JUMP CUT
A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Jump Cut, No. 63, summer 2025

Families in constant crisis: *Ömer*'s nostalgia, critical affordances of TV genres, and shifting politics of intimacy in "New Türkiye"

By Zeynep Serinkaya Winter and Cüneyt Çakırlar

Over the course of three years, a new wave of TV productions emerged in Türkiye, narrating encounters between secular and conservative families, with familiar stories of romance and intergenerational conflicts.[1] [open endnotes in new window] Transforming the generic limits of soap operas and considered a distinctly local cultural phenomenon, a "genre in progress" categorized as *dizi*,[2] these shows include *Kızılcık Şerbeti/Cranberry Sorbet/One Love* [GoldFilm & ShowTV 2022-], *Ömer* [OGM & StarTV 2023-2024] and *Kızıl Goncalar/Scarlet Rosebuds* [NOW 2023-]. Although different in their stylistic registers and thematic frames, these serial melodramas have mobilized a public debate about rampant political polarization in Türkiye, and discussions of the authenticity of how they represent pious, conservative and secular lifestyles. Engaging with this expanding televisual ecosystem of primetime Turkish *dizi*s, we use the case of *Ömer* to suggest an alternative reading of the political backdrop: a critical reading that prioritizes politics of intimacy, rather than that of the oppositional axis of pious conservatism vs. secularism.[3]

Following a brief overview of the ruling Justice and Development Party's (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi [AKP]) current authoritarian policies of family and social welfare, and its instrumentalization of the Directorate of Religious Affairs (hereafter *Diyanet*), we will introduce a critical reading of *Ömer* through Lauren Berlant's concepts of "cruel optimism" and "crisis ordinariness".[4] Berlant argues,

> "The optimism is cruel when the object/scene that ignites a sense of possibility actually makes it impossible to attain the expansive transformation for which a person or a people risks striving; and doubly, it is cruel insofar as the very pleasures of being inside a relation have become sustaining regardless of the content of the relation, such that a person or a world finds itself bound to a situation of profound threat that is, at the same time, profoundly confirming."[5]

Cruel optimism, in the case of *Ömer*'s narrative, emerges as a constant investment into heteronormativity and kinship relations when the family has failed to fulfil its promises. The characters' optimistic attachment to their family is "cruel" as it is more unbearable for them to sever their ties with it, even in the face of disillusionment and harm, than to remain in the stifling familial setting. Following Berlant, our reading of *Ömer* will depart from the question of what happens when the fantasy of family starts to fray and how the characters adjust to the crisis ordinariness through their desires to sustain these attachments (no matter what) and inhabit their affectivity despite their families' "cruel promise of reciprocity and belonging".[6]

We will then discuss the shift in *Ömer*'s political undertones as the narrative moves into plain "old" optimism, articulated with the show's reproduction of the generic tropes adjacent to Yeşilçam melodramas.[7] While the thematization of political debates around patriarchy in these TV productions assumes a "cruel optimism" as the default spectatorial identification for Turkish-speaking audiences, *Ömer*'s shift to a "nostalgic", anachronistic representation of family and intimate/amorous attachments separates the show's affective register from Turkish TV's new genre paradigms of competing primetime stories. Having ended after two seasons with a surprisingly rushed finale, the show did not survive this competitive ecosystem, likely because its nostalgic swerve to the "waning genres"[8] of Turkish cinema compromised its ideological relevance and affective currency. This nostalgic turn in *Ömer*'s narrative trajectory, and its failure to align with the new generic system's valorization of spectacularized crises, provide us with a critical point of entry into a discussion on the ways in which hegemonic discourses of representation operate in contemporary Turkish television.

Ömer's familial world

Starting as an adaptation of the Israeli television drama *Shtisel* (Yes & Yes Oh 2013), *Ömer* tells the story of the titular character Ömer Ademoğlu, a young *müezzin* who likes spending his spare time sketching. His father, Reşat, is the neighborhood's *imam*, devoted to his congregation and family; he exercises a strong authority over his three children, Ömer, Nisa and Tahsin, who have recently lost their mother. Nisa and Tahsin are both married and are also devout Muslims, leading modest lives. Nisa has five children and has a fraught relationship with her father as she married Hakan against her father's will. Hakan is a frivolous and immature man, who later elopes with his girlfriend, taking with him a large sum of money that Ömer has taken out for him as a bank loan. Tahir is a very stern zealot, who terrorizes his family with strict rules. His wife Şükran, an obedient housewife, is often the target of his ridicule and insults. His daughter

Eda is sick of her father's despotism, and is fascinated with popular culture, despite her father's ban against TV and mobile phones in her household.

Ömer and Reşat reside with Reşat's mother Nezahat, living a quiet life until Gamze comes back to the neighborhood. Gamze is a recently divorced mother in her 40s, forced to come back to her mother's house after her con artist husband flees abroad, leaving her with a huge debt. Fatma, Gamze's mother, does not let her in, as Gamze never had her consent to the marriage in the first place. Gamze also has a broken relationship with her sister Nuran as Gamze did not visit during their father's illness. Ultimately, Gamze and her son Tuna start living in the already crowded family household, together with Nuran and Sadık (her brother-in-law), Erdem (their son) and Fatma (Gamze and Nuran's mother).

Gamze and Ömer fall in love instantly, yet their age difference and conflicting lifestyles lead to many conflicts. Although the series does not explicitly spell out what makes their love affair transgressive, an implicit bias towards divorced working mothers moves the narrative arc forward and help new subplots unfold. It is important here to note that in Turkish popular culture, divorced women are immediately associated with moral ambiguity, and often stigmatized.[9] With patriarchal reasoning, the promiscuity of a divorced woman (or a widow) is always a possibility as their virginity can neither be expected nor proven as in the case of women who are marrying for the first time.[10] Furthermore, in Gamze's case especially, reluctance to have another child or impending menopause would mean the end to the bloodline of the male partner. As further episodes also reveal, another social anxiety around such relationship arise from the fact that an older woman with career aspirations stands in the way of a younger man from performing his gender role as primary—and protective—breadwinner.

