Proximity or Difference:
The Representation of Turkish Melodramas in the Middle East and Balkans

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Abstract: This paper analyzes how Turkish newspapers and online news websites present and discuss the rise of Turkish cultural products in neighboring regions including the Balkans, the Middle East, and Eastern Europe. Why have Turkish television dramas prompted the Turkish press to talk about proximity, difference and modernity? How do Turkish language newspapers frame and represent the popularity of Turkish TV series circulating through international media? To answer these questions, this study focuses on discourses of proximity, difference and modernity in the news. The author argues that Turkish media discourses on the perception of Turkish television dramas by Arab and European audiences tells us about Turkey’s own struggle between binary oppositions in ontological categories such as the East and the West, and modernity and tradition.

Keywords: Turkish television series, newspaper, discourse, proximity, difference, modernity

Introduction

During the 2000s, television formats have become one of the most important Turkish exports, igniting a debate on Turkish media about representation and the socio-cultural impact of Turkey in neighboring regions. Turkish television series that have become extremely popular in Turkey were soon airing on Arab and European satellite networks, triggering debates in the foreign press about the remarkable success of these series. Particularly, the Turkish press showed great interest in the portrayals of these television series in the Middle East and Europe. For many, the success of Turkish TV series in the Middle East, the Balkans, and Eastern European countries signifies the articulation of culture and capital on an increasingly productive level in Turkey after the 1990s. Since the 2000s, Turkey has become a real regional power within the context of the Greater Middle East or the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. Jung and Piccoli (2001, p. 2) state that:

with the demise of the Soviet Union and the subsequent independence of Transcaucasian and Central Asian states, the Middle East entered into a new evolutionary stage. The Greater Middle East can be defined by variables such as a common history, ethnic links, Islamic civilization, European-dominated state-formation, and overlapping regional conflicts, as well as regional economic competition.

Within this context, relying on the legacy of the Ottoman Empire, Turkey has found new opportunities to take the initiative in political and economic areas, playing an eminent role in social and cultural matters in an emerging Middle Eastern and North African region. With the rising power of the AKP (the neo-conservative Islamic party), Turkey started to see itself, both discursively and practically, at the center of a new world constituted by so-called previously “peripheral” countries. These discourses re-locate Turkey on the stage of world culture and politics in a recursively globalizing world. They focus on Turkey’s potential to become a leader in the region while reconstructing Turkey as an alternative model of modernity and as the primary point of reference for other cultures and societies (Al-Ghazzi and Kraidy 2013; Mango 1993; Jung and Piccoli 2001). Accordingly, Turkish agents often refer to Turkish TV series as transnational narratives, undermining the local or national identities of these cultural products.

Against this backdrop, I analyze how Turkish newspapers and an online news website present and discuss the rise of Turkish cultural products in neighboring regions, such as the Balkans, the Middle East, and Eastern Europe. To answer how Turkish language newspapers and websites frame and represent the popularity of Turkish TV series circulating through international media, I first tackle discourses of proximity and difference in the news. I explore reasons why Turkish television dramas have prompted the Turkish press to talk about proximity, difference, and modernity. The hypothesis guiding my investigation is that Turkish media discourses on the perception of Turkish television dramas by Arab and European audiences tell us about Turkey’s own struggle between binary oppositions in ontological categories such as the East and the West, and modernity and tradition. In the second section of the paper, considering media as a platform which triggers debate on cultural and social issues, I focus on whether or not these series offer an alternative form of modernity (Gaonkar 2001; Keyman and Koyuncu 2005) – a Turkish modernity – to non-Western countries, as opposed to Western capitalist modernity, by articulating a specific discourse engaging proximity in modernity.

