

Tarlabasi:  
“Another World” in the City

Nermin Saybasili



You can see, can't you?  
How flimsy the city has become  
As if from here and there  
Suddenly another city will appear  
Edip Cansever, "Two Cities"<sup>1</sup>

Istanbul is possessed by a "ghost." This "ghost" of a multi-inhabited quarter located in the city center, named Tarlabasi, has been haunting the city for some time.

Located on the slope downwards to Dolapdere, Tarlabasi is part of the Beyoglu sub-province of Istanbul, on the European side of the city. The quarter is located on both sides of Tarlabasi Bouvelard, which begins at the intersection of Taksim Square and Cumhuriyet Road and ends where Refik Saydam Road starts. Tarlabasi, a residential area of minority groups in the second half of the nineteenth century, inhabited by primarily Greeks, Armenians, and Levantines, has been gradually detached from its history, national narratives, and collective memories of the social, after the foundation of the Turkish Republic in 1923. Demanding ethnic and religious homogeneity in society, that is being Turkish, directly found its contrast in this non-Muslim, middle-class quarter. To mention the major events of the era: compulsory population exchanges took place after the Turkish Republic was established and the Lozan Pact was signed; the Wealth Tax (1942-44) went into effect during the Second World War for the rectification of the economy and was applied only to minority groups, mainly Greeks, Jews, and Armenians, in order to weaken these ethnic groups' dominance in the economy; the "September 6-7 Events" in 1955, when people revolted both in Beyoglu in Istanbul and in Izmir against minority groups, looting their goods and properties, breaking into their homes, beating and harassing them; and the Cyprus Operation in 1974. Beginning from the 1940s, Tarlabasi has become the "unhomely house" for the rootless and displaced urban population arriving from the rural areas of the eastern part of Turkey, and has turned into not only a site of physical dilapidation, but also one of social deprivation.

Tarlabasi, beginning from the 1970s, has gradually become a location, firmly nested inside the city, for the destitute, repressed, and exploited. According to data given by the State Institute of Statistics, based on the last Census of Population in 2000, the population of Tarlabasi is estimated to be around 31,040. Dincer and Zeynep Merey Enlil, from their field work in Tarlabasi, conclude that destitution is the main and permanent condition of the population of Tarlabasi, 78% of whom are migrants.<sup>2</sup> A man from Romania who had to leave his country and who has been trying to earn money for his family by collecting used papers to sell, replied to my question quite angrily: "Are you asking who are the people

living in Tarlabasi? They are just the poor, we are just the poor." It is not a coincidence that in two Turkish popular films shot towards the end of the 1990s, Tarlabasi is depicted as a forgotten, neglected place where the people have "disappeared" in the commotion of Istanbul. In *Eskiya* (The Brigand, 1997) by Yavuz Turgul, a fearless and a good-natured brigand, who was arrested by the gendarme on the mountains of the Eastern Turkey and served a thirty-five-year sentence in prison, finds himself, without any addresses in his hands, in an old small hotel in Tarlabasi. However, even though he was the fearless bandit of the mountains and the only brigand of his friends who survived, he finds the city to be insurmountable and is defeated by it eventually, coming to his end on the streets of Tarlabasi. On the other hand, the film *Ağır Roman* (1997) by Mustafa Altıoklar, which was adapted from Metin Kacan's novel (1990) of the same title, depicts Tarlabasi as a space which can only be narrated as a tale, a tale of the losers, the actual "city heroes" surrounded by the flash fire of the metropolis. In the Kolera Street (whose name is very elucidating in itself), where the lives of the misfortunate people have been already conditioned by death, the story centers around a braggart whose family migrated from Anatolia, and his lover, a Greek prostitute. All the contradictions in the film are lived out in extremes (vagrancies, crimes, murders, fire, and love), and this dangerous space becomes an irrevocable trap for its inhabitants.

New inhabitants of this old abandoned city center are the Kurds, who migrated during the "unspoken war" against the Kurds on the eastern border of the country in the 1990s; the gypsies who moved to this part of the city in the 1970s and 1980s; transvestites and transsexuals, who previously lived and worked in Cihangir, a quarter near Beyoglu, before the gentrification of the district forced them out; plus foreign immigrants, such as Afghan, African, and Iranian communities, who plan for a short stay and seek a quick getaway to a European city; and Romanians, Bulgarians, and Russians, who work as a cheap laborers. They have been all rendered unlocatable, they have become part of a "spectral reality." Their existence, their displaced bodies do not refer to an original entity, as they are left outside of history and outside of social life.

"The boulevard defines our destiny," says a father, and adds, "when my children go up to Beyoglu, I wish they will never return." His words indi-

<sup>1</sup> Edip Cansever: *Sairin Seyir Defteri* (The Sailing Book of the Poet), Istanbul: Adam Yayınları, 1982, p.154.

<sup>2</sup> İclal Dincer-Zeynep Merey Enlil: "Eski Kent Merkezinde Yeni Yoksullar (New Poor in the Old City Center), in *Yoksulluk, Kent Yoksulluğu ve Planlama* (Destitution, Urban Poverty and Planning), Ankara: TMMOB Şehir Plancıları Odası, 2002, pp.416-418.

