"Re-attaching the Detached: In-class Critical Analysis of Popular Media Images of "Karagoz
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BY ISMAIL OZGUR SOGANCI

Re-attaching the Detached

In-class Critical Analysis of Popular Media Images of *Karagoz*

The enormous development of image technologies in the last three decades has brought us to a day in which a widespread inflation of images has become an indispensable part of our lives. As a result, learning about the complexities of visual culture is becoming ever more critical to human development (Freedman, 2003). There is therefore an increasing necessity for young generations to develop a critical visual literacy by which they can appreciate the pros and cons of popular imagery. Art education can and should become a facilitation ground on which such appreciation will develop. Remaining indifferent to today's mass media, excluding it from art curricula will diminish art educators' roles in and influences on visual cultures, and deprive students of the essences of the visual repertoire humans have developed so far.

Figure 1.
Two main characters from traditional Turkish shadow theater, *Karagoz*, right, and *Hacivad*, riding a boat. National Library, *Karagoz* Archives, Ankara, Turkey.

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Images can be and have been used in various ways, and by their man-made nature they cannot be considered independent of their providers' intentions. Yet, in our age, identifying such intentions is complex, and requires a critical look supported by relevant information on what is being represented, how, and why.

In this article, I try to illustrate some of the ways the traditional Turkish shadow theatre became an item of easy consumption with little historical, cultural, and artistic essence, if any at all. I have collected artifacts regarding the shadow puppet tradition from Turkish popular culture that demonstrate an increasing poverty of relevant references to original resources, a widespread exploitation of history and cultural values for dominantly commercial ends, and an alarming need for a sound art educational initiative on the issue.

The Necessity of a Critical Visual Literacy

In our overly determined daily lives at schools, offices, factories, and stations, we are continuously instructed to follow linear paths toward practical ends with tight daily, weekly, monthly, and yearly schedules and deadlines. It seems almost absurd to have the luxury to direct our gaze beyond what is in our practical reach. The love of simple step-by-step instructions, "no-brainer" manuals, prescribed curricula, and standardized tests manifests a one-size-fits-all concept of life in which, more than anything else, the ease with which something can be executed counts (Anijar, 2000). History, culture, and art, in such ease-oriented contexts, become compressed in the shape of Mona Lisa magnets on our refrigerators, half-page "artsy stuff" in our newspapers, or a stereotypical scene of our favorite actress in a "based-on-a-real-story" movie. As Edward Said (2003) noted six months before his death, the famous Hollywood phrase "you are history" equates history with non-existence, nothingness, and death. Such equations resume at light speed encapsulating our values into commercial signs, logos, and icons. What meets the eye constitutes most, if not all, of our ideas under a popular regime of pre-packaged and shortened information or "info."

At this point teachers come face-to-face with a question, a question so relevant to our times: Should schools be institutions where we indoctrinate "info" so that students will comply with the demands of a global capitalistic discourse? In other words, must we perceive schools as only training institutions for future preparation, or is *educing* (the root of the worn-out word "education") still essential in our professions?

It is obvious that compared to the financial, technological, and access power of local and global media corporations, public education is a modest enterprise. Yet, schools can still play essential roles in facilitating students to better understandings of human cultures through a historical perspective along with what Dewey (1934) once called "the greatest intellectual achievement" of humankind: art (p. 25). This role, however, is only possible if teachers of art attend carefully to the marketplace mechanisms that alienate students from the essences of culture, history, and art. Only by recognizing the fact that visual culture is a pastiche formed under various influences, one of which is mass media, can an art teacher follow a meaningful and fruitful path in art classes. Instead of loyal acceptance of popular iconography mandated mainly by media, the art class at times should become a laboratory in which visual literacy is taught through critical analysis of popular icons, advertisements, cartoons, comics and so forth.

This article offers an example of such analysis departing from the frequent use of images of traditional shadow puppets in Turkish media. My analysis will focus on how, in the hands of local politics of Turkish popular culture (Street, 1997), a unique piece of artistic heritage can become a cartoon-like surface image detached from its cultural, artistic and historical roots. I also propose how to make use of mass media images in art classes reversing their effects by a critical look.

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Figure 2. Kucuk Ali (holding *Hacivad* and *Karagoz*), one of the last representatives of puppeteers raised in Turkish shadow theatre tradition. National Library, *Karagoz* Archives, Ankara, Turkey.

