Turkish Shadow Puppetry and the Carnivalesque

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It was nighttime in Istanbul. Women, children, and men of all professions and class sat together facing a white cotton screen held up by a wooden frame in anticipation of a Karagöz performance. Among them were several European travelers who, having toured the city, decided they wanted to see the famous shadow puppetry for themselves. The lights in the area were suddenly extinguished; with the light of one olive oil lamp, the screen began to glow. An orchestra of drums, a string instrument, a flute, and a triangle sounded “quavering sounds, [that] enchant[ed] the Eastern ear, but which nearly [drove] the European listener mad. For a minute, or two, the transparency remained empty. Presently a funny little figure on a camel’s back scurried across, speedily followed by a cat running after a mouse.” The cat caught the mouse and swallowed him whole, causing the orchestra to emit “a sort of quivering shriek, intermingled with a rumbling rattle—possibly intended to illustrate the agonies of the luckless mouse in the torture-chamber of the cat’s stomach. […] a little wave of admiring whispers rippled through the chamber, to be presently silenced as the figures of two ladies were projected up on the screen. […] Then followed a scene with the fair ladies” so shocking that one of the Europeans present claims she “may not describe [it]—not even in Greek, let alone Latin!”

Thus opened a Karagöz performance. This 1907 description, which we shall return to later in this paper, paints a wonderfully vivid picture of the pre-show and captures the European alarm at the content of the Karagöz stories. But what could have been so shocking to this European woman that she would refuse to recount it, “not even in Greek, let alone [in] Latin”? What was this theatre that brought people, irrespective of class, gender, age, profession, religion or ethnicity, together in laughter? This paper will attempt to address these questions through a presentation of the origin of Karagöz theatre, its materiality (the stage, the puppets,
the puppeteers), and the structure that these plays took. Finally, this paper will show how Mikhail Bakhtin’s theories on the carnivalesque can illuminate Karagöz stories.

While most Karagöz plays center either on sexuality or language (if not both), they do so by satirizing a large variety of everyday scenes. Some of the many subjects that Karagöz theatre depicts include: circumcision, sports (such as wrestling), minstrel competitions, scenes of cuckolding, and of love affairs. There are also plays that include supernatural or pseudo-magical elements, disguises, explicit violence, nudity and sex. Most importantly, the majority of the plays involve the main character, Karagöz, gaining power – either through money, employment, or a strategic marriage—dreams with which many Turkish people could identify.

In each play, the eponymous Karagöz is always joined by his foil Hacivat, as well as any of a variety of stock characters. But who are these characters? Karagöz is the fool—a lower class man, with a rounded beard, who is brash in his mannerisms and not at all educated. Though while scandalous in his actions, he is not an immoral character; he is, rather, amoral, making “no pretence to the possession of any moral code”. His friend, Hacivat, has a pointed beard, is somewhat educated, morally upright, and is often beaten (à la Punch and Judy) by Karagöz. He embodies the lower class perception of middle-class ineffectiveness and pretention. Besides these two main characters, there were many stock characters, including the ‘cut’ (the Jew), the dancer, and the dandy, among many, many others. Each character would have an identifying tune that would be played when he entered and repeated at any following entrances. Despite the vast number of stock characters, no viziers, sultans, or other religious or political figures were to be found among them. As Daryo Mizrahi explains, this meant that despite the seeming absence of boundaries in Karagöz theatre, “the shadow plays […] do not

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2 Mizrahi, “One Man and his Audience” 3
3 ibid 4
4 Smith 190
5 Mizrahi, “One Man and his Audience” 4
6 Smith 188 and 190
7 ibid 190
8 And, “Karagöz” 32
transcend one of the central boundaries that divided the Ottoman community. They do not offer alternative political scenarios for the organization of society [...] what they did achieve is a higher degree of differentiation among the subject class.9 Within this subject class, however, no topic was off limits.

Karagöz plays all follow a basic structure, within which there is almost infinite opportunity for variation. Before the play itself begins, there is often a scene in which animals fight or try to outsmart each other.10 After the pre-show, the play opens with a prologue, followed by a dialogue and an interlude, and then by the main plot, which concludes with a brief finale. The content takes an “open form”, that is to say that the puppeteer draws from a series of episodes that he knows by heart.11 The episodes are performed independent of an overarching plot so that the puppeteer can, like a storyteller, pick whichever episodes he thinks his specific audience might appreciate and then switch to another episode if the first was not well received, while still maintaining the entertainment value of the performance.12 This is not to say that there is no coherence within the show—there is a unity of place (all of the episodes are depicted as taking place in the same neighborhood) and a certain coherence created by the character of Karagöz who, having appeared in the opening dialogue, always makes an appearance in the main plot as well.13

