

# Between magnificence and monstrosity: Turkishness in recent popular cinema

Asuman Suner

## Abstract

This paper studies the idea of Turkishness as one thematic element that commonly characterizes recent Turkish box-office champions. The pre-occupation with the idea of Turkishness in recent popular cinema can be seen as a reflection of Turkish society's bafflement with the process of rapid and intensive transformation during the 2000s. In this period, Turkish society has grown increasingly confused about how to assess its own worth in the contemporary world. The paper makes use of the terms "magnificence" and "monstrosity" to make sense of the excessive representations of Turkishness in Turkish box-office champion action films and comedies of the second half of the 2000s. The term "magnificence" stands for aspirations in Turkish society during the last decade about the revival of the glory of the Ottoman past and becoming a powerful actor again on the world scene. The term "monstrosity" is employed in relation to Turkish society's cynical indifference to the violence perpetrated by the Turkish state, which is often rendered acceptable through the presumption of "Turkish peculiarity." The paper points to the continuity between recent blockbuster action films and comedies in their representations of Turkishness by suggesting that magnificence and monstrosity appear in these films as two sides of the same coin.

**Keywords:** *Turkish identity, Turkish cinema, the Justice and Development Party (AKP), nationalism, nostalgia, neo-Ottomanism, white Turks*

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"Magnificence" and "monstrosity" have been terms widely circulating in the Turkish media since the first months of 2011: The term "magnificent" comes from the title of a popular television drama, *Muhteşem Yüzyıl* (The Magnificent Century), which portrays the sixteenth-century Ottoman palace under the reign of Sultan Süleyman (also known as Süleyman the Magnificent), whereas the term "monstrous" (*ucube*) was uttered by Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan to characterize the Humanity Monument in the northeastern city of Kars near the Armenian border. Both events caused enormous controversy. *The Magnificent Century* caused an outcry mainly by Islamist and nationalist groups, because of its supposedly belittling portrayal of the glorious Ottoman past. It was accused of focusing its story not on the outstanding achievements of Sultan Süleyman as commander and statesman, but rather on the private affairs around the *harem* quarters of the palace.<sup>1</sup> The prime minister's characterization of the Humanity Monument as "monstrous" caused indignation among secularist and liberal circles, on the grounds that he was insulting a work of art and advising its demolition on the basis of his personal taste.<sup>2</sup> The prime minister's comments were perceived as yet another manifestation of the concealed authoritarian and anti-democratic tendency of the ruling *Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi* (AKP, Justice and Development Party). The Humanity Monument was designed by the sculptor Mehmet Aksoy, with the declared purpose of sending a message of peace and friendship to the Armenians across the border. As such, the building of the Humanity Monument can be taken as an apologetic gesture on the part of Turkey towards Armenians for the mass deportation and massacre of Ottoman Armenians at the turn of the twentieth century. The word "monstrous" uttered by the prime minister,<sup>3</sup> in this respect, also resonates with Turkey's uncomfortable position with regard to the violence perpetrated against its religious and ethnic minorities in the past.<sup>4</sup>

1 Despite the threats that the screen-writers and directors received from nationalists and Islamists, *The Magnificent Century* ended the first season with successful ratings and will continue to be aired during the 2011/12 season.

2 The demolition of the Humanity Monument began in April 2011.

3 In the same speech in which Prime Minister Erdoğan characterized the Humanity Monument as "monstrous," he stated: "We will not tolerate those who seek to cast a shadow on history." Although the term "history" in this statement seems to point to the Islamic historical treasures of Kars, it obviously also resonates with Turkey's troubled history with its Armenian minority.

4 The Turkish-Armenian journalist Etyen Mahçupyan has directed attention to the connotations of the prime minister's characterization of the Humanity Monument as "monstrous" in terms of Turkish-Armenian relations. According to Mahçupyan, in the imagined picture of Turkish identity, Armenians are envisaged as "monsters." If they were to be taken as humans, then this would raise questions concerning what Turks did to them. Such an interrogation would have shifted the scope of "monstrosity"

My intention in this paper is not to deal with the particular incidents from which the terms “magnificence” and “monstrosity” emerged. Rather, I try to show that images of “magnificence” and “monstrosity” had already been in circulation in Turkey even prior to these incidents, as part of the way in which Turkishness is conceived. The last decade has been a period in which Turkish society underwent a complex process of transformation in social, economic and political terms. One crucial outcome of this transformation has been the unprecedented questioning of the idea of Turkishness. Once a largely invisible, normative, and naturalized form of identity in Turkey, Turkishness today has come under critical scrutiny. It has begun to be contested, challenged, and problematized in ways in which it had never been before.

Popular cinema, like other domains of popular culture, is a field where striking manifestations of the tensions around Turkishness can be found. This paper aims to demonstrate that one thematic element that commonly characterizes Turkish box-office champions of the recent years is the exploration of the idea of Turkishness. Examining the dynamics of recent popular cinema in Turkey, the first part of the essay attempts to make sense of recent blockbusters’ thematic concentration on Turkishness in relation to the transformation of Turkish society over the last decade. The second part focuses on the most popular example of recent action-adventure films, Serdar Akar’s *Kurtlar Vadisi Irak* (*Valley of the Wolves: Iraq*), the record-breaking box-office champion of 2006. I read the representation of Turkishness in this film in relation to the rising nationalist discourses in Turkey and the fantasy of “magnificence” invoked by the pro-active regional foreign policy approach of the AKP government, which is often called the doctrine of “neo-Ottomanism.” Through a discussion of the recent box-office champion comedies, namely *G.O.R.A.* (Ömer Faruk Sorak, 2004), *A.R.O.G.* (Ali Taner Baltacı and Cem Yılmaz, 2008), *Recep İvedik* (Togan Gökbakar, 2008), and *Recep İvedik 2* (Togan Gökbakar, 2009), the third part argues that, while recent blockbuster comedies make fun of Turkishness, the element of self-mockery in these films can easily turn into self-celebration. This part also discusses the image of “monstrosity” in relation to the presumption of “Turkish peculiarity” and the rise of “authentic” Turkishness in the AKP-era as a reactionary discourse against “white” Turkishness. The final part calls attention to the continuity between recent blockbuster comedies and action films in their representations of Turkishness

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to include the Turks themselves. Etyen Mahçupyan, “Ucubeleşme,” *Zaman*, January 19, 2011, <http://www.zaman.com.tr/yazar.do?yazino=1080940>.

and aims to demonstrate how magnificence and monstrosity appear in these films as two sides of the same coin.

### Recent popular cinema and the idea of Turkishness

In the 2000s, popular cinema in Turkey has turned into an increasingly lucrative branch of the culture industry.<sup>5</sup> While domestic film markets all over the world have seen a drop in recent years, Turkish films have done remarkably well. The recent commercial success of new popular cinema cannot be considered apart from the increasing popularity of Turkish television dramas, not only in Turkey, but also abroad, particularly in Middle Eastern, Balkan and Arab countries. Film and television industries have remained strongly interconnected during this period, in the sense that they share the same creative crew, financial sources, technical infrastructure, and viewers. Actually, several blockbuster movies of this period were film adaptations of television shows. As a result, parallel to the growing popularity of television dramas, box-office revenues of popular cinema have also dramatically increased. The second half of the 2000s has witnessed an increase not only in the number of films produced in Turkey,<sup>6</sup> but also in their box-office success. The market share of Turkish films during this period has generally been slightly above 50 percent. Also, the top positions in the box-office lists were always taken by domestic productions,<sup>7</sup> more often than not by comedies and action films.<sup>8</sup> The story-lines of recent blockbuster comedies and action films often deal with the question of how to make sense of Turkishness. This thematic concentration is closely related to the transformation of Turkish society over the last decade.

5 Popular cinema in Turkey—also known as Yeşilçam Cinema—had its heyday during the 1960s and early 1970s, when on average 200 films were produced every year. Yeşilçam Cinema started to decline in the late 1970s due to the increasing production costs incurred by the transition to color cinematography, the political turmoil of the period, and the nation-wide expansion of television broadcasting (Nilgün Abisel, *Türk Sineması Üzerine Yazılar* [Ankara: İmge, 1994]). After a period of grave recession, the mid-1990s witnessed a revival of Turkish cinema.

6 In the second half of the 2000s, there has also been an increase in the number of independent art-house films produced in Turkey, which have been extensively featured at international film festivals. The number of domestic viewers that these films attracted, however, has remained quite low.

7 The year 2008 was particularly significant, since domestic pictures in that year captured almost 60 percent of the country's box-office and all top ten positions were taken by Turkish films. For an analysis of the Turkish box-office figures of the recent years, see Şenay Aydemir, "Yerli Sinema Sezona Hazır: Peki ya Seyirci?," *Altıyazı*, no. 87 (2009).

8 The rise in the number of films produced in the 2000s coincides with a greater variety in terms of film genres. Along with comedies and action films, romantic comedies, youth films, and historical dramas have been the most popular genres of this period. Also, genres that previously had not been explored in Turkish cinema, such as crime-thrillers and horror films, began to appear on the screen.

