

FABIO TOLLEDI

## STARS AND ACROBATS CONFLICT AND TRADITION IN TURKEY

For many years, *performativity* has represented an effective key of interpretation in identifying the processes which mediate the construction of sense on the part of a given society.

From the research that we are conducting it is evident that, in the social environment of Turkey and of the South-East Mediterranean, we are witnessing a continuous process of profound upheaval and reformulation of the concrete and symbolic spaces pertaining to a manifold and varied context.

The forms of *popular* theatre, the forms through which Turkish society entertains and narrates itself (attributing traits which are absolutely proper and peculiar to it), are constantly transformed, subjected to all kinds of influences and drives. From belly dance to shadow theatre, from occidental drama to several forms of storytelling, it is possible to identify a continuous mode of self-representation and of representing the conflict which affords the social dynamics of Turkish society.

Watching Karagöz permits the observation of that subtle, constantly shifting, texture of ways by means of which a society represents itself, by means of which a society is able to describe its concrete and material horizon.

In this sense, the contribution of Victor Turner is vital for an understanding of the concept of *performativity*.

It is necessary to remember that the concept of *performance* indicates, first of all, the practice of bodies, a practice apt at producing a critical redefinition of the surrounding reality. The theoretical reflection of Victor Turner is, in this sense, crucial precisely because the concept of *performance* is used in order to penetrate liminal phenomenologies (potentially fertile zones for the rewriting of cultural codes), therefore to also penetrate social transformation itself.

The point of departure in Turner's analysis resides in the concept of *social drama*.

According to Turner, in fact,

a social drama is primarily manifested as the rupture of a norm, as the breaking of a moral rule, of the law, of custom or of the etiquette in some public circumstance. Or it can emerge from the background of passionate feelings. Once it appears, it is difficult to erase it. In any case, it produces a growing crisis, a fracture or an important turn in the relationships between the members of a social field, in which the apparent peace is changed into open conflict and latent antagonisms become visible. Parties are joined, factions are formed, and unless the conflict may be rapidly confined in a limited zone of social interaction, the rupture has the tendency to expand and spread to the point of coinciding with some fundamental

division in the vast complexity of relevant social relationships, which the factions in conflict belong to.

*Social drama*, therefore, takes place when, in the quotidian sphere of a particular context, a fracture is created in the traditional norms of life, or when, in a complex society, a turning point is generated in the consolidated socio-cultural structure and, at the same time, strategies defining contrasting actions are brought into effect. *Social dramas* reveal the “subcutaneous strata” of social structure and bring the opposing elements of that self-same society to the light. According to Turner, in fact, *social dramas* have the propensity to activate *oppositions* within groups, social classes, ethnicities, social categories, crystallized roles and statuses, transforming such oppositions into *conflicts* which, in order to be resolved, require a critical revisiting of particular aspects of the socio-cultural system, a critical reconsideration which reaches a point of *validity* and *effectiveness*.

Such critical reflection usually takes place in *phases of passage* from an institutionalized cultural situation to new spontaneous aggregations, which can originate in the act of tracing new and unfamiliar lines within the territory of *socio-cultural liminality*.

According to Turner,

liminality may involve a complex sequence of episodes in the sacred space-time, and it may involve also subversive and ludic (or playful) events. The cultural factors are isolated, as far as this is possible to do with plurivocal symbols [...] such as trees, images, paintings, dance figures, ecc., each of which may assume not one, but diverse meanings. Then, these cultural factors or elements can be recombined in many, often grotesque ways because they are arranged according to possible or imaginary combinations instead of those which are dictated by experience: thus the disguise of a monster may unite human, animal and vegetable traits in an “unnatural” way, while the same traits may be combined in a different way, albeit always “unnatural”, in a painting or as described in a story. In other words, in liminality people “play” with elements in the sphere of the familiar and renders them unfamiliar. Novelty is born from unprecedented combinations of familiar elements.

In good part the *liminal* represents a practice of social hybridization, a border zone in which potentially new cognitive paradigms might arise. Turner highlights how «the essence of liminality consists in the breaking down of culture in its constitutive factors and in the free or “ludic” re-composition of the same in every and any possible configuration, irrespectively of how bizarre».

In this free and experimental cultural sector, new socio-cultural elements and new combinatory rules might be introduced, and above all it is possible to effect a «critical reflection on the socio-cultural elements themselves beginning with the performative *mise en scène* of one’s own body».

