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Art Istanbul: The Burden of Myth and the Hope in Art
Art İstanbul: Mitin Yükü ve Sanatta Umut

Abstract

The present article takes off from developments surrounding the opening of the new ArtİstanbulFeshane exhibition space in Istanbul, and the responses to this initiative – some have been enthusiastic, seeing the possibilities that such an arts venue might open up; whilst other responses have been critical, notably those of groups of conservative, Islamist protesters. The discussion seeks to explore key issues in the context of the wider politics of the city and of Turkey more generally. It is argued that the contemporary ideological climate is dominated by a concern with national identity, aligned with new nationalist priorities. Central to this is an emphasis on the ideology of conquest. Arguing against this disposition, the article emphasises the metropolitan context, and seeks to open up issues pertaining to urban politics. And against the logic of cultural closure associated with national imagination, it seeks to explore the possibilities in arts practice and policy for developing an open agenda – an existential space that becomes a space of possibility.

Öz

Bu makale, İstanbul'daki yeni ArtİstanbulFeshane sergi mekânının açılışını çevreleyen gelişmelerden ve bu gelişmelere verilen tepkilerden yola çıkmaktadır. Bu tepkilerin bazıları böyle bir sanat mekânının açabileceği olasılıkları görerek coşkulu davranırken; diğer tepkiler, özellikle muhafazakâr, İslamcı protestocu gruplarınkiler olmak üzere eleştirel olmuştur. Tartışma, temel meseleleri şehrin ve daha genel olarak Türkiye'nin daha geniş politikaları bağlamında incelemeyi amaçlamaktadır. Günümüzün ideolojik iklimine, yeni milliyetçi önceliklerle uyumlu bir ulusal kimlik kaygısının hakim olduğu savunulmaktadır. Bunun merkezinde, bu siyaseti bilgilendiren fetih ideolojisine yapılan vurgu yer almaktadır. Bu eğilimi tartışan makale, metropol bağlamına vurgu yapmakta ve kentsel siyasetle ilgili konuları açmaya çalışmaktadır. Ulusal tahayyülle ilişkilendirilen kültürel kapanma mantığına karşı, sanat pratiği ve politikasında açık bir gündem - bir olasılık alanı haline gelen varoluşsal bir alan - geliştirme olanaklarını keşfetmeye çalışıyor.

Keywords
Istanbul, urban politics, nationalism, cultural policy, conquest culture, freedom

Anahtar kelimeler
İstanbul, kentsel siyaset, milliyetçilik, kültür politikası, fetih kültürü, özgürlük

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There is always a burden that people may be carrying with them; but there is also an enduring sense of hope. Long ago, Nâzım Hikmet was already dealing in his way with this human condition – for example, in his "9-10 p.m. Poems."

There is the burden that weighs heavy on the soul:

The worst	Asıl en kötüsü:
is when people – knowingly or not –	bilerek, bilmeyerek
carry prison inside themselves…	hapisaneyi insanın kendi içinde taşıması...

But, at the same time, somewhere, there is always the awareness of future possibility, even of revelation:

The most beautiful sea	En güzel deniz
hasn't been crossed yet.	henüz gidilmemiş olanıdır.
The most beautiful child	En güzel çocuk
hasn't grown up yet.	henüz büyümedi.
Our most beautiful days	En güzel günlerimiz
*we haven't seen yet.***	henüz yaşamadıklarımız.

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In the summer of 2023, an event had significant resonance in Istanbul cultural circles. After the opening of the first exhibition – "Ortadan Başlamak" ("Starting from the Middle") – at the newly inaugurated ArtİstanbulFeshane exhibition space, there were demonstrations by a small group of conservative Islamic protesters. As favourably reported in the conservative and Islamic newspaper, *Milat Gazetesi* (27 June 2023), their objection to the show emphasised its "disrespect for spirituality:" with artworks featuring sexuality, nudity, LGBTQ+; promoting socialism and terrorism (as they perceived it); and even going so far as to engage in satanism. The message was loud and clear: there should be zero tolerance towards an institution prepared to stage a display so patently contrary to "our spiritual and national culture."

Now, one way of considering the significance of this protest is in the context of contemporary developments in the cultural industries in Istanbul. Feshane is a new development by the Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality (İBB), along with other projects such as Gazhane in Kadıköy and Casa Botter in Beyoğlu. The expressed intention is to promote independent cultural creation and exhibition, to reflect the urban scene in all its complexity and diversity. In one important respect, this is also an initiative being undertaken by İBB to respond to central government interventions in the city by the Ministry of Culture and Tourism (Atatürk Cultural Centre, Beyoğlu Culture Route, for example). These latter state interventions reflect the AKP

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government's very different cultural ambitions, involving the promotion of national image and prestige, and the marketing of Istanbul as a global tourist destination. At the same time, the AKP has been seeking to transform the city through the imposition of an Islamic architectural "look" (the new Taksim mosque, for example). What is evident at the present time, then, is a keen rivalry between the priorities of İBB and those of the central authorities. And this is highly significant in the context of the upcoming municipal elections, in March 2024, and AKP's burning desire to "re-conquer" the city from the present CHP oppositional administration. It doesn't take much imagination to see how the Feshane protests might be in alignment with this AKP conquest mentality.

The cultural, or creative, industries have been central to urban research and policymaking over the last thirty years or so. And let us be clear, the agenda concerning the future development of the cultural industries in Istanbul is a very important one indeed. Which conception of the city's future will prevail? The civic and inclusive project of the present İBB, when it is at its most ambitious? Or the amalgamated neoliberal and conservative-Islamic blueprint of the AKP? Or, far more likely, some kind of compromise formation (which could, of course, be more or less democratic in its spirit)? There is a great deal at stake. What is clear is that, in the recent period, the agenda concerning cultural development and cultural policy has been driven by mainly economic and entrepreneurial concerns: concerns for the origination of leisure and consumption spaces, events and commodities. The cultural industries have come to be seen as crucial to the future prosperity of cities in particular. Urban managers and entrepreneurs have sought to promote and market their particular cities in terms of cultural lifestyle, identity and image. I will have something to say, albeit briefly, about the cultural industries agenda at the end of the present discussion. And this will be to suggest some alternative – that is, other than economic – issues that should be considered.