It is now a widely shared observation that Turkey has been undergoing a complex process of transformation since the turn of the millennium. The country has been undergoing this process under the rather strong AKP government. Founded in 2001 by the younger generation of the pro-Islamic *Fazilet Partisi* (FP, Virtue Party), the AKP, defining itself as a center-right party with a conservative-democrat identity, has won successive electoral victories since then.<sup>9</sup> On the economic front, after a period of severe recession following the February 2001 crisis, Turkey has proven itself to be a rapidly growing economy since the second half of the 2000s. Attracting global investors because of its relative macro-economic stability over the past five years, the Turkish economy was rated the seventeenth-largest economy in the world in 2009 and the most rapidly growing economy in Europe in 2010.<sup>10</sup> The last decade has also been a period during which Turkey emphasized its role as a regional power in world politics, by adopting a more pro-active foreign policy orientation. Attracting growing global attention in recent years,<sup>11</sup> Turkey is often seen as the “most successful example in the world today of a secular democracy with a Muslim society.”<sup>12</sup> During this period, Turkey has taken several significant steps also towards further democratization of state-society relations. To a certain extent, the prospect of Turkey’s European Union (EU) membership was a major force behind these developments. Following the announcement of Turkey’s official candidate status at the 1999 Helsinki Summit, a reform process was initiated to meet the EU criteria for full membership, which in turn contributed to improvements in the country’s culture of democracy. Along with legal reforms, there have been various non-governmental efforts during this period to consolidate democracy. For instance, several civil society organizations have made significant attempts to make Turkish society face the violent episodes in its past (the practices of often state-inflicted

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- 9 The AKP has won three successive parliamentary elections since its foundation in 2001: In the 2002, 2007 and 2011 parliamentary elections, it received 34.3, 47, and 50 percent of the total votes, respectively.
- 10 Turkey was ranked as the most rapidly growing economy in Europe in 2010-11, with a growth rate of 5.7 Average Projected Real GDP Growth. “World Economic Outlook (WEO): Recovery, Risk and Rebalancing,” *International Monetary Fund Report* (2010), <http://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/weo/2010/02/index.htm>.
- 11 *The Economist*, for example, in a 2010 article, has characterized Turkey as the “China of Europe” because of its successful economic performance and suggested that Turkey, assuming a more pro-active role in its foreign policy, has turned also into a “local diplomatic giant.” “A Country’s Welcome Rise: Is Turkey Turning its Back on the West? No. But It Might if Europe and America Cannot Come to Terms with its Success,” *The Economist* (2010), <http://www.economist.com/node/17309065/print>.
- 12 E. Fuat Keyman, “Modernization, Globalization, and Democratization in Turkey: The AKP Experience and its Limits,” *Constellations* 17, no. 2 (2010): 322.

discrimination, oppression and violence, especially against Turkey's religious and ethnic minorities).<sup>13</sup> As a result of these developments, certain issues which were considered taboo in the past—most notably the Kurdish<sup>14</sup> and the Armenian<sup>15</sup> issues—are now to some extent debated by intellectuals and progressive civil society organizations.

Despite the air of optimism created by political stability, economic growth, an improving culture of democracy and the increasing visibility of the country as a rising regional power in global politics, the last decade has not necessarily been a period of harmony and contentment for Turkish society. For one thing, the 2000s have witnessed a strong polarization between the state elite and the AKP government, which manifested itself in recursive interventions into politics in the form of coup attempts, legal cases for party closures, military ultimatums,<sup>16</sup> and so forth.<sup>17</sup> Moreover, widespread complaints and protests concerning the economy—especially in relation to high unemployment rates and worsening conditions of employment due to the rigorous implementation of neo-liberal policies—have continued to challenge the government. The second half of the 2000s was also a period during which the AKP government's commitment to the EU reform process was seriously weakened.<sup>18</sup>

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- 13 Among these civil-society initiatives that have attempted to make Turkish society face its past, the Apology Campaign inaugurated by a group of intellectuals in 2008 created the greatest impact both inside and outside Turkey. The apology text, placed on the internet, is comprised of the following statement: "My conscience does not accept the insensitivity shown to and the denial of the Great Catastrophe that the Ottoman Armenians were subjected to in 1915. I reject this injustice and, for my share, I empathize with the feelings and pain of my Armenian brothers and sisters. I apologize to them." The statement was signed by more than 30,800 persons. "Özür Diliyorum," <http://www.ozurdiliyoruz.com/destekleyenler.aspx?pg=0>.
- 14 Today, the Turkish public finds itself in the position of admitting, even if often unwillingly, the atrocities perpetrated by the Turkish state against its Kurdish citizens. For a more detailed discussion of the Turkish state's policy of suppression and denial concerning the Kurds, see Mesut Yeğen, "Prospective-Turks or Pseudo-Citizens: Kurds in Turkey," *The Middle East Journal* 63, no. 4 (2009).
- 15 Although the term "genocide" is still mostly viewed as a taboo, the catastrophe created by the mass deportation and massacre of Ottoman Armenians in 1915 is now a subject that the Turkish public begins to face. For a more detailed discussion of the Turkish state's policy concerning Ottoman Armenians, see Fatma Müge Göçek, "Reconstructing the Turkish Historiography on the Armenian Massacres and Deaths of 1915," in *Confronting the Armenian Genocide: Looking Backward, Moving Forward*, ed. Richard G. Hovannisian (New Jersey: Transaction Publishers, 2003).
- 16 The AKP government took significant steps to tame the interventionist endeavors of the military. For a more detailed discussion of the complex relations between the AKP and the military, see Ümit Cizre, "The Justice and Development Party and the Military: Recreating the Past after Reforming it?," in *Secular and Islamic Politics in Turkey: The Making of the Justice and Development Party*, ed. Ümit Cizre (New York: Routledge, 2010b).
- 17 Keyman, "The AKP Experience," 324.
- 18 By 2007, the EU-driven reform process had come to a halt, after having already slowed down over the course of the year 2006. This was due to the increasing questioning of the very basis of Turkish membership in several European countries (Ziya Öniş and Şuhnaz Yılmaz, "Between Europeanization and Euro-Asianism: Foreign-Policy Activism in Turkey during the AKP Era," *Turkish Studies* 10, no.

Parallel to the slowing down of the democratization reforms, there have been signs pointing to increasing problems in the areas of human rights and freedom of expression.<sup>19</sup> There appears a growing anxiety in certain segments of society about the perceived tendency of the Islamic conservatism and authoritarianism of the AKP government.<sup>20</sup> There also has been a growing number of cases of ethnic polarization, intolerance and violence, along with the rise of various nationalist discourses. Last but not the least, efforts to face the past remained generally inconclusive. Although today the unlawful practices and atrocities perpetuated by the Turkish state against its citizens have been to a certain extent exposed, the persons responsible for these acts have not been fully revealed and brought to justice.

The picture created by these developments is that of a society undergoing a rapid process of transformation—leaving behind the certainties of the past, finding itself in an ambivalent present, and becoming increasingly confused about its future. The prevailing mood in today's Turkey may best be described as that of a pendulum swinging back and forth between conflicting opinions about how to make sense of the present condition of the country. This has an impact on the way in which Turkishness is perceived. A recent study on nationalism has shown that in the 2000s Turks tended to reflect more and more upon Turkish identity and what it means to be Turkish.<sup>21</sup> Turkish society has developed an increasingly ambivalent self-image during this period oscillating between magnificence and monstrosity.

On the one side, there is an aspiration to magnificence. What might be called a “latent post-imperial consciousness”<sup>22</sup> has always been a subtle, yet significant constituent of Turkish identity, in the sense that Turkish citizens tend to see themselves as successors of the Ottomans. This often contributes to a sense of “collective failure,” however, since society perceives itself as incompetent and weak in comparison to the pre-

1 [2009]: 13), as well as the AKP's interest in attracting nationalist votes for the 2007 parliamentary elections (Dilek Kurban, “Introduction to English Edition,” in *Coming to Terms With Forced Migration: Post-Displacement Restitution of Citizenship Rights in Turkey*, eds. Dilek Kurban, et al. [Istanbul: TESEV, 2007]).

19 In the 2010 Press Freedom Index of Reporters Without Borders, Turkey ranked 138th among 178 countries: Reporters Without Borders, [http://en.rsf.org/press-freedom-index-2010\\_1034.html](http://en.rsf.org/press-freedom-index-2010_1034.html).

20 For a more detailed discussion of increasing conservatism under the AKP government, see the recent survey by Binnaz Toprak et al., *Türkiye'de Farklı Olmak* (Istanbul: Metis, 2009).

21 Ferhat Kentel et al., *Milletin Bölünmez Bütünlüğü: Demokratikleşme Sürecinde Parçalayan Milliyetçilik(ler)* (Istanbul: TESEV, 2007), 50.

22 Yael Navaro-Yashin, *Faces of the State: Secularism and Public Life in Turkey* (Princeton: University of Princeton Press, 2002), 47.

sumed glory of that past.<sup>23</sup> The sense of “collective failure” is also closely linked to the perceived level of development and “civilization” of the West (particularly European societies), compared to which Turkish citizens are often dissatisfied with their country’s performance.<sup>24</sup> The latent memory of once having been a powerful actor on the world scene (and having eventually been dismantled by European powers) has left Turkish people with a sense of “collective failure,”<sup>25</sup> which today manifests itself through feelings of resentment and bitterness towards the West, on the one hand, and a desire to prove itself to the West, on the other.<sup>26</sup> The fantasy of “magnificence,” in this context, refers to the aspirations of Turkish society about the revival of the glory of the past and about once again becoming a powerful actor on the world scene. Having benefited from the international sympathy and support that it received in the new strategic environment created by the reshaping of the world after the Cold War and 9/11,<sup>27</sup> the AKP has very much promoted the aspiration of magnificence in its political discourse. Challenging the Kemalist *status quo* represented by the military-bureaucratic elite, the AKP valorizes the Ottoman past over Republican history (particularly the single-party era). The party promotes an image of Turkey as a rising power in the world, eager to attain ever greater economic development and political influence.<sup>28</sup> It expresses the conviction that the obstacles that hinder Turkey’s development can be overcome and that Turkey can change. It encourages Turkish citizens to take pride in the development of their country. The political discourse of the AKP not only self-consciously invokes the fantasy of magnificence, but also makes it appear attainable. Turkey’s recent accomplishments on the economic and international fronts have made Turkish citizens think that their aspirations to change might actually come true. On one hand, then, the current self-image of

23 Ibid., 50.

24 Ibid., 50.

25 According to the findings of this study, nationalist ideology in today’s Turkey serves to establish a sense of pride and self-affirmation, counter-balancing the negative self-perception of society. Patriotism is seen as the strongest inherent asset of the Turkish people and associated with attributes such as Turks’ absolute devotion to their country, their willingness to sacrifice themselves for their country, and so forth (Kentel et al., *Milletin Bölünmez Bütünlüğü*, 50-54).