After the pre-show, Hacivat enters and begins the prologue with prayers to God and for the Sultan, which he follows with a song or a poem. He then sets the stage for the ensuing depiction of daily life, announcing that “what is to follow is not merely a shadow play but mirrors faithfully the world we live in and teaches [us] much”.14 He then declares that he would like to have a friend with whom he could speak. Karagöz arrives, but he quickly makes it clear that he is not Hacivat’s ideal friend since he hits Hacivat whenever the

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9 Mizrahi, “Diversity and Comedy in Ottoman Istanbul” 200
10 And, “Karagöz” 32
11 And, “The Traditional Turkish Theater” 95
12 ibid 76
13 ibid 77
14 And, “The Traditional Turkish Theater” 44
opportunity arises. The play then moves into the dialogue, during which Karagöz and Hacivat get into a heated debate (on whatever subject the puppeteer has decided the audience might like to hear debated). Over the course of the debate, the differences between the two men are highlighted: Hacivat uses his superficial knowledge to pontificate and Karagöz, either pretending to misunderstand or actually not understanding, responds with comedic turns of phrase or nonsense words (to Hacivat’s great frustration). Thus, the tensions felt between the educated bourgeois class and the uneducated lower class are represented through the puppets’ debate. It is during the dialogue that we first get a sense of the satirical nature of the Karagöz performance. As Metin And describes, “the essential feature of all [Karagöz] dialogues is liberation from the constraints of logic, a mocking attitude of habits like meaningless politeness, fossilized conventions, and the insistence of false syllogism”. After the debate, the focus shifts from Karagöz and Hacivat to the main plot, which involves and often centers on other characters. After some progression of the main plot, Karagöz and Hacivat make an appearance, and eventually the play draws to a close. The finale can take a variety of forms: the play may end with a logical tying up of the main plot, with a festival at which the characters dance and sing, or with a return to normalcy.

In accordance with the relatively firm structure of the Karagöz performance, the timing, set, and puppets used in this theatre art are also relatively fixed. Karagöz would always be performed against a screen of some sort, traditionally made of white cotton. A flickering olive oil lamp would be placed behind the cloth to create stained-glass colored shadow effect of the puppets and to make the puppets movements appear more human (thanks to the flickering). The puppets were manipulated using horizontal rods (unlike the vertical rods of Javanese puppets) that were held at a 90-degree angle so as to reduce their visibility or using Y-shaped rods, or “puppet-trees”, so as to manipulate more than one puppet at a time. The puppets themselves were made out of

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15 And, “The Traditional Turkish Theater” 47
16 ibid 45
17 Smith 190; And, “Drama at the Crossroads” 152; It is interesting to note that not all Karagöz performances ended with this clearly demarcated end of the carnivalesque and a return to normalcy.
dried animal skin, usually camel, that were painted with vegetable dyes in blue, green, red, yellow, orange, and purple. Many of the puppets were constructed with hinges on their back, at their neck, and at their knees, making their movements more realistic. In order to maintain observance of the Koran’s interdiction of reproducing human form, holes were made along the edges or within the design of their garments. These wonderful little figures danced, somersaulted, fought, and debated, attracting audiences from all over the world. Often performed in coffee shops and frequently performed during the nighttime feasting of Ramadan, Karagöz performances were one of the most popular events at which people of any social class, gender, age, or ethnicity could gather and intermingle.

But what were these stories that brought such a diverse crowd together in laughter? There are many examples of Karagöz that survive, although they are very small in number compared to how many we know existed when it was still a very popular art form. We will look at three Karagöz episodes that deal with the ubiquitous theme of the relation between men and women, two in which the women are made more powerful than Karagöz and one in which Karagöz and Hacivat are made more powerful than a husband and a lover. The first, entitled “The Raid with the Password of ‘Nail’”, portrays Karagöz being outsmarted by prostitutes. The second comes from the account of the early 20th century female European traveler quoted earlier—this episode depicts a married woman who is at first seduced by a dandy and then seduced by Karagöz and Hacivat. In the third and final episode, called “Bloody Nigâr”, two prostitutes who have been swindled out of their payment by a dandy take revenge.

In “Çivi Baskını”, or “The Raid with the Password of ‘Nail’”, two women ask Karagöz if they can rent one of his houses. While he strongly suspects that the women may be prostitutes, and capricious ones at that, he

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18 And “Traditional Turkish Theater” 42-44
19 And “Karagoz” book 31
20 Smith 188-9 and Mizrahi 6
agrees to take them on as tenants. Having installed themselves in the house, the women decide that they will only admit their clients, who have all been told the secret password, a sexual double-entendre of the name for a special kind of nail. Karagöz arrives and is told that he needs a password to enter, but he is unable to produce the desired word despite listing by name every possible kind of nail he can think of. Other men arrive, give the password, and are admitted into the house, and an orgy begins (which we watch). Finally, Karagöz produces the password and he too is allowed inside (we assume, to join in the fun). But then Matiz (the stock drunkard character) arrives and becomes enraged when he discovers that they have turned the house into a brothel and are having an orgy in such a respectable neighborhood (which is ironic since drinking could be seen as similarly offensive). The episode ends happily with Matiz forgiving all involved.

