

TOWARDS A SOCIAL HISTORY OF TURKEY THROUGH TELEVISION SERIES

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ABSTRACT

By taking a sociological perspective toward relationships between media products and social issues and relying on historical analysis of Turkish TV series in the last five decades, this article explores the transformation of Turkish TV series in the context of changing socio-political, cultural and economic milieu in Turkey. Focusing on 102 TV series broadcast between 1974 and 2022, it strives to understand

the social and political history of the country through the television series. The article concludes that while Turkish TV series have reflected the ever-changing political orientation of the government and constant cultural fluctuations of society in every epoch, the discourse, narrative and formats of TV series have undergone significant transformations due to the impact of socio-cultural and political issues, the development of the TV production and broadcasting sector, and cultural policies of the state in Turkey. In this case, Turkish TV series can help us to understand the failed attempt of the governments for creating a national community united around middle-class values in the 1980s and 1990s as well as the polarized structure of society in today's Turkey.

INTRODUCTION

As one of the first researchers to work on television series in Turkey, I have conducted several studies in this field since the 1990s. It is this experience and the different ways of thinking that allowed me to start this research which aims to propose a preliminary roadmap for a “reading” (not to say “writing”) of the social history of Turkey through television series. This is in fact the prologue of a macro-sociological work of greater scope; a work in progress.

Taking as a basis a hypothesis built in an interdisciplinary dimension at the crossroads of the sociology of television and social history, according to which the characteristics of television series, in our case those produced in Turkey, are correlative to the socio-political evolutions of the period of their production and broadcasting, I asked myself the following questions: what are the changes observed in Turkish television series, from the beginning of their broadcasting to the present day; to which socio-political options or orientations of the country do these changes correspond? Do they constitute, and in what sense, answers to the needs of the actors of this system of production and reproduction of images and discourses?

My approach is, as I said, mainly sociological. Being interested in cinema, before giving rise to a sub-discipline devoted to television content, sociology questions, by virtue of its main object, the relations, even correlations between images and social reality (Goldman 1992: 38), and even other potentialities such as doing sociology by and through cinema (Durand and Sebag 2015). But it is not only sociologists who are interested in films, since cinema is becoming a material of the first order for historians who want to break with classical historiography. In France, for example, Ferro proposes through his pioneering work to make “a historical reading of the cinema and a cinematographic reading of history” (1977: 26), and many authors define in this sense the tasks of the historian, such as Garçon, who proposes him/her to enter a “mental universe” in order to see the relations between films and social life in the general sense (1992: 17).

In this article, I have limited my qualitative content analysis of Turkish TV series, which is a descriptive one, to the main lines such as the genre, the sub-genre, the main characters and the filmic language (narrative form; atmosphere; use of more or less sophisticated techniques). This choice is explained by the volume of the sample to be analyzed. Indeed, since I am reviewing the history of Turkish TV series which covers 48 years and concerns more than 1000 different productions,

some of which lasted for many seasons, it is technically impossible for me to claim to be exhaustive. Consequently, I refer in this article to 102 series that I consider as the most representative, either because they are prototypes in the history of series, or because they stand out from others due to their national or international popularity, and finally because they represent a political or cultural issue on their own, thus becoming symbols in their own right. The second method used is desk research (analysis of written sources, especially media information on series or on socio-political news) and literature review (on series and socio-political conditions).

I would also like to point out the limitations of this research, as they are numerous given the time period it covers and the disciplines to which it refers. First, even if comments are made about the climate of production and reception, these are general deductions and not detailed analyses in these two areas. Secondly, in spite of the very important number of sources and publications observed, I had to limit the bibliographical references here. Finally, in order not to make the text more cumbersome, I have not made explicit certain concepts that are taken for granted (for example, those of television genres; of globalization or soft power) and that appear in the sources to which I refer.

1. THE EMERGING TURKISH TELEVISION: A PUBLIC SERVICE IN SEARCH OF ORIGINAL CONTENTS

While Turkey (or more precisely the Ottoman Empire, since the present republic was only founded in 1923) became acquainted with cinema and radio almost at the same time as European countries and the United States, this was not the case for television. Television did not become part of people’s daily lives until the 1970s, and broadcasting was a public monopoly, as was radio¹.

The volume and diversity of programming are linked, on the one hand, to technical and economic imperatives and, on the other, to the political will of the public power that governs broadcasting. As it was in other countries a few decades earlier, the broadcasting policy was “paternalistic”: The audience was considered as a crowd to be educated and the medium as a means of disseminating cultural, and above all educational, products. The limited broadcasting hours were

1 Many works exist on the history of television in Turkey. For a compact and chronological presentation see Uğur Tanrıöver 2011b.

devoted to rather informative content such as news, self-produced or commissioned documentaries. However, the public authorities did not deny the entertainment “function” of the small screen and made efforts to satisfy the needs of the audience even if it was very limited in the early 1970s because of the scarcity of TV set ownership.

Throughout this first period of television launch, the audience’s need for dramas was mainly satisfied by the reruns of popular films already released in theaters; original productions of literary adaptations² in TV movies; theater shows specially filmed for TV; and imported TV movies or series, which were either literary adaptations (especially of great Russian or British classics, etc.) or popular productions, especially those of the BBC. I would like to point out here that the desire to satisfy the audiences’ need for more entertainment content such as dramas does not mean that the television’s didactic mission had been abandoned. Thus, even during the short period (1974-1975) of the then general manager of the public broadcasting channel (TRT), İsmail Cem, the efforts for quality productions went hand in hand with the desire to meet the needs of the audience.

It was during 1974-1975 that TRT produced and broadcast the first Turkish television series: A family comedy, *Kaynanalar* (1974) and a melodrama from a literary adaptation, *Aşk-ı Memnu* (1975). When we consider the characteristics of these two productions, we see on the one hand what constitutes, and will continue to constitute even today some basic elements of Turkish “feature films/series”; and on the other, those that reflect the social and political options of their time.

The first of these basic elements that will somehow “resist” the various changes, and even transformations of the series, is the genre. This is certainly not unique to Turkey and the rich literature on series shows us that comedy and melodrama are the most popular genres. The adoption of these two genres first of all shows the commitment of TRT management to attract the audience to this new medium. Moreover, the fact that these two series have left their mark on the history of Turkish television fiction³ is first and fore-

most related to the choice of genre. It is also worth noting that these genres are already those preferred by popular cinema, as Behlil (2010) and Toy Par (2022) point out.

These productions are conceived with short episodes (25-30 min) and on a classical, linear narration with theatrical acting (a cast consisting of big theater celebrities); written and directed by theater (Tekin Akmansoy) and film (Halit Refiğ) directors. The themes and diegesis are also significant: *Kaynanalar* takes up the very classic theme of the family comedy of Turkish cinema, as the main conflict the opposition of the traditional and the modern through the lifestyles of two families whose children are getting married, and deals with another theme by this occasion: the issue of adaptation to urban life of a traditional provincial family. As for *Aşk-ı Memnu* (*Forbidden Love*) adapted from the classic novel of the same name written in the previous century, it is a family drama around a young woman who has made a marriage of reason with an elderly and rich man, living a forbidden love, as the title indicates, with the latter’s cousin. In other words, here again the general theme is the most classic and the discourse is moralistic, as it suits the approach of the public channel.

The priority is to offer productions that are as cost-effective as possible without giving up on quality. So, these early local dramas are self-produced, with production crews made up of employees of the public channel but entrusted or commissioned to well-known filmmakers and scriptwriters⁴. With technical and financial means that are often insufficient, and lacking in professional staff and manpower, Turkey’s only public channel would remedy the need for series by buying foreign productions, in particular successful American and European programming, in order to satisfy the demand of an audience that is supposed to be⁵ more and more important.

Towards the end of the 1970s, the interest of the audience was fed mainly by curiosity in front of this technological novelty that is TV and also by new forms of socialization created because of the scarcity of household equipment. Indeed, the neighborhood, already important as a value and as a form of communication in Turkey, took a new form: the TV visit. Particularly on days when there was a popular program, neighbors and friends who did not have a TV at home

2 On the subject of public television literary adaptations and telefilms in the early years of broadcast see Kale 2019.

3 *Kaynanalar* had, with interruptions, 14 seasons and 314 episodes, first on the public channel TRT and then on Kanal D, a private channel. *Aşk-ı Memnu* (*Forbidden Love*) had a remake in 2008-2010 on Kanal D and was one of the most popular productions of that period, with also a great success on international markets. For a comparison of these two versions of *Aşk-ı Memnu*, and especially for an analysis of the history and evolution of the series through these two versions, see Çelenk 2010.