26 This sentiment is strikingly conveyed by a popular chant sung by Turkish football fans when a Turkish team plays against international rivals: “Hear our voice, Europe! These are the footsteps of the Turks...”

27 Ümit Cizre, “Introduction: The Justice and Development Party: Making Choices, Revisions, and Reversals Interactively,” in *Secular and Islamic Politics in Turkey: The Making of the Justice and Development Party*, ed. Ümit Cizre (New York: Routledge, 2010a), 8.

28 Members of the AKP government frequently declare that Turkey’s aim is to take place among the ten largest economies of the world by 2023, the year of the hundredth anniversary of the establishment of the Republic.



Turkish society is shaped around the anticipation that Turkey is moving towards a better future that will bring back the magnificence of the past.

On the other hand, there is an encounter with monstrosity. The 2000s has witnessed a somewhat unsystematic, yet drastic exposure of the wrong-doings and atrocities perpetrated by the Turkish state in the past, especially against the members of its religious and ethnic minorities. A complex network of complicity lurks behind the horror of the past, implicating not only military and civil officials, but also other segments of society, most notably big business and the media. Actually, it is precisely the new role that Turkey intends to play on the world scene as a rising regional power that necessitates the cleansing and normalization of the Turkish state. In the present-day context of the increasing global integration and internationalization of politics, it is no longer possible for the Turkish state to isolate itself from the world and to continue to follow a politics of denial concerning its wrong-doings.<sup>29</sup> This situation presents a unique opportunity for Turkish society to come to terms with its past. Yet, while a small segment of society (consisting mostly of victims and their families, human-rights organizations, and intellectuals) has responded to this situation by demanding an overreaching quest for truth and justice, a more common response has been a mixture of confusion, indifference, cynicism, and defensiveness. In other words, Turkish society on the whole, expressing no genuine grief and shame for what has been done in its name in the past, chooses not to distance itself from the state. It remains rather silent and apathetic in the face of the ongoing operations of the state (now under the AKP-government) to regulate this new situation with minimum damage to itself, to cover up its wrong-doings, and to protect the responsible parties.<sup>30</sup> The 2000s, then, has also been a period in which Turkish society has irrefutably encountered the brutal face of the Turkish state, yet remained largely

29 Deniz Yüksek and Bilgin Ayata, for example, have maintained that, while the Turkish state has abandoned its politics of "absolute denial" concerning the Kurdish issue (more specifically, the forced deportation of Kurds), it has shifted its position not to a new politics of acknowledgement, but to a "policy of regulation": Deniz Yüksek and Bilgin Ayata, "İnkâr Siyasetinden 'İdare' Politikasına Kürtlerin Zorunlu Göçü," *Birikim*, no. 213 (2007).

30 The most emblematic illustration of the ongoing cover-up operations of the Turkish state under the AKP government is related to the case of Hrant Dink, the Turkish-Armenian journalist who was assassinated by a young Turkish ultra-nationalist in January of 2007. Although Dink's killer was sentenced to 23 years in jail, the masterminds behind this assassination, which allegedly include high-level state officials, have not been revealed and brought to justice. In September of 2010, the European Court ruled that Turkish authorities failed in their duty to protect Dink when they had information about plots to kill him. "Killer's Conviction Seen as Important Step, But Masterminds Still Protected and Threats Continue," *Reporters Without Borders* (2011), <http://en.rsf.org/turquie-killer-s-conviction-seen-as-26-07-2011,40690.html>.

indifferent to it. This indifference brings about the understanding that, regardless of the accomplishments of the country on the economic and international fronts, certain things will never change. Here, the prevalent presumption concerning “Turkish peculiarity” comes into play.<sup>31</sup> This is the presumption that Turkey is a unique country in the world, incomparable to any other because of its peculiar geo-political location and history, which renders it exempt from abiding by the standards of modern democracy. The presumption of “Turkish peculiarity,” serving to justify the monstrous face of the Turkish state by making it appear acceptable, establishes a tacit complicity between state and society.

Below, I will show that the Turkish box-office champions of the recent years include excessive representations of Turkishness, oscillating between magnificence and monstrosity, which actually constitute two sides of the same coin.

### Turkishness in action

*Kurtlar Vadisi Irak* (*Valley of the Wolves: Iraq*, Serdar Akar, 2006)—due to its politically charged story and enthusiastic reception, arguably the most controversial Turkish action film of the last decade—illustrates how a sense of “magnificence” is evoked around the idea of Turkishness. Based on a hit television series by the same title, the film broke the box-office records of all times to that date, by reaching more than 4,250,000 viewers in Turkey and more than 500,000 abroad.<sup>32</sup>

The enormous popularity of *Valley of the Wolves: Iraq* must be understood in the context of the rising popularity of nationalist discourses in Turkey over the last two decades. Established during a grave crisis in which its very existence was threatened, as Tanıl Bora has argued, modern Turkey possesses a nation-state tradition that has subsequently perceived its surrounding countries as a severe threat.<sup>33</sup> This condition of survival and threat has had a considerable effect on the way in which Turkish national identity has taken shape.<sup>34</sup> The strengthening of nationalist discourses in Turkey over the last two decades can be seen as an outcome of a series of developments including the implementation

31 The presumption of “Turkish peculiarity” is related to what Meltem Ahiska has called the “trope of the exception” in Turkish politics, which refers to a common defensive reflex that “positions Turkey as a unique case and thereby isolates it from the lens of critical and comparative analysis”: Meltem Ahiska, *Occidentalism in Turkey: Questions of Modernity and National Identity in Turkish Radio Broadcasting* (London: I.B.Tauris, 2010), 8.

32 Birsen Altuntaş, “Kurtlar Vadisi Irak Tüm Rekorları Kırdı,” *Milliyet*, August 3, 2006, <http://www.milliyet.com/2006/03/08/magazin/amag.html>.

33 Tanıl Bora, “Nationalist Discourses in Turkey,” *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 102, no. 2-3 (2003).

34 *Ibid.*, 434.

of neo-liberal economic policies and Turkey's integration into the global capitalist system; the rise of political Islam; and the rise of the Kurdish separatist movement and the armed clashes between the Turkish army and Kurdish guerillas. Having claimed an estimated 30,000 lives, mostly of Kurdish origin, the protracted conflict in eastern Anatolia also gave rise to the surfacing of a "deep-state" formation in Turkey, which refers to the "corrupt and repressive state implicated in mafia business and authoritarian politics."<sup>35</sup> The improving relations between Turkey and the EU have also been a key factor contributing to the development of nationalist discourses. The harmonization reforms demanded by the EU caused alarm among the military-bureaucratic elite, because of the significant changes in the national security system that they require.<sup>36</sup> Finally, the aggressive imperialist policy of the United States during the post-9/11 era and the consequent instability in the Middle East contributed to the strengthening of nationalist discourses in Turkey. Accordingly, as Ayşe Kadioğlu and Fuat Keyman have stated, the AKP's rise in popularity, coupled with the reform process and the increasing tension at Turkey's southeastern border in the aftermath of the war in Iraq, gave rise to a nationalist discourse based on a fear of Islam, the EU, the United States, the Kurds, and all non-Muslim and non-Turkish identities in Turkey.<sup>37</sup> Perceiving these developments as a threat against the unity and sovereignty of the country, nationalist discourses have aggressively spread during the 2000s.

The phenomenon of *Valley of the Wolves* (both the television series and the film) can be conceived as an outcome of the rising nationalist discourses shaped around a conspiratorial and paranoid mentality. Telling the story of dark relations between a group of Turkish intelligence service agents and members of Turkish and international mafia organizations, *Valley of the Wolves* is a mafia drama series that alleges to reveal the hidden facts about deep-state formation in Turkey. It presents the geopolitical location of Turkey as a territory where superpowers have historically confronted each other to expand their economic and political interests.<sup>38</sup> Located in a historically volatile territory, Turkey is imagined to be under constant threat from various malicious forces.

35 Kevin Robins and Asu Aksoy, "Deep Nation: The National Question and Turkish Cinema Culture," in *Cinema and Nation*, eds. Mette Hjort and Scott MacKenzie (London: Routledge, 2000), 203.

36 Çağlar Keyder, "The Turkish Bell Jar," *New Left Review*, no. 28 (2004): 80.

37 Ayşe Kadioğlu and Fuat Keyman, "Introduction: Understanding Nationalism through Family Resemblances," in *Symbiotic Antagonisms: Competing Nationalisms in Turkey*, eds. Ayşe Kadioğlu and Fuat Keyman (Salt Lake City: The University of Utah Press, 2010), xii.

38 For a more detailed discussion of *Valley of the Wolves*, the television series, see Aksu Bora and Tanıl Bora, "Kurtlar Vadisi ve Erkeklik Krizi: Neden Iskender'i Öldürmüyoruz Usta?," *Birikim*, no. 256-257 (2010a).

