

'Karagöz is ours': İsmayıl Hakkı Baltacıoğlu's cultural revivalism and the Long Turkish Modernity

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Introduction

On 16 November 1939, a single grisaille Karagöz figurine, one of the main characters of the popular plays of shadow theatre, took over the cover of *Yeni Adam* (*New Man*), a weekly cultural magazine that had been founded in 1934 by the Turkish academic and intellectual İsmayıl Hakkı Baltacıoğlu (1886-1978). Accompanying the figure on the cover was the simple statement 'How Karagöz Resurrects' (*Karaköz Nasıl Dirilir*).¹ This was one of the earliest of several magazine issues, books, essays and conference proceedings that Baltacıoğlu published between the 1930s and the 1950s on the topic of the shadow theatre plays, spearheading a cultural intervention for the recuperation of the plays which involved many of his fellow intellectuals. Why did Karagöz need resurrecting in the first place? Why, and when exactly, had it died? The plays of shadow theatre had gained their popularity in the region during the Ottoman Empire, so their relevance within the newly founded Turkish Republic was initially threatened by concerns on the new position and function of 'Ottomanness', a collective cultural consciousness which the Turkish Republican government sought to declare obsolescent, looking instead to Europe for more modern and desirable models of cultural identity.² For Baltacıoğlu, shadow theatre ought to be at the heart of this national rejuvenation: it was the symptom of a widespread cultural crisis within the Republic, as well as a potent *pharmakon* to address it.³

The postulate of a clean-cut historical and cultural demarcation between the Ottoman Empire and the Republic as distinct entities, one belonging to the Early Modern period and one to the realm of the modern and contemporary, follows

Presented at *Mobile Memories*, Annual Conference of the International Research Project 'Bilderfahrzeuge. Aby Warburg's Legacy and the Future of Iconology', 10 – 11 November 2022, Humboldt Universität zu Berlin.

¹ *Yeni Adam*, 16 November 1939.

² Sibel Bozdoğan, 'Art and Architecture in Modern Turkey: The Republican Period', in *The Cambridge History of Turkey vol.4*, Reşat Kasaba ed., Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008, 452.

³ The term *pharmakon* here comes from Georges Didi-Huberman, who refers to it as a multifarious concept: simultaneously a drug and a poison. Georges Didi-Huberman, 'The Exorcist', in *Confronting Images: Questioning the End of a Certain History of Art*, translated by John Goodman. University Park, PA: The University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005, xvi.

linear historical and historiographical tropes which have critically misinformed what it means to talk about modernity in Turkey.⁴ By means of diagrams that closely recall Alfred J. Barr's now disparaged hand-drawn charts of Cubist and Abstract Art, the tendency among scholars has been to understand the onset of modernity in Turkish art as a linear narrative of progression, with clearly demarcated areas of influence.⁵ In truth, the instances of continuity and of disorderly timelines as the Ottoman Empire became the Turkish Republic outnumber those that would support the idea of a radical rupture between them. Nonetheless, at the onset of the Republic, the perception, and for some the threat, of a break with the past, bolstered by politics and by ideology, was a potent trigger for these intellectual debates.

In light of this context, this paper argues that Baltacıoğlu's writings, before and around the time of his attempted resurrection of Karagöz, constitute a case of forced, or methodically sought, connection with the past which must be considered within a wider intellectual phenomenon of cultural revivalism in 1930s Turkey. Through his long-term labour in support of a re-actualisation of cultural and artistic aspects of Ottoman society into Republican Turkey, Baltacıoğlu emerged as a principal agent of this movement. This stance should not be seen to be at odds with the Republican modernising mission, nor with its nationalistic impetus towards the location of an authentic Turkish culture. In fact, this revivalism, promoted by Baltacıoğlu and others in his circle, was itself meant as an operation in the service of nationalism. This paper conjures the notion of a Turkish long modernity, which bled beyond the artificially fixed parameters of official periodisations, and in which Baltacıoğlu laboured to show that modernity was not an explosive affair tied to a process of Republican westernisation, nor a degenerate disavowal of a sacred past - but an intrinsic and intellectual aspect of the Turkish character that had to be located both within its heritage and its external contributing factors.⁶

The past in the present

While his revivalist stance earned Baltacıoğlu a reputation as a conservative figure in the scholarship, his position in Turkey's cultural milieu was never marginal, and testified to the initial institutional frictions and continuities between the Imperial and the Republican orders.⁷ Baltacıoğlu occupied academic positions in the *Darülfünun*, the Imperial university in Istanbul, both before and after the establishment of the Republic. Between 1920-1924, he was elected Dean of the Faculty of Literature four times and Rector of the University until 1925. In 1925,

⁴ Duygu Köksal, 'The role of art in early republican modernization', in *La Multiplication des Images en Pays d'Islam*, edited by Bernard Heyberger and Silvia Naef, Würzburg: Orient-Institut İstanbul, 2016, 154.

⁵ Adnan Çoker, 'The Evolution of Turkish Painting in XIX and XXth Centuries', in *A History of Turkish Painting*, Seattle, London: University of Washington Press, 1988, 236.