4 İsmail Cem, Director of TRT in 1974-1975 explains in his memoirs this collaboration of the public channel with the confirmed filmmakers (Cem 1976: 59).

5 I use the term “supposed” because there were no studies or audience measurements at that time. The first “media survey” that also included television audiences was conducted in 1986 by a private market research institute (PIAR) with a team of researchers recruited for this work. I was the co-director of this study.

would go to visit those who do for a collective viewing session over a cup of tea, creating a “semi-public sphere within the domestic space” (Öztürkmen 2018: 3), and as discussed in the next section, this new practice also correlated with the general socio-political climate of the country which was on the verge of a civil war.

2. THE “HOME, HOME, SWEET PTT” YEARS: THE DOMESTIC WITHDRAWAL OF PEOPLE IN SEARCH OF COMFORT AND SECURITY

Political instability and the inability of successive governments to prevent acts of terrorism and clashes between opposing political groups served as a pretext for a military coup in 1980. This was going to be one of the darkest periods in the history of the republic. Most of the population sought refuge at home, fleeing the already dangerous public space, which had become even less safe under the curfew and the great repression by the military regime.

This climate, and the economic crisis that underlies it, had also hit the cinema, which was struggling to survive in the face of an audience who was deserting theaters to stay home and watch TV. The abbreviation PTT was invented at that time: Referring to the initials of Pyjamas, Terlik (meaning slippers in Turkish), and Television, it was used to translate this need of cocooning and feeling of home. The switch to color broadcasting in 1982 and the launch of a second channel (despite being not much different from the first) excited the audience even more, even if it required them to buy new color TV sets.

Tired of the chaos of the street, people discovered the fairy tale world of the great foreign series such as *Dallas* (1980), *Dynasty* (1981), *Love Boat* (1983), etc. in the evening, and when the broadcasting hours increased, that of telenovelas during the day. However, the television executives, due to their conservative and nationalist political position⁶, were concerned about the popularity of these productions, which were considered unfit for the moral and national values of the nation and made efforts to launch new local productions.

Thus, more than thirty (30) Turkish series were produced and broadcast in the 1980s. It should be noted, however, that almost all of these series were produced from 1984 onwards,

i.e. after the liberal-conservative party of Özal came to power after the (admittedly controlled and questionable) elections to replace the military government, promising a minimum of normalization.

When we look at these series, we first see that the trend of literary adaptations of classical authors is maintained (*Yaprak Dökümü* and *Çalığışu* by Reşat Nuri Güntekin, *Ateşten Gömlek* by Halide Edip Adivar, *Hanımın Çiftliği* by Orhan Kemal,⁷ etc.), and adaptations by the works of contemporary authors have been added (*Küçük Ağa* and *Kuruluş Osmancık* by Tarık Buğra, *Samanyolu* by Kerime Nadir). Moreover, the fact that public TV produced an original series written by contemporary famous writers such as Atilla İlhan (*Kartallar Yüksek Uçar*, 1984) already shows us an important characteristic of these early series: they were the work of writers and not scriptwriters per se. These series-adaptations also had the particularity of being all dramas or melodramas, sometimes historical (*Küçük Ağa*, *Ateşten Gömlek*, *Kuruluş Osmancık*).

Among the series of this period, however, we also see comedies. Even though some historians categorize many of them as sit-coms, I think it would be wrong to label them as such. They are in fact family comedies, among which we also find serialized adaptations of plays, such as *Kuruntu Ailesi* or *Uğurlugiller*. For instance, *Kuruntu Ailesi* was produced for the theater⁸ in Turkey based on an adaptation of Louis Verneuil’s play, *Madame Vidal’s Love*. Moreover, most of the scriptwriters of these series were theater writers. Let us note finally that a few series of other genres such as detective (*Mesela Muzaffer*, 1987) or science fiction (*Kavanozdaki Adam*, 1987; *Uzaylı Zekiye*, 1988), featuring elements of comedy at the same time, have also been broadcast but without much success.

The narrative and cinematographic characteristics of these series reflect their production conditions and especially their writing and follow the line of the first two series of 1974 and 1975: classic dramatic structure, theatrical aspect, linear narration. Except for a few, practically all the characters represent quite ordinary people with a physique of an “average Turk” and the casting corresponds to this realistic tone: a realism of middle classes. Even though there are a few movie stars, most of the performers come from the theater which

6 It should be noted that the management of public radio and television has been a major asset in the quarrels between the government and the opposition. For more details, see Tanrıöver 2003a.

7 These examples I have given have had remakes after the 2000s.

8 It was this filmed play that was first broadcast on TV in the form of three episodes; then, due to the popularity of the show, a series was commissioned from the team that produced and performed the theater show.

also explains the theatrical tone highlighted above. Another particularity that reinforces this aspect is the urban environment represented and the settings of the interiors forming the universe and creating the atmosphere of the series. In most of these series, the interiors of the houses, as well as the offices or workplaces represented (for example the editorial office of a daily newspaper in *Mesela Muzaffer*) are those of the middle classes: poorly furnished and to the taste of these classes. This atmosphere, which could seem stifling, is also highlighted by the tight shots, and takes on another meaning when articulated to the stories and characters: proximity and intimacy. But their choice translates another reality of this period: the reduced means of production in terms of budget and technologies and the lack of experienced professionals considering the particularities and needs of this new medium that is TV.

But one of the greatest novelties about series is the “de facto” birth of a sub-genre specific to the country, which in the following decades will be generic for new productions and will constitute for the audiences the somewhat nostalgic reference point about local series: the so-called “mahalle” series, otherwise known as neighborhood series. This is a genre that corresponds somewhat to dramedy and takes place in middle-class neighborhoods (Çetin 2016: 698) around stories of ordinary characters emphasizing the importance of neighborhood, family and community values⁹. It is the *Perihan Abila* series (*Sister Perihan*¹⁰, 1986) that is the precursor of this subgenre. Written by a play writer, Kandemir Konduk, who became in the 1990s one of the most important scriptwriters of TV series, *Sister Perihan* also promoted two actors, a woman and a man, to the main roles (Perran Kutman and Şevket Altuğ) who became, in the eyes of the audience, real TV stars, and in the following period, starred in other series which were also “unforgettable” for the audience: for example *Şehnaz Tango* and *Süper Baba (Super Dad)*, of which I will talk about.

When we consider these series as a whole, we see several explanatory elements of the socio-economic but also political conditions of their time. First and foremost, they reflect

the lack of experience and professional competence and the limits of investment in TV production as such. This makes the series hybrid texts, mixtures of literature, theater and cinema, borrowing even some of their particularities from older forms of entertainment.

As for the genres, themes and narratives of these series, we see that producers and TRT offering to audiences, who had already become “PTT”, these “mahalle” (neighborhood) series, where the members of middle-class families can recognize themselves easily through the characters depicted as if they are just like neighbors and friends of the audience.

The “mahalle” series made the domestic withdrawal created by the atmosphere of the military regime tolerable by widening the universe of socialization of the spectators towards the diegesis of the series which are situated in districts and houses similar to theirs, with characters who resemble them. These series functioned to give them a safe virtual space and stories that exalt traditional family and community values, contributing to the restoration of social cohesion after the tormented years of civil war and military rule.

3. COMMERCIAL COMPETITIVITY OF TV BUSINESS AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF TV SERIES: A PERIOD OF “TRIAL AND ERROR”

Certainly, the beginning of the 1990s was a particularly significant period, not only in Turkey but also internationally. To summarize, one can say that the cards were reshuffled all over the world, with the collapse of the Soviet Empire, the questioning of political bipolarization and the birth of new economic and political models due to globalization. While national borders were being redefined from a territorial point of view, from a socio-economic perspective, they tended to become blurred, in particular by the great role played by technological advances (even revolutions).

Despite the after-effects of the troubled period of chaos and military rule of the previous decade, the liberal policies of the elected government had concrete effects on the Turkish television sector. With the technical development of the network and the huge increase in the sales of television sets, the number of the audience also increased, and furthermore, with the introduction of audiometry by the AGB group in 1989, audiences could now be measured. All this fed another sector that was also developing in line with liberal policies: marketing communication and advertising.