However, as such kind of cultural promotion has progressed – involving matters of cultural business, recreation and entertainment, or tourism – I suggest that this preoccupation with the business of culture has diverted attention away from other – and, actually, other very critical – questions. And it is these questions – both political and philosophical – that will be of primary interest in my discussion. They are fundamental questions concerning how we conceive of the fundamental significance and purpose of the arts in and for our lives together – let us think of this in terms of their existential significance. And how, I shall be asking, should we be trying to address these kinds of questions in the very specific context of Istanbul today?

There are three general kinds of issues that will be raised in the course of my argument. The first concerns the problem of the national imagination in the "commonsense," and generally unquestioned, notion of what a society is – even, unfortunately, urbanised society. I think of this in terms of the national-mythical imagination. The second issue, which follows on from this, addresses the issue of how societies now actually exist and function – in reality, and beneath the myth, as it were. Here, the emphasis will be on the contemporary significance of metropolitan urbanisation – on life experiences in the city as it actually exists in its moving and

constantly shifting dailiness. And, thirdly, I will consider what collective social life in the city might require from contemporary art practices. How might artistic practitioners connect now with the world of a dynamic city in motion? Throughout all this, I will appeal to the principle of hope, against what I regard as the heavy burden of the mythical imagination.

The Burden of Myth

Let me be specific. And, to make my first point concretely, let me return to the case of the Feshane protesters. One individual from the group, a lawyer, expressed his opinion to *Milat Gazetesi* in the following way: "There are elements in this exhibition that are insulting to the values, beliefs, history and culture of the Turkish nation, and that will damage our social structure and family values. I interpret this as a part of the siege of cultural imperialism." Now, of course the protesters emphasise their adherence to spiritual values, but what stands out here is an equal adherence to the nation and the national imagination. Rather than expressing some transcendent values – as it could well be conceived – their piety is bound to the Turkish nation state and its political constitution. In the words of another spokesperson, an academic this time, the exhibition has to be opposed because of its "negative effects on spirituality, patriotism and the sense of unity." Piety and patriotism go hand in hand.

It is this national allegiance that I want to focus on here particularly. What is this sense of the imagined unity of the people living in a nation state? The militant conservative-Islamic version in the minds of the Feshane campaigners is a particularly noxious variant. But, of course, the national imagination – along with the patriotic or nationalistic emotions it can stir up – is far from being exclusive to them. Right across the spectrum of Turkish society, there is strong attraction and commitment to the idea of national belonging. So, any challenge to the protesters' belligerent sense of national unity must be clear regarding the rationale informing its objection. Perhaps it is just and simply in the name of what is considered a more sophisticated or progressive sense of imagined community (Kemalist, notably, as mainstream CHP supporters would advocate)? What I want to argue is that the critique must be far more radical, and that it should address the very principle of national imagining and belonging. The national imagination is problematical as such - particularly in the context of the diverse lifeworlds that must live alongside each other in contemporary Istanbul. Such an imagination insists upon allegiance to a kind of social ordering that will never allow the society to be at peace with its complexities.

The national imagination is problematical as it operates essentially as a system of cultural closure. The modern nation-state works to exercise and protect its sovereignty in the international order. And, to this end, it must, of course, mobilise the support of its "people," which it strives to achieve through creating a sense of collective unity and belonging. The modern state works hard to lock up its "members" within the fiction of national cultural

identity. And this identity will then be defined in contradistinction or in opposition to other such cultural identities, which are perceived – and always somehow feared – as threatening to the imagined integrity of "our" nation ("I interpret this as a part of the siege of cultural imperialism;" for the threatening other may also be another that dwells within). At particular historical moments, national identification may be less exacting. However, identities will always be ready to assert their priority when the moment comes. And, in so far as they privilege collective allegiance, they will always be motivated to limit and restrict the greater creative freedom of human expression and aspiration.

The national identity also works through a narrative that is constructed across time – time past, present, and future. And it is this historical dimension of national culture particularly interests me in the context of our present concern with Istanbul. The sovereign nation claims the past as its heritage, invariably conceived as a unique heritage: the customs and traditions handed down to the present from through historical generations. And the future is conceived in terms of historical continuity and constancy, the prolongation of the national culture and values in the light and spirit of what has been inherited from the past. Again, the fundamental logic is one of closure. In this temporal context, it amounts to the closing off of the future as a possibility space – involving a fundamental antipathy to the idea of life as transformation.

Hayden White has decisively and radically drawn attention to the problematical nature of such a facile kind of historical imagination. In a seminal article, "The Burden of History," White (1966, p. 123) writes of "not only a substantive burden imposed upon the present by the past in the form of outmoded institutions, ideas, and values but also *the way of looking at the world* which gives to these outmoded forms their specious authority." And what he, therefore, calls for is "the liberation of the present from *the burden of history*" (p. 124). What White wanted to emphasise was that the present condition of society is "always in part a product of specifically human choices, which could therefore be changed or altered by further human action…" (p.133). What may be thought of as a "liberation historiography" is about the human possibility to "choose a future." But not only that… It is also about the possibility to "choose a past" (Paul, 2011, pp. 42-44). Out of his radical opposition to any deterministic and identitarian historical scheme, Hayden White develops an existential line of thought, a preeminent concern with *human* agency, creativity, and flourishing.

Hayden White is introduced here as an interpretive ally as I now come to address and confront the official discourse of Turkish national historical heritage. I am referring to the epic of the foundation of Istanbul, which tells of the city's conquest by Sultan Mehmed II, on 29 May 1453, the glorious defeat of the Byzantine Empire, and the establishment in its place of an Ottoman and Islamic dynasty. The narrative of the Conquest has become part of the national mythology. And, at the present time, it is being vigorously mobilised by the AKP government in its ongoing campaign for the political-Islamic "re-conquest" of Istanbul. What is astonishing is that the ideological exploitation of this myth is scarcely ever subjected to serious reflection or scrutiny, let alone contestation.