⁶ The term 'long modernity' evokes the theorisations of Fernand Braudel's *longue durée* in the 1950s and of the 'long 19th century' by Eric Hobsbawm in the 90s. I employ here more elastically, without a rigid reference to either of these theories.

⁷ Nazım İrem, 'Turkish Conservative Modernism: Birth of a Nationalist Quest for Cultural Renewal', *International Journal of Middle East Studies* no.34, 2002, 87-92.

shortly after the establishment of the Republic, the government announced a programme of restrictions of the economic and institutional autonomy of the *Darülfünun* – foreboding its dissolution in 1933, when Istanbul university was established in its place. Baltacıoğlu gave an impassioned statement to the newspaper *Cumhuriyet* in January 1925, following this announcement, where he declared that 'the autonomy in question was given to the *Darülfünun* by the Sultanate. A republic, which should not be willing to silence its opponents for fear of being loyal to its own principles, cannot take it back'.⁸ In April 1925, the Ankara-based newspaper *Hâimiyet-i Milliye* announced that

Istanbul's *Darülfünun* should be improved with foreign professors, and the Turkish *Darülfünun* should be located in Ankara. Such a *Darülfünun* will make Ankara a cultural centre for the whole of Turkey. All institutions of the Republic of Turkey must be in the bosom of Anatolia.⁹

Following these statements, in May 1925 Baltacıoğlu resigned as Rector of the *Darülfünun* but remained affiliated with it until 1933, when he, his staff and several other academics were laid off. Shortly after, the Turkish government invited European academics, especially Germans and Austrians, to fill up the vacancies.¹⁰

Despite the government's belief that foreign hires would contribute to the much desired, fast-tracked modernisation of its education and cultural apparatus, Baltacıoğlu's art historical writings during his time as Rector already reveal awareness and willingness to respond to the Republic's ideological concerns. In his article 'Research on Turkish Arts: An Introduction', published in 1926 in the journal of the Theology department, Baltacıoğlu laid down what he considered to be foundational questions and conventions for a new methodology of Turkish art history. Writing two years before the Alphabet reform, the article appeared in Ottoman script, but took Turkish art as its subject – declaring the continuity between the two. He began the text with foundational questions:

Why is it important to research Turkish arts? What are the principal forms of Turkish arts? How should Turkish arts be researched? What are the general misconceptions? What are the underlying principles of such research? How can Turkish arts be defined? What should a research institute dedicated to Turkish arts look like? What are the benefits of such research from the perspective of scientific inquiry and culture?¹¹

Through these initial queries, Baltacıoğlu attempted to capture and to establish new conventions of Turkish art historiography, guided by the principle that 'in art

⁸ 'Muhtariyetin geri alınması meselesi Darülfünunda büyük üzüntü uyandırdı', *Cumhuriyet*, 28 January 1925.

⁹ Reported in 'Darülfünun ile ilgili bir makale', *Cumhuriyet*, 29 April 1925.

¹⁰ Kader Konuk, *East West Mimesis: Auerbach in Turkey*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010, 57-62.

¹¹ İsmayıl Hakkı Baltacıoğlu, 'Türk Sanatlarının Tedkikine Medhal', *Darülfünun İlahiyat Fakültesi Mecmuası* no.2, March 1926, 135. I partly refer to the translation of the original text found in *Europe Knows Nothing about the Orient*, Zeynep Çelik ed., Istanbul: Koç University Press, 2020, 139-157.

historical research, truth and reality must replace conjecture', which took inspiration from the scientific method.¹² Part of these conjectures, he explained, were arguments such as those by French sociologist Gustave Le Bon, which maligned Turkish art and attributed its existence wholly to the influence of Arab, Persian and Byzantine art.¹³ Disputing these views as untruthful and un-scientific, Baltacıoğlu highlighted aspects of originality in Turkish art and challenged the notion of artistic self-sufficiency: even Greek art, he stated, which had been considered for a long time to have no past beyond itself, had borrowed elements from the Assyrians, the Egyptians and the Phoenicians.¹⁴ The act of borrowing for Baltacıoğlu, was re-interpreted as natural and positive, rather than a mark of artistic inferiority.

In support of this argument, within the same article Baltacıoğlu referred to 'arts' in the plural instead of the singular 'art', committed to including in the category also crafts, architecture, theatre and cinema.¹⁵ Against a mereological deconstruction of art into its components, he advocated for an understanding of art and art history as 'living systems': these were organic and mutable entities, constantly adapting to their environment and adopting elements from it.¹⁶ Nonetheless, Baltacıoğlu isolated certain foundational objects which, as he put it, informed Turkish arts as a whole – its domes, arches, ceramic tiles, and calligraphy – attributing to them a 'quality of Turkishness' and a stylistic clarity which were found lacking in other traditions.¹⁷ The authentically Turkish character and forms had to be located, for Baltacıoğlu, in an obscure deep past of antiquity, alternative to the Western canonical reliance on Graeco-Roman forms, whence Turkish authentic forms were derived:

The origins of Turkish art are being discovered in periods well before the emergence of Islam [...] For art as life has been an uninterrupted progression. The future is always hidden in the present. And the present is a living organism impregnated by the past ... In this sense, Turkish art history is the continuation of Turkish archaeology.¹⁸

The initial invitation in his article to free the mind from conjectures for Baltacıoğlu took the form of an art historical method of phenomenological rapprochement to the object. Akin to the task of the archaeologist, he claimed, the art historian's first concern should not be with words, but with physical objects: mosques, fountains, inscriptions, tombstones, tiles, carpets, calligraphic and muqarnas.¹⁹ Calligraphic inscriptions - were objects of particular interest for Baltacıoğlu, who was not only a calligrapher, but also a teacher of the medium. In an article he wrote in 1927,

¹² Baltacıoğlu, 'Türk Sanatlarının Tedkikine Medhal', 147.