9 For a detailed study of these series and in particular the relationship of the “mahalle” as a site, with the family and the community life of the middle classes, see Tanriöver 2003a; Uğur Tanriöver 2004.

10 In order to simplify in-text referencing of TV series, I only give the English title of the precursor series and of those that have official English titles. Also, only the date and the TV channel of the first season are provided because, from the 1990s on, the durations of the seasons are very variable and the popular TV series transfer from one channel to another frequently.

The television series, already one of the favorite programs of the public, which replaced the practice of going to the cinema with the “magic box” at home, became a real issue following a great change in the audiovisual landscape. This was the foundation, first de facto, then regulated (Uğur Tanrıöver 2011b) of private TV channels breaking the monopoly of public TV and introducing the dimension of competition in content production. The new TV channels not only offered more choices, but also swept away censorship, which was argued to be necessary for public service, but in fact reflected the conservative policy that had weighed on TV until then.

It is from 1992 to 1993 that private channels started to buy and broadcast original series. The first productions (*Tatlı Betüş*, Show TV; *Şaban Askerde*, Star; *İki Kızkardeş*, Show TV) were quite similar to the popular ones broadcast by the public channel in the 1980s. Dramas and family comedies were written and directed by professional filmmakers, including “auteurs” such as Atıf Yılmaz (*Tatlı Betüş*) and Orhan Oğuz (*Şaban Askerde*) and were performed by major film stars such as the great Turkish film diva Türkan Şoray (*Tatlı Betüş*) and Kemal Sunal, known from the *Şaban* film series on which the *Şaban Askerde* series is based, or an actress-singer Gülben Ergen (*İki Kızkardeş*).

One series, *Mahallenin Muhtarları* (1992, Kanal 6) stood out from the rest, firstly by the fact that it was positioned in the sub-genre “neighborhood series”, but also in relation to its production team. It was conceived by the scriptwriter Kandemir Konduk who wrote *Sister Perihan* (TRT 2, 1986) which was very popular but the script itself was written by a group of six persons under the supervision of the scriptwriter. It was the first “scriptwriting team” of TV series crews. The series was directed by Filiz Kaynak, a female director, with a professional background in communication. She became the first professional director of television series in Turkey.

In the space of a few years, the number of TV series had increased steadily in line with the growth in the volume of programs of the new private channels, who were gradually seeing them as the main source of their advertising income. Because of the length of the episodes, relatively conventional at this period (from 35 to 60 minutes), some private channels like Star, ATV, SHOW TV could broadcast two series in prime time (Uğur Tanrıöver 2003b: 197-198). Also, producers (always in relation to audience measurements and the media planning requirements of advertising agencies) began to pay attention to the segmentation of series. Most of the productions kept this characteristic of being for “all audiences” and, in particular, the collective family audience, but they were starting to

produce series more specifically aimed at certain audiences: women, men, young people, children. Of course, in the absence of serious audience research and sophisticated ratings classifications, this segmentation is also rather “crafty” and operates more at the level of genres (detective for men, for example) or characters. For instance, *Çarli* (1998, Star), which features a chimpanzee as one of the characters, was aimed at children, and *Çılgın Bediş* (1996, Kanal D), which is an adaptation of the popular comic strip of the same name published in the weekly satirical magazine *Gırgır* on the adventures and generational conflicts of a high school girl, was for youth.

So, as producers and private channels began to compete fiercely to offer series, they mixed, combined, experimented with genres, themes and casting. In the sub-genre “neighborhood series”, several series were produced, some of which became cult over time: *Süper Baba* (ATV, 1993); *Ana Kuzusu* (1996, Show TV); *Babaevi* (1997, ATV); *İkinci Bahar* (1998, ATV). So much so that the public channel TRT1 also launched a neighborhood series (*Şaşıfelek Çıkmazı*, 1996) thus entering the competition game with private channels for the sharing of large advertising budgets.

One of the great novelties was the conception and broadcasting of series (often dramas or melodramas) that brought the great stars of cinema or music to the small screen, such as Türkan Şoray (*Gözlerinde Son Gece*, 1996, Star); Hülya Avşar (*Sevginin Gücü*, 1994, Show TV); Fatma Girik and Sibel Can (*Bize Ne Oldu*; 1999, TGRT); as well as music stars İbrahim Tatlıses (*Aşık Oldum*, 1992, Star), Ebru Gündeş (*Fırtınalar*, 1996, Star), Kenan Doğulu (*Hiç Bana Sordun Mu?*, 1996, Kanal D) and Muazzez Ersoy (*İntizar*, 1996, TGRT). While some stars continued their careers in television by taking part in other productions in the following years, the popularity of “star-studded series” as a wave did not last in the following years.

We know from different works on reception that in series, and especially in some genres like classical dramas (and in their soap-opera or telenovelas versions), female protagonists and how they are represented are important (Mumford 1995; Geraghty 1996; Modleski 2008). Conceived in rather traditional roles (even if their way of life was modern) these female characters (still in a rather timid way) have evolved since the 1990s¹¹. Certainly, the representations themselves are not directly part of the problematic of this research, but

11 For early research on these representations in Turkish series, see Tanrıöver 2000 and 2003a.

I would like to give here an example of a series that stands out for its character and the events related to its broadcast.

Şehnaz Tango (1994, Show TV, Star) presents itself in its official announcement as a story of love and separation, but, conceived by a female screenwriter, the story evolves into the life (and struggles) of a middle-aged divorced woman (played by Perran Kutman known by the cult series *Sister Perihan*), mother of two young women, who experiences a relationship with a man and becomes pregnant by him. This is the first time that we see a relationship “out of wedlock” of a couple of adults and “good” characters on screen. Under the pretext of reactions and declining ratings, the series was suddenly stopped after four years of broadcasting. Women all over Turkey, including in small towns, held meetings and the telephone exchange of the channel was blocked by calls from protesting female spectators demanding the continuation of their favorite series¹².

As I have already pointed out, the search for better targeted audiences pushed producers to make genre choices. Thus, action or police series, of which we have seen a few examples in the 1980s, would be part of the audiovisual landscape of this period. In 1998, *Deli Yürek* (Show TV) presented the adventures of a hero who is determined to expose the relations of the mafia with corrupt political circles. This series would also be among those that use actors who come neither from the cinema nor the theater. By choosing Kenan İmirzaloğlu, a man voted “best model of the world” in 1997, for the lead role, the producers were also paving the way for the launch and training of new actors and attracting not only male but also women audiences. The following year, a rival channel, Kanal D, started to broadcast *Yılan Hikayesi*, whose hero is a police commissioner played by a young theater actor, Memet Ali Alabora, called by some viewers the “Turkish Mel Gibson” and rivaling the handsome hero of *Deli Yürek*. In *Yılan Hikayesi*, too, the police struggle is mostly about dismantling a mafia gang alongside other crimes and against a backdrop of romantic stories. But the launch and popularity of these two action series must be analyzed in relation to the political context of the time. In fact, in 1996, a road accident in which three people were killed and one wounded broke into a scandal, implicating obscure relations between the police, the mafia and the political world. Known as the

“Susurluk car crash”¹³, this scandalous affair made the political context, which had already been very turbulent for several years, even more unstable and raised public awareness of the issues of corruption in political circles and serious incidents of police or paramilitary blunders under the pretext of the fight against terror against Kurdish separatists¹⁴.

Thus, the popularity of series, of which there were about 10 per week on the six channels that broadcast them in 1997¹⁵, was driving the production and broadcasting sectors, and the need for original content was pushing them to seek out and innovate not only in terms of series but also in terms of the production process. We can thus observe a clear trend towards the professionalization of the design and production professions. To give just a few examples, we can refer to scriptwriters or directors who specialize in creating TV series. Nuran Devres, the first anchorwoman of the public channel, with a background in English philology, wrote the script for 15 series during the 1990s. There are also several directors from universities’ film and television departments who shot a significant number of series during the same period (e.g. Türkan Derya, Taner Akvardar, Ömer Uğur, Veli Çelik). The professionalization also extended to technical teams: film technicians, who for the most part had no professional training, gave way to young people with film or television training. Since the university departments providing training in cinema and television were not founded until the 1970s and 1980s, the first graduates did not arrive on the film market until the end of the 1980s, and then, following the crisis in the film industry (and correlatively, the rise of television series) on the television market until the 1990s. The presence of these young professionals were felt much more clearly in the following period, when the human resources and media sectors even saw more graduates after the opening and growth in the number of private universities following the promotion of higher education as part of the Özal government’s policies (1984-1994).