This research employs textual analysis of the coverage in Turkish print media and news websites of discourses generated by the foreign press about Turkish television series. Six Turkish-language newspapers (Radikal, Hürriyet, Milliyet, Zaman, Yeni Şafak, Haber Türk), an English-language daily in Turkey (Hürriyet Daily News) and a Turkish news website (Doğan Haber Ajansı) were analyzed in this study since the research
focuses on disputes over representations of Turkish television series in neighboring countries and on the discourses involving them. Radikal epitomizes democratic and leftist tendencies, while Milliyet, Hürriyet, Hürriyet Daily News and Haber Türk are center-right-leaning Turkish dailies with a nationalist bias. Zaman and Yeni Şafak typify the conservative Islamist press media that arose in Turkey in the 1990s. Doğan Haber Ajansı is a Turkish news agency owned by one of the most powerful media conglomerates in Turkey, Doğan Media Group. These sources were chosen as representative of a stream of stories about the cultural and social impact of Turkish dramas on Arab viewers and Eastern European audiences, which appeared in the Turkish news between 2009 and 2012. Based on an analysis of a corpus of more than 50 articles taken from these newspapers and the online news agency from January 2009 through December 2012, this research reveals that the newspaper discourses constellate around the construction of the Other by Turkish actors through cultural proximity in order to reposition Turkey within an epoch of emerging power dynamics in the Greater Middle East and Balkans. Due to the increasing number of news stories about Turkish TV exports, the study focuses on news that appeared between 2009-2012. The analysis ends in 2012 because that year marks a turning point in Turkey’s foreign policy. Before 2012, Turkey attempted to “play a major role in the unanimity of Islamic countries and [to hold] a prominent position [especially] in the Muslim world (Kaptan and Karanfil 2013, p. 2331). Thus, the popularity of Turkish TV series in the Middle East and the Balkans rose along with the notion of Turkey as the regional leader. Since 2012, Turkish foreign policy has been severely criticized for creating problems in the region, particularly with its Muslim neighbors. Relations with countries in the Middle East have been jeopardized by Turkey’s support for groups including Assad’s Sunni opponents in Syria, the fundamentalist Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, and Iraq’s Sunni sectarian groups opposed to the Iraqi government, as well as by political tension with Israel.

Through an analysis of contested, conflicting debates and the articulation of different discourses over the meanings of proximity and difference in the Turkish press, this essay outlines prevalent media discourses by focusing on language and its use in the modern Turkish press, and by considering the sociocultural contexts of that language use. Teun A. van Dijk says “the ideologies and opinions of newspapers are not usually personal, but social, institutional, or political” (van Dijk, 1998, p. 22). It is therefore deeply significant that most of these debates appeared in the Turkish press after Turkish television series attracted the attention of foreign media. The Turkish press showed great interest in stories about the cultural and social impact of Turkish dramas on Arab and Eastern European audiences and the portrayals of these television series in the Middle East and Europe.

Turkish news-agents in this sample recurrently emphasize that one of the main reasons for the success of Turkish programs and TV series is their country of origin. Ignoring the increased production power of the Turkish media industry resulting from Turkey’s economic growth, and the expanded opportunities for Turkish companies to market and distribute their products in neighboring regions as a result of Turkey’s sociopolitical and economic rise in the Arab world, the Balkans, and Eastern Europe, Turkish actors employ a discourse of audience preference and proximity to explain the complex associations among audiences, cultural texts, and the Turkish programs’ success in international markets. Hence, in the next section, in order to clarify the argument of the paper, I deal with the concepts of “cultural proximity” and “difference.”

Media and Cultural Proximity

La Pastina and Straubhaar (2005) discuss cultural proximity at multiple levels. Proximity can be geographic and spatial; cultural or linguistic; religious; ethnic and diasporic; and gender-related. In this paper, I use the term cultural proximity in the sense offered by Koichi Iwabuchi: “[C]ultural proximity cannot be seen as an essential quality of culture or audience orientation, but rather as a shifting phenomenon in dialectical relation to other cultural forces” (Quoted in La Pastina and Straubhaar 2005, p. 272). Therefore, to understand newspaper discourses on the success of Turkish melodramas, I take into account instances of contested discourse, linguistic struggle, and heated debate, and their relation to other cultural forces within “the order of discourses” (Fairclough 1995). From Iwabuchi’s perspective, cultural proximity is not something “out there,” but rather is something that needs to be subjectively identified and experienced by the audience. It is based on an impression and assumption of similarity rather than ontological cultural similarities (MacLachlan and Chua 2004, p. 156). Therefore, the idea of closeness, or similarity in characteristics, must be constructed discursively and selectively from a diverse pool of concepts “based in regional, ethnic, dialect/language, religious, and other elements” (Straubhaar 1991, p. 51) on a daily basis – in our case, through newspaper articles.