These kinds of social anxieties about such transgressive intimacies fuel *Ömer*'s narrative drive. Both families condemn this relationship due to Gamze being an older (i.e. 15 years older than Ömer) divorced mother of a young boy. Although Ömer keeps reminding his father of the parable of Prophet Muhammed marrying Khadija, an older widow, Reşat vigorously tries to dissuade his son from this relationship. First, Reşat arrange for Ömer to get engaged through a matchmaker, and he later gets a suitor for Gamze, to ensure the two do not end up with each other in an "unhappy", unsanctioned marriage. The fact that Ömer's fiancée is a distant relative of Gamze's family amplifies the transgressive potential of their love affair. However, this does not stop the couple from secretly getting married, resulting in further dramatic situations, including Gamze's ex-husband's coming back to kidnap her and her son, and Ömer's becoming an alcoholic and his family's ending up in further debt. Later in the show, the plot thickens with the introduction of new characters such as Vicdan, a sex worker and Tahir's ex-girlfriend, and İzzet, Ömer's uncle, the leader of an ultraorthodox religious cult who seeks revenge from his brother Reşat.

The convoluted storyline has social resonance. In particular, it echoes the complexities of the contemporary sociopolitical context with regards to women's rights and family policies under the AKP rule in postmillennial Türkiye. Under the current neoliberal and neoconservative governance, a restructuring of social welfare has largely redefined the family as a self-reliant economic unit which is burdened with the responsibility of its members' welfare. The family that lacks managerial skills is associated with moral failure.[11] Women and children have been rendered more precarious and dependent on family bonds because of changes in legal frameworks and financial aid policies, especially with the withdrawal from Istanbul Convention. Although the state's role in regulating religion has been an ongoing issue since the foundation of the Republic, AKP's *Diyanet*[12] has new powers and an ever-growing budget to further consolidate its hegemony directly through the domestic space of family.[13] Delegation of educational and social welfare oversight to religious foundations and *Diyanet* have contributed to the reconsolidation of moralist discourses about gender roles and familial duties.[14] For example, recently, *Diyanet*'s astronomical budget has been increasingly allocated to regulate the family through the Family Bureaus.[15]

Over the last decade, the country has given rampant impunity to perpetrators of femicide and domestic violence, and it has criminalized feminist interventions and safety networks. Furthermore, political demands for gender equality and LGBTI+ rights have been responded to with heavy-handed repression.[16] Such repression is aided by the mobilization of religious foundations, orders and pro-government civil society to enact anti-gender politics. In addition, government discursively associates LGBTI+ and women's movements with terrorism and foreign espionage. Amid this neoliberal and conservative framing of the moral crisis of families, the increased precariousness and financial strain on the family as a managerial institution bleeds into various stories in Turkish media, ranging from independent "art house" cinema to reality TV and investigative journalism, and including the primetime *dizi*s.

Ömer's engagement with the "crisis of family" is significantly shaped by the show's overarching diegetic setting of "crisis ordinariness". In Berlant's terms, "crisis ordinariness" is a state of living under neoliberalism, whereby crisis is not "exceptional to human consciousness but a process embedded in the ordinary that unfolds in stories about navigating what's overwhelming."[17] It is a part of ordinary life, with people adapting, making do with what they have, a present where unfolding of crises generates new norms and forms. Berlant notes,

> "Even those whom you would think of as defeated are living beings figuring out how to stay attached to life from within it, and to protect what optimism they have for that, at least."[18]

In *Ömer*, the neoliberal transformation of family in Türkiye is made strikingly visible as the ordinariness of the cycles of constant debt and financial problems that the family faces. At the show's various turning points, lack of safety nets of social welfare stream through the plotline as "crisis ordinariness".

Two recurring tropes that point to crisis ordinariness are episodes that show characters adjusting to constant job change and shuttling back and forth between households. The Ademoğlu family must often rely on a pool of money saved or loaned by family members in case of rising hospital bills or unemployment. Increased rents are a recurring problem which leads Nisa and Gamze to be constantly on the move or on the brink of homelessness. Nisa's desperation deepens during Hakan's disappearance, due to lack of opportunities for childcare, so the duty for household management falls on her daughter Emine's shoulders, which not only compromises her academic performance at the school but also causes an unhappy teenage life. Nisa has a hard time holding onto a job as she never worked before, and at the same time she must also take care of her baby. Her unpaid and invisible domestic labor later yields a new career as a restauranteur. This depends on the bank loan Gamze can get, as she often does, thanks to her job as a branch manager of a local bank.

Although economic precarity is a recurring theme in *Ömer,* class differences are obscured in a neighborhood/*mahalle* [19] setting, in contrast to the ways in which the political economy of class relations is registered in the competing *dizi*s such as *Kızılcık Şerbeti* and *Kızıl Goncalar*. *Kızılcık Şerbeti* and *Kızıl Goncalar* rely on the spectacularisation of class difference, both in their visual style and trajectory of the plots. While *Kızılcık Şerbeti* articulates the pious vs. secular frictions through the lens of not only cultural differences but also class relations that have been transformed by neoliberal Islam (as the "new", i.e. postmillennial, status quo), *Kızıl Goncalar* reduces these contemporary class formations to settings and spectacles of antagonistic relations between a Kemalist family of secular "white" Turks and an ultraconservative *tariqah* order that deviates from the state-sanctioned, or "official", Islam.

