

## Turkish TV Dramas, Visual ‘Seduction’, and the Cultural Diplomacy

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### Abstract

International success of Turkish television (TV) dramas first reached its peak in 2014. Since then, Turkish productions have reached second place in world market distribution, after American ones. What are the reasons for this success, in particular in Southeast Europe? This is the main research question that this paper addresses. The research is based on a study of the fan communities on social media and on the analysis of cinematic qualities of a sample of all film material broadcast so far. Turkish serials reinforce the effects of world popular culture known as ‘seduction’, in terms of Baudrillard, through a politics of imagery that involves both appealing images of their native country and ‘seducing’ the audience through the pull of visual suggestion. Visual appeal is an important factor in viewers’ interest. Turkish series show continuity with examples of literary and cinema classics that viewers expect and recognize. The viewer appreciates the archetypal narrative patterns (the fairy tale; melodrama) contained in television. By adapting Western models of soap operas, Turkish TV production has ‘glocalized’ this model and created its local version. In this sense, globalization should not be understood as merely synonymous with Americanization.

**Keywords:** Turkish TV series, popular culture, cultural diplomacy, visual suggestion

### Introduction

The international success of Turkish television dramas first reached its peak in 2014. Since then, Turkish productions have reached second place in international market distribution, after American ones. They are watched in over one hundred countries with an ever-growing audience of more than five hundred million viewers. At present, they are also broadcasted by globally spread American digital platforms, such as *Netflix* and *Amazon*. As of 2017, the revenues of

Turkish TV series and films are estimated to be between two hundred and three hundred and fifty million dollars annually. In the same year, 2017, the series *Endless Love* (*Kara Sevda*, 2015-2017) received the *Emmy* Award for Foreign Series, and this was the first official international recognition for Turkish film production. There is an upward trend in the popularity of Turkish TV productions internationally.<sup>1</sup>

The initial transborder 'breach' of the Turkish series happened in regions that experienced centuries of Ottoman domination, and it was linked to the success of the melodrama *Gümüş* (2005-2007). This show was broadcast in 2008 in Arab countries and in 2009 in Bulgaria<sup>2</sup>. Only five years later, TV programs in Balkan countries were flooded with Turkish series. "Turn on the TV in any part of the Balkans today, and you are likely to come across a Turkish soap opera", claimed the news site *BalkanInsight*.<sup>3</sup> Currently, the popularity of Turkish TV dramas has displaced South American ones on a global scale. The final episode of *Gümüş* was watched by an audience of eighty-five million in twenty MENA<sup>4</sup> countries.<sup>5</sup> The internationally acclaimed *What is Fatmagül's Fault?* kept an average of thirty million Pakistani viewers per episode in front of their screens.<sup>6</sup>

Regarding the presence of Turkish TV production in the countries of Southeast Europe, I will focus on Bulgaria, not only due to my knowledge of the TV sector in my native country but also because, if compared to other European countries, the number of Turkish TV series broadcast in Bulgaria is high. At the beginning of 2022, 148 Turkish TV series had been broadcast in Bulgaria<sup>7</sup>. Immediately after the first big international success of the melodrama *Gümüş* in Arab countries in 2008, the same production was broadcast in Bulgaria in 2009. As a country that experienced five centuries of Ottoman rule and whose largest minority population consists of ethnic Turks, Bulgaria is a potential target for Turkey's neo-Ottoman political project.<sup>8</sup> Nevertheless, I by no means claim the Bulgarian case to be either 'typical,' or representative. It gives an insight into specific trends, though, in terms of audience tastes and perceptions. The largest number of premiere productions has been broadcast by *bTV* channel, followed by *Diema*

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<sup>1</sup> Alankuş, Sevda and Eylem Yanardağoğlu. 2016. Vacillation in Turkey's popular global TV exports: Toward a more complex understanding of distribution. *International Journal of Communication* 10, 3615-3631; Sofuoğlu, Murat. 2017. The giddy rise of Turkish television series. *TRT World*, 27 January 2017; Daily Sabah. 2017. Turkish drama 'Kara Sevda' wins 'best telenovela' at international Emmy Awards. *Daily Sabah*, 21 November 2017; Sebastián, Ruiz-Cabrera and Hasan Gürkan. 2023. Effects of Turkish cultural products on its foreign policy toward Africa: Turkish TV series as an example of soft power in Kenya, Mozambique, and Senegal. *Profesional de la información* 32(2), e320226.

<sup>2</sup> Kraidy, Marwan M. and Omar Al-Ghazzi. 2013. Neo-Ottoman cool: Turkish popular culture in the Arab public sphere. *Popular Communication. The International Journal of Media and Culture* 11(1), 17-29; Alankuş and Yanardağoğlu, *Vacillation in Turkey*, 3616.

<sup>3</sup> Cabric, Nemanja / Nedelkovska, Maja / Demoli, Donjeta and Amina Hamzic. 2013. Turks bewitch the Balkans with their addictive soaps. *BalkanInsight*, 1 May 2013.

<sup>4</sup> MENA: Middle-East and North Africa countries.

<sup>5</sup> Alankuş and Yanardağoğlu, *Vacillation in Turkey*, 3621.

<sup>6</sup> Malik, Qurrat-ul-Ann / Haq, Amrat and Sahifa Mukhtar. 2019. Cultural proximity and transnational drama: Popularity of Turkish TV content in Pakistan. *Journal of Media Studies* 34(1), 1-18, 2.

<sup>7</sup> According to the website *TV Series – Aired in Bulgaria*. See, TV Programa. *TV Programa* [TV program] (accessed: 31 May 2024).

<sup>8</sup> On the neo-Ottoman political project see Kraidy and Al-Ghazzi, *Neo-Ottoman Cool*; Sébastien and Gürkan, *Effects of Turkish*, e320226.

*Family*; then *Nova TV* and *bTV Lady* (renamed *bTV Story* since the end of 2023); a few or even one or two have been broadcast by other TV channels (all of them private).<sup>9</sup>

A quick overview of the TV programming shows that by the second half of January 2022, different private channels offer the Bulgarian viewer sixteen Turkish series (premiere or repeats) simultaneously. Two of the Bulgarian national broadcasters with the largest audiences – *bTV* and *NOVA* – currently air three Turkish series each, and the broadcaster with the largest share of the viewing audience – *bTV* – has for years included a Turkish production in prime time immediately after the evening news. The family channel *Diema Family* airs at present (2024) seven Turkish TV dramas at different times of its programming schedule, and *bTV Story*, aimed at a female audience, airs four.