It is evidently a potent myth. Among Muslims, as Halil İnalcık (1990) has observed, there has always been the conviction that the conquest of Constantinople divinely ordained, that it was a providential event. But, if this providential narrative has afforded the myth a particular, divine authority, other factors have worked to ensure its ideological efficacy. Stéphane Yerasimos has documented how the historical event of the fall of Constantinople was transformed into myth. The chronicles that ensued soon after the event of 1453, he demonstrates, were conflictual in their judgements: some expressed support for Mehmed and his imperial aspirations, whilst others, through their commitment to a peaceable ideal of Islamic community, were opposed to the Conqueror's expansionist aspirations. What emerged after this time of debate, however, was the politically defused legend that subsequent generations came to inherit: "The history was trivialised, tending to become a succession of pleasant stories, and thereby losing its political and contested character" (Yerasimos 1990, p.218). The themes in these stories are diverse, not to say antithetical – with the conception of divine providence being brought together with that of worldly ambition and that of the subjugation of an enemy with the image of cultural respect and tolerance. The force of the myth no doubt derives from this remarkable capacity to work with and through antinomy.

As such, the Conquest myth has proven to be extremely versatile. In the modern period, we have seen how it has been effectively adapted to the cause of Turkish nation-building and nationalism. In the crisis years of the declining Ottoman Empire, there were momentous processes of historiographical revision taking place, with the growing assertion that the Turks had been the ruling nation within the Ottoman Empire; and, even more emphatically, that the Empire had essentially been a Turkish state. After the founding of the new Turkish state in 1923, the great event of the fifteenth century would be appropriated and refashioned to suit the needs of the modern Republic, one of the most urgent being the establishment of a new national culture and identity. There was a providential moment in this mobilisation of the mythic past, since the year 1953 would mark the 500th anniversary of the original Conquest. In anticipation of this, 1950 saw the inauguration of the scholarly Istanbul Conquest Society. Istanbul's "cultivated" conservative elites readily took on the revisionist task. Thus, in a text celebrating the quincentenary, the distinguished architect and art historian Ekrem Hakkı Ayverdi – who would go on to chair the Conquest Society for thirty years – endows the Conqueror with transcendent qualities: Mehmed stood out as "the symbol of the deep-rooted and inflexible will and upsurging spirit of the Turkish people in the XVth century" (1954, 195). In the same period, İsmail Hami Danişmend, the first head of the Conquest Society, published a small booklet with a grandiose title, *The Importance of the Conquest of Istanbul for Mankind and Civilization*. He points to "the remarkable humanitarian, legal and civilized understanding of the Conqueror" (1953, p. 30). Referring to the later Ottoman conquest of the Balkans, the author is clear about its significance: "the Turks who entered the country brought with them their principles of human rights and justice – and brought these not as a political force

but as a national ideal" (p. 46). In such accounts, some kind of essential and illustrious Turkishness is being proclaimed and elevated. In his classic biography of Mehmed, Franz Babinger made the key point, however: the Conqueror "is presented to the Turkish people… as the most brilliant and blameless figure in its whole history – a phenomenon which can be explained only by virulent nationalism" (1979, p. 409).

Especially from 2002, when the AKP came to power – though it also been a significant theme in previous Islamist politics –the Conquest theme has been a major device for political campaigning and promotion. The conservative elites of the mid-twentieth century had done their work in making the Conqueror part of the national identity. From now on, the theme assumes a new kind of standing in the society, in part ideological sloganeering, and in part cultural pageant. The Panorama 1453 History Museum was opened in 2009. 2012 saw the appearance of the blockbuster film *Fetih 1453*. In 2017, to celebrate the 564th anniversary of the Conquest, a parade of 1,453 trucks was organised at Istanbul's vast new airport. And in 2022, on the occasion of the 569th anniversary of the Conquest, the President and his wife attended a ceremony initiating the planting of 145,300 saplings at the inauguration of the new Atatürk Airport Nation's Garden. On this historic occasion, what was being displayed was the scale of Turkish ambition and resoluteness: "The conquest of Istanbul took place as a result of genius plans, tremendous efforts, masterful preparations, unprecedented sacrifices, and an unwavering perseverance and determination." And this was perhaps also an oblique comment on the skills necessary to achieve the project of "re-conquest."

At this present time, there is also a resurgence of the Islamic theme of holy providence in the Conquest narrative. In 2021, at the opening of the controversial new mosque in Taksim, the head of the Directorate of Religious Affairs would declare: "My dear brothers and sisters, the descendants of Fatih, who had the fortune of seeing the Taksim Mosque, which was built on the land where Fatih Sultan Mehmed the Conqueror led his ships for the conquest of Istanbul and whose opening coincided with the days of the conquest."[1] Such triumphalist discourse could also assume a more bellicose tone. The head of the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP), also celebrating the holiness of the Conquest, was full of disdain for the vanquished enemy – now unfortunately identified with an enemy within (the İBB): "The world's largest Turkish city is unfortunately under the sway of a dangerous mentality that is incompetent and unsure, and who and what it serves is unknown… Even though the Byzantine state has been erased from history, its putrid ghost and oppressive goals are still in circulation."[2] Nothing seems to have been learned here about the (elsewhere posited) humanitarian and civilised spirit of the Conqueror. "It has been 568 years since the page of Constantinople was sealed and closed with the blood of martyrs. To aspire to reopen this page is a rootless Byzantine conspiracy, whose liquidation and dissolution is obligatory for the sons of the homeland." How this page has been reopened – and by supposed new Byzantines operating now within the Turkish homeland – is not made at all clear.

Up to this point, I have been considering the significance of national cultural attachment and belonging. And my main concern is with the logic of cultural closure that such a kind of allegiance presupposes. Loyalty to the nation entails a collectivist condition of compliance and conformity – and consequently involves the closing down of other horizons – by which I mean human and existential horizons. Let me briefly make two points here with respect to the particular Turkish case.

