

RARO VIDEO

CINEMA ART VISIONS

ALESSANDRO
GASSMAN

FRANCESCA
D'ALOJA

IL BAGNO TURCO

HAMAM

directed by
**FERZAN
OZPETEK**

Ferzan Ozpetek
Steam – The Turkish Bath

by Mario Sesti



Ferzan Ozpetek, a summary

Born in Istanbul on 3rd February 1959, Ferzan Ozpetek spent his childhood surrounded by women: his mother, a lover of art and music, and his grandmother, a wise and caring presence. Both unquestionably helped foster his artistic development and decision to become a filmmaker.

When he was very young the first film he ever saw enchanted him: Mankiewicz's sumptuous *Cleopatra*. The *kitsch* impact of this staging had an explosive and memorable effect on him. The opulence of the costumes, the monumental style of Hollywood kitsch in the reconstruction of ancient times and the melodramatic expressiveness of the couple Liz Taylor and Richard Burton marked his attention.

Despite the strong bond with his homeland and family, he decided to move to Rome at the age of 17 where he attended the Academy of Dramatic Arts "Silvio D'Amico", thus coming into contact with Julian Beck's *Living Theater*, one of the most important experimental theaters of that period; he then reverted to his true passion and went to university to study History of Cinema.

Thanks to his collaboration with a film magazine, he had the opportunity to interview some of the most important Italian directors and found a job as an assistant director on the set of *Scusate il ritardo* by Massimo Troisi (1983). This was his first real experience on a movie set.

In the following years he worked with Maurizio Ponzi, Ricki Tognazzi, Francesco Nuti, Sergio Citti, and Marco Risi but he already had a story in mind, an idea for his first film as a director. Thanks to Marco Risi, Ferzan Ozpetek's debut came to life: it's a film which embodies the soul of its author, who is half Turkish half Italian, thus staging the most intimate reflection of his personal experience.

***Il Bagno Turco – Hamam (Steam: The Turkish Bath)* was selected for the *Quinzaine des réalisateurs* at the Cannes Film Festival in 1997, achieving great and unexpected success with critics and audiences.**

Following his surprising positive debut, Tilde Corsi and Gianni Romoli decided to produce Ozpetek's second film, *Harem Suaré*, a tormented love story set during the fall of the Ottoman Empire. The synergy between the producers (with Romoli in the double role of producer and writer) and the director would be long lasting. However, the film did not achieve the same success as *Il Bagno Turco*. Only with his next film *Le fate ignoranti (His Secret Life, 2001)*, shot entirely in Rome, Ozpetek would be celebrated as one of the best emerging directors in Italian cinema capable of exploring the dreams and needs of a country where sexual diversity was no longer a taboo, even though comparing the traditional customs of couples and families still generates resentment and conflicts. But with his sensibility he is able to narrate the most intimate context of homosexuality capturing harmonies and depths that cinema was lacking on this topic. Nevertheless, it is marked by an uncensored and invulnerable search for new forms of sentiments and sociality built by the personal experience of feelings in every social class or geographical and urban area.

In 2003 he directed *La Finestra di Fronte (Facing Window)* that was acclaimed by both audience and press alike. Marked by a rather

difficult shooting that culminated with the death of actor Massimo Girotti a few days after shooting had ended, this film is a poignant journey through the memory of a man who survived the Holocaust; but it's also, and probably even more delicately, the analysis of a traditional relationship in which one of the two partners of the couple (in this case the character interpreted by Giovanna Mezzogiorno) has evolved and grown, inevitably leaving her other half behind.

His next film caused debate: *Cuore Sacro* (*Sacred Heart*, 2005) narrates the spiritual conversion of a middle-class woman. Inspired by Rossellini – there's a clear reference to *Europa '51* (*The Greatest Love*) – it remains a noble and icy hypothesis: this time the Rome catching his eye is over the top and artificial, full of ruins and design. The message prevails over language and narration. This pushes the director to go back to atmospheres which are more familiar to him and to work on a more collective and intimate story: in *Saturno Contro* (*Saturn in Opposition*, 2006) he recounts the mourning process of an extended family by directing a packed and polyphonic cast with even more mature control. That is the final confirmation that his cinema gets the best from the twilight of the deepest and hidden affections, where our reasons for love as well as the most painful sources for our wounds are hidden. Also in this film, as well as in *Le fate ignoranti*, Ozpetek is possibly able to narrate with more precision, warmth and clarity than any other contemporary Italian film director, the touching traits of “families” born by chance, desire, and friendship compared to those we belong to by birth and accident. “Fate is always up in the morning before you”, says a Chinese proverb: our concern, Ozpetek seems to say, is being able to find other human beings willing to accept us or with whom we can share the flow of life before the inevitable occurs.