Drawing upon the anti-American sentiments in Turkey that emerged following the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, *Valley of the Wolves: Iraq*, the first film sequel to the television drama series,<sup>39</sup> narrates the adventures of a Turkish intelligent agent who goes to northern Iraq on a special mission to take revenge for an assault against Turkish soldiers by American warlords. The beginning of the story is based on a true event known as the “sack incident” (*çuval olayı*) in Turkey. On July 4, 2003, shortly after the US invasion of Iraq, US forces entered the unofficial Turkish headquarters in northern Iraq and arrested eleven Turkish soldiers stationed there, blindfolding them with hoods.<sup>40</sup> Triggering a diplomatic crisis between Turkey and the US, the “sack incident” also caused an enormous public outcry and boosted anti-American sentiments in Turkey. Drawing upon the public mood created by real events, *Valley of the Wolves: Iraq* tells a fictional revenge-story about the aftermath of the “sack incident.” In the film, one of the Turkish soldiers arrested by the US forces in northern Iraq leaves behind a letter before committing suicide. This letter is addressed to Polat Alemdar (Necati Şaşmaz), a specially trained Turkish intelligent agent. Polat Alemdar, who no longer has any official ties to the Intelligence Agency at that point, cannot ignore the last wish of his friend and goes to northern Iraq with his two men. There, he begins a crusade against the man who insulted the Turkish soldiers, Sam William Marshall (Billy Zane), a special forces commander. The rest of the film presents an action-style orgy of blood and violence.

Seeing the US invasion of Iraq as rooted in a historical struggle between Islam and Judeo-Christianity,<sup>41</sup> *Valley of the Wolves: Iraq* represents “Turkishness” against a gallery of ethnic-religious stereotypes. The film employs negative stereotypes of Kurds as “enemy collaborators” and “US pawns”<sup>42</sup> and of Iraqis as “backward,” “cowardly,” “overtly religious” and clearly inferior to Turks.<sup>43</sup> Ironically, *Valley of the Wolves: Iraq*, despite its obvious anti-Americanism and anti-Semitism, poses Turkish-

39 In subsequent years, two more film sequels to the television drama were released: *Valley of the Wolves: Gladio (Kurtlar Vadisi Gladio)*, Sadullah Şentürk, 2009) and *Valley of the Wolves: Palestine (Kurtlar Vadisi Filistin)*, Zübeyr Şaşmaz, 2011).

40 The US attempted to justify these arrests by claiming that it was trying to prevent an assassination plan against the Kurdish governor of Kirkuk. Turkish observers believe, however, that the incident was orchestrated after the Turkish Parliament on March 1, 2003 rejected the US request to use Turkish territory as a launching pad for its invasion of Iraq (Ahmed Khalid Al-Rawi, “Valley of the Wolves as Representative of Turkish Popular Attitudes Towards Iraq,” *International Journal of Contemporary Iraqi Studies* 3, no. 1 (2009).

41 *Ibid.*, 79.

42 *Ibid.*, 80–81.

43 Ioannis N. Grigoriadis, “Friends No More? The Rise of Anti-American Nationalism in Turkey,” *Middle East Journal* 64, no. 1 (2010): 61.

ness not so much against Americans or Jews, but rather against Arabs. The film's implied final statement—"Turks will not be humiliated, as Iraqis have been"—reinforces the Turkish prejudice of ethnic difference and the superiority of Turks to Arabs.<sup>44</sup>

Although it is an action film, *Valley of the Wolves: Iraq* articulates a sense of nostalgia.<sup>45</sup> Discussing nostalgic thinking as an integral part of the experience of modernity, Svetlana Boym has defined a "restorative" mode of nostalgia (in contradistinction to a "reflective" mode) as one that evokes a "national past" and proposes to "rebuild the lost home."<sup>46</sup> Not considering itself nostalgic, restorative nostalgia maintains that its project is about truth. The two dominant narrative plots of restorative nostalgia are the restoration of origins and conspiracy theory. "This kind of nostalgia," writes Boym, "characterizes national and nationalist revivals all over the world, which engage in the anti-modern myth-making of history by means of a return to national symbols and myths and, occasionally, through swapping conspiracy theories."<sup>47</sup> The conspiratorial worldview reflects nostalgia for a "transcendental cosmology" and a simple "pre-modern conception of good and evil."<sup>48</sup> As modern history is seen as a fulfillment of ancient prophecy, the complexity of history and the specificity of modern circumstances are erased.<sup>49</sup> *Valley of the Wolves: Iraq* operates within a similar conspiratorial worldview. The film's critical position towards the US invasion of Iraq is grounded in a trans-historical plot based on a battle of good and evil. The Judeo-Christian conspiracy embodied by the US appears as the unmistakable evil in this battle, with sadistic soldiers killing civilians for sport, perverted doctors dealing in human organs, and sinister warlords and missionaries preoccupied with the idea of taking the region under Western domination. Iraqi-Kurdish leaders are ignorant, yet greedy actors, blindly obeying the Americans. Iraqis are cowardly and passive in the face of American invasion. Iraqi Turkmen are dignified patriots (they are after all of Turkish origin!), yet they are forced by the Kurds to leave their homeland so that the ethnic make-up of northern Iraq will change in favor of the Kurdish population. Polat Alemdar, the Turk, is inserted in this picture as an absolute hero. He is not only a brave and tough combatant, but also suc-

44 Al-Rawi, "Valley of the Wolves," 82.

45 For a discussion of *Valley of the Wolves: Iraq* in relation to Turkish "nostalgia films" of the last fifteen years, see Asuman Suner, *New Turkish Cinema: Belonging, Identity, and Memory* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2009).

46 Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), 41.

47 Ibid., 41.

48 Ibid., 43.

49 Ibid., 43.

ceeds in remaining fair and humane under all circumstances. He takes his power from his Turkishness. He considers his love for his country sacred. What makes him unbeatable is his complete devotion to his mission—that is, to save his country's honor.

Nostalgia emerges in *Valley of the Wolves: Iraq* in relation to the idea of neo-Ottomanism and the fantasy of “magnificence” that it invokes. As such, the film is very much in tune with the pro-active foreign policy ambitions of the AKP government in the region. The term “neo-Ottomanism” refers to a view that advocates the “Turkish pursuit of active and diversified foreign policy in the region based on the Ottoman historical heritage.”<sup>50</sup> In this view, Turkey is envisioned as a leader of the Muslim and Turkic worlds and a central power in Eurasia.<sup>51</sup> The new foreign policy of the AKP government is often perceived as the realization of the neo-Ottoman doctrine,<sup>52</sup> in the sense that it assumes the more assertive role of a regional player and mediates regional conflicts.<sup>53</sup> The AKP government uses the neo-Ottoman discourse in “projecting the image of a just and impartial arbiter in foreign policy towards the Middle East.”<sup>54</sup> While the discourse of neo-Ottomanism sees the revival of the Ottoman past as a source of cultural enrichment and political empowerment, it also promises to revive a long-lost sense of magnificence in relation to Turkishness. The fantasy of magnificence, which is closely related to the “latent postimperial consciousness,”<sup>55</sup> is already a crucial component of contemporary Turkish identity. In the official narrative of the Ottoman Empire's rise and decline, school children are given the impression that their ancestors were driven from the territories to which they were entitled and that they had to compromise to receive a smaller piece of land after the defeat by the European powers.<sup>56</sup> In this way, the memory of “once broader space and territory” is inculcated in Turkish people from an early age.<sup>57</sup>

50 Alexander Murinson, “The Strategic Depth Doctrine of Turkish Foreign Policy,” *Middle Eastern Studies* 42, no. 6 (2006): 946.

51 The doctrine of neo-Ottomanism has become an important component of the post-Cold War transformation of Turkish foreign policy. Turgut Özal, the first president of Turkey in the post-Cold-War era, laid the foundations of a new foreign policy concept in tune with the philosophy of neo-Ottomanism. This new doctrine took a more mature and comprehensive shape under the AKP government (*ibid.*, 945–946).

52 The Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu is the architect of the new Turkish foreign policy vision of the AKP government, which he describes as the “strategic depth” doctrine. While the term neo-Ottomanism is widely used by foreign policy observers, Davutoğlu himself does not use it.

53 Murinson, “The Strategic Depth Doctrine of Turkish Foreign Policy,” 953.

54 *Ibid.*, 953.

55 Navaro-Yashin, *Faces of the State*, 47.

56 *Ibid.*, 47.

57 *Ibid.*, 47.

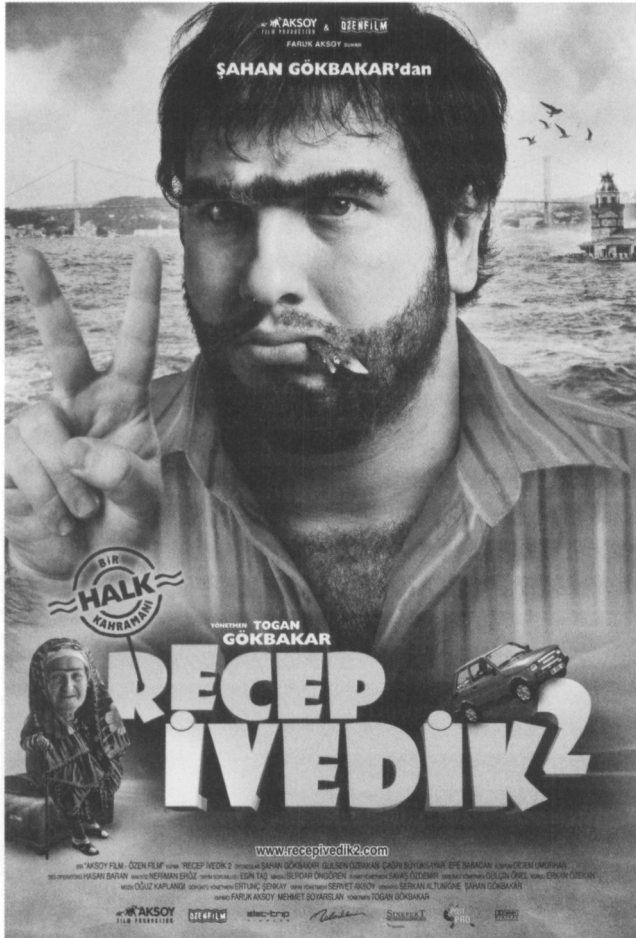
Invoking the nostalgic memory of magnificence, *Valley of the Wolves: Iraq* appeals to the Turkish/Islamic nationalist fantasy of “restoring” Ottoman/Turkish imperial power in the Middle East.<sup>58</sup> In the film, the Ottoman Empire is imagined not only as a potent, but also as a humane and just power. This idealized image of the Ottoman/Turkish imperial rule is made manifest in the suicide note of the Turkish soldier, which we see in the opening sequence. “All the powers who reigned these territories,” the soldier states in his letter, “have tyrannized the people of this land, except our ancestors.” Seen as a symbol of a magnificent past, the Ottoman rule is idealized as the sole “good” power in history, ruling territories from the Middle East to the Balkans without tyrannizing its subjects. Restorative nostalgia, the fantasy of re-invoking the magnificence of the Ottoman past, in the film also serves as an antidote to the monstrous image of Turkishness. The basis of the story of *Valley of the Wolves* (both the television series and the film), after all, is built upon an open recognition of deep-state formation in Turkey—that is, the monstrous face of the Turkish state. Claiming to expose the underside of the dark relations between the Turkish deep state, foreign intelligence agencies and mafia organizations, *Valley of the Wolves* ends up affirming “monstrosity” on the grounds of the presumption of “Turkish peculiarity.” The peculiar geographical location and historical condition of Turkey, the conviction that “Turkey takes place in the world’s valley of the wolves,” in the words of the director of the television drama series,<sup>59</sup> serves to justify Turkish deep-state formation (with all the violence that it has perpetuated), by rendering its existence not only inevitable, but also necessary. The promise of magnificence counter-balances the burden of monstrosity.