12 <https://www.hurriyet.com.tr/kelebek/perran-ziyayi-secerdi-39002308>; https://www.yeniasir.com.tr/yazarlar/seda_kaya_guler/2014/09/24/sehnaz-tango-ve-guner-namli, Accessed on 11.10.2022

13 <https://www.nytimes.com/1996/12/10/world/scandal-links-turkish-aides-to-deaths-drugs-and-terror.html>; for a comment on this case see the interview <https://m.bianet.org/bianet/crisis/104529-ergenekon-conspiracy-is-rooted-in-susurluk-says-former-minister> (Accessed on 12.10.2022)

14 Hundreds of civilians were reported missing, and many unsolved political crimes committed. These acts provoked the reaction of the “Saturday Mothers”: women in search of their loved ones, like the “Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo” in Argentina, still active today, called “Saturday Peoples”.

15 We do not have official records or sources on quantitative data. This figure is obtained from research I conducted in 1997-1999 (Tanrıöver & Eyüboğlu 2000)

There was a huge growth in TV series productions during this era, but this was partly due to the fact that there were few series that lasted beyond one or two seasons. Shortly after most productions were “launched”, they were canceled, sometimes overnight, due to low audience ratings¹⁶. Presenting in general the filmic characteristics of the series of the 1980s (classic dramatic structure, linear narration, urban landscapes and middle-class interior settings, invisible editing, etc.), the new series gave priority to genres, subgenres and themes that have become classic, but also tried out new genres, new figures (characters and actors), new plots. The producers’ experimentation with various methods (Tanrıöver & Eyüboğlu 2000: 78-85) created instability and a climate of competition, strong on one hand, fragile on the other.

This instability was not unrelated to the social, economic and political realities of the country. Indeed, Turkey was also going through a period of oscillation between opening up to the world and integrating into the process of globalization on the one hand and trying to establish its political system and equip itself with public authorities in such a way as to take up these challenges on the other. These series, conceived in a fragile manner without adequate preparation and consideration of their feasibility, were eliminated to make room for others, and seemed to reflect the situation of the governments in power. From 1989 to 2002, there were 10 governments with 7 parties alternately in power, ranging from the extreme right to the social democratic left, with different coalition combinations and 6 prime ministers¹⁷. There was a certain willingness to open up the economy to the world, but also economic and political crises. The uncertainty and instability of the TV series was not only related to the direct and indirect effects of these economic crises on producers and broadcasters as on other social actors, but also as a reflection of political life as such. In the same way that governments were formed without a structural basis but for “conjunctural needs” and failed in a short time, TV series were also, for the most part, produced and distributed in a rather artisanal way without much planning or taking into account the needs of the market and the audience, and thus, ended up disappearing sometimes only after a few episodes.

16 We cannot detail here the working conditions in the production and broadcasting sector of series. But it should be noted that there are almost no contracts between producers and channels (and therefore between film crews) fixing the number of episodes, etc. For more details on the film industries in Turkey, see Uğur Tanrıöver 2011a.

17 Among a large literature in political science and economics about this period, see for example Cizre Sakaliloğlu and Yeldan 2000.

4. THE MATURATION PERIOD OF THE TV SERIES: THE CONSOLIDATION OF THE PRODUCTION SECTOR AND THE FORMATION OF A TELEVISION CULTURE

Amidst aforementioned crises, the Turkish audience found refuge in TV series and began to forge a television culture. From the decoration of living rooms to the regulation of domestic life, for people, and especially for “housewives”¹⁸, the preferred target of advertisers, television occupied a central place (Tanrıöver 2003a; Uğur Tanrıöver 2003b), which I referred elsewhere as the “fifth wall” of the home (Uğur Tanrıöver 2013). The reflections of the severe economic crisis experienced on the eve of 2002, when Erdoğan’s Justice and Development Party (AKP) came to power by gaining a majority in the parliament¹⁹, were also evident in all the TV content. Channels preferred lower-cost content shot in the studio, such as contests and talk shows, rather than high-budget productions. Thus, a new genre of series, the sit-com, appeared, which gave the possibility to satisfy the public, accustomed to family comedies, and constituted a solution for the decrease of production costs.

The remake of *The Jeffersons* (*Tatlı Hayat*, 2001, Show TV) and *The Nanny* (*Dadı*, 2001, Show TV); and then an original production talking about the daily life of a family, the quarrel between the husband who wants to be macho and the modern, active woman who is in fact dominant (*Çocuklar Duymasın*, 2002, TGRT), became very popular and would be, in a way, the pioneers of other productions of the same genre in the coming years. They also inspired the TV producers for mixed genres of comedy mixing the characteristics of classic family comedy, sit-com and absurd comedy, such as *Avrupa Yakası* (2004, ATV); *Yarım Elma* (2002, Kanal D) or *Saklambaç* (2005, ATV). As can be seen, this genre also attracted competition as each channel broadcast its own series of this genre.

The sit-com and its derivatives were not the only new popular genres of this period where actors were looking for new creative content (Öztürkmen 2018: 6). As soon as a certain restoration of economic equilibrium and a trend towards political stability appeared, from the years 2002-2004 onwards,

18 In terms of political correctness, it would be more appropriate to use “homemaker” instead of this term. However, in order to draw attention to the fact that this archaic term is still used in Turkey, especially in marketing communication and advertising, it is used here in quotation marks.

19 It should be noted that the AKP party gained the majority of the parliament in all elections since 2002 and is still in power making it the longest-lived government in the history of Turkey.

there was a kind of “series boom” on screens, a phenomenon probably never seen in countries comparable to Turkey (Çelenk 2010: 21). In this flourishing production setting, one finds practically all genres, including new and original sub-genres, and also themes not (or hardly) dealt with before. Filmic languages, protagonists and relationships were also highly diversified.

Among the great novelties of this period, let's first note a sub-genre known as the “tribal series.” Set in the countryside of Anatolian provinces, in large estates where extended rich families (several generations) of powerful local notables live, with all the servants and workers of the farms and the house, they were in fact sagas, somewhat in the style of *Dallas*. Staging on the one hand the quasi-feudal relations and sometimes problematic traditions, such as the vendetta and polygamy, these series drew attention to the weight of the families of provincial notables, but also underlined the presence of young generations who oppose these traditions for a modernization of the ways of life and human relations. The first series in this tribal sub-genre, *Asmalı Konak (Vine Mansion, 2002, ATV)*, broke audience records, and thanks to the series, Turks have discovered the region of Cappadocia, which was until then almost completely ignored by domestic tourism²⁰. TV series in this era served as a kind of documentary on the ignored or forgotten regions of the country through several productions such as *Zerda (2002, ATV)*, *Berivan (2002, Kanal D)*, *Kırık Ayna (2002, Kanal D)* or *Kınalı Kar (2002, Kanal D)*. As television studies have shown, filming locations are important in terms of audience identification with the series. Series set in their own city or region, familiar locations (just like local cultural practices, relationships, etc.) increase the interest of the audience in these productions. These series, in turn, have made local audiences more sensitive to the stories told and the problems addressed, as well as increasing their loyalty to the series. I would even argue that we can talk about the trans-regionalization of TV series because they convey the problems and socio-cultural structure of one region to the audience in another region, thus contributing to the development of interregional relations.

It was not only the hitherto invisible towns or villages that were brought to the screen but also, in some of these series, a whole identity that had been politically ignored or denied that began to be integrated into the diegesis: that of

the Kurds²¹. These were not obviously identity-based representations but rather references to cultural elements, often to criticize semi-feudal mores. Thus, not only in these series but also in melodramas, more and more of the main protagonists would have Kurdish first names such as Baran, Hevin, Berivan, even though the use of these names was officially prohibited at the time. I don't want to establish a linear causality, but it can be said that these series have been (among other factors, of course) “agents of history”, in the same way as certain films (Ferro 1977: 106). Indeed, in 2003, the ban on Kurdish names was lifted by the government as part of Turkey's European integration process.²² A few years later, Turkish audiences heard short dialogues, songs and chants in Kurdish on TV screens for the first time (for example in *Sıla, 2006, ATV*).