Evoking class consciousness, the differences in these families' lifestyles are symbolized by expressive choices in the mise-en-scene (to almost farcical degrees), e.g. consumer goods, household settings and consumption patterns. In *Kızılcık Şerbeti,* the wealth of the Ünal family is always on the forefront, from the palatial decor of the living room to their private vans with tinted glass driven by chauffeurs. The Arslan family, although still an upper middle-class family living in a flat overlooking the Bosphorus, has Kıvılcım as the main breadwinner, whereas Nursema, Abdullah Ünal's daughter, is often dissuaded from building a career as she does not *need* to work. In *Kızıl Goncalar,* the class difference is even more pronounced, as Zeynep's family is impoverished new migrants who take refuge in the lodgings of the *tariqah*. The modesty of their household is juxtaposed against her twin sister Mira's secular lifestyle in an upper-class villa, donned with modern furniture, a fireplace and high-end house appliances. In fact, for several episodes, this setting is used for commercials for a very expensive vacuum cleaner, with Meryem learning how to use this novelty device. Both pairs of families in the two shows are constantly marked by their lifestyle choices, but more importantly, by whether the women in the family are encouraged to participate in public life.

In *Ömer*, however, a nostalgic investment in the *mahalle* setting obscures the postmillennial formations of new pious middle classes by "culturalizing", and thus de-politicizing, neoliberal Islam. While the pathos of familial crises in *Kızılcık Şerbeti* and *Kızıl Goncalar* is produced through the antagonizing forces of gender-based violence and class privilege, *Ömer*'s "crisis ordinariness" does not instrumentalize family through such a spectacular economy of oppositions and confrontations. Unlike in other two shows, the characters' lives are situated in not just familial relations, but also *mahalle* relationships, marked with social and cultural homogeneity absorbing class differences. Although the Ademoğlu family's house is portrayed with almost anachronistic decor, with no TV in sight and old furniture and handcrafted ornaments, the lifestyles of all families in the neighborhood are quite similar. From the clothes they wear to the dinners they eat as families; characters are portrayed as people with humble lives. *Mahalle* residents know and respect each other, as long as their moral values and norms remain uncontested.

In this setting, Vicdan and Gamze are the only markers of difference, due to their insistence on seeking independence as women, mostly expressed by Gamze's wanting to live in her own house and to go out at night, and by Vicdan's continuing to pursue sex work in a conservative neighborhood. Thus, *Ömer*'s *mahalle* setting contributes to the show's evasion (if not erasure) of class difference and cross-class/cross-cultural conflicts. In this way, the show deviates from its rivals' diegetic intensification of crisis-spectacles, and ultimately, brings it to an earlier finale as a series, since such "nostalgic" choices hinders sufficiently competitive opportunities for plot expansion.

Ömer's women and the "waning" currency of melodrama: "New Turkey"s shifting genres

Ömer's "nostalgic" investments are not limited to Yeşilçam.[20] Its use of the *mahalle* (neighborhood) setting is another formal element that distinguishes *Ömer* from the dominant trends in Turkish *dizi*s. A historically rooted diegetic device of Turkish television drama, this *mahalle* setting has been considered as an attempt to consolidate a fantasy of social cohesion in an era of disruptive urban transformation projects.[21] Such nostalgic framing of the *mahalle* (pioneered by the TRT production *Perihan Abla* [1986-1988]), Tanrıöver suggests, creates an "imaginary dimension (*düşsel boyut*)"—as the evil always comes from the outside of family and

mahalle relationships, which is certainly the case in *Ömer*.[22] However, Tanrıöver also underlines that *mahalle* and family elements are not innocent, as they reinforce the traditional family structure defined by patriarchy and its gendered division of labor. In these narratives, women characters are given the traditional role of the housewife or work in jobs conventionally assigned to women. The character development point to an expectation that men are to be disciplined or taken care of by the women of the family. Likewise, even in mafia-themed series (e.g. *Kurtlar Vadisi/Valley of the Wolves* (Sinegraf, Panafilm and ShowTV/KanalD 2003-2005)), Tanrıöver argues, the family is the safe space the characters resort to, to remain "good" and "pure". Tanrıöver concludes with the caveat that this does not mean the depictions of *mahalle* or family are monolithic in Turkish *dizi*s: these include dissident voices within, such as the rebellious teenagers, or may generate varying interpretations amongst the audiences.[23]

While the absence of *mahalle* in *Kızılcık Şerbeti* and *Kızıl Goncalar* make their spectacularisation of the neoliberal crisis of the family gain an accent of class privilege,[24] *Ömer* authenticates crisis ordinariness through its stylistic engagements with *mahalle* as setting, and melodrama as genre.[25] The show accommodates the constant torrent of crisis through its melodramatic pathos and affective —*mahalle*-driven—investment in familial bonds.[26] Each episode follows up on previous crises (either financial or familial), while unfolding multiple new ones.

Likewise, there are almost no scenes without musical accompaniment and the narrative heavily relies on the emotional driving power of the dramatic musical score. These features are at their most intense in Episode 41, when Yaman is stabbed and killed in an altercation after Eda's compromising photos circulated among her peers. Meanwhile, right after witnessing the stabbing, Gamze finds out she must get an abortion as her pregnancy is risking her life. The episode is dominated by intense scenes of crying and wailing, with some of these scenes lasting up to 13 minutes. The scenes repeat like verses in a song, with only brief intervals of mere seconds.

However, the show also borrows elements from other genres like action and horror, especially in the episodes when Emine and Eda are kidnapped by a sex trafficking gang, and when Gamze is kidnapped by her stalker. In these episodes, the stylistic affordances of fast-paced fighting scenes and suspense expand the show's genre ties to action. Similarly, during the episodes when Eda and Nilüfer are placed in the hands of Uncle İzzet's ultraorthodox cult, the show uses stylistic conventions and tropes from gothic and occult horror, with chilling spectacles of violence and abuse that override the melodramatic pathos.

In the beginning of the show, the children of the Ademoğlu family are introduced to us as individuals stuck between their desires to conform within their familial duties and their desires for self-actualization. They all seem to be inflicted with what Berlant conceptualizes "cruel optimism". Berlant describes cruel optimism as a type of attachment to an object, where the object undermines the very potentiality of its promise. This promise could be change, social change or change to a better version of self. It could be the promise of stability. Berlant's work focuses on fantasies of "good life" in neoliberal times and how these generate optimistic attachments to norms, cultural institutions or ideas. What is overwhelmingly present in *Ömer* is the characters' investments in hetero-familialist norms which seem to promise safety and affection within the family space. Yet they are also the very source of toxicity in familial bonds, violence and discrimination, which decimates the promise itself. However, many families and family members, especially those in *Ömer*, invest in conforming to these norms and remaining within their family as the idea of severing ties is more intolerable than maintaining them.

