desire: a youth re-affirming his parents' values. When published, the book became a bestseller, selling 30,000 copies from February to April 1977.<sup>20</sup> Later, the *New York Times* 'Special Features' serialized the book and the *Chicago Tribune* ran the book in instalments.<sup>21</sup>

### The making and marketing of *Midnight Express* as a film

*Midnight Express* can be called an 'exploitation film' in the sense that, as the previous section shows, it invested in a timely subject matter that had already aroused public curiosity and had a clear promotional tie-in.<sup>22</sup> The production crew included Peter Guber from Casablanca Records and FilmWorks as executive producer, Alan Marshall and David Puttnam as producers, Alan Parker as director, and Oliver Stone as the screenplay writer, all of them in their thirties. The film would be a Columbia Pictures release of a Casablanca FilmWorks Production.

Thinking that the book 'didn't have the dramatic cohesion the film needed' and that '[they] weren't making a documentary' Stone made several changes to the story in the book,<sup>23</sup> which rendered the Turkish prison much more brutal and Hayes much more victimized than they were in the book. It is argued that when writing the screenplay Stone also 'drew upon his own jail experience for motivation'.<sup>24</sup> After his return from Vietnam, Stone was 'arrested on the US-Mexican border and thrown in jail after being charged with smuggling drugs'.<sup>25</sup> Shooting of the film began in Malta in September 1977 and ended in 53 days in the absence of Stone. An abandoned army barracks was transformed into Istanbul's Sagmalcilar Prison. The entire film was shot in Malta except for the establishing shots of Istanbul with which the film opens. 'In order to authenticate the location as Turkey', Frank Beaver points out, 'Parker sent another film crew to Istanbul (on the pretense of shooting a cigarette commercial)' where the shots of Istanbul were taken.<sup>26</sup> 'Realizing that the Turkish government would be less than sanguine about abetting a production so unflattering to the Turkish penal system', Neal Nordlinger explains, 'Puttnam and crew wrote a bogus cigarette commercial and got not only the requisite permission from the Turkish government but the help of the Turkish Police in shooting the material which would eventually frame the Maltese footage'.<sup>27</sup>

The main dramatic event common to both literary and cinematographic versions of *Midnight Express* is that after spending three years in a 'primitive' Turkish prison, 53 days before his release, Hayes's sentence is changed to life, leaving him no option

other than to 'catch the *Midnight Express*'—prison slang for escape. However, by the time the film was completed, it deviated considerably from the book. Along with omitting certain events (like Hayes's good relations with his Turkish inmates, his homosexual affair with a Swedish inmate, pleasant days on the island prison, the adventurous escape by sea) and fabricating new ones (Hayes's angry courtroom speech announcing Turks as a 'nation of pigs', his murdering of the Turkish stoolpigeon Rifki [Paolo Bonacelli] by biting out his tongue, several tortures of Western characters, the attempt of the chief guard Hamidou [Paul Smith] to sodomize Hayes, Hayes's escape after a 'divine' accident in which he murders Hamidou by impaling his head with a coat hanger), the film-makers did not follow the chronology of the book. All of these alterations transformed the literary Hayes into a naive and innocent victim-hero, and the film to a moving action-thriller story, ensuring spectator pleasures such as full identification and catharsis.<sup>28</sup> In 1986, Parker reflected on the deviation of the film from the book as follows:

We started with the book which was ghostwritten for Billy Hayes by William Hoffer. Billy Hayes had been in prison, escaped, and came to America to find that he was an incredible celebrity. He started telling stories to the press that supposedly happened to him, but in fact did not. Many of these incidents happened to others in prison. Also, time plays tricks on memory, so the truth was moved a little bit to one side when he came back. William Hoffer then wrote this account into a novelized version, and so truth was moved a bit further. Then Oliver Stone wrote the original screenplay and he moved the truth further. Finally, when I made the film, I contributed my bit and moved the truth even further. So the story moved a long, long way from the original events. But never at any point was it ever anything other than a film. The studio [Columbia Pictures] made us put on the ads the line 'based on a true story' to lend a kind of credibility that apparently helps bring an audience into the cinema. But to me it was a piece of fiction. After that, I made the story as powerful as I possibly could.<sup>29</sup>

The publicity for *Midnight Express* had started with the publicity for the book itself. The press reviews of the book were declaring that the movie was already being planned. Hayes was still the major promotional asset for the film's publicity. Parker recounts that Guber visited Malta once together with Hayes and 'a press junket of journalists', and showed Hayes off to the press.<sup>30</sup> A featurette showing Hayes walking around the set, which is included in the 20th-anniversary DVD edition of the film, was shot during that visit. Stills showing Hayes behind the bars of the prison used in the shooting of *Midnight Express* would later appear in the American press during the film's American release. However, it was Guber's decision to open *Midnight Express* in Europe 'to build awareness before bringing it to the United States',<sup>31</sup> that opened the way for the film's becoming something much more than the 'true' story of Hayes. *Midnight Express* was first screened at the Cannes on 18 May 1978 as a British entry. From that moment until the film's American opening on 5 October 1978, film critics, the Turkish government, and Turkish communities abroad, even more than Hayes, would play the major role in publicizing *Midnight Express*. Indeed, by opening the film first at the Cannes and Europe, the producers would enable even the critical reactions

to and the Turkish protests against the film to turn into a kind of free publicity for its American release.

## The controversy and the protests

An anonymous press story on the production of *Midnight Express*, published in *Films Illustrated* in January 1978, three months before the film's screening at the Cannes, conveys one of the earliest media constructions of the film's 'preferred' meaning. The story read: 'The new film . . . is a telling indictment of the plight of thousands of young people—jailed for long periods for relatively minor drug offences—in filthy jails around the world'.<sup>32</sup> This preferred meaning was parallel to Parker's intention, declared in 'an open letter to his crew shortly before he began directing *Midnight Express*', which was quoted in length. The last paragraph of the letter read: 'In short *Midnight Express* is a film about hypocrisies of drug offence penalties, brutalities of prison life, the nearer verges of insanity, growing up and, above all, about never losing hope'.<sup>33</sup> Parker also stated in an interview: 'Drug penalties around the world are inconsistent, and I think it valuable that we debate that, examine it, and consider its implications'.<sup>34</sup> These statements positioned *Midnight Express* as a timely social problem film, which looked at the problem from the standpoint of youth. However, the majority of the reviews that appeared, especially in the French and British press in the aftermath of the Cannes screening, read into the film other meanings as well.