Although language is one of the major levels of similarity, there are other elements of proximity in culture, including music traditions, religious elements, ethnic types, gestures, humor, and dress (La Pastina and Straubhaar, 2005). Different agents bring diverse discourses into the dialogue, such as those that focus on economic, religious, and cultural issues, to explain the popularity of Turkish melodramas abroad, accordingly claiming proximity between Turkey and neighboring regions. On a rhetorical level, “proximity” was a concept referred to by many actors in interviews and commentaries. This usage is diverse and complex, but, for Turkish actors, the term commonly denotes “the potential of a program to refer to an international audience,” thereby
explaining “the selection and enjoyment of television programs” (Trepte, 2003) by a transnational audience. For example, Izzet Pinto, CEO of Global Agency, one of the major companies that distribute Turkish television series abroad, reflects this perspective in an interview on HaberTurk when he answers a journalist’s question about reasons behind the popularity of Turkish TV series in the Balkans and the Middle East. He says, “Asian people do not share any proximity with this region, either culturally or physically. Latin soap operas are getting boring. American TV series are culturally distant from our [culture]. Our TV series are good alternatives” (HaberTürk, November 12, 2011).

Pinto’s statement offers insights into the concept of proximity on a global scale: his first point about proximity manifests the perception of Otherness as embodied by Asians and their cultures. Latin American cultural products, which were very popular in the Middle East during the 1980s and 1990s (Kraidy 1999; Kraidy 2008), are described as “boring,” while, despite their global success, US programs are deemed “culturally distant,” implying a global and Western form of modernity in terms of lifestyle. Finally, Pinto asserts a self-reflexive turn that presents Turkish TV series as “good alternatives” to all other less proximate cultures and cultural products. Repetition of “our” is prominent in his statement. According to Greg Urban, the use of “our” is a cultural gesture indicating “the circulation of discourse that is necessary for a significant number of individuals to come to articulate their membership in a group of a ‘we’” (Urban 2001, p. 95). This proximity discourse offers a broader ontological category both to Turks and to transnational audiences who are looking for alternatives and feeling proximate to Turkish culture.

Other actors also underline the importance of proximity at multiple levels to explain the success of these TV series in the Middle East, the Balkans, and Central Asia. For example, Kemal Uzun, the director of Gümüş (Noor), which is the most popular of all Turkish dramas in the Middle East, says “Neither the characters and the subject matter nor the featured locations are foreign [to viewers]. They do not feel like outsiders. Our cultures are close, our geographies are close; we have close ties.” (Hürriyet Daily News, December 12, 2011). Uzun presupposes geographical, cultural, and historical proximity between Turkey and the Middle Eastern countries. Like Pinto, Uzun uses “our” to signify Turks and Middle Eastern people as a homogenous category. He also reflects on the discourse that circulates within popular culture to recreate a commonality between Turkish and Middle Eastern audiences, based on shared cultural values due to close (historical) ties and proximate spatiality.

Similarly, as the Chairman of the Board of Directors in Calinos Holding, the leading company for the distribution of Turkish TV series, Fırat Gülgen frames the adventure of exporting Turkish TV series, beginning in 2001, by endorsing Uzun’s argument. Gülgen says that his company first exported Deli Turek to “countries that are culturally proximate to Turkey such as Kazakhstan and Azerbaijan” (Milliyet, January 15, 2011). His lexical choice, “culturally proximate,” not only reinforces the already-established yet “imagined” historical and cultural connections between Turkey and Central Asia in the minds of Turkish audiences, but it also re-creates a discursive connectivity and communion between Turkey and these societies. Gülgen adds,

Why do they watch Turkish TV series? Turkish dramas became very popular in these regions [the Middle East and the Balkans] because of Turkish culture. Previously, they watched Brazilian soap operas and they saw churches in the background. . . . In our television dramas they see mosques. I am not saying that these dramas have religious content but the audience members find themselves [in these dramas]. They hear ‘Insallah’ and ‘Masallah,’ which they use daily (Milliyet, January 15, 2011).

Gülgen starts by asking a rhetorical question, inviting readers to consider his subsequent claim: Why do people in the Middle East and the Balkans watch Turkish TV series? He positions himself as an expert and accentuates his authority and power by answering his own question. He is precise and direct, leaving no space for discussion: “[B]ecause of Turkish culture.” Later, in order to support this “fact” and persuade readers to believe his argument, Gülgen emphasizes multiple proximities – cultural, historical, regional, religious, and linguistic -- that, he posits, create familiarity and closeness among these societies based on Islam.