First, and elaborating further on the Conquest narrative, we may think of the way in which it works in terms of a loss of reality. The philosopher Hans Blumenberg provides one way of considering this through his concept of prefiguration. He points to the notion – an entirely mythical notion – that an action or figure in the past may provide the key to performing an action in a subsequent time. Thus, among many of the conservative ideologues in the early Republican era, the foundation of the new nation-state could be conceived in terms of a logic of *re*-foundation, with the conquering achievement of Mehmed in mind, and affording the sense of destiny being fulfilled. Similarly, and more emphatically, in the early days of the new Islamist politics, the discourse that emerged was focused on once again making Istanbul the "Istanbul of the Conqueror." Before the 1994 election, in which the Refah Partisi (AKP's predecessor) "captured" the city, the head of that party, Necmettin Erbakan, was referring to Erdoğan as the conqueror, and Erdoğan himself was promoting the idea of a "second conquest" of the city. "In prefiguration, mythicisation approaches the limit of magic, or even exceeds it," Blumenberg argues, "as soon as the expectation of producing the identical effect is connected with the explicit act of repeating a prefiguring motif" (2014, p. 9). What is at issue here is a discursive confusion of rhetoric with metaphysics. And what emerges out of this confusion is a state of what Blumenberg thinks of as magical thinking. It is state in which what prevails has been predetermined solely through the logic of the paradigm; and, as such, it has to be seen as "a counterworld to that of realism" (p. 33). This is not to deny that Turkish politics may be pragmatic, but simply to make clear that the theme of prefiguration is always available for use in its ideological-historical imagination.

My second point concerns a crucial theme that cannot be made sense of within the national myth. Turkey is a nation that imagines itself in terms of its exceptionalism, as a people blessed by God, and with a triumphal Conquest at the heart of its historical destiny. But where, we have to ask, where in the myth of Conquest is there a place for the presence and the reality of the ones who were conquered? Of course, there can be no meaningful place: that is the burden and the curse of the Conquest mentality. In the context of the distant Ottoman centuries, this issue has been partially addressed – or managed – through debates about the standing of the minorities in the Empire, with many historians commending the "multiculturalism" of the Ottomans, whilst more critical others have cautioned that, if the non-Muslim populations were afforded recognition, they were always held to be of inferior status. In the early twentieth century, however, the ground shifted dramatically and disastrously. With the rapid shift toward the new ideology and politics of national Turkification, it would follow

that non-Muslims no longer had any meaningful basis for belonging in the new national space. The minorities came to be thought of as "outsiders" within. And, in the space of a very few years of total violence, they were almost entirely expelled from the domestic scene. Whilst Christians (Greeks, Armenians and Assyrians) constituted approximately 25–30 percent of the Ottoman population in 1914, today they represent less than a meager one percent of the Turkish population.

What is remarkable is that even such tragic circumstances as these were not enough to put into question the mythical idea of a nation of Conquest. As we have seen, the myth continues to be defended. Though the reality, of course, is that it now has to be sustained alongside what Reinhart Koselleck describes as the "estrangement of the vanquished" (2002, p. 78). "If history is made in the short term by the victors," Koselleck maintains, "historical gains in knowledge stem in the long run from the vanquished." And this is so because "to be vanquished is a specific, genuinely historical experience" (pp. 76, 78):

> Once experience has been methodologically transposed into knowledge by the vanquished – and which victor does not finally belong to them? – it remains accessible beyond all change of experience. This might offer some comfort, perhaps a gain. In practice, it would mean saving us from victories. Yet every experience speaks against it (p. 83).

In Koselleck's view, it is actually suffering and defeat that constitute the real incentives for writing histories: "They are ethical incentives because they respond to something that ought not to have happened, to a disturbance, not simply of expectations, but of a moral order that is disturbed by the pretence of victory" (Olsen, 2012, p. 238). The point is to save us from victories – and from what he regards as the absurdity of histories predicated on victory myths.

Our Fictive Powers

Today we live in societies that want to impress on us the importance of the nation and of national identity – of "our" nation and "our" identity. What is on offer is the imagined security of national belonging, and what is asked for in return is our loyalty and acquiescence. But surely there is more that we should be wanting from this life than conformity to such a kind of identity. It is at this point that I want to consider the significance of the art. It is precisely the significance of art in the life of the city that has come to the surface again in the events around the opening of ArtİstanbulFeshane. For the protesters, it seems clear that artistic endeavour should be subordinated to the higher duties and responsibilities of patriotism. What I am proposing – in line, I believe, with the critical approach of the Feshane curators and artists – is that the significance of art is entirely other than this. Art is actually about quite another way of human being in the world. Art celebrates human agency and creativity, and it does so because these are essential for changing the world – in the words of Gaston Bachelard,

to "open up or enlarge the world" (1971, p. 22). Whilst the political regime is always intent on protecting the sovereignty of the nation state, the arts have entirely different priorities, concerned with the value of public happiness – public happiness in the urban space. Public happiness? Yes, I do mean precisely that.

The most crucial factor at the present time is the urban context, the metropolitan context, in which we are living. What need to be developed are ideas and practices that address the diversity and complexity of Istanbul's urban scene. And by this I ~~am~~ also intend~~ing~~ to say that they should be ideas and practices that go against the grain of the national imagination. There has long been a tendency to think about the city through the categories of the national mindset (and that is certainly the case with the Feshane protesters). At the high point of Republican nationalist sentiment, in the 1940s and 1950s, Istanbul was being hailed as a Turkish city. As if a city could be possessed through the national imagination and its categories. Celebrated authors published texts under the title *Türk İstanbul* – Ahmet Hamdi Tanpınar (1946), Yahya Kemal (1942, 1954), Reşad Ekrem Koçu (1953). But Istanbul has never been simply a Turkish city. And it certainly should not be regarded as such at the present time – the time of its metropolitan expansion. What is required from artists, in whichever medium they are working, are aesthetics – in fact, many diverse aesthetic approaches – appropriate to the multiplicity and diversity of the city. And, above all, an agenda that speaks to people's lived situations and experiences in the constantly changing urban scene. It has to be a counter-mythical agenda. A worldly agenda, that is to say, in the poetic sense evoked by Gaston Bachelard, one that is concerned with "adherence to the world" – adherence to the reality of the world in the place of compliance with the mythical fabrication. "By loving the things of the world," Bachelard goes on to say, "one learns to praise the world" (1971, pp. 194, 187).