The broadcast of Turkish TV series in Bulgaria is linked to the pluralism created in TV sector after introducing of private TV channels in the country since 2000. Since then, the Bulgarian TV environment has definitely changed. The initial massive penetration of (state-subsidized, i.e., less expensive) Turkish production coincided and was likely related to the need for newly established Bulgarian private TV stations to provide content for their programs, as researchers have noted for other countries.<sup>10</sup>

It is difficult to say whether Bulgarian private TV stations broadcast Turkish production because it is watched and popular (among a certain, but not small, segment of the audience) or, conversely, it is watched and popular because it is over-presented. Some of my interlocutors claim that they watch Turkish series because “there is nothing else to watch”. On the one hand, the oversupply of Turkish production shapes the viewer’s chances of choice, especially when TV programs offer repeated reruns of old American films. On the other hand, there are different degrees of interest in Turkish productions among the audience. Similar to the fans of Korean series in Southeast Asia<sup>11</sup>, a community of “active viewers”<sup>12</sup> of Turkish TV dramas was formed in Bulgaria.<sup>13</sup> In regard to the formation of virtual communities of ardent fans or aficionados, the situation in Bulgaria follows the same trends observed in the global Internet environment: ardent fans comprise a minority within the majority of passive audiences.<sup>14</sup>

What accounts for the success, local and global, of Turkish TV dramas and in what way do their visual qualities contribute? These are the most important research questions I pose. Observations on Bulgaria serve as a starting point, but the research horizon will also encompass the transnational Internet environment. Does this success have anything to do with the neo-

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<sup>9</sup> The TV schedule in Bulgaria: TV Programa. *TV Programa [TV program]* (accessed: 31 May 2024).

<sup>10</sup> Malik, *Cultural proximity*, 2.

<sup>11</sup> Huat, Chua Beng 2012. *Structure, audience and soft power in East-Asian pop culture*. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 103.

<sup>12</sup> Livingstone, Sonia. 1998. *Making sense of television: The psychology of audience interpretation*. 2nd ed. New York & London: Routledge, 33-50

<sup>13</sup> Evidence of this are the active Bulgarian FB groups, which provide free access to Turkish series translated into Bulgarian by volunteers, to mention but some of them: Facebook. *Turski seriali – fen grupa [Turkish series – a fan group]* (accessed: 30 April 2023) with 77700 members; Facebook. *Liubimi seriali s prevod [Favorite series with translation]* (accessed: 28 April 2023) with 51897 members; Facebook. *Obichanite turski seriali [The loved Turkish series]* (accessed: 30 April 2023) with 6300 members.

<sup>14</sup> Huat, *Structure, audience, and soft power*, 103.

Ottoman line in contemporary Turkish politics? What are the qualities of the TV product that contribute to its expansion?

It is the aim of this research to explore the factors that have led to the growing international popularity of Turkish TV dramas. The issue is all the more relevant to Southeastern Europe against the backdrop of traumatic historical narratives about the “five hundred years of Turkish rule” (which have influenced national identities) and in the context of the rise of nationalisms in the region over the last thirty years. The reception of Turkish series could be presented as a field of research in which the messages of TV production intersect with the audiences’ tastes in general and the levels of their commitment.<sup>15</sup>

Despite the fact that Turkish series in Bulgaria became part of the daily routine for a part of the population, this topic remains understudied, i.e., research is in its initial stage.<sup>16</sup> The present article should contribute to filling this gap.

In this text, I focus on particular aspects which are relevant to the problem of visual qualities of Turkish TV productions as a factor for the ‘seduction’ of viewers, in terms of Jean Baudrillard.<sup>17</sup> I argue that the factors defining the international popularity of Turkish TV dramas are to be found in both the qualities of the TV product and the related perceptions and tastes of international audiences. The work of Turkish TV producers on the visual richness and veracity of their artistic production significantly improves its quality and, ultimately, its commercial success.

The reasons for the international success of Turkish TV dramas can be understood by comparing them with the qualities of other similar productions. Substantial literature has been devoted to the subject of soap operas; serious studies of American soap operas appeared as early as the 1940s.<sup>18</sup> Since then, soap operas have undergone significant genre transformations, while at the same time, the TV market has become transnational and now global. Media messages and images created in the elite milieu of producers from a small number of major urban centers (Hollywood, Rome, Delhi, São Paulo, Bombay, London, New York, Tokyo, and in the last fifteen years, Istanbul) meet and interact with different local cultures and (often non-elite) audiences. The crossing of cultures is the main, though not the only, reason for anthropologists' interest in the problems of this part of mass culture.

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<sup>15</sup> Salzman, Philip Carl. 2002 [1996]. *Mass media and culture*, in *Encyclopedia of Social and Cultural Anthropology*, edited by Barnard, Alan and Jonathan Spencer. London & New York: Routledge, 538.

<sup>16</sup> Except for: Mineva, Mila. 2012. Serialat na balgarskata identičnost [The serial of Bulgarian identity]. *Kritika i humanizam* 39, 215-238; Zhekova, Vania. 2014. “Kakva e vinata na Fatmagül?” *Etnologia na rabotnia den* [“What is Fatmagül’s Fault?” Ethnology of the working day]. *Balgarska etnologia*, 40(2), 157-175; Atanasov, Dimitar and Anna Aleksieva. 2020. *Osmanski kauboi, nacionalni geroi i malko traki. “Mekata sila” na popularnata kultura* [Ottoman cowboys, national heroes and a few Thracians: The “soft power” of the popular culture], in *Etnologiatata v promeništia se sviat. Sbornik v čest na 80 godišnia jubilej na Prof. Dr. Radost Ivanova* [Ethnology in the changing world. Collection of articles in honor of 80-years jubilee of Prof. Dr. Radost Ivanova], edited by Luleva, Ana, Aleksiev, Bozhidar, Vladimir Penchev. Sofia: Izdatelstvo na BAN “Prof. Marin Drinov”, 295-317; Papuchiev, Nikolay. 2022. *Prehodat: Trideset godini sled načaloto. Rezultati ot izsledvane* [The transition: Thirty years after the beginning. Results from a survey]. Unpublished manuscript.

<sup>17</sup> Baudrillard, Jean 1981: *Simulacres et simulation*. Paris: Galilée.

<sup>18</sup> For an overview see, Blumenthal, Dannielle. 1997. *Women and soap opera. A cultural feminist perspective*. Westport & London: Praeger.

In the following pages, I will present the methods on which my research is based, the historical context facilitating the initial breakthrough of Turkish TV dramas, the influence of globalization and the present-day Internet environment, the image of ‘accessible modernity’ as one of the main reasons of the attractiveness of Turkish TV productions; specific aesthetics and visual particularities that make them more competitive than other similar products on the international market.

