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Re-creating history and recreating publics: the success and failure of recent Ottoman costume dramas in Turkish media.

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Re-creating history and recreating publics: the success and failure of recent Ottoman costume dramas in Turkish media.

Josh Carney

AUTHOR'S NOTE

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- 1 On 25 November 2012, while speaking at the opening ceremony for an airport in the city of Kütahya, then Turkish Prime Minister (now President) Recep Tayyip Erdoğan veered from his remarks on the progress Turkey had seen under the past decade of his Justice and Development Party's (AK-Party) rule to lambast one of the country's most popular TV shows, the sometimes sultry Ottoman costume drama *Magnificent Century* [*Muhteşem Yüzyıl*], which depicts the sixteenth century reign of Sultan Süleyman the Magnificent. Noting that opposition leaders had criticized his government's foreign policy, Erdoğan responded by saying,

We know our responsibilities. We'll go everywhere that our [Ottoman] ancestors went on horseback, we'll take an interest in all those places. But I think some may be thinking of our ancestors as they're shown on the television screen in that documentary, *Magnificent Century*. We do not have ancestors like that. We don't recognize that Süleyman. [The real Süleyman] spent 30 years of his life on horseback, not in the palace like you see on the TV series. You really need to know and understand this. I condemn the directors and the owner of the channel before our nation. And since they've been warned, I expect a judicial decision on the matter.¹

- 2 Though Erdoğan did not detail his concerns with the show, he tapped into a debate about respect for Ottoman heritage that began to plague *Century* even before its premiere. The debate has many facets, but often crystallizes over questions of how “truthful” the program’s representation of history is and the issue of whether ancestors are to be viewed as sacred heroes or human beings with potential weaknesses. In addition to being one of the top shows on Turkish television for its four-season run, *Century* now commands a global audience of over 200 million across more than 40 countries and its influence continues to grow,² so the implications of the debate reverberate well beyond the Turkish borders.³ This international success would appear to be part of what fuels the domestic debate about the show, as some Turks celebrate the program’s “conquering” of the world and others bewail the picture of Ottoman heritage depicted therein.
- 3 Though *Century* was the first in a recent crop of Ottoman-themed media texts⁴, it is far from the only production of that sort. It was followed by an epic film about the conquering of Istanbul, *Conquest 1453 [Fetih 1453]*, and by a number of other TV shows across a variety of genres. Of the many attempts, so far, only *Century* and *Conquest* have seen commercial success, and yet their modes of telling and their approach to history are markedly different, leading to questions about what is necessary for historical drama to connect with a public.⁵
- 4 I here attempt to answer that question with a three-part discussion. First, I turn to some of the existing literature focusing on the recent surge of interest in Ottoman heritage in Turkey, trying to understand how this trend arose and how it relates to politics. Next, I examine the issue of nostalgia, employing Svetlana Boym’s distinction between reflective and restorative nostalgia to highlight two markedly different approaches to the past that seem to exist in the Turkish milieu. Distilling Boym’s distinction through the work of other thinkers, I situate it in relation to a notion of publics that helps me to characterize the success or failure of a text. I then turn to four such texts—all of which represent the Ottoman past in unique ways—and attempt to classify them with regard to their nostalgic approach, building a cumulative case that reflective depictions of the past are more likely to engage publics than restorative ones in the TV environment. Ultimately, I suggest that reflective and restorative approaches may actually engage different publics in different ways.

I. Ottoman heritage as a value for the present

- 5 The current rage for all things Ottoman is a *fait accompli* in Turkey. Ottoman history texts and Ottoman-inspired historical fiction are being written faster than ever before and selling briskly. Consumer trends ranging from Ottoman-themed home decor to jewellery to clothing to food to the hanging of imperial seals [*tuğras*] in car and shop windows are all on the rise. Traditional arts such as paper marbling [*ebru*] are experiencing a revival, as is interest in the Ottoman language itself. Historical museums are packing visitors at greater numbers every year and a variety of Ottoman-themed museums and amusement parks have arisen as well.⁶ Celebrations of the conquering of Istanbul on 29 May 1453 have grown to become major public spectacles and government and private forces are undertaking “restoration” projects on Ottoman-era monuments and buildings across Istanbul and the nation at an unprecedented rate, though the aims, scope, and execution of these is often highly controversial.

- 6 This state of affairs has become increasingly visible in the last twenty years. As the trend of adopting and displaying would-be Ottoman related trappings and practices in various social fields —public, private, state, and commercial— has conquered the territory of history in everyday life, the once “official” historical narratives of the Turkish republican and the ancient Turkic pasts have lost much of their sheen. Prevalent narratives of this so-called neo-Ottomanism often tie the cultural side of this trend to a concurrent populist and sometimes Islamist political movement that had roots in the Democrat Party of the 1950s, gained much strength with the National Vision [*Milli Görüş*] movement of Necmettin Erbakan from the 1970s to 1990s, and attained a more stable form of political legitimacy with the coming to power of the Justice and Development Party (AK-Party) lead by Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in 2002. Though this outline does form a relatively tenable narrative for the rise of this trend, recent scholarship provides a more detailed picture of how this resurgent interest in the Ottoman past arose and how it has circulated socially and politically.
- 7 Focusing on what she calls a struggle over Ottoman heritage in Istanbul, Ayşe Öncü identifies two different narratives that have arisen since the 1990s. Both the *Belle Époque* and the conquest-to-tolerance narratives glorify the Ottoman past by emphasizing the peaceful coexistence of a variety of cultures under Ottoman rule. Despite this surface similarity and the fact that they sometimes even refer to the same aspects of Ottoman history, however, they are quite different in their contemporary political content and motivation. According to Öncü, the *Belle Époque* narrative emphasizes the various cultures existing in cosmopolitan Istanbul in the late nineteenth century and tends to be popular among a secular elite (Öncü 2007: 238). The Islamic conquest-to-tolerance narrative, on the other hand, looks further to the past, revelling in the conquering of Istanbul and yet touting the tolerance for other religions displayed by the victorious Ottomans. This narrative came to prominence with the “second conquest” of Istanbul in 1994, when Recep Tayyip Erdoğan was elected as mayor of the metropolitan municipality (Öncü 2007: 242-243).
- 8 Covering related territory from a perspective of ideological affiliation, Nora Fisher Onar (2009) typifies six different representations of the Ottoman past in accordance with various political groups in Turkey. Kemalists, for Onar, reject the Ottoman legacy and wish to leave it clearly in the past. Islamists, on the other hand, have two divergent approaches to the legacy: the neo-imperialist, as typified by the Welfare Party [*Refah Partisi*] under Necmettin Erbakan in the 1990s, and the pluralist-multiculturalist branch, which Onar sees as exemplified in the writings of (now Prime Minister) Ahmet Davutoğlu. There is some overlap with this latter category and that of political-economic liberals, of whom Turgut Özal is Onar’s prime example, but the liberals, unlike the pluralist Islamists, tend to uphold the post-*Tanzimat* period as their prime example of Ottoman multiculturalism. The typology is rounded out by two divergent ultra-nationalist takes on the Ottomans: a rather racist approach, which finds in Ottoman tolerance a reason for the downfall of the Turks, and a pan-Turkist, pro-Ottoman view, which sees the Ottomans as one of many great Turkish dynasties.
- 9 Drawing both on Onar and Öncü, Amy Mills undertakes a discussion of the Ottoman legacy grounded in ethnographic work in the Istanbul neighbourhood of Kuzguncuk, unearthing two discourses very much in keeping with the narratives highlighted by Öncü (Mills 2011: 192). Yet for Mills, the most relevant aspect of these discourses is their functional overlap. As she puts it, “the Ottoman legacy has become a catchall

geographic imaginary produced locally: leftists, human rights activists, secularists, and intellectuals, as well as Islamist politicians and conservative, nationalist policy makers, invoke Ottoman multi-ethnic tolerance as they engage in local identity politics” (Mills 2011: 193). Mills finds that, whether coming from a relatively more liberal/secular or conservative/Islamic perspective, the Ottoman past is selectively employed to tout a kind of cosmopolitanism that, ironically, can only be celebrated once the human actors upon which it is based —Jews, Armenians, and Greeks in the case of Kuzguncuk— have been removed.

