

Chapter 11

The Past as a Spectacle: *The Magnificent Century*

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ABSTRACT

Television plays an important role in shaping our perception of the past. Popular television fiction selects, alters, and reinterprets the past in order to appeal to a broad audience. The Magnificent Century (2011–present) is one such television drama, which unfolds during the reign of the Ottoman Sultan, Suleiman the Magnificent. The show, which is the most expensive Turkish television drama to date, promises its audience a spectacle. It has proven a huge success domestically and as of 2013 has been syndicated in 46 other countries. The show’s success has been commodified both officially and unofficially. However, this is not to say that it receives unanimous acclaim, even in Turkey. It has provoked controversy due to the representation both of the period and of Suleiman himself. This chapter reflects on the implications of a historical-fiction television series for the contemporary social and political spheres.

INTRODUCTION

The Magnificent Century (2011– present) is a television drama that unfolds during the reign of the Ottoman Sultan, Suleiman the Magnificent. The show, which is the most expensive Turkish television drama to date, promises its audience a spectacle. It has proved a huge success domestically and as of 2013 has been syndicated in 46 other countries. However, its representations of a past epoch have proved controversial. As Douglas Kellner notes, “cultural studies as a diagnostic critique not only engages in ideological appraisal of the texts and spectacles of media culture, but

analyzes how they put on display social content, such as hopes and fears, circulate ideological discourses and political positions, and allow a diagnosis of contemporary pathologies, anxieties, political contestation, and ambiguities” (Kellner, 2003, p. 28). As a serialized prime-time drama marketed to a diverse audience, *The Magnificent Century* selects and alters the past, turning it into spectacle for contemporary viewers. This article explores this transformation and investigates how a piece of popular television fiction has been woven into ongoing public debates about Turkish national identity.

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BACKGROUND

History Serialized on Television

History is “the reconstruction always problematic and incomplete, of what is no longer” (Nora, 1989, p. 8). It selects, alters and invents the past. It “is a view, not a copy of what happened.” In the words of David Lowenthal, “history is an interpretation of the past rather than a replica” (1998, p.112), and as such “only a fraction of events have been noted, only a few of past lives are remembered, and only fragments of flawed records survive in decipherable form” (Lowenthal, 1998, p.113). The evocation of the past in film or television dramas often sparks controversy. Which parts of history have been chosen for narration? And whose contemporary interests are being served by this or that representation of the past? In accordance with the conventions of drama and fiction, films and television shows emotionalize, personalize, and dramatize history (Rosenstone, 2001, p.56). They transform historical events into spectacular experiences in order to reach more viewers, and as Andreas Huyssen points out, we “know that media do not transport public memory innocently. They shape it in their structure and form” (2001, p. 66).

Contemporary media play an important role in shaping our understanding of history by offering us realistic images and narratives of the past. What we witness is a transformation of the media narratives and institutions through which history and memory are transmitted (Baer, 2001, p. 491). Alison Landsberg has coined the term “prosthetic memory” to refer to virtual memories that are circulated in mass media culture. These “originate outside a person’s lived experience, and yet are taken on, and worn by that person through mass cultural technologies of memory” (2004, p. 19). Similarly, Marianne Hirsch uses the term “post memory” to describe “the relationship that the generation after those who witnessed cultural or collective trauma bears to the experiences of

those who came before, experiences that they ‘remember’ only by means of the stories, images, and behaviors among which they grew up” (2008, p. 106).

The distinctive aesthetic qualities of the medium must be considered in any discussion of whether television is suitable for the representation of history. An insistent “present-ness” differentiates television’s temporal dimension, and as such, television has been conceptualized as the annihilation of memory, and consequently of history (Doane, 2001, p.269, 274). Jean Baudrillard defines television as a cold medium, radiating oblivion, dissuasion, and extermination. He claims that television is “the veritable final solution to the historicity of every event” (2008, p. 91). According to Fredric Jameson “in a society which has become incapable of dealing with time and history, ... we seemed condemned to seek the historical past through our own pop images and stereotypes about that past, which is itself forever out of reach” (1983, p.118). Viewers’ understanding of history is further altered by the culture industry’s widespread embrace of stereotypes when representing the past. Adorno claims that “the more stereotypes become reified and rigid in the present set-up of cultural industry, the more people are tempted to cling desperately to clichés” and risk losing their insight into reality (1991, p. 171). The fact that memory is increasingly mediated by the culture industry has “raised ... questions of the politics of the image, debates about authenticity and issues of commodification and consumerism.” (Sturken, 2008, p.75)

Guy Debord claims that every aspect of life has turned into an “immense accumulation of spectacles”, “[a]ll that once was directly lived has become mere representation” (1995, p. 12). History is subsumed into the spectacle as well. In his 1987 book, *Heritage Industry*, Robert Hewison suggests that the idea of heritage in the United Kingdom developed into a cottage industry in which sanitized versions of the past are produced

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