### Turkishness in comedy

Recep İvedik, a character whose peculiar speech pattern has rapidly turned into an epidemic among youngsters, is arguably the most scandalous phenomenon in recent popular Turkish cinema. Based on a successful television program starring the young comedian Şahan Gökbağkar, *Recep İvedik*, the record-breaking box-office champion of 2008 with

58 *Valley of the Wolves: Iraq* was warmly received by the members of the AKP government at its public premiere in Ankara in February 2006. Bülent Arınç, Parliamentary Speaker at the time, for example, praised *Valley of the Wolves: Iraq* as a “magnificent” film that will go down in history. “Siyaset ve Sanat Dünyasının Kurtları Galada,” *NTV-MSNBC*, February 6, 2006, <http://arsiv.ntvmsnbc.com/news/359889.asp>.

59 Osman Sınav interviewed by Ebru Çapa, *Aktüel* 602 (2003). The quotation is taken from Zeynep Gültekin, “Irak’dan Önce: Kurtlar Vadisi Dizisi,” *İletişim Kuram ve Araştırma Dergisi*, no. 22 (2006), [http://www.ilet.gazi.edu.tr/iletisim\\_dergi/22/2.pdf](http://www.ilet.gazi.edu.tr/iletisim_dergi/22/2.pdf).



Film poster of *Recep İvedik 2* (Togan Gökbağkar, 2009). Courtesy of Aksoy Film.

more than 4,300,000 viewers, was written by Şahan Gökbağkar himself and directed by his brother Togan Gökbağkar. Advertising its title character as a “people’s hero,” the film revolves around the adventures of a simple man from a low-income neighborhood in Istanbul. Recep is a young man with vulgar manners and a large, unshapely body almost completely covered by dark body hair. The first film of the sequel tells the story of Recep’s journey from Istanbul to a tourist resort town in southern Turkey in order to return a wallet he found on the street. The owner of the wallet turns out to be the manager of one of the many five-star hotels there and awards Recep with a week-long holiday in his establishment. *Recep İvedik 2*—breaking the Turkish box-office record set by the original *Recep İvedik* with admissions slightly exceeding 4,330,000—is set in



Istanbul. This film gives a more important role to Recep's grandmother, an extraordinary elderly woman whose manners are even worse than Recep's. Having great respect for his grandmother, Recep attempts to find employment merely in order to please her. Although he somehow succeeds in obtaining several low-rank positions, each time he is fired almost instantly because of his attitude. Disappointed by Recep's repeated failures, the grandmother makes him work for his nephew who runs an advertisement agency.<sup>60</sup>

Despite its popularity, the Recep İvedik phenomenon has created controversy in Turkey. Part of the criticism has to do with the films' allegedly brash and tasteless quality. Based on an episodic narrative, the visual language of the films can hardly be considered sophisticated or stylish. Moreover, the films have caused controversy because of the main character's vulgar manners, gross habits, and dirty jokes. Most jokes in the films are rather juvenile: humor is often produced by alluding to bodily activities involving defecation, breaking wind, masturbation, and so forth. There are also many sexist jokes as well as homophobic references.<sup>61</sup>

A.R.O.G., with approximately 3,700,000 viewers ranking second after *Recep İvedik* in 2008, in some respects significantly differs from the *Recep İvedik* films, although there are also a number of similarities. A.R.O.G. is the sequel to G.O.R.A. (the box-office champion of 2004 with admissions slightly exceeding 4,000,000), its title obviously consisting of the same letters in reverse order. Both G.O.R.A. and A.R.O.G. were written by Cem Yılmaz, a popular stand-up comedian. Political incorrectness is one aspect that G.O.R.A. and A.R.O.G. share with the *Recep İvedik* films. In terms of visual sophistication, G.O.R.A. and A.R.O.G. are far ahead of other popular comedies of recent years (including the *Recep İvedik* films), as they have an elaborate mise-en-scene (particularly set and costume design) and successful special effects.

Very much like the *Recep İvedik* films, the stories of G.O.R.A. and A.R.O.G. revolve around a particular character, Arif (Cem Yılmaz), a carpet-dealer in a resort town. Different from Recep's beast-like appearance, Arif seems to be a more regular person. In G.O.R.A., a parody of space odyssey films, Arif is abducted by aliens and taken to a planet called

60 Although the third film of the sequel, *Recep İvedik 3* (Togan Gökbakar, 2010), has been released in the meantime, this essay will not take it into account.

61 The *Recep İvedik* films have often been accused of offering young people and children a negative role model. Ertuğrul Günay, the Minister of Culture and Tourism, for example, criticized Recep İvedik for his language and stated that this character should not be promoted as a role model to young people. "Recep İvedik'i Özendiremem," *Vatan*, September 26, 2008, <http://haber.gazetevatan.com/Haber/200717/1/Gundem>.

GORA. There, he falls in love with the planet's princess. Commander Logar (Cem Yılmaz), however, has plans to marry the princess in order to rule the entire planet. Arif fights against the commander. After several adventures, he succeeds in defeating Logar and leaving GORA with the princess by his side. In *A.R.O.G.*, we see Arif back in Turkey, running his carpet store and happily married to the princess who is now expecting a baby. Commander Logar, however, comes to earth to take revenge. He transfers Arif to the Stone Age with the help of a time machine. There, Arif has to struggle against the powerful ruler of a tribe (Cem Yılmaz), who prohibits any social and technological progress. The film ends happily as his wife unexpectedly shows up to bring Arif back to the present.

In both *G.O.R.A./A.R.O.G.* and the *Recep İvedik* films, the story revolves around a particular character with certain features representing a cultural prototype. This kind of comedy has a long tradition in Yeşilçam Cinema, with several of its memorable characters still being among the most celebrated figures of Turkish popular culture. Among them, Tourist Ömer (*Turist Ömer*, played by Sadri Alışık) was an important source of inspiration for Cem Yılmaz in creating Arif. The *Tourist Ömer* films<sup>62</sup> are based on the humorous travel adventures of their main character, a kind-hearted tramp who does not have great aspirations in life.<sup>63</sup> Although there is no such obvious connection between *Recep İvedik* and previous Yeşilçam comedy characters, there has been a tendency to compare him to Şaban (played by Kemal Sunal), a lower-class man from a provincial background with naïve manners.<sup>64</sup> Despite these resemblances, however, Arif and Recep are different from previous prototypes of Yeşilçam cinema in several key respects. Cultural critic Orhan Tekelioğlu has pointed to the "hybrid" nature of humor produced in both the *Recep İvedik* films and *G.O.R.A./A.R.O.G.* as a distinctive quality of this new type of comedies which we can observe in the merg-

62 There were seven *Tourist Ömer* films made between 1964 and 1974, all directed by Hulki Saner (Özge Güven, "Uzay Yolunda Bir Aylak: Turist Ömer," in *Kahkaha ve Hüzün: Sadri Alışık*, ed. Kurtuluş Özyazıcı [Ankara: Dost, 2006]).

63 *G.O.R.A.* alludes especially to *Tourist Ömer on Star Trek (Turist Ömer Uzay Yolunda)* in which the character, abducted by aliens, finds himself on the spaceship Enterprise, to be examined by Turkish versions of Captain Kirk and Mr. Spock.

64 Having first appeared in the 1975 Yeşilçam adaptation of Rifat Ilgaz's novel *Outrageous Class (Hababam Sınıfı)*, Kemal Sunal's Şaban became enormously popular within a short period of time, and several films featuring this character either in the main role or as a supporting character were made during the 1970s and 1980s. When asked about how he compares Şaban to his own character, Şahan Gökbağkar stated that Recep, as someone who was born and grew up in a lower middle-class neighborhood in İstanbul, is less naïve and more aggressive than Şaban, a provincial character struggling to adapt to the big city. Cited from Ayşe Arman, "Yüzde 60 İvedik Yüzde 40 Şahan'ım (Interview with Şahan Gökbağkar)," *Hürriyet*, March 15, 2009, <http://hurarsiv.hurriyet.com.tr/goster/haber.aspx?id=11211049&tarih=2009-03-15>.

ing of lower- and middle-class identity and cultural taste.<sup>65</sup> Representing a decidedly anti-elitist position, both Recep and Arif appeal at once both to the lower and middle classes, to slums and suburbs alike. Another distinguishing characteristic of these films, I suggest, is their preoccupation with the idea of Turkishness. Both the *Recep İvedik* films and *G.O.R.A./A.R.O.G.* produce their humor out of a playful interrogation of the idea of Turkishness in the context of contemporary global capitalist modernity.