Moreover, this interest in the countryside, and especially provincial regions of Anatolia can also be analyzed in relation to the great socio-political change of this period. The AKP party coming to power, which openly declared itself to support Islamic conservatism, also enhanced the value of conservative circles and local notables. The small and medium-sized enterprises (industrialists) in the provinces, called “Anatolian tigers” under Özal's rule²³, continued to be promoted and presented as models, not only in economic but also implicitly in social and cultural terms.

These first years of Erdoğan's power were those in which many initiatives were taken to emphasize a hypothetical synthesis of Islam and modernism, such as the continuation of the European integration process and the establishment (or strengthening) of close relations with the Muslim countries of the Middle East and the Gulf. At the national level, this translated into a peaceful cohabitation of different ways of life and a certain recognition of identities. And the comfortable position of the AKP government at the international level made it possible, once the economic crisis has subsided, to move towards integration into the world economy.

A global look at the different series of this period shows us precisely these socio-cultural changes. Alongside sit-coms and new tribal series, the already popular genres were maintained with new blockbuster productions. Yet it is especially

20 Several studies have been done on the impact of these series on the promotion of filming regions. Cf. as an example Şahin et al. 2003.

21 Note that a series that aired in 1999 (*Aşkın Dağlarda Gezer, TGRT*) already dealt with the vendetta between two Kurdish tribes against the backdrop of love stories and the characters also had Kurdish first names.

22 “Kurdish name ban lifted by circular”, <https://www.hurriyet.com.tr/gundem/kurtce-isim-yasagi-genelgeyle-kaldirildi-38499242>

23 There is a large literature, particularly in economics, on the subject of the “Anatolian tigers”. See for example, Demir et al. 2004.

at the level of the themes, characters and universes represented in these series that we witness the most significant changes.

The representation of different communities and identities, as well as that of the large Anatolian semi-feudal families in tribal series became important, offering viewers the opportunity to experience different ways of life and traditions. Among these were series set in the Black Sea region such as *Gülbeyaz* (2002, Kanal D) and *Fırtına* (2006, Kanal D) and those that depict the lives of the Roma (*Cennet Mahallesi*, 2004, Show TV; *Görgüsüzler*, 2008, ATV). Later, in 2010, the language and culture of Azerbaijan would also be represented in a comedy (*Yahşi Cazibe*, 2010, ATV).

It was also through a comedy (*Yabancı Damat*, 2004, Kanal D) that one of the biggest taboos of nationalist prejudices was shaken. The adventures of a mixed couple (a young Turkish woman and a young Greek man²⁴) would make the “average Turkish” spectator discover their neighbors, long considered as the main enemies, because of ancient wars. This invitation to good neighborly relations with Greece cannot be considered as simply a new dramatic plot since Turkey was about to become an institutional partner with this neighboring country. Indeed it was in the same year, 2004, that the European Council decided to open membership talks with Turkey, and the Accession Negotiations opened on 3 October 2005²⁵.

One of the great changes in the series can be observed in the characters of protagonists and in their relationships, especially in the dramas. We can certainly talk about changes for all types of protagonists, but to me, it seems more significant to underline those related to female heroes. Indeed, as already said above, the representations of women in television series had long been (and still have not entirely ceased to be) problematic. In the 2000s, several TV series were innovative in this area. Conceived much more as an independent “subject”, female characters were active in professional life, equipped with power in the family or simply masters of their life and choices. Single women, divorced women, etc. began to be visible in the series; and such vital issues as domestic violence, forced and early marriage of girls, submission to polygamy, etc. were integrated into the narratives of series such as *Gurbet Kadını* (2003, Show), *Aliye* (2004, ATV), *Omuz*

24 Let me note that there have been other fictions dealing with mixed marriages, in cinema or in series. But until then it was always a Turkish man marrying a “foreign” woman, certainly to conform to the radical Muslim belief that forbids Muslim women to marry a non-Muslim man. It is therefore a reversal of this stereotype.

25 <https://www.avrupa.info.tr/en/eu-and-turkeys-history-711>

Omuz (2004, Kanal D); *Binbir Gece* (2006, Kanal D). The fact that these series are almost all written or co-written by female writers or co-writers is certainly one of the determining factors of these changes.

However, this evolution can also be explained by important social and political facts. The women’s movement, which was already active during the second wave of feminism in the 1980s, and which includes a large number of organizations throughout the country, has been much more visible since the 1990s²⁶. With the active participation of jurists who are part of this movement, two important legal reforms have been carried out: the new Civil Code concerning marriage and divorce rights, which established (despite some shortcomings) the equality of the couple (2002), and the revision of the Criminal Code, particularly concerning violence against women (2005).

The detective genre was also on the rise in this period. The series *Kurtlar Vadisi* (The Valley of Wolves), broadcast on Show TV with the slogan “it’s a mafia series”, from 2003, attracted a huge male audience and became, in a way, “the” series for men. It was based on the themes already dealt with in *Deli Yürek* and *Yılan Hikayesi*, a few years earlier, but exceeded them in popularity and broke audience records. Having been both controversial (especially for its ultra nationalist discourse and scenes of extreme violence) and popular²⁷, and having also inspired three films of the same name, the series became somewhat a classic and continued with interruptions or name changes (*Kurtlar Vadisi Terör*²⁸, 2007; *Kurtlar Vadisi Pusu*, 2007, Show TV) until 2016, changing channels five times. Other series of this new genre “mafia/deep state series” followed (*Şubat Soğuğu*, 2004, STV; *Sağır Oda*, 2006, Kanal D; *Kod Adı*, 2006, Kanal D) but without going beyond one season. Different versions, such as *Poyraz Karayel*²⁹ mixing elements of comedy (2015, Kanal D) or *Eşkiya Dünyaya Hükümdar Olmaz* (2015, ATV) made some ten years later prove the popularity of this subgenre. But other forms of

26 To give just a few examples of women’s activism in this period, we can recall the foundation of the first association for the fight against violence and shelters Mor Çatı in 1989; the creation of a library of women’s works in 1992; the foundation of two women’s film festivals (Flying Bloom, 1997 in Ankara and Filmmor, 2003).

27 For a publication on critical analyses of the series and the films derived from the series, see *İletişim Kuram ve Araştırma Dergisi* No. 22, 2006.

28 This version of the series was sanctioned for “increasing social tension and inciting violence” by the public authority and its broadcast was stopped after two episodes. <https://www.hurriyet.com.tr/gundem/kurtlar-vadisi-teror-yayindan-kaldirildi-5962756>

29 For a detailed analysis of this series and its reception, see Özt Demir 2018.

crime series were also produced such as *Karanlıkta Koşanlar* (2001, TRT) or *Hırsız Polis* (2005, Kanal D). A TV series with the characteristics of detective, comedy, and even some elements of drama, *Arka Sokaklar*, which was first broadcast in 2006 by Kanal D also became a sort of “classic”, since it still airs as of 2022.

In this period, television began to take a sustained and sometimes critical interest in history. *Kırık Kanatlar* (2006, Kanal D) and *Elveda Rumeli* (2007, ATV) brought the audience back to the last years of the Ottoman Empire and the liberation war of the early twentieth century, following the example of this category of productions of the public channel in the 1980s. But the main novelty is the launch of TV series “of memory” (Özen 2010). These are series that, through dramatic plots that focus on families or characters, propose a return to a history that is almost non-existent in school textbooks, practically ignored (not to say “buried”) by official history: *Çemberimde Gül Oya* (2004, Kanal D), *Hatırla Sevgili* (2006, ATV). Especially *Bu Kalp Seni Unutur Mu?*³⁰ (2009, Show TV) with scenes of police torture on the screen as a documentary, dealt with the troubled times of the country and especially with the military coup of 1980. These series were considered by the circles close to the conservative power as left-wing propaganda and “biased”. The public channel (always controlled by the political power) launched, several years later, a series on the same period but conceived in a “national” vision (i.e. nationalist and conservative) where there would also be a protagonist embodying the youth of Prime Minister Erdoğan: *Sevda Kuşun Kanadında* (2016, TRT), without much success. But this last series can also be analyzed in the context of the “politicization of series” and their instrumentalization by political power that we have observed from 2012 onwards.

It is impossible to detail all the changes or continuities observed in the series during this period when the volume of productions reached its peak. In addition to those mentioned in relation to the genres and subgenres, I will develop here only a few points that I consider essential. All the more so, as these also give us clues to the great success of Turkish series at the international level and their instrumentalization by political power in the following period, starting in the 2010s.