Pinto emphasizes cultural rather than geographical proximity. He notes, “[First,] there [was] great interest for the Turkish TV series in the Middle East and the Balkans . . . Then, South American countries became interested in [them].” Now, “we’ve succeeded in attracting the attention of Europeans” (Hürriyet, December 23, 2010). In Pinto’s statement, countries of the “peripheries,” which are considered culturally proximate to Turkey, are mentioned in relation to spatiality, either by referring to a specific place (“in the Middle East and the Balkans”) or by using a special kind of metonym, in which place is substituted for people (“South American countries became interested”). Yet in the last sentence, he prefers an active sentence with an active subject (“we” the Turks) with an active verbal phrase (“succeeded in attracting”) by stating the direct object (the “attention” of Europeans). That is, unlike other audiences, Europeans are discursively constructed as the receivers of action, while Turks are clearly identified as active agents.

As a general category, Turkish agents tend to overestimate cultural proximity between Turkey and neighboring regions, and their discourse specifically emphasizes cultural proximity. They imply that cultural
commonalities are created by shared historical experiences, collective regional values, and geographic proximity. Hence, they draw rhetorical parallels with other nations in the Middle East and the Balkans based on a totalizing and homogenizing approach. Their discourse undermines and ignores the subnational, regional, and local identities of non-Turkish audiences – mentioning them as Tunisians, Arabs, Arab women, and Albanians, signifying their national identities – while non-Turkish agents emphasize distinctions and strive to maintain a sense of difference from Turkish culture and society. Therefore, there is a striking difference between discourses originating in Turkey and those from other countries. The discourses of non-Turkish actors in Turkish newspapers are diverse and complex, and they are extremely different from ‘Turkish agents’ rather optimistic and hegemonic discourses entailing proximity.

The commentaries of some of these non-Turkish agents challenge and undermine the proximity discourses of Turkish agents. For instance, MBC-El Arabia’s TV Representative to Turkey, Daniel Abdülfettah, says, “Arabs and Turks do not know each other very well . . . We have not propagandized using these Turkish dramas . . . We see them as a medium of entertainment and culture. After watching these TV series, people who did not know Turkey well began to perceive Turkey better (DHA, February 17, 2012).

Making a similar point, a headline quotes Bosnian Turkologist Amina Siljak Jesenkovic: “Turkish dramas made a positive contribution to Turkey’s image.” She says, “The prejudice towards Turkey in the Balkans has changed after the broadcast of Turkish TV series [in this region]. Serbians and Croats who hated Turkey changed their minds,” adding that “because of the positive impact of Turkish TV series, seven baklava stores were opened in Serbia in 2010” (DHA, February 17, 2012). Even non-Turkish agents who acknowledge that there is proximity between the local and national cultures of Turkey and the Arab world express their confusion. For example, Fahad Al Sheibani, the chief executive of Saudi Arabia Airlines, declares, “[It is hard to believe but the Turkish TV series created a remarkable impact” (Yeni Şafak, January 11, 2010).

In their statements, Abdülfettah and Jesenkovic describe how people in the Middle East and the Balkans perceive Turkey. Unlike Turkish agents, their statements highlight distance and even hostility between the nations. While commenting on the winds of change in these regions, they depict a previously negative image of Turkey in the Balkans and the Arab Peninsula. Even Al Sheibani’s fairly moderate statement expresses astonishment over the startling success of Turkish melodramas, revealing an assumption of distance whose effects have been overcome to a “remarkable” extent. Unlike the rhetoric of Turkish agents, words such as “similarity,” “sameness,” “closeness,” and “local” are not commonly used by foreign experts and agents, who use emotional language (“hate,” “prejudice,” and “surprise”) that focuses on distance and difference rather than intimacy.

In analyzing discourses in the Turkish press about the popularity of Turkish TV series, the Turkish media can be defined as an arena in which different intersecting, overlapping, juxtaposing, contradicting, and competing discourses are reconstructed. The struggle over discourses manifests the multiplicity of identities and differences between Turkish and non-Turkish agents. Newspaper commentaries provide evidence of strong discursive associations among Turkish agents and foreign experts that position Turkey within a wide cultural geography spanning the region. Foreign agents challenge hegemonic strategies by providing alternatives to the Turkish discourse of proximity, which becomes an important factor in the struggle over discursive practices. The shifting representations of those practices map “potential protagonists and antagonists in struggles for hegemony in the media, or potential alliances and accommodations” (Fairclough, 1998, p. 148).