Humor in *G.O.R.A.* and *A.R.O.G.* is produced mostly from intertextual references to popular Hollywood films. Both films use the popular trope of time/space travel in the science fiction genre. They contain direct references to films such as *Star Wars*, *Star Trek*, *Matrix*, and *Jurassic Park*. In this respect, their stories are similar to popular Hollywood comedies that parody other popular Hollywood films, such as the *Hot Shots* series of the 1990s. What makes *G.O.R.A.* and *A.R.O.G.* distinct, however, is an additional layer of humor that might be difficult to decipher for viewers unfamiliar with the Turkish context. This additional layer has to do with an implicit element of anachronism at the center of the story, which is linked to the presumption of “Turkish peculiarity.” In the science fiction genre, the protagonist representing “our” world (read: modern Western society) travels to an alien territory (in space and/or in a different era). The alien quality of the territory that the protagonist encounters is measured against the normative status of the West to which he belongs. In *G.O.R.A.* and *A.R.O.G.*, humor mainly arises from the distance, not so much between the contemporary world and the alien territory, but between the protagonist and the Western subject that he replaces. Epitomizing the presumably characteristic features of an ordinary Turkish man, Arif can hardly be considered a representative of the contemporary modern world. In the words of Cem Yılmaz, Arif is someone who has an opinion about everything, yet knows nothing.<sup>66</sup> He is uneducated and has no interest in intellectual matters. Still, from the bits and pieces of information he has heard here and there he manufactures an opinion. He has a solution for every problem. Pursuing his own self-interest, he is totally pragmatic and opportunist. He can easily adapt himself to different situations. With his unbeatable self-confidence and optimism, he considers himself to be of outstanding

65 Orhan Tekelioğlu, “Mezleşmiş Bir Mizaha Doğru,” *Radikal İki*, March 1, 2009, <http://www.radikal.com.tr/Radikal.aspx?aType=RadikalEklrDetayV3&ArticleID=924203&Date=03.03.2009&CategoryID=42>.

66 Cited by Uğur Vardan, “Taşı Sıkça Medeniyet Çıkarır,” *Radikal*, December 4, 2008, <http://www.radikal.com.tr/Radikal.aspx?aType=RadikalHaberDetayV3&CategoryID=113&ArticleID=911277>.

practical intelligence. What makes *G.O.R.A.* and *A.R.O.G.* so appealing to Turkish viewers, then, is precisely the idea of having a Turk at the center of a science fiction story. In an enthusiastic review of *A.R.O.G.*, the Turkish film critic Uğur Vardan has described Cem Yılmaz as the comedian who has succeeded in capturing the essence of Turkishness most accurately.<sup>67</sup> The brilliance of his films, according to Vardan, is not to produce yet another spoof on Hollywood films, but to explore the idea of what a Turk might do on a spaceship or in the Stone Age.<sup>68</sup> The anachronism in *G.O.R.A.* and *A.R.O.G.*, then, arises from replacing the modern Western subject at the center of the science fiction genre with a Turk, a subject who presumably does not quite fit into Western modernity. Humor, in this sense, arises precisely from the very “Turkishness” of the protagonist, which explains his peculiar responses to situations.

A similar element of anachronism is also at work in the *Recep İvedik* films, albeit in a more implicit fashion. The central character of these films is placed against the backdrop of settings that represent Turkey’s integration into global capitalist modernity. In the first film, this setting is a luxurious resort hotel with all the standardized features of this new form of vacation, such as an open buffet, entertainment shows by professional animators, spa services, and fitness classes. The second film places its central character in settings representing the prominent manifestations of Istanbul’s integration into global capitalist modernity, such as modern offices, international hotels, fast-food delivery chains, restaurants, and coffee shops. The sheer presence of the main character with his beast-like appearance in these places appears anachronistic in itself. In order to make better sense of this element of anachronism, we should conceive of Recep İvedik not as someone embodying the presumably emblematic features of a typical Turkish man, as Arif does, but as someone who illustrates a certain mode of Turkishness—“authentic” Turkishness—which in the films is pitted against the world of “white” Turks, a notion which has been widely circulating in the Turkish media for the last two decades. The term “white Turks” mainly refers to the consolidated urban classes who “have identified with a particular image of ‘the West’ and ideologies of Westernization ... and adopted arrogant attitudes towards those unable to pass as ‘Western.’”<sup>69</sup> Tanıl Bora has suggested that the concept of the “white Turk,” having been used as an extension of the term “Euro-Turk,” in the 1990s designated a dynamic,

67 Ibid.

68 Ibid.

69 Özlem Altan-Olcay, “Reframing the Ideal Citizen in Turkey: National Belonging and Economic Success in the Era of Neo-Liberalism,” *New Perspectives on Turkey*, no. 44 (2011): 50.

talented, and assertive group of people who knew about the wider world, fluently spoke one of the Western languages, shared Western life-style and were “good” consumers leading a “good” life.<sup>70</sup> The term “white Turk” has thus functioned as a demarcation of privilege differentiating Westernized Turks from those groups who are unable to pass as Western such as the urban poor, conservative Sunni-Muslims, Kurds, or people from the provinces. Necessitating not only cultural, but also physical capital, the elitism of the “white” Turkishness discourse promoted a refined appearance and a polished image in both men and women. As such, Recep İvedik obviously represents the opposite of the idealized image of the “white” Turk. He is uneducated and uncultured. His appearance is beast-like. His manners are vulgar. He has no clue about how to conduct himself in modern settings. When we watch him trying to find a girlfriend on the internet or ordering food in a Chinese restaurant, we actually laugh about the ways in which he tries to cope with an alien territory to which he does not belong. As such, humor in the *Recep İvedik* films often arises from the clash between what appears to be “authentic” Turkishness and the Westernized world of “white” Turks.

Presenting humorous cases displaying how peculiarities of Turkish-style modernity can at times be quite at odds with Western modernity, recent blockbuster comedies, thus, entail a subversive dimension of self-mockery by playfully tackling Turkish identity. Yet, what appears to be self-mockery in these films always comes with an implicit element of self-approval. The characters epitomizing Turkishness, despite their obvious downside, ultimately make perfect sense. What appears to be subversion, in other words, can easily turn into celebration.

Celebration of Turkishness in recent blockbuster comedies often comes in the form of a confrontation of Turkish identity with Western culture. This confrontation is marked by a deeply ambivalent attitude towards the West. Here, it should be noted that the West designates a unified entity in the Turkish context, without a strong demarcation between Europe and the United States as distinct entities is made.<sup>71</sup> The West has always been an ambivalent construct in the history of modernity in Turkey, which simultaneously stands for an “object of desire” as well as a “source of frustration.”<sup>72</sup> Turkishness, in this sense, signifies “a historical identity shaped not only by a grudge against the imperialist Christian-West ... but also simultaneously by a deep and unfulfilled de-

70 Tanıl Bora, “Beyaz Türkler Tartışması: Kirli Beyaz,” *Birikim*, no. 260 (2010b): 25.

71 Öniş and Yılmaz, “Foreign-Policy Activism,” 15.

72 Meltem Ahıska, “Occidentalism: The Historical Fantasy of the Modern,” *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 102, no. 2-3 (2003): 351.

sire for their ways of life."<sup>73</sup> Ayşe Kadioğlu has described this ambivalent attitude as "Westernism despite the West."<sup>74</sup> During the founding years of the Republic, "(t)he unwanted 'imperialists' who were the enemies in the War of Independence were at the same time the Western role models whose civilized way the Turks were encouraged to emulate."<sup>75</sup> According to Kadioğlu, this has created confusion in the psyche of Turks and made them "rather proud people despite the fact that they do not think very highly of themselves."<sup>76</sup> In recent blockbuster comedies, this ambivalent attitude towards the West is evoked through the films' simultaneous fascination with and resentment against Western modernity.

In *G.O.R.A.* and *A.R.O.G.*, the fascination with Western modernity is manifest first and foremost in the films' aspiration to attain (via imitation) the technological sophistication of Hollywood science fiction films. The humor of these films addresses a viewer who already has an appreciation for American cinema. *G.O.R.A.* and *A.R.O.G.*, in this sense, never shy away from admiration for Western culture. This admiration, however, comes with a sense of bitterness. A football match turns into a metaphor in these films, through which not only the ambivalent attitude towards the West is displayed, but also Turkishness celebrated.

I have already mentioned *G.O.R.A.* alluding to an earlier Yeşilçam character, Tourist Ömer, played by Sadri Alışık. Besides Tourist Ömer, another Yeşilçam character, again played by Sadri Alışık, is referred to in *G.O.R.A.*: Offside Osman (*Ofsayt Osman*), a penniless, yet kind-hearted tramp who is named "offside" because in his entire life he has not once managed to score a single goal.<sup>77</sup> He cannot succeed in anything, no matter how hard he tries. Towards the end of the film, we see the character in a courthouse defending himself against a crime of which he has been unjustly accused. Complaining that all the goals that he until then attempted to shoot were counted as offside, he asks the judge in a sentimental tone: "Is this again not a goal?" In *G.O.R.A.*, a lengthy portion of this scene is shown as a kind of tribute to this memorable Yeşilçam character. Offside Osman is once again evoked in *A.R.O.G.*, this time in an indirect fashion. At the end of the film, a football match is organized between Arif's men (who have no clue about football) and the chief's

73 Meltem Ahıska, "A Deep Fissure is Revealed After Hrant Dink's Assassination," *New Perspectives on Turkey*, no. 36 (2007): 157.