Tahir seeks acceptance and reverence from his father and larger community by strictly and violently adhering to traditional gender norms and controlling his family (i.e. his wife Şükran and his daughter Eda). As viewers are introduced to more of his story, we find out that he gave up his love for music and for his girlfriend Vicdan to obey his father's wishes. Despite his great loss of a sense of self, Tahir continues to invest in upholding patrimonial authority and following his father's example while enacting a much more authoritarian and violent version. Nisa, as opposed to Tahir, married Hakan despite her father's disapproval. When Hakan leaves her stranded with no money or help with her five kids, she keeps her abandonment a secret and tries to maintain her image as a content mother and wife to save grace with her father. Vicdan, a later entry to the narrative, was left alone as a pregnant teenager when Reşat refused to believe her pleas, which led to her becoming dependent on sex work to sustain herself. Although a disobedient and independent character, Vicdan still invests in the ideal of a family, led by a man. As the family accepts her as the mother of Tahir's child, she starts calling Reşat "father" and repeatedly demonstrates her eagerness to be included as a member of the family.

Gamze, too, is portrayed as a strong woman who would not give up her financial independence, yet she too continues to sacrifice her own desires for the sake of her husband and his family. When faced with possible death, Gamze chooses to continue her pregnancy, despite her eagerness to abort the baby in the first place. The doctor tells her that due to her age, her pregnancy might lead to miscarriage and could prove fatal. After a miscarriage, she files for a divorce, as she rather chooses that Ömer "taste fatherhood". During their tribulations, these characters constantly remain devoted to the idea of "good life" as something that can be maintained by familial bonds, despite repeated failures, disappointments, and endless sacrifices. It is particularly women whose autonomy is compromised within *Ömer*'s cruel optimism. The show empowers women insofar as their autonomy does not threaten its adherence to restorative familialism.[27] Inverting Yeşilçam's fantasy of woman-as-Pygmalion whom the rich male protagonist transforms and then falls in love with,[28] *Ömer*'s women do the work of restoring family and transforming masculinity. Through their persistent and selfless

commitment to family, and by keeping their households together financially, these women (Fatma, Gamze, Nisa ve Şükran) provoke men to re-situate, in softening, their masculinity.

Nevertheless, while the show begins with exposing the impossibility of achieving a "good life" defined by familial harmony, it proceeds to build a new optimistic attachment to familialism through restoring patriarchy as a tolerant and inclusive structure of authority. Through its critical instrumentalisation of women (and their conditional empowerment), *Ömer* restores hetero-familialism as an ideal without necessarily questioning its political currency and discursive violence.

Toxic masculinity and pious pastoral fatherhood

The narrative's restorative logic is also at work in consolidating the pastoral role of religious authority. In the later episodes of the show, Tahir gets embroiled in the ultraorthodox religious cult led by his uncle İzzet, who seeks revenge on his brother Reşat. Fed up with waiting for his father's approval and wanting to prove himself, Tahir follows İzzet without questioning his intentions. The cult engages in all sorts of illegal affairs, including sex trafficking and forging documents. The cult follows an authoritarian religious doctrine, especially regarding women's place in social life and unconditional obedience for the cult leader. It serves as a cautionary tale about the threat of legitimacy granted to the religious orders by the AKP government in "New Türkiye." In this regard, Reşat's sermons emerge as a new narrative device. We watch Reşat as he addresses his congregation including his sons, and ultimately, the *dizi* spectators. These sermons often thematize the ongoing conflicts in the family and operate as a discursive (and narrative) tool for Reşat to communicate his feelings and advice to his sons.

Against the backdrop of AKP's reliance on *Diyanet* to consolidate its hegemonic hold over the family and the instrumentalization of various religious orders by the government, Reşat embodies a fantasy of a tolerant, unifying, and compassionate figure of pastoral fatherhood. In these scenes, Reşat often negates *Diyanet*'s own sermons, especially as he suggests that daughters are not their fathers' possessions and that there should be equality between spouses. The sermons also warn against blindly following sheiks, endorsing the practice of reading the Qur'an for oneself and following the path of reason and science. These scenes serve as an alternative religious guidance and counselling message for the audiences to achieve a "good life" (perhaps a "good afterlife" too). At the same time, he is educating his congregation and audiences through a tame, softer masculinity, pointing to a more lenient and tolerant patriarchal authority as the solution to the crisis of family.

What we consider particularly meaningful are the show's choices to intensify the visibility of religious sermons as a core diegetic component in addressing competing masculinities. In Episode 38, Reşat comes across the sermon of Nurettin Hoca, one of the leading members of the tariqah run by Reşat's vengeful brother İzzet, which Tahir ends up being embroiled in. Nurettin's sermon asserts that women belong in their homes, and they should not be allowed to work or to go to school. Frustrated by Nurettin's statements and motivated to show Tahir the corruptness of İzzet's cult, Reşat says:

> "Stop these superstitions! Your words are against the Qur'an! Our religion [Islam] has become unrecognizable, unlivable, because of you and those like you! You have estranged the youth the most! If you preach about religion, talk about Allah's words, not these superstitions! Wake up, my Muslim friends!" [29]

In Episode 39, Reşat's own sermon is inspired by his personal concerns about his son Tahir's indoctrination and İzzet's corrupt cult. The sermon cites verses from *Surah Al-Hujurat*:

> "Say, 'Do you presume to teach God about your religion, when God knows everything in the heavens and earth, He has full knowledge of all things?'" (*Al-Hujurat* 49:16)