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Figure 3. An illustration representing the atmosphere of a *Karagoz* play in 19th Century Ottoman context by an unknown artist. National Library, *Karagoz* Archives, Ankara, Turkey.

Karagoz

In Turkey, the traditional shadow puppet theatre is popularly known as *Karagoz*, the historical name given to the leading character in almost all scenarios of various puppeteers, which literally means "black-eye." Its original Turkish name *Hayal Oyunu* can be translated into English as "Dream Play." The puppeteers are called *Hayali*, which means "dreamy" or "imaginary," and the screen on which they animate the shadow puppets is called the "dream screen" or "mirror."

Karagoz is characterized as one of the oldest of the four major styles of Turkish theatre (And, 1985). Its dream screen had been a lively ground for economical, technical, and aesthetic aspects of Turkish life throughout centuries until the advancement and spread of mass media technologies in the second half of the 20th century (Duyuran, 2000). Traditionally a single male puppeteer who is also in charge of narration and music performs the plays behind a white cloth screen. The audience sits on the other side of the screen and cannot see the puppeteer during performances. At the bottom of the screen on the puppeteer's side is a wooden shelf which holds a bell, a tambourine, a reed pipe, candles or gas lamps to illuminate the screen, and the forked rods for holding the two-dimensional puppet figures (Mutlu, 1999). The figures, called *tasvir*, are 32 to 40 cm long, and are preferably made of camel skin, or, otherwise, water buffalo and cattle skin. The skins are treated with special chemicals to make them transparent so that the colors and forms applied on them will show when illuminated. A special knife called a *nevrekan* is used to cut out the forms, and they are painted with natural dyes. In the final step, the puppet-maker, traditionally the puppeteer himself, makes holes on the cutout and painted figures for the manipulating rods (Mutlu, 1999).

A majority of researchers attribute the origins of shadow puppet traditions in various cultures to India, Java, and Eastern regions of Asia (And, 1985). Later, Arabs adopted its particular techniques and finally it passed on to Anatolia (the Turkish peninsula) in the 14th century via Egypt. The Ottomans, a multiethnic empire that ruled the Middle East for roughly six centuries between the 14th and 20th centuries, had improved this old tradition in terms of artistry and technique adding new colors, designs, instruments, scripts, and musical compositions. The current phase of *Karagoz* imagery was widespread in Anatolian cities in the 17th century, and the plays were popular both in the palace among elites and in public gathering places among the majority of people (And, 1985). Although it was considered first "a folk art form, the sultans raised puppetry to an art form during the golden age [from the 15th to the 18th century] of the Ottoman Empire" (Stokrocki, 2004, p. 42). *Karagoz* became so popular that legends started to circulate and some even connected the two main characters in the plays to real persons who lived in the Ottoman context (Ekler, 2003).

Karagoz, the main character in the plays, represents the ordinary man in the Ottoman context. He is virtually illiterate, usually unemployed, and embarks on money-earning ventures which never work. He frequently resorts to violence, beating *Hacivad* and the other characters in an authentic Turkish context depicted in its multicultural complexity (Ekler, 2003). His best friend *Hacivad* on the other hand is well educated and exhibits a more balanced attitude towards the events that occur in the plays.

> Beneath their comical plots, the plays reflect an interpretation and critique of the world, daily life, and social culture … [T]he *Karagoz* show is a lesson in language [morals], setting the naturalness, charm, and expressive power of popular speech against the artificial and snobbish speech of *Hacivad*. It sides with virtue and naivety against deceit, with benevolence against calculation (Ekler, 2003).

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Re-attaching the Detached through Critical Analysis: Suggestions for Classroom Use

The variety of characters, attitudes, opinions, worldviews, and beliefs displayed on the dream screen is usually detached in contemporary media's one-dimensional presentation of *Karagoz*. For instance, many characters from *Karagoz* tradition rarely appear on screens or pages of today's media, yet they were originally of much importance in the formation of a pictorial, musical, and linguistic representation of various discourses under Ottoman regime. One of the main reasons why *Karagoz* has survived so long was that people from different walks of life were represented on its screen such as drunks, gamblers, workers, elites, various ethnicities, children, and students. An article written by one of the few shadow puppeteers in Turkey accuses TV shows or Internet animations of robbing *Karagoz* of its multicultural satire (Senyer, 2003, p. 3). Indeed, the name *ayna*, which means "mirror", was given to *Karagoz* screen because it, as mirrors do, reflects the image of its beholders, the society. The two images below from *Karagoz* plays are two examples of such inclusive discourse; an Ottoman teenager with his backpack and a Jewish musician.

