

Image Acts and Visual Communities: Everyday Nationalism in Contemporary

Turkey

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Summary

In this study, I investigate the image politics of nationalist practices in everyday life by focusing on contemporary Turkey and tracking the way images of the nation travel through a variety of fields, taking various shapes. I depart from the idea that images provide an especially productive ground to analyze the contested and negotiated dynamics of national identity (re)production and community (de)formation in everyday life. Thus, I focus less on the history of official nationalist imagery production by the state, and more on the reproduction and performance of nationalist imagery in everyday life, by the people themselves. These people not only look *at*, but also look *with* images. In this way, my aim is to contribute to the understanding of contemporary performances of national identity and the popular, corporeal and affective mechanisms generated through nationalist images in Turkey, as well as to the theorization of the relationship between nationalism and imagery in general.

I identify five different types of images as significant for analyzing the ways in which national identity formation and image politics intertwine: commodified images, bio-images, ghostly images, media images and disorienting images. Through a variety of objects, such as commodities, masks, tattoos, advertisements, films, shadowy apparitions, monuments and artworks, I explore how images act both to draw borders around communities and to provide the means to challenge these borders, as well as examining the cultural and political implications of the “visual communities” people form around these images. I look at the ways in which visual communities provide shortcuts to existing notions of national language, race, as well as ethnicity and gender, and how they work to cover up the “imaginative” quality of the nation, turning its fictive status into a tangible entity with material effects and consequences. The identification of these image acts and visual communities does not only reveal the specificities of the particular context of 2000s Turkey, but also offers a theoretical path and conceptual kit to analyze the intertwinedness of nationalism and visual culture in other parts of the world.

The 2000s proves to be a relevant period to analyze the production of (Kemalist) nationalism in Turkish everyday life through the realm of images as this period features a dual process of the rise and crisis of official nationalism. During the 2000s, Islamic conservative nationalism not only gained momentum, but also challenged the historical continuity of the official Kemalist form of nationalism,

incrementally establishing its own political and economic hegemony. As a result, gestures of defending, protecting and performing Kemalist secular national identity multiplied in everyday life as the hegemonic presence of Kemalism gradually decreased. The increasing visibility and power of alternative national representations of AKP (Justice and Development Party)-type Islamic neoliberal conservatism, as well as of various alternative Kurdish and leftist imaginations accelerated Kemalist nostalgia and fueled the need for novel survival techniques. This in turn increased the role of the body and of popular consumption cultures in producing and performing national identity, which indicates a new collaboration between nationalism, popular culture and corporeal practices, resulting in the production of a new visual grammar in need of analysis.

The dual aspect of images as both projections of ideologies, made possible by specific contexts, and active constituents of these contexts is one of the guiding theoretical assumptions informing my analysis of this visual grammar. Thus, my aim is less to define what images are than to look at what they do and how they act by taking different forms and mediating social encounters in myriad ways. W. J. T. Mitchell argues that while the socially constructed and ideological nature of images has been a common assumption in the study of images, “a dialectical concept of visual culture cannot rest content with a definition of its object as the social construction of the visual field, but must insist on exploring the chiastic reversal of this proposition, *the visual construction of the social field*” (2002: 171, emphasis in text). I find it especially productive to extend this understanding to the realm of nationalism, in which images have a crucial role in reproducing, performing and perpetuating the idea of a nation, a national community and a national identity.

Hence, I conceptualize images as performing actions, as playing an active role in shaping what they claim to be depicting, rather than as merely representing a preexisting reality. Like J. L. Austin’s “speech acts”, which are performative utterances that do what they say, “image acts” performatively shape what they portray and thus have direct effects and consequences. In this sense, the term “image act” refers to two simultaneous and inseparable processes that affect each other in dynamic and contextual ways: images which act and at times force people to do things, and individuals acting through, with and upon images, at times forcing them to do things. This dual process is especially important to explore in the context of nationalism, in

which object and subject, image and body, tactics and strategies, are continuously negotiated, as I argue throughout my chapters.

In the first chapter, I focus on the appearance of national images in the form of commodities since the 1990s, with a focus on the 2000s, when they gained more visibility. I look at commodities such as flag-shaped necklace pendants, rings and lighters embroidered with Atatürk's image, as well as at t-shirts depicting nationalist symbols and quotations. Through these items, I explore the ways in which images of the nation become part of everyday life, appearing in smaller, more portable and more diverse forms than more familiar patriotic items, such as flags and statues in public spaces and institutions. Since this is a rather new phenomenon in the relatively short history of the Turkish nation-state, I look closely at the political motivations for and the consequences of the conversion of official, collective national symbols into commodity objects that can be bought, sold, carried and worn by individuals.

I frame this process as a response by Kemalist nationalism to the crisis it faced in the 2000s and argue that commodified image acts, which both keep the aura that is characteristic of nationalist symbols intact and allow people to invent their own everyday rituals, reveal more than the seemingly routine market- and tourism-oriented strategies would suggest. Rather than indicating the desacralization and disenchantment of national imagery, they enable it to be diffused more broadly in everyday life in novel, more corporeal and more affective ways.