As discussed above, Turkish and non-Turkish agents employ profoundly different discursive strategies to explain the reasons behind the success of Turkish TV series in the hinterland of the former Ottoman Empire. In addition to the contrast between Turkish and non-Turkish discourses, there are striking differences within the press venues themselves. While mainstream media such as Hürriyet, Haber Türk, and Radikal give voice to Turkish agents, we hear the voices of non-Turkish agents who severely criticize proximity in modernity mostly in conservative right wing newspapers such as Yeni Şafak and Zaman.

These discursive differences become conspicuous when considering Middle Eastern criticisms of Turkey. A severe criticism of proximity with modernity mostly comes from right wing newspapers, particularly Zaman and Yeni Şafak, two widely circulated Islamist Turkish dailies. A headline in Zaman on December 3, 2011, serves as an example: Tunisian Prof. Ayari: TV series do not represent Turkish people. The article centers on a panel of Middle Eastern scholars and journalists who have criticized Turkish dramas as “immoral” and “non-Islamic.” Moncef Ayari is quoted as saying, “Turkish TV series have a negative impact on the Arab world. They do not represent the Turkish people. We know that Turks do not have extramarital relations and they do not drink alcohol, as we see in the TV series” (Zaman, December 3, 2011). Zaman reflects on Ayari’s statement and underlines, not proximity with modernity, but Islam. Similarly, another criticism comes from Yeni Şafak in a commentary. In his article entitled “The TV Series Make a Wrong Impression of Turkey,” published in Yeni Şafak, an Azerbaijani sociologist and scholar, Abulféz Süleymanov, claims that in his own research conducted
in Azerbaijan in 2012, 62% of TV audiences declared that Turkish TV series are harming the moral values of Azeris. He adds that these TV dramas create false judgments about Turkish society (Yeni Safak, December 7, 2012). The panel’s moderator, Ibrahim Şahin, who is the General Director of Turkish Radio and Television (TRT), urged producers and scriptwriters to act more responsibly and carefully about this issue. Similarly, panelist Hamoud al-Touqti, the editor-in-chief of Al Waha, a magazine published in Oman, states that “since values represented in Turkish dramas are not proximate to our culture, TV series which depict the real lives of Turks must be produced” (Zaman, December 3, 2011). All of these statements make bold claims about Turkish modernity on the screen and the identities of Turkish audiences, as well as the identities of audiences in other nations, by taking an essentialist approach to both Turkish and non-Turkish values and lifestyles. They construct presumably “authentic” and “original” identities for national audiences in that they assume distanced cultures that can find commonality only in Islam. Lawrence Grossberg refers to such moves when he notes, “[T]he struggle over representations of identity takes the form of offering one fully constituted, separate and distinct identity in place of another” (Grossberg, 1996, p. 89). The non-Turkish agents’ attempts to fix a distinctly singular form of Turkish identity -- one that is Islamic, traditionalist, and conservative -- reflect a discursive struggle based on supposedly “true” or “false” representations of a Turkish quintessence. Such statements negate cultural proximity by positing an identity that is exclusively, essentially Turkish. They illustrate the problem of representation in these TV series by claiming that false representations of Turkish society are the major source of difference between Turkey and Middle Eastern countries. Agents claim that the virtual reality presented in these programs is a falsification of the reality of everyday Turkish life. By articulating a “real life” discourse, Middle Eastern agents weave another thread into the debate that challenges the proximity discourse predominating the discussion in Turkish newspapers. They suggest that cultural proximity is only possible if Turkish dramas depict the “ordinary” lives of “ordinary” Turkish people, which are essentially fixed. They introduce a religious discourse that centralizes a conservative, moral, Islamic lifestyle that is proposed as a contingent layer of proximity.

Conversely, the rhetoric of Turkish actors creates a great contrast to the argument of Middle Eastern presenters who treat the TV series as faulty media representations. Their assertions, apparently based largely on the assumption that reality is always effectively represented in these media products, contradict the “real life” discourse of non-Turkish agents. The Turkish discourse abolishes absolute distinctions between what is “real” and what is “fictional,” and by articulating the discourse of representation with the discourse of proximity, they attempt to eliminate the distinction between “us” and “them.” This discourse strives to increase self-awareness and heighten the reader’s self-consciousness.