Just in the aftermath of the Cannes screening, *Midnight Express* became the subject of a controversy provoked by the press. While some critics appreciated it as a powerful 'real-life drama', an 'anti-drug film' and 'courageous filmmaking', others criticized it for its 'needless violence', 'xenophobia', 'racism' and 'homophobia'.<sup>35</sup> One of the most repeated arguments was that the film altered the facts in the book for 'exploitive' and 'manipulative' purposes. Andrew Yule recounts the press's reception of *Midnight Express* at the Cannes as follows:

Although the film was given a tremendous reception at its festival screening, the following morning the press seemed to turn against the whole enterprise, hurling question after question at Alan Parker about the excesses shown in the picture. At one point Alan was photographed yelling back defiantly at the marauding journalists, with David [Puttnam] caught in the background tugging away worriedly at his beard.<sup>36</sup>

Beaver explains the reaction to *Midnight Express* at Cannes by the fact that the festival 'had had a long-standing policy of not screening films that might offend the "political sensitivities" of a particular country' and according to many, Beaver notes, '*Midnight Express*, in its one-sided attack on the Turkish penal system, had done just that'.<sup>37</sup>

Following the Cannes screening, *Midnight Express* was reviewed mostly in French and British newspapers or periodicals. These European reviews suggest that the critics generally disliked and/or disapproved of *Midnight Express* especially in terms of the film-makers' handling of Hayes's story, which was, in the critics' terms 'racist', 'xenophobic' or 'prejudiced'. Bernard Bolan from *Cahiers du Cinéma* found the film's



representation of 'the Other' 'racist' and argued: 'These Turks are not Turks but the abstract and undifferentiated signs of the Other [inspiring] hatred'.<sup>38</sup> According to *Positif* critic Hubert Niogret, especially Hayes's courtroom speech, including the statement 'I hate your nation, I hate your people', one of the film-makers' fabrications, marked the moment when the film turned into 'the discourse of an unsupportable racism'.<sup>39</sup> Similarly, while Bruno Villien from *Cinématographe* associated it with 'anti-Turk racism',<sup>40</sup> Fabien Gastellier, in *Jeune Cinéma*, described the film as 'a product of manicheism and absolute fascism'.<sup>41</sup> *Midnight Express* was framed as a 'racist' film in such French newspapers as *Le Matin*, *Le Nouvel Observateur* and *Le Monde* as well.<sup>42</sup>

Philip Bergson from *Times Educational Supplement* was among the British critics underscoring *Midnight Express*'s 'racism'. He described the film as 'a supremely negative epic . . . spiced with an uncusomary dash of racism'.<sup>43</sup> Although he did not use the term 'racist' or 'racism', the British critic David Robinson from the *Times* described *Midnight Express* along similar lines. He identified 'nationalist hatred' to be the film's 'most unappealing aspect' and noted: 'The Turks are characterized by the hero [Hayes] as "a nation of pigs" and the film only supports the thesis'.<sup>44</sup> Robinson reiterated the same argument when he re-reviewed *Midnight Express* after the London opening (10 August 1978) and added a new term into the critical vocabulary about the film: 'xenophobia'. He wrote: 'Though the film is hardly likely to promote the Turkish tourist industry, it seems less dangerous to the Turks than to Anglo-Saxons, who will find their own worst and most fearful xenophobia reinforced'.<sup>45</sup> The film was also reviewed in *Variety* along similar lines. Remarking that 'acceptance of the film depends a lot on forgetting several things', A. D. Murphy described *Midnight Express* as a 'muddled and moralizing screenplay, which, in true Anglo-American fashion, wrings hands over alien cultures as though our civilization is absolutely perfect'.<sup>46</sup>

One affirmative review published before the film's American opening was written for the *Sunday Times* by an anonymous author. This review does not seem to be simply aimed at affirming *Midnight Express*, but more importantly at defending it against the French and British critics' accusations of racism:

"Midnight Express" is not, repeat not (as one French newspaper claimed) a fascist picture. It is not, as one British critic alleged at a seminar last week, a meretricious piece of work . . . In fact, as Parker himself hopes and believes, "Midnight Express" . . . is a film about injustice. What upset the French when it was shown at the Cannes Festival was a splenetic outburst by the prisoner facing a life sentence in which he describes his Turkish prosecutors and jailers as "pigs". Some of us, reflects Parker, might have used even harsher terms in the circumstances: "But he wasn't referring to the Turkish people as a whole, only to those responsible for their bloody awful legal system".<sup>47</sup>

The quotation above highlights the formation of the first controversy around *Midnight Express*, which has remained unresolved until the present: 'Is *Midnight Express* a racist film or a good-intentioned statement about injustice as a universal theme?'

Besides the controversy that followed the Cannes opening, the protests of the Turkish Government and of the Turkish communities in Europe contributed to the transformation of *Midnight Express* into a much larger event. Contrary to what Stone



and Parker believed, the film never has been simply a fiction or 'just a film' for its Turkish audiences. Shortly after the Cannes opening, the Turkish government banned *Midnight Express* in Turkey due to its 'anti-Turk rhetoric' and on 23 May the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs released, through its embassies worldwide, a protest statement asking other countries to deny exhibition rights to the film.<sup>48</sup> Parallel to the film's becoming a political event for Turkey in the international arena it became a news event in the domestic press. The film was framed in the Turkish press as 'insult' and political 'assault' against Turkey and Turks.<sup>49</sup> Despite the Turkish Government's pressures, *Midnight Express* was shown in such countries as France, Britain, Ireland, Germany, Holland, Denmark, Sweden and Finland, where it continuously met the protests of Turkish communities. As a result of the pressure from Turkish community, *Midnight Express* was removed from exhibition in three theatres in France,<sup>50</sup> whereas it was shown in Holland with some cuts. The *Washington Post* reported in August 1978:

Protests from Holland's 100,000-member Turkish community caused the distributors of the American movie *Midnight Express* to cut certain scenes from the film for Dutch release. They cut scenes in which the main character abuses Turkey and Turks in general, which Turkish organizations argued incite hatred and discrimination by portraying Turks as inferior.<sup>51</sup>