First, I will offer some details about the forms and processes of production and broadcasting. The biggest change in TV series occurred in the length of episodes. Episodes that ran between 25-35 minutes during the early days of television increased to 45-50 minutes in the 1990s. In the 2000s, the episodes became even longer ranging from 90 to 120 minutes, sometimes even longer meant that all the “prime time” of the channels that broadcast them were devoted to TV series.

The professionalization of the production and management teams continued in parallel with the considerable number of new departments at universities and specialized schools of higher education. Even though there are still some film directors or writers who work for television, the series have had, from this time on, professional scriptwriters, directors, editors, etc. specialized on TV. This also explains the presence of more women and young people influencing the new themes and forms, as in the film industry (Uğur Tanrıöver 2017).

The impact of these new teams on the aesthetics of productions is impressive. There are clear technical improvements (supported also by technological advances and digitization) but also processes of filming, editing and narration are now similar, for some, to those of art house cinema. The simple and linear narration gives way more to alternate narratives, flash backs, even the anachronistic narrative; shooting angles, alternations of shots usually targeted at cinephiles are offered to TV viewers. This evolution has also to be related to the changes in the sector at the international level (Akınerdem and Sirman 2018: 6). Great changes also exist in the diegesis, the narrative universes of the series of this period (Danacı Yüce & Güvenli 2013). On the one hand, tribal or regional series (such as those of the Black Sea in particular) reflected provincial life, against a backdrop of spectacular landscapes and show, in a tone that is moreover auto-orientalist, the mores and traditions of these less developed regions. On the other hand, some series that took place in Istanbul no longer reflected mosques and ancient streets, but instead large buildings in ultra-modern neighborhoods offering quite different landscapes: skyscrapers, very well-designed offices where meetings of wealthy executives and bosses are held, with dresses and suits of haute couture. Families live in luxury villas with pools and gardens, drive branded cars; and the famous middle-class family dinners or modest lovers’ tea parties are transferred to fusion food restaurants or chic cafes. Tea, the traditional drink, is replaced by cappuccinos and flavored coffees; the small glass of Turkish tea gives way to Starbucks cups in the hands of students or young work-

30 The production of the series was interrupted after 17 episodes, although the project was intended to cover the whole of recent history until the AKP took power. The reason officially announced was economic (declining ratings and funding difficulties), but the producer had doubts about the reliability of the audience measurement. <https://m.bianet.org/bianet/toplum/120400-bu-kalp-seni-unutur-mu-yayindan-kaldirildi>

ers who “run” in the streets of rich neighborhoods or on the campuses of modern³¹ private universities. So we can already speak of a kind of “New Yorkization” or “Dubaization” of the urban landscape.

Related to this change in diegesis and narratives, the cast of the series was also transformed. The physique of the actors changes radically. If we look only at the very popular series of this period, we can say that the Turks are, in majority, very tall, slim, with a photo-model look, blond, with blue or green eyes, with babies and children who are also blond. Gone are the protagonists that were so familiar to the fans of the 1980s neighborhood series, the chubby, dark-haired women, the short, not-so-muscular men and the brown-eyed children who made identification and familiarity easy. The new figures are therefore not identifiable but to be taken as models. Their clothes and accessories are also admired by the audience, especially women, who carefully follow the names of the series’ sponsors to acquire the same (Uğur Tanrıöver 2011a).

These two changes (of the urban landscape and of the cast) reflect the actual transformations experienced and the economic and social policies adopted during these years. The opening of Turkey to global markets has allowed the penetration of chains such as Starbucks, Ikea or Mango in the country; and in a country with a very young population, they have found in the big cities a clientele open to novelties (Uğur Tanrıöver & Kara 2019). Moreover, under the Erdoğan government, the priority given to urban construction investments³², the rapid opening and increasing number of large and busy shopping malls have, in fact, also transformed urban landscapes and daily practices.

5. SEEN AS A MEANS OF “SOFT POWER” BUT SUBJECT TO “HARD CONTROL”³³: TRANSNATIONALIZED AND POLITICIZED SERIES FACING A FRAGMENTED AUDIENCE

One of the phenomena that marked Turkish series the most from 2006-2007 onwards was their opening up to the world: their export, first to Arab and Muslim countries, then to practically every corner of the globe. The popularity of Turkish

series, especially in Muslim countries, but just as much in Greece³⁴ and other countries, would not be a simple economic fact among others but would figure in the economic and international policy of the political power itself. The Ministry of State for Foreign Trade declared the film and TV series production sector a “strategic sector” to be encouraged by the public power in 2010 (Uğur Tanrıöver 2011a). The popularity of Turkish series accompanied the rise in popularity of Erdoğan’s image internationally, especially among Muslim countries, and also due to the presence of Foreign Ministers Ali Babacan (2007-2009) and Ahmet Davutoğlu (2009-2011)³⁵, leading the political and academic circles to think there was a relationship between TV exports and Turkey’s “soft power” or cultural diplomacy.

When Turkish TV series were introduced to international markets,³⁶ they were first preferred because of their very low, and therefore, competitive prices. This changed as the series gained in popularity internationally. Recent reception studies conducted among Turkish TV series audiences in various countries reveal that the reasons for appreciation of these series are linked to the changes I have highlighted earlier. Some of these include technical and aesthetic aspects, such as their widely popular quality original music. Another is their discursive and narrative features. Modern lifestyles and respect for certain traditions and institutions (especially the family), and the presence of strong and relatively independent female characters are the most emphasized aspects, especially in Muslim countries³⁷. Supported by this success, producers are starting to produce new series in new genres and themes, without giving up on more classic genres and forms, such as *Gümüş* (2005, Kanal D) broadcast under the name of *Noor* that became phenomenal in Arab countries.

From the 2010s onwards, the most significant changes include the more obvious introduction of social and political issues and demands, the visibility of new identities and a different aspect of urban landscapes. In 2010, the first epi-

31 This aspiration to modern life and to be part of the intellectual elites was the theme of a sit-com (*Avrupa Yakası*, 2004, ATV)

32 For a dossier on these policies analyzed in different disciplines, see <https://birikimdergisi.com/dergiler/birikim/1/sayi-270-ekim-2011-sayi-270-ekim-2011/2444>

33 These terms (soft power, hard control) are borrowed from Vitrinel 2019b.

34 For a detailed analysis of the presence and reception of these series in Greece cf. Larochelle 2021.

35 Both of these politicians later left Erdoğan’s party to found new political parties, in 2019 and 2020, respectively, positioned in the opposition.

36 An important initiative also comes from TRT which launched new channels in different regional languages, especially in Kurdish, Arabic and the languages of Central Asian countries, familiarizing the audiences of these countries with Turkey through all kinds of programs.

37 For a documentary on the impact of these series on female audiences, cf. *Kismet. How Turkish Soap Operas Changed the World*, Nina Maria Pashalidou, 2013: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NX8Un4nneXg&ab_channel=AljazeeraEnglish

sode of a series of the melodrama genre, adapted from the novel and film of the same name, made the news. Openly featuring a gang rape, *Fatmagül'ün Suçu Ne?* (Kanal D), at first controversial, later became very popular. It drew public attention to rape and its prosecution, but also to the importance of solidarity between women and organizations fighting for women's rights. In the same year, the series *Behzat Ç. Bir Ankara Polisiyesi* (Star) was broadcast. As its name suggests, it is a police series that highlights the city where the story takes place: Ankara. This was a kind of revenge against all the melodramas that take place in Istanbul and the series that promote different regions, while the capital is invisible in the world of series. *Behzat Ç.* is a pioneer on several levels. First, it raises such crucial issues as the right to practice one's mother tongue, violence against trans people, etc. in every episode. Through the main protagonist, *Behzat Ç.*, who is in fact a kind of anti-hero (and the other police protagonists who are also conceived in a similar way) and the general atmosphere with a film noir aesthetic, the series displays a critical tone towards the racist, sexist, etc. mentality of the police, through police plots and adventures and the fight against the mafia. But among its most important features worth noting here is the presence of a lesbian protagonist (Banu) for the first time in the history of Turkish series. Her sexual orientation was represented as neither an insinuation or innuendo, nor a caricatured figure, as has been the case with some gay characters in films and series.

