Script of presentation delivered at invited workshop: “Legacies of Conquest: Interconnections and Memories of the Ottoman and Spanish Empires” at the Leibniz Institute of European History in Mainz, Germany on 26 January 2024. Title: Palimpsestuous screen: Mediating the conquest of Istanbul in the post-truth era.
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My thanks to the Leibniz Institute and Denise, Thomas, Barbara, and Richard for the invitation to join you here today, and to all of you for your time an attention. I’m happy to be here and I look forward to our conversation.

I’ve strayed a bit from the plans I set forth in the abstract, so the title has shifted, but we can touch on affect and gaming in the discussion if there’s interest in that.

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On January 15th tourists visiting Istanbul’s Aya Sofya Mosque were met with a surprise: the 6th century building, which had been free to enter since its reconversion from a museum in July of 2020, suddenly boasted a 25 euro entry fee. While the initial shock meant that, according to Agence France Press, “only a handful of visitors” were willing to pay (AFP 2024-01-15), this will presumably shift as expectations adjust.

The new fee is simply one of myriad changes that this storied building has seen. When it comes to its sacred/secular status and the matter of paid/unpaid entry, other key moments include its conversion from an Eastern Orthodox to a Catholic church during the Fourth Crusade in 1204, its return to Eastern Orthodoxy in 1261, its conversion into a mosque after Fatih Sultan Mehmed II’s conquest of Constantinople in 1453, its transition into a museum under Mustafa Kemal Ataturk in 1935, its reconversion into a mosque under Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in 2020, and the latest shift, which makes it the only mosque with paid entry that I am aware of in Turkey. Each of these moments has sought to redefine Aya Sofya’s use to some degree, and with that, inevitably, its identity.

As both a magnificent building and as a locus of deep history and

historical affect, Aya Sofya was and remains among the preeminent symbols of the conquest of Istanbul, featuring prominently in many of the accounts that come down to us of that event. This is certainly true of the accounts I wish to explore today: those appearing during the period of AKP rule in Turkey.

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I've chosen this period because a set of mutually constitutive trends appear to me to have coalesced at this time: first the AKP capitalized on and greatly accentuated a rising public interest in the Ottoman past; second, this has occurred simultaneous with a digital revolution in communication technologies that has greatly expanded the possibilities for producing audio-visual stories about this past, as well as avenues for their distribution and sharing; third, this period has seen the rise of competitive authoritarian politics in Turkey as Berk Esen and others have discussed. Both the interest in the Ottoman (and, more broadly, Islamist Turkic) past and the AKP's active control and exploitation of the digital revolution have had key roles in consolidating this authoritarian regime, and I've written a fair amount about the various forms this has taken. Audio-visual accounts about or referencing the 1453 conquest have flourished during this period in quick succession and with varied degrees of success, highlighting and eliding different aspects of the conquest in what might best be called a palimpsestuous relation with with past. (I employ this term, credited to Michael Alexander, and often used within academic discussions of literary adaptations, to highlight the necessarily re-written aspect of such accounts; and the sense of accretion and masking that such stories must also contain due to their long-explored nature.)

Indeed, the period under consideration has been subject to so many versions of the conquest that this re-mediation itself may change the nature of our relationship with the events. It is this phenomenon that I would like to explore today.

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I will do so in a four-part argument. Starting with the medium of film, I will

revisit the 2012 blockbuster film Fetih 1453 as a point of departure, touching on its points of emphasis in the recent canon of conquest media. I will next turn to television, to examine two Turkish broadcast serials (dizis) that were cancelled before they could take off, as well as a hybrid docu-drama by Netflix that fared better in a very different distribution scheme. Drawing on these three serials and the film I will next reflect on the role of the waffling signifier, which seems to be an emergent phenomenon in the era of rapid-fire remediation. I will then turn to a series of propaganda videos produced by the Directorate of Communication, highlighting the ways in which the waffling signifier is not simply a side effect of such remediation but quite possibly one of its intended aims. I will also discuss some of the other innovative approaches to exploiting the conquest practiced by the DOC, suggesting that they are part and parcel of a broader post-truth phenomenon in which Turkey is on the cutting edge. Throughout this discussion I will focus in particular on portrayals of Mehmed and Aya Sofya. This is not only a means to limit the discussion but also, as we will see, in keeping with the way the AKP government makes use of the conquest, which is ultimately my greatest point of interest.

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In other words: what can a bad movie, two failed TV shows, a docu-drama and some propaganda videos tell us about the ambient meaning of the conquest of Istanbul in Turkey today?

[slide]

Fetih 1453

I wrote about this and some of the early Ottoman TV dramas in 2014

Will share two brief examples.

[Slide - video]

Inverse orientalism - the tropes of orientalism are projected onto the Byzantines, whether we want to call this occidentalism or not could be a topic for discussion

[Slide - video - skip]
Digging the tomb of Eyup to find faith

[Slide - video]
Aya Sofya
Importance of building
Simplistic narrative
Bill Clinton moment

[slide]
Fatih
Also touched on in my 2014 piece
“Brave” enough to broach taboo topics
Competitive unigeniture

[slide - video]
We can see the stilted character of Mehmed here, but also the deep discomfort of this realization - a discomfort that may well have been shared by viewers.