Following Tahir's imprisonment as he was held responsible for İzzet's fraudulent affairs in the cult, Reşat's congregation (i.e. *jamaat/cemaat* in Islam) turns against him and holds Reşat accountable for the crimes his son is convicted of. Reşat responds to his followers by, again, using a public sermon and reminding them of the Quranic verses about the wrongs of gossip, sedition and wrongful convictions:

> "Believers, if a troublemaker brings you news, check [verify] it first, in case you wrong others unwittingly and later regret what you have done." (*Al-Hujurat* 49:6)
>
> "Believers, avoid making too many assumptions- some assumptions are sinful- and do not spy on one another or speak ill of people behind their backs: would any of you like to eat the flesh of your dead brother? No, you would hate it. So be mindful of God: God is ever relenting, most merciful." (*Al-Hujurat* 49:12)
>
> "Do not follow blindly what you do not know to be true: ears, eyes, and heart, you will be questioned about all these." (*Al-Isra* 17:36)

In Episode 45, Tahir's reconciliation with his father Reşat, following Reşat accepting his son's apology and forgiving him, also inspires and informs the sermon Reşat delivers about the redemptive powers of forgiveness in Islam with references to verses from *Surah An-Nur* and *Surah Al-Fussilat*:

> "Those who have been graced with bounty and plenty should not swear that they

> will [no longer] give to kinsmen, the poor, those who emigrated in God's way: let them pardon and forgive. Do you not wish that God should forgive you? God is most forgiving and merciful" (*An-Nur* 24:22)
>
> "Good and evil cannot be equal. [Prophet], repel evil with what is better, and your enemy will become as close as an old and valued friend" (*Al-Fussilat* 41:34)

When Reşat recites verses from the Qur'an, or the *hadith*, or call to prayer in Arabic, the Turkish subtitles appear on the screen. Despite their constant references to Qur'anic verses and phrases in Arabic, neither *Kızıl Goncalar* nor *Kızılcık Şerbeti* presents a simultaneous translation to the audience, unless a character asks its meaning. Such "pedagogic", or instructional, moves that *Ömer* takes can be considered as reappropriating the educational religious shows broadcast on public and/or "Islamic" channels (e.g. Samanyolu TV).[30] It is as if the show itself assumes the pastoral and patrimonial role of Reşat towards its audience, ensuring the transparency of what could otherwise remain unfamiliar. By lifting the language barrier between the audiences who may not be well versed in the Qur'an and the Islamic scripture, the show highlights the need for the believers to interpret the Qur'an themselves, without blindly adhering to false authorities.

In place of conclusion: *Ömer*'s restorative closures and the subversion-banalization cycles in TV genres

Towards the end of the show, the script's cruel optimism, which provides a narrative arc and allows it to expose the conflicts of hetero-familialism, is replaced by "mere" optimism, that is, that patriarchy is salvageable. Gamze decides to get divorced as she wants to be independent, yet later, the audience is told that she is indeed sacrificing her love as she does not want to stand in the way of Ömer becoming a father. Tahir ultimately embraces his vulnerability and manages to regain Şükran's trust through his newfound "soft" masculinity. Both despotic parental figures, Fatma and Reşat are transformed during the course of the show, partially with the help of romantic love. We even find out that Reşat wanted to marry out of love, but was not allowed to. Just like his sons, he too, had desires, but his dreams were crushed by familial responsibilities. To the audience's surprise, he suddenly decides that he does not regard his new wife Çiçek as a housekeeper, but as a romantic partner. Gamze's mother Fatma, increasingly supportive of her children towards the end of the show, ends up falling in love with Rahmi and marries him. Hakan, who has abandoned and gaslit his wife in so many ways, "smartens up" and convinces Nisa to remain married to him.

The story ends with a sickly sweet, communal wedding ceremony of all these characters, in a cultish reunion. Out of a very violent chain of events, laced with domestic abuse and toxic behavior, emerges a supposedly new family union. Familial oppression, we are led to believe, is gotten rid of through romantic love and mutual understanding. The fantasy here is that hetero-familialism is not inherently faulty; that romantic love can discipline familial violence into tolerance. The power of love, it turns out, is so sublime and miraculous that Gamze ends up giving birth to a baby girl. Ömer is finally an artist as he always dreamt of and has an exhibition coming up. Thus, the story's happy ending suggests that individual desires and societal expectations can meet in the middle ground. Such is the fantasy of Ömer's story: violence can be endured, toxicity can be fixed, neither are structural, but are curable by romantic love.

As a concluding remark, perhaps it is pertinent to finish with the question of whether the audiences of Turkish shows are inflicted with cruel optimism as well as the *dizi* characters. Thinking about the debates surrounding not just *Ömer* but the other shows that have emerged of late, can we use the concept of cruel optimism to define the expectations and disappointment of audiences with the development of the storylines? As the public space for open discussion shrinks, popular culture and media become the arena for public debate on political issues. There is a commonly felt expectation that these shows will delve into these issues in a critical manner. The fictional TV narratives start off with a transformative potential, or so they seem, as they thematize issues of current public debate such as divorce, toxic masculinity, violence against women and familial pressure on women. Yet quickly they turn back on themselves, with the plots defaulting into typical, melodramatic tropes, and female characters leaving their quest for independence behind for the sake of love and family.

Nevertheless, this new trend in commercial dramas of the primetime Turkish *dizi* scene demonstrates a significant shift in the critical literacies of popular culture and its audiences. Rather than dismissing the symptomatic significance of these new shifts in the televisual economy, it is useful for us as critics to pay attention to cycles of subversion/innovation and banalization, and cycles of progressive critique and normative closure. This is, we contend, one of the most effective ways to grasp and examine the ideological workings of national TV genres. However, considering the shifting economies of content creation, changing habits of TV consumption, and rise of transnational markets in television production, we should note that a critical attention to the industrial context of *dizi* is also needed when fully conceptualizing TV content and its political economies.