### **Empirical Methods and Theoretical Background: Anthropology Without ‘Participant Observation’?**

Research methods are theoretically based on the achievements of sociocultural anthropology and media studies but also draw on concepts from folklore studies. As the emblematic method of sociocultural anthropology, participant observation is hardly relevant to the global media environment as far as the ‘*research site*’ and ‘*being there*’ are virtual and rather fluid. Spatial dimensions or constraints have relative or no relevance on the Internet as an environment and for media ethnography, respectively.<sup>19</sup> The question of appropriate empirical methods/fieldwork is complicated by the transnational nature of the TV market and the global audience itself. The digital boom has made it possible to watch TV productions via Internet platforms (*Netflix*, *Amazon*) with global distribution. To be successful, TV dramas must be “culturally appropriate, understandable, familiar and conducive to mass participation”.<sup>20</sup> On the one hand, it is about communication between series creators and viewers; on the other hand, social networks have made it possible to directly communicate between viewers from different countries and parts of the world. “Media ethnography is a highly complex multifaceted endeavor. Indeed, even the notion of a research site has become much more fluid in recent years. [...] Here we suggest that media ethnography be understood as a research process of forming communities and making conversations that underscore systematic and long-term investment in form, purpose, and practice”.<sup>21</sup>

Watching a sample of the Turkish productions was an indispensable part of the study aiming to explore their cinematic qualities. Over a period of two years, I watched, mostly via the Internet, 25 series out of all 148 broadcasts in Bulgaria by 2022. This makes a sample of 16.89% of all film material relevant to the Bulgarian audience. The sample was not random. Series to watch were selected according to their success among the audience (measured by the number of views on *YouTube*; by the number of fan groups and pages on *Facebook* [*FB*]) or according to awards received, Turkish and international. Watching examples of films perceived as successful was in line with the research aim, which is to determine which cinematic qualities of Turkish TV dramas predispose to their commercial success.

Addressing viewers’ perceptions is related to watching. Research on viewers’ perception is based on two types of empirical study: research on social media, Bulgarian and international, on the Internet: *FB* (fan groups and pages); *YouTube* – the perception of viewers’ reactions and comments on videos (whole episodes or excerpts from the series, or fans-made remakes of them);

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<sup>19</sup> Murphy, Patrick D. and Marwan Kraidy. 2003. *Media ethnography: Local, global or translocal?*, in *Global media studies: Ethnographic perspectives*, edited by Murphy, Patrick D. and Marwan Kraidy. London & New York: Routledge, 299–307.

<sup>20</sup> Kottak, Conrad Philip. 1990. *Prime time society: An anthropological analysis of television and culture*. Belmont: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 141.

<sup>21</sup> Murphy and Kraidy, *Global media studies*, 5-4.

and on informal conversations with Bulgarian viewers. Taking comments as a primary research source, I will use them for the purpose of descriptive analysis. The same applies to informal conversations. In 2022, 68% of the Bulgarian population used *FB*, and Bulgaria was the country with the highest level of trust in social networks within the European Union<sup>22</sup>; therefore, media ethnography would be a relevant approach. As stated above, the “research process of forming communities and making conversations” is a substantial part of media ethnography.

The study of *FB* fan groups lasted for two and half years (2021-2023) and included follow-up on six international and six Bulgarian groups. The latter either provide free access to translated films or are dedicated to a) a particular series and b) individual actors and actresses. For ethical considerations, when quoting postings and comments, I omit the names of authors.

### **Theoretical Frame: The Notions of Soft Power and Cultural Diplomacy**

I draw on the interrelated concepts of ‘cultural diplomacy’ and ‘soft power’<sup>23</sup>. Cultural diplomacy concerns three areas of national interest: “cultural identity (social), soft power (political), and creative economy”.<sup>24</sup> Cultural diplomacy includes the “exchange of ideas, information, art, and other aspects of culture among nations and their peoples to foster mutual understanding”<sup>25</sup>. In addition, “cultural diplomacy is a long-term process involving a range of policies, initiatives, and activities to advance national interests [...] This is achieved through the strategic channeling of cultural and media flow composed of texts created within the cultural industries”.<sup>26</sup>

According to Joseph Nye, soft power means that “[a] country may obtain the outcomes it wants in world politics because other countries—admiring its values, emulating its example, aspiring to its level of prosperity and openness—want to follow it; [...] [s]oft power rests on the ability to shape the preferences of others”.<sup>27</sup> “Soft power supposedly succeeds by ‘attraction’—making one’s culture attractive to the target audience”. In addition to culture, soft power also serves foreign policy and the promotion of ideologies.<sup>28</sup> Globalization “gives unrivalled prominence to popular culture” for cultural diplomacy, unlike earlier in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, when cultural diplomacy rested mostly on high culture. Following Jean Baudrillard, I admit that ‘seduction’ is a common feature of popular culture. Images are especially effective in shaping perceptions. Artistic expressions and the creative economy of popular culture bring positive images and have “enormous potential” to mitigate negative stereotypes, yet popular culture is a commercial enterprise.<sup>29</sup>

### **International Politics and the Government Support for Turkish TV Production**

Under the rule of R. T. Erdoğan, Turkish government institutions gave a strong impulse to the production and broadcasting of Turkish TV dramas during the last twenty years. In total, 139

<sup>22</sup> Ilieva, Angelina. 2022. Facebook kato teren za antropologichnoto izsledvane: Vazmozhnosti i predizvikatelstva. [Facebook as a field of anthropological research: Opportunities and challenges]. *Antropologija / Anthropology* 9(2), 35-57, 37.

<sup>23</sup> Goff, Patricia M. 2013. *Cultural diplomacy*, in *Oxford handbook of modern diplomacy*, edited by Cooper, Andrew F. / Heine, Heine and Ramesh Takhur. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 419-436; Kang, Hyungseok. *Reframing cultural diplomacy: International cultural politics of soft power and the creative economy* (accessed: 28 August 2020)..

<sup>24</sup> Kang, *Reframing cultural diplomacy*.

<sup>25</sup> Cummings, Milton C. *Cultural diplomacy and the United States government: A survey* (accessed: 28 August 2020).

<sup>26</sup> Kang, *Reframing cultural diplomacy*.

<sup>27</sup> Nye, Joseph. 2004. *Soft power: The means to success in world politics*. New York: Public Affairs, 5.

<sup>28</sup> Huat, *Structure, audience and soft power*, 119-120.

<sup>29</sup> Goff, *Cultural diplomacy*, 424.

Turkish TV series had been produced as of 2016.<sup>30</sup> In 2017, Erdoğan's government increased its support for TV drama production from \$28.5 million to a then-record \$40 million.<sup>31</sup> The Turkish president has shown a personal commitment to series production as an instrument of neo-Ottoman politics. "President R. T. Erdoğan has advocated a global approach, aiming to expand the country's influence across the territories governed by Turkey's predecessor state, the Ottoman Empire".<sup>32</sup>

### **'Cultural Proximity', 'Cultural Hybridity', and Globalization Without 'the West'**

The lower cost of Turkish TV production (depending on state sponsorship) is an economic prerequisite for its international commercial success. But what is the significance of neo-Ottoman politics? Governmental involvement in international cultural politics, altogether with the preceding transformation, commercialization (since the mid-1980s), and transnationalization (since the 1990s) of the media landscape of Turkey, contributed to the proliferation and international success of Turkish TV drama.