On its outward appearance *Karagoz* could be deemed no more than a simple entertainment device, but in reality, this show is a profoundly meaningful product of Turkish-Islamic synthesis that has a complex history of almost a millennium. When the Turkic peoples conquered Anatolia (the Turkish peninsula) in 1071, they found a fertile ground of civilizations including Roman, Iranian, and Arabic peoples along with older inhabitants of Anatolia such as the Greeks and Hittites. Such fertility enabled Turks to combine their original cultural accumulations, which they carried with them all the way from the Mid-Asian context with the new ones. *Karagoz*, perhaps, is one of the best-preserved artifacts of such cultural mix. The forms in *Karagoz* puppetry exhibit a combination of multiple iconographies: A heavy Byzantium influence, an indispensable Islamic temperament toward depiction, and a characteristically Turkish palette. The characters look obviously Turkish with their costumes and facial features, while the two-dimensional way they are represented is reminiscent of the Byzantium icons. Yet the puppets still evoke an Islamic artistic feeling with their arabesque-like motifs and the two-dimensional spatial placement on the screen.

Despite its richness in terms of artistic form, most prints of *Karagoz* imagery in today's popular culture exhibit poor qualities whether reproduced mechanically or digitally. Figure 5 is an example of such poor quality printing on a little souvenir towel.

At first look, this print is a well-intentioned effort to preserve icons of cultural heritage, but indeed the poor image quality harms the above-mentioned artistic complexity. Images like these may be another tool to start in-class discussions on issues regarding the quality of mass media images and its effects on us.

In addition to image quality, the frequent use of *Karagoz* imagery in Turkish media can become an interesting ground for interdisciplinary discussions in art classes. The following image taken from an advertisement booklet of a chain of supermarkets in Turkey, for example, exploits *Karagoz* imagery in order to inform customers of the prices of the items they carry. *Karagoz*, here, is only a

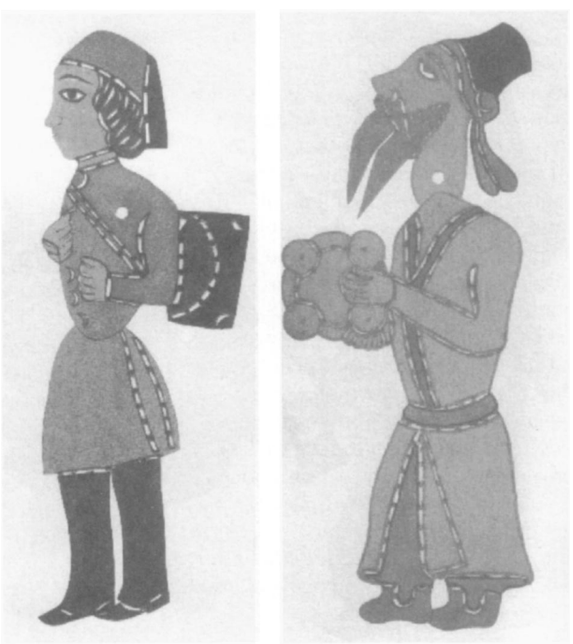


Figure 4. Two characters from *Karagoz* plays that reflect the multicultural setting. Topkapi Palace Museum Library, Istanbul, Turkey.



Figure 5. A souvenir towel with *Karagoz* and *Hacivad* printed on it. Photographed by the author.

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Figure 6. A section from a supermarket advertisement featuring *Karagoz* and *Hacivad*. Photographed by the author.

An art teacher can start an educational discussion in which s/he can facilitate students toward understanding the mechanisms of marketplace, teach them to approach such careless applications critically, and mention the significance of authenticity through telling them about the cultural aura of *Karagoz*.

tool of a marketing strategy, and expectedly there is no reference or rational link to the contextual or artistic aspects. Noting that, an art teacher can start an educational discussion in which s/he can facilitate students toward understanding the mechanisms of marketplace, teach them to approach such careless applications critically, and mention the significance of authenticity through telling them about the cultural aura of *Karagoz*.