- 10 To the extent that the Ottoman legacy gains popularity among various groups, this function as a “catchall imaginary” is highly contextual. That is, where Öncü notes two competing Ottoman heritage narratives circulating in greater Istanbul, Mills finds that parallel discourses actually work in concert with one another in the particular locale of Kuzguncuk, and in the representation of Kuzguncuk to the rest of the country.⁷ Rather than betraying a contradiction, I believe that this juxtaposition reveals a general truth: when the past functions as a value for the present its use will always be contingent.
- 11 The Ottoman legacy is subject to great admiration and great dispute precisely because it is malleable. In the case of Kuzguncuk, the past is malleable because there are few original inhabitants left to tell their own versions of history. In the case of Turkish history writ large, the sea change between the one-time Kemalist “status quo” and the quasi-Islamic, quasi-Ottomanist populism of the AK-Party has opened the way for a re-valuation of historical narratives generally, with the Ottoman past as a locus of great value and, hence, struggle. In effective terms, one of the key venues for this struggle is popular media, because it is here that different ideologies of representation emerge and circulate, upholding different mythical pasts that infer different understandings of the present.

II. Nostalgia and its public(s)

- 12 Though the case of Turkey is certainly unique, the country is not alone in terms of a tendency to revalue the past. The trend may be linked to the global phenomenon that Andreas Huyssen (2003) has dubbed a “culture of memory,” a trend whereby mediation has brought the past increasingly into our present, fundamentally changing our relationship with history and memory in the process. For Huyssen, this trend is tied directly to the increasing prominence of media in our daily lives. He points out that the rise of information technologies and archival capacities has been accompanied by a rise in the “musealization” (a term drawn from Hermann Lübbe) of many aspects of our lives. Elsewhere⁸ I trace the overlaps between Huyssen’s culture of memory and the rise of nostalgia, a trend commented on by Fredric Jameson (2005), Arjun Appadurai (1996), Kathleen Stewart (1988), and Svetlana Boym (2001). Though there are important differences between these thinkers in terms of both framework and goals, they are in accordance in seeing the rise of nostalgia as indicative of a malaise brought on by the (post)modern conditions of late capitalism. In a time when visions of the future are increasingly bleak, the past provides a seemingly familiar territory that offers some (admittedly elusive) promise of navigability. Crucially, the role of media is key in the spread of this nostalgia, often harnessing the sensibility for commercial gain and introducing highly idealized portraits of the past (or even the present in the case of Jameson) for consumption.

- 13 If the culture of memory and the rising tide of nostalgia are worldwide phenomena it will come as little surprise that their presence in Turkey has received commentary. Esra Özyürek (2006) has made a convincing argument that the 1990s political shift that saw the rise of Islamist parties was accompanied by the personalization and privatization of state iconography by a number of secularists. This trend is, for Özyürek, indicative of a “nostalgia for the modern” —a longing for the positivist era of Republican Turkey marked by Kemalist ideology and the belief that the nation’s future lay with the project of Western modernity. This nostalgia can of course be counterpoised to that focusing on the Ottoman past, termed *Ottomanalgia* by Ufuk Adak (2013),⁹ providing us with a distinction between nostalgia for that which nearly all Turkish citizens have lived (Republican Turkey) and a longing for the past that must be more overtly imagined (Ottoman Empire). While this distinction merits consideration,¹⁰ both of these broad types of nostalgia are ultimately idealist constructions, a point that is emphasized by historian Edhem Eldem in an opinion piece on the politics at work in 2013’s Gezi Park protests:

Turkey’s past has little to offer in terms of democratic inspiration. Ironically, there is hardly any difference between the nostalgia for Atatürk-era secularism and the A.K.P.’s glorification of the Ottoman imperial past. Both rest on the reinvention of an imagined golden age—the former with a secularist emphasis, and the latter with a focus on Islamic identity. And both look back fondly on authoritarian regimes, which makes them all the less credible as political models for a democratic present and future. (Eldem 2013)

- 14 A potentially more useful way of conceptualizing nostalgia is offered by Boym. She sets forth a distinction between restorative and reflective varieties:

Restorative nostalgia stresses *nostros* and attempts a transhistorical reconstruction of the lost home. Reflective nostalgia thrives in *algia*, the longing itself, and delays the homecoming —wistfully, ironically, desperately. Restorative nostalgia does not think of itself as nostalgia, but rather as truth and tradition. Reflective nostalgia dwells on the ambivalences of human longing and belonging and does not shy away from the contradictions of modernity. Restorative nostalgia protects the absolute truth, while reflective nostalgia calls it into doubt. (Boym 2001: XVIII)

- 15 Rather than evaluating the, for lack of a better word, “authenticity” of the nostalgia implied by the question of lived or “imagined,” Boym here looks at practices. Practice, in turn, takes us to the realm of the people who experience nostalgia—its publics—and what use they make of it, be that personal, social, or political. While Boym distinguishes idealized types of nostalgia, I aim to alter this formula somewhat, exploring, instead, different texts and the interactions that take place amongst their publics. The reasons for this bear brief elaboration.
- 16 While nostalgia was once considered a disease and object for study it is now generally thought of as an emotion or social current. The latter are more difficult to grasp conceptually, and this often leads to their displacement onto individuals or texts. In Boym’s own work, for example, we get statements such as, “the past for the restorative nostalgic is a value for the present” (Boym 2001: 49). This is both an interesting observation about value and a projection of a totalizing type—the restorative nostalgic—onto a would-be individual. Though Boym’s project is not deeply troubled by this situation, the general framework can lead to awkward moments when transported into other investigations. In her insightful work on Kemalist nostalgia, for instance, Özyürek suggests that said nostalgia would at first seem to have much in common with Boym’s restorative category, but for the fact that those experiencing it do not really believe the

bygone era can be restored. She notes that “although helpful conceptually, a purely restorative nostalgia, as the nostalgia for the single-party regime of the early republic demonstrates, proves difficult to maintain, especially if it is experienced by individuals, rather than circulated in political pamphlets” (Boym 2001: 178). Özyürek correctly points out that Boym’s idealized categories of nostalgia are hard to identify in specific people, though they might be found in certain texts. While the latter may get us closer to a nostalgic object, a related problem will emerge when trying to identify nostalgia in the text because texts are inevitably open to multiple interpretations.

- 17 A more useful approach may be to look at the situation in terms of a set of relations between various actors: specifically, texts, their productive activations by individuals, and the publics constituted by this interaction. That is, rather than referring to restorative or reflective nostalgia writ large, I prefer to speak of (potentially) restorative texts and their (more soundly) restorative or reflective activations. When I talk about the activation of a text, I am drawing on the work of Tony Bennett, who puts forth the notion of a reading formation, “a set of intersecting discourses that productively activate a given body of texts and the relations between them in a specific way” (Bennett 1983: 5). Bennett’s own work draws on the notion of “discursive formations” set forth by Michel Pêcheux (1982), though it also resonates with work on discourse and intertextuality of Mikhail Bakhtin (e.g. 1981, 1984, 1986) and subsequent critics. The crucial understanding that I draw from Bennett is that a text has no inherent meaning but, rather, that meaning is constituted in and negotiated through the various “readings” that take place as texts circulate discursively through time and space.
- 18 The limits on this circulation are, in turn, defined by the publics that interact with a particular set of texts. Drawing on Michael Warner, a public can be conceived of as a self-organized, text-based social space created by the reflexive and temporal circulation of discourse among strangers (Warner 2002: 67-119). While Warner suggests that a public is constituted through “mere attention” to a text or a world of textual discourse (Warner 2002: 87), in the case of *Century* there is a distinction to be made between those viewing within the Turkish context and those viewing outside. This is not a matter of political alignment —on the contrary, all those who take part in the debate in Turkey, whether, to put it crudely, pro- or anti-*Century*, are part of the show’s Turkey-based public. The distinction at hand, rather, is simply one of contextual knowledge. Language plays a major role in this,¹¹ but so do encounters with history education in the Turkish system, and awareness of and sensitivity to socio-political issues ranging from the Kurdish question to the role of Islam in public life to gender norms to the legacy of Kemalism. *Century* circulates in a particular manner within Turkey and in other manners without.¹² And though one could certainly speak of the program’s greater public, I will limit my comments in this essay to the emic perspective, focusing only on *Century*’s Turkey-based public.
- 19 In assembling a toolkit to analyse the public formation or lack thereof for recent, Ottoman-themed texts in Turkey, I have thus far drawn on Boym’s distinction to address types of nostalgia, Bennett’s notion of productive activation to clarify that such nostalgia is revealed through practice, and Warner’s account of publics to conceptualize the ultimate result of such practices. Before turning to the texts at hand it will be useful to further equip this toolkit with a media-focused refinement. Marcia Landy’s work on cinematic uses of the past incorporates the Nietzschean (1991)

distinction between monumental, antiquarian, and critical approaches to history in a discussion of cinematic genres, and her interpretation of that typology is worth summarizing.