Discourses of contemporary neo-Ottoman propaganda use the hypothesis of 'cultural proximity' between viewers and Turkish screen images.<sup>33</sup> However, this hypothesis has limited validity. First, Turkish TV dramas are watched far beyond the former Ottoman cultural circle, also in regions distant from it: Malaysia, India, Pakistan, Russia, the United States, South America, the Philippines, Indonesia, in some African countries, in some countries of the European Union, and including some of the 'old democracies' (Spain, France, Italy, Portugal, Greece).<sup>34</sup>

Referring to countries in the Middle East, Kraidy and Al-Ghazi note the limited validity of the 'cultural proximity' thesis and argue that cultural similarities are exaggerated, and mutual perceptions between Turkey and Arab countries are "still often riddled with hostile stereotypes". In this sense, according to the authors, the euphoria that the airing of *Gümüş* (*Nour* in Arabic) evoked among young Arab audiences is "puzzling and paradoxical, and sparks critical debate among Arab journalists." Negative stereotypes of Turkey in the Arab world are due to the memory of four hundred years of Ottoman rule and the contemporary neglect of Arab interests by Turkish foreign policy.<sup>35</sup>

Another similar claim comes from Pakistan: the country is also Islamic, but TV viewers there do not think there is cultural proximity between their country and Turkey.<sup>36</sup> Hence, the 'cultural proximity' hypothesis cannot completely explain the success of Turkish TV productions around the world. Second, sometimes it is not cultural proximity but, conversely, cultural differences that explain the enthusiastic reception of foreign cultural production, as is the case with the enormous popularity of Indian film production in Nigeria.<sup>37</sup> Thirdly, the spread of Turkish TV series has also provoked (politically motivated) negative reactions in countries within the

<sup>30</sup> To date, their number is higher, on the data concerning Turkish series broadcast in Bulgaria, see above.

<sup>31</sup> Sofuoglu, *The giddy rise*; see also Kraidy and Al-Ghazzi, *Neo-Ottoman cool*, 28.

<sup>32</sup> Sofuoglu, *The giddy rise*.

<sup>33</sup> Sofuoglu, *The giddy rise*; Cabric, *Turks bewitch the Balkans*.

<sup>34</sup> Constantinou, Constantinos and Zenonas Tziarras. 2018. TV series in Turkish foreign policy: Aspects of hegemony and Resistance. *New Middle Eastern Studies* 8(1), 23-41, 23.

<sup>35</sup> Kraidy and Al-Ghazzi, *Neo-Ottoman cool*, 25; see also Sofuoglu, *The giddy rise*.

<sup>36</sup> Malik, *Cultural proximity*, 12-13.

<sup>37</sup> Larkin, Brian. 1997. Indian films, Nigerian lovers: Media and the creation of parallel modernities. *Africa* 67(3), 406-440.

cultural circle of the former Ottoman Empire. The popularity of Turkish TV dramas is perceived as a threat to national or religious identity and has led to attempts to ban them in Greece, (North) Macedonia, Syria, Iraq, and Saudi Arabia.<sup>38</sup>

Turkish series provoke similar controversies, although not as acute, almost everywhere in Southeast Europe. The state-owned Bulgarian National Television (BNT1) has broadcast only one Turkish series so far, and this fact testifies to a certain cultural policy. Bulgarian intelligentsia is critical of their spread for political and aesthetic reasons (threat to national identity; criticism of aesthetic merits).<sup>39</sup> A recent discussion on *Facebook* testifies to the disagreement between the negative attitude of the intelligentsia toward Turkish TV series in Bulgaria on the one hand and the avid fans of Turkish production on the other. On the occasion of an opinion of a popular Bulgarian actress expressing her dissatisfaction with the airing of Turkish TV dramas, an ardent fan of the latter commented:

*[The actress] Y. M. protests against the Turkish series the children watched!*

*Which children? They spend all day long in the FB. And we adults watch Turkish movies! I am not ashamed to say that I have watched more than a hundred movies! Thank you to the [Bulgarian] voice actors, carefully selected! I don't watch Bulgarian films, not that the content is bad: it is good, but our actors are in a hurry to say their lines and do theatrics, they have no experience in front of a camera! And Y. to mind her own business! [...] I'm not gloating against her, but she challenged me! The Turk's acting is superb; I forget I'm watching a movie!<sup>40</sup>*

In response to that, another fan added:

*Bravo, exactly, Turkish movies are very nice, the actors are very good, playing with feeling, with skill, I watch it and do not want it to end! I'm currently watching 35 movies, from one to the other, and I have four more saved, which I haven't started yet, I'm sick, I watch around the clock, then here there are no commercials: only two hours and 20 min. movie.<sup>41</sup>*

In the final comment the 'cultural proximity' thesis should not be completely ignored as regards the Balkan viewers. The latter recognize (at least, but not only) the names of popular dishes of Turkish cuisine insofar as they are also popular in the everyday life of their own countries. On the other hand, "boosting the producing nations' cultural capital abroad"<sup>42</sup> takes place even without a post-imperial political agenda, as the case of Argentine telenovelas demonstrates. The successfully exported products of a given popular culture, TV productions in particular, serve cultural diplomacy, whether based or not in 'cultural proximity.'

<sup>38</sup> Constantinou and Tziarras, *TV series*, 24; Kraidy and Al-Ghazzi, *Neo-Ottoman cool*, 22.

<sup>39</sup> Atanasov and Aleksieva, *Ottoman cowboys*, 295-317.

<sup>40</sup> A female, Bulgarian, 15 May 2023, in Facebook. *Erkenci Kus, the continuing story by Deb (Scott) Storm group* (accessed: 31 May 2024).

<sup>41</sup> A female, Bulgarian, 16 May 2023, in Facebook. *Erkenci Kus*.

<sup>42</sup> Benamou, Catherine L. 2009. *Televisual melodrama in an era of transnational migration. Exporting the folkloric nation, harvesting the melancholic-sublime*, in *Melodrama: Passion, pathos and entertainment*, edited by Sadlier, Darlene J. Urbana & Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 139-172, 139.

A more productive theoretical tool is the understanding of cultural hybridity in the context of globalization.<sup>43</sup> Media products of cultural hybridity are successful because of the ‘transparency’ in the sense of the universal validity of the messages they broadcast. As Jeremy Tunstall predicted, regional media centers produce ‘hybrid genres’ – domesticated versions of successful American and European formats.<sup>44</sup> His prediction preceded the rise of Latin American, Indian, Japanese, and South Korean productions. Their international success, however, was surpassed by the success of Turkish TV dramas.

In the outlined context, it hardly makes sense to see globalization as synonymous with Americanization anymore.<sup>45</sup> The global success of regional media productions, in this case Turkish, shows that cultural hybridity shows give life to another type of globalization phenomenon. Through them, the West-East (or North-South) line of hegemonic power and domination no longer seems like a fully viable cognitive scheme for solving the riddles of globalization.

Hybridization, however, excludes the West from these cognitive schemes only at first glance. Despite the hybridity and ‘glocalized’ nature of media production, in this case, Turkish and Western models are still part of the context. Despite their specificity, Indian, South American, Korean, Japanese, and Turkish productions produce local versions of basic schemas imposed by Western models. I argue, therefore, that domestic media productions follow new schemes of globalization whose point of reference is not directly Western models, yet the latter outline general contours or forms recognizable and preferred by audiences.