In his classic text, *The Sense of an Ending*, the literary critic Frank Kermode ~~made~~ makes a valuable distinction between myth and fiction. "Myth operates within the diagrams of ritual," he maintains, "which presupposes total and adequate explanations of things as they are and were; it is a sequence of radically unchangeable gestures. Fictions are for finding things out, and they change as the needs of sense-making change. Myths are the agents of stability, fictions the agents of change" (1967, p. 39). Kermode's concern is with fiction as a mode of expression through which mind and sensibility engage with a world that is always in movement. He invokes Hans Vaihinger's description of how an agile intellect and imagination negotiates its way in and through such a world:

> The psyche weaves this or that thought out of itself; for the mind is invention; under the compulsion of necessity, stimulated by the outer world, it discovers the store of contrivances hidden within itself. The organism finds itself in a world of contradictory sensations, it is exposed to the assaults of a hostile world, and in order to preserve itself is forced to seek every possible means of assistance (p. 40; quoting from Vaihinger, 1935, p. 12).

Myths are imposed structures, and require acquiescence to a preordained narrative logic. In the case of fictions, we can do things with them; they afford a meaningful space for the articulation of personal experience, authenticity, or choice. As Hayden White expresses it in his endorsement of Kermode's perspective: "total or totalising meaning at the level of myth; provisional, hypothetical, or practical meaning at the level of fiction" (White, 2012, p. 44).

I have suggested that art can introduce us to another way of being in the world, an other-than-mythical way of being in it. Kermode thinks of this in terms of the mobilization of "our fictive powers." Fictions – and we could just as well think of this activity of sense making in terms of other kinds of artistic creation – offer a means through which we work to make imaginative sense of our lives and of our relation to the world in which we live. A fiction is something that is consciously false, something to which we assent, with the knowledge that it does not exist, but knowing too that it helps us to make sense of and to move in the world. Literary fictions "find out about the changing world on our behalf" (1967, p. 64). Or, as Paul Ricoeur expresses it, by means of fictions "we try new ideas, new values, new ways of being-in-the-world," and what may be produced through the processes of exploration is "an expanded vision of reality… a *redescription* of reality" (1991, pp. 128, 123). Fictions provide us with a possibility space – a space in which we might re-envision the sense of our lives, and in ways that may be released from the alienating logic of cultural and ideological belonging. Kermode attends to a valuable observation by Jean-Paul Sartre: "The final aim of art is to reclaim the world by revealing it as it is, but as if it had its source in human liberty." This statement makes two important points, says Kermode: "First, it links the fictions of art with those of living and choosing. Secondly, it means that the humanizing of the world's contingency cannot be achieved without a representation of that contingency" (Kermode, 1967, p. 145; quoting from Sartre, 1988, p. 63).

What is being emphasised here is the unique role of fiction, or art, in thinking about our human situation. The point that I would emphasise is that its significance should not reside in putting forward a counter-ideology to the prevailing mythical discourse – a new secular dogma, let us say, to confront the conservative-Islamic dogma. Terry Eagleton (2023) makes an important point in a discussion of Marx's aesthetic sensibility. Whereas a common perception would be that Marx was an advocate for ideological and partisan cultural production, the truth is that he was an opponent of such kind of instrumental endeavour. His approach to cultural creation was more sophisticated. In Marx's view, says Eagleton, "truth for a writer was not abstract and invariable but unique and specific… Art prefigures a future in which human energies can exist simply for their own delight. Where art was, there shall humanity be." Of the greatest significance is the sense of being alive – of living and choosing in the now of everyday life. As John Banville (2022) puts it, "If art has a purpose other than simply existing, then surely it is to quicken our sense of what it is to be in the world, thinking, feeling, rejoicing, suffering."

In resolutely opposing an instrumental or ideological approach to aesthetics, Leonhard Emmerling seeks to emphasise the distinctive qualities of aesthetic discourse – what radically differentiates it from the rhetoric of power. "Art is weak," he maintains (2016, p. 103), and it should be thought of in terms of its "powerlessness, fragility, insecurity, doubtfulness." (p. 117). And this requires a reassessment of the concept of weakness – such as to make it stand in meaningful opposition it to the totalising language of power and arrogant authority. Aesthetic discourse and aesthetic judgement aim "to establish a form of humanity based on weighing up and making suggestions, reflecting and arguing" (p. 115). The persistence of reasoning, but at the same time all the uncertainty and fallibility of thought. "It is not agreement in what has always been known or the assertion of agreement with everyone else," Emmerling observes, "but the unpredictability of this process of groping, doubting judgement that establishes a sense of community" (p.105). The disposition, and the values, of what he calls the "community of argumentation" (p. 115) stand in fundamental opposition to those belonging to what we might call the community of myth and dogma. In Istanbul now, such a spirit of openness and conviviality – such an existential spirit – would represent a constructive and purposeful move in the context of an "official" culture that promotes myths in order to serve corporate-political gain and ambition. (Here I should make clear that, whilst Emmerling's exposition is intellectually persuasive – and fully merits the attention of cultural practitioners and scholars – in the present Turkish context, and in terms of broader and critical political imperatives, more is needed than conceptual finesse. I will take ~~this~~ up this issue below.)