Hayes, Parker and Columbia publicist Bob Beerman joined some of the premieres in Europe to promote the film.<sup>52</sup> However, it seems that the film owed its popular attraction more to the controversy and protests than any direct publicity by the film-makers. Frank Beaver notes: 'Most likely because of continuing controversy and efforts to have the film banned, *Midnight Express* played to record attendance in Holland, England, France, and Finland before opening in the United States in mid-October 1978'.<sup>53</sup> Beaver's observation is supported by Guber's statement that 'someone did try to burn down a cinema in Holland where *Midnight Express* was about to play, and it garnered a lot of publicity'.<sup>54</sup> There would be similar protests even in later periods. In December 1978, an entertainment centre in Australia would be evacuated due to a bomb threat, which would be associated with the reaction of the Turkish community there to the screening of the film.<sup>55</sup>

It was not always the Turkish Government or Turkish communities that reacted negatively during the European screenings of *Midnight Express*. The British premiere of the film (10 August 1978) was launched as a contribution to the activities of the British division of the human rights organization Amnesty International. This organization, as *Variety* put it, 'was offered the premiere to raise funds for its work for prisoners.' *Variety* reported that although Amnesty International accepted the offer, the Executive Council subsequently 'overruled the British division's acceptance of the premiere proceeds because the film was felt, could offend Turkey (sic)' and passed a formal statement which read: 'To anyone who may have been hurt by the decision, we apologize without reserve'.<sup>56</sup>

*Variety* also reported in August 1978 that the Theatre and Film Control Board of Israel decided to ban the film on the grounds that it was 'slandorous to a friendly country (in this case Turkey).' Although the Chairman of the Control Board denied any official pressure on their decision, *Variety* suspected the influence of 'a circular letter sent by the Turkish Plenipotentiary in Israel to different personalities in the

media, including members of the Board', which claimed that 'the film distorts reality and maliciously presents the Turkish people in a bad light'.<sup>57</sup>

The media space granted to such events must have been as effective as the events themselves in contributing to the publicity for *Midnight Express*. For example, *Variety* reported in September 1978 that the Turkish Ambassador to Ireland wanted to prevent the screening of the film in Ireland by writing a letter to film critics and to the Minister for Foreign Affairs. The letter was published in Irish newspapers and quoted at length in *Variety*, together with the information that 'it is the first time an ambassadorial protest has been lodged in Ireland about a screening.' *Variety* also reported that Irish censor Dermont Breen 'reacted with surprise at the ambassador's comment on the film which he described as a "brilliant but shattering experience"'.<sup>58</sup>

It could be argued that by constructing an imaginary dialogue between contrasting responses, the press was also contributing to the formation of the main axes of an international debate that would continue until the present. The press also constructed a dialogue between institutions and film-makers. For example, three weeks after publishing a news story about the Israeli ban on *Midnight Express*, *Variety* quoted Parker's reflections on the ban. Stressing that the film 'is not anti-Turkish', Parker argued: 'It is a criticism of the penal system... and could have taken place in any number of countries. The film is basically about injustice'.<sup>59</sup>

The picture presented above suggests that by the time of its release in the United States in October 1978, *Midnight Express* had become a much larger event than the film alone would merit. It could be argued that, by postponing the film's American release to October, Guber was not only able to avoid, the summer competition from box-office hits such as *Grease* (Randal Kleiser, 1978) and *Jaws 2* (Jeannot Szwarc, 1978), but also to build controversy around *Midnight Express*, which would become an important element of publicity for the film's subsequent releases and part of its marketing potential.

### **The movie that 'everyone' is talking about: american publicity for *Midnight Express***

The two-page press advertisement for *Midnight Express*, which appeared in *Variety* a week after the Cannes screening, already bore the traces of a transformation in the film's publicity before its American release, namely the incorporation of the discursive terrain constituted by critics' comments into the film's promotion (Figure 1). The advertisement, which was also included in the press pack circulated to journalists, consisted exclusively of media spots. Under the heading of 'Cannes 1978, Acclaim Begins', the advertisement presented opinions of several media figures from England, France, Canada and the United States. These media spots were also recycled in the theatrical trailer, posters and press advertising for the film during its American release.

The change away from Hayes towards film critics in the publicity for *Midnight Express*, especially in the United States, was explicit in the theatrical trailer as well. It opened with two media spots superimposed on the image track followed by the statement, 'it's the movie they couldn't wait to talk about. The movie is *Midnight Express*.' The trailer clearly points to the addition of a new aspect to the film's

CANNES 1978, THE ACCLAIM BEGINS

# “...it’s impossible to imagine a more exciting film than *Midnight Express*...”

—Rona Barrett, ABC-TV

“As far as I am concerned it’s impossible to imagine a more exciting film than *MIDNIGHT EXPRESS*. Several times during the film’s swift one hour and 56 minutes, I found myself crying. Director Alan Parker handles the volatile material with impeccable skill, you are grasped right from the beginning and the suspense never lets up. Much of the film’s power also rests with its actors.

Brad Davis, as Billy Hayes, displays an unexpected depth and compassion. It’s the sort of performance from which stars are made. I am certain that it’s going to be one of the most talked about movies of the year, and an Oscar contender that stands a good chance of rivaling the cult status of “Cuckoo’s Nest” because in its own way it again deals with the fundamental battle of man against mindless authority.”

—Rona Barrett, ABC-TV

“Potentially the most explosive British film ever made. It is a brilliantly made stomach-turning, frighteningly true tale. The film makes a star of Brad Davis. After *MIDNIGHT EXPRESS*, I doubt whether that cozy, unprovocative entity known as the British cinema will ever be the same again.”—Margaret Huxman, LONDON DAILY MAIL

“It has all the ingredients for one to shiver with terror. The acting is excellent. Brad Davis is a perfect Billy Hayes. He sometimes reminds you of James Caan, but being less of a household name, he is more credible. He is surrounded by remarkable actors like John Hurt, Randy Quaid and Bo Hopkins. And you have Susan, Billy’s girl, who makes the escape possible and who is played by a young actress named Irene Miracle. You really have to see it spelled out before your eyes.”

—Robert Chazal, PARIS FRANCE-SOIR

“An impressively well made movie. It will be a rare audience that can sit through it without emotional outrage. With *MIDNIGHT EXPRESS* conceived with an emphatic physical realism rare in British cinema and with a profound and unexploited concern for human values rare in the Hollywood one, these movie makers leap into international prominence.”