In this respect, Turkish newspapers work like cultural performances, illustrating Barbara Babcock’s claim that “all forms of cultural performance do more than reflect sociocultural patterns and beliefs; they reflexively comment upon those patterns and alter a society’s awareness of itself” (Babcock, 1980, p. 5). In other words, the proximity discourse circulated in newspapers doubles the subject and the object by producing reflexivity for Turkish audiences as it “changes things into a spectacle, spectacles into things, myself into another, and another into myself” (Babcock, 1980, p. 5). Babcock’s description of reflexivity indicates the capacity of both language and thought to refer back to themselves and, in these articles, every reference points back to Turkey, Turkish culture, and Turkish identity. The discourse represents otherness as well as self4, in that, as Babcock observes, reflexivity is a “process linking self and other, subject and object” (Emphasis added, Babcock, 1980, p. 2). In this discursive process, the other – the non-Turkish audience of Turkish TV series – becomes Turkish, as Turks change into the other. On newspaper pages, readers themselves are transformed into spectacular objects as the Turkish “self” is newly constructed in the minds of readers, through a reconstruction process that increases “self-awareness” through self-referentiality. Through self-referentiality and reflexivity, Turkish journalists, critics, and readers, engender an active agency that results in self-empowerment. As a result, despite the discourse of proximity, self-referentiality and self-empowerment bring about the illusion of the supremacy of the Turkish self by discursively creating superiority over “others,” which implies the potential to become a source of hegemony.

Proximity, Difference, and Modernity

Since the inception of media studies, many researchers and scholars have attempted to illuminate the roles of media and media consumption in modernization (Lerner, 1958; Thompson, 1995; Kraidy, 2008). Mass media, especially television, represent modernity (Abu-Lughod, 2005; Rivero, 2007; Lee, 2006; Mitchell, 2000) as an indicator of advanced technology, and a sign of economic development and a modern lifestyle. Recent media and television studies literature focuses on how television relates to modernity, and how popular television serials manifest the tension between the local (traditional) and the global (modern) while creating a variety of meanings generated on the national, regional, and transnational planes (Abu-Lughod, 2005; Mankekar, 1999; Iwabuchi, 2004; Wilk, 2002). A heated debate on the role of media and the effects of media consumption in modernization (Lerner, 1958; Thompson, 1995; Kraidy, 2008) was triggered by the success of Turkish
melodramas in Middle Eastern, Balkan, and Eastern European countries. The popularity of these series has provided a platform for debating modernity and tradition in Turkey.

In this section, I examine debates over the contested meanings of modernity in Turkey by exploring disputes over the representations of Turkish television series in neighboring countries and the discourses in Turkish newspapers that address the series’ success. After programs such as Aşk-ı Memnu (Forbidden Love), Deli Yürek (Brave Heart), Binbir Gece (A Thousand Nights), KURTlar Vadisi (Valley of the Wolves), Gümüş (Silver, or Noor dubbed in Arabic), and recently Muhteşem Yüzyıl (The Magnificent Century) aired both in Turkey and on Arab and European satellite networks during 2000s, the debates which appeared in the foreign press about Turkish television series attracted the attention of the Turkish media. Because of the unforeseen success and renown of these television serials, issues of modernity have intensified in public discussions in the Turkish media. By analyzing how Turkish newspapers present and discuss the rise of Turkish media in neighboring regions, I strive to answer why Turkish television dramas have prompted the Turkish press to engage such contentious issues as modernity and the media.

To explore the relationship between media discourses and formations of modernity in the Middle East and the Balkans, I raise the following questions: How are these countries and their cultures represented in the Turkish media? How are Middle Eastern viewers’ perceptions of Turkey, and Turkish viewers’ perceptions of their regional neighbors, conveyed? To deal with these questions, I analyze the relationship between media and modernity in Turkey, as well as the significant role of transnational and transregional flows in defining culture and politics among Middle Eastern, Balkan, and Eastern European countries. Newspaper articles use a discourse of modernity to signify and represent an ambiguous form of Turkish modernity. They focus both on processes that articulate Western Capitalist modernity to the societal modernization of Turkey, as well as on practices that create an alternative cultural modernity.