In 2007, Domenico Procacci's Fandango production company asked him to adapt Melania Mazzucco's novel “Un giorno perfetto” (*A perfect day*) for the screen. Ozpetek made a film of strong lights and shades and irreparable contrasts (vulnerability and aggression, childhood and adulthood, discomfort and anxiety, marginalization and

comfort), where Valerio Mastandrea stands out above all with his sick and shady interpretation as the main character haunted by jealousy and revenge and inspired by a real murderer involved in a crime story. The film was selected in competition in Venice but didn't get positive reviews. Whereas two years later he undertook a completely different project, directing – still for Fandango – *Mine Vaganti (Loose Cannons)*, a sunny comedy coming to life among the olive groves in Apulia, and once again brought the audience to his side. Once more, his most athletic and original pace, his deepest and most seductive score is the comparison between a conformist society and anthropology (here more than elsewhere, since we are in Southern Italy), and relationships and communities that on the contrary are born from normal affinity and necessary solidarity and



friendship of those whose sexuality differs from the norm. But if in *Saturno Contro* gloom, melancholy, a gentle and decadent breath were prevailing, Ozpetek here (also helped with the screenplay by Ivan Cotroneo) shows himself capable of playing in the comedy without shame or sense of inferiority. The result, as shown in the audience's appreciation even abroad (especially at the Berlin Film Festival), once again testifies to a kind of cinema that follows constellations of issues, research and feelings which are deep-rooted in his own personality – but that also has the resources to change the tone, gender and rhythm needed to fuel a long and populated path.



Il Bagno Turco – Hamam

Francesco and Marta are a couple of young architects with high hopes. A telegram from Istanbul will change their lives: Francesco's aunt died leaving him a property. Driven by curiosity, Francesco leaves for Turkey and discovers that it is an old Turkish bath his aunt had managed for 30 years. Fascinated by the place and the people whose lives revolve around it, he decides to renovate it. Marta, who has no longer heard from him, acknowledges that their love affair is over and decides to go to Istanbul to ask him for a divorce. But Francesco surprises her: in fact he is deeply changed. And he is in love with the young Memet.

After ten years of apprenticeship as an assistant director, Ozpetek had the chance to direct his first feature film thanks to the trust placed in him by his friend Marco Risi who, along with Maurizio Tedesco, decided to finance the project. In its rudimentary form, the story of *Il bagno turco* is full of interesting ideas and already shows the range of issues and nuances that the director will elaborate in his later productions. It is interesting to note that the character of Marta was not present in the first draft of the screenplay, but was only added later at the request of Risi himself: if the script was initially focused on the existential crisis of a man, with the inclusion of a female character Ozpetek had the chance to analyze the couple's crisis and of more deeply emphasizing the dialectical dichotomies which cross the whole movie.

The relationship between man and woman is a conflict that hides a need for change, purification, and a catharsis that the hamam grants to the character of Francesco forever changing the characteristics of his soul. Ozpetek shows his characters' condition of dissatisfaction, knowing that their unfulfilled desires will lead them to awareness and strengthening of their ego. Francesco and Marta, always on the brink of splitting up forever, are both seeking rebirth. If at first glance the discovery of Francesco's homosexuality on the part of Marta seems to be a valid reason for permanently ending their relationship, it actually leads the woman to rediscover and desire her husband once again.

Ozpetek films objects and characters with the same care and concentration, but above all he turns his gaze to their relationship with the places around them: real geography and that of feelings permeate each other, creating a magnificent contrast between East and West, Istanbul and Rome, Interior and Exterior. Land, sea and steam accompany the inner journey of the protagonists and allow the director, through dense and enveloping camera movements, to load them with mystery and attraction. The ancient capitals of the Empire dominate the space and time of the story and set its pace with particularly effective stylistic counterpoints created by this "canon" in which two such distant and ancient worlds reflect their changes.

And it is on this rhythm that the author builds his representation of the relationship between past and present. In each sequence, it seems as if *Il bagno turco* wants to drag the audience into the abyss of time gone by and, of course, of memory: the double vision of Time erasing the traces of History and of what History on the contrary tries to stop, crystallize and revise – that is memory – is a form that cinema has taken from literature, especially from the 20th century. It has thus enhanced its extraordinary emotional pressure with the strength and transparency of images and sounds, making it an inexhaustible reservoir of imagination, which great



authors from Bergman to Fellini demonstrated they could draw on endlessly. Ozpetek uses wise Aunt Anita's letters and decadent monuments almost in the same way to highlight the dominance of the past on the lives of the protagonists, so their rebellion versus

time will be an integral part of their journey. But from now on, as demonstrated by films like *Le fate ignoranti* and *La finestra di fronte*, the obsession with the reconstruction of the past, the charm and the restlessness of its puzzles and of its repression, the resistance of its bonds and the endless effect of its traumas will become one of the most popular objects of contemplation and analysis for Ozpetek's cinema.