- 20 Monumental approaches idealize heroic figures of the past, revelling in their deeds and their power and frequently presenting historical effects as causes. This reverence for the past is, for Nietzsche and Landy, often a way of downplaying the political figures of the present. Antiquarian approaches, on the other hand, venerate the past in terms of its artifacts and records, failing to make it a value for the present, and feeding “on a frozen and fetishized attachment to past individuals as objects” (Landy 1996: 19). Critical approaches round out the typology and are characterized by a lack of reverence for the past and a relativistic understanding of its role in the present. They tend to emphasize the subjective agency of individuals from the past.
- 21 In the discussion that follows, I situate these approaches alongside Boym’s typology to better characterize the dynamics involved as publics engage (or fail to engage) with a variety of Ottoman-themed texts. My analysis will at times be marked by an apparent tension between classification of the texts themselves and classification of the productive activations of the texts. At one time I may refer to a text as restorative and monumental; at others I may refer to the reflective activations of a text by members of its public. The line between these two can be murky, and this is all the more true when one of the primary objects of study is the work of media critics commenting on the shows themselves. In such cases, apparently, “restorative” texts may also be activated in “reflective” ways by some of the cultural intermediaries (Bourdieu 1984) who have taken them up. Lest there be any doubt, my critical position assumes all texts are ultimately activated, and thus given meaning, by their users. When I speak of a “restorative” text, then, I am making a statement about its value relative to dominant cultural currents in Turkey.

III. Activating nostalgia - texts and their viewing formations¹³

Magnificent Century

- 22 In a parallel project¹⁴ I examine a number of discursive tropes that arose in the public debate over *Century*, noting that each trope tends to have a, roughly speaking, pro- and anti-*Century* side. One conclusion from that analysis is pertinent to the current discussion: namely, that *Century* circulates as a reflectively nostalgic text in Turkey. What I mean by this is that those who enjoy *Century* also tend to be those who activate that text reflectively by, for example, questioning the Ottoman history that is taught in Turkey, viewing the show in an interpretive framework where irony may be more relevant than the issue of “truth,” and asking “what if” questions rather than making “and thus” statements.
- 23 To illustrate this trend I include here a brief example from what is perhaps the master-trope of the *Century* controversy: the taboo on sacred history. This trope engages questions about whether certain historical figures and incidents should be subject to representation at all and, if so, what sort of representation should be permissible.

- 24 The first time I met with, Günhan Börekçi, a historical consultant to *Century*, he happened to have been on location at Topkapı Palace earlier in the day,¹⁵ and he related a conversation that had taken place there between himself and lead actor Halit Ergenç, who played Sultan Süleyman. Ergenç asked Börekçi what he thought would have happened if Süleyman hadn't had his oldest son and primary heir, Mustafa, killed, and they discussed how different history might have been.¹⁶ Börekçi told me that one of the useful aspects of *Century* is that it allows people to engage history with these sort of "what if" questions. Questions that can be both accepting and critical at the same time and, thus have, in Börekçi's terms, a dialectical nature (2012). Posing such questions is uncomfortable for those who wish to view Süleyman as infallible—it breaks a taboo on the sacred nature of figures such as Mehmed II, Süleyman, and Atatürk—but it is precisely this kind of probing that is in line with Boym's reflective nostalgia.
- 25 Another of my informants, Ali,¹⁷ a male doctor, displayed similar reflection in his response to the show's portrayal of relations between Charles V and Süleyman. When I asked him how historically accurate he felt the show was, he told me the following:
- The show is going in the right direction. I'm not a professional historian, but ultimately, it's going to end with history. But there is something wrong in history. *Kanuni*¹⁸ exaggerates a threat from the Spanish King and he goes to find him, that's what the program shows. This is before Vienna, our troops are on their way to campaign. *Kanuni* leads them to take Belgrade and the like. At that point the King was already dealing with the English and he had conquered America. The question, according to history, is what would it benefit him to come fight in Hungary or Belgrade. But here it looks as if he'd run away—that's not realistic. [...] The Spanish are dealing with America, collecting gold, tomatoes, potatoes and the like. Why would they come fight a dark war, taking the time to gather 100,000 soldiers when they've got so much else going on? That's a really expensive project. The Ottomans could gather people easily, but Spain was smaller and it was harder to rally troops. I mean that's what I know of history. Because in that time, the sixteenth century, they had conquered America, it was full of gold. Why would they go fight *Kanuni* for Hungary? What's the point? [...] Wars are all about money. It's surprising that others weren't there fighting for America. (May 2012)
- 26 In this rich moment Ali starts off with what could be called a critique of history itself: "there's something wrong in history." Ultimately, what he seems to mean by this is that both the show and the history that he learned in the Turkish educational system fail to address key reasons that Charles V might have had for not fully engaging the Ottomans between Süleyman's taking reign in 1521 and the Siege of Vienna in 1529. Crucially, this questioning of history (or, more accurately, Turkish historiography) arises in reaction to the show, but clearly not as a passive adoption of the "truth" of the text. On the contrary, Ali says that while he agrees with much of the history presented there, in this case something is wrong.
- 27 This kind of productive activation was repeated frequently: many viewers I spoke with detailed similar reactions, and numerous internet chat rooms and Facebook groups housed discussions devoted to topics such as this. It is significant that these critiques come from fans of the show who continued to engage with the text and, thus, remain part of its public. This is to say that something in the viewing formation surrounding *Century* kept audiences reflecting on history *and* watching the show, despite any disagreements they may have had with the portrayal of history contained therein.
- 28 Some answer to why this interest remained may be found if we look more closely at Landy's typology for mediated history. The depiction and reception of Sultan Süleyman

would most likely be a hybrid of the monumental and critical approaches to history discussed by Nietzsche and Landy. That is, it revels in the portrayal of Süleyman as a great hero of the time and yet also treats his character subjectively, exploring his human side, and allowing viewers to form a bond with him. That it does so in part through the frequent use of dream sequences and flashbacks, each of which ultimately function as historical explanation, is very much in line with the cause/effect transposition noted by Landy as a mode of monumental telling (Landy 1996: 20-21).

- 29 Another aspect of the monumental type is its potential for downplaying contemporary political figures. Along this line there has been much commentary on Erdoğan's unease with *Century*, as critics have suggested this relates to the competing portrayal of a "great man" on the Turkish airwaves. Satirical political cartoons, in particular, have made a point of comparing Erdoğan with *Century*'s Süleyman, often with the implication that the former craves the respect and attention lavished on the sultan.¹⁹ Whether this is psychologically valid for the man is largely irrelevant; what matters is that such discourse circulates actively in Turkey, stoking discussion about the show and contributing to the viewing formation for the program.
- 30 Finally, the lack of total reverence for the historical figure of Süleyman—the failure of the producers and fans of the show to fetishize the character in the way those who oppose it seem to have done—indicates that we are in the realm of a critical, rather than antiquarian approach to history. The extent to which this is the case will become clearer as we proceed to other, very different, portrayals of the Ottoman past, examining what might have led to their success or failure to engage a public. I will make the case that the nostalgic formations emerging between the texts and their viewers have as much to do with their ultimate success as more commonly considered issues such as production quality.