The passage from Ottoman culture to the *modernization* of the state which takes place in Turkey, starting towards the end of the 1800s, is a clear example of this *liminality*. In fact, in this case, we see the redefinition of different forms of performativity – in many instances such redefinition translates into a deponentiation of performance forms which develops via processes of *touristication* and *folklorization* (in the most pejorative sense of such neologisms). The same counts both for Karagöz and for belly dance. A valid attraction for those who, from the outside, without too

much effort, seek a stereotypical image for touristic fruition and consumption. As if one could take the small plastic models of the Colosseum or the Tower of Pisa (in those kitsch glass balls which, when shaken, simulate snowfall) for the *authentic* surrogate of the Colosseum or the Tower of Pisa. Nevertheless, those small plastic models are cultural products which construct the concrete horizon of a new social narrative.

We are therefore reminded, through Turner, that *social dramas* may take place also in industrial and post-industrial societies, in the event of a *passage* from one cultural phase to another, when the eventhood of life itself no longer draws its sense in terms which were previously held as valid, and the production of a new cultural perspective for certain aspects of life in society becomes necessary. At times *social dramas* can take shape in the emergence of *new social and cultural oppositions* which arise and break into the parameters which until then found legitimacy in tradition and institution, invasions which at times take on the features of real *revolutions*.

In large scale modern societies, social dramas may extend from the local level to national revolutions, or right from the start take on the form of a war between nations. [...] In our industrial societies we are familiar with oppositions between classes, sub-classes, ethnic groups, sects and cults, religions, political parties and associations based upon the division of labour or the sense of belonging to the same sex or the same generation. Other societies are internally divided into traditional castes and corporations. Social dramas tend to activate these and many other classificatory *oppositions* [...]. Social dramas have the power of transforming these oppositions into *conflicts*. Social life, therefore, also in its moments of apparent quietude, is eminently “pregnant” with social dramas.

With regards to dance forms, it would be useful to note certain characteristic features proper to these performance modes. In the Ottoman society of the late 1800, in fact, we have the forms of *Chengis* and *Köçeks*.

*Raks* is the name given to Oriental dance, representing one of the favourite forms of entertainment in Muslim society. Across the globe this dance has become the symbol of Oriental performance cultures.

Late nineteenth century Ottoman society enjoyed this kind of performance in particular, a mode which combined musical entertainment with dance. It can be considered as a form of spectacle performed by professional dancers grouped in dance companies proper. Some of these professional companies were formed by male dancers, the *Köçeks*, whereas those formed by female dancers were called the *Companies of dancing girls*. Notice that we have no trace of mixed groups.

The female dancers were called *Chengis*. Female groups gave shows exclusively for women and were considered on an equal footing with actresses. They had a leader, a few assistants to the leader, twelve dancers and four female musicians who played string instruments called *saz*.

The leader of the group was generally a woman of experience, according to several historical records she was known to all as a lesbian who had spent all her life in the company of female dancers. Her house served as a sort of academy for future leaders, and this particular element allows us to consider the forms of transmission of this artistic learning, which was not assigned to

Academies or similar institutions, but trusted to the tradition of individual transmission which is proper to forms which include the presence of a *capocomico* (a phenomenon present also in Italy, as this term implies). The beauty, the grace, the skill of movement and the playfulness of the *Chengis* attracted many men. It was a well known fact to Ottoman society, however, that the *Chengis* preferred the love of women.

The *Chengis* were hired to entertain weddings, ceremonies which lasted several days. The group stayed at the house of the host for the entire duration of the wedding, entertaining the people invited. The arrival of the company was always an exceptional event. The beauty of the *Chengis* and their vivid costumes were a point of attraction for the men. Their rooms were kept in the area of the house reserved for the Harem. Admission was prohibited to both the other residents of the house and to the guests.

In many accounts describing the *Chengis*, travelers refer to splendid long hair and bodies wrapped in transparent clothes, with skirts trimmed in gold and embroidered belts, made in such a way as to leave the breasts bare during the dance. They carried cymbals in their hands, and the rhythmic movement of their shoulders and of the pelvis animated an extremely sensual dance which held all the spectators captive.

In many of these chronicles there is a diffused reference to their change of costume, which allowed them to return dressed as young men, throwing the female spectators into raptures.