In the path opened by *Behzat Ç.*, other adventure series would stage the dark streets, the poor and dangerous neighborhoods, in short, the chaotic face of the big city. In 2012, *Kayıp Şehir* (Kanal D) featured the first trans person, not as a representation but as a real presence, to the sector and to the screen through the role of Duygu, played by trans actress Ayta Sözeri. In *Ulan İstanbul* (2014, Kanal D), there was to be a protagonist, somewhat secondary, gay. And finally, *Çukur*³⁸ (2017, Show) took up and developed these socio-political themes, adding new ones such as incest, with protagonists of different sexual orientations or identities, such as sex workers, Kurds, illegal immigrants, etc.

These critical stances of some series for more equality and rights are not unrelated to political and social developments. If *Behzat Ç.* seems to anticipate certain developments such as a growing civil society as a result of demands made by political actors and NGOs, the other aforementioned series

were produced and broadcast at the time when Turkey signed (as the first country to do so) the Istanbul Convention³⁹ in 2011, and when the government launched the initiatives called "peace process" with the armed Kurdish groups of PKK, considered a terror organization, in 2014, with the goal of resolving ethnic division and violence.

One of the series that has somehow shaken up the landscape of the sector and especially contributed to the development of new relationships between producers/broadcasters and the political world⁴⁰ is *Muhteşem Yüzyıl (Magnificent Century)*, Show TV, 2011). This period drama which depicts the 16th century palace life of Sultan Suleiman, known as Suleiman the Magnificent in the West for his extending the Ottoman Empire to its greatest reach, was focused more on the story of his favorite wife Hürrem, her love for the Sultan, and the various intrigues of power in the Palace. The series, which broke audience records, was strongly criticized by the then prime minister Erdoğan, who, in 2014, accused it of falsifying history and not talking about the military victories of the Sultan. He added "we have warned the producers of this series and are also waiting for the judges to do what is necessary"⁴¹. This reaction was in fact, as imminent research works point out (Vitrinel 2019b; Ildir 2022) a direct response to the political stance of some of its actors (but also others) on the side of the Gezi Park protesters, a social revolt, severely repressed by the government. Despite excellent ratings, *The Magnificent Century* stopped being broadcast. Already in 2013, the popular absurdist comedy of the public channel TRT, *Leyla ile Mecnun*⁴² (2011), was also canceled for the same undeclared reason. This was the historical moment when the political power openly declares its will to control and thus directly politicize⁴³ the series. Also, and in reaction, some view-

39 Known as the Istanbul Convention, The Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence, is a human rights treaty aimed at protecting the victims of gender-based violence and ending the impunity of the perpetrators of violence.

40 As I stated in the introduction about the limitations of this article, I cannot make an in-depth analysis of the production and broadcasting sector. There are several publications that report on the changing ownership structures of media groups and TV channels since Erdoğan's party came to power and on the relations of these groups with political power. Cf. for example, Sözeri and Güney 2011 for an overview or Çetin 2014 on the politicization of the series.

41 <https://www.hurriyet.com.tr/gundem/basbakan-erdogandan-muhtesem-yuzyila-agir-elistiri-22009998>

42 This series also criticized in a satirical way the ban on showing alcoholic beverages on TV, replacing glasses of wine with bunches of grapes.

43 For a study developing this aspect of politicization cf. Emre Çetin (2014).

38 For an in-depth analysis of this series, which details the elements I quote, cf. Emre Çetin 2016.

ers chose to watch the series most criticized by Erdoğan, as a proof of political opposition.

At the behest of the government, several series recounting the founding of the Ottoman Empire or the reign of important sultans began to be produced and broadcast on the public channel TRT (*Diriliş Ertuğrul*, 2014; *Payitaht Abdülhamit*, 2017) or the pro-government channel ATV (*Kuruluş Osman*, 2019). As academic studies on these series point out⁴⁴, Erdoğan and his party aim to “construct” an alternative history that glorifies the Ottoman past instead of the dominant historical narrative since the foundation of the republic in 1923. These initiatives also came after a radical change in audience measurements. The public television left the system of audiometry provided by Nielsen AGB to make its own measurements. The task then was entrusted to a new institution in 2012, which had an impact on the reliability and stability of the TV industry, especially for producers (Ildır and Çelik Rappas 2021: 258).

The consideration of television series as a means of direct propaganda, in the manner of Soviet propaganda cinema, would have, as another consequence, the arrival on the screens of a new genre which can be described as “special operation” or “anti-terror” series. Certainly, as I have already pointed out, action series recounting the struggle of heroes against foreign spies or Kurdish separatists based on often ultra-nationalist discourses (sometimes going as far as racism) have already existed, but they didn’t reach a wide audience (*Tek Türkiye*, 2007 and *Şefkat Tepe*⁴⁵, 2010, STV; *Sakarya Fırat*, 2009, Kanal 7; *Önce Vatan*, Show TV, 2010). As of 2017, there was a sort of screen invasion by these special operation or anti-terror series: *İsimsizler*, 2017, Kanal D; *Söz*, 2017, Star TV; *Savaşçı*, 2017, Fox, *Börü*, 2018, Star and *Teşkilat*, 2021, TRT (its second season is currently airing). Taking advantage of the direct support of the government, especially regarding the loan of equipment or access to military areas, but also through marketing communication strategies (President Erdoğan’s visit to the set, etc.) these TV series portrayed the heroism of Turkish soldiers and secret agents fighting terrorists or “foreign” forces plotting on the future of the country according to various conspiracy theories. As can be seen, the launch of

these series was directly related to the political situation and position of the country. They serve both to legitimize Turkey’s military engagement in Syria since 2015 and to consolidate Erdoğan’s power which has been weakened after the 2016 failed coup d’état. Consequently, these series’ narratives are intended to glorify the image of military heroism and the already present discourse of martyrdom in Muslim culture. When one considers that military service is compulsory for men (conscientious objection is forbidden and sanctioned) in Turkey and that unemployment, especially among young people, is high around 20% officially but estimated much higher by economists, these TV series function like the famous advertisement of the American army during the First World War, where in this case the message would be: “I want you for Turkish Army!” but also “I want you to approve of my national and international policy and to support my government”.

Towards the end of the 2010s, other factors also brought important changes to Turkish series, such as the arrival of digital platforms on the market, since 2016. Turkish viewers, already accustomed to watching series online, especially due to the widespread practice of piracy, found new media (Ildır and Çelik Rappas 2021) and new series there. These media were also, at least initially, a way to escape the increasingly strict censorship applied to the TV channels under the control of the Supreme Council of Radio television (RTÜK). However, the political power ended up extending the media censorship to digital webcasts (Ildır and Çelik Rappas 2021: 257). TV series that are subject to more diverse competition on platforms like Netflix tend to be more creative and less conventional in their ability to offer new themes and narratives to large transnational audiences of the platforms. Thus, we see, for the first time, a series whose main character is, for example, a Jewish woman from Turkey (*The Club*, Netflix, 2019) or a headscarf-wearing housekeeper⁴⁶ (*Ethos*, Netflix, 2020). I must point out, however, that the number of subscribers to these transnational platforms is still quite limited (3.5 million for Netflix and 2 million for Disney+) compared to the country’s total audience estimated at over 58 million viewers⁴⁷. And above all, it is a different demographic compared to Turkish series fans of network TV channels.

Faced with competition from digital platforms, network television channels too are developing new forms and themes

44 There is abundant literature in this area. See for example Çevik 2019; Özçetin 2019; Tinas 2020; Tua 2021.

45 The pro-government press said that the 2016 coup d’état unleashed by the Gülen community (known as FETÖ, Fetullahist Terror Organization since this date) had been prepared through coded messages in these TV series (and others not cited here) broadcast on the semi-official channel of this community and banned since. <https://www.yenisafak.com/bilgi/feto-halki-dizileriyle-isledi-2764294>

46 Both in popular Turkish cinema and TV series, there have been headscarved cleaning women characters before. However, *Ethos* is the first series in which such a character is the “main protagonist” while preserving her fundamental qualities.

47 <https://tiak.com.tr/evren-degerleri>

of series, such as the “couch” series (*Doğduğun Ev Kaderindir*, 2019, TV 8; *Kırmızı Oda*, 2020, TV 8 *Camdaki Kız*, 2021, Kanal D) all adapted from the books of psychoanalyst Budaycıoğlu, making psychotherapy, which still not widely practiced in the country, popular. Korean or American adaptations of already popular genres and forms, such as melodramas or even family comedies, continue their way through new productions to more traditional audiences on TV channels but are also included in digital platforms to “attract new audiences.”