Conquest 1453 [*Fetih 1453*]

- 31 The first major Ottoman-era text to follow *Century*, Faruk Aksoy's *Conquest 1453* [*Fetih 1453*], was a film rather than a TV series. This formal distinction is highly relevant to the question of publics and I will return to it shortly. *Conquest* was a 17 million USD production that premiered at 14:53 on the seventeenth of February 2012 and quickly went on to become the biggest Turkish box office hit to that date,²⁰ surpassing multiple iterations of an Aksoy-produced comedy series as well as the nationalistic crime drama *Valley of the Wolves Iraq*. *Conquest* is an epic retelling of the conquering of Constantinople under Sultan Mehmed II. It lavishes in action, and a large portion of the film's budget went into computer-generated imagery for battle scenes. The film presents a very black and white version of history, with the Byzantine rulers portrayed as entirely corrupt and the Ottomans as pure-hearted. Mehmed's character is largely one-dimensional: he is young, ambitious, and clever, and will stop at nothing in his quest to conquer the city. He shows doubt just once in the film, when the siege of the city is going badly, and this serves as the opportunity for him to receive a divine message from an Islamic sheikh that will spur him on to victory. Perhaps noting the controversy aroused over Süleyman's portrayal in *Century*, the producers seem to have made a point of shopping out even the obligatory love story to film's secondary (and less sacred) hero, Ulubatlı Hasan, who dies while planting the Ottoman flag atop one of Constantinople's towers.

- 32 We can see evidence of both of the Ottoman narratives mentioned by Öncü in this film, but with an interesting twist. Öncü suggests that the shift from a narrative of conquest to tolerance came about because the conquest metaphor had worn thin and something more in keeping with the neoliberal market policies of the AK-Party was required (Öncü 2007: 244). While the metaphor may well have worn thin, the narrative (and the discourse) of conquest are still alive and well both across Istanbul and throughout Turkey today, and nowhere is this represented more clearly than in the awkward synthesis of conquest and tolerance enacted in the final scenes of the film. Immediately after an incredibly graphic battle, Sultan Mehmed II acknowledges the body of recently killed Emperor, Constantine XI, and then marches to claim Hagia Sophia, where he encounters hundreds of frightened Christians who have sought refuge. Mehmed addresses them kindly, assuring them that they have nothing to fear, and even picks up a small blond girl, allowing her to touch his face.²¹ The film ends on this happy note of tolerance, leaving untold the story of looting and pillaging that was so violent and destructive that Mehmed actually put a stop to it after two days rather than the customary three.
- 33 Further description of the film, which was panned in Greece and banned in Lebanon for its base portrayal of Christian characters, would only serve to highlight that *Conquest* partakes in a largely restorative telling of Turkish history. In Landy's terms, the film would be a hybrid between monumental and antiquarian approaches to history—it is monumental as the heroic struggle of an individual in place of the nation and yet it is antiquarian in its fetishized approach to the figure of Mehmed, utilizing a second hero, Hasan (also a figure from legends of the conquest), to partake as a surrogate in the more human aspects of the drama.
- 34 Critical reception²² of the film tended to split along ideological, educational, or religious lines, though not in a simplistic fashion. Secular columnist Burak Bekdil, writing in the English-language liberal daily *Hurriyet Daily News*, derides the chauvinism of the film (Bekdil 2012a), and then mentions the various threats he received in the wake of that column as evidence of the nationalism and naiveté of the Turkish populace (Bekdil 2012b). Historian and long-term resident in Turkey, Vangelis Kechriotis, writes ironically about all the “possible” (though implausible) aspects of the film in the liberal daily *Radikal*, but says that the ending with the child is completely beyond belief, even for those raised on the logic of video games (Kechriotis 2012). Another foreigner with deep experience of Turkey, Andrew Finkel, notes the same scene as breaking all credibility in his piece for the liberal daily *Taraf*. He comments that there is no way for a foreigner who did not grow up with this legend to take part in the film, in part because it is presented as a chronicler's account, ignoring the rules of character creation or realistic drama (Finkel 2012). Finkel's critique becomes the fodder for an ironic response by *Radikal* columnist Ezgi Başaran, who suggests that indeed it is impossible for foreigners to understand the film. Her column is a critique of Turkish society and its love for such a film despite an overt ignorance about historical facts (Başaran 2012).
- 35 Such accounts emphasize the chauvinism of the film, the worship of the heroic characters, the valorisation of violence, and the shallow portrayal of history as a series of memorized events rather than humanized experience. Indeed, historian and *Century* historical advisor Günhan Börekçi, who had not seen *Conquest* when I spoke to him, said that, as a result of the Turkish educational system, many aspects of that story were

entirely fixed and memorized by Turkish audiences in advance, and the filmmakers would have been obliged to follow that “script” (Börekçi 2012)²³. In one group interview I did with religious students at a university in Istanbul, my informants dismissively referred to the film as “science fiction” in discussing how unbelievable its portrayal of history was, and noted that people were expecting something like *Gladiator* and were thus also disappointed by the effects (April 2013). Many of the secular interlocutors that I interviewed about *Century* had simply refused to watch *Conquest*.²⁴ For those who had, though, the response I received from Ali, the doctor quoted in the section on *Century*, was typical: “ridiculous” (May 2012). This speaks to the possibility of two rather different publics for the productions. Though I am sure there is overlap between the two groups, my experience also suggests quite potent detest for the “other” text from what might be called extreme members of each group.

- 36 Praise of the film tended to come from more conservative camps. M Nedim Hazar, writing for the Gülen-movement paper *Zaman*,²⁵ notes the difficulty of producing a historical drama and finds *Conquest* highly successful in terms of costumes, special effects, and war scenes. What’s more, he notes that the film avoids the “mistakes” of similar projects, which depict the Sultan sharing a bed with more than one woman among their various insults to history. He is disappointed, however, with the portrayal of history overall because the film fails to demonstrate the incredible intelligence, education, and strategy that were part of Mehmed II’s character, and instead exaggerates the glory of Ulubatlı Hasan, thus making it like a Hollywood production (Hazar 2012).
- 37 Ali Murat Güven, writing a lengthy review for Islamist intellectual daily *Yeni şafak*, is far less parsimonious in his praise, saying it is about time for Turkey to have such a sensational film, and noting that *Conquest* dodges the trap of histrionics so common among productions from a nationalist and conservative perspective. His review reads as a response not just to the film, nor to the liberal critiques noted above but, rather, to conservative religious critics who object to the lack of proper beards on some of the characters, or to the portrayal of scantily-clad women in the Byzantine palace,²⁶ or to the love story between Hasan and Era, which Güven defends as pure despite the lack of a religious ceremony to consummate it. Interestingly, he repeats the defensive claim frequently issued by *Century*’s writer Meral Okay, that this is not a documentary and should not be judged as such, but then goes on to say that, unlike *Century*, whose writers “intentionally and knowingly give false information,” *Conquest* is simply a case of acceptable artistic license in the representation of history. He does not, however, clarify the criteria on which he bases this distinction. By way of conclusion he notes that (then) Prime Minister Erdoğan is reported to have watched the film and enjoyed it. “What else could have happened?” he asks rhetorically, “Would it be possible for a person who shows unconditional love to Istanbul and has given service to the city for so many years not to like this film?” (Güven 2012).
- 38 Though these examples are by no means exhaustive, they serve to demonstrate the existence of two different approaches to history, or nostalgia, at work in the viewing formations of *Conquest*. I have argued that the text itself could, in the dominant Turkish setting, be considered restorative. In fact, those who criticized the film often disparaged its restorative aspects and those who lauded it frequently praised the same characteristics. It is indeed the very richness of this debate coupled with the film’s commercial success that suggest it connected with a public. *Conquest* stayed in Turkish

cinemas for one year, reaching a total viewership of 6,572,618 and thus becoming the most-watched film ever in Turkey (Turkish or otherwise), until it was surpassed in 2014 by the comedies *Düğün Derneği* and *Recep İvedik 4*.

