

Editors' introduction: Thinking through images: Turkishness and its discontents

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The articles in this special issue are an attempt to critically engage with the historical present of Turkey and the notion of “Turkishness,” through and with visual images. To write a history of the present implies taking a critical distance from the immediacy of unfolding events, in order to question the politics of their representation. It means delving beneath the surface of visual proliferation, to consider how images underwrite or destabilize notions of identity and wholeness. Most of all, it means probing how visual images are imbricated in power relations.

The kinds of visual images from which the individual authors depart are quite varied. Reading these articles together, however, within the covers of a single volume, compels us to think about a series of thorny questions. One justifiable question that arises when talking about the “discontents of Turkishness” in present-day Turkey is: what is new? Indeed, many of the tensions highlighted in various articles in this volume—between Islam and Turkish ethnicity as markers of national identity, between Sunni and Alevi sectarian affiliations, or between the Turkish state and its Kurdish citizens—have been fault-lines of Turkish society for almost a century. If these tensions are not new, then have they intensified, or accelerated? But this may not be a particularly fruitful line of questioning, as Ackbar Abbas points out in his commentary. For it would mean pitting the “old” (history) and the “new” (present) against each other, to resurrect familiar dichotomies of modernity. The articles in this volume compel us to think about “the old” and “the new” together, as occupying the same public space, rather than to see them as mutually exclusive phenomena. They do so by exploring the multiple ways in

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which the “past” becomes part of the “present” as it circulates through the domains of popular culture, media, and the arts.

The articles by Ahıska and Karaca offer us insights into how monumental objects and art objects are drawn into spaces of “mediated” publicity which change their relationship to the present. Ahıska’s analysis begins with a specific sculpture that stands crumbling in a public park in İstanbul, the Workers’ Monument in the Tophane district, and the politics of locality which made it visible once again. Ahıska employs the trope of “monstrosity” to take up the issue of public monuments in Turkey, which are often subjected to destruction by various actors (the state and/or anonymous citizens). She reads the “monstrosity” of the Workers’ Monument in relation to the state practices of building Atatürk monuments all over Turkey, as visual embodiments of state power. Karaca’s point of departure consists of explicitly political images selected from the contemporary art world of İstanbul. Examining current modalities of censorship in Turkey, Karaca points to the arbitrariness of a conceptual separation between art and politics, as well as to the practices of censorship that effectively draw boundaries between them.

Öncü, Suner, and Arslan all start out with popular cinema and television programs. By engaging with particular examples, they proceed to uncover how they are interwoven with questions of authenticity and difference, alterity and wholeness. Öncü’s discussion highlights how enduring narratives of “the East” as an exceptional territory within the homogeneous space of the nation are valorized in contemporary cultural markets through television melodramas and packaged tours. Examining recent Turkish blockbuster comedies and action films in the context of Turkey’s transformation under the *Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi* (Justice and Development Party) government during the 2000s, Suner uses the terms “magnificence” and “monstrosity” to make sense of the excessive representations of Turkishness in these films. Taking us back to the 1950s, Arslan focuses on an extraordinary cultural icon in Turkey, Zeki Müren, who has been acclaimed for his distinctive performance of Turkish classical music songs as well as his rather effeminate on-stage persona. Examining the duality intrinsic to Zeki Müren’s image, Arslan suggests that, while Zeki Müren is presented as a “model citizen” in his films, this image is destabilized by a number of excesses.

Equally significant, we believe, is how the articles in this volume invite us to think about intermediations between the national and the transnational. It is now commonplace to point out how the explosive growth of visual technologies, and the commodity logic that underpins them, have undermined the capacity of national states to monopolize

cultural production. The seeming totality and imagined homogeneity of national cultures have come under challenge, as a plurality of alternative visions has acquired voice and visibility in the public arena. In particular, television with its ontology of “liveness” and a lexicon of plentitude and choice—“free” entertainment, “free” opinions, “free” rights—has made it increasingly difficult to harness the dispersal of cultural identities in the public realm. Kosnick’s article in this issue, based on a scandal surrounding an episode of Germany’s most famous television crime series, offers a detailed account of this process on the ground. Discussing this scandal to highlight the growing significance of “border-crossing public spheres,” Kosnick’s article also provides an intriguing example of how television intervenes in daily life, to destabilize ethno-religious hierarchies embedded in national culture (Sunni/Alevi distinctions, in this case) and to open them up to cultural struggles across borders (Germany/Turkey, in this case). Another essay that directs our attention to intermediations between the national and the transnational is Baruh and Popescu’s article, the starting point of which is a recent international political event, the Israeli raid on the Gaza flotilla in 2010. Analyzing the commentary posted on online discussion forums immediately following the raid, Baruh and Popescu’s article suggests that this incident highlighted Turkish ethnicity and Islam as two alternative, yet coinciding forms of collective identity. This article also highlights how the explosive growth of social media has brought to the foreground new modes of identification with the abstract nation. The nation assumes a form of paramount reality, as its icons and narrative tropes circulate in endless variety across the world-wide web.

No doubt, these contradictory trends of fragmentation and affirmation are not unique to Turkey. On the contrary, there is a prolific literature on how the phenomenal growth of visual technologies and the expansion of commercial media markets have unleashed remarkably similar tensions around the world. How the ensuing tensions of fragmentation and affirmation are played out in different national/cultural sites, however, is historically contingent and politically mediated. The articles in this issue remind us that the political site of struggles unleashed by transnational trends continues to be the *national*.