¹³ Baltacıoğlu, 'Türk Sanatlarının Tedkikine Medhal', 142.

¹⁴ Baltacıoğlu, 'Türk Sanatlarının Tedkikine Medhal', 143.

¹⁵ Baltacıoğlu, 'Türk Sanatlarının Tedkikine Medhal', 135-157.

¹⁶ Baltacıoğlu, 'Türk Sanatlarının Tedkikine Medhal', 145.

¹⁷ Baltacıoğlu, 'Türk Sanatlarının Tedkikine Medhal', 145.

¹⁸ Baltacıoğlu, 'Türk Sanatlarının Tedkikine Medhal', 145.

¹⁹ Baltacıoğlu, 'Türk Sanatlarının Tedkikine Medhal', 147.

Baltacıoğlu showed a methodical drive to memorialise the heritage of calligraphic art by creating archival repositories of the medium in the Imperial university.²⁰

The obsolescence of Ottoman art forms in the Early Republican years was institutionally enforced through measures like the 1928 Alphabet reform, which replaced the Ottoman script with the characters of the Latin alphabet.²¹ It was not a sudden occurrence, but rather the result of debates dating from the 1860s on the Ottoman alphabet, which posed significant difficulties for effective mass communication.²² Within intellectual circles, reforming language did not entail a unidirectional return to folk linguistic forms and structures, but rather a comparative and outward-reaching stance which the Turkish government actively promoted, which fostered the search for more formal articulations of the relationships between East and West, between national culture and world culture within Turkish modernity at large.²³

During the formation of the Republic, the Kemalist party championed a European positivist outlook and scientific mindset, believed to usher in modernity, in opposition to the perceived spiritualism of the country's Ottoman, Islamic past.²⁴ A kind of positivist thinking kindled the fire of the Young Turks movement in the early 20th century, seeking greater investment in industrialisation, secularisation and scientific knowledge.²⁵ So, to a certain extent, positivism was already a popular and widespread intellectual current at the onset of the Republic, which the Atatürk government mobilised for its reformist agenda. In the 1930s, a group of intellectuals challenged the dichotomous understanding of modernity and conservatism, arguing that the country's Ottoman past could be revived in the Turkish present and meaningfully contribute to the Republic's 'push' towards modernity.²⁶ Against the notion of a 'debt' to the West, since the uptake of positivist ideologies positioned Europe at one end of the modernising narrative and Turkey at the other, the group appointed Turkey as 'the Other West' and championed 'alternative' currents of European thought.

Henri Bergson was an incisive voice for this group of so-called 'conservative modernists' – as they have been defined in the scholarship– which united figures like Baltacıoğlu, the conservative intellectual Peyami Safa (1899-1961), the politician Ahmed Ağaoglu (1869-1939), the academician Hilmi Ziya Ülken (1901-1974) and the philosopher Mustafa Şekip Tunç (1886-1958). Bergsonism was the subject of

²⁰ İsmayıl Hakkı Baltacıoğlu, 'Türk Yazılarının Tedkikine Medhal', *Darülfünun İlahiyat Fakültesi Mecmuası* no.5-6, June 1927, 111-136.

²¹ Feroz Ahmad, *The Making of Modern Turkey*, London: Routledge, 2002, 94-96.

²² Erik J. Zürcher, *Turkey: A Modern History*, London: I.B. Tauris, 188.

²³ Emily Apter, *The Translation Zone: A New Comparative Literature*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006, 46. Franco Moretti, 'Conjectures on World Literature', *New Left Review*, no.1, Jan/Feb 2000, 54-68.

²⁴ İrem, 'Turkish Conservative Modernism', 87-92.

²⁵ Banu Turnaoğlu, *The Formation of Turkish Republicanism*. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2017: 105-106.