In the second episode, deemed too scandalous to describe even in Greek or Latin, the main plot opens with two female figures appearing on the screen. They are soon joined by a Turkish dandy, wearing lavender pants and a comical and “prodigious moustache [that] curl[s] up under his nose”, who passes one of the women a slip of paper (on which we assume a love letter is written) and then tries to convince her to run away with him. The two flirt back and forth until Karagöz appears, bringing with him the woman’s furious husband. The husband attacks the dandy, only to find himself very much the weaker of the two, “to the delight of the public”. Karagöz, who we assume must have left quickly after bringing the husband, returns with Hacivat and, as our European female spectator explains, “things now [become] very mixed indeed, for both these iniquitous little gentlemen having cast a longing glance upon the ladies’ charms, determined forthwith to rid themselves of the inconvenient [dandy]. When least that luckless youth expected it, they pounced upon him and literally pulled

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21 Mizrahi, “Diversity and Comedy in Ottoman Istanbul” 164
22 Adapted from And, “Traditional Turkish Theater” 80-81
him in two.” This is then followed by the unspeakable scene, which we could imagine might include something like the orgy portrayed in previous story.23

In the final episode, called “Kanlı Nigâr” or “Bloody Nigâr”, the main plot begins with Çelebi, the dandy, escaping after having just cheated two prostitutes (one of whom is named “Bloody Nigâr”) out of their hard earned money. The women eventually catch him and begin to argue with each other, each claiming that the dandy is more indebted to her than to the other. Female neighbors are asked to come and weigh in on the debate but the conflict is irresolvable. Finally, Bloody Nigâr grabs the dandy and drags him into the brothel so that she can take revenge on him for having caused this whole situation in the first place. As punishment, she strips him naked and throws him back onto the street. A series of male stock characters including Karagöz and Hacivat pass by and ask Çelebi why he is naked. When he explains, the men offer to try to get Çelebi’s clothes back, but Bloody Nigâr and her prostitute friend strip naked every man who enters the brothel attempting to help Çelebi, causing the entryway to the brothel to be filled with naked men. Finally, a heroic stock character named San Efe arrives. Bloody Nigâr respects San Efe and so when he proposes a solution (perhaps he pays the women), they agree to give the men back their clothes.24

The world depicted in these episodes of Turkish shadow puppetry is one of reversals of class, power, and norms of polite (and legal) social behavior: it embodies a traditional reading of Mikhail Bakhtin’s carnivalesque. This term comes from Bakhtin’s observations of behavior during carnival and his reading of the Franciscan French author François Rabelais. Bakhtin observes that:

[The] temporary suspension, both ideal and real, of hierarchical rank created during carnival time a special type of communication impossible in everyday life. This led to the creation of special forms of marketplace speech and gesture, frank and free, permitting no distance between those who came in contact with each other and liberating from norms of etiquette and decency imposed at other times. A special carnivalesque,

23 Adapted from Davey 243
24 Adapted from And, “Traditional Turkish Theater” 78
marketplace style of expression was formed.  

According to Bakhtin, carnivalesque brings about “a continual shifting from top to bottom, from front to rear of numerous parodies and travesties, humiliations, profanities, comic crownings and uncrownings”. But these reversals do not “obliterate the authority of the social norms in public space. On the contrary,” Bakhtin explains, “the performance makes the norms explicit”. We find evidence of this in the structure of the performances themselves; in each Karagöz performance, a marker exists to denote the shift from normal power structures into the carnivalesque world of the play. This occurs during the dialogue section of the performance (after the pre-show and the prologue) when the lower class Karagöz establishes his power over the bourgeois Hacivat by beating him. Once this symbolic reversal has taken place, the carnivalesque story begins.

But what makes these reversals so funny? During carnival, Bakhtin explains, those who resist the carnivalesque become clear targets for mockery since they do not partake in the fun. They are “gloomily serious” because they imagine themselves to have “an extratemporal important[ce]” and to represent absolute truths. “They do not see themselves in the mirror of time, do not perceive their own origin, limitations and end”, Bakhtin tells us, “they do not recognize their own ridiculous faces or the comic nature of their pretentions to eternity and immutability. And thus these personages come to the end of their role still serious, although their spectators have been laughing for a long time. They continue to talk with the majestic tone of kings and heralds announcing eternal truths, unaware that time has turned their speeches into ridicule”. While this comedic aspect of the carnivalesque is present in all three of the Karagöz stories described in this paper, it is most clearly the main source of comedy in the story of “Bloody Nigâr”. Here, men present themselves one after another as inherently more powerful than the women and therefore capable of forcing the women to return the clothes.