This *liminality* of gender is of great importance. First of all, such gender shifting is an essential trait of all performance traditions. Masking, ambiguity, hermaphroditism are all strong signs of transformation. The *masculine* and the *feminine* are privileged spaces of social representation and the recent phenomena such as trans-genderism, cross-dressing, trans-sexuality, all have traditional roots and take on a thousand different forms which change from society to society.

Besides, it was a widely known fact that great part of the *Chengis* had lovers among the well-off women and the middle-aged widows of the city. This particular element ought to furnish food for thought with regard to the *liberal* traditions of the West, traditions which up to this day have been marked by a strong homophobia, nourished, in the feminine sphere, by infinite silences and censorships.

In the course of performance there was an open activity whereby dancers sent intimate messages to their lovers via explicit gestures which constituted a concretely seductive element of central importance to the dance itself.

It was customary among the public to attach gold coins to the bodies of the *Chengis* during the dance. This practice also became an essential element of this laic and profane rite, allowing for the intricate plot of invites and messages to develop further. It was habitual for the *Chengis* to spend the night in the company of a woman, after the show. Such behaviour was all but condemned, as the *Chengis* enjoyed much fame and were very much sought after in Ottoman society. They distinguished themselves for their beauty and their charm.

The majority hailed from the gypsy communities of the Balkans, although at times one could also find non-Muslim girls among them.

The male dancers, the *Köçeks*, were also much sought after in Ottoman society. They worked in groups, similar to those of the female dancers, which were named after the leader. Each company was generally made up of 30 dancers and, in exceptional cases, could even number between 200 and 300.

The *Köçeks* were the most popular attraction of Ottoman nighttime entertainment. These young men, experts both in dance and in music, having developed their craft to a high level of sophistication, wore female clothes and danced for the Sultan on all occasions. Some of these dancers wore broad trousers called *Şalvar* and provoked the envy of the women of the Harem. The *Köçeks* had long curly hair and wore very colourful garments, golden bodices hemmed with embroidery and silken skirts donned with bells. They also wore makeup and, like the *Cenghis*, they held cymbals in their hands.

Also in the case of the *Köçeks*, their dance was characterized by a marked erotic emphasis and it was openly oriented towards provoking the sensuality of the public. Male spectators did not hide their arousal during the performance and participated in very obvious ways to the growing erotic frenzy of these performances. The *Köçeks* were a strong object of desire, and the famous painter Enderun Fazil Bey portrayed some of the dancers of his epoch in a book entitled *Chenginâme*. Although in the title he obviously refers to the female dancers, actually the book is dedicated to their male counterparts, singing their praises in a most obscene way:

«Egyptian, harmonious and unique in form and figure. He is a Jew. When he starts dancing he drives all crazy. He has many lovers. And the mere sight of him walking gives great pleasure».

Also in this case, therefore, a total *normality* seems to transpire in the expression of homosexual desire and seduction. And therein lies the obvious reference to a mechanism of playful contrast, related to the place *par excellence* for pleasure and ambiguity, for the care of the body and the promise of sensuality: the Turkish bath.

According to Turner, within the phases of crisis, of transition, of cultural change, new cultural modalities are devised in order to face the crisis, to comprehend and supply it with meaning, and at times also to resolve it. For the societies we live in, auto-analysis, a critical reflection of society itself, the re-evaluation of our social behaviour, the metaphorical presentation of modalities in which one may find a response to socio-cultural ambiguity, finds its place in *artistic* expression.

Precisely what the members of a tribe do when they fabricate masks, disguise themselves as monsters, pile disparate ritual symbols, invert or parody profane reality in the popular myths and legends, is repeated in the entertainment genres of industrialized societies such as theatre, poetry, the novel, cinema, sport, classical and rock music, the figurative arts, pop art, etc.: these *play* with cultural factors, assembling them in combinations that are usually of an experimental character, at times casual, grotesque, improbable, surprising, upsetting. Only that they do this in a much more complicated way than that which takes place in the liminal phase of tribal rites of initiation, since specialized genres of artistic and popular entertainment (mass culture, pop culture, folk culture, high culture, alternative culture, avant-garde culture, etc.) multiply, in contrast with the relatively limited number of the symbolic genres in a “tribal” society, and internally each of those genres leave ample space for writers, poets, playwrights, painters, sculptors, composers, musicians, actors, comedians, folk singers,

rock musicians, and for the “producers” of culture in general to create not only strange forms, but also, and with sufficient frequency, models [...] which contain a severe criticism of the *status quo*, in part or in its entirety».