²⁶ İrem, 'Turkish Conservative Modernism', 96.

numerous articles in the daily *Cumhuriyet* and in *Yeni Adam* in the 1940s, which credited it with the introduction of elements of 'spiritualism and intuition' in Turkish philosophy. Promoting an optimistic notion of national creativity, arguments towards Turkish ingenuity were central to the group's intellectual activities, which conceived of Bergsonism as a 'new philosophy of liberation' that could allow Turkey to free itself from all external constraints, both militaristic and intellectual. Writing in *Yeni Adam* in 1939, the writer Râsim Özgen, reviewing Bergson's *Matter and memory* and *The Two Sources of Ethics and Religion*, claimed that

The greatest turning points in the history of human evolution are the dates that record the evolutions of philosophy: Socrates, Descartes, Kant, Bergson... each of them marks the beginning of a new era in the development of human ideas. In my opinion, in general, it is ideas that make the revolutions. The seventeenth century was Cartesian; our era is Bergsonian.²⁷

Within Bergson's *Matter and Memory*, which first came out in 1896, we can track some of the principles behind Baltacıoğlu's method of reactualisation of the past, as his writings almost mirrored Bergson's theories and employed his terminology. Across four chapters, Bergson identified the reality of matter and the reality of spirit as distinct entities, and analysed their relationship by means of the process of 'memory'. Bergson distinguished three processes: firstly, the realm of pure memory; secondly, memory-images, which he understood as visual instantiations of memory that were more concrete than mere 'representations' and less definite than the actual 'object'; and thirdly perception, the direct relationship between the mind and the object.²⁸ He understood these as profoundly intertwined. Tracking the movement between these, Bergson tries to follow the movement of memory at work by placing it in time, that is to say, between perception of the present and representation of the past, and argued that

we shall never reach the past unless we frankly place ourselves within it. Essentially virtual, it cannot be known as something past unless we follow and adopt the movement by which it expands into a present image, thus emerging from obscurity into the light of day...My present is that which interests me, which lives for me, and, in a word, that which summons me to action; whereas my past is essentially powerless...the past has no longer any interest for us; it has exhausted its possible action, or will only recover an influence by borrowing the vitality of the present perception.²⁹

This theory was predicated upon an ideal understanding of the present, a pure conception of an indivisible limit that separates past from future, which necessarily occupies a duration and has one foot in the past and one in the present. The re-actualisation of the past in the present, in this model, was the only way to ensure the past's power and its vitalism, through the act of physical translation of the inert past into the vital, embodied present. Baltacıoğlu's understanding of art was similarly

²⁷ Râsim Özgen, 'H. Bergson', *Yeni Adam*, 10 August 1939.

²⁸ Henri Bergson, *Matter and Memory*, London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd, 1929, 176-185.

²⁹ Bergson, *Matter and Memory*, 176.

predicated upon the interplay of external perception and internal recall; to capture this dichotomy, in 1926 he had likened art to a theatrical play:

the substance of art is made of both the real and the unreal. If, to understand the nature of art, we must compare it to something else, then, to some extent, it is reasonable to compare it to play (*oyunu*). Like art, play, too, is part real and part unreal. While binding its players with uncertain strings of reality, the play ushers the soul to an imaginary and fictitious realm.³⁰

A Living Entity

It should not be surprising, then, that Baltacıoğlu, in one of his first large-scale projects, turned his attention to theatre, and in particular to the plays of shadow theatre. As a form of live performance, the shadow theatre was a truly transnational phenomenon of the early modern world, found in China, Indonesia, South-East Asia, as well as in Greece and the Balkans. It enjoyed great success in the Ottoman Empire. The plays were performed by holding two-dimensional figures on sticks against a sheet lit by candle to create a shadow and light effect.³¹ The plays were mostly improvised by the puppeteer and passed down orally, rather than through scripts, revolving around a fixed set of conventions. Karagöz and Hacivat, the two main characters, created absurd and often scatological scenarios through formulaic conflicts. Karagöz embodied the lower-class trickster, always up to no good, while Hacivat was the bourgeois Ottoman bureaucrat. Every play was set in the *mahalle*, a generic local neighbourhood which provided a familiar fabric of social interactions. They were performed in collective spaces, speaking to and of society as a collective. They owed their popularity to their subversive political satire and brash social commentary which did not spare the upper classes.³²

Because of their power in moulding public discussions, the characters of Karagöz and Hacivat were employed by newspapers in the early Republican years in the form of satirical illustrations, such as in the eponymous revue *Karagöz*, co-opted as unofficial mouthpieces of mainstream ideologies and removed from their original contexts of Ottoman coffee houses.³³ In the 1930s, several articles in various Republican press outlets showed that a rising discourse about Karagöz, and whether it could 'be resurrected' for modern society, was gaining momentum in Turkey. Burhan Belge, writing for the cultural revue *Varlık* in 1937, indicated that Karagöz could not live in its old form, with its old characters and dialogues, because

³⁰ Baltacıoğlu, 'Türk Sanatlarının Tedkikine Medhal', 139.

³¹ Dror Ze'evi, 'Boys in the Hood', in *Producing Desire: Changing Sexual Discourse in the Ottoman Middle East, 1500-1900*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2006: 125.

³² Metin And, *Karagöz: Turkish Shadow Theatre*, Istanbul: Dost Yayınları, 1975: 67-68. Andreas Tietze, *The Turkish Shadow Theatre and the Puppet Collection of the L.A. Mayer Memorial Foundation*, Berlin: Gebr. Mann Verlag, 1977: 19-20.