74 Ayşe Kadioğlu, "Denationalization of Citizenship: The Turkish Experience," *Citizenship Studies* 11, no. 3 (2007): 290.

75 *Ibid.*, 290.

76 *Ibid.*, 290.

77 Offside Osman (*Ofsayt Osman*) is a character who appeared in Osman Seden's 1965 film *Şakayla Karışık*.

professional team (composed of aggressive and intimidating players) in order to settle the argument between the two. Although the first half of the game ends with a score certifying the indisputable supremacy of the chief's team, Arif's team in the end manages to win the game. The lengthy football match sequence in *A.R.O.G.* in all likelihood is intended to reward Turkish viewers (especially men), who are known for their obsession with football, with a taste of the game. However, as in the much-used phrase, football is never only football. The football match sequence—in which the players on Arif's team are clearly associated with Turkey, not least because of their red-and-white uniforms in the colors of the Turkish flag—may have allegorical significance in relation to Turkish society's perception of how it is treated by the West. In this perception, the goals that Turkey scores are always counted as offside. Towards the end of the match, we see Arif jumping into the air in slow motion and announcing to the camera, just before kicking the ball: "I am shooting this goal for all subordinate nations." This statement does not only voice feelings of resentment and bitterness towards the West, but also positions the Turk as the champion of "subordinate nations."

"Unfair game," in this way, becomes a metaphor for the relations between Turkey and the Western world. In fact, it may even be suggested that *G.O.R.A.* and *A.R.O.G.*, as films aspiring to attain the technological sophistication of Hollywood science fiction films, indeed represent popular Turkish cinema's way of proving itself to the (Western) world. *G.O.R.A.*'s director Ömer Faruk Sorak has conveyed this sentiment by defining the film as "Anatolian-style science-fiction" that reflects the "intelligence of Anatolia, a territory which has always been critical for world civilizations, from the past to the present."<sup>78</sup> The most important lesson that *G.O.R.A.* teaches, according to Sorak, is that "we are not too bad ourselves."<sup>79</sup> Here the pronoun "we" refers not only to the film crew, but also to Anatolian/Turkish people in general. This statement, reproducing the presumption of "Turkish peculiarity" in a different way (this time as source of a potential bliss, not a potential peril), is a revelation of the desire to prove oneself (read: Anatolia/Turkey) to the outside (read: Western) world. As such, the director himself seems to ask: "Is this again not a goal?"

In the *Recep İvedik* films, the celebration of Turkishness once again appears in relation to the presumption of "Turkish peculiarity" and Turkey's ambivalent relation to the West, but this time the reference point is

78 Ömer Faruk Sorak, "Anadolu Usulü Bilimkurgu (interview by Fırat Yücel and Nadir Öperli)," *Altıyazı*, no. 34 (2004): 40.

79 *Ibid.*, 40.

not so much Western modernity in itself, but the Westernized life-style of “white Turks.” While it is easier to decipher the codes of “Turkishness” in the case of Arif (he represents a typical Turkish man with his football fanaticism, banal nationalism,<sup>80</sup> sexism, homophobia, and so forth), the type of Turkishness that Recep embodies is rather ambiguous.<sup>81</sup> Recep is simultaneously funny and irritating. He often shocks the audience with his excessive verbal and bodily reactions. Laughter in the *Recep İvedik* films always comes with annoyance. In his chaotic excessiveness, however, Recep is still a sensible character. Displaying the main character’s inevitable failure in integrating himself into the social settings dominated by “white” Turks, the films lay bare the oddness not just of the character, but of the world into which he attempts to fit. In the *Recep İvedik* films, “authentic” Turkishness becomes ultimately triumphant in the world of “white” Turks. A case in point is the second part of *Recep İvedik 2* which narrates Recep’s adventures in the advertising agency, a family business currently run by his nephew. At first, everyone in the company, including his own nephew (who is completely dissimilar to Recep with his refined appearance and “white” Turk manners) is annoyed by Recep’s intruding presence. Despite this initial reaction, however, Recep eventually becomes immensely successful in the business world. He makes his first move at an elegant party that his nephew organizes for Japanese businessmen, potential partners of the company. Attending the party in a flashy red jacket with a large dragon design on its back, Recep is visibly discordant with the elegant environment populated by men and women in stylish outfits. It turns out, however, that the dragon pattern on the back of his jacket has a special meaning for the Japanese, which makes him instantly popular with them. Reluctantly introducing Recep to the Japanese guests, his cousin is embarrassed by Recep’s informal conduct involving obscene jokes and pinching. Recep, however, claims that he is showing Turkish warmth and hospitality to the foreign guests. Blaming his cousin for the “funeral-like” ambiance of the party, he goes to the DJ cabin and changes the techno music to a loud and rhythmic Anatolian folk tune. All of a sudden, the cool air of the party fades away as everyone (including the Japanese guests) begins enjoying themselves with belly-dancing. The next morning, Recep goes to the office only to find out that the Japanese businessmen are

80 In G.O.R.A. and A.R.O.G., there are affirmative allusions to cherished symbols of official nationalism in Turkey, such as references to Atatürk and several other military figures.

81 Savaş Arslan has suggested that, in many ways, Recep İvedik is similar to Sacha Baron Cohen’s character Borat, a similar non-Western male in an American context: Savaş Arslan, “The New Cinema of Turkey,” *New Cinemas* 7, no. 1 (2009): 93.



now reluctant to sign the partnership contract to which they previously agreed. Enraged and losing himself, Recep jumps over the table towards the Japanese, furiously bullying and threatening them. Having already been intimidated by Recep's behavior at the party, the Japanese businessmen hastily sign the contract. The next scene shows Recep receiving an award in a ceremony organized by the "Big Businessmen Association" for signing the most important business contract of the year. After this, we see close-up shots of a series of magazines featuring Recep on their cover-page as the leading businessman of the year.

In order to make sense of Recep's triumphant entry into the world of "white" Turks, we need to direct attention to the transformation of the discourse of "white" Turkishness, the tone of which, according to Bora,<sup>82</sup> has shifted during the 2000s from "aggressive self-confidence" to the perception of "self-victimization." A crucial factor in this transformation was the 2001 economic crisis after which the career-related expectations of the educated middle classes shrunk dramatically. The decisive turning point, however, came a year later with the 2002 general elections as a result of which the AKP came to power. Urban, secularist, educated middle classes, who had already been perceiving themselves as an excluded "loser" group during the aftermath of the 2001 crisis, began to feel increasingly anxious about the transformation of Turkey under the AKP government, which brought about a new elite's growing presence in economy and culture, an elite who tends to have an Anatolian-based provincial cultural identity and a conservative Sunni-Muslim life-style.<sup>83</sup>

The Recep İvedik phenomenon, in this context, can be seen as a reflection of the rapid transformation of Turkey during the AKP era. The AKP's success story in Turkish politics is often perceived as a victory of "authentic" Anatolian people against the military-bureaucratic elites. The AKP, in this sense, is by many considered a populist and pragmatic right-wing political party that represents "rising forces ... who have long felt relegated to the sidelines of public life by strongly entrenched bureaucratic state elites."<sup>84</sup> Referring to the headline of a mainstream Turkish daily on November 4, 2002, the day after the first election victory of the AKP, which read "Anatolian Revolution," Mustafa Şen has pointed out that the AKP is often perceived as the representative of Anatolia, "the supposed home of authentic, humble, and uncorrupted Turkish-Muslim people," who are oppressed by "secular and modernist elites, a group which is culturally alienated from

82 Bora, "Beyaz Türkler Tartışması," 35.

83 Ibid., 35.

84 İhsan Dağı, "Turkey's AKP in Power," *Journal of Democracy* 19, no. 3 (2008): 30.

the majority of the people.”<sup>85</sup> The image of the AKP is often identified with its charismatic leader Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, whom his supporters see as the true representative of a genuine Turkish-Muslim identity. Having been raised in Kasımpaşa, a poor and rough neighborhood of Istanbul, Erdoğan’s upbringing bestowed upon him a masculine and sincere style.<sup>86</sup> He cultivates an image of himself as a “man of the people” by emphasizing his poor background and by addressing people directly.<sup>87</sup> He deliberately distances himself from the secular-modernist state and cultural elites. What makes Erdoğan particularly appealing to his supporters is his image as “one of them.”<sup>88</sup> Seen in this light, the *Recep İvedik* films actually very much resonate with the values of Turkish society under the AKP. These films do not necessarily display a critique of Turkey’s integration into global capitalist modernity, but they challenge the privileged position of “white” Turks in this process. The main character, ironically a namesake of the prime minister, presents an illustration of the articulation of “authentic” Turkishness with liberal market values and global capitalism. His style is genuine, simple and direct. He is proud of his Muslim-Turkish identity. He assertively contests the life-style of “white” Turks. Here, the opposition between Recep and “white” Turks is demarcated as that of an opposition between authenticity and pretense. While Recep remains true to his cultural origins, “white” Turks artificially adopt Western life-style and values. In contrast to Recep’s presumed “authenticity,” they are alienated from their own culture. Hence, Recep constantly bullies them to “stop role playing” (his favorite expression is “*artistik yapma!*”).

Thus, it may be suggested that the *Recep İvedik* films ultimately celebrate the rise of “authentic” Turkishness during the AKP era. Promoting their main character as a “people’s hero,” these films imply that Recep, despite his excessive features, is actually a character with whom ordinary Turkish people can easily empathize and identify.<sup>89</sup> In this respect, they serve to make their viewers feel good about their “Turkishness.”

85 Mustafa Şen, “Transformation of Turkish Islamism and the Rise of the Justice and Development Party,” *Turkish Studies* 11, no. 1 (2010): 59.

86 Cihan Tuğal, *Passive Revolution: Absorbing the Islamic Challenge to Capitalism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), 176.