IV. The form factor

- 39 Thus far I have argued that *Century* and *Conquest* circulated in Turkey in reflectively and restoratively nostalgic manners, respectively, and I have suggested that they may have appealed to different publics as well, though some overlap between these is highly likely. Beyond these matters, the forms of the two texts also bear consideration. *Century* was a three-and-a-half-year-long TV series that ran for about two hours per week and for approximately 40 episodes per year.²⁷ It was watched on television and on the internet. The former often took place in a family setting where viewing was interrupted by commercials. Such an environment invites conversation and the use of mobile devices for “fact checking,” a practice that many informants confirmed. The series format meant that producers had to create nearly two hours of content per week, so the plot tended to feature extended stories about personal relationships, sometimes drawn from legend or foreign diplomatic accounts, other times created *carte blanche*. These subplots fed into and decorated the telling of major events such as wars, treaties, and executions that are well recorded in Ottoman and other documentary sources. The series covered the 46-year span of Süleyman’s reign, with occasional flashbacks to his time as a prince [*şehzade*].
- 40 *Conquest*, on the other hand, was released as a 160-minute film to be watched in a single viewing. The filmic viewing environment —darkened room, fixed seats facing the screen, and the norms of polite behaviour— does not lend itself to conversation or fact-checking, though the single intermission which is the Turkish norm does provide some opportunity for this. The storytelling in any film will have to be compressed when compared to that in a TV series. If this is generally the case, *Conquest* may be an exaggeration of the norm insofar as the story and characters were already well-known to the Turkish audience and didn’t have to be (and were not) so much developed as revealed. (Recall Börekçi’s comments that the elements of the plot were scripted by the Turkish educational system and Finkel’s observation that only someone raised on these legends in Turkey could access the film.) The story narrated by *Conquest* is shorter than that of *Century*, covering a three-year period with the occasional flashback to Mehmed’s childhood and an introductory scene that begins in Mecca at the time of Prophet Muhammad.
- 41 If these formal constraints suggest some of the reasons that *Conquest* presents a more restorative picture of the past, the frenzy that greeted *Century*, which included death threats to the creators when the show first appeared, should also be considered. *Conquest* came out just over a year after *Century*’s premiere, though the film’s production had started well before the first episode of the TV show had aired. Aksoy, making a film about one of the two most revered Ottoman sultans, would have known quite well the reaction to the portrayal of the other that was presented in *Century*.
- 42 Whether or not this atmosphere affected the production of *Conquest*, it likely affected the production of Ottoman TV shows that followed *Century*, none of which have managed to match the program’s success and the majority of which have been outright failures. In the discussion that follows, I will present brief commentary on the modes of

presentation of the most significant of these followers, building a case that restorative nostalgia is a difficult mode to maintain over a long-term format such as a series.

Once Upon a Time in the Ottoman Empire: Rebellion [*Bir Zamanlar Osmanlı: Kiyam*]

- 43 The production that I will refer to as *Rebellion* for the sake of simplicity experienced many setbacks over its four iterations. Set in the Tulip Era, a period known both for the flourishing of arts and culture as well as for decadence, it is the story of the Patrona Halil Rebellion that brought this era to an end. It was produced by Her şey Film Productions for state-run channel TRT-1 and was initially advertised for release in late 2011 as *This is the Ottoman Empire* [*Burası Osmanlı*].²⁸ Though the show, which featured Turkish cinema legend Turkan şoray, was heavily promoted early in the fall, its first four episodes were scrapped because they were found to be “more like a documentary than a drama series” (İzci 2012). The director of these episodes, Ezel Akay, chalked this up to executive interference, saying, “The administrators at TRT said we’ll criticize you if you touch on the Sultan’s private life. They think it will be just fine if the Sultan’s bedroom remains unseen and we believe all the princes were brought by storks” (Karabıyık 2012).
- 44 The next iteration, still starring şoray but now directed by Altan Dönmez and bearing the *Rebellion* title, premiered in March of 2012 and continued through June of that year, earning modest ratings on Mondays that were roughly a third of what *Century* was receiving on the more competitive Wednesday night slot. The third iteration got a new director, Abdullah Oğuz, removed “rebellion” from the title, and added heartthrob Özcan Deniz to the cast, premiering in November of 2012. It was cancelled the following month, however, owing both to dismal ratings and the departure of one of its main stars, Fırat Tanış, who played Patrona Halil. In the wake of the cancellation, Gülen-affiliated broadcaster Samanyolu TV purchased the rights to the show, picked up a new cast and director (Kumral Pakel), and premiered *Deep State in the Ottoman Empire* [*Osmanlı’da Derin Devlet*] in April of 2013. This iteration, striking for its highly negative portrayal of non-Sunni Islamic communities (Atay 2013a), concluded in July of the same year.
- 45 Though *Rebellion* received heavy investment at every step of the way, featured major stars, and was helmed by some experienced directors, it was a consummate failure. There are clearly many reasons for this. Early episodes were critiqued for the garishly amateur choreography of fight scenes, the grating use of contemporary jargon, the weak performance of actors, and striking errors such as having a car drive by in the background at one point (Atay 2012; İzci 2012). Many questioned the wisdom of trying to bring out a second Ottoman drama while one was already on the air. Beyond this there was the issue of the period chosen, a moment from the so-called decline of the Empire rather than its greatest triumph, as depicted in *Conquest*, or its apogee, as in *Century*. According to TV critic Tayfun Atay, the choice to focus on a weak period of the Empire makes *Rebellion* a “brave attempt” particularly in the face of the current “fetishization of all things Ottoman” (Atay 2012).
- 46 While this may be true from the perspective of ratings, I suggest that the Tulip Era was likely chosen with great care and thoughtful reference to the current Ottomania. As Öncü has pointed out, this era has multiple meanings in Turkey, being a period of high

art and culture in the Islamic tradition on the one hand but, on the other, one that tends to be recalled in “‘common knowledge’ [...] as a timeless moment when the poor people of Istanbul went hungry while the Ottoman rulers were engaged in ‘pleasure-seeking activities’”. For Öncü, the early 2000s were marked by the AK-Party’s attempt to reinvent the Tulip Era as “an imaginative point of reference when the Muslim populations of Istanbul occupied a privileged status and Islam was the locus of authority merging both religious and political power” (Öncü 2007: 246).

- 47 We can see in *Rebellion* a continuation of this clearly restorative approach to Ottoman nostalgia. The show was produced for and, according to initial director Akay, policed by the state-run channel TRT, which has close ties to the AK-Party government. It featured women dressed far more modestly than those in *Century*, and spent far less time on the intrigues of the harem and palace life. Since the Sultan depicted, Ahmet III, is not one of the sacred untouchables of the Ottoman line we can say that the avoidance of taboo performed by the show relates not only to *what* is shown, but also to *who* is shown. Shifting to Landy’s more fine-grained approach to depictions of the past, *Rebellion* is in the realm of antiquarian history, lacking the monumental heroism of either *Century* or *Conquest*.
- 48 In this journey through Ottoman nostalgia we have thus far examined two TV shows and one film; two restorative approaches, and one reflective. But the two restorative texts that I’ve touched on differ from each other both in terms of format and in terms of their approach to history as typified by Nietzsche. *Conquest* gave us a monumental hero, put forth in all his glory while *Rebellion* gave us antiquated proscriptions on what could be represented with regard to the past. It would be useful to have a monumental restorative version of the past to compare with and, fortuitously, one was provided in the fall of 2013.

Conqueror [*Fatih*]²⁹

- 49 The TV show *Conqueror* was a long time in the planning, though it was destined to have only a short life on the air. In May of 2012 reports emerged that Show TV, the channel that had brought forth *Century*,³⁰ had signed a deal with Faruk Aksoy, the director of *Conquest*. This included rights to show *Conquest* as the first four episodes of a new TV drama that would continue after that point with an Aksoy-directed series in which Devrim Evin would reprise his role as Mehmed II from where the film left off (Radikal Staff 2012b). Six months later, word came out that, due to financial difficulties at Show TV, the much-anticipated series had been cancelled despite nearly eight million USD having already gone into the stage and props (Eyüboğlu 2012). The program was later purchased by Kanal D, but without Aksoy or Evin and with a revised concept: the action would pick up 20 years after the conquest of Istanbul, showing Mehmed in the mature years of his leadership. *Conqueror* was heavily promoted by Kanal D and premiered at the end of September 2013 as the third highest rated show for the evening, behind a talent competition and another drama. Despite receiving only about half as many viewers as either of these shows, *Conqueror* was heavily discussed on Twitter and Facebook that night (Radikal Staff 2013). Unfortunately for *Conqueror*, it would seem that much of this discussion was negative. In subsequent weeks the ratings dropped drastically and the program was pulled from the air at the start of November, after its fifth episode.