³³ Serdar Öztürk, 'Karagoz Co-Opted: Turkish Shadow Theatre of the Early Republic 1923-1945', *Asian Theatre Journal* 23 (2006): 296-297. *Karagöz (Cara-Gueuz Journal Illustré Constantinople)*, 22 February 1922. SALT Archives.

it would inevitably have a pastiche effect.³⁴ In order to adapt Karagöz to the present day Belge argued that Karagöz should be modified ideologically – that is, by changing the relationship of its characters but without turning it into an organ of propaganda – but also in its institutional performance, bringing the plays from the coffee houses to larger theatres. Another article in *Yeni Adam* by Husamettin Bozok, who reviewed two recently published books about Karagöz, argued that the permanence of shadow theatre as a relevant cultural phenomenon in the present was not due to an obstinate traditionalism:

we do not say, 'Karagöz must live' just to keep the traditions alive. The strength and vitality of his artistic elements maintain this hold to us, because Karagöz is a mature and advanced art in its own right.³⁵

The vitalism of Karagöz as an independent, 'living' art form resonated with Baltacıoğlu's first major intervention on the topic. In November 1939, he asked how Karagöz could 'resuscitate' – an active use of the verb *dirilmek*, which confirmed the postulate of a wilful art form. Much like his earlier writings on art, he began by posing a foundational question:

Is this oneiric play, so deeply entrenched in the essence of our childhood, a strong primitive and reactionary residual art form peculiar to the Orient, or is it an unparalleled example of a rich and ingenious art? The purpose of this article is to give a reasonably accurate answer to this egregious question.³⁶

Through a deliberate self-Orientalising language, Baltacıoğlu engaged with the Orientalist travelogue tradition, where Karagöz was often displayed as an abhorrent and vulgar performance, completely alien to European culture, and actively reclaimed it as a native object that stood for Turkish ingenuity and self-sufficiency. In Baltacıoğlu's case, the indigenous qualities of Karagöz distinguished it from similar manifestations that had taken place elsewhere, whether it be in a generic Europe or in Greece, where Karagöz was similarly fashionable, and which held political stakes at a time of delicate relationships between the two nations.

For Baltacıoğlu, the ability of the Karagöz plays to represent society with sharpness and verisimilitude by means of an aesthetic that was neither realistic nor abstract, could only be described as 'surrealist' – harnessing a term from the European avant-garde, in this case from the French Surrealist movement.³⁷ The appeal of Surrealism, in this context, was the result of its wider reception in Turkey in the 1920s and 1930s, where Surrealism was interpreted as straddling realistic representation and fantastical images by 'faithful' approaches to objects, that were offset by their illogical pairings.³⁸ Bergson's study of unconscious representation in *Matter and Memory*, as 'non perceived material objects [...] images not imagined [...] perceptions absent from one's consciousness and yet given outside of it', in the way

³⁴ Burhan Belge, 'Kara Göz', *Varlık*, 15 March 1937.

³⁵ Hüsamettin Bozok, 'İki Kitap', *Yeni Adam* 226, 27 April 1939.

³⁶ Baltacıoğlu, 'Karagöz Nasıl Dirilir', *Yeni Adam* 255, 16 November 1939, 10.

³⁷ Baltacıoğlu, 'Karagöz nasıl dirilir?', 11.

³⁸ For more on the Turkish reception of Surrealism, see Ambra D'Antone, 'An Inside Look at Yüksel Arslan's Outsider Practice, 1955–64', *Art History* vol.46, no.2, April 2023, 344–369.

that it connected to the French Surrealists' mining of unconscious states, was also significant for Baltacıoğlu's formulation of a programmatic 'surrealism' for his method.³⁹

Baltacıoğlu had employed terms from the European avant-garde before, seeking to apply this theory of recollection not only to the codification of the past, but also to recent European trends and their place within the Turkish context. To Cubism, for instance, Baltacıoğlu dedicated two articles, in 1929 and 1931, in which he sought to disprove the claims by some of his contemporaries that Cubism was a 'sick and degenerate movement' and to argue instead that Cubism was a 'living entity', adapting and resulting from societal and industrial developments in Europe and – he predicted – in Turkey.⁴⁰ The Cubism of buildings such as those of the Czech architect Adolf Loos, he argued, were neither a theory nor a discovery, but a necessary consequence. Similarly, in the Ottoman context, the early 19th century Selimiye Barracks in Üsküdar, were, in his words, 'a move towards Cubism in their own time'.⁴¹ Disappointed in the current architectural trends, which he saw as overly reliant on 'the 'national school' of arches, capitols and domes', Baltacıoğlu advised the modern Turkish architect to analyse the history of Turkish cities, factories and houses: 'In other words, there is only one way for the Turkish architect. It is to become Cubist like the new worldly architects'.⁴²

Similarly, he understood Cubism in painting as a purpose-driven style, deriving from the epistemic evolution of European thought and its relationship to and representation of external reality. Cubism in painting, for Baltacıoğlu, meant the rejection of the direct observation of external reality, in virtue of a completely reinvention of nature as an intellectual object determined by individual sensitivities and conscience. Nurullah Berk, a sort of spokesperson for the artistic collective Group D, an association of Turkish artists that began its activities in 1933, saw the ocular strain and visual distortions of Cubism as important for Turkish artists insofar as they engendered a 'more intellectual, more thoughtfully constructed conception of art'.⁴³ Already in his 1933 *Still Life with Playing Cards*, Berk had put the painterly genre of still lifes to use to disrupt the viewer's expectations, turning a mundane fruit bowl into the superimposition of multiple volumes and their progressive retreat into the depths of the pictorial space, while objects splay out and are pressed between the increasingly unyielding plates of representation.