Another significance of *Karagoz* is its extraordinary place in the figural representation legacy of Islamic art. Compared to the European traditions of art, the Islamic context has produced little figural representations. Especially in religious contexts, Islamic civilizations have refrained from portraiture and have emphasized geometric and floral motifs, still lives, and calligraphy. *Karagoz*, at first look, might seem as an exception of the Islamic "reluctance" toward figurative representation, especially of human beings.

Despite the widespread misconceptions regarding a ban on figurative representation, the Islamic orthodoxy in the Ottoman era exhibits an acceptance of *Karagoz* imagery and the strong evidence for this is the Ottoman archives about shadow puppeteers sponsored by the sultanate (And, 1985). Some religious authorities declared it unsuitable for a Muslim. Yet the majority of the Ottoman theologians either did not comment on *Karagoz* puppet theatre and the use of human images in it, or they often encouraged people to participate among the *Karagoz* audience. Those who encouraged *Karagoz* puppetry had in mind the possible manifestation of an Islamic universe in *Karagoz*. Just like Plato's allegory of the cave in which he demonstrates the temporary nature of earthly existence, they saw in *Karagoz* a simplified and highly didactic version of the Muslim understanding of life on earth. The white *Karagoz* screen (the dream screen) symbolized temporary life; the puppets were humans with almost no will; the unseen puppeteer represented "a superior will" that manipulated all existence; and the light was considered the energy that enables us to see the world while concealing the Divine. The spotless screen, the animated images that inhabit it and the flickering light all had their philosophical implications in Islam (Ekler, 2003).

Today, in popular media, such philosophical richness is considered irrelevant. The original screen of *Karagoz* has been transformed to the television screen. The puppeteer has become the animator and the allegory has been televised. Figure 7, a photograph of the TV screen that was taken from the cartoon series named *Karagoz* on the Turkish Channel 7, is an example of such transformation. Whichever intention dominated its making, its effects definitely do not comply with the philosophical discourse in which the Ottomans have placed shadow theatre. This series is at most

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Carrying out similar discussions in art classes with such critical ideas can move our students from the passive position of consuming what is given toward an active position of questioning, responding to, and reconsidering the given.



Figure 7. A screen shot from the cartoon series called *Karagoz* on one of the Turkish TV channels. Photographed by the author.

another cartoon that has to compete with *The Lion King*, *Tom and Jerry*, and *The Simpsons*. It has to compete with them because, in its every detail, it mimics them and leaves its own tradition behind.

Mentioning and illustrating examples of such images, art teachers can create opportunities for students to explore differing spiritual attitudes toward figural representation in fresh and interesting ways.

Ugur Goktas (2002) comments on the current applications that are presenting *Karagoz* plays through Windows Media Player® and other means of Internet media. In his article "The Dream Play of the Dream City," for example, Ugur Goktas (2002) asks interesting questions regarding the recently written stories for an online *Karagoz* theatre site: "If *Karagoz* is going to space, why is he wearing 16th century clothes?" (p. 64). The cultural and social structure *Karagoz* originated, he argues, is being degenerated by such careless applications (Goktas, 2002). Carrying out similar discussions in art classes with such critical ideas can move our students from the passive position of consuming what is given toward an active position of questioning, responding to, and reconsidering the given.

What we call "popular media" are sets of capital-based institutions that have their own various aims, interests, and effects. At times these might cause situations that contradict our educational ideals. For me, seeing *Karagoz* advertising cream cheese on a supermarket handout was frustrating at first, but it is also potentially encouraging for newer instructional strategies. *Karagoz* is just one of many possible departure points which can *educe* new horizons for today and for the future.

Given the inflation of careless representations of traditional forms such as Virgin of Guadalupe, Kachinas, and totems in popular culture, the task ahead of art teachers in the United States and elsewhere is challenging. Yet, school can re-attach the detached by critically unfolding the ways popular media exploits examples of visual culture. While not all images in popular culture exhibit a detachment of images from their cultural, historical, and artistic essences, it should still be considered one of the art teacher's essential duties to keep a close and critical eye on mass media. After all, formation of a critical visual literacy on our students' part is not just a luxurious extension of their artistic skills, but a major necessity for them to survive under the bombardment of popular images in today's world.

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

This article includes excerpts from my ongoing dissertation study which problematizes the current attitudes in art education, especially the particular ones in Turkish art education practice, towards the place of figurative representation in the culture of Islam.

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