50 As with *Rebellion*, there are many explanations for the show's failure. İrfan Şahin, the CEO of Kanal D and the man ultimately responsible for *Conqueror's* purchase and broadcast, told me he had strong doubts about the show from the outset: "Fatih [Mehmed] is known as the conqueror of Istanbul. You can't take a show that picks up 25 years after his major accomplishment and expect it to do well." Comparing the show with the Showtime drama *The Tudors*, he noted that Henry VII's life was colorful both before and after he took the crown. "Unfortunately," he told me, "the same cannot be said of Fatih" (Şahin 2013).

51 A number of people commented on the lack of connection they felt for the character of Mehmed, some chalking this up to poor acting by Mehmet Akif Alakurt (Güleroğlu 2013), others noting that this is inherent in representation that keeps us distant from the Sultan's private life and only allows us to see his didactic speeches rather than his inner struggles and motivations (Tekelioğlu 2013). Some critiques focused on the patent attempts to imitate aspects of *Century*. Media critic Anibal Güleroğlu, for instance, noted that the character of Çiçek Hatun was a clear effort to cash in on *Century's* meddling Hürrem (Güleroğlu 2013), and my own observation is that, beyond resemblances in costumes and setting, which are possibly to be expected, the very music used in the show was often strikingly similar, both with reference to melodies and the deployment of thematic types across scenes. *Century's* historical advisor, Günhan Börekçi, had suggested over a year before *Conqueror* came out that such resemblances were likely, since the imaginative work that goes into creating such a world is considerable. He told me,

When you read Ottoman history you don't get the kinds of details that are necessary for the show. There's a lot we don't know. So you either need to find that information in an archive, take it from another example, or make a guess. My colleagues rarely realize how difficult it is to create historical "reality" without a substantial pool of documents and secondary literature. That's where the imagination comes in. Meral Okay emphasized this. She read all that she could, but there was plenty of stuff that couldn't be found in what's available to read. Now the show is part of history and others can imitate it. (Börekçi 2012)

52 TV critics Tayfun Atay and Orhan Tekelioğlu both noted that, in Turkey, there is a trend of trying to imitate successful program formats, and that the followers often tend to fail. For Atay, this is the difference between "proactive" and "reactive" work, and "the reactive work is hard" (Atay 2013b). He gives an example of how hard when describing *Conqueror's* place within the greater Ottoman-inspired media framework. Explaining that the last iteration of *Rebellion*, *Deep State*, was ethnocentric and that the FOX Turkey comedy *Harem*³¹ is a parody, he suggests that it is hard to tell which of these *Conqueror* more closely resembles because it is ethnocentric but has such bad acting that it seems to be a parody.³² Noting that many audience members wanted the show to be more about the conquest, he says, contra those fans and Kanal D's Şahin, that staying away from the conquest itself was the best thing the show could have done, but that people in Turkey are not yet ready for anything other than a heroic portrayal of history at this point.

53 Tekelioğlu seems to flesh out Atay's point about proactive versus reactive shows in his discussion of why *Conqueror* failed:

[*Conqueror*] doesn't cause us to wonder about the past in the same way that *Magnificent Century* does. (Were our ancestors Turkish? Were most of the women in the palace non-Muslims? Were the women's concerns always like that? Why were

there so many inappropriately ambitious men. etc.) *Conqueror* doesn't arouse questions like this. Also, it's hard to understand what kind of person Fatih was from the show. We don't see his difficulties and we don't see him as a regular person, so the portrait presented of him is almost foreign. We occasionally see him giving patriotic didactic speeches. The show resembles the first era of Westerns or 1960s Yeşilçam films about the Byzantines, with clear-cut good and bad characters. We don't see debates about our ancestors, nor intimate portraits, nor official Republican ideology. (Tekelioğlu 2013)

- 54 What Tekelioğlu describes, whether intentionally or not, is a distinction very much in keeping with that between reflective and restorative nostalgia. Güleröğlü makes a similar point, but in even stronger terms, telling us, "Watching *Conqueror* it doesn't even seem like a drama on a free channel. It's impossible to escape from the feeling that it's being shown on a restricted Iron Curtain station as propaganda with a goal of indoctrinating certain lessons" (Güleröğlü 2014). *Conqueror*, like *Conquest*, offers a restorative, monumental-antiquarian approach to the past: a nostalgia that treats the lead character as a hero, but does not allow viewers access to his human side; one that relishes in official history rather than inviting questions about what might have been.
- 55 Where *Conqueror* differs from *Conquest* is in the matter of format. Restorative tellings may work for the short span of a film, but they are much harder to maintain in the serialized world of TV. Güleröğlü emphasizes this point as well:
- A TV show is not like cinema. The viewer in the home setting can come face to face with the show to evaluate it more closely and has the right to watch an episode again. In this setting the lifelessness of *Fatih*, the spiritlessness of the character came up immediately (Güleröğlü 2014).

Conclusion

- 56 In the discussion above I have pursued an explanation for the fate of various Ottoman historical dramas released in Turkey in the wake of *Century*, attempting to understand why some projects succeeded while others failed. Ultimately, the measure of a text's success is its ability to engage a public. This engagement has a commercial side, which is currently measured in terms of ratings for TV and in terms of box office for film, but it also includes many other dynamics such as the watching and discussion of the texts that takes place among family, friends, and acquaintances; the study, popularization, and retelling of history linked to the texts; the use and formation of social groups to share information and commentary on the texts and the history they depict; and the interactions between creators, critics, and lay viewers of the texts. Such exchanges are all examples of productive activations of a text and, insofar as they continue to build, drawing on and leading into one another, they comprise the reflexive circulation of discourse that characterizes what Warner calls a public.
- 57 I have attempted to trace evidence of this discourse by highlighting a variety of reactions to the texts, including their most salient praises and critiques. These evaluations not only shed light on the different viewing formations the texts elicited, but also on some of the reasons for their success or failure. My overarching conceit in tracing this path has been the notion that different nostalgic approaches to the creation and activation of texts will have much to do with whether a TV show or film ultimately foments a public.

- 58 In short, it appears that restorative approaches to the Ottoman past face an uphill battle in establishing a public among TV viewers. This is not a singular explanation: production quality, timing, acting, and countless other aspects of each of these texts certainly had much to do with their ultimate success or failure. Nevertheless, the pattern exemplified is striking, and appears all the more so when highlighted with critical reactions from cultural intermediaries and lay viewers alike. In the Turkish setting, Ottoman-era historical dramas that portray history with a restorative nostalgic inflection (*Rebellion* and *Conqueror*) had a difficult time keeping TV audiences interested. The reflectively nostalgic portrayal of *Century*, on the other hand, led to arguably the most popular Turkish TV show ever.³³ The realm of film may be different, as *Conquest* clearly demonstrates that a restorative approach to Ottoman history can meet with commercial success and establish an active discourse community.³⁴
- 59 This is not to suggest that restorative or ultimately conservative programs in general are bound to fail. On the contrary, one of the country's most popular and longest-running franchises, *Valley of the Wolves* [*Kurtlar Vadisi*] tends to engage publics that are conservative in terms of religion, nationalism, and social norms. Furthermore, its underlying mythos is very much in line with the pan-Turkist, pro-Ottoman, nationalist view highlighted by Onar and the presentation of this mythos includes a distinctly restorative nostalgia for the Ottoman past.³⁵ Yet, even though this nostalgia provides *Valley's* mythical impetus, guiding the characters and affecting plot development, it is not the program's overriding gestalt, as in the case of the Ottoman projects we have examined.
- 60 Something shifts when the overarching project of a text is the Ottoman past. When one enters the realm of Ottoman history, one enters the realm of taboos, and the choice to challenge or observe these taboos is key. Restorative approaches respect the taboos; reflective approaches are less likely to do so. Since the spectrum between these poles is clearly relative, the approach to taboo must be evaluated with reference to the viewing formation that characterizes each project. Generally speaking, however, the long-term engagement offered by TV shows seems to require that some of the taboos on Ottoman history be broken in order to give audiences a chance to identify with the characters and, thus, the shows. As a public engages with a program in a reflective manner, its members partake in various tangible if diffuse forms of recreation: discussions and debates about the "truth" the show and what "really" happened; book purchases and internet searches to learn more on historical tidbits from the plot; visits to historical sites for tourism, pilgrimage, or a combination of these; purchase of jewellery, clothing, or decor inspired by the show, and the like.³⁶
- 61 The would-be publics for restorative projects, on the other hand, are offered avowed re-creation rather than recreation—the "absolute truth," in Boym's terms, of a purified past. The audience is invited to watch and admire rather than participate; to view history and its characters from a discrete distance. Such accounts eschew questions and, thereby, room for discussion or further investigation—the key practices in forming a public.
- 62 Restorative nostalgia is not without its participatory outlets—in the case of *Conquest*, Istanbul's Panorama 1453 museum and the 29 May celebrations are two examples—but they may entail an engagement of a qualitatively different nature than their more reflective counterparts. The questioning (or not) of the past and probing (or not) of taboos is one key distinction. In this sense, the re-creation of the past that takes place