[slide]
Mehmed: Bir Cihan Fatihi
Kenan Imirzalioglu - major actor
Strong supporting cast
Heavy investment
Private TV environment - not TRT, not (then) govnt ally, so highly competitive

[slide - video]
Aya Sofya as prize delayed

[slide - video - skip]
Red Apple literalized

[slide]
Rise of Empires: Ottoman
Streaming environment very different
Ratings not directly (publicly) part of the “game”
Commissioned as complete (mini) project
“Renewed”

[slide - Video - skip, check time]
Red Apple, Aya Sofya

Much could be said about these shows, but for now I want to highlight one point: the rapid succession of these often overlapping representations is, to my knowledge, unique. 4 versions in the course of 8 years.

One of the upshots of this is the waffling signifier: the image that, by something in its relation to other images, calls into question the very nature of the representation taking place.

[slide]
Mehmed - Gentile Belini (1480)

[slide]
Devrim Evin

[slide]
Mehmet Akif Alakurt

[slide]
Kenan Imirzalioglu

[slide]
Cem Yigit Uzumoglu

The situation works in the other direction too—amidst the many historical TV shows and films, there are actors who seem to have

specialized in such roles and, thus, they bring to each new role some accretion of their previous roles. Though this phenomenon has long been remarked upon within celebrity studies, I suggest that it takes on a refined dimension within the relatively limited confines of Turkish history.

[slide]
Selim Bayraktar
Candarli Halil Pasa - Rise of Empires
Sumbul Aga - Magnificent Century
Alpagu Khan - Destan

[slide]
Cengiz Coskun
Giustiniani - Fetih 1453
Turgut Alp - Resurrection Ertuğrul
Alparslan - Malazgirt 1071

Turgut Alp - government events, including the 563rd anniversary of the conquest of Istanbul

[slide]
Stakes of Waffling signifier?
confusion
comedy
reflection (Boym's reflective nostalgia)
but I'm most interested in possibilities for instrumentalization. While I do not know whether there is intent behind the waffling signifier, at least a speculative intent can be read into some of the ways it appears to be used.

[slide]
DOC propaganda videos
various sites of display

[slide]
Direction of Fahrettin Altun

Shared on Twitter

[slide - video - play] Kizil Elma
Watch - skip to Mehmed/RTE

[slide - video - play] Mavi Vatan
Start - Mehmet 1st - Mehmed 2nd w RTE and voice

[slide]
I've just published a piece on these videos and their coordination with historical TV drama

Point for today: waffling signifier is instrumentalized in allegorical fashion to reinforce a parallel between Erdoğan and Mehmed II - a parallel that's been part of discourse since Erdogan's "conquest" of the Istanbul mayorship in 1994.

[slide]
Post-truth environment
Strategy of the hyperreal
Altun wrote dissertation on McCluhan and Baudrillard—the latter a scholar of simulation, simulacra and the hyperrreal

[slide]
Baudrillard on nostalgia and hyperreal

We might call all of what I've discussed thus far the palimpsestuous screen: the screen in which multiple representations of the same figures and events overlap in such close temporal proximity that they begin to bleed into and through one another, calling all accounts into question as authoritative and (perhaps) highlighting, in line with post-truth logics, that affect will tend to trump a fact every time.

I'd like to highlight a further element of this palimpsestuous screen - the

monumental screen.

Expanding on what I've spoken about elsewhere as the "public screen" - AKP using screens in public to direct publics in innovative ways

Subset of DOC videos that could be best be described as installations on monuments - turning the monument itself into a screen for a very particular mediation of the conquest - mise en abyme, as the monument becomes the screen of its own story - or, rather, of a particular account of its own history

There has been an evolution:

1. Screen as literal in front of monument - 2020 conquest celebration

[slide - video]
Screen at Aya Sofya

2. Monuments as screens - 2021 - conquest celebration

[slide - video]
Galata Tower and Aya Sofya - but two different processes are at work here, perhaps with the idea of obfuscating the distinctions between them: 1) Galata literally becomes the screen for a projection in the first half; 2) Aya Sofya appears to the online viewer as a monumental screen, but the digital effects are being mapped on specifically for that viewer—the person sitting in front of Aya Sofya at that moment will see few, if any, of these effects. Crucially, this was a "live" broadcast, meaning these effects were being mapped in real time, so the claim to temporal copresence seems to have been important, as does the claim to te´chnical mastery and, of course, the overarching claim that the DOC, RTE, and MOCT are all the "legitimate" heirs to and stewards of this legacy. (More on this in a moment.)E

3. Monuments as hyperreal screens - all added digital effects

[slide - video]
2022 conquest celebration

The culmination (thus far) of this evolution seems to be the entirely digitally mapped projection onto the monumental screen. Here, the digital effects are so pervasive that it is difficult for me to discern whether the Aya Sofya pictured here is even a “real” layer in the image. This calls into question whether Aya Sofya is actually playing itself, suggesting that we are approaching what Baudrillard would call the simulacrum—the image of pure simulation with no relation to reality at all.

Part of the context here is likely the shift in mayorship in 2019—the retreat from physical celebrations such as the massive one held at Yenikapi in 2016 to the hyperreal seems to be an easy answer when the Istanbul municipality is now held by the opposition, which puts on its own (competing) celebrations marked by similar, but also distinct, visual and textual rhetorics spectacularized through massive screens.

This competition over the legacy of the conquest is part and parcel of the greater struggle over the legacy of the Ottoman (and Turkic) past that has been waged via screens in Turkey since the major controversies that emerged over Magnificent Century starting in 2011.

While the palimpsestuous screen is just a part of that struggle, it is noteworthy for the degree to which is draws us into the post-truth realm.