#### **‘Internet Revolution,’ Its Impact on Globalization and on Viewers’ Behavior**

Social networking on the Internet has once again revolutionized mass entertainment on a global scale, and the most visible result is the individualized consumption of popular culture products: “With new technologies, the reception/consumption of pop culture has become a highly individualized activity. TV watching is less and less a shared activity among family members as individuals, especially youth, move to watch television on personal computer screens and again, mobile phones.”<sup>46</sup>

According to my observations of Bulgarian viewers (on *FB* groups, but in informal conversations, too), a large number of them of different ages nowadays increasingly prefer watching (any, not only Turkish productions) on small devices (smartphone, computer, laptop, tablet) on the Internet, to television. The ‘internet revolution’ makes it possible to watch more Turkish series, including those not yet aired on Bulgarian TV channels or those that were aired years earlier. In the *FB* fan groups of Turkish series, international or Bulgarian, questions like *Where can I watch movie X?* are read on an everyday basis, and the answers usually point to the Internet: specialized websites (*Turkish123.com; Whatchturks.com; Turk-flix.com*), *YouTube*, *Telegram* or through links *FB* groups provide themselves. Here is a random example of this search for

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<sup>43</sup> Kraidy, Marwan M. 2005. *Hybridity, or the cultural logic of globalization*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 5; “Globalization thus can be defined as the intensification of worldwide social relations which link distant localities in such a way that local happenings are shaped by events occurring many miles away and vice versa”. See, Giddens, Anthony. 1990. *The consequences of modernity*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 64.

<sup>44</sup> After Kraidy, *Hybridity, or the cultural logic*, 6.

<sup>45</sup> Rao, Shakuntala 2007: The globalization of Bollywood: An ethnography of non-elite audiences in India. *The Communication Review* 10, 57-76.

<sup>46</sup> Huat, *Structure, audience and soft power*, 103.

Turkish series via the Internet – social networks: “Hello. I was reminded of an old but great movie: Ezell. I looked to see if it was there, but couldn’t find anything. Could you tell me if it’s there?” Or: “Good morning, where can I watch this series in Italian?” [Buongiorno dove posso vedere questa serie in italiano?]<sup>47</sup>

The preference for devices smaller than the increasingly large screens of TVs is due to the viewers being able to choose the time at which they watch movies, and without being constrained by TV programming, or being mobile while watching. One of my interlocutors watches a series on her smartphone alone in her room while the rest of the family watches other programs or football matches on TV<sup>48</sup>. She is not alone in that respect.

However, individuation is also linked to the opposite process: the formation of communities of like-minded people with similar interests and tastes. Like Chinese or Taiwanese fan groups specializing in translating Korean or Japanese productions,<sup>49</sup> several of the Bulgarian *FB* groups provide free access to Turkish series (see above) translated by volunteers in Bulgarian.

Technological advances and the active marketing strategies are equally accessible to all film producers – not just Turkish ones. Therefore, the reasons for the success of Turkish TV productions are not explained by technology and Internet environment alone, neither by their lower price, nor by the impact of globalization and hybridization; we must look elsewhere.

### **Structural Principles and Improved Cinematic Quality as Success Factors of the Turkish TV Series**

To identify the features of Turkish dramas that contribute to their success, it is necessary to compare them with the established conventions of soap operas (since the 1950s), Latin American telenovelas, and serials in general. If in the American or British “soap opera the narrative is continuous and ends only in the last episode” and “the sequence creates a notion of continuity of time”, the soap opera is virtually endless; “it unfolds multiple narratives”. In turn, “the telenovela features the same hero (heroine) and set of characters, but each series tells its own story, which ends at the end of the program”.<sup>50</sup> In the sense outlined, it would be inaccurate to describe Turkish TV productions as soap operas: most of them are shorter if compared to the American (or British) ‘endless’ series with tens of thousands of episodes. They are not intended only for daytime viewing, unlike the early American soap operas in the 1950s, oriented exclusively toward an audience of housewives. In Bulgaria, for example, Turkish TV dramas are broadcast at various times, including prime time; in other words, family viewing is also an option.

In terms of plot organization, Turkish series keep to principles similar to soap operas: their narrative is continuous and ends in the last episode. However, Turkish production also draws on some of the proven principles, techniques, and formulas of the telenovela and soap operas aimed

<sup>47</sup> Female, Bulgarian living in the USA, 30 years old, college education. Facebook. *Liubimi serili s prevod*; Female, Italian, high school education. Facebook. *Adim Farah* (accessed: 22 September 2023).

<sup>48</sup> Personal communication with a female, Bulgarian, 19 August 2021.

<sup>49</sup> One study identified twenty-seven translation and subtitling groups, see Huat, *Structure, audience and soft power*, 102-104, 113.

<sup>50</sup> Saffhil, Luiza. 2005. *Podrostki-zritelii myl'nykh oper* [Teenage-viewers of soap operas], in *Massovaja kul'tura: sovremennye zapadnye issledovanija* [Mass-culture: contemporary Western Studies], edited by Zvereva, Vera V. Moscow: Fond naučnyh issledovanii “Pragmatia kul'tury”, 61-75, 64-65; Blumenthal, *Women and soap opera*.

at sustaining viewer interest. Like soap operas, Turkish TV series introduces a larger cast of characters (with whom different categories of viewers can identify). Unlike soap operas, the action does not unfold slowly, paralleling time in the real world. Turkish series are often sharply plotted and the action develops quickly, and this is one of the main reasons for viewer interest. Each episode ends with a tense scene containing a collision, but its resolution is left for the next episode. The alternation of contrasting states, changing calm with sharply dramatic scenes, also serves to maintain interest.<sup>51</sup> The writers and producers of Turkish TV dramas apply techniques to stretch the action (repeating plot schemes, introducing new characters, etc.) only when there is an opportunity to film a larger number of episodes, depending on TV ratings.<sup>52</sup>

Fifteen years after initial international success, today's Turkish series has a distinct genre differentiation that is in line with the tastes of different audience segments and markets, domestic and international. Among the films broadcast at present, however, in addition to classic types of melodramas, we find productions in a wide range of genres: crime dramas, romantic comedies, police serials, historical dramas, fantasies, thrillers, or remakes of foreign productions.

American soap operas and especially Latin American telenovelas have formed expectations and perceptions in viewers who recognize the macro-genre of melodrama, and this has contributed to the successful reception of Turkish production. Universal human themes such as family, love intrigues, the archetypal image of the mother, and the fates of women are central to Turkish serials as well as American soap operas and South American telenovelas.<sup>53</sup>

However, the producers of Turkish TV dramas have significantly improved their quality: according to one expert opinion, "shooting the series like a film"<sup>54</sup> is an important reason for their success. "The growing appetite for programmed content galvanized stronger professionalism in the mid-2000s. Production companies felt the need to produce higher quality output and have a more transnational outlook".<sup>55</sup> Compared to Latin American and some American productions, Turkish ones are filmed not in a studio but in a real environment, in picturesque locations, usually, but not limited to Istanbul. The inclusion of pictures from everyday life strengthens viewers' sense of connection with the place of screen action and enhances the illusion of the narrative's veracity. Turkish TV series rely strongly on visual suggestion, a point I will return to later. The more successful productions are enriched with carefully selected music. Compared to Latin American telenovelas, there are fewer overtly implausible sensational plot elements. Having "a more transnational outlook" means to underscore universal human situations and values; and emitting respective images of modern transnational culture. Similar to the success of Latin American telenovelas, Turkish TV dramas "appeal simultaneously to global, transnational and national audiences [due to] their cultural translatability".<sup>56</sup> The numerous

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<sup>51</sup> Saffhill, *Teenage viewers*, 64-68; Blumenthal, *Women and soap opera*.