While we are writing this article, we observe changes in the cycles of subversion/innovation and banalization. Such changes have already been at work as the dominant/popular paradigms in the *dizi* sector have begun swerving to shows like *Leyla: Hayat… Aşk… Adalet…* (Star TV and Ay Yapım 2024-), a remake of the Brazilian telenovela *Avenida Brasil* (Globo and SIC 2012), and *Bahar* (ShowTV and MF Yapım 2024-), a remake of the South Korean show *Doctor Cha* (JTBC 2023).[31] While the centrality of women as protagonists (and their critical function in

contesting hegemonic masculinities and the wider gender/sexuality politics in Türkiye) remain, these new *dizi*s demonstrate a detachment from other emergent, pious-versus-secular paradigms of the contemporary TV ecosystem. While *Bahar* clearly attempts to carve out a proto-feminist space of "joy" in its story (leading to a genre hybrid that engages playfully with conventions of comedy (especially romcoms and sitcoms), medical drama and musical), *Leyla*'s hyper-melodramatic modality uses generic excess as a performative strategy to queer the Manichean formulations such as those of "good"/moral/innocent/docile woman/mother vs. "bad"/ill-willed/promiscuous/fallen/transgressive woman/mother. While these new "interventions" to the *dizi* scene diversify the representations of femininity, the "success" of such diversification occurs at the cost of political detachment. What seems to remain as a constant, though, is the ways in which these productions navigate gendered operations of neoliberalism and their evasion of class in favor of individual entrepreneurialism and self-governmentalization, in contemporary Türkiye.

Acknowledgements

An earlier version of this essay has been presented at the NECS2024 conference in İzmir, Turkey, on 29 June 2024, as part of a panel titled "TV Series in Turkey: Crisis in Governance, Production and Narratives," organised by İpek A. Çelik Rappas. We are grateful for İpek's kind invitation to take part in this panel. We also would like to thank Ayşegül Çura for participating in our group viewings and discussions and providing us with invaluable assistance throughout the process of data collection and writing.

Notes

1. This can be seen as a continuation of what Thwaites Diken considers as a "return of religion" in postmillennial Turkish cinema: see Ebru Thwaites Diken, *The Spectacle of Politics and Religion in the Contemporary Turkish Cinema* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018). In his study on the postmillennial formation of Turkish djinn-themed horror films, Çakırlar has also noted that these horror films "offer a continuity to the recent proliferation of the spectacularized crises of familialism in the wider generic system of Turkish media culture, including the primetime soaps and dramas (e.g. *Kızılcık Şerbeti/Cranberry Sorbet* [GoldFilm & ShowTV 2022-], *Camdaki Kız/The Girl in the Glass* [OGM & KanalD 2021-2023], *Aile/Family* [Ay Yapım & ShowTV 2023-], and *Ömer* [OGM & StarTV 2023-]), "prestige TV" dramas (e.g. *Bir Başkadır / Ethos* [Netflix/Oya 2020]), and women's daytime reality TV of investigative journalism (e.g. *Müge Anlı ile Tatlı Sert* [atv 2008-] and *Esra Erol'da* [atv 2015-])". See Cüneyt Çakırlar. "Djinns as Transformative Otherness: Forms of Toxic Kinship in Postmillennial Turkish Horror Film", in *Transnational Horror: Folklore, Genre, and Cultural Politics*, edited by Cüneyt Çakırlar (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press), 177. "In addition to the thematic parallels", Çakırlar argues, "these genres are more intimately intertwined": "The majority of the djinn-horror movies (Alper Mestçi's films in particular) register their excess by combining the horrific with the pathos of family drama, while soaps, prestige TV dramas, and daytime reality TV shows occasionally spectacularize their contents by concatenating a dramatic pathos with elements of the horrific (e.g. "body horror" through the horrific maternal violence of the "chastity corset" in *Camdaki Kız*, horrors of coerced marriage and sexual assault in *Kızılcık Şerbeti*, and horrific crimes committed within morally corrupt families being investigated in *Müge Anlı*). What the contemporary generic system's hybrid registers of pathos share, however, is their engagement with family and women as the key sites of excess" (Çakırlar, 177). [Return to text]

2. *Dizi*, in general, refers to a particular televisual format in Turkish. For a detailed conceptualization of *dizi* as a genre, see Arzu Öztürkmen, "'Turkish Content': The Historical Rise of the *Dizi* Genre", *TV/Series*, no 13 (2018), 1-12. Öztürkmen later revises her conceptualization of *dizi* as a "metagenre." See Arzu Öztürkmen, *The Delight of Turkish Dizi: Memory, Genre, and Politics of Television in Turkey* (London: Seagull Books 2022). For the conceptual and methodological affordances of *dizi*, see Josh Carney, "Extreme dizi-ness: stretching the bounds of genre in (New?) Turkish Television", *Jump Cut* 62 (Winter 2023-24). For *dizi*'s resonances with other serial formats, in the contexts of soap operas and melodramas, see Baran Germen, "*Yalı* as mise-en-scene and frontality: an infrastructural take on dizi aesthetics", *Jump Cut* 62 (Winter 2023-24).

3. Our proposed focus on the politics of intimacy in contemporary Turkish TV serials does not necessarily suggest that intimacy and political polarization are mutually exclusive phenomena. We argue that treating the representation of intimacy as the primary point of entry into analyzing Turkish *dizi*s bear the potential to better understand the shifting politics of family and gender identification in the context of neoliberal Islam shaping the political status quo in contemporary Turkish politics.

4. Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Oxford and Durham: Duke University Press, 2011).

5. Berlant, 2.

6. Berlant, 21.

7. Covering the 1960s, the 1970s, and the 1980s, Yeşilçam refers to a period in the cinema of Turkey when film production reached its peak (see Arslan 2011: 63-236). According to Arslan, Yeşilçam "came to indicate a certain type of popular filmmaking [in Turkey] – in a way, comparable to the name "Hollywood"". See Savaş Arslan, *Cinema in Turkey: A New Critical*

History (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 11.

