

Identity Construction in Pepée—Cartoon Series: A Critical Analysis Based on Visual Culture Approach

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Abstract—Visual Culture paradigm in Art Education suggests understanding visual imagery in its context based on a critical approach. In this approach, it is suggested that analyzing and understanding visual constructs is only possible through deconstructing phenomena in terms of social hierarchy and power relationships in a society. Pepée is a TV cartoon series, being broadcasted in Turkey. For the lower age groups it is considered an exemplary, educational cartoon series. In this paper, the grandfather character in the series is being deconstructed in terms of identity, based on traditional Turkish political dynamics. Although, the character seems apolitical at first sight, it is rather interesting how it unfolds when analyzed within sociological, political, and societal power dynamics and perspectives. What we are teaching to our children and how the informal educational processes are handled seems controversial. In the study, content analysis was used to analyze visual information. Six art educators analyzed the grandfather character and then their inferences were compared based on underlying cultural identification measures constructed in Turkey's social dynamics and political power relationships throughout 20th Century. The results revealed that the character was designed based on a certain ideological perspective which partly omitted identity constructs built through sociological fundamentals over hundreds of years.

Keywords—Visual Culture, Social power dynamics, Critical pedagogy, identity, cultural identity.

I. INTRODUCTION

Visual Culture as a paradigm suggests educational approaches to understand and decode visual cultural phenomena that surround us. The paradigm supports a holistic understanding of human life and culture, especially based on consumer culture and power dynamics. In an ever changing world dominated by corporate capitalism; human beings are also perceived as consumers, being directed toward constructing our individual perceptions based on predetermined motives that are mainly driven by selling products, ideas, philosophies, and politics. While corporate capitalism has no limits in a global world of their sense, indigenous cultures increasingly started to be assimilated by predetermined values and a global culture. Nevertheless, we

still believe we take our individual decisions based on our free wills, and then we feel satisfied. When we compare today's world with the world of two hundred years ago, we created almost a universal culture of *T-shirt* and *jeans*, we proudly drink our universal drink—*Coke*—.

Over the last decades, much of the scholarly focus in art history and criticism has shown the influences of postmodernist theory: Examining and analyzing the ways in which images have functioned, been valued, and used, thus revealing the overt and hidden meanings or messages they conveyed to human society (Carter, 2008).

II. POLITICAL EQUILIBRIUM

Despite the global uniformity created by corporate capitalism, many societies have preserved their sense of uniqueness and unique cultural identities. Consciously or unconsciously, some societies have created a reflexive response against uniformity of this global culture, sub-culture, non-existence of culture, loss of culture or whatsoever. Turkey is one of the countries experiencing a cultural deterioration caused by globalization. There have been conflicts between conservatives, traditionalists and Left wing politics that pioneered progressivism in Turkey. As being a physical and cultural bridge between East and West; Christianity and Islam; Turkey has been a battleground of Western values versus Eastern values; or maybe clash of civilizations. Westernization of Turkey has a long history of its own started during Ottoman period, by the collapse of the empire, the new, young Turkish nation, Turkish Republic was founded based on new values and a new worldview. The constitutional law was based on a secular model of government, which was identified as *Laique* (French term for secular). Merriam-Webster defined secularism as “*indifference to or rejection or exclusion of religion and religious considerations*” (Secularism, 2017). This was revolutionary when we think about a six hundred years of government; its rulers were also *Caliphs* of Islam. The renunciation of *Caliphate* intended to cut direct ties between new *Laique* Republic and Islam. This was not all, many other conversions were also enforced to Westernize society and the governing bureaucracy, including but not limited to; *Hat reform, Outfit reform, and Alphabet reform*, etc.

Furthermore, the predecessor government consisted of many ethnicities and some of these ethnicities were

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associated with and taken responsible for the collapse of the empire. Therefore, the successor, new *Laique* Republic was founded on a stronger sense of nationalism. There were no ethnic minorities but Turks, no matter what your ethnic origin was but you were Turkish. The new national anthem and parliamentary oath were also created based on this ideology. The new nation's overall figure was rather Western, and all the laws and regulations were adapted from European nations accordingly. Religion was not considered as a fundamental based on *laïcité*. From the beginning, there have also been tensions between supporters of *laïcité* and other groups such as groups of orthodox Islamists, and supporters of conservative nationalism.

