POSTCARD FROM ISTANBUL: DIGITAL RECONSTRUCTION OF THE CITY AS MEMORY IN TASOS BOULMETIS'S *POLÍTIKI KOUZÍNA / A TOUCH OF SPICE / BAHARATIN TADI*

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Abstract

Reconstructing space with the use of computer generated imagery (CGI) is commonly used in moviemaking to enhance the depicted pro-filmic reality, creating virtual spaces in which layers of the narrative that are more difficult to represent via realistic mise-en-scéne, such as emotional conditions, can become visually explicit. In the 2003 film *Polítiki Kouzína / A Touch of Spice / Baharatin Tadi*, the Istanbul-born Greek filmmaker Tasos Boulmetis digitally combines heterogeneous elements to reconstruct a virtual experience of his own sense and memory of Istanbul: the urban landscape in the film is a hybrid of on-location scenes of the modern city, CGI and enhanced coloring, digitally fused into a mural of historical and personal memories. By deliberately conveying a strong emotional tone to the audience, the film equates the notion of place with the experience one has of it: as the memory of mid-Twentieth century Istanbul is digitally re-com-

posed, the city dissolves under the pressure of its emotionally charged reflection, and the general concept of "location" is redefined through individual perception. Digital technology is used not simply to bring to life a past urban setting, but becomes a tool for affect, thus revealing invisible layers of the filmic narrative.

Keywords: film, special effects, narrative, visual space, cinema, digital

Introduction

After the sweeping effects of digital technology applications on cinema, the visual construction of space (especially in relation to the connection between characters and setting) has been a controversial subject. The technologies used to create locations, on the one hand, make more extensive use of digital graphics both to impress and affect audiences with the life-like quality of the virtual spaces, now easily recreated with computer generated imagery (CGI); but on the other, when the distinction between shooting on-location and pure CGI is blurred, various aesthetic, narrative and even ontological issues arise. Tasos Boulmetis's *Polítiki Kouzína*[1] (2003) is an example of such a movie, as it uses digital manipulation to establish the strong bond between man and city. This bond is presented through the childhood memories of the main character Fanis (Georges Corraface)[2], deported as a child with his family from Istanbul in the 1960s. Thirty years later he is a successful scientist in Athens, burdened with nostalgia and regret. In a game of flashbacks that continuously blend present and past, the viewers share Fanis's memories and perceptions, filtered through the heavily emotional recollection of family feasts and enhanced senses. The city of Istanbul, both of Fanis's present time and of the 1960s, is deliberately presented like an old postcard: pastel colors and sepia tones, in addition to digital compositing of live action through CGI, are employed to evoke a nostalgic rendering of the city which relies heavily on the visual for meaning. Istanbul in *Polítiki Kouzína* transcends the literal and the geographical; in order to be conveyed more as a carrier of memory and emotion than an actual place, the city becomes dematerialized, a virtual metropolis reworked with CGI so that both compositing and color manipulation transform its actual spatiotemporal aspects for the sake of nostalgia and memory, at the inten-

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[1] The movie was also marketed outside Greece under the Turkish title *Baharatin Tadi* and the international title *A Touch of Spice*.

[2] The character of Fanis is played by Georges Corraface (adult), Odysseas Papaspiliopoulos (18 years old) and Markos Osse (8 years old).

tional expense of a completely accurate historical or visual representation of the real city. Stretching over a turbulent past and a promising future, this kind of representation of the city becomes the perfect setting for narrating lives in limbo; it represents all things stuck "in-between" the old and the new or the past and the present, and eventually becomes the ideal setting for both conflicts and their resolutions.

This mixture of elements lies at the core of the content as well as the technical aspect of the movie. By following Fanis's story the viewer is introduced to an image of Istanbul that is inextricably bound with the lives of its inhabitants. Fanis is portrayed as a man unable to get over or even cope with the emotional void left inside him after his family is deported from the country and resettles in Athens, trying to adapt to conditions vastly different than those they were accustomed to in Istanbul. On the level of character development, these traumatizing events lead the main character to develop into a creative, emotional and multifaceted personality that matches the essentially heterogeneous nature of his beloved city. In addition to this, the concept of fusion is also reflected in the structure of the movie itself; just like cooking, a major theme in the movie, politics and astrophysics are interrelated in the story as the background to all of Fanis's memories. Real actors and settings are mixed with CGI as a commentary on the effects of blending and pastiche, stressing the effect of meanings deriving from thoughtfully assembled narrative elements and technical bric-a-brac.