Declarations in the "official" public culture of Istanbul put a great emphasis on the distant historical past. In a document presenting itself as the *Hagia Sophia Manifesto*, the citizens of Istanbul are asked to celebrate what is presented as a resurrection: "The resurrection of the Hagia Sophia is a symbol of the re-rising of our civilization's sun… The resurrection of the Hagia Sophia is required by our respect and commitment to all of our ancestors from Alparslan to Mehmed and Abdulhamid." In a context in which such an atavistic worldview is being propagated, artists must surely think alternatively, in terms of an aesthetic of openness and of possibility. Such a way of thinking would correspond to people's experiences of how they actually live their lives in real historical time. It is a question of the unpredictability of living in this ongoing real time, and also of the surprises that are always inherent in the capriciousness of historical change. I immediately think of the poet René Char, who expressed the resistance to experiential closure and determinism in a particularly intense way: "How can we live without the unknown in front of us?" ("Argument"). Char's philosophy comes from an entirely different universe than that informing the *Manifesto*. It stands for being creatively alive, and open to the experience of Becoming: "Everything in us ought to be just a joyous feast when something we haven't predicted, that we don't shed any light on, that will speak directly to our heart, comes about" ("The Library is on Fire")[3].

I think that such commitment to openness should have particular resonance at the present historical moment. For what is presently being announced by the Turkish state is the inauguration of what is dubbed "the Century of Türkiye". According to the AKP, "In the next 100 years, a strong Türkiye will lead the world. This is one of the main goals of the Century of Türkiye." The mythical imagination that has hitherto been reaching back across the Ottoman centuries is now laying claim to the future. Given this national-mythic pretension to colonise the historical future, it is important that we now reflect upon how we live, and want to live, our lives in time, in actual time. At the present moment, this issue actually presents itself as an aesthetic challenge, no less. For time exists as an existential resource – this reality is precisely what the poet René Char is alerting us to. And the historian Reinhart Koselleck makes the same kind of argument through his own, more conceptual discourse. Koselleck's interest is in how we experience historical events, and how these events relate to the experience of surprise. The singularity of a historical event is located at the point when one experiences surprise. "To experience a surprise," says Koselleck, "means that something happened differently than one had thought… It is this temporal minimum of an irretrievable before and after that inscribes surprises into our bodies, which is why we are always trying anew to interpret them" (2018, p. 7). From a philosophical perspective, Françoise Dastur is also interested in the meaning and significance of an event, which "in the strong sense of the word is therefore always a surprise, something which takes possession of us in an unforeseen manner, without warning, and which brings us towards an unanticipated future." To acknowledge the eventfulness of the world, to be open to the possibilities of surprise, is to live a life creatively, fictionally, as it were, poetically. "Openness to the accident is therefore constitutive of the existence of the human being. Such an openness gives human being a destiny and makes one's life an adventure and not the anticipated development of a program" (2000, p. 182).

We are born in time, and we are challenged to live in time. We are always positioned, in Reinhart Koselleck's terms, between the "space of experience and the "horizon of expectation." We live our lives in the constantly moving present tense, between past and future, memory and hope, experience and expectation. Experience is present past, whose events have been incorporated and can be remembered today, whether consciously or unconsciously, as well as through indirect sources, passed on through generations or through institutions. Similarly with expectation: "at once person-specific and interpersonal, expectation also takes place in the today; it is the future made present; it directs itself to the not-yet, to the nonexperienced, to that which is to be revealed. Hope and fear, wishes and desires, cares and rational analysis, receptive display and curiosity: all enter into expectation and constitute it" (Koselleck, 2004, p. 259). And it is only on the basis of this existential condition, and through its recognition, that we can think of human liberty and its inherent possibilities. On this basis, it becomes conceivable for the individual subject "to take responsibility for the authenticity if not the truthfulness of a version of where one ha[s] come from, who one was, and what future one ha[s] a right to choose for oneself" (White, 2014, p. 99).

Being Alive and Becoming

I have argued that there is a strongly deterministic element in the "official" culture – a will to manage the contingencies of history and life with the containing frame of the hard-line national myth. We have long seen this in the retrojective imagination of the 1453 Conquest mentality, and now we see it in the projective imagination directed towards the proposed "Century of Türkiye." And our present situation may, indeed, be thought of as being in the midst (to borrow and adapt the title of the first Feshane exhibition) – in the midst between a supposedly divinely determined past, on the one hand, and corporately and power-politically determined future, on the other. And it is from this situation, in the midst, as we now experience both the backward and the forward versions of this kind of fabrication, that mythical imagining has to be called into question. (And let us be clear that mythical thinking is common to diverse constituencies right across the Turkish political spectrum.) What we need is a new language with which to describe the present experience of being in the midst – a language with which to awaken and reanimate our historical being.

I have invoked the work of historians – Hayden White, Reinhart Koselleck – who have a very different, existential sense of the historical condition – a sense of the significance of contingency and a conviction about the possibilities for human action. Let me just briefly mention another advocate for human freedom. Hannah Arendt invokes the possibility – and she considers it to be no less than a *miraculous* possibility – that new beginnings can be made in history:

> I would like to suggest that, if it is true that action and beginning are essentially the same, it follows that a capacity for performing miracles must likewise be within the range of human faculties. And in order to make this theory a little more palatable, I would like to remind you of the nature of every new beginning: seen from the viewpoint of what has gone before, it breaks into the world unexpected and unforeseen (Arendt, 2018a, pp. 239-240).

It is through the possibility to start something new that human freedom resides. Arendt puts the greatest value on "the unequalled experience of being free to make a new beginning," with the anticipation that "the idea of freedom and the actual experience of making a new beginning in the historical continuum should coincide" (Arendt 2018b, pp. 384, 382). And the great danger of authoritarian and dictatorial politics, she maintains, is "that it threatens to kill off all forms of spontaneity, that is, the element of action and freedom in all human activities… that it strives to eliminate the possibility of 'miracles' or, to put it more familiarly, to exclude the possibility of events in politics, and thereby deliver us up entirely to the automatic" (Arendt 2018a, p. 241).