Over time, various political groups have built their own cultural symbols, values, and sign systems. Understanding cultural imagery and iconography is essential for understanding a particular culture or group. Dress codes, hair styles, religious and other cultural signs and symbols, types of foods we consume, the visual design elements and such; all may have inferences in relation to a particular culture or group. In today's Turkey, there are also certain imagery, cultural symbols, or even a vernacular that may be associated with particular worldviews, ideologies and understandings.

Visual Culture paradigm suggests understanding visual imagery based on power dynamics within a society (Duncum, 2003). From Marxist perspective, the power dynamics are not only shaped by capital but also other power structures such as religion and ideology. In today's Turkish society, conflicting political arguments, religion, cultural phenomena, social hierarchy, military as a political power, and social power structures have been largely at play within this ramification. Educational policies have also been part of these political debates and conflicts. Stereotypes and representations of *Left* and *Right* political ideologies expressed themselves through imagery, symbols and sign systems as well. The executive cabinets have mainly shaped formal education policies but informal educational practices varied based on respective ideologies. Political views showcased and manifested themselves through mass media such as TV networks, newspapers. Media networks are stereotypically categorized as being *Right* or *Left* and so forth. While such an atmosphere essentially contributes to democratic society within diversified views (Heise, 2004), we witness visual manifestations of ideologies also constantly trying to shape our perceptions to manipulate our worldviews.

In general, accredited curriculums are designed to build expected citizen outcomes of particular regimes, reproduce the labor force and perpetuate dominant ideologies of society (Freire, 1970). Although, we all believe we take our personal decisions based on our freewill, ideologically structured educational systems constantly shape our worldviews and perceptions.

III. METHOD

In this study, a children's cartoon series, *Pepée*, was focus of investigation in terms of visual perception constructs of a character, the grandfather. Children's cartoons may have great influence on our personal identity since we all start to learn many things from them. They typically have social, psychological and educational aspects; their contents are regulated, assessed and censored by governmental agencies in terms of the projected values and psychological manipulative agents. The grandfather character projected in *Pepée* cartoon series was analyzed in terms of visual representations of previously explained cultural structure of Turkish controversial politics. Six art teachers evaluated two episodes of the series based on a survey questionnaire designed to enlighten projected personality traits, ideological traits and demographic traits of the grandfather.

Visual Cultural critique of media images in art education may contribute significantly to a democratic society as creating informed citizens through critical discourse (Heise, 2004). Even though, this approach was also criticized as being a *Marxist far-Left* attempt (Smith, 2005), in today's world, it is our responsibility to teach our children to perceive and discriminate imagery within contextual, social, ideological and other power perspectives.

Six art educators were asked independently to watch and analyze two 10-minute episodes of *Pepée* cartoon series, then answer a questionnaire designed to decode visual elements while omitting verbal expressions. The two episodes included scenes in which the grandfather character appeared in various contexts. The questionnaire included questions to figure out underlying meanings behind visual symbols and imagery about the personality of grandfather, his social status, his family status and relationships, his ideological inclination, his worldview, his religious status and his cultural background. Duncum (2010) suggested seven principles for examining various forms of imagery, these principles are: Power, ideology, representation, seduction, gaze, intertextuality, and multimodality. Power is the key principle because most of the other principles intersect with issues of power. Power is central to a consideration because all images involve an assertion of ideas, values, and beliefs that serve to interests of those whom they are made—political, social, economic—and audiences, in their turn exercise the power of interpretation (p. 6). Therefore, the questionnaire was designed based on these principles. The images and the people represented in pictures are also subject to stereotyping: for example, of women, men, ethnicities, and sexual orientation (Duncum, 2010). In the analysis section, all critics similarly reported stereotyping of a grandfather figure as well.

IV. ANALYSIS

Similar conclusions were reported based on the projected grandfather image. No religious symbols or visual elements were projected neither about the grandfather nor other characters in the episodes. Religion is the major and the

most obvious element of a culture; however, Pepée's grandfather was projected as a *Lâïque* figure. Based on the official *Lâïque* constitutional structure of the government this was expected. The Pepée series is broadcasted by the government's national public TV network, TRT.

V. DECODING VISUAL IMAGERY

A. *The Evil Eye Talisman*

Instead of religious signs or imagery, a few other cultural symbols were projected, the most obvious one, the *Turkish Evil Eye Talisman* as an accessory on Pepée himself. *Evil Eye* has been a major Turkish cultural symbol for centuries and it was rooted to old Turkish culture long before Turks converted to Islam in the history. It is very common and still used among public and not seen as a religious sign. The *Evil Eye* comes from Turks' older religion, *Shamanic* belief system and culturally preserved until today. Ideologically, *Evil Eye* is a safe haven and can be used by all people from all political views. Although it is very old, it is identified as a secular (*Lâïque*) element, and does not project further information about a person whether the person is Muslim, devout or from another religion.

