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Spaces of Protest in Turkish Popular Music

Lyndon C. S. Way

Turkey stands on the periphery of the dominating centre of Europe, straddling the East and West politically, culturally, and geographically. Oppositional Turkish voices come from the periphery of Turkey itself, challenging the government’s political Islamist centre. ‘Özgün’ (authentic protest) music is one such voice of protest. With its roots in Anatolian musical traditions, it also borrows liberally from Western musical styles, instrumentation and even harmonies raising fears of cultural imperialism where the West is seen to dominate the rest. This chapter argues that it is useful to think of this borrowing in terms of relocating semiotic resources from both the West and Turkish culture to construct spaces of resistance. Other than musical traditions, representations of place and people in places in music videos are also relocated into a semiotic package of subversion (meaning to undermine principles and corrupt). These representations are powerful, affecting our understanding of places, reinforcing myths, and providing listeners with a sense of identity (Forman 2002). In song, analysis of settings are ‘highly revealing about the world being communicated’ (Machin 2010: 92), and ‘can be used to understand broader social relations and trends, including identity, ethnicity, attachment to place, cultural economies, social activism, and politics’ (Johansson and Bell 2009: 2).

I selected the official video for Grup Kızıırmak’s Çesmi Siyahım (My Black Eyed Beauty) for this chapter. I chose this video first because it clearly articulates protest within the Özgün music genre. Grup Kızıırmak was formed in 1990, producing 13 albums and participating in theatre productions, poetry groups, concerts, and festivals. Its Marxist political orientation is indicated by both performing at Cuban benefits and Marxist conferences and by its music which focuses on Turkey’s oppressed, highlighting their plight and offering solidarity.
(Grup Kızılrmak 2013). These actions have resulted in its members being arrested and concerts banned or cancelled. Due to the sensitive nature of protest in Turkey, songs even within the mainstream which may be considered subversive are shunned from airplay (Way 2012). However, with the Internet, videos by-pass the broadcasting authorities and are an important part of fans’ pop experiences. The video exemplifies this route of distribution. I also chose this video because it was released and popularised when Turkey’s Justice and Development Party were in government. Çesmi Siyahim is a cover of a folk song originally performed by Mahsun Şerif in the 1960s. However, Grup Kızılrmak did not record it until 2002. It appeared on its album Figan, while its accompanying video was first uploaded on to the video sharing website İzlesene.com in 2007 and YouTube in 2008.

I offer a short discussion on cultural imperialism and popular music, focusing on Turkey. I then give an historical account of Turkey’s politics and mediascape in order to help understand the subversion articulated in the video. This is followed by an analysis of lyrics, visuals, and the music of Çesmi Siyahim. For lyrics and visuals, I examine the representation of place, participants in places, and how visual elements share space to suggest relations between each other. The music itself is also analysed to illustrate how musical elements from both the West and within Turkey are relocated to express protest, the desire for change, and alternatives to dominant discourses offered in Turkish mainstream music and media.

**Cultural imperialism and popular music**

Economically, Turkey can be described as a country embracing neoliberal capitalism. Its neoliberal economic policies, accelerated over the past decade, include both privatisation and the lifting of restrictions for international economic interests. This applies to most public/state institutions in the areas of communication, transportation, industry, and energy. Symptomatic of this shift is the migration of Turkish pop stars from national labels to the global music giant Polygram (Stokes 2003: 300). Though proponents claim neoliberal style globalisation promotes fair and equal access to world markets, there are fears over the effects this has on local cultures. One fear is ‘cultural imperialism’ which critics (such as Hall) claim leads to a ‘global mass culture’, not a two-way balanced flow of culture between ‘the West and the rest’ (Hall 1992, 1991, Lang cited in Ang 1985: 2). It is attributed to shaping ‘social institutions to correspond to, or even promote, the values and structures of the