8. In Berlant's thought, the perpetually propagating sense of precarity and political impasse in neoliberal capitalism results in "waning of genres". See Berlant, 6. Old genres no longer register the new affective universe of neoliberal capitalism, a relevant and progressive political intervention against which necessitates different paradigms of pedagogy and critique that go beyond affirmative identity politics or the conventional aesthetics of protest, sabotage and transgression. For a case study of queer art practices that critically engages with the "waning of genres", see Cüneyt Çakırlar, "The Non-Ameliorative Art: Erinç Seymen's Unsettled Scenes of Cruel Optimism", *Erinç Seymen: Homo Fragilis*, exhibition monograph (Istanbul: Zilberman Gallery, 2017), 6-22 (Turkish) & 34-55 (English), online, https://irep.ntu.ac.uk/id/eprint/31678/

9. Esra Gedik, *Trapped in between state, market and family: experiences of moderately educated divorced and widow women*,PhD Dissertation (Ankara: Middle Eastern Technical University, 2015). For Gedik's relevant studies published in English language, see also Esra Gedik, "Testing the Honor: Divorced and Widow Women's Experiences in Turkey", *ASOS Journal: The Journal of Academic Social Sciences* 6, no. 82 (2018), 314-337; and Esra Gedik, "Single Mothers Doing Family: Re-forming Traditional Family in Turkey", *Journal of Sociological Research* 21, no. 1 (2018), 71-101.

10. For a detailed account of the political and social significance of virginity in Türkiye, see Ayşe Parla, "The "Honor" of the State: Virginity Examinations in Turkey", *Feminist Studies* 27, no.1(2001), 65–88.

11. Zafer Yilmaz, ""Strengthening the Family" Policies in Turkey: Managing the Social Question and Armoring Conservative–Neoliberal Populism", *Turkish Studies* 16, no. 3 (2015), 371-390.

12. The President of Religious Affairs, i.e. the religious bureaucracy of Turkey, was established in 1924 as the Diyanet İşleri Reisliği with the Law No. 429 adopted by the Grand National Assembly of Turkey (TBMM) as a continuation of the Ottoman institution of Shaykh al-Islam.

13. Sevgi Adak, "Expansion of the Diyanet and the Politics of Family in Turkey under AKP Rule", *Turkish Studies* 22, no. 2, 2020, 200-221.

14. Feride Eralp, "How Are Our Lives Shaped through the Protocols of the Presidency of Religious Affairs (Diyanet) and the Absolute Integrity of the Family?", *Çatlak Zemin*, 8 April 2021, online, https://en.catlakzemin.com/how-are-our-lives-shaped-through-the-protocols-of-the-presidency-of-religious-affairs-diyanet-and-the-absolute-integrity-of-the-family/ (Accessed 9 December 2024). See also Sevgi Adak, "Grassroots Familialism? NGO Mobilization and Neoconservatism in Contemporary Turkey", *European Journal of Turkish Studies. Social Sciences on Contemporary Turkey* 33 (2021), https://doi.org/10.4000/ejts.7644 (online).

15. Hikmet Kocamaner, "Regulating the Family through Religion", *American Ethnologist* 46, no. 4 (2019), 495–508.

16. At the time when we have been finishing this article for publication, the government has been working on a "draft law proposal" that criminalizes of any gender expression or representation that is deemed non-conforming. The proposal also brings further restrictions and challenges against the gender-confirming surgeries. For KaosGL's news report on the draft law, see Oğulcan Özgenç, "LGBTI+'s are targeted with amendments to the Civil Code and Penal Code", *KaosGL* (27 February 2025), online, https://kaosgl.org/en/single-news/lgbti-s-are-targeted-with-amendments-to-the-civil-code-and-penal-code

17. Berlant, 10

18. Berlant, 10.

19. Although *mahalle* roughly translates to "neighborhood" in English, it refers to a web of relations based on locality. It is officially an administrative unit under the city and district governance, represented by elected officials called *muhtar*s. However, *mahalle*s as communities defined by primary relations, unwritten norms and codes based on lifestyle, and social expectations can survive even after they cease to exist legally. As Behar explains, "the mahalle is first and foremost a space where people are neighbors and where human relationships are based on being neighbors. It is a bundle of face-to-face, dense daily relationships people and families, women men and children form with each other; whether it is through shopping, praying, playing or conversing." See Cem Behar, *Bir Mahallenin Doğumu ve Ölümü (1494-2008)* (Istanbul: Yapi Kredi Yayınları, 2019).

20 *Ömer*'s nostalgia can also be located in a wider context of nostalgic attachments in Turkish popular culture. The ongoing legacy of the Yeşilçam imagery is not only maintained in *dizi*s but it also prevails in the practices of digital media audiences in Türkiye. As Yeşilçam film archives move onto online platforms, a new wave of Yeşilçam revival has taken over the media spaces. This article's co-author Zeynep Serinkaya Winter is currently working on her PhD research titled *Digital Intimate Publics, Yesilcam Fandom and Nostalgia for Old Turkey*, where she explores the new publics and audience discourses emerging around such nostalgic attachments to Yeşilçam.

21. See Hülya Uğur Tanrıöver, "Towards a Social History of Turkey Through Television Series", *Series - International Journal of TV Serial Narratives* 8, no. 2 (2022), 9-26.

22. Tanrıöver, suggests that *mahalle* is also useful in technical sense, as it allows for subplot lines and introduction of new characters. It also allows the story to continue seamlessly without "jumps" in the ordinary flow of daily life, from interior space to exterior spaces. The thematic preference is also because *mahalle* continues to be the main public space in the Turkish social life for most of the population. Depictions of *mahalle* also evoke nostalgic sentiments in the context of rapid urbanization. It is also a nostalgic reference to wider/extended (*geniş*) *aile* living, as opposed to rising nuclear family structure. See Hülya Uğur Tanrıöver, "Türk Televizyon Dizilerinde Mahalle ve Aile Yaşamı", *İstanbul Dergisi* (January 2002), 93-96.