<sup>3</sup> Neil Smith has stressed the fact that urban frontiers draw a sharp economic line in the urban landscape by dividing areas of reinvestment from areas of disinvestment in the built environment. They are bound up with economic expansion rather than geographical expansion. See Neil Smith: *The New Urban Frontier, Gentrification and the Revanchist City*, London and New York: Routledge, 1996, p. xvi.



cate the presence of a border which functions as a “frontier”<sup>3</sup> within the city. Tarlabasi Boulevard divides two worlds: one is gleaming, the other murky; one is rich, the other poor; one is visible, the other obscured. Through Tarlabasi Boulevard, Tarlabasi has become the counterpart of what a modern city should be: the habitat of disorder, corruption, crime, drugs, and danger. Tarlabasi Street, now Tarlabasi Boulevard, was widened during the wave of liberalism in the 1990s, within the scope of the project of “making Istanbul a city of the world,” when the urban space was violently rewritten. During this clean-up operation, 368 buildings in Tarlabasi, most of them historical, were demolished.<sup>4</sup> Beyoglu, a quarter which covers the area defined by Istiklal Road (running parallel to Tarlabasi Boulevard) and the streets opening onto it, was considered an unlawful district since the 1970s, but was gentrified throughout the 1990s to become the cultural and entertainment center of Istanbul. Tarlabasi was pushed towards the other end: the wrong side of Tarlabasi Boulevard. The city was re-arranged with this push, by wiping all those who were “unsuitable” for urban life from the public space. Whereas for the Istanbulers this wide street functions as a link to Taksim and other centers, for the residents of Tarlabasi this wide boulevard is a border where the flux of traffic becomes a river, so that Tarlabasi can be cut off, like an island, from the rest of the city and the world.

This old city center has become a “compulsory space” for those who are excluded from the society, and thus, having no social security, are left outside all formal networks, business markets, and housing facilities. Therefore they dwell in the city not by being excluded, but rather included as an “exception” within the urban space.

In the Turkish artist Esra Ersen’s latest video-work *Brothers & Sisters* (2003) which was shown during the Istanbul Biennial in 2003 and consists of interviews with African immigrants living in Istanbul, Kissin, an “illegal” immigrant, likens Tarlabasi to a refugee camp. “Talking about Beyoglu is fun... Compare it to back behind Beyoglu, there is this deadly place, the grand finale of Istanbul: Tarlabasi. Tarlabasi where all atrocities, all the good things, everything you think as the good and the bad exist. Tarlabasi is like a place where... like a refugee camp. You don’t fault anybody. You know, in the refugee camp... this place is a mix of everybody: the father, the mother, the sister... Everybody stays inside. It is a party place,” he says. The video starts with a scene at Haydarpasa Train Station, the main train station in Istanbul. In the 1970s this location hosted the most memorable scenes of Turkish melodramas, in which for the first time the main protagonists, having migrated from rural regions of Turkey, face the city of their dreams, Istanbul, which symbolizes Western values,

<sup>4</sup> M. Rifat Akbulut: “Tarlabasi Bulvarı” (Tarlabasi Boulevard), in *Encyclopedia of Istanbul*, Vol 8, Istanbul: Tarih Vakfı, 1993, p. 219.

with endless opportunities and a high standard of living. In Esra Ersen's *Brothers & Sisters*, a very similar story unfolds at the same train station. But this time, a group of black people have just arrived in Istanbul. Standing in front of the same train station, they are observing Istanbul, "the last gate" to reach to Europe. African people standing in front of the train station built by a German architect, assume it to be Hamburg. However, the smuggler, who was paid to take them illegally to Hamburg, deceived them and left them in Istanbul instead. While they are watching the beautiful scenery of Istanbul, standing at the stairs of the station, they seem to know that they will never be part of the city, like the immigrants from the impoverished rural areas of Turkey.

In his film *In This World* (2002), which depicts migration as a series of constant movements from one border to another, condensed into waiting in small rooms in unfamiliar towns or villages until the next ride comes along following the negotiations with smugglers, Michael Winterbottom tells the story of two Afghan boys, Jamal and Enayatullah, who are making their own way to Europe from a refugee camp in Pakistan. Jamal and Enayatullah stay in Tarlabasi for a short period of time, after their dangerous border crossing into Turkey through Iran in pitch-black-darkness under the gunfire of border guards. The film's images look as if they had been smuggled across borders, echoing the movements of the protagonist, the fifteen-year-old Jamal who finally reaches London after his long journey. It shows how, as the result of endless and uncontrollable flux of migrations, the classical dichotomies of city and country or center and periphery no longer apply; how, in our times, "cities are engaged as opening onto the possibilities of the unconventional and the unrecorded – where urban dynamics are shifted away from actual cities to murky borderlands, and where new formulations of sovereignty, belonging, and nationhood are provisionally concretized. Exclusion and incorporation, marginality and experimentation, then, converge in ways that are not easily discernible to any kind of actor operating in this interstice."<sup>5</sup>