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25 Bakhtin in Rivkin and Ryan 686-687
26 ibid 687
27 Mizrahi, “Diversity and Comedy in Ottoman Istanbul” 199-200
28 Bakhtin 213
Each man who attempts to retrieve the clothes, an act he considers to be no great feat, is stripped naked and thrown out onto the street to be made a laughing stock.

There is a second kind of Bakhtinian carnivalesque that we find in Karagöz plays; the changing of language from a serious means of communication into a comedic means of miscommunication. This “grotesque […] marketplace speech” as Bakhtin names it, involves not only an astounding variety of plays on words but also a frankness otherwise absent from daily life.\(^{29}\) While the Karagöz texts we have examined in this paper do not make mention of this kind of speech, we know it was a large part of what made Karagöz so well liked through traveler’s accounts (among other sources). The French author Théophile Gautier, among others, describes how “it is impossible to give you a faint idea of these terrific jokes, hyperbolic scenes of womanizing, which in order to be understood, require the dictionary of Rabelais”.\(^ {30}\) Gautier’s association between the language used in Karagöz theatre and by Rabelais is entirely apt since it is this very same language that inspired Bakhtin’s theories on the carnivalesque. This “marketplace speech” of Rabelais and Karagöz would have included everything from the speaking of nonsense words as if they were sensible, the changing of intonation patterns to make logical words sound like nonsense words, to reciting scatological or irreverent verses as if they were from the repertoire of Ottoman poetry.\(^ {31}\) It is no wonder that the rational language of Hacivat, the dandy of “Bloody Nigâr”, and the husband of the seduction story are seen as comedic since are juxtaposed by the free and playful speech of Karagöz and all of the other characters who participate in the carnivalesque.

This paper has heretofore examined the materiality of the Karagöz puppets, the subject matter and form of the Karagöz performance, as well as three specific episodes from the Karagöz repertoire. We have seen how this theatre form embodies aspects of Bakhtin’s carnivalesque in the content of the plays and how the language

\(^{29}\) Bakhtin in Rivkin and Ryan 686-687  
\(^{30}\) Cited in Mizrahi, “One Man and his Audience” 9  
\(^{31}\) For a more detailed analysis of comedic speech in Karagöz, see Daryo Mizrahi’s “One Man and his Audience”; Mizrahi, “One Man and his Audience” 10-11
used in the performances would have been exemplary of Bakhtin’s conception of “marketplace speech”. However, while Bakhtin’s notion of the carnivalesque helps to shed light on many aspects of the Karagöz performance, it does not go so far as to explain why there were indeed people who were excluded from the reversals (namely, sultans, god, prophets, and other religious figures). Collective participation (from the king to the peasant) in the carnivalesque is fundamental to Bakhtin’s carnivalesque. “Carnival”, he writes, “is not a spectacle seen by the people; they live in it, and everyone participates because its very idea embraces all the people”.  

Furthermore, those who resist participation become targets for mockery and are thereby included against their will in the carnivalesque experience. Whereas we do find the spirit of Bakhtin’s carnivalesque in the Karagöz performance, the founding concept of universal participation is absent. Despite being surprisingly inclusive, the carnivalesque nature of Karagöz is limited by a political awareness that there are certain people who may never be joked about.

When considered in conjunction with the work of Russian medievalist Aron Gurevich (who challenges Bakhtin’s conception of the grotesque element of the carnivalesque and reveals that Bakhtin ignored the omnipresence of the grotesque in medieval culture), the selective exclusion of the Sultans, prophets, and religious figures brings to mind the question of whether the comedy of the carnivalesque “actually challenges the audience’s own sense of judgment and values”, as Michael Bernstein has posited. This interpretation is not in fact in contradiction to either Gurevich or Bakhtin—all basically agree that within the carnival exists “parody of official reason”. Moreover, since the festival, and Karagöz, are both formally authorized events, this implies “that the ruling conventions permit themselves to be mocked, due to a full confidence in their own

32 Bakhtin in Bernstein 297-298
33 See Gurevich’s chapter “‘High’ and ‘low’: the medieval grotesque” in Medieval Popular Culture: Problems of Belief and Perception; Bernstein When the Carnival Turns Bitter 290
34 Bakhtin in Bernstein 297-298
power to emerge still more firmly entrenched the following morning”. While there is no denying that Karagöz can be understood as embodying certain aspects of Bakhtin’s carnivalesque, we must conclude that a purely Bakhtinian reading of this theatre form is misleading of how truly deferential the reversals are. While Karagöz was highly entertaining to and unifying of the Turkish people, close analysis reveals it to have encouraged “safe”, rather than subversive, laughter.

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35 Bernstein 290
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