This multi-leveled visual game of "cooking", in the wider sense of mixing things together, is also reflected in the wordplay implied in the Greek movie title, *Πολίτικη Κουζίνα*. The movie poster features the first word of the title in uppercase letters (*ΠΟΛΙΤΙΚΗ Κουζίνα*), thus intentionally concealing the stress between either the second or the last syllable, and causing significant ambiguity in the way this word is read.[3] This ambiguity acquires a clear dual denotation within the context of the movie: on one hand, *Πολίτικη Κουζίνα* means "Istanbul Cuisine", a reference to the wealth of Istanbul culinary tradition and appreciation of the elaborate food on the family dinner table, which is an important social ritual forming the axis around which the entire familial structure of the Greek community of Istanbul revolves. When the stress is on the last syllable on the other hand, *Πολιτική Κουζίνα*, it becomes a figurative translation and metaphor for "political give-and-take", a Greek turn of phrase and, in the context of the storyline, refers to the political turmoil of the time during the deporta-

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[3] The poster retains this ambiguity although the movie was marketed using the first alternative for the title, i.e. Polítiki instead of Politikí.

tion of Fanis's family. On the etymological level, the root of both Πολίτικη and Πολιτική remains the word "πόλις", the archetypal Platonic concept combining city, state and community, denoting the link that connects all aspects of human life with one's communal environment. The city in this sense becomes the stage or setting upon which modern man performs the drama of his existence; as such, enhancing it visually with the use of CGI can indeed accentuate the visual and emotional impact of that drama.

Coloring Memory

In *Polítiki Kouzína,* one of the main agents underlining this visual, existential continuity between man and urban landscape is the way in which the color palette is manipulated in post-production. In order to communicate Fanis's nostalgia and emotional void, Boulmetis seems to have considered the Greek audience's collective memory, a significant part of which comes from old refugee families as a result of several military conflicts Greece was involved in especially during the 20th century. That collective memory has infused Greek culture with the strong feeling of the abandoned homes. The visual coherence of coloring in the movie, in combination with the emotional associations of the specific colors selected, creates a strong aesthetic impact, which is sanctioned within moviemaking with the goal of establishing or supporting the meanings moviemakers wish to communicate.[4]

The use of color to establish additional layers of meaning is both common in the practice of moviemaking as well as a recurring issue in cinema theory. With regard to the frequency or willingness to use digital technology in post-production for chromatic alterations, Richard Misek observes that it is commonplace practice nowadays, ranging anywhere between a subtle color grading to a complete re-working of the entire color palette, and applied to almost everything available in the media (169). The obvious reason is that the features of color, such as tone, hue, intensity, etc. are parameters associated with the handling of light, which has always been an intrinsic feature of cinematographic expression. Brian Price comments that moviemakers have long realized the importance of color in conveying meaning: far beyond being an "incidental characteristic of film stock", color selection is a very careful process that is expected to affect the experience of spectators by establishing "meaning, mood, sensation, or perceptual cues"

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[4] In contemporary cinema, John Belton discusses the "Digital Intermediate", i.e. the stage in postproduction that begins when the original film material starts undergoing digitization and ends after the new, digitally processed files are transferred back to film (58) and locates a significant portion of the creation of meaning in a movie by moviemakers in the process that a movie goes through in that stage (59).

(2).[5] William Johnson also acknowledges that specific use of color in visual arts helps elicit emotional responses, due to the associations that the spectators make between certain colors and specific emotional conditions (6); in fact, he comments on the ways in which movie-wide chromatic patterns, like e.g. a specific hue or palette, help the story acquire a visual consistency and aesthetic unity (17), which is the case with *Polítiki Kouzína* as well. Finally, John Belton uses the examples of movies like Gary Ross's *Pleasantville* (1998) and Frank Miller & Robert Rodriguez's *Sin City* (2005) to describe the way the application of a specific color scheme in a movie anchors each color to a specific matrix of meanings that subtly blends with the overall narrative (62–63). In this sense, color becomes a subtle, powerful meaning carrier; regardless of whether the action takes place in a real or a CGI set, color becomes a kind of second-order, virtual background that provides additional layers of meaning that operate parallel to the literal ones and are associated with the internal, emotional and non-verbalized state of the characters.