As a quarter with a permanent flux of migrations, Tarlabasi comprises ghostly relations to other cities, other towns, Batman, Diyarbakır, Mardin, Siirt, and so on. It is perhaps closer to these cities or towns than where it is actually located. However, this mobility also creates immobility for the inhabitants of Tarlabasi. The narrow, steep, maze-like streets of Tarlabasi seem to superimpose one street on the other, without reaching anywhere else in Istanbul. Although it juxtaposes multiple and diverse cultural identities, modes of life, and forms of appropriating urban space, it turns to itself. People had come to this quarter when they first arrived at Istanbul thinking that they could move to a better area in the city or move "forward" to a European city very soon. However, their temporary settlements have turned into permanent living quarters. "Being unwell-



come in other quarters, they learned to welcome each other here," says a pharmacist who has been running a pharmacy in Tarlabasi for almost twenty years. In other words, they do not want to live there, but they have no other choice. I heard many times, from the people I interviewed, that Tarlabasi is, for them, a "compulsory space." And this leads to tensions and reactions towards society as a whole, as well as between different ethnic groups – the most apparent being between the Kurdish and gypsies, for both ethnic groups accuse the other of street robbery and for the stigma Tarlabasi carries. Religious nationalism, as a reaction to the Kurdish people, is very common amongst the gypsies. A gypsy woman who invited me to her house pointed out menacingly: "There is a Turkish flag hanging in my balcony. Let them dare come and take it down, if they can. The Arabs are good, but the others have spoiled everything." "Don't be afraid of us, but the Kurds," said another one.

### **Tarlabasi as a "Container"**

The body of immigrants ruptures out of the increasingly constricted boundaries. Their existence prevents society based on citizenship from

<sup>5</sup> Abdou Maliq Simone: "The Visible and Invisible: Remaking Cities in Africa," in Okwui Enwezor et al., eds.: *Under Siege: Four African Cities, Free-*

*town, Johannesburg, Kinshasa, Lagos: Documenta 11\_Platform 4, Ostfildern-Ruit: Hatje Cantz Verlag: 2002, p. 29.*

being fixed within a central organization, for the material body of the immigrants, the people from various ethnic groups, resist “enclosure.”<sup>6</sup> The barrier to closure, therefore, is seen as a threat and new barriers are built up in order to subordinate this “surplus mass,” for their mere existence challenges the very definition of the nation-state, and the nation-state’s direct appearance in the public domain. The paradox produces a structure in the city similar to camps: their bodies, even if they are not wanted, occupy space and require space. So their existence has to be reduced in order to protect and preserve the exclusive representation of the nation-state in the cities, such as shanty towns, ghettos, or slums. In this way, they are domesticated; their bodies are squeezed into a tiny space in the city, a certain location, a certain geography in the city which functions as a “container.”

If any, the public space of the inhabitants of Tarlabasi is in their chat in front of their doors opening onto corridor-like streets. A young Kurd, sitting on the stairs in front of his house, complains that whenever he goes to Istiklal Street, a place only one boulevard away, to sell mussels, the police always ask for his ID. In the 1990s, while the political geography of sovereignty focused on border wars against Kurds, the urban geography focused on visual purity in terms of identity through the production of a continuity between being Kurdish and being a PKK-terrorist. This Kurdish man, therefore, is reminded of the fact that he does not belong there. The exclusion itself is material, has material effects, and produces particular forms of materiality. The “absent presence” of the inhabitants of Tarlabasi calls for the questioning of the production of space by inhabiting space in a way that frustrates limits of its inhabitability. In the name of overcoming the “urban jungle,” violence in the heart of the city is actively justified and it has become a “war zone” between the gangs and the police forces. It confounds and unhinges clear assessments in the context of the activities of the police or the gang groups. In this respect, Tarlabasi is what Agamben calls a “dislocated location” resembling the camp, a zone of “indistinction between the outside and the inside, the exception and the rule, the licit and the illicit, in which every juridical protection has disappeared.”<sup>7</sup> While the highly visible presence of the police force exerts an overt violence over the space, it also indicates a covert violence that constitutes the space, for the events taking place there are often not seen and left simply uninvestigated. The space, therefore, is included, Agamben argues, through the creation of a zone of indistinction that traces a threshold where “outside and inside, the normal situation and chaos enter into... complex topological relations.”<sup>8</sup> Tarlabasi is haunting its inhabitants, as a young boy accurately puts it: “Tarlabasi is like mud. You should not touch it, otherwise it will suck you in, it will infect you.”

This article is based on field work conducted in Istanbul / Tarlabasi between December 2003 and January 2004.



<sup>6</sup> My idea draws on Rosalyn Deutsche's arguments on the meaning of democracy in terms of homelessness and public space. She suggests that “when public space is represented as an organic unity that the homeless person is seen to distrust from the outside, the homeless person becomes a positive embodiment of the element that prevents society from achieving

closure.” See Rosalyn Deutsche: *Evictions, Art and Spatial Politics*, Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, England: MIT Press, 1996, p. 278.

<sup>7</sup> Giorgio Agamben: *Means Without Ends, Notes on Politics*, Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2000, pp. 40-41.

<sup>8</sup> Agamben: *Homo Sacer*, pp. 19-20.