23. Tanrıöver, 93-96.

24. This critical observation also applies to the dizi *Camdaki Kız/The Girl in the Glass* (OGM & KanalD 2021-2023) and its evasion of class in its formative "*yalı* mise-en-scene". See Germen, "*Yalı* mise-en-scene and frontality", n.p. (online).

25. As a social network that shelters individuals, *mahalle* has been narrated in considerably different registers in contemporary Turkish television. For example, *Çukur* (Ay Yapım 2017-2021), a popular crime-thriller *dizi*, depicted an almost dystopian, poor neighborhood at the margins of the city, with its residents left to their own devices – sustaining themselves through illegal activities, everything but drug and sex trafficking. The show was targeted by censorship of the government as it thematized current political and social issues such as urban poverty and urban regeneration, as well as corruption. For a detailed analysis of familialism and masculinist protection logic in *Çukur,* see Ergin Bulut and Zeynep Serinkaya Winter, "Contested Masculinities and Political Imaginaries in "New Turkey" and *Çukur* as Authoritarian Spaces of Protection", *New Perspectives on Turkey* 68 (2023): 49-70.

26. Melodrama is a well-established genre within Yeşilçam tradition, with its style defined by excess and reliance on mise-en-scene and music for mobilizing genre as well as its convoluted storyline and incessant crises, evoking fear, surprise, dread and overall pathos. Yet, as Mercer and Shingler explain, it is also a "sensibility": it endorses a view of the world as divided between the good and the evil, with moral value assigned to victimhood; a legible moral order amidst the chaos of modern life. For a nuanced take on melodrama as a genre and a mode, or a sensibility, see John Mercer and Martin Shingler, *Melodrama: Genre, Style and Sensibility* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005). Such sensibility goes beyond genres and, as Arslan suggests, persists through different genres such as action and adventure. For a re-conceptualization of melodrama in the context of Turkish cinema, see Savaş Arslan, *Cinema in Turkey: A New Critical History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011). The melodramatic tropes and sensibility continue to influence TV serials in contemporary Turkey. The social anxieties of adjusting to modernity that audiences grapple with are inscribed into the impossible love stories, into the "personal". Indeed, as Germen defines it, *dizi*s are "television melodrama", employing this familiar worldview in the television format. See Baran Germen, "*Yalı* mise-en-scene and frontality", n.p.

27. The challenge this new group of shows pose against the familialism as waged by AKP is not a new feature, as post-millennial TV shows in Turkey often depicted women protagonists pushing the boundaries of gender roles. Through an analysis of Turkish TV series, popular both home and abroad, Üstek and Alyanak suggest that these protagonists and their stories are a "unique blend", introducing alternative narratives of womanhood and empowerment while retaining devotion to traditional gender roles as a mother and a wife. As the authors demonstrate, while these stories depict single or divorced mothers, working women as well as extramarital affairs, they always find the middle ground in brokering relations with the patriarchal family structure. Such narratives offer a "palatable hybrid" for the local and international audiences (Üstek and Alyanak, 414), while responding to cultural production conditions defined by the scrutiny of RTÜK. As the authors underline, RTÜK has been instrumental in dictating the boundaries of what is acceptable as representations of family and sexuality, through its punitive authority, hence its role in shaping narratives on screen. See Funda Üstek and Oğuz Alyanak, "The "Unique Blend": Reframing Womanhood through Turkish Drama Series", in *Gender in Cross-Cultural Perspective*, edited by Adrienne E. Strong and Richard Powis (London: Routledge, 2024), 405–421.

28. There are several adaptations of Bernard Shaw's *Pygmalion* produced in the Yeşilçam era, recycling the story of an upper-class male protagonist disciplining a lower-class female protagonist into a sophisticated and elegant lady. The male protagonist then falls in love with his own "creation". For a critical discussion on how the story was adapted and recycled in the Yeşilçam era, see Evren Barin Eğrik, "Türk Sinemasında Pygmalion Etkisi: Yeşilçam'da Pygmalion Uyarlamaları ve Toplumsal Cinsiyet", MA Thesis (Istanbul: Marmara University, 2007).

29. Authors' translation. The original, in Turkish language, is: "Bırak bu hurafeleri! Sen Kuran'a aykırı şeyler anlatıyorsun. Sen ve senin gibiler yüzünden bu din tanınmaz, yaşanmaz hale geldi. En çok da gençleri soğuttunuz. Dinden konuşacaksan Allah'ı anlatacaksın, hurafeleri değil. (...) Ey Müslümanlar, uyanın!" From this point onwards, the English translations of Quranic references will be cited from the Oxford World's Classics edition of *The Qur'an* translated by M.A.S. Abdel Haleem (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

30. In his critical commentary on the proliferation of religious TV shows, Kocamaner notes: "In 1990, the Turkish state's monopoly on television broadcasting came to an end, enabling the liberalization of the media sector and the flourishing of any privately owned TV stations, including several Islamically oriented ones [e.g. Samanyolu TV, Kanal 7, and TGRT]. The programming of Islamic TV channels was initially distinctly theological in character, with shows focusing on the doctrinal, scriptural, and ritualistic aspects of Islam. Recently, however, Islamic TV broadcasters have started producing family-friendly entertainment programs as well as family-related shows aimed at solving domestic problems and "strengthening the family"". Kocamaner asserts that "Islamic TV executives and producers of such shows consider themselves moral entrepreneurs aiming to prevent what they see as the increasing corrosion of the "moral fabric of the family ("*ailenin ahlaki dokusu*") and the devaluation of "family values" ("*aile değerleri*") in contemporary Turkish society". See Hikmet Kocamaner, "Strengthening the Family through Television: Islamic Broadcasting, Secularism, and the Politics of Responsibility in TV", *Anthropological Quarterly* 90, no. 3(2017), 676.

31. For a critical account of the Turkish remakes of Korean TV dramas, please see Melis Behlil, "Turkish Remakes of Korean TV Dramas", *Creative Industries Journal* 16, no. 2 (2023), 163-179.

To top Print version JC 63 *Jump Cut* home