Alessandro Gassman's interpretation, perhaps the most significant of his career, is not a minor contribution to the success of the film. Due to the homosexual implications of the character, the role of Francesco frightened many other actors who were offered the part: however, it is precisely because of those conditions that his performance is full of subtexts, inner views and passion.

Besides, as a foreigner in a foreign land, Ozpetek demonstrates he knows Italian cinema better than many of his Italian colleagues who, unlike him, seem to move away from the masters of the past. His debut film treads existential paths already boldly explored by Pasolini, describing atmospheres with Viscontian elegance. His ability to criticize the existing reality and the withered and empty middle-class seems, in some ways, to recall aspects and characters from Scola, Monicelli or Pietrangeli.

After a series of production ups and downs, *Il bagno turco* found its way when it was selected to be in the prestigious *Quinzaine des réalisateurs* at the 1997 Cannes Film Festival: since then the film began a successful journey through the authors' circuit and arthouse cinemas all around the world becoming a small cinematic success. In this world, made up of imperceptibly whispered secrets, of laid tables, of signs which fate grants us through seemingly insignificant objects – a book, a photograph, a garment – all his film-making is already there.





Critical Reviews

open film-making. (...) You will rarely see an Italian film shot in two languages, respectful of anthropological differences, not overwhelmed by the tones of exotic comedy.”

Michele Anselmi, *L'Unità*, 11/05/1997

“It is nice to find a young director who is not obsessed with a narcissistic need to show off his skills and who is not overwhelmed by the imperative of pleasing at all costs, but who rather seeks inspiration in the roots of his culture and history (...) The Italian man will discover the world of family warmth but also of ancestral male chauvinism, of his own liberation from himself as well as from all the economical and political constraints in an unreconciled situation at last, where there will be at least some doubt that opulent Italy is not the best of all possible worlds.”

Paolo Mereghetti, *Sette*, 11/05/1997

“All of the Turkish performers are wonderful, from leading actors to minor ones; Serif Sezet, as the mother, is memorable; the third-rate lawyer is properly sketched by Zozo Toledo who, through sideways glances and tremors, appears to be a farcical character announcing tragedy, a grotesque messenger of death (...) When we see the protagonist reading his aunt’s unsent or returned-to-sender letters, we think of “The Aspern Papers” by Henry James. A refined sensibility, a real satisfaction for the exuberance of a non-tourist folklore, a touch which is already expert in telling stories through images are the qualities that define Ozpetek as a director from whom you can expect other beautiful films.”

Tullio Kezich, *Corriere della Sera*, 12/05/1997

“What a strange and really nice movie Turkish-Italian director Ozpetek was able to make; he has been living in Italy for many years and, like Fiona May or Kalambay, he gives us a new sense of pride. The story takes off just from our country, from a terrace in Rome, which has the air of wealth and unhappiness. On that terrace a man and a woman in their thirties are facing each other, they are married and also partners in a renovation company. They are two creatures of our time: they talk and don’t understand each other...”

Marco Lodoli, *Diario*, 22/01/1999



“Grâce à la sensibilité d’une mise en scène qui parvient à homogénéiser des mentalités différentes, le film échappe au piège; on imagine un monde dans lequel les vieux quartiers porteurs d’un art de vivre ancestral ne seraient pas condamnés à disparaître sous la pression immobilière des bâtisseurs aussi enragés à Rome qu’à Istanbul, aussi dénués de scrupules sur les bords du Tibre que sur les rives du Bosphore. ”

“Thanks to the sensibility of a director who manages to combine different mentalities, the film escapes being entangled. We imagine a world where the old districts, witnesses of a traditional lifestyle, should not be destined to disappear under the pressure of the money-grabbing construction industry’s boom, as widespread in Rome as it is in Istanbul and as unscrupulous on the banks of the Tiber as on the shores of the Bosphorus.”

Positif, n. 447



Biography



Born in Istanbul in 1959, Ferzan Ozpetek, moved to Italy in the late 1970s to study History of Cinema at the University “La Sapienza” in Rome. He collaborated with Julian Beck’s Living Theatre and then worked as an assistant director, collaborating with Massimo Troisi, Maurice Bridges, Sergio Citti, and Marco Risi.