Several scholars suggest the hegemonic influence of Western capitalist modernity. Kevin Robins (2003) states: “cultural meaning is created only through affiliation and comparison to the Western ideal” (p. 67). Similarly, Marwan Kraidy’s fieldwork in Lebanon between 1993 and 1998 suggests that American norms of production, writing, and acting are the standards by which his informants judge media programs (Kraidy, 1999). Although Turkish TV series represent metropolitan values, cosmopolitan identities, and modern lifestyles, Calinos Holding’s Chairman of the Board of Directors, Fırat Gülgen, complains that “it is hard to sell [Turkish dramas] to countries that produce their own programs. For instance, we could not sell any to Germany and France because they watch their own productions” (Hürriyet, February 6, 2011). Nevertheless, proximity in modernity is implied in accounts of the success of Turkish dramas in neighboring regions, invoking a hierarchical structure between the East and the West, the developed and the underdeveloped, and the North and the South. As the chief of Turkey’s Global Agency, which distributes Forbidden Love, Magnificent Century, and 1001 Nights, Pinto rhetorically exemplifies and reinforces this hierarchy. He mentions a list of the regions to which the TV series are exported, starting with the Middle East and the Balkans: “The Middle East and the Balkans are very interested in Turkish soap operas,” he says, and indeed, he claims, Arab audiences “were charmed by Turkish TV series.” He adds, “South American countries later started to pay attention to Turkish dramas. And now, we have succeeded in attracting the attention of Europeans” (Radikal, December 20, 2010). It is important to note that the word “later” is used to explain the temporality of a business transaction between Turkey and Latin America, regions that are geographically distant but culturally proximate. According to Pinto, marketing Turkish TV series to Europe signifies the ultimate success of the industry. Almost every newspaper article uses this same sequence to describe the spreading popularity of these series: first the Middle East and the Balkans, then South America, and finally Europe.

This discourse, uniting proximity with modernity, implicitly recreates the hierarchy between developed and underdeveloped countries, between the West and the East, while reinscribing the distinction between the self and the other. By emphasizing differences between Turkish and non-Turkish consumers of these dramas and other facets of Turkish culture, the newspapers remind Turkish readers that the construction of the self and identity is always affected by outside factors, and it is always related to understanding the other. Understanding the other is bound up with understanding the other’s culture. The newspapers suggest that Turkish TV series are invitations that provide people with opportunities to act like Turks, to live like Turks, and to understand modernity and everyday life from a Turkish perspective. As soon as they embrace Turkish culture and begin to practice it in everyday life, they re-construct their identities, which they then represent and elucidate. In both processes, Turkish culture is coded as proximate – familiar, or even the same – and plays a crucial role, especially in the processes of representation and elucidation. The “self” and the “identity of self” operate and change through culture. The Turkish self is reflected through the appearances and behaviors of actors in the melodramas, positioning Turkishness as a hybrid identity constituted by both the East and the West, and that offers to both what they demand. For example, the following headline was culled from an article in Hürriyet published on June 14, 2011: “Kıvanç in the East, Kenan in the West” (“Doğuda Kıvanç, Batıda Kenan”). The article asks how to explain the popularity of the blonde and blue-eyed Kıvanç Tatlıtuğ in the Middle East and the darker-complexion of Kenan Imirzalioğlu in the Adriatic region. The explanation comes immediately:
Everyone is after what is missing (Hürriyet, June 14, 2011). According to the article, Middle Eastern women admire Kıvanç but Croatian women are less interested in him because, as one Croatian woman declares, “It is hard to find someone like Kenan, but there are many blonde, blue-eyed men here.” Columnist Cengiz Semercioglu concludes that “dark, swarthy Turkish young men still work in the West; in the East, however, a Western type like Kıvanç is preferred. Now, in a wide geographical area, handsome Turkish men are mentioned” (Hürriyet, June 14, 2011). In this statement, the appearance of Turkish actors is deconstructed and the Turkish self-image is reconstructed as a hybrid identity that is both familiar and unfamiliar, the same and different, the self and other – and, most importantly, it possesses the potential to offer everyone what is lacking or missing in his or her own society and culture.

Conclusion

According to cultural studies scholar John Fiske (1987), “the ‘power to be different’ is the power that maintains social differences, social diversity. The relationship between social diversity and a diversity of voices on television is one that needs to be carefully thought through” (p. 319). In the Turkish press, various discourses, diverse voices, and different types of agency represented by different kinds of speech and conflicting ideologies all coexist in disparate articles. However, in mainstream media venues such as Hürriyet, Haber Türk, and Radikal, the press gives more voice to Turkish agents who emphasize sameness and proximity between Turkey and Middle Eastern or Eastern European countries. From Hebdige’s (1979) point of view, in such discourses “the Other can be trivialized, naturalized, domesticated. Here, the difference is simply denied. Otherness is reduced to sameness” (p. 97).