Most of that non-verbal meaning in *Polítiki Kouzína* relies on selecting color schemes traditionally associated with memory, longing, and the pain of nostalgia. This had to be accomplished in a way that would not only make sense in the fictional microcosm of Fanis's family story, but would enable spectators to forge associations with their own stories as well. Since the associational meaning and significance of specific colors are culturally and ideologically-bound, thus expected to be different across various traditions and geographical areas of the world, according to Philip Cowan (143), the use of color in *Polítiki Kouzína* should also be traced back to the cultural and historical specifics of the region. The entire movie has been digitally processed to obtain a faded pastel tone, making it resemble the old hand-tinted postcards from Asia Minor, whose old-style aesthetics and patina now carry the melancholia of "leaving home" that Boulmetis wishes to make resonant throughout the narrative. This color manipulation directly sets the emotional tone for an audience that actually retains such mementos. The movie respectfully capitalizes on the fact that objects like these carry their own history in Greek tradition, being vital components in the micronarrative of origins and heritage that families cherish.

Digital post-production colorization cleverly extends this "old-postcard" color effect, from the use of actual postcards as props in the story, to

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[5] Price notes that, despite this conscious and meticulous attention to color by moviemakers, the field of film studies has actually paid little attention to the ways color is used in movies (2).

the old-looking texture of the entire movie. This artificially created texture ensures strong associations of memories with the present time, as if it is a reminiscence of a distant past brought to life in the present time. When Vassilis (Tassos Bandis), Fanis's grandfather, teaches him and his friend Saime (Gözde Akyildiz)[6] geography with spice-scented postcards of Greek landscapes, in a scene where the movie subtly reproduces even the yellowish stain that time leaves on paper, everything is contextualized, from the colors to the screened objects and the characters, in a unified representation of past-ness or remembrance blended with the intangibility of space. In Vassilis's lesson, a place can be experienced even without actually being there; in the same way that Fanis and Saime experience distant places only with vision and smell, spectators are seamlessly transferred into a heavily emotional long shot of the two children near a lighthouse in the Bosporus, which features the trademark CGI-enhanced scene of a bright red umbrella being carried away by the wind over the sea. This example perfectly exemplifies the capacity of digital colorization to reaffirm and transfer fundamental oppositions (such as those between past and present, or waking and dreaming) to the visual plane that Misek asserts in his commentary of the potentials of digital film coloring (177). Facilitating the interaction between color and context – which are, for Beth Tauke, "reciprocal coordinates" that "symbiotically fade in and out of each other" (28) – digital coloring eventually bridges not only present and past for the characters, but places the audience on this bridge as well.

Enhancing the impact of physical objects without possessing any tangibility of its own, color is a powerful catalyst for meaning because, according to Tauke, it connects to other sensory associations while actually remaining inarticulate (27). Fanis comes to know the world through such an overwhelming process of associations that it is permanently imprinted in his unconscious; colors, smells and language, like his grandfather's spice mixes, are bound with the attic of the spice store, forever tangled with the image of Istanbul he puts together in his imagination. This spiritual rather than intellectual way of knowing the world around him establishes an urban universe, within the fictional world of the narrative, that exists only in his mind. In addition, it also demonstrates the spatial and temporal displacement Istanbul undergoes in the movie for the sake of representation, and that the audience comes to share both with the main character and

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[6] Gözde Akyildiz plays the 5-year-old character. The adult Saime is played later in the movie by Basak Köklükaya.

with each other through the common experience of movie-watching and the power of collective memory.