in the restorative milieu may be akin to the more unidirectional interaction once said to characterize filmic reception: the viewer is, relatively speaking, more passive and at the whim of the image presented.

- 63 There may appear to be echoes of Marshall McLuhan (1994) here —medium and message as closely interwoven— and, indeed, I believe this work accents some of the difficulties inherent in presenting restorative accounts of history through a TV series in a free-market media environment. This is not, however, to say that restorative histories are doomed to fail; it is rather to highlight the multitude of problems such projects faced in the particular nexus between entertainment, politics, and the past in contemporary Turkey.
- 64 Ultimately, both reflective (*Century*) and restorative (*Conquest*) approaches to the Ottoman past have had great success in this environment, and this may suggest that very different publics are engaging these productions. The result is a paradox with regard to the Ottoman past that is perhaps best illustrated with reference to a Turkish proverb: *taklitler aslını yaşatır*³⁷ (the imitations bring life to the original). *Century* and *Conquest* are imitations that have brought their respective originals back to life in a manner of speaking: their living, breathing representations have been recorded in moving pictures and made available to viewers on a heretofore unprecedented scale. And yet these imitations present very different pictures of an “original” past that is often assumed to be monolithic in Turkey. Their side-by-side existence speaks to a divide in Turkish society that reflects disputes not only about the nature of the past, but also the present and future of the country. This divide, increasingly palatable each day, is anything but history.

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NOTES

1. This and all subsequent translations mine. The original Turkish was as follows: “Bizim görevimiz nedir, bunu çok iyi biliriz. Ecdadımızın at sırtında gittiği her yere biz de gideriz, her yerle biz de ilgileniriz ama bunlar televizyon ekranındaki ecdadımızı zannediyorum o Muhteşem Yüzyıl belgeselindeki gibi tanıyor. Bizim öyle bir ecdadımız yok. Biz öyle bir Kanuni tanımadık. Biz öyle bir Sultan Süleyman tanımadık. Onun ömrünün 30 yılı at sırtında geçti. Sarayda o gördüğünüz dizilerdeki gibi geçmedi. Bunu çok iyi bilmeniz, anlamamız lazım. Ve ben o dizilerin yönetmenlerini de o televizyonun sahiplerini de milletimizin huzurunda kınıyorum. Ve bu konuda da ilgilileri uyarmamıza rağmen yargının da gerekli kararı vermesini bekliyorum” (Radikal Staff 2012a).

2. While some have suggested that the figure could reach over 1 billion when *Century* starts broadcasting in China (Zaman Staff 2014), the man in charge of the show’s international distribution, Global Agency CEO Izzet Pinto, told me in March of 2014 that the additional audience was likely to be closer to 100 million.

3. In fact, there have been reports that Erdoğan's own attack on *Century* was inspired by a trip to Egypt, where he was questioned by then President Morsi or another high-up politician as to why he allowed such a depiction of the Ottomans (F5 Haber Staff 2012). From the perspective of heritage studies, *Century*'s international circulation might be usefully viewed in terms of the historical relations between the Ottomans and the territories where the program circulates. Different discourses about the show dominate the agenda in former Ottoman territories depending on whether the population there is primarily Muslim or Christian, and this situation is even more diverse when considering the territories of former enemies of the Ottomans and countries that had little or no relation with the Empire.

4. Throughout this paper I use a number of terms to refer to the media texts, either TV shows or films, at hand. These terms include "program," "(TV) show," "series," "franchise," "film," and "text." Among these, "program," "(TV) show," and "series" are used to refer to texts that appear on TV in a serialized fashion. These tend to be interchangeable, though "series" is often used to emphasize the collective. "Franchise," refers to a group of such texts that has more than one iteration, as in a series of films, a TV show that also includes films, or multiple instances of closely related TV series. All of the above are possible renderings of the Turkish word "dizi" (literally "series") in situations where I have translated. "Film" refers to a production created for cinematic (also called "theatrical") release. In accordance with prevailing practice, even digital productions created to target cinematic release are called "films." "Text" is used to refer to any of the above media texts, and is most commonly employed to suggest some degree of analysis. On the prevailing practice of referring to such media products as "texts," see Threadgold (2005).

5. The fall of 2014 is slated to have a number of new Ottoman-themed dramas, particularly on the state broadcaster, TRT, which had one miniseries (*Çırağan Baskını* - detailing a coup at Çırağan Palace) and two series (*Filinta* - an Ottoman police story; and *Diriliş Ertuğrul* - a story of the foundation of the Ottoman Empire). Even bigger news is the highly-anticipated return of *Century* production company TIMS to the scene with *Kösem Sultan* in the fall of 2015.

6. The Panorama 1453 Museum commemorating the conquest of Istanbul is perhaps the most striking example of the museum/amusement park synthesis. Miniaturk and Vialand are two other Istanbul attractions that lean further in the direction of amusement.

7. Onar speaks of political representation, Öncü of narrative, and Mills of discourse. These terms, though employed in their specificity, overlap insofar as they are all socio-political constructions. Onar's political perspective is not exclusive of the approaches of Öncü and Mills but, rather, provides a broader tapestry from which the figures for specific iterations of the Ottoman "imaginary" can be drawn. It is clear, for example, that Öncü's conquest-to-tolerance narrative is linked to both the neo-imperialist and the pluralist Islamist categories mentioned by Onar, while Onar's liberal type shares much with Öncü's *Belle Époque*.

8. "Chapter 3 - Nostalgia for the present: struggle for the present in *Magnificent Century*," in my PhD dissertation. I am currently revising the piece to article form.

9. And commented on by many others, including şafak (2011).

10. This topic is tackled in the aforementioned dissertation chapter on *Century*. Drawing on Jameson, Appadurai, and Huyssen, I suggest that the distinction between the imagined and the lived is far more problematic than it might initially appear, particularly when the role of advertising is taken into account.

11. Warner touches on this problem of limits with regard to language as well: "In addressing indefinite strangers, public discourse puts a premium on accessibility. But there is no infinitely accessible language, and to imagine that there should be is to miss other equally important needs of publics: to concretize the world in which discourse circulates, to offer its members direct and active membership through language, to place strangers on a shared footing" (Warner 2002: 108).

12. In fact, my tentative observations on *Century*'s international reception suggest that it tends to circulate restoratively in many locales, while I make the argument elsewhere and below that it circulates reflectively within Turkey.

13. I here adapt Bennett's term "reading formation" to emphasize the nature of the activity at hand in television and film viewing. While Bennett and Woollacott (1987) continue to employ the term "reading" in their analysis of audio-visual texts, I prefer to emphasize the visual aspects at hand. This is in keeping with a recognition of the "visual turn" noted by WJT Mitchell (1986, 1995, 2005) and others, with particular debt owed to DeLuca and Peeples' notion of the "public screen" (2002), a rethinking of Habermas' "public sphere" for our highly mediated age. Ultimately, whether the reference is to "reading" or "viewing," this and related projects attempt to trace discourse through a wide array of social and technological media.