The question of how these images act is complemented by a focus on how people act upon, with and through these images, how they configure commodified images in everyday life and the narratives they construct through this configuration. Rethinking Mieke Bal's conceptualization of collecting as a narrative in relation to consumption allows me to look at this aspect, as well as at the ways in which the narratives constructed through these commodified images function in people's encounters, perpetuating a sense of crisis that I argue has become "banalized". In addition, the notion of the fetish enables me to further explore the encounter between people and commodified images. Bringing together Sigmund Freud's well-known theorization of the fetish as a substitute and Louise Kaplan's focus on the strategic function of fetishism in the context of nationalism, I look at the role of commodities in holding on to a sense of national identity in a context of perceived crisis by employing the materiality of things against the "immateriality" of national identity.

The second chapter moves to a seemingly more intimate realm, that of the

body, by exploring what I call “bio-images”, which are images that become part of the body or that are made out of body parts, such as masks, tattoos and flags made out of blood. Bio-images are strong, tangible markers of a particular national identity caught up in a struggle to survive, revealing the increasing role of the body in politics. Looking at how the political is engraved on the face as a mask, under the skin as a tattoo, or externalized through blood opens up a perspective on the ways in which the body is turned into a prosthesis of the modern Turkish nation-state in the face of loss and trauma. The coexistence of strength and fragility, vitality and mortality, in relation to the body resonates significantly with the seemingly paradoxical rise and crisis of nationalism and the oscillating quality of national identity between lack and fulfillment.

Structurally, the chapter moves closer to the body in each section, by first focusing on the Atatürk masks people put on in nationalist demonstrations, which cover the surface of the body, then on tattoos of national symbols, which actually become part of that surface itself, and finally on the case of a group of high school children making a Turkish flag out of their own blood, externalizing their body in the form of an image. The Bakhtinian notion of carnival, Michel Foucault’s conceptualization of the panopticon and Michel de Certeau’s notion of tactics and strategies inform my analysis by providing different entry points into the discussion of how images are not only looking or looked at, but also looked *with*, corporeally.

In the third chapter, I move from the body to apparitions and monuments that, as image acts, produce the nation through the haunting body of Atatürk, which I argue to be in a constant loop of dying and being reanimated. The notion of ghostliness contributes to my discussion of the liminality of these images, alluding to national identity’s status as oscillating between absence and presence. Close readings of Atatürk’s annual appearance as a shadow on a mountain slope, celebrated as a festival, and of an enormous Atatürk statue erected in 2009 allow me to explore the haunting character of nationalist image acts, which “conjure up the nation by circumventing the history of its imaging” (Rafael 610). Looking at an ephemeral image like the Atatürk apparition as a monument and at a monument like the giant Atatürk bust as a ghostly entity blurs the association of the former with ephemerality and of the latter with solidity. As such, the fluidity of the forms and localities of nationalist image acts is revealed.

In Chapter 4, I move from ghostly images to more “humanized” images of Atatürk. I focus on two recent media representations: the first television commercial in which Atatürk is portrayed by an actor (Isbank, 2007) and the first blockbuster movie on Atatürk’s life (*Mustafa*, directed by Can Dündar, 2008). I argue that the national figure who walks, talks, bleeds and cries on the screen, as seen in contemporary media representations, reframes the notion of national hero in a way that creates “same heroes with new manners”. By exploring the metaphorical, allegorical and mythical burden put on the shoulders of this newly “humanized” figure in the two objects of analysis, I reflect upon the motives, methods and consequences of their attempt to reframe national images in line with the capacities and needs of media and popular culture.

Commodified images, bio-images, ghostly images and monuments, as well as media representations all attempt to create, in related but distinct ways, a unifying image of the nation. If one of the ways in which nationalism reproduces itself in everyday life is through a visual grammar by which one is supposed to make sense of the world and orient oneself towards the other, then it is crucial to also look at the images that disorient this grammar and question the subjectivity it calls for. Thus, in the last part of this study, I focus on images that turn these narratives into sites of struggle in order to explore the possibility of “disorienting” national imaginations, semantically and politically. I conceptualize the notion of disorientation as a shaking of an existing orientation, as a loss of destination, conveying a sense of ongoing ambiguity rather than the achievement of a new stasis.

Thus, in Chapter 5, I focus on three main tactics of disorientation that I identify in Vahit Tuna’s bust installation from the exhibition “We were always spectators...” in the art space DEPO, Istanbul, 2011: the reconfiguration of space, the superimposition of different visual elements, and the opening up of affective channels. The analysis of these tactics go beyond this specific installation and allows me to explore the role of distance, the correlation between physical closeness and the ability to grasp an image, the genre of portraiture and its subversion, and the role of affect in challenging the representational fixities of national symbols. In this way, I look at what disorientation can do, both in the specific context of contemporary Turkey and with regard to a more general discussion of aesthetics and politics, which is closely connected to the confidence in the possibility of another world that would radically challenge the demarcations that an exclusive national identity brings about.