—Alexander Walker, LONDON EVENING STANDARD

“A film that proclaims the resiliency of the human spirit, the power of the will to live. The performances shriek with authenticity and the shifting moods are conveyed with the precision and intensity that keeps the film consistently absorbing. There is a sense of honesty about the production, the burning desire to make a statement that lifts it beyond the class of mere entertainment.”

—Arthur Knight, HOLLYWOOD REPORTER

“The biggest bonus at this year’s Cannes Film Festival, is *MIDNIGHT EXPRESS*, an exquisite, emotional roller-coaster that emerges as a hymn to human survival. An artistic triumph of gut rendering tortured suspense and the stuff that nightmares—and Oscar dreams are made of.”

—George Anthony, TORONTO SUN

*Midnight Express*

Columbia Pictures Presents A Casablanca FilmWorks Production of An Alan Parker Film **MIDNIGHT EXPRESS**  
Executive Producer PETER GUBER Screenplay by OLIVER STONE Produced by ALAN MARSHALL and DAVID PUTTNAM Directed by ALAN PARKER  
Based on the true story of Billy Hayes from the book *MIDNIGHT EXPRESS* by BILLY HAYES with WILLIAM HOFFER



© 1978 Columbia Pictures Industries Inc.

FIGURE 1 Press advertisement for *Midnight Express*, *Variety*, 24 May 1978, pp. 10–11.

consumable identity. It indicates that the creation of the impression that *Midnight Express* was the most-talked about movie, or that ‘everybody’ was talking about it, became an important strategy in the construction of the ‘must-see’ appeal of the film.

Naturally, as a promotion strategy, the trailer, posters and the press advertisements for *Midnight Express* put into circulation during the film’s American release referred exclusively to those critics’ opinions that approved of the film in some way and, overall, served to ‘fragment’ and ‘pluralize’ the *Midnight Express* text. As Klinger notes, the fragmentation and pluralization of any film text during the process of promotion serve to ‘produce multiple avenues of access to the text that will make the film resonate as extensively as possible in the social sphere in order to maximize its audience’.<sup>60</sup> By means of critics’ opinions, the press advertisements for *Midnight Express* highlighted elements such as Parker’s ‘impeccable skill’ or ‘superb directing’; Brad Davis’s ‘powerful’ and ‘credible’ performance as well as his being ‘a strong bid for instant stardom’; the ‘masterful acting’ in general; the film’s being ‘the biggest bonus’ of the Cannes Film Festival, ‘up for Academy Awards’, and ‘beyond the class of mere entertainment’. Much more emphasis was given to the ‘emotional’ and ‘suspenseful’ story. In this respect, one of the spots even compared *Midnight Express* with James Bond movies stating that it was ‘filled with more honest suspense than any James Bond adventure.’ Similarly, the soundtrack was compared with the soundtrack of Hitchcock’s *Psycho* (1960). All these imply that, besides being a ‘true’ story, *Midnight Express* could be enjoyed as a Parker film (auteur discourse), a Brad Davis performance (star discourse), a festival film/‘serious’ entertainment (art discourse), a suspense film/thriller, and even as a love story (genre discourse), which could be

regarded as ‘multiple avenues of access’ to the film text opened by the press advertisements through the employment of various cinematic discourses. Moreover, the film could also benefit from the popularity of other texts of the era such as the James Bond series, *Psycho*, *East of Eden* (Elia Kazan, 1955), *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest* (Milos Forman, 1975), with which *Midnight Express* was compared by critics, as well as from the similarity some of them saw between Brad Davis and James Dean. However, between the lines, these advertisements convey more prominently the aim of creating a public impression that *Midnight Express* was a ‘must-see’ mainly because, as the form of the advertisements implied and the trailer announced, ‘everyone’ was talking about it.

### ‘The most important film of the decade’: a timely and socially relevant movie

As Table 1 shows, *Midnight Express*, from the beginning, became one of the 20 top-grossing films in the United States, despite the fact that it was released only in one city (New York) and at seven or eight showcase theatres. The film opened nationally on 27 October. Shown in 17 cities and 124 theatres, it became the box-office hit of the week with a weekly gross of \$1,300,711. *Midnight Express* remained one of the three top-grossing films for seven weeks, enjoying the first rank three consecutive weeks. Its hit status was broken with the release of *Superman* (Richard Donner) in mid-December.<sup>61</sup>

Although the box-office success of *Midnight Express* and its screen endurance can be explained by its being promoted everywhere as the ‘true’ story of Hayes, which was already in circulation by means of the book and media space it was granted,

**TABLE 1** US exhibition figures of *Midnight Express*.

Week ending	Rank	Cities	First-run theatres	Showcase theatres	Theatres (total)	Weekly grosses (\$)
October 11	17	1	–	7	7	200,000
October 18	14	1	–	8	8	180,000
October 25	13	1	–	7	7	160,000
November 1	1	17	20	104	124	1,300,711
November 8	2	19	18	114	132	1,272,351
November 15	3	20	26	54	80	912,901
November 22	2	20	20	122	142	982,265
November 29	1	19	17	110	127	993,743
December 6	1	21	21	113	134	746,543
December 13	1	20	18	112	130	590,763
December 20	4	21	20	89	109	388,855
January 3	16	7	4	50	54	207,955
January 10	16	8	4	54	58	218,368
January 17	21	7	3	28	31	107,382
January 24	35	10	8	9	17	53,405

Source: 50 Top-grossing Films, *Variety* (18 October 1978 to 31 January 1979).

and the sensation and controversy built around it, these factors might nevertheless have come to nothing had the subject matter of the film not been socially timely and relevant too. This was also a part of the publicity discourses on the film. Some of the press advertisements announced *Midnight Express* in big fonts even as 'the most important film of the decade', borrowing the words of *Village Voice* critic Tom Allen (Figure 2). An emphasis on the film's social relevancy was more obvious in a letter of thanks addressed to Columbia Pictures by Guber, which was published in *Variety* just before the nationwide opening of the film in the United States. The letter read: 'A movie based on the true story of one American boy is apparently affecting the lives of many thousands'.<sup>62</sup> *Midnight Express* was truly a socially relevant film for 1970s American culture, even if not 'the most important film of the decade.'