Cinema also formed a crucial backdrop for the modern recuperation of the plays. Baltacıoğlu argued that cinema offered a similar experience from Karagöz to modern audiences, functioning as an industrialized Karagöz out of its handicraft form. Moreover, the ambiguity between three-dimensionality and two-

³⁹ Bergson, *Matter and Memory*, 183.

⁴⁰ İsmayıl Hakkı Baltacıoğlu, 'Resimde Kübizm ve türk an'anesi', *Darülfünün İlahiyat Fakültesi Mecmuası*, Mart 1931, 33-48; İsmayıl Hakkı Baltacıoğlu, 'Mimaride Kübizm ve türk an'anesi', *Darülfünün İlahiyat Fakültesi Mecmuası*, April 1929, 110-131;

⁴¹ Baltacıoğlu, 'Mimaride Kübizm ve türk an'anesi', 128.

⁴² Baltacıoğlu, 'Resimde Kübizm ve türk an'anesi', 130.

⁴³ Nurullah Berk, *Modern Painting and Sculpture in Turkey*, translated by Belinda Bather, Ankara: Turkish Press Broadcasting and Tourist Department, 1954: 12.

dimensionality, between reality and representation, between real bodies and actors of the cinematic pertained in full, for Baltacıoğlu, to Karagöz. The physical elements of the figurines, as in their material, make and weight, and their compromised relationship to real bodies, to real figures, to real actors, made them a primitive, Oriental and abiding art form in the present. In fact, Baltacıoğlu abhorred the early Republican attempts to put 'real' Karagöz figures on stage, as actors dressed up, denouncing it as an ignorant act.⁴⁴

This cinematic quality was enhanced by the performance of the plays in candlelight: the figurines, bathed by that warm and flickering light, became flat bodies pierced by the light that seeped through the holes poked in the material. The installation of electric lights behind the play sheets was, for Baltacıoğlu, also abhorrent: the electric light was white, fierce, and motionless, whereas the candlelight, in this account, only contributed to the vitalistic and dynamic form of the figurines in the present. As he put it,

All these visions show us around which pole we can centre Karagöz's aesthetic. These fantasy plays are neither naturalistic nor realistic; it is a surrealist art. It is also possible to call it 'the essence of art'. Because Karagöz is not a kind of art that has been taken from nature in terms of shape, form, dissection, colour, decor and the evolution of its subject and claims to conform to this nature; yet, neither is Karagöz just a subjective, degenerate artistic whim of art that includes the distortion of nature, instead of its truth. In him, the reality and relativity of nature and the sincerity and absoluteness of the ideal are harmoniously combined. Karagöz is a new nature that has transcended nature, and like every metaphysical art, it draws its strength not from what is concrete, but from the substance, the essence.⁴⁵

Just a few months later he declared, on another cover, the success of his mission: 'Karagöz is revived' (*Karagöz Diriliyor*).⁴⁶ The articles included in this issue included contributions from leading intellectuals, which Baltacıoğlu curated, inserting his own voice as a moderating authority. This process of reactualisation had extended to, for example, to radio coverage of the plays for children's consumption, as well as debates in the journal as to how that should take place, or whether Karagöz should be performed within the *Halkevleri*, organs of the Republican People's Party - taking pride of place in the Republican visual culture and pedagogical infrastructure.

Yet, Baltacıoğlu also debuted in 1939 his second Karagöz play (his first had come much earlier, in 1935, garnering much smaller coverage at the time). The modern shadow theatre play was titled *Karagöz in Ankara* (*Karagöz Ankara'da*), which was performed for the first time in April 1939 at Uluş Cinema in Ankara by the Children's Protection Agency (*Çocukları Esirgeme Kurumu*).⁴⁷ In the play, the traditional character roles were reversed: Hacıvat, presented as the owner of the fictional Wrong Order Company, was contracted to find a new job for Karagöz,

⁴⁴ Baltacıoğlu, 'Karagöz nasıl dirilir?', 11.

⁴⁵ Baltacıoğlu, 'Karagöz nasıl dirilir?', 11.

⁴⁶ *Yeni Adam*, 22 February 1940, 1.

⁴⁷ İsmayıl Hakkı Baltacıoğlu, *Karagöz Ankara'da*, Istanbul: Sebât Basımevi, 1940.

whose career as a coffeehouse shadow puppet was over in modern Turkey. To this avail, Hacivat introduced Karagöz to a number of popular figures and movie stars that could help him find a job: Charlie Chaplin, Mickey Mouse, Tarzan, Greta Garbo, and the Turkish critics Nurullah Ataç and Münür Hayrı all appeared in the play – illustrated for the play 'in the Karagöz technique'. The strange encounters between them and Karagöz formed the main body of the performance. While Hacivat, a traditionally Ottoman figure, and the Western stars, taken to represent the dangers of excessive reliance on Western culture, appeared to be almost grotesque relics, in Baltacıoğlu's play Karagöz turned into a civilized, polite, and modern Kemalist.