<sup>52</sup> Alankuş and Yanardağoğlu, *Vacillations in Turkey*, 3620.

<sup>53</sup> Livingstone, *Making sense of television*, 143; Blumenthal, *Women and soap opera*; Alankuş and Yanardağoğlu, *Vacillations in Turkey*, 3620.

<sup>54</sup> Alankuş and Yanardağoğlu, *Vacillations in Turkey*, 3620.

<sup>55</sup> Yanardağoğlu, Eylem, Karam, Imad. N. 2013. The fever that hit Arab satellite television: Audience perceptions of Turkish TV series. *Identities. Global Studies in Culture and Power* 20(5), 561-579; Alankuş and Yanardağoğlu, *Vacillations in Turkey*, 3620.

<sup>56</sup> Benamou, *Televisual melodrama*, 141.

Turkish remakes of American, Korean, Japanese, Latin American, etc. productions<sup>57</sup> also contributed in the same vein. This type of intertextuality enhances the international translatability of Turkish TV dramas.

### **Modernity and Melodrama. ‘Accessible Modernity’ as a Success Factor**

According to a detailed definition, the meta-genre of melodrama

*is a form of dramatic composition in prose partaking of the nature of tragedy, comedy, pantomime, and spectacle, and intended for a popular audience. Primarily concerned with situation and plot, it calls upon mimed action extensively and employs a more or less fixed complement of stock characters, the most important of which are a suffering heroine or hero, a persecuting villain, and a benevolent comic. It is conventionally moral and humanitarian in point of view and sentimental and optimistic in temper, concluding its fable happily with virtue rewarded after many trials and the vice punished.*<sup>58</sup>

I argue that Turkish TV dramas, in all of their genre variety, from police series to romantic comedies, follow the conventions of melodrama easily recognizable by international audiences. This contributes to its international success, together with its enhanced cinematic qualities.

On the other side, as international film melodrama addresses individuals’ sense of modernity and relates to modernity in general,<sup>59</sup> Turkish TV dramas address modernity in a specific way. Kraidy and Al-Ghazzi define it as “accessible modernity”. Turkish modernity is a hybrid, combining Western (respectively, European and secular) with Eastern values.<sup>60</sup> Turkish TV dramas show images that present this modernity as something accessible and attainable, not distant and belonging only to a thin elite stratum. Accordingly, Turkish TV production conveys messages through a carefully maintained balance between positive images and values of (Western) modernity on the one hand, with local traditions on the other. In this way, they manage to satisfy the expectations of different segments of the viewing audience.

Depending on their orientation toward a certain audience segment, some productions broadcast mainly traditionalist messages, for example, *Yemin* (2019-2022 – translated as *Promise* in Bulgaria). Others rely on universal themes and values like *Sen Çal Kapımı* (2019-2021 – *You Knock on My Door*), whose creators have relied on a universal love story while the context of

<sup>57</sup> Just a few examples of remakes: *Yentikam* (2013-2014) – a remake of ABC’s American production of the same name *Revenge*; or *Mother* (2016) - based on the Japanese original; *Ufak Tefek Cinayetler* (2017) - based on the American *Pretty little liars*; *Çilek Kokusu* (2015, - *Strawberry smell*) – of the South Korean series *Heirs*; *Kiralık Aşk* (*Love for rent*, 2015-2017) – of the South Korean series *How much is love worth*; *Kara Sevda* (*Endless love*, 2015-2017) is a remake of the South Korean *Endless love*.

<sup>58</sup> Rahill, Frank. 1967. *The world of melodrama*. University Park & London: Pennsylvania State University Press, XIV.

<sup>59</sup> Singer, Ben. 2001. *Melodrama and modernity. Early sensational cinema and its content*. New York: Columbia University Press, 17-59; Abu-Lughod, Lila. 2002. *Egyptian melodrama: Technology of the modern subject?*, in *Media worlds: Anthropology of new terrain*, edited by Ginsburg, Faye D., Abu-Lughod, Lila, Brian Larkin. Berkeley, LA: University of California Press, 115-133.

<sup>60</sup> Kraidy and Al-Ghazzi, *Neo-Ottoman cool*, 19-27; Demirtaş, Birgül. 2013. Turkey and the Balkans: Overcoming prejudices, building bridges and constructing a common future. *Perceptions: Journal of International Affairs* 18(2), 163-184, 166.

Turkish traditions is almost absent; the series is enjoying success among international audiences.<sup>61</sup>

The dualism of messages and styles in Turkish TV dramas does not go unnoticed by the audience: on the occasion of the series *Minor Murders (Ufak Tefek Cinayetler, 2017)*, a Bulgarian viewer called this type of production “Turkish ‘European’ films”<sup>62</sup>. The third type of series maintains a careful balance between the suggestions of modern universalism and images associated with Turkish traditions (for example, *Erkenci Kuş / Early Bird, 2018-2019*).<sup>63</sup> Through a similar strategy of ‘bricolage’, Japanese popular culture constructs the image of ‘cool Japan’; while Japanese film products gain mainly regional popularity (East Asia), Turkish TV dramas achieve global success, analogously called “the neo-Ottoman cool”.<sup>64</sup>

But whose modernity are we talking about? If among female Arab audiences, Turkish TV series are perceived as ‘conduits’ of new gender models, through the images of heroines upholding modern values, reactions of nostalgia for the recently lost values of the ‘patriarchal’ social order are also sometimes found in Southeastern Europe.<sup>65</sup> The differing spectatorial responses are indicative of multiple modernities and different temporalities across regions of the world.

Another less obvious feature of Turkish TV dramas is that scripts follow (to different degrees) narrative schemes established by the classical–modern European novel of the early 19th century. The resemblance to the novels of Jane Austen is paradigmatic, although the parallel is by no means limited to that writer. The romantic story involves an initial social distance between characters (a man of high social standing and a woman of lower status); the initial animosity between them gradually evolves into romantic infatuation as the plot progresses; the characters go through various vicissitudes and mistakes that create their narrative, on the way to the happy ending. The outlined novel structure has another distinctive feature that we find in the Turkish series: the parallel development of a second romantic line, respectively, the second or even third pair of romantic characters.

This pattern can be found in many Turkish series, even outside of the romance genre, in melodramas, or even crime stories. One randomly picked example of the latter would be *Nefes Nefese (Breathless, 2018)* and *Adım Farah (My Name is Farah, 2023)*: convoluted crime dramas that also feature a romantic storyline doubled through two pairs of characters presented in parallel.<sup>66</sup>

The world’s exemplars of romantic comedy follow the same patterns laid down in the classic novels of the 19th century, and it is no coincidence that this pattern is most clearly traced in Turkish romantic comedies, too. This is exemplified by three of the most popular Turkish

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<sup>61</sup> TV Seriali. *Liubimi balgarski i turski seriali [Favorite Bulgarian and Turkish series]* (accessed: 31 May 2024); mh-musings. *Erkenci Kuş: The story of us* (accessed: 2 February 2021).