In such articles, Turkish agents emphasize articulations between distinct identities. The proximity discourse is the glue that cements different identities, as it assumes a singular identity for diverse audiences inhabiting a vast landscape from Eastern Europe to the Arab peninsula. Emphasizing proximity first and foremost creates a discursive connectivity between Turkey and neighboring societies, implying the absence of boundaries between geographically and culturally proximate cultures. This discursive abolition of boundaries has formed new types of power relationships that position Turkey in a dominant position, constructing it as a cultural authority. In this process, Turkish agents ignore the production power of the Turkish media industry resulting from Turkey’s economic growth, and from expanded opportunities for marketing and distribution in neighboring regions that stem from its rising sociopolitical and economic influence in the Arab world, the Balkans, and Eastern Europe. Instead, they employ proximity discourse to account for audience preferences, thereby simplifying the complex associations between audiences and cultural texts that lead to the success of Turkish programs in international markets.

Conversely, non-Turkish agents underline the multiplicity of identities and differences rather than similarities and familiarities. The negation of proximity and the marking of differences and distance strive to establish an alternative politics of representation in order to construct the self. Severe criticism of cultural sameness and proximity as a measure of modernity mostly comes from right wing Islamist newspapers such as Yeni Şafak and Zaman. These newspapers emphasize foreigners’ discourse on difference, even though they assume that commonality based on religion (Islam) brings a universal proximity. Grossberg (1996), however, considers difference a strategic form of modern logic that fulfills an essential and constitutive role in the formation of identity. In this context, the discursive productions of difference by non-Turkish agents can be considered within a framework of modernity and identity that is constructed around relations of difference and otherness.

Accordingly, focusing on the discourse of Turkish media regarding perceptions of Turkish television dramas by non-Turkish audiences can help us to understand Turkey’s own struggle between binary oppositions and ontological categories such as the East and the West, and modernity and tradition. Representations in Turkish newspapers employ reflexivity in their representations of Turkish culture, society, and identity, in that “all collective representations or systems of signification are reflexive” (Babcock, 1980, p. 4). Reflexivity, here, is a key to understanding how Turks represent and perceive themselves within the context of cultural proximity in the discourse of Turkish-language newspapers, and to grasping why Turkish and non-Turkish agents use different discursive strategies. Reflexivity is not only the condition in the mind of the self, but also it is “the imagined effect of this reflection upon another’s mind” (Babcock, 1980, p. 2). The newspaper articles refer to the Turkish image in “the other’s mind” while also representing Turks’ own self-image. This self-image, from a Turkish perspective, is strikingly enhanced in the discourse of Turkish newspapers, which articulate reflexivity and self-referentiality to evoke self-empowerment within the power dynamics resulting from the rise of Turkey in the Middle East, marked by wide-ranging rhetorical battles between Turkish and non-Turkish agents.

Through their discourse of difference and proximity, the newspapers become a site of conflict and struggle. However, discussions of proximity and difference have failed to open up a space for debating alternative forms of modernity. On the contrary, the newspapers’ discourse offers a specific interpretation of the relation between identity and modernity – a relation intensified through the logic of difference and proximity.
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**End Notes**

1. The most popular TV dramas both in Turkey and in neighboring countries include Aşk-ı Memnu (*Forbidden Love*), Deli Yürek (*Brave Heart*), Binbir Gece (*A Thousand Nights*), Kurtlar Vadisi (*Valley of the Wolves*), Gümüş (*Silver*, dubbed Noor in Arabic), and recently Muhteşem Yüzyıl (*The Magnificent Century*).

2. Although these two terms are sometimes used interchangeably (See Taylor 2004), as geopolitical terms they include different countries. The Greater Middle East includes Afghanistan and Pakistan, while the MENA extends from Morocco to Iran. (The MENA Project)

3. It is commonly believed that Turks originated in Central Asia and came to Anatolia through mass-migration (Altay 1981; Akçura 1990).

4. When I employ the term “self,” it should be understood not as individual entity, but as a collective ontological subjectivity of Turkish agents.

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