And in helping us to think ourselves away from the automatic and to invoke the miraculous, art has a vital role to play. John Berger argues that corporate and political discourses are generally "dumb concerning what is being lived and imagined by the vast majority of pe-

ople in their struggle to survive" (2016, p.112). The point is that it is the language – or, more properly, the languages – of art that have the capacity to relate to lived reality and experience. And maybe it is only art can connect us this reality now? Berger thought of it in terms of "Being alive and Becoming" – perhaps just a simpler way of making the same point as Kermode, White, Koselleck or Arendt. (Sometimes, we choose to think about our predicament in philosophical terms, sometimes we want it to be expressed poetically, and sometimes it just needs to be addressed in simple and straightforward ways.) The project now should be to develop arts and cultural practices that connect to the everyday lives of Istanbul's citizens, in their great plurality, and in the difficult circumstances that they are living through at the present time. Again, I am drawn to the poetic insight of René Char:

> "Wisdom comes not from huddling together but from discovering, in our similarity and shared creativity, how numerous we are, how we respond to each other, how different we all are, how we pass through life, what our truth is – and from discovering the grain of despair which is its goad and swirling fog" ("Redness of the Dawnbreakers").

The poet knew how people actually experience the intricacies of their lives – the varied elements and textures, the moods and dispositions, through which they compose their life stories – stories of human consequence, far exceeding the narrow and barren classification of their "identity," within which the national imagination seeks to encase the significance and potential of those lives.

Towards Public Happiness

In this discussion, I have wanted to open up certain issues concerning artistic and cultural life in contemporary Istanbul. And I have proposed that any such aesthetic consideration must be situated in the context of the country's wider political culture and climate. This has involved a critique of the national mentality that is absolutely central to the politics of culture in Turkey now. I have suggested that the mythical rhetoric that it has assumed at the present time is alien and detrimental to any meaningful human engagement with the arts. And I have sought to open up lines of thought that might allow us to think of arts, culture, and politics in more open and creative ways. My interest has been in the idea of art as a possibility space – a space for human possibilities, for possibilities that might find expression in the specifically urban environment of Istanbul. Now, you may well say that this is all very idealistic. And that is indeed the case, I accept. But I think that such a kind of aesthetic discussion – and not necessarily on the terms I have been setting out, of course – has to be engaged with at the present time, given the dire political circumstances that we find ourselves in. Even though one may not expect too much… For, as Reinhart Koselleck acknowledged in the context of his hope that we might be saved from victories, "every experience speaks against it." And yet hope and aspiration will persist.

At this point, I will come back to Feshane, and to the cultural industries agenda that I briefly touched on at the beginning of this article. It is no doubt the case that it is difficult to work through intellectual issues in the elevated and relatively isolated space simply of thought alone. Let me suggest that in the grounded and working context of such a project as that being undertaken at Feshane there is a good possibility to open up purposeful aesthetic debate. This would be to think of such a cultural institution – and, indeed, of cultural industries in general – not just in terms simply of economic and business potential, but rather as a focal point for civic and democratic engagement. This possibility can be thought of in the terms set out by the curator Nicolas Bourriaud in his notion of relational aesthetics, with its emphasis on how contemporary art and art institutions produce new kinds of sociability. He signals the development of a kind of art practice "where the substrate is formed by intersubjectivity, and which takes being-together as a central theme, the 'encounter' between beholder and picture, and the collective elaboration of meaning." (2002, p. 15). "It creates free areas," he maintains "and periods whose rhythm contrasts with those structuring everyday life, and it encourages an inter-human commerce that differs from the 'communication zones' that are imposed upon us" (p.16). Significantly, Bourriaud argues, these possibilities have come to exist as a consequence of "states of encounter" proposed by urban living and experience – they stem essentially "from the birth of a world-wide urban culture, and from the extension of this city model to more or less all cultural phenomena" (p. 14).

Perhaps there is a possibility for Feshane to establish its distinctiveness on the Istanbul scene through its alignment with such specifically urban values? The significance of this venue resides in more than just the exhibition of individual artworks – maybe of equal importance will be the organisation of workshops and festivals that encourage encounter, reflection and dialogue. Feyyaz Yaman, the overall coordinator of the "Ortadan Başlamak" exhibition, quickly initiated a preliminary discussion of contemporary cultural issues – issues concerned with art and freedom, art's connection to urban environment, the role of the museum in contemporary life, the professional situation of artists (Dursun, 2023). In a recent discussion between Ekmel Ertan and Alp Esin (2023), the distinctive potential of Feshane is highlighted, not just as an exhibition space, but also as a site for events and diverse kinds of social encounters. It is mooted that Feshane is becoming a "festive space." And an absolutely key question is then posed: "Where have we encountered this manifestation of civic space before?" But there is something that then has to be immediately added to this observation: "We know which areas of opposition the components of power react to the most."

And, indeed, in the context of contemporary Istanbul, it seems that precisely the kinds of possibilities being opened up at Feshane set off alarm bells in certain circles of power. Hence the swift move on the part of the Istanbul Chief Public Prosecutor's Office to investigate the inaugural exhibition because it may be "inciting the public to hatred and enmity." The Feshane protesters must surely have felt vindicated. As the distinguished legal specialist, Rıza Türmen (2023), a former judge for the European Court of Human Rights, has observed, such an inves-

tigation would have the greatest difficulty in establishing any direct causal link between such a collective exhibition and the impulse to hatred and enmity. The key issue, however, concerns the intimidation intended by this act of state intervention: "Even if a lawsuit is not filed at the end of the investigation and a decision of non-prosecution is given, the pressure and deterrent effect that the investigation will create on the artists and the exhibition organisers is enough to violate freedom of expression." And, of course, the message is being sent well beyond the confines of these particular artists and this exhibition. In fact, it's not the individual artworks that are the most significant issue, those that the protesters find distasteful, but rather the coming into existence now of Feshane as a potentially eventful space – a space in which the potential to be free threatens to manifest itself.