B. *The Moustache*

The moustache is very common especially among countrymen, and is seen as very traditional and old fashioned. Clean shaved men are oppositely projected as modern and Western. It may also seem interesting that various ideologies among public express themselves by means of *sporting* various styles of moustaches. Based on the analysis of four critics, the grandfather's moustache represents Left to moderate Left ideology, which is represented by the traditional Left party, CHP, *The Folks' Republican Party*, official founder of the Turkish Republic. This party is also generally represents *Lâïque* ideological disposition and worldviews. As being neither far Left, nor radical, it is ideologically seen as acceptable and socially appropriate political standing. Although, it has own traditional values in itself, it also represents worldviews associated with West and progressiveness; does not favor Islamic or religious worldviews in general; rather supports isolating Islam from commonplace. From their perspective, especially Islam as a religion is seen as too conservative and it is seen as against any kind of progress that is possible only by *laïcité*. Therefore, according to this worldview, the progress is only possible through segregating Islam from communal institutions and bureaucracy.

When it comes to Islam, this view is far from accepting religious freedom that is common among Western democracies and Western Left, nevertheless declares itself as being Left and Social Democrat. Freedom or ban of women's wearing headscarves has been a long battle between this worldview and various other political views in Turkey. *The*

Folks' Republican Party traditionally supported prohibition of headscarves in governmental institutions; until recently, girls wearing headscarves were not allowed at schools, that is preventing their basic human right of education and is also seen against religious freedom in typical Western Left political orientation. Another governing political party (AKP) in power abolished the prohibition recently. Other four analyses by the critics also supported this ideological decoding that the grandfather seems or gives a vibe that he reads newspapers that typically represented previously mentioned *Lâïque* worldview or political ideology.

C. *The Old-fashioned Cardigan Jacket*

The grandfather's cardigan jacket is a typical old-fashioned jacket worn by elder Turkish men. It is very common among elderly and retired men, and a comfortable low-budget outfit solution not typically worn by *Middle Class* or *Upper Middle Class*. It is very typical and familiar around country but does not represent a certain culture, ideology or unique identity. It may be defined as a low budget; retired-elderly outfit but still does not represent a specific cultural value in particular, it is safe to codify as a *Lâïque* choice.

D. *The Oriental Corner*

Following by the migration to big cities because of employment opportunities and other economical reasons, small towns and villages started to attract interest again for reasons of longing, nostalgia, homesickness and headaches of cities. Once *Modernism* was observed as the ultimate solution for progress, it was not fruitful to create a new culture and identity besides consumerism. While rejecting traditional and blaming it for being an obstruction against progress; people voluntarily left everything behind, almost everything that represented old, traditional, and old-fashioned. *Modernism* was almost equal to a new ideology. However, neither it was successful in building a new identity, nor building a new identity was a purpose.

Nowadays, people started to feel a longing for the old, the old with its authentic personality, and the cultural identity that had been built over hundreds of years. This longing for the lost cultural identity started to manifest itself in various forms. *The oriental corner* is one of the expressions of this longing in Turkish society today. The grandfather's house has a porch with a pergola and an *oriental corner* in it. An *oriental corner* in Turkey is typically a sitting area designed based on rural style arrangements of objects common in the countryside. *Oriental corners* are typically not sophisticated but rather extremely naïve in terms of cultural elements used.

The authentic culture in its complexity has been long forgotten, instead every single, naïve objects used in the countryside is collected and brought into the so-called *oriental corners*. Wool hand-woven socks with folk motifs, a *baglama*—a traditional folk instrument—, and some copper kitchen utensils typically used to certify authenticity of an oriental corner. Sadly, when most people think about authentic Turkish culture, this so-called *Oriental Corner*

setting is the first thing coming to mind. As the typical perception, as long as you have an *oriental corner* at your home, you basically respect, value and preserve authentic Turkish culture.

Baglama has a further value in terms of preserving folk culture for the *Folks' Republican Party*. It represents folks, working class, peasants and proletariat so is attributed to certain cherished values of Leftist ideology. For example, if you play piano as an instrument you may be seen as a *bourgeois*, so playing a folk instrument is ideologically more appropriate such as a *baglama*. However, *oriental corners* typically do not have any association with religion, thus can be described as a *Laique* setting. We spend more time dealing with objects than we do with people, and we use objects as markers of identity and meaning (Duncum, 2003). A cultural identity based simply on local, folklore elements may be very *Laique*, but is also a shallow perception of culture and identity. *Oriental corners* represent a widespread deterioration of history and cultural values in Turkish society today.