In these new productions, there are also many changes correlated with the evolution of social life and the mentalities of the public, despite (and sometimes against) the hardening of the conservatism of the power. One no longer needs to be married to experience romantic (or sexual) relationships, women are active in all sectors of professional life; domestic violence, sexual harassment is strongly denounced, especially since Turkey exited from the Istanbul Convention by Erdoğan’s presidential decree in 2021. As love stories, family affairs, and police and mafia intrigues unfold, the demand for rights and social and legal justice (Akinerdem and Sirman 2018) in a general sense is being heard.

BY WAY OF CONCLUSION

Taking advantage of the great success of Turkish cinema with audiences, especially families, Turkish TV series have become the most appreciated television content in a short amount of time. By illustrating the relationship between television content and the cultural, social and political context of its creation through periodization, in this paper I presented an introductory analysis to the social history of Turkey through television series. The changes that these series have undergone during almost fifty years of their existence are strongly correlated with social transformations, political stances or the state of development of the production and broadcasting sector, which itself is a function of economic and political relations.

Thus, the priorities in the forms, contents and genres of the series show us that in the first years of television broadcasting, these productions translated the will to assure the social cohesion and a certain national unity around common values of the middle classes. The sector lacked professionals while the broadcasting monopoly and the economic crisis also prevented any impulse in this field.

Since the 1990s, with the transition to a hybrid regime and the arrival of private channels on the market, TV series,

the industry’s main competitive asset, began their ascent up the diversity ladder. The production sector has become more professional which resulted in better quality productions although the sector is still struggling. Without established contracts, without reliable commitments, series were produced somewhat “on trial.” The result was a high turnover, without many productions lacking longevity.

It was following the change of power, with in particular, relatively liberal political promises and the will of integration to the world economy in the 2000s, that the series would live their period of maturation and foundation. More diversified, playing on different genres, improving their technical and aesthetic quality, they became “the” common cultural practice at the national level and infiltrated into the international markets.

From the 2010s onwards, we can observe a politicization of the series, which translated a propagandist will of the government to instrumentalize them in the consolidation of the conservative, nationalist and Islamic (and even Islamist) power in place. However, the government’s attempt to increase its partisan base and further spread its ideology through such series on pro-governmental channels does not seem to have succeeded as planned. This is because the proliferation of platforms broadcasting TV series, especially the competition created by the introduction of digital platforms, has resulted in a fragmentation of TV series (and their audiences): the propagandist ideological series and those that aim to tell a story, not to teach a lesson to the audience.

On the one hand, there is a more conservative and traditional audience that admires glamorous melodramas, classic family comedies or epic productions of ancient or current heroes/warriors broadcast on the network channels and available thereafter on the websites of these channels. On the other hand, there is an audience with modern inter- or transnational lifestyles, who also consume TV series from different countries, prefer watching less conventional Turkish series, and are more open to the new cultures and ideas presented via new media. Some of the audience, who are subscribers to transnational platforms such as Netflix and Disney+ or even Turkish ones (BluTV, Exxen) look for more quality and more “high level” productions, and criticize the “regional” content of these platforms. To such an extent that we should perhaps now speak more of a fracture than a fragmentation of the audience; a fracture that corresponds to an increasingly polarized population exasperated by the authoritarian tendency of Erdoğan’s new presidential regime.

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TV Series

- Aliye (2004-2006)
- Ana Kuzusu (1996)
- Arka Sokaklar (Back Streets) (2006-2022)
- Asmalı Konak (Vine Mansion) (2002-2003)
- Aşk-ı Memnu (Forbidden Love) (1975), Remake (2008-2010)
- Aşkın Dağlarda Gezer (1999)
- Aşık Oldum (1992)
- Ateşten Günler (1987)
- Avrupa Yakası (2004-2009)
- Babaevi (Dad's House) (1997-2001)
- Behzat Ç. Bir Ankara Polisiyesi (2010-2013, 2019)
- Binbir Gece (1001 Nights) (2006-2009)
- Berivan (2002)
- Bize Ne Oldu (1999)
- Bu Kalp Seni Unutur Mu? (2009-2010)
- Börü (2018)
- Camdaki Kız (2021-)
- Cennet Mahallesi (2004-2007)
- Çalığışu (1986)
- Çarli (1998)
- Çemberimde Gül Oya (2004-2005)
- Çılgın Bediş (1996-2001)
- Çocuklar Duymasın (2002-2005, 2010-2014, 2017-2019)
- Çukur (The Pit) (2017-2021)
- Dadı (Nanny) (2001-2002)
- Deli Yürek (Crazy Heart) (1998-2002)
- Diriliş Ertuğrul (Resurrection: Ertuğrul) (2014-2019)
- Doğduğun Ev Kaderindir (2019-2021)
- Elveda Rumeli (2007-2009)
- Eşkiya Dünyaya Hükümdar Olmaz (2015-2021)
- Ethos (Bir Başkadır) (2020)
- Fatmagül'ün Suçu Ne? (Fatmagul) (2010-2012)
- Fırtına (2006-2007)
- Fırtınalar (1996-1998)
- Görgüsüzler (2008)
- Gözlerinde Son Gece (1996-1997)

- Gurbet Kadını* (2003-2005)
Gülbeyaz (2002-2003)
Gümüş (Noor) (2005-2007)
Hanımın Çiftliği (1990), *Remake* (2009-2011)
Hatırla Sevgili (2006-2008)
Hırsız Polis (2005-2007)
Hiç Bana Sordun Mu? (1996)
İki Kızkardeş (1993)
İkinci Bahar (1998-2001)
İntizar (1997)
İsimsizler (2017)
Karanlıkta Koşanlar (2001)
Kartallar Yüksek Uçar (1984)
Kavanozdaki Adam (1987)
Kayıp Şehir (*Lost City*) (2012-2013)
Kaynanalar (1974-2005)
Kıvalı Kar (2002-2004)
Kırık Ayna (2002-2003)
Kırık Kanatlar (2006-2007)
Kırmızı Oda (*Red Room*) (2020-2022)
Kurtlar Vadisi (*The Valley of Wolves*) (2003-2005)
Kurtlar Vadisi Terör (*The Valley of Wolves: Terror*) (2007)
Kurtlar Vadisi Pusu (*The Valley of Wolves: Ambush*) (2007-2016)
Kuruluş Osmancık (1988)
Kuruluş Osman (*Establishment/The founder: Osman*) (2019-)
Kuruntu Ailesi (1985-1990)
Küçük Ağa (1984)
Kod Adı (2006)
Leyla ile Mecnun (2011-2013, 2021-)
Mesela Muzaffer (1987)
Mahallenin Muhtarları (*Head People of the Neighborhood*) (1992-2002)
Muhteşem Yüzyıl (*The Magnificent Century*) (2011-2014)
Omuz Omuza (2004-2005)
Önce Vatan (2010)
Payitaht Abdülhamit (*The Capital: Abdul Hamid*) (2017-2021)
Perihan Abla (*Sister Perihan*) (1986-1988)
Poyraz Karayel (2015-2017)
Sağır Oda (2006-2007)
Sakarya Fırat (2009-2013)
Saklambaç (2005)
Samanyolu (1989)
Savaşçı (*Warrior*) (2017-2021)
Sevda Kuşun Kanadında (*On the Wings of Love*) (2016-2017)
Sevginin Gücü (1994)
Sıla (2006-2008)
Söz (2017-2019)
Süper Baba (*Super Dad*) (1993-1997)
Şaban Askerde (1993-1994)
Şaşıfelek Çıkmazı (1996-1998)
Şefkat Tepe (2010-2014)
Şehnaz Tango (1994-1997)
Şubat Soğuğu (2004-2006)
Tatlı Betüş (1993)
Tatlı Hayat (2001-2004)
Tek Türkiye (2007-2011)
Teşkilat (*The Shadow Team*) (2021-)
The Club (*Kulüp*) (2021-)
Uğurlugiller (1988-1991)
Ulan İstanbul (2014-2015)
Uzaylı Zekiye (1988)
Yabancı Damat (*The Foreign Groom*) (2004-2007)
Yahşi Cazibe (2010-2012)
Yaprak Dökümü (*The Fall of Leaves*) (2006-2010)
Yarım Elma (2002-2003)
Yılan Hikayesi (1999-2002)
Zerda (2002-2004)