14. The previously mentioned dissertation chapter.

15. A rare event, since *Century* was generally filmed either on set or on locations at the Şehzade Mosque, the Otağ-ı Hümayun at Yıldız Technical University's Davutpaşa campus, or the forest of the German Consular summer residence in Tarabya.

16. When Mustafa was eventually killed on the show in February of 2014 a massive set of reactions from *Century*'s public made their presence felt in formal and social media.

17. A pseudonym. Interviews with anonymous informants are not cited in the bibliography. Instead I include the month and year of the interview after the cited material.

18. This is the name by which Süleyman is commonly known in Turkey. It refers to Süleyman's role in reforming and codifying laws.

19. See, for example, the covers of satirical weeklies *Girgir* and *Leman* for 28 November 2012, or images from cartoonist Ergin Altaylı appearing in the Kemalist daily paper *Sözcü* available at the following links:

<http://galeri.sozcu.com.tr/2012/foto/karikatur/karikaturler.html?pid=362>

<http://galeri.sozcu.com.tr/2012/foto/karikatur/karikaturler.html?pid=395>

20. As of September 2014 it has been surpassed in terms of both ticket sales and total viewers by the comedy films *Wedding League* [*Düğün Dernek*], and *Recep İvedik 4*. See <http://boxofficeturkiye.com/tumzaman/?tm=1989>

21. This moment would likely have a certain familiarity for its Turkish public, as it mimics a very famous photo of US President Bill Clinton and a child taken as he visited the site of an earthquake in Turkey in 1999. I have explored this photo and the trope it began in Turkish political imagery in an essay (Carney 2014). Others have also pointed out this resemblance (e.g. Finkel 2012; Kechriotis 2012).

22. Here and below, the work of columnists is treated alongside that of film critics. Though there are important differences between these categories (see, for example, Andrew Finkel's comments on the status accorded to columnists in Turkey (Finkel 2000: 154-155)), both are among those that Bourdieu (1984) calls "cultural intermediaries," a group with elevated power to influence public discourse. Ultimately, it is discourse, whether at the level of film critique, socio-political critique, or conversation, that interests me

23. Börekçi is far from alone in his appraisal of the Turkish educational system. For further analysis of the nature of this system, especially in terms of its highly codified approaches to nationalist mythology and historical figures, see Altınay (2004), Çayır (2009), Ceylan and Irzık (2004), and Kaplan (2006).

24. My primary research was on the TV shows *Valley of the Wolves* and *Century*. I did not specifically attempt to reach viewers of *Conquest*, though I often asked my informants about the show in the course of our interviews. It is striking to me how few of the people I interviewed about *Century* had watched (or would admit to having watched) the other major Ottoman costume drama of the time. Viewers of the nationalistic crime drama *Valley*, on the other hand, also frequently reported having seen *Conquest*.

25. For a general overview of the Gülen community see (Hendrick 2013); for a more recent take on the struggles between this community and the AK-Party see (Hansen 2014).
26. The women in the palace frequently appear in bikini-like attire and at one point there is a bath scene that openly hints at licentiousness, so it is little surprise that religious conservatives might object to these aspects of the film.
27. *Century's* first season started in January 2011, and was thus only a half season. The entire series ran 139 episodes and there have been rumors of a filmic conclusion (Biroğlu 2014). In its Turkish broadcast, the show was preceded by a summary of the previous week, which tended to run about 40 minutes, thus making for an entire viewing experience that often spanned over three hours with commercials included.
28. The pre-production name of this project was actually *Silver Tulip* [*Gümüş Lale*].
29. The word *fatih* means conqueror in Turkish, but also refers to the very specific conqueror Mehmed II, and is often used as a substitution for his name.
30. Show TV was *Century's* home for its first full year of production—the 2011 calendar year—which spanned two TV seasons. After that, *Century* shifted over to Star TV, where it remained until the conclusion of the series in June of 2014.
31. This is one of two Ottoman-themed TV shows that quickly followed *Century* that I will not discuss in this paper. The other is *Ottoman Slap* [*Osmanlı Tokadı*]. *Harem* was mildly successful, airing for a 32-episode season between September 2012 and June 2013. According to FOX Turkey's general manager, Pietro Vicari, it was “set sometime in Mesopotamia” and had “nothing to do with the Ottoman Era” (Medyafaresi Staff & Vicari 2012), though the show followed themes and events from *Century* on an almost weekly basis. As a parody, the show's primary target seems to have been *Century* and the viewing formations that activated it, rather than Ottoman history as such. Since *Harem* both drew on and contributed to these formations, it is of interest in understanding the circulation of Ottoman era shows, but I will not attempt a discussion of that matter in the present work, which focuses on texts that lay more overt claim to historical correspondence. *Ottoman Slap* is a story of two Janissaries from the era of Mehmed II who travel through time to present-day Istanbul and offer the wisdom and charity of the past to the denizens of today's Turkey. It began airing on TRT-1 in April of 2013 and finished a year later after holding onto modest ratings for 37 episodes. As with *Harem*, the show is of interest in understanding the greater Ottoman-inspired viewing formation, but it cannot be called a historical drama and thus falls outside the scope of the present project.
32. A similar point is made by Anibal Güleroğlu, who says “some of the scenes are put together so poorly that the viewer can't simply pass over the logical gaps but is, rather, forced to laugh at them, asking ‘is *Conqueror* a historical comedy?’” (2014).
33. When considered in global terms. The other contender for this title *Gümüş* (*Noor* in Arabic or *Silver* in English), had massive viewership in the Arab world, but did not achieve global significance, and was far less popular than *Century* within Turkey.
34. The persistence of this community may, however, be less certain in the case of film. As Warner notes, the temporality of discourse is a key aspect of public formation, and TV series, with their regular broadcast schedule, provide a predictable rhythm, which may encourage the reflexive circulation of discourse (Warner 2002: 95-96). With film, such an environment is far less common—though cult films and film series are possible exceptions. *Conquest* was unique in bringing together a number of factors that allowed for a public (as distinct from an audience) to form: its year-long run in Turkish cinemas, its role as the biggest film of the time, the controversies it elicited in other countries, which fed into discussions regarding the show, and the quite different approach towards history that it took relative to the already established *Century*.
35. Briefly, *Valley* imagines a Turkic deep-state that has had a continuous existence for about 2,000 years, including the Ottoman Empire, which is highly exalted by the show. The ultimate

form of this state now rests in the control of a secret intelligence unit directed from within the Turkish state, but with ties to other countries as well.

36. This partial list is based on my numerous interviews with various members of *Century's* viewing public between 2011-2014.

37. I thank Gaye Eksen for bringing this proverb to my attention.

ABSTRACTS

The popular Ottoman costume drama *Magnificent Century* [*Muhteşem Yüzyıl*] was controversial from the outset, with domestic (Turkish) detractors suggesting that it falsified history and mocked Ottoman heritage. Noting the different fates of many Ottoman-era shows that followed *Century*, this paper examines the success or failure of such projects through a three-part discussion. First, it turns to literature focusing on the renewed interest in Ottoman heritage in Turkey, touching on how this trend arose and how it relates to politics. Next, it employs Svetlana Boym's distinction between reflective and restorative nostalgia to highlight two markedly different approaches to the past that exist in the Turkish milieu. Finally, it discusses how these approaches relate to media representations of the Ottomans, suggesting that reflective nostalgia has a better chance of engaging a public in the TV setting, and that, ultimately, the two nostalgic approaches may engage two very different publics.

INDEX

Keywords: Ottoman, heritage, Muhteşem Yüzyıl, nostalgia, Conquest 1453, Fetih 1453, restorative, reflective, public, history, media, TV, film, cinema, Süleyman the Magnificent, Kanuni, Mehmed II, Magnificent Century, Once Upon a Time in the Ottoman Empire: Rebellion; Bir Zamanlar Osmanlı: Kıyam, Deep State in the Ottoman Empire, Osmanlı'da Derin Devlet, Conqueror, Fatih.

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