Like the book, the initial release of *Midnight Express* coincided with the American social debates on drugs, youth, counterculture and declining traditional values, including American ideology. Within this context, the film could be activated on a number of axes within the social and political discourses of the period due to its emphasis on drug smuggling and drug penalties, and, more importantly, their association with American youth. I would argue that, at the time of its release in the United States, *Midnight Express* became especially a part of the discourses on the social problem of youth and drugs. As Jerry Robinson's remark quoted below shows 'drug culture' was a significant element of counterculture and it was an important ingredient of the life of many Americans in the 1970s:

The cynicism of Americans about their leaders and institutions and the feeling of helplessness on larger issues turned into an obsessive self-regard, which made social critic Tom Wolfe characterize the period as the Me Decade. The need for a greater exploration of the inner space of the American psyche led to the growth of numerous movements such as est and Transcendental Meditation. The sixties were just a prelude to the drug culture of the seventies. Forty million Americans smoked marijuana, twenty million tried cocaine, and filled forty-four million prescriptions a year of valium, not to mention seconal, tuinal, dexedrine, and qualudes. The 1960s refrain, 'Turn on, tune in, drop out,' in the seventies, became 'Give me Librium or give me Meth'<sup>63</sup>.

A 1970 article in *Weekly Reader*, an American newspaper for children, reported that a 'New York City Health Officials Report' estimated 25,000 teen-age heroin addicts in that period. The article informed its readers about the Nixon Government's efforts and plans to deal with 'the growing abuse of drugs by school-age youth'. The article also mentioned making movies 'warning of drug dangers' and preventing the 'flow of drugs coming into [the United States] from Mexico and Turkey' among the plans of the American Government.<sup>64</sup> Although there is no information to claim that *Midnight Express* was a government-supported film, one cannot ignore that it matched perfectly the government objectives described in *Weekly Reader*. First, as a narrative set in Turkey, *Midnight Express* was a politically timely movie, in terms of US–Turkey relations regarding the issue of drugs.<sup>65</sup> The United States' drug war and Turkey's position were also referred to in some of the reviews of *Midnight Express* in the American press.<sup>66</sup> Secondly, and more importantly, the social and cultural context of the time suggests that the film, which offered a much more brutal and incredible



# "THE MOST IMPORTANT FILM OF THE DECADE"

Tom Allen—*Village Voice*



"IT IS SUPERBLY DIRECTED, MASTERFULLY ACTED BY A DEDICATED CAST, AND FILLED WITH MORE HONEST SUSPENSE THAN ANY JAMES BOND ADVENTURE."  
Daily News—Rex Reed

"IT'S IMPOSSIBLE TO IMAGINE A MORE EXCITING FILM THAN MIDNIGHT EXPRESS. I AM CERTAIN THAT IT'S GOING TO BE ONE OF THE MOST TALKED ABOUT MOVIES OF THE YEAR."  
ABC-TV—Rene Barret

"MIDNIGHT EXPRESS HAS KIND OF A WAILING, ARIID AUTHENTICITY AND ENORMOUS POWER. IT IS STRONG AND UNCOMPROMISING STUFF."  
L.A. Times—Charles Champlin

"THIS SUPERIOR FILM WILL BE UP FOR ACADEMY AWARDS. MIDNIGHT EXPRESS MIGHT JUST BE THE MOST IMPORTANT FILM I HAVE VIEWED THIS YEAR."  
Soho News—Bob Weiner

"BRAD DAVIS MAKES HIS FIRST FEATURE FILM A STRONG BID FOR INSTANT STARDOM."  
Playboy Magazine—Bruce Williamson

"THE BIGGEST BONUS AT THIS YEAR'S CANNES FILM FESTIVAL IS MIDNIGHT EXPRESS. AN EXQUISITE, EMOTIONAL ROLLER-COASTER THAT EMERGES AS A HYMN TO HUMAN SURVIVAL. AN ARTISTIC TRIUMPH OF GUT RENDERING TORTURED SUSPENSE AND THE STUFF THAT NIGHTMARES—AND OSCAR DREAMS ARE MADE OF."  
Toronto Sun—George Anthony

COLUMBIA PICTURES Presents A CASABLANCA FILMWORKS Production of  
An ALAN PARKER Film MIDNIGHT EXPRESS Executive Producer PETER GUBER Screenplay by OLIVER STONE  
Produced by ALAN MARSHALL and DAVID PUTTNAM Directed by ALAN PARKER Music Created by GIORGIO MORODER  
Based on the true story of Billy Hayes from the book *Midnight Express* by BILLY HAYES and WILLIAM HOFFER Read the FAWCETT PAPERBACK

FIGURE 2 Press advertisement for *Midnight Express*, *Village Voice*, 16 October 1978, p. 73.

portrayal of Hayes's incarceration in Turkey than the one in the book, might very well function like a cautionary tale of drug abuse and, especially, drug smuggling.

Susan Griffith's statement quoted below from a travel guide first published in 1979, just in the aftermath of the release of *Midnight Express*, provides an instance of

reception that justifies the cautionary value of the film. The guide is addressed to Western travellers to the East. Besides providing general information about various countries, the guide mentions drug-related laws and procedures for each country under the sub-heading 'Drugs'. This provides further insight in the popularity of using and smuggling drugs, not only among the Americans but Westerners in general in the 1970s. More importantly, the statement exemplifies the extent to which, within such a context, *Midnight Express* could function like a cautionary tale set in Turkey involving timely motifs such as travel, drugs and smuggling. Griffith writes: 'There is only one word of advice on the subject of drugs and smuggling in Turkey; DON'T. If you find yourself tempted, just go out and see the harrowing film *Midnight Express*'.<sup>67</sup>

This cautionary value attributed to *Midnight Express* is best affirmed by the awards given to the film, its executive producer Peter Guber, and Casablanca Records and FilmWorks by two law enforcement agencies in 1979. *Variety* reported that the International Conference of Police Association gave Guber 'a special merit award for bringing home the dangers of drug smuggling' and The International Narcotic Enforcement Officers Association awarded Guber and *Midnight Express* the organization's 1979 Award of Honor for 'offering an unusual opportunity to warn Americans of the dangers of breaking the laws of foreign nations'.<sup>68</sup> An article in the *Washington Post* reported the motivation behind the award as follows: 'The association representing some 200,000 officers worldwide, said the film "has reached millions of young Americans with a vital message concerning the international drug laws and is of substantial assistance in the war against drug abuse"'.<sup>69</sup> *Midnight Express* was appreciated as a cautionary tale warning young people against the terrible consequences of smuggling drugs by some of the American critics as well. Even *Christian Science Monitor* reviewer David Sterritt, who described the film as 'one of the most relentlessly grim movies in memory' and complained that the violent events made the viewer 'feel more exhausted than enlightened', argued: '*Midnight Express* cannot be ignored [because] it has a cautionary value—it is hard to imagine anyone contemplating the most minor or causal involvement with drug traffic after witnessing the awesome wages of Hayes's law-breaking'.<sup>70</sup> However, as has been stated, drugs were only a symbol for the much larger issue of counterculture within the context of the 1970s. Therefore, the implications of the film as well as its reception by American critics extend beyond the issue of drugs *per se*.