E. Family Values

Chalmers (2005) suggested based on McFee (1966) that careful content analysis of the values being projected through mass media, as well as continued study of the diversity of values being projected (p. 139). Four critics reported that the *Pepée* episodes deliberately stressed or projected family values. A kind, compassionate, affectionate, modest, considerate, tolerant, kindhearted, gentle, thoughtful grandfather who represents all the positive values fundamental for an ideal Turkish family which is also fundamental for the future healthy society. Based on the episodes, *Pepée* and his family visit their grandfather's, and spend their summers with the big family. Apparently, for the children audience future ideals are embedded in idealized images for our future society.

F. Surrounding Cultural Identity

Five critics reported that environmental design elements, cultural atmosphere, visual imagery and symbols did project neither Turkish identity, nor another culture. In fact, no cultural identity was represented besides previously mentioned *Evil Eye Talisman*, the moustache, and an apparent Turkish flag. The architectural styles of houses, environmental design elements and outfits of characters did not address a certain cultural identity. This was surprising when we think about previously mentioned subcommunicating official ideology. Perhaps, it may also be result of enforcing a *Laique* underlying attitude in constructing an identity for *Pepée*.

The main character, *Pepée*, the name itself does not suggest even a remote association to Turkish identity. It rather recalls a Latino name, which is part of another culture on the other side of the world, far away from Turkey. It may also be that a *Laique* emphasize did result in elimination of religiously cultural values and imagery that consequently created a faceless personality without identity. Based on the historical political conflicts in relation to *Laique* worldview,

the culturally faceless representation may well be identified as an identity crisis.

G. An Ideal Citizen Archetype

Three critics especially stressed that the grandfather definitely does not question government, ideology, or authority. He represents an ideal citizen who votes, works diligently, builds and preserves family values, adhere the law, observes religious days without being orthodox, national and family values come as priority, religion's share in his life is rather small and symbolic respectively. All these traits expected from a typical Turkish citizen are set by the official ideology; freedom of individual choices, and individuality are hardly stressed. Therefore, as an archetype the grandfather never questions authority, government or law as long as everything is in accordance with *Laique* constitutional ideology. National and social values come before individuals, individual rights, personal choices and free will. We can observe many similar examples of visual manifestations of conflicting political views in the media.

The 'identity' is a complex phenomenon including heavily loaded cultural fragments. While particular ideological projections are hidden in this cartoon series, it does not represent a specific cultural identity at all. Further, neither the name of the main character *Pepée*, nor his sister's name *Sheela* is Turkish names. Duncum (2003) quoted: "Ordinary objects 'convey and condense' ideas about the world and our place in it so that the link between artifacts and identity is an intrinsic and profound feature of social experience" (Myers, 2001, 3). Visual imagery and symbols in visual media seem to have meanings further than they appear to represent. Unlike the sciences, the arts are bound to their cultures of origin (Efland, 2005). Similarly, visual cultural elements and materials cannot be characterized as freestanding without its cultural identity.

As Burton (2000) pointed out, "Even in the earlier years of childhood, free expression was often subject to the power of media-dominated images. This was not only thought to curtail youngsters' own imaginative efforts, but, in the absence of any pedagogical intervention, also cut them adrift from the larger world of aesthetic understanding" (p. 332). We often can witness such cartoons and imagery targeting children, either for building future consumer minds or simply for shaping ideologies or maintaining societal power structures and status quo. Duncum (2003) suggested similarly that society is structured by dominance and that signifying practices are always a means of establishing and maintaining power, but nevertheless that people can resist and negotiate meaning for themselves. Perhaps, resisting and negotiating may not be a choice at earlier ages, and worse, you may well be forgotten your questioning ability when you grow up with visual cultural manipulations. Media and powers behind them slowly and constantly shape not only our perceptions but also our identity.

As our educational objective we need to work on understanding how to assist students to think about the ways they have been influenced by seductive images, how they

have tried to use images in persuasive ways themselves and then to assess the value of all of this in our contemporary cultural context (Boughton, 2004). Most of the times even recent past historical and political events are unknown to our students, teaching them coding and decoding of visual culture forms should be one of our objectives in the classroom (Chalmers, 2005).

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