<sup>62</sup> bg-mamma. *bg-mamma* (accessed: 2 February 2022).

<sup>63</sup> mh-musings, *Erkenci Kuş*.

<sup>64</sup> Iwabuchi, Koichi. 2015. Pop-culture diplomacy in Japan: Soft power, nation branding and the question of ‘international cultural exchange’. *International Journal of Cultural Policy* 21(4), 419-432; Iwabuchi, Koichi. 2002. ‘Soft’ nationalism and narcissism: Japanese popular culture goes global. *Asian Studies Review* 26(4), 447-469; Kraidy and Al-Ghazzi, *Neo-Ottoman cool*, 17-29.

<sup>65</sup> Kraidy and Al-Ghazzi, *Neo-Ottoman cool*, 17-29; Cabric, *Turks bewitch the Balkans*.

<sup>66</sup> IMDb. *Nefes Nefes* (accessed: 2 February 2022); Turkish World. *Nefes Nefese (Breathless) synopsis and cast* (accessed: 2 February 2022).

romantic comedies: *Kiravik Aşk* (*Love for Rent*, 2015-2017), *Erkenci Kuş* (*Early Bird*, 2018-2019), and *Sen Çal Kapımı* (*You Knock on My Door*, 2020-2022).

What do Western literary influences have to do with the problem of ‘accessible modernity?’ On the one hand, it is about the dual (or hybrid) character of Turkish modernity, which flexibly combines Western values with local traditions, and it is this flexibility that shows Turkish modernity as ‘accessible.’ On the other hand, it is about the gradual change, since the end of the eighteenth century, of marriage patterns: from arranged and pragmatic marriage to marriage based on romantic love, considered to be one of the signs of the transition to modernity in Europe in general.<sup>67</sup> “The idea of romance, in the sense which the term came to assume in the nineteenth century, both expressed and contributed to secular changes affecting social life as a whole.”<sup>68</sup> In keeping with the ambivalent and flexible nature of Turkish modernity, the plots of Turkish TV dramas show a dual model of marriage relationships: marriage by arrangement (often problematized) and marriage by love. In this sense, they ‘speak’ a familiar language to both national and international audiences, who, consciously or not, find satisfaction in recognizing the established narrative pattern.

### **Melodrama, Viewers’ Reception, and Visual Language**

As I showed above, ‘cultural proximity’ as a reason for the popularity of the Turkish series is a thesis of limited validity. What, then, does the transnational viewing audience like about them? Difficult as it is to study due to its varied nature, there is evidence to show different viewing tastes in different countries. The sample of 400 viewers from Pakistan shows that “the most cited reasons for viewing Turkish dramas was to see the beautiful scenery and locations (78.9%), interesting stories (64.2%), observing the lives of fellow Muslims (59.3%), good looking cast (53.7%), beautiful clothes and accessories (41.5%), and love and romance (30.9%).”<sup>69</sup> Another study with 100+ respondents from English-speaking countries, lovers of Turkish cinema shows that most viewers (between 80 and 90%) liked “multi-talented, beautiful, emotive actors/actresses”; between 50-60% like “strong script”; in third place – “intricacy of culture” – 50% “romantic, non-graphic but sensual love scenes, family-friendly” like 38%; only 24% like the Turkish series because of “gorgeous locales”<sup>70</sup>, most liked among Pakistani viewers.

I argue that the enhanced adherence to melodrama, the way to address the emotions and visual appeal contribute significantly to the positive reception of Turkish TV dramas. The success of Turkish TV series is related to finding a globalized ‘formula’ of melodrama: adapted to the local market in some productions and in other cases – to the international entertainment market. The creators of Turkish TV dramas have carefully tempered some of the extremes of the ‘canon’ in the melodrama genre while adhering to its basic characteristics.

<sup>67</sup> Giddens, *The consequences of modernity*, 121-122.

<sup>68</sup> Giddens, Anthony. 1992. *The transformation of intimacy. Sexuality, love and eroticism in modern societies*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 40.

<sup>69</sup> Malik, *Cultural proximity*, 9.

<sup>70</sup> mh-musings. *Turkish drama: The power to heal* (accessed: 2 February 2021).

The way in which authors appeal to the emotions of viewers is a core issue of melodrama.<sup>71</sup> Whether because we live in a world saturated with emotions, or conversely, emotions in melodrama function “as a release repressive puritanism and patriarchy,”<sup>72</sup> intense, extreme emotional content has characterized film melodrama since the early twentieth century. Turkish TV dramas follow these principles, adhering to specific aesthetic measures and cinematic techniques tailored to modern sensibilities.

Vivid contrasts in the alternation of plot segments and in the presentation of characters are part of the melodrama’s ‘arsenal’, which is, as a matter of fact, also linked to the conventions of Romanticism in fiction. Turkish TV dramas follow these principles, which are in line with viewers’ expectations. The latter is expressed, for example, in the dissatisfaction of some fans when some of the characters are shown in development, i.e., when they do not fit into the graphic black-and-white scheme of opposing ‘good’ heroes against ‘villains’. This development may trigger negative comments and discussion among viewers on *FB*.<sup>73</sup>

The plot collisions and vivid contrasts in the presentation of the characters also find expression through the visual language of the Turkish series. I will give just a few examples. In *My Name is Farah* (2023), happiness and mortal danger, joy and terror collide sharply (episode 8). The wedding of the two protagonists is interrupted by a vicious attack and furious gunfire; the groom is shown covering the bride’s body with one hand while holding an automatic weapon with the other. This example is also related to another feature of Turkish TV dramas: they generally present gender roles as sharply contrasting, and this finds expression in the visual language. The aggressive masculinity of men is emphasized; conversely, the femininity, sensitivity, and vulnerability of women are underscored, including through certain visual clichés. The adherence to melodrama as the basis of all genre varieties of Turkish productions seems to be related to the expressive style of acting. The latter offers audiences transparency and ‘openness’ to viewers (respectively, accessibility) of visual messages.

Figure 1: Groom Protects the Bride while their Wedding Is Interrupted by Fierce Gunfire. *Adım Farah* [My Name is Farah], 2023. Actors: Engin Akyürek & Demet Özdemir.

<sup>71</sup> Abu-Lughod, *Egyptian melodrama*, 115-117; Sadlier, Darlene J. *A short history in film melodrama of Latin America*, in *Melodrama. Passion, pathos and entertainment*, edited by Sadlier, Darlene J. Urbana & Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 11-18, 2.

<sup>72</sup> Sadlier, *A short history*, 2.

<sup>73</sup> See for example discussions in the international FB group *Adım Farah*: Facebook. *Adım Farah*.



Source: YouTube. [Adim Farah 8. Bölüm 3. Fragmani@DizAdimFarah](#) (accessed: 31 March 2024). Screenshot by the author.