Although hardly a novelty in cinema as a whole, in the digital era color reveals its true potential as an important sub-narrative tool. A striking example in *Polítiki Kouzína* is the scene in which various CGI images and scenes from the city are linearly composed and chromatically unified in a simulated panning shot that represents an artificial panorama of scenes from life in Istanbul of the late 1950s. The scene is successfully composed, not only because it conveys a large amount of visual information in a very compact yet coherent way, but also because it succeeds in representing the way a succession of memories provides a seamless transition from the present to the past. As grown-up Fanis in present-day Athens hears of his grandfather's sudden illness (his grandfather, who was not deported but remained in Istanbul by his own choice), Fanis's mind is flooded by a sudden recollection of the city. He tries unconsciously, through an overwhelming emergence of tangled memories, to recompose the image of Istanbul from the bits and pieces he remembers from childhood. Vassilis embodies the entire array of Istanbul memories that Fanis retains, as all his childhood experiences of the city revolve around the image of his grandfather. As such, Vassilis stands at the very center of the emotional link between Fanis and Istanbul; when that link is broken with his death, the city is reaffirmed for Fanis, and for the audience in the process, as nothing more than it already was: a part of his memories, which is more important that the actual place.

The chromatic patterns used in the movie, particularly in the artificial panning shots, stress this semantic displacement of the city as a site which carries personal, individual signification. In that sense, the digitally composed virtual panning shot does not aim to realistically show what Istanbul was like fifty years ago, but to illustrate how the city is reconstructed as memory inside Fanis's mind through a series of mental associations. The actual Istanbul dematerializes under the pressure of the enchanting mural with which it is replaced on screen. Blending time and space, CGI aids this deliberate dematerialization, serving a different representational intention in moviemaking with regard to aspects of rendering history on screen; it is an example of CGI not serving a probably futile pursuit of presumed historical or spatiotemporal accuracy, but becoming a version of what Louise Krasniewicz sees as the "visual demonstration of the boundary fluctuations that humans and their worlds are experiencing" (qtd. in Burgoyne 228). Mediating all historical experience through Fanis's subjective experiences, the movie finds its place in the branch of digital cinematic historicity that favors a more personal, rather than objective, authenticity.

On similar grounds, Robert Burgoyne discusses this kind of CGI which establishes a different kind of authenticity in its depiction of the past, one that subordinates "fidelity to the record" to "meaningfulness, understood in terms of emotional and affective truth". This kind of historical cinematic consumption by spectators, Burgoyne continues, is established on the effect of memory and, similar to the latter, is associated with the physicality of the human body; thus it directly targets a more affective experience, i.e. one that simulates a more personal contact with the past that is being screened (223). This kind of experience has an impact that exceeds an accurate but emotionally flat visual historical representation. Digital technology in *Polítiki Kouzína* on one hand enables this multi-layered experience of cinematic historicity by facilitating the association of multiple stimuli with one another; and, in the same context of Burgoyne's argument on other digitized historically-based narratives (224–225), it immerses the audience, through characters' viewpoints, into an experience of history that, though completely artificial, becomes an unlived collective memory with an impact as realistic as any other memory. The CGI in *Polítiki Kouzína* is deliberately and obviously oriented toward this more personal kind of authenticity, one that uses the power of memory as emotional leverage in the response it elicits from the audience. The digital manipulation of city representation is therefore the result of luring spectators into emotional attachment to the content, a moviemaking technique that, at least in the case of this particular movie, is both intended and, in the context of Burgoyne's argument, representationally legitimate.

On Objections to Realism

Inevitably, digital intervention in sensitive areas like representation of the past and authenticity of memory has been accused of rupturing the ontological link between image and its referent, which is the cornerstone of what Bazin understood as the naturally "ethical and moral dimension" that derives from the photographic nature of film (Burgoyne 220–221). Kayley Vernallis, for example, identifies the "referential function" of color in photographs as the source of their meaning, thereby claiming that the "faded photograph lies", because its original referential meaning has been compromised (462) and its aesthetic value has been reduced (467). For Vernallis, more than a simple alteration, fading inevitably entails a significant loss of meaning as it undermines the expectations that we have from color photographs to "mirror the world" (463–464). Under this scope, it is normal for Vernallis to view digital manipulation of images as a process which raises by default concerns about loss of originality (473). If one follows Vernallis's

line of thought, the use of digital technology in general, let alone to artificially produce a patina of fading that alters the original color, would indeed cause a severe aesthetic and semantic degradation to the image that should be met with skepticism. Nevertheless, in an argument such as this, in which authenticity is placed precariously close to a sense of accuracy, the CGI in movies like *Polítiki Kouzína* would easily be rendered as "inauthentic"; this observation, however, suffers greatly from the frailty of the concept of authenticity itself.