Throughout this discussion, I have been considering the political culture of contemporary Istanbul – the burden of the closed mythical imagination and the exploitation of this inclination in the cause of authoritarian politics; and I have wanted to consider the possibilities – and maybe they are just small possibilities – that could be opened up to respond to the difficult circumstances in which we find ourselves through the arts and artistic practices. Feshane offers a possibility space. The statist responses to it – from the combined efforts of both the incited Islamist protesters and the Prosecutor's Office – make it clear that the way forward cannot be easy. We are in the midst of a cultural war. What I want to draw attention to, as I bring this discussion to its conclusion, is the fact that the problem does not only arise as a consequence of the state's enmity. There is also a problem within the opposition ranks. And this problem resides in the opposition's approach to politics. Feshane has great potential. Yet we have to be cautious about the politics of the İBB, driven as it is by the oppositional CHP. Halil Karaveli (2018, p.2) has made the essential point at length, arguing that Turkish politics has always been characterised by "one form or another of authoritarianism, running from the most unrestrained, with no tolerance for any free expression of the people's will, to more 'tempered' versions with a semblance of democracy." Following the 2023 national election, Kaya Genç (2023) passed a scathing judgement on the politics of the CHP, accusing the party of being engaged in the same style of autocratic politics as the AKP, which is to say a politics of power over principle: "when it comes to power politics, the distinction between Islamist and Republican doesn't apply: both are obsessed with power."

Earlier in this discussion, I referred to Hannah Arendt's observation that there is a logic at work in authoritarian politics, that works to counter the possibility of free and spontaneous action in human endeavours, thereby delivering us over to what she thinks of as automatic existence. And the automatic is what Arendt most vehemently opposes. "In the state of being free," she says, "where the gift of freedom, the ability to begin, becomes a tangible worldly reality, the actual space of the political comes into being along with the stories that action generates" (2018a, p. 243). And, in her judgement, "a community that is not a space for the appearance of the endless variations of the virtuosity in which being free manifests itself, is not political" (p. 226). If we accept Arendt's rigorous definition of what constitutes a properly political space, then we have

to say that what we casually refer to in terms Istanbul's political life is actually non-political. The gift of freedom is never permitted to become a worldly reality. The rule of power over principle is such that the space of the truly political cannot come into being.

Please don't think that I am just naïve. I know as well as the next person about the distressing reality of contemporary Turkish ideological politics. The investigation into Feshane and the "Ortadan Başlamak" exhibition is evidence enough of this everyday reality curse. We know very well that resistance will involve a great and laborious process of legal-political struggle. And we have to recognise the inescapable necessity of engaging in this absurd, and ultimately futile, kind of struggle. The serious point that I want to make, however, is that, even as we grudgingly enter into such pursuits of justice, we have to keep hold of political ideals. On the basis of the same differentiation that I made with respect to artistic expression – Frank Kermode's distinction between fictional voice and mythical rhetoric – we should always keep in mind the difference between crude and reactive political manoeuvring, on the one hand, and the political aspiration to be free. Always keep in mind the gift of freedom, the possibility, that is to say, of new beginnings. To know that the gift of freedom will never be given – it is something that people must take (Robins, 2018). To reclaim the world: that is an aspiration that may be attacked, but it can never be extinguished. We live in gloom (*karanlık*), let me put it that way, but there are always tattered shreds of light (ışık parçaları), and we have seen the blue sky, the open blue (*açık mavi*).

Hannah Arendt's evocation of the idea of public happiness, drawn from her thoughts about the drawing up of the American Declaration of Independence, a process in which the idea of public or political freedom and public or political happiness were inspiring principles. It stood against tyrannical government – "a form of government in which the ruler, even though he ruled according to the laws of the realm, had monopolized for himself the right of action, banished the citizens from the public realm into the privacy of their house-holds, demanded of them that they mind their own, private business" (Arendt, 1990, p. 130). As Olivia Guaraldo comments, in Arendt, the idea of freedom involves collective action: "Freedom as a communal experience qualifies politics as an intersubjective space of 'company,' 'concert,' and 'plurality:' all these words have been chosen by Arendt to describe the sphere of action and speech as an essentially relational scene in which alone the human can display her humanity" (p. 399). And in Arendt's view, such a communal experience, understood in the sense of the human potentiality for beginning something new, is associated with the possibility of collective or public happiness. Public happiness attaches to the achievement of public freedom. This surely seems to be a very idealistic aspiration in the contemporary Turkish context. The point I would make, however, is that such an ideal gives us a very good reference point against which to measure our present condition of rule and servitude – and collective unhappiness.

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Let me end as I began, with a poem by Nâzım Hikmet - "The Long March"/ "*Uzun Yürüyüş*," addressed to Abidin Dino, and translated by John Berger, no less (Berger, 2007, p. 32).

These men, Dino,	Bu adamlar Dino,
who hold tattered shreds of light	Ellerinde ışık parçaları,
where are they going	Bu karanlıkta, Dino
in this gloom, Dino?	Bu adamlar nereye gider?
You, me too:	Sen de, Ben de, Dino
we are with them, Dino.	Onların arasındayız
We too Dino	Biz de, biz de, Dino
have glimpsed the blue sky.	Gördük açık maviyi

Let us hold on to those tattered shreds, and always have the blue in mind, the lovely blue.

1 Ali Erbaş, "İslam'ın Yeryüzündeki Mührü Camiler ve Fethi İstanbul", https://www.diyanet.gov.tr/tr-tr/Content/PrintDetail/32434

2 Bahçeli, İstanbul'un fethinin yıl dönümünde CHP'li İBB yönetimini eleştirdi: Dünyanın en büyük Türk kenti, tehlikeli bir zihniyetin tasallutu altında https://t24.com.tr/haber/bahceli-istanbul-un-fethinin-yil-donumunde-chp-li-ibb-yonetimini-elestirdi-dunyanin-en-buyuk-turk-kenti-tehlikeli-bir-zihniyetin-tasallutu-altinda,955433.

3 Hagia Sophia Manifesto, https://www.ayasofyacamii.gov.tr/en/ayasofya-manifestosu.

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