The conversations between the characters oscillated between the ironic and the serious, among linguistic puns and practical jokes on figures that, by then, also populated the imaginary of the Turkish visual popular culture. In the case of Chaplin, the irony resulted from linguistic misunderstandings, as Chaplin was shown speaking English to Karagöz, as well as from more serious, existential questions about whether Charlot – Chaplin's most famous character – and Karagöz, were 'real men'. Baltacıoğlu's reference to figures from international popular culture like Mickey Mouse and Charlie Chaplin, which had begun to perform a function of collective relief around the globe, inherently connected them to the shadow theatre plays and to other Turkish figures of the folk imaginary, such as the Seljuk Sufi Nasreddin Hoca, whose feats are remembered in Turkey for their anecdotal, moralistic and satirical content.

Mickey Mouse enjoyed particular popularity in the Turkish press; newspapers often announced performances in cinemas of the *Silly Symphony* animated cartoons and discussed how a simple mouse could have become such an international sensation.⁴⁸ An article published in *Akşam* on 19 February 1938 by the Turkish journalist Hikmet Feridun Es recalled the journalist's visit to Walt Disney in his Mickey Mouse studio in Hollywood: he claimed that '[Walt] Disney admired Nasreddin Hoca and Karagöz' and that he had fallen in love with the technique of Karagöz, which he saw as a sort of precursive technique of animation. The article even boasted that, impressed by the international character of its humour, Disney wished to feature Karagöz in one of his films.⁴⁹ In fact, in *Karagöz Ankara'da*, the conversation between Karagöz and Mickey Mouse revolved around the paternity of cinema:

Mikimauz comes to the curtain singing a mouse song and making mouse noises. Meanwhile Karagöz comes to the window again and again

He says to Mikimauz, shh, shh! and waves his arm.

K: Ay...rat rat...is there no rat poison around here? Hush...hush!

Miki squeals, Karagöz comes down.

K: Shut up! This mouse is talking! This will be a civilised mouse!

⁴⁸ For instance, in *Cumhuriyet*, 25 November 1937, 4.

⁴⁹ Hikmet Feridun Es, 'Mickey Mouse'un Babası', *Akşam*, 19 February 1938, 1.

[...]

M: I won't shut up, Father Karagöz.

K: Am I your father?

M: Of course you are also my father. [...] Aren't you Karagöz?

K: Of course I am.

M: The oldest shadow play is Karagöz. That's why you are considered the father of cinema. Then you are also my father.⁵⁰

Among some of the theorists who had discussed the ubiquitous and global figure of Mickey Mouse was Walter Benjamin, who understood Mickey as nothing short than a visual miracle, providing social relief: Mickey proves that a creature can survive even when it has lost any resemblance to a human body.⁵¹ It appealed to Baltacıoğlu's surrealist appraisal of Karagöz, similarly predicated upon the liminal presence of somatic elements in the plays. Beyond its social function, Baltacıoğlu praised the epistemic function of Karagöz as an art form, where bodies operate beyond reality. A similarly powerful function was associated with Charlie Chaplin's films and their potential to provoke cathartic laughter in the audience. The relief brought about by laughter was important for Turkish society: at least two newspaper articles reported that in 1942, during a radio interview for Voice of America, Charlie Chaplin spoke directly to the Turkish nation and praised its humour, exemplified by the folk satirical and moralistic figure of Nasreddin Hoca, as a fundamental show of resilience during the horrors of the war.⁵²

In the final analysis, the rapprochement of Karagöz with these international figures, similarly 'types' of performed plays rather than real human beings, served a nationalist agenda: to claim that Karagöz was a unique and creative expression borne of Turkish character and culture. Within Baltacıoğlu's argument, similarly to his earlier treatment of Cubism, the deployment of Surrealism served a particular brand of nationalism that sought to celebrate the forms of indigenous culture that displayed authentically Turkish creativity and artistic self-sufficiency:

Karagöz is ours...the images of Karagöz, its curtains, candles, surrealist techniques, humour and genius are all ours. Karagöz is a Turk, son of a Turk. Karagöz is a realm of surreal forms (*gerçeküstü sûretler*) that are flat, holey, transparent, fragmented, freed from the bonds of time and space. There are not real people here, but real types who have become shadows.⁵³

⁵⁰ Baltacıoğlu, *Karagöz Ankara'da*, 34-35.

⁵¹ Walter Benjamin, 'On Mickey Mouse', in *Walter Benjamin, Selected Writings, Volume 2, 1927-1934*, Rodney Livingstone et al transl., Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland, and Gary Smith eds, Cambridge, Mass: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999, 545.

⁵² 'Şarlo, dünyadan soruyor: İnsanlara mı inanacağız yoksa eşekleremi?', *Vatan*, 7 December 1942, 1.

⁵³ İsmayıl Hakkı Baltacıoğlu, 'Karagöz Dâvası', *Yeni Adam*, 15 December 1949, 2.