Arguments like Vernallis's assume the common but recently contested notion of the photographic (and thus also the cinematic) apparatus as a mechanical aid to human vision, an idea similar to aspects of Kendal Walton's concept of transparency, but should remain flexible and adaptable in cases where digital graphics are used to enhance layers of authenticity that supersede the strict tangibility of things, as is the case in *Polítiki Kouzína*. If anything, the purposeful manipulation of color and spatiotemporal parameters not only crafted with a specific narrative line in mind, but aiming at finding common ground between that narrative and a collective sense of historical reality, should be seen as a realistic technique in its own right. For example, Lev Manovich, commenting on William Mitchel's argument on the obvious technical crossover between painting and digital graphics, illustrates that CGI manipulation repositions cinema somewhere between painting and photography because of the practical similarities that exist between computational and painting tools (304).[7] Instead of this duality being a problem linked to issues of ontology and a proprietarily photographic sense of veracity, movies like *Polítiki Kouzína* demonstrate the ways in which CGI manipulation reflect experiential realities that stretch even further: the unprecedented financial success of the movie proves that the audience recognized a kind of reality that is infused with elements not limited to the tangible or the haptic. The manipulation of color in *Polítiki Kouzína*, instead of being a loss or a risk, elicits an emotive parameter that is an integral and indispensable part of the specific kind of representation intended in the movie, lying between the personal and the historical.

Color alteration should therefore not be charged with breaking the indexical relation between the original and its image, because, as Johnson rightly notes, colors in a movie are actually never identical to the original in

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[7] Misek also comments on the frequent metaphor between painting and digital colorization, starting from cinematographer Bruno Delbonnel's opinion and further extending the comparison between the two (169–170). Misek provides a number of examples from popular cinematic texts that relate to the various ways in which colorization has been used in specific ways to blend with the narrative.

real life due to the technical specificities of the medium of cinema (7), and this is true regardless of digital or analog manipulations. If this technical truth is contextualized in the argument which equates color with authenticity, this would essentially mean that all photographic color is already unrealistic from the moment the image is created. Since the reconstruction of Istanbul in *Polítiki Kouzína* is not a photographically transparent image of the city, in Walton's use of the term, but a virtual representation of memory, color is an essential carrier of information rather than degradation. As Johnson puts it, color "sharpens the viewer's perception of the screen image" in the sense of bringing additional details to the foreground (8). Additionally, it is the emotional response elicited by the fading of actual photographs of the past that actually prompts moviemakers to control color in the first place, in order to elicit a similar emotional response from their audience by enabling the underlying tone or mood of the narrative to extend to the visual level. The CGI image of the chromatically-enhanced or spatiotemporally recomposed city does not malevolently impose itself on reality. CGI imitates the way reality is composed in the mind of the spectator, as memory composed from bits and pieces of external stimuli; thus the CGI image of Istanbul simply enables a visual rendering of the bricolage process through which the audience already mentally reconstructs its understanding of urban space. The fact that this rendering on screen may be one of infinite possible representations, thus jeopardizing objectivity, is hardly a counter-argument, given the fact that there can be no claims for objectivity or a single way in which memory can or should be visually rendered. The aesthetic result is left at the creatively hit-and-miss discretion of digital artists. In fact, the massive and generally uniform positive impact that the movie had on the Greek audience could be an argument in favor of its objectivity rather than against it; the movie claims its aspect of truthfulness exactly via the fact that its CGI techniques confirmed a experiential truth for a significant amount of people.

Man and the City
The mystical spatial energy of Istanbul is enhanced beyond the geographical location itself, with the latter eventually succumbing to its own reputation, existing in the sphere of culture as a concept somewhere in between Fanis's story and the collective memory of both Greeks and Turks. A powerful symbol of past empires, Istanbul becomes the locus for the clash between past and present; the virtual city inside Fanis's mind becomes a battlefield of old promises and passions that rupture the city's continuity, claiming a payoff of guilt and his old debt to family bonds, the breaking of