Peter Lev has argued that many American films of the 1970s expressed 'conflicting positions on the question of social change': 'Should American society move toward openness, diversity, and egalitarianism, welcoming such new developments as the counterculture and the anti-Vietnam War movement? Or should America change by refusing to change, by stressing paternalistic authority and traditional morality?'.<sup>71</sup> *Midnight Express* is not among the films covered in Lev's book, but the film might be confirming the latter, despite the fact that the film-makers had not meant it. It might be worth noting that *Midnight Express* became a box-office hit by pushing *Animal House* (John Landis, 1978) to the second rank. *Animal House* is a youth film about the rituals of college life and, as Peter Lev observes, 'in favor of sex, alcohol, marijuana, and rock and roll'.<sup>72</sup> While *Animal House* ends with the humiliation of those young Americans who struggle to maintain order based on the principles of their parents/professors, it could be argued that *Midnight Express* sends the same young Americans to a 'nightmare' through which they will reaffirm their



parent's values—like the real Hayes did according to the press stories published during the publication of his book. Indeed, the reception of *Midnight Express* by American film critics suggests that the film was mostly read as an affirmation of the American identity and ideology, especially in such a period, by projecting Turkey and Turks as an instance of the 'inferior' Other. Describing the film as a 'full-scale fantasy of drug culture' and 'the cautionary tale that parents have been waiting for' *New Yorker* critic Pauline Kael argued:

Here, at last, is the movie that puts Vietnam behind us. It has been a long time since middle-aged people could say to their kids, "You don't know how lucky you are to be Americans, safe and protected" . . . *Midnight Express* . . . is a there's-no-place-like-home story, of a very peculiar variety. Hysterically sensual on the surface but with basic honor-thy-parents-and-listen-to-them glop at the center, it manipulates cross-generationally <sup>73</sup>.

Gary Arnold, from the *Washington Post*, claimed: 'the story might also be interpreted as an ironic study of American cultural chauvinism during the period of the Vietnam War'.<sup>74</sup> Pointing to the depiction of Americans as 'essentially innocent and good-hearted', and 'the rest of the world' as 'irredeemably corrupt' in *Midnight Express*, Peter Biskind from *Cineaste* remarked:

Every Turk in the film is either a creep or a sadist, and when the put-upon hero, an All-American kid . . . delivers an impassioned harangue against all things Turkish (Turkey is "a nation of pigs"), we're supposed to applaud. Indeed, after two hours of beatings, knifings, and general mayhem inflicted on clean-cut Billy Hayes . . . by fat foreigners, the impulse to run to the nearest McDonalds is almost overwhelming.<sup>75</sup>

*Midnight Express* produced conflicting responses in the United States as well. While some appreciated the film as a story about injustice, most of the critics found it 'racist' or 'xenophobic' as well as 'manipulative' and 'exploitative'. However, be it affirmative or negative, the critical reception of the film in the United States suggests that to debate *Midnight Express* in the late 1970s was to debate 1970s America and this underscores one more time the film's social relevancy in that period.

### From the late 1970s to the present

On 14 December 1978, the *New York Times* critic Janet Maslin wondered why *Midnight Express*, a movie 'without stars or gimmicks or other obvious selling points', was 'among [the] season's most durable hits'.<sup>76</sup> 'Released in October 1978 [in the United States], *Midnight Express* was an immediate success', writes Riordan James. He notes: 'Since the film had not been a big-budget affair or heavily hyped before its release, it was viewed by the Hollywood establishment as a dark horse made good, a little film with a message that proved all over again that such films could still succeed on their own merit'.<sup>77</sup> *Midnight Express* was made at a cost of \$2.4 million<sup>78</sup> and grossed \$10 million in the United States by 25 April 1979.<sup>79</sup> Neither the film-makers nor

Brad Davis, as the leading actor of the film, was well known to the public at that time. Nevertheless, it is the contention of this article that although it was not produced and marketed like a blockbuster, contrary to the impressions of the critics above, the box-office success of *Midnight Express* and its screen endurance were not accidental. Having invested in the celebrity of Hayes and his bestseller, and promoted through a wise publicity and marketing strategy carrying the film to 'event' status, the timeliness of the 'true' story of an American college student imprisoned in a foreign land on charges of drug smuggling not only made it a highly socially relevant and so appealing film for 1970s American society but also opened the way to its becoming, in Susan Bluestein Davis's words, 'the cinematic touchstone for a generation'.<sup>80</sup>

On 21 September 1980, Americans watching the television networks CBS and NBC after 10 p.m. were witnessing a presidential debate between John B. Anderson and Ronald Reagan at the Baltimore Convention Center, but those following ABC were watching *Midnight Express*. The event even became a joke between President Carter and journalists the next day. When a reporter asked Carter his opinion about the Baltimore debate, Carter replied: 'How do you know I didn't watch *Midnight Express*?'<sup>81</sup> It is not possible to know exactly how much ABC's broadcast of *Midnight Express* on the night of the Baltimore debate added to the popularity of the film and to its consolidation in the social memory of Americans. However, one can, at least, say that when ABC purchased distribution rights for the film from Columbia Pictures in 1980, it actually marked the beginning of a new period in the screen life of *Midnight Express*. From now on, the film would be shown on television networks repeatedly, especially in North America and Britain, and, thereby, would be recycled for new generations.