In 1997 he directed his first feature film *The Turkish Bath – Hamam*, which was a big hit with audiences and critics in Italy and abroad. The movie, released in May 1997, was presented at the 50th edition of the Cannes Film Festival in the Quinzaine des Realisateurs session. The movie was presented in other international festivals and was sold for distribution in more than 20 countries around the world.

In 1999, he directed his second film *Harem Suare*, set in his native land of Turkey, telling the tormented love story between the sultan’s favorite, Safiye, and the eunuch Nadir, with the fall of the Ottoman Empire in the background. The story was written by Ozpetek himself in collaboration with Gianni Romoli, who also produced the movie with Tilde Corsi and their R&C Production company. The film was presented in the Un Certain Regard section at the Cannes Film Festival, as well as at the London Film Festival and at the Toronto International Film Festival.

In 2000 he achieved extraordinary success with *The Ignorant Fairies* starring Margherita Buy and Stefano Accorsi; a sweet and easy to watch drama about homosexuality and bonding and friendship. The movie won numerous awards including three Globi d’oro and four Nastro

d'Argento awards. Shortly after he confirmed his incredible talent and his sensitivity with *Facing Windows* (2002), with a very talented Giovanna Mezzogiorno as the protagonist along with a fascinating Raoul Bova. It also starred Filippo Nigro and Massimo Girotti, in what turned out to be his last performance on film. The film won multiple awards including: five David di Donatello, four Ciak d'Oro and three Globi d'Oro awards. The film's success in Italy and the rest of Europe, led it to be distributed by Sony Pictures Classics in North America.

In 2004 he directed *Sacred Heart*, which tells the story of a hard and ruthless young businesswoman named Irene, played to perfection by Barbara Bobulova, who changes completely before our eyes, in one of the greatest acts of magical transformation ever performed by an actress on the screen.

In 2007 he directed *Saturn in Opposition*, which, once again, demonstrates the directors ability to combine poetry and truth, using a formal style and a diverse cast of actors. It featured: Pierfrancesco Favino, Luca Argentero, Isabella Ferrari and Ambra Angiolini, and also Margherita Buy and Stefano Accorsi with whom he worked with earlier, in *The Ignorant Fairies*. The movie won four Ciak d'oro, five Globi d'oro and four Nastro d'Argento awards. Angiolini, in her acting debut, won the David di Donatello award for the Best Actress in a Supporting Role.

In 2008, he directed, *A Perfect Day*, adapted from the novel by Melania Mazzucco Gaia, which examines the humanity in Rome today. The title is a quote from the Lou Reed song "Perfect Day". The film starred Isabella Ferrari and Valerio Mastandrea and was presented at the 65th Venice International Film Festival. It grossed 3 million euro at the box-office. The film was selected in competition at Venice. In 2008, Ozpetek ended his partnership with producers Romoli and Corsi, and started a new one with Domenico Procacci and his Fandango company.

In 2008, the Museum of Modern Art in New York City, dedicated a retrospective on him, screening all of his movies. He has been one of the few Italian directors to be given this honor.

In April 2009, he directed a short movie called *Nonostante tutto è Pasqua* (*Despite Everything it's Easter*), a segment of the project *L'Aquila 2009 – Cinque Registi tra le Macerie*, in which multiple directors took on subjects regarding the 2009 L'Aquila earthquake. Ozpetek's short was dedicated to Alessandra Cora, an aspiring singer who died in her house during the quake.

His next film *Mine Vaganti* was released in 2010. It was co-written with Ivan Cotroneo and stars Riccardo Scamarcio, Alessandro Preziosi, Nicole Grimaudo and Ennio Fantastichini. It is a comedy concerning the family issues of a household in Lecce. This is one of the few movies Ozpetek has set outside Rome, a city very close to his heart. On May 22, 2010, the city of Lecce declared Ozpetek honorary citizen. The movie was presented out of competition at the 70th edition of the Berlinale as well as at the Tribeca Film Festival 2010, getting a special recognition by the jury.

In 2011 he was asked to direct Verdi's famous opera *La Traviata* at San Carlo Opera House.



Filmography



Loose Cannons, 2009

L'Aquila 2009 – Cinque registi tra le macerie (video documentary short) (segment *Nonostante tutto è Pasqua*),

A Perfect Day, 2008

Saturn in Opposition, 2007

Cuore Sacro, 2005

Facing Windows, 2003

The Ignorant Fairies, 2001

Harem Suaré, 1999

Steam – The Turkish Bath, 1997