Baltacıoğlu's 'nationalistic' argument, as he put it, did away with emotional 'overblown mythology' to focus on the 'facts of tradition': among these was the idea that Cubism had originated in Turkish architecture, and that

we Turks are the creators of surrealism and waking dreams in painting. We are the ones who show that art is not a work of knowledge (*bilgi işi*), but a work of conscience (*duyunç işi*). ... Sheikh Hamdullah, Hafız Osman, Mustafa Rakım, Mahmut Celalettin, Mehmet Şakir Recai, Alalettin... each of these are Cézannes and Picassos who came years ago and studied human beauty and described it with the images of Elif, Vav, Ayn i.e. Arabic letters.⁵⁴

Again, below, he claimed that 'we Turks are the founders of the most advanced, Surrealist understanding of theatre'.⁵⁵ Much like Cubism had in previous writings, here Surrealism was a stabilising concept, 'anchoring' the reactualisation of the Turkish Ottoman past into established 'modern' circuits, while engaging with a perceived subcurrent of European intellectual thought, to which Turkey, as an Oriental opposite, provided a compelling counterpoint.

A decade later, the 1950 General Elections saw the rise to power of the Democratic Party and the defeat of the Republican People's Party, which had held the reins of government since 1924. The new democratic government promised a new era of liberalism, modifying the terms and primary stakeholders of Turkish nationalism. Nevertheless, Karagöz was still at the forefront of Baltacıoğlu's nationalist agenda, as he continued to promote shadow theatre as a cultural form that could propagate a Kemalist agenda. On a cover of *Yeni Adam* from 1950, he asked: 'Karagöz is folk art, it is the art of suggestion and of tradition. The Russians are using our Karagöz for Communist propaganda. Why can't we use it for Kemalist propaganda?'⁵⁶ By now, when Kemalism was a more fragile ideology, Baltacıoğlu was not opposed to the open mobilisation of Karagöz for political agendas and support.

Conclusion

In 1958, Baltacıoğlu (1886-1978) published the treatise *Turkish Script Arts* (Türklerde Yazı Sanatı), where he wove Surrealism and Islamic calligraphy into an extraordinary genealogy, theorising a model of Turkish modernity that was contingent on the understanding of calligraphy as a source of proto-Surrealist creativity. Baltacıoğlu argued that the letters of the Ottoman script used in calligraphy possessed a pictographic, anatomical dimension and were suggestive of different expressive poses of the human body in a non-mimetic fashion. To illustrate this, Baltacıoğlu drew a corresponding body next to each letter of the alphabet: these appear as barely human, limbless and hollowed silhouettes. Baltacıoğlu characterised this quality of the script as 'surrealist':

Turkish imagination escapes the mimesis of nature ... What could be as indigenous as the imagination shaping letters that mimic the body? Writing

⁵⁴ İsmayıl Hakkı Baltacıoğlu, 'Milliyetçiliğim', *Yeni Adam*, 7 May 1942, 2.

⁵⁵ Baltacıoğlu, 'Milliyetçiliğim', 2.

⁵⁶ *Yeni Adam*, 2 March 1950, 1.

is painting. However, it is not a naturalistic, realist painting, but a surrealist one. These letter forms, like the figures in Picasso's paintings, are simultaneously inside and outside nature. Turkish calligraphers were the originators of surrealism in writing.⁵⁷

Bringing together his earlier writings, Baltacıoğlu promoted here calligraphy as a marker of Turkish ingenuity, rather than an Ottoman or Arab art form, discharging the government's efforts towards national self-fulfilment. Much like Karagöz, the Ottoman alphabet became divested with meaning beyond the semantic or the ornamental: in Baltacıoğlu's theory, it carried 'tradition', as a unity comprising art, music and religion that could enact change in the present. Moreover, the calligraphic works reproduced by Baltacıoğlu in the treatise, in fact, were not synchronic products of a finished event, but embodied a process of repeated reproduction – concretising the process of reactualisation of the past. Participating in this process, Baltacıoğlu added his own calligraphies to earlier examples in the text, deliberately positioning them in relation to artists like the eighteenth-century calligrapher Mustafa Râkim (1757-1826). Râkim had gained a reputation as an innovator in script arts, who, Baltacıoğlu argued, managed to bring back beauty to calligraphy by incorporating aesthetic considerations to the practice.⁵⁸

Baltacıoğlu's calligraphic creation process appears characterised by a continuum of transformation, rather than by abstract ideas of originality or linearity: reviving past expressions of visuality was not a reactionary process for Baltacıoğlu, but a nationalist search for modern creativity. Yet, despite Baltacıoğlu's desire for a rapprochement with the objects, his 'carriers of memory' were not just the theatre figurines, or the calligraphies, but rather the creation of a method for identifying and codifying such carriers, as well as the formulation of an alternative narrative for the modernisation of the nation.

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⁵⁷ İsmayıl Hakkı Baltacıoğlu, *Türklerde Yazı Sanatı: Türk Sanat Yazılarının Grafolojisi ve Estetiği Üzerine Sosyo-Psikolojik Deneme*, Ankara: S.A.Ş. Matbaası, 1958, 25.

⁵⁸ Baltacıoğlu, *Türklerde Yazı Sanatı*, 32.