For Turkish audiences living abroad, television broadcasts of *Midnight Express* were no less problematic than its initial release in movie theatres. Several showings became a little *Midnight Express* event, in that wherever the film was broadcast protests from Turkish communities followed.<sup>82</sup> The Turkish ban on *Midnight Express* ended when the film was aired on Turkish television without cuts on 6 April 1993 on the private channel HBB in prime time. The Turkish press welcomed HBB's broadcast on the grounds that the Turkish public would 'finally' be able to see that 'controversial' film about which they knew nothing apart from its title'.<sup>83</sup>

There is no information about ratings the film received, but it was reported that HBB made a revenue of 3.5 billion Turkish Liras (\$368,000)<sup>84</sup> out of 60 commercials aired during the broadcast of the film.<sup>85</sup> It was also reported that during the broadcast the telephones lines at HBB were jammed due to numerous calls from audience members either claiming that *Midnight Express* was 'unreal, prejudiced, and exaggerated' or arguing that it 'reflected only a very slight portion of the realities in Turkish prisons'.<sup>86</sup> The film was framed as 'prejudiced, exaggerated, and fanatic' negative propaganda against the Turks, as a film 'full of insults to Turkish society' in the Turkish press as well.<sup>87</sup> Even *Cumhuriyet* (*Republic*), a paper known for its leftist stand, argued: 'it is not possible to deny the prisons where thousands of political prisoners were kept and tortured before and after 1980', [but] 'one should not ignore the fact that, beyond being a critique of torture, the film [*Midnight Express*] has the purpose of an international assault on Turkey.' Moreover, according to *Cumhuriyet*, *Midnight Express* was not simply a film that 'maligned' Turks, but, more importantly, it was 'racist'.<sup>88</sup> In a similar manner, Doğan Heper from *Milliyet* (*Nationality*), a liberal

daily, claimed that, *Midnight Express* might be 'the only film which targeted and despised a whole nation.' Consequently, Heper described the film as a 'nasty conspiracy aimed at Turkey' and as 'a product of the Crusader's mentality'.<sup>89</sup> Some newspapers voiced also the popular rumour that *Midnight Express* was supported by some foreign sources antagonistic to Turkey, most notably the Greek and Armenian lobbies abroad.<sup>90</sup> In addition to the existence of the Greek-Armenian names in the cast, the Armenian dialect observed in the Turkish spoken by some of the Turkish characters in the film appear to be the main sources of this rumour. Although some contemporary facts suggest that *Midnight Express* is actually important in some Armenian circles even today,<sup>91</sup> some Turkish people's belief in a Greek-Armenian conspiracy behind the film seems to be mainly a reflection of the historical mutual distrust between Turkey and Greece, the roots of which date back to the Ottoman era and early Turkish republic.<sup>92</sup>

*Midnight Express* also became the subject of a few scholarly articles by Turkish authors in the 1990s. According to Mehmet Basutcu, who considers *Midnight Express* as the film that transformed 'dreams' of and 'enchantments' with Istanbul, Turkey, or the East, reflected in literature, into 'the stuff of nightmares', the film 'has imposed a negative and injurious idea of Turkey on the minds of people who don't even know where the country is!'<sup>93</sup> Similarly, Haluk Şahin states that a Turk or a person from Turkey has always been regarded as someone from 'the land of *Midnight Express*' by Westerners, especially Americans, and that this has had very bad effects on Turkey over the past 20 years. Şahin refers to *Midnight Express* as a 'cursed Hollywood passport... branded upon... all citizens of Turkey' and he writes:

Turkey is still the land of *Midnight Express* for many. For human rights groups, journalists, intellectuals and others still come to Turkey with preconceived images branded in their minds by this film. And perhaps so do the officials of the European Union who refuse to admit Turkey... *Midnight Express* is but one case. Turkey may have the strongest army in the Middle East, but it has been proven powerless against a fictive attack far costlier than a bombing. And, 20 years later, the bombs are still falling!<sup>94</sup>

The Turkish sensitivity to the assumed 'power' of *Midnight Express*, to its 'harmful' effects on the West's perception of Turkey, has never disappeared. As a country targeting full membership in the EU and trying to improve its image by making the necessary adjustments, Turkey stayed alert to *Midnight Express* throughout the 1990s.<sup>95</sup> Moreover, this sensitivity has taken the form of a '*Midnight Express* syndrome', which has been observed most recently in some of the Turkish reactions to Atom Egoyan's 2002 film *Ararat*. *Ararat*, which deals with the 1915 deportation of Armenians from Van by the Ottoman forces, has been criticized and protested by some circles in Turkey on the grounds that it would become a 'new *Midnight Express*'.<sup>96</sup> One observes that parallel to the growth of the desire of Turkey to connect herself to the West, especially to become a member of the European Union, *Midnight Express* has been received as a much more powerful and dangerous portrayal of the country and its people. While some kind of *Midnight Express*-related imagery, imagination and projections continue to be recycled or (re)produced in the Western context, to Turkey '*Midnight Express*' has become an ambiguous expression standing for all the

domestic and foreign obstacles, both real and imagined, to its self-realization as well as to its connection to the West.

Today, hundreds of viewer comments posted to such web sites as the Internet Movie Database, Amazon and Yahoo from many different parts of the world, including Turkey, North America and Europe show not only that the film maintains its popularity but also the *Midnight Express* controversy preserves its heat. I would argue that, when considered within the social context of its production, *Midnight Express* underscores more Americans' inner social conflicts in a particular period than being a political assault on Turkey or Turks, nor an innocent story about injustice in which Turks play the major villains. The critical reception of the film at the time of its initial release also supports my argument. However, despite the persistence of some themes from the late 1970s, there has been an important shift in the international reception of *Midnight Express* during the period after 1980, as a result of the changes in the discursive contexts in which the film has been circulating. One does not observe any particular debate on Turkish prisons or human rights violations in Turkey in the initial reception of the film by Western critics, whereas these issues appear to be important constituents of a particular reception of the film in the West in the present. This shift appears to be the outcome of the fact that several political events and their media representations have constituted a particular discourse on human rights violations in Turkey after 1980 military coup, and especially throughout the 1990s, which has become a part of the discursive repertoires of Western audiences. In this respect, today *Midnight Express* might function as a more legitimate political statement about Turkey than it had been in the 1970s, and this is the subject for my future research.