which is partly his own responsibility. Through the strong connection Fanis has with Istanbul, *Polítiki Kouzína* presents the city as something more than the natural habitat of contemporary man in which he lives, loves, works and dies. In his study on inhabited space, Arnold Berleant notes that the distinguishing character of a place is affected by its physical or topographical identity, its physical coherence or architectural homogeneity, and, most important to the present discussion, its interaction with the human factor, or the people that inhabit it (43). In Berleant's view, therefore, understanding a place is inextricable from the experience one has of it. This cultural dimension ties the physical traits of a place to the human element; the distinctive meaning of a place is acquired through "the interaction of human sensibility with an appropriate physical location" (43), i.e. the meaning or importance that human actions give to a place. On the same grounds, Aušra Burns reads Berleant on the importance of the "experiential realm" that comprises an understanding of the city as lived space. This importance is revealed by the fact that the city can only be conceived as a continuation of the individual; consequently a complete understanding of urban space should incorporate the lived experience of it that one has (Burns 69).

In his own study of *Polítiki Kouzína*, Dimitris Eleftheriotis argues that this experiential dimension of the city, as portrayed in the movie by Fanis's memories and behavior, accounts for the commercial success and popularity of the movie. For Eleftheriotis, one of the main reasons the audience responded positively to the movie was because spectators picked up on the director's intention to use Fanis as an agent of nation-wide "past and present national anxieties, fantasies and aspirations". According to Eleftheriotis, the movie gradually constructs the bond between man and urban space by projecting a dual mobility, first a virtual one between the present and past as Fanis recalls his memories, then an actual one, as he travels to Istanbul (18-19). His arrival, just in time to bid farewell to his dying grandfather, as well as to Saime and to any chance he ever had of reuniting with her, is the culminating point of the movie using memories as building blocks to reconstruct the image of the city. After Fanis buries Vassilis and walks around the city trying to retrace whatever is left from his childhood, the virtual and the actual mobility collide in an overwhelming sequence that strongly emits loneliness and a sense of regret.

As the movie gradually progresses towards its foreshadowed melancholic resolution, Boulmetis renders the emotional ties between Fanis and Istanbul in the mixture of the bitterness of deportation, remembrance of lost love, and the unbreakable bonds of kinship, all of which are gradually interwoven with the beloved memory of home-made food. Boulmetis

creates a cinematic "placelessness" that is established somewhere between physical objects and personal experience. This place-in-between vividly illustrates the tormented memories of Istanbul that Fanis struggles to cope with throughout his life, the things and people left behind but who are not actually there anymore, except in the image of the city that his mind retains. This condition is a visual example of what Sarah Menin defines as the state of being *atopos*: an essentially negative condition, "a characteristic of an emotional, mental and physical nothingness that can accompany depression or sense of *Unheimlichkeit* – home sickness or not feeling at home, or a deep angst of unbearable emptiness", and is a condition remedied only by endeavoring to find a place again, even if the quest only remains spiritual rather than physical (2). Menin describes *atopia* as the consequence of encountering a place that is not there anymore, a re-affirmation of the fact that a familiar and beloved place is a positive factor in a person's healthy life. (2) As Fanis is trapped in the internal void of loss and the consequent experience of being *atopos*, the viewers follow him literally and virtually oscillating between neighborhoods in Istanbul and his imagination. He is not merely seeking to return to the place itself, which he easily accomplishes towards the end of the movie; from a wider perspective, he longs to reunite with the irrevocably lost worldview of his childhood.

In the very end of the movie, Fanis makes his peace with the past, closing the circle of memories inside his grandfather's run-down spice shop. Fanis's hope of return and reunion is frustrated, as he realizes that the Polis[8] of his youth is no more; the way the city is illustrated in the movie makes it clear that this happens because, for him, it had always been a mixture of memories, smells and colors which he naively thought he could regain. The actual city remains, but the representation of its emotional charge is inevitably lost along with Fanis's childhood years and, as he is coming to terms with it, he uses his imagination to recreate the mixed smell of the spices in order to help his memories resurface. Indeed, the final CGI scene with the various spice seeds composing a microcosm of Fanis's universe, both metaphorically and literally, is both intense and visually eloquent; it manages to escape shallow emotionalism by representing Fanis's internal world as a grown-up's game with spice dust, denoting the completion of his redemptive circle. As Istanbul floats quietly like an ark of history in the everlasting flow of Bosporus, Fanis makes peace with his regrets by listening to the city that bred him, seeing it moving on without him, and eventually, deciding to let go.

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[8] The abbreviation *Polis* is a common reference to Istanbul in Greek.

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