87 Cizre, “Introduction,” 5.

88 Tuğal, *Passive Revolution*, 176.

89 Cultural critics have often argued that Turkish viewers like Recep İvedik because they believe he reflects their own image. Tülay Şubatlı, “İvedik Ayna Tutuyor, Seyirci Gülüyor,” *Vatan*, March 12, 2008, <http://haber.gazetevatan.com/Haber/166573/1/Gundem>. Also, a survey published by a daily newspaper has shown that teenage viewers find the character quite sympathetic and feel close to him, saying that their own neighborhoods are populated by men resembling Recep İvedik. “Bu Filmi Sevdik Çünkü Bizim Mahalle Recep İvedik Dolu,” *Vatan*, March 1, 2008, [http://haber.gazetevatan.com/Bu\\_filmi\\_sevdik\\_cunku\\_bizim\\_mahalle\\_Recep\\_ivedik\\_dolu\\_164655\\_8/164655/8/Haber](http://haber.gazetevatan.com/Bu_filmi_sevdik_cunku_bizim_mahalle_Recep_ivedik_dolu_164655_8/164655/8/Haber).

Yet, we cannot make sense of the Recep İvedik phenomenon solely on the basis of the celebration of “authentic” Turkishness against the Westernized culture of “white” Turks. The enormous popularity of these films is also related to the ambiguity that they deliberately articulate. Behind the mask of “authenticity,” Recep is actually a highly eclectic figure. His speech pattern brings together disparate elements from various discourses in a non-cohesive way. Not having any discernible ideological or political position, he is totally pragmatic and opportunist in his everyday conduct. He freely makes use of the elements of various discourses articulated within different ideologies. He makes reference to his Muslim identity by repeating certain religious words. He invokes his Turkish-Anatolian origins to criticize the Westernized life-style of “white” Turks. Despite his obvious ignorance about everything, he enjoys using the latest “hype” phrases such as “synergy” or “organic food.” His sentences sometimes entail (often wrongly used) English words. His discourse incorporates the terminology of the latest technology. In his everyday conversations, he addresses, usually out of context, issues such as the “secular democratic state of law,” “the level of starvation for a family of four,” “decline in oil prices,” “the European Union adaptation laws,” “global warming,” and so forth.

I contend that the mode of “authentic” Turkishness articulated by the *Recep İvedik* films comes closest to the AKP-style “authentic” Turkishness in terms of their shared “eclecticism passing as authenticity.” The covert asset of the AKP, after all, is precisely its social and political eclecticism. The AKP brings together liberal market values and the conservative morality of Sunni Islam. It simultaneously speaks of globalism and nationalism, modernity and religion. Its eclecticism involves a “marriage of Islam and secularism, of religion and democracy, of East and West.”<sup>90</sup>

The AKP’s claim to authenticity has long been contested by its opponents. Since the 1994 local elections, when the Welfare Party (one of the AKP’s predecessors) won the municipalities of several big cities in Turkey, there has been a debate in Turkey on “what constitutes Turkish nativeness,” to use Navaro-Yashin’s terms.<sup>91</sup> Women’s style of dress has become the crux of this debate. While Islamists have claimed that Islamist women, by wearing the headscarf, have “revived Turkey’s true local culture” that had been repressed by years of Westernization and accused secularist women of “copying the West” and “not being true to themselves,” secularists have ascribed “foreignness” to Islamist women

<sup>90</sup> Tuğal, *Passive Revolution*, 5.

<sup>91</sup> Navaro-Yashin, *Faces of the State*, 20.

and accused them of looking like Arabs.<sup>92</sup> The issue of who represents “authentic” Turkishness, therefore, had already been on the public agenda for some time before the 2000s as part of the confrontation between Islamists and secularists. The portrayal of “authentic” Turkishness in the *Recep İvedik* films takes this issue out of the context of political polarization, and gives a more popular, unifying edge to it which could embrace Islamists and secularists alike. Passing eclecticism as “authenticity,” Turkishness in the *Recep İvedik* films is all about an eclectic collage of fragments of disparate discourses and cultural practices. This is one key trait that the *Recep İvedik* films share with G.O.R.A. and A.R.O.G. In recent blockbuster comedies, Turkishness is all about pretension. Its greatest asset is its adaptability to different situations. In pursuit of self-interest, it is completely self-centered, pragmatic and opportunist. It takes no recognition of the other. The image of Turkishness in these films is monstrous to the extent that it brings about releasing oneself from any sense of morality, integrity and responsibility, on the ground of the presumption of peculiarity. It is at this point that there appears a difference between G.O.R.A./A.R.O.G. and the *Recep İvedik* films in their rendering of monstrosity. In G.O.R.A. and A.R.O.G., we encounter a somewhat romantic pursuit of meaning. The films attempt to make sense of the situation that they depict. The lyrics of a song in the sound-track of G.O.R.A., entitled “I could not make it happen” (*Olduramadım*),<sup>93</sup> capture well the nature of this pursuit. The lyrics go as follows: “I am tired of repeating the same mistakes every time / tired of creating miracles / I tried hard thinking maybe this time it will be OK / yet the chain was broken, broken, broken / I could not make it happen / no matter how hard I tried / I could not make it happen.” Communicating the sense of weariness resulting from repeated failures, from things that inexplicably go wrong, this song seems to reveal Turkish society’s unease with itself. The covert referent of the song, the “broken chain” in the lyrics, sounds as if it points to the presumption of “Turkish peculiarity,” which hinders Turkey’s normalization. The lyrics, in this sense, capture the sentiment that both G.O.R.A. and A.R.O.G. convey: Turkey fails to be a properly developed modern democratic country because of its “peculiarity” (or, we may as well say because of its “monstrosity”). They attempt to make sense of monstrosity by making references to the ways in which Turkey has been treated unjustly by the West. Their reaction to monstrosity in this sense is a mixture of self-mocking, self-celebration, and self-pity.

92 Ibid., 20.

93 *Olduramadım* was composed and performed by Özkan Uğur, and the lyrics written by Aysun Aslan Uğur.

What distinguishes the much more cynical humor of the *Recep İvedik* films from G.O.R.A. and A.R.O.G. lies exactly here: they do not attempt to make sense of monstrosity. There is no reason, no excuse, no explanation. In their representation of Turkishness, the *Recep İvedik* films produce pure enjoyment from monstrosity.

### **Turkishness between magnificence and monstrosity**

In this paper, I have shown that the Turkish box-office champions of the recent years articulate excessive representations of Turkishness that oscillate between magnificence and monstrosity. The preoccupation with the idea of Turkishness in recent popular cinema can be seen as a reflection of society's bafflement created by the process of rapid and intensive transformation during the 2000s. In this period, Turkish society has grown increasingly confused about how to assess its own worth in today's world.

There are some obvious differences between block-buster action films and blockbuster comedies due to their dissimilar generic conventions. Behind the appearance of disparity, however, there are also continuities in terms of their rendering of Turkishness. An ambivalent attitude towards the West is one major commonality among the recent Turkish blockbusters, action films and comedies alike. Despite their critical attitude towards the West, which becomes manifest in their stories, Turkish blockbusters often blatantly imitate the American cinema in their form. I have already mentioned the self-conscious engagement of G.O.R.A. and A.R.O.G. with American films. In *Valley of the Wolves: Iraq*, constituting an ironic contrast to the anti-American political stance of the film, the narrative and visual style overtly imitates Hollywood action films, without necessarily displaying any self-conscious acknowledgement of this feature. The film's protagonist, nick-named "Turkish Rambo," is a typical American-style action hero.

In a similar vein, the impulse of proving the worth of the Turk to the world (read: the West) is a common thematic element in recent Turkish blockbusters. This impulse actually goes beyond the fictional stories of the narratives and marks the way in which these films are publicized. As Turkish blockbusters reach a record number of viewers in Turkey and defeat Hollywood films on the domestic market, the films themselves turn into a way of proving the rising value of Turkey to the world. After all, the phenomenal commercial success of these films can be said to contest the hegemonic power of Hollywood cinema in Turkey. The way in which they have allowed Turkish cinema to conquer the domestic market at a time when most other national film markets in Europe have seen

a sharp decline may well be regarded as a challenge. Therefore, the films themselves seem to pose the question (with a slight touch of nationalist pride): "Is this again not a goal?"

Likewise, Turkishness in recent Turkish blockbusters, comedies and action films alike, is all about masculinity. Comedies do not associate masculinity strictly with patriotism and militarism, as *Valley of the Wolves: Iraq* does. Yet, a high dose of assertive and aggressive masculinity is at work in all these films. The male protagonists are completely self-absorbed and take no recognition of the other. They always have the last word. Their discourse is "naturally" shaped around sexism, homophobia,<sup>94</sup> and chauvinism.

Finally, an element of cynicism (to varying degrees) is at work in recent blockbuster action films and comedies. Maintaining that cynicism, or "doing as if one doesn't know," describes the "contemporary experience of the political in Turkey," Navaro-Yashin has argued that Turkish people for the last couple of decades have become conscious of the "contradictions and complexity of the notion of the Turkish state."<sup>95</sup> Not simply deluded by the state, they are well aware of the fraud and violence of the system in which they are living. Yet, they pragmatically prefer to act as if they do not. In this context, it may be suggested that recent blockbusters appeal to Turkish viewers by providing an accessible outlet for communicating cynicism. The last decade has been a period when Turkey was very close to attaining "magnificence," while also encountering "monstrosity." Testifying to this uneasy situation, recent blockbusters seem to make a cynical proposition: why not go on with monstrosity, as long as magnificence can be claimed?

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94 Cem Yılmaz disagrees that references to homosexuality in his films entail homophobia. Senem Aytaç et al., "Cem Yılmaz: Matkabin Genel Prensibi Üzerine (Interview with Cem Yılmaz)," *Altıyazi*, no. 91 (2009).

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