## Acknowledgements

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## Notes

- 1 Best Screenplay Based on Material from Another Medium (Oliver Stone), and Best Original Score (Giorgio Moroder).
- 2 Best Drama Picture, Best Supporting Actor (John Hurt), Best Film Debut—Male (Brad Davis), Best Film Debut—Female (Irene Miracle), Best Screenplay (Oliver Stone), Best Original Score (Giorgio Moroder).
- 3 Parker began his media career in 1968 as a director of television commercials. By the end of 1975, he had made only a 50-minute fictional film (*No Hard Feelings*, 1973) and a full-length film (*The Evacuees*, 1975) both of which were for television. It was *Bugsy Malone* (1976), 'a pastiche gangster musical with a cast composed entirely of children', that established Parker as a feature film director. *Midnight Express* was his second feature. For more information, see John Wakeman (ed.) *World Film Directors Vol. 2* (New York, 1988), Alan Parker, pp. 739–743.
- 4 Samantha Miller and Lorenzo Benet, Escape Artist, *People*, 52(21) (1999), p. 108.
- 5 Adam Dawtrey, Quinta backs 'Midnight' sequel, *Variety*, 5 May 2000.

- 6 See, for example, John McKay, Heche, Vaughn Pair Memorably in Tale of Drugs, Love and Morality, *Hamilton Spectator*, 22 January 1999, p. E:2 and Jay Carr, *Return to Paradise* Lost, Despite Some Fine Acting, *Boston Globe*, 14 August 1998, p. C:4.
- 7 See, for example, Malcolm Johnson, The Heroin Unchic of *Brokedown Palace*, *Hartford Courant*, 13 August 1999, p. F:4 and Philip Kemp, *Brokedown Palace*, *Sight and Sound*, 9(12) (1999), p. 38.
- 8 A major proof of this is that one often meets, although corrective in approach, references to this film in travel guides, travel memories, or tourism articles about Turkey. They all communicate the message that Turkey is not *Midnight Express*. For example, *The Alternative Travel Directory: The Complete Guide to Travel, Study and Living Overseas* reads: 'Toss *Midnight Express* out of the window . . . The Turks are friendly, generous, kind, hospitable and outgoing.' Quoted in Lucy Izon, Thailand Tops with Student Travel Guide, *Toronto Star*, 3 April 1999, p. K:7. See also Mary Lee Settle, *Turkish Reflections: A Biography of a Place* (New York, 1991), p. xii and Rick Steves, *Europe Through the Back Door: The Travel Skills Handbook for Independent Travelers* (Berkeley, 2002), p. 447.
- 9 For example, when the Canadian journalist Ken Hechtman returned home to Montreal after spending a week in jail as a prisoner of the Taliban in 2001, he stated that, as CBC-TV reported, 'he holds no grudge against his captors. He even sympathizes with them.' Hechtman said: 'Absolutely they're [Taliban] being demonized. People are expecting me to come out and tell these *Midnight Express* type horror stories and I don't have any.' Alison Smith, CBC-TV broadcast, 2 December 2001.
- 10 Quoted in Barbara Klinger, Digressions at the cinema: reception and mass culture, *Cinema Journal*, 28(4) (1989), p. 3.
- 11 *Ibid.*, 5–9.
- 12 Lawrence Van Gelder, The Plaudits Continue, *New York Times*, 3 October 1976, p. 21:2.
- 13 Miller and Benet, *Escape Artist*, p. 108.
- 14 Clark Taylor, Making '*Midnight Express*': The Long and Dark Road, *Los Angeles Times*, 22 October 1978, pp. CAL:6–7.
- 15 Pranay Gupte, The Movie Will Star, *New York Times*, 6 June 1976, p. 21:1.
- 16 Alvin Klein, I Can Play a Prisoner, Believe Me, *New York Times*, 27 November 1983, p. 11LI:31.
- 17 Gupte, The Movie Will Star, p. 21:6.
- 18 Lawrence Van Gelder, After a Nightmare, Awakened Interests, *New York Times*, 24 April 1977, p. 21:2.
- 19 Chrissie Hynde, On Kent State, in Ashley Kahn, Holly George-Warren & Shawn Dahl (eds) *Rolling Stone: The Seventies* (New York, 1998), p. 22.
- 20 Gelder, After a Nightmare . . . , p. 21:2.
- 21 Leopold Tyrmand, Toying with the Cultural Messages, *National Reviews*, 32(18) (1980), p. 1083.
- 22 For a discussion of the term 'exploitation' in the film industry and critical discourse, see Thomas Doherty, *Teenagers and Teenpics: The Juvenilization of American Movies in the 1950s* (London, 1988), pp. 3–7.
- 23 Quoted in Anthony Holden, *Behind The Oscar: The Secret History of the Academy Awards* (Toronto, 1993), p. 77.

- 24 Riordan James, *Stone: The Controversies, Excesses, and Exploits of a Radical Filmmaker* (New York, 1965), p. 96.
- 25 Walter La Feber, Salvador, in Robert Brent Toplin (ed.) *Oliver Stone's USA: Film, History, and Controversy* (Kansas, 2000), p. 93.
- 26 Frank Beaver, *Oliver Stone: Wakeup Cinema* (New York, 1994), p. 35.
- 27 Neal Nordlinger, The making of *Midnight Express*, *Filmmakers Monthly*, 12 (1978), p. 20.
- 28 It was reported that the audience in the theatre cheered when Hayes bit out Rifki's tongue. See, for example, Andrew Yule, *Fast Fade: David Puttnam, Columbia Pictures, and the Battle for Hollywood* (New York, 1989), p. 80.
- 29 In Andrew Horton, Britain's angry young man in Hollywood: an interview with Alan Parker, *Cineaste*, 15(2) (1986), pp. 31–32.
- 30 Quoted in Nancy Griffin and Kim Masters, *Hit and Run: How Jon Peters and Peter Guber Took Sony For a Ride in Hollywood* (New York, 1996), p. 94.
- 31 *Ibid.*, p. 95.
- 32 '78: *Midnight Express*, *Films Illustrated*, 7 (1978), p. 185.
- 33 *Ibid.*
- 34 Quoted in Steve Umberger, Conscientious exception, *Humanist* 39 (1979), 66.
- 35 James, *Stone: The Controversies . . .*, p. 103.
- 36 Yule, *Fast Fade . . .*, p. 79.
- 37 Beaver, *Oliver Stone . . .*, p. 32.
- 38 Bernard Boland, Cannes 78. 23 Films Vus A. C.: *Midnight Express*, *Cahiers du Cinéma*, 290–291 (1978), p. 29. All translations from French are mine.
- 39 Hubert Niogret, *Midnight Express*, *Positif*, 208–209 (1978), p. 92.
- 40 Bruno Villien, *Midnight Express*, *Cinématographe*, 40 (1978), p. 79.
- 41 Fabien Gastellier, *Midnight Express*, *Jeune Cinéma*, 113 (1978), p. 42.
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