Figure 2: Expressive Style of Acting and Melodrama: A caricature by a Fan.



Source: Facebook. [Adım Farah](#) (accessed: 22 September 2023). Author: Anu Shism, 2023. Permission by the author.

The attractive appearance of the cast is a well-established principle in the film industry and the Turkish film industry is particularly consistent in this respect. Actors and actresses are specially selected by appearance, often by special talent agencies. Leading Turkish actors and actresses are often prizewinners in (local and international) modeling or beauty contests.<sup>74</sup>

Figure 3: The Attractive Appearance of the Cast: Actors Can Yaman and Demet Özdemir, *Erkenci Kuş* [Early Bird], 2018-2019. Animation.



Source: Facebook. [Erkenci Kus, the continuing story by Deb \(Scott\) Storm group](#) (accessed: 31 May 2024). Author: Maike Höft. Permission by the author.

<sup>74</sup> Çevik, Senem B. 2014. Turkish soap opera diplomacy: A Western projection by a Muslim source. *Exchange: The Journal of Public Diplomacy* 5(1), 78-103.

However, there is no shortage of negative comments on Turkish TV series. Some features of screen images are not well received by international audiences, e.g., some scenes of brutality toward women or excessive parental control over children's lives. Certainly, however, the overwhelming majority of comments from transnational as well as Bulgarian audiences range from positive to enthusiastic. Many of the comments testify that their writers have deprived themselves of sleep to watch a particular Turkish drama, that they have cried repeatedly, and that they have watched their favorite series repeatedly.

### **Folklore Substratum**

Turkish TV dramas (like Latin American telenovelas) adhere to certain established fairy tale patterns and schemas. By this comparison I do not intend to reduce the model of Turkish TV dramas to the fairy tale: such an approach would be reductionist.<sup>75</sup> It is my intention here to show an important element of that 'amalgam,' which is a prerequisite for the success of the Turkish series.

Like the classic folktale, Turkish serials often contain motifs such as an initial social inequality between the protagonists. On the way to the happy ending, the characters go through a series of trials. According to Vladimir Propp, this is the main plot axis of "trial-victory".<sup>76</sup> The wedding as a standard form of a happy ending is an (almost) obligatory feature of the structural pattern of the magic tale (Meletinskii 1998: 305-317).<sup>77</sup> This model, with the necessary amount of conventionality, corresponds to the canon (or cliché) of Turkish romantic serials, but not only.

Dreams and dreaming play an important role in magic tales.<sup>78</sup> In Turkish serials dreams as signs of fate play a prominent role: they contribute to the magical atmosphere being perceived by the viewer. The frequency with which prophetic dreams and visions occur in Turkish TV dramas distinguishes them from other similar productions. Perhaps this echo of *One Thousand and One Nights* is a sought-after effect on the part of writers and producers. All these elements create expectations in the viewer, conscious or not, that facilitate the reception of Turkish serials.

### **Conclusion**

To summarize, recalling the initial research questions is necessary. What accounts for the global success of Turkish TV dramas during the last fifteen years? What is the significance of Turkish TV productions to cultural diplomacy, and how do they relate to the neo-Ottoman line in contemporary Turkey? What are the cinematic qualities of the TV product that contribute to its expansion? In what way their visual qualities do contribute to it? However, I will first return to the question of the power of 'seduction,' which is a common feature of popular culture. Turkish serials reinforce this effect through careful politics of imagery that involve both appealing images of their native country and 'seducing' the audience through the pull of visual suggestion. The phrase 'soft power,' which served as the starting point for the analysis, should be understood in a metaphorical sense, relating to the power of 'seduction' emanating from the screen rather than

<sup>75</sup> For a critique of such approaches, see Livingstone, *Making sense of television*, 34.

<sup>76</sup> Propp, Vladimir. 1928. *Morfologija skazki* [*Morphology of the fairytale*]. Leningrad: Academia, 110-114.

<sup>77</sup> Meletinskii, Eleazar M. 1998. *Zhenit'ba v volšebnoj skazke: eë funkcija i mesto v siuzhetnoj strukture* [*Marriage in the fairytale: Its function and place in the plot structure*], in *Izbrannye stat'i. Vospominanija* [*Selected articles. Memories*], edited by Novik, Elena S. and Eleazar M. Meletinskii. Moscow: Izdatel'stvo RGGU, 305-317.

<sup>78</sup> Vukov, Nikolai. 2021. Saniat-prikazka [Dream-Fairytale]. *Balgarski folklor* 48(2), 164-182.

in the established usage of the term. Turkish TV dramas 'seduce' with a set of characteristics of their own, and it is an attraction experienced by the viewer. However, if we are talking about the political effect of serials on the perception of contemporary Turkey internationally, the term cultural diplomacy is more appropriate. In the context of the global proliferation of Turkish TV dramas, the idea of hegemony embedded in the term 'soft power' is blurring its meaning.

Initially, the project of transnational distribution of TV serials explicitly declared its connection to the neo-Ottoman line in Turkish foreign policy. The demise of the neo-Ottoman political project and the global spread of Turkish TV production have largely taken away from the meaning of this ambition. In the context outlined, the thesis of 'cultural proximity' between the viewers and the world of Turkish TV dramas has limited validity; rather than 'cultural proximity,' Turkish TV production benefits from cultural hybridity in the contemporary world under globalization.

Images of 'accessible' Turkish modernity, flexibly combining Western values with the color of its cultural traditions, facilitate the perceptions of international audiences. The contact of Turkish TV production with audiences from different parts of the world living in multiple temporalities evokes different spectatorial responses. Thanks to 'active viewership,' in most cases the messages meet a positive reception.

One of the reasons for the global spread of the Turkish series is the transnational viewership and specific fan culture created through social media. The intensive exchange of information on social networks amplifies the effect of TV broadcasts many times over and causes a snowball effect. However, the question of why Turkish serial producers are more successful than other similar industries can only be answered if the cinematic qualities of Turkish productions are examined. Turkish TV dramas appeal to transnational audiences because of their universal themes and messages, such as family, love, and gender relations, yet convincingly integrated into images of everyday life. Certainly, the enhanced qualities of the TV product also have important implications for viewer ratings. Finding a 'glocalized' form of adherence to melodrama is one of the main factors in the success of Turkish film productions. Quite in the spirit of melodrama, the makers of Turkish TV dramas appeal to the emotionality of the audience by avoiding extreme exaggerations and outright implausible components of the screen narrative.

Visual appeal – the richness of visual suggestion – is also an important factor in 'seducing' viewers. Turkish series show continuity with examples of literary classics (the 19th-century European novel) and cinema that viewers recognize and expect. Similarly, the viewer subconsciously perceives the archetypal narrative (fairy tale) patterns contained in TV dramas). Both of these influences contribute to better audience receptivity.

Finally, the international success of Turkish soap operas is a cause for reflection on globalization itself. By successfully adapting Western models of soap operas, Turkish TV production has 'glocalized' this model and created its local version. The success is result of the impact of divergent influences and cultural exchanges, and it shows that globalization should not be understood as merely synonymous with Americanization.

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