These genres, which provide for the possibility of undertaking free experimentation within the domain of mass culture, allowing for a reshuffle of the pieces which define a shared, collective imagination, are the products which Turner calls *liminoid*. For Turner, «(the “oid” comes from the Greek *-eidos*; form, model, and it means “resembling to”; the “liminoid” *resembles* the liminal without being identical to it).

What is *liminoid*, therefore, resembles the *liminal* in its being characterized by a transformative potential. After all, Turner gives great importance to action through *play* and *amusement* in Western societies – indeed, via the element of free and spontaneous experimentation which *play* affords, it is possible to *live specific creative experiences*, thus learning to take apart and to fragment our collective imagination, reconnecting cultural elements according to unusual logics of aggregation and reflecting upon the existing universe of values.

Flicking through the Karagöz plots collected by Metin And, we get a glimpse of a gallery of types and situations which indicate a horizon of social figuration that is of immense utility for the comprehension of a complex and articulate social dynamic.

These stories, upon careful examination, echo a repertory which is well known among us, in the plays of Totò, of Peppino De Filippo, of Erminio Macario, that is to remain within the Italian context.

Social figurations, as defined by the sociologist Norbert Elias, are based on the concept of an interdependence between human beings. In this sense, figurations have to be understood in terms of dynamic processes. According to this perspective, beyond static conceptions it is also necessary to totally overcome the dualistic idea which sees Man and society simplistically put one against the other, qua two diverse and antagonistic entities.

The following are some of the most widespread and well known Karagöz plots:

**Karagöz and the poetry competition** - Karagöz participates to a poetry competition between bards and beats all the poets, who one by one exhibit their bizarre ways and costumes. He wins the first prize not because of his talent in improvising poetry, but because he is valued for his roughness and misbehaviour.

**The madhouse** - Karagöz, having spoken for a long time with mad people who escaped a mental asylum, shows signs of infirmity. Hacivat locks him up in a madhouse and chains him. Some make fun of Karagöz and a doctor prescribes him some absurd medicine in order to cure him. Finally, Hacivat saves him from the madhouse.

**Yacivi (the public clerk)** - Out of work, as usual, Karagöz is enrolled as a public clerk in a shop haunted by ghosts, where he writes nonsensical letters for his clients. In the end he is persecuted by a *djin*, a spirit, hired purposefully by Hacivat.

**Salincak** - Karagöz and Hacivat rent their clients a swing. Karagöz cheats his partner Hacivat of

his part of the earnings. Hacivat disguises himself as an old lady to unmask the culprit. A Jew comes along and he pretends to be dead. What follows is a burial scene in which other Jews carry a coffin in order to frighten Karagöz, who heaves the dead Jew onto the coffin.

**Agalik (Karagöz, the rich man)** - Karagöz becomes rich by betraying the trust of a rich Persian who had trusted him with a big sum of money. He then seeks to do business with all those who wish to work for him.

**Orman (the forest)** - Karagöz, running an open air bar, becomes the unwilling accomplice of some bandits. Having robbed many travelers, the bandits are eventually caught.

**Kirginlar (offended)** - Karagöz kills Hacivat and his brothers, then hides them in a huge vase upon which he sits. The witty son of Hacivat manages to move Karagöz from his seat and thus discover the murder. Tuzsuz seeks to punish him, but then he forgives him.

**Cazular (the witches)** - Two rival witches have a son and a daughter respectively. The latter are lovers but they fight. Each one complains with the mother about the other. The two witches have a dispute in the course of which many people are transformed into animals.

**Sahte Gelin (the false bride)** - Karagöz disguises himself as the bride of Matiz to cheat him into promising to quit drinking. On their wedding night, when Matiz raises the veil of his bride and finds the bearded Karagöz, the drunkard learns his lesson.

**Sunnet (the circumcision)** - Karagöz, although he is a grown up man, is circumcised like a child against his will. The ceremony foresees the shows and entertainments usually put up in order to distract the boys who lie on the bed after having been circumcised.

**Buyuk Evlenme (The big wedding)** - A long parade exhibiting the dowry of the bride takes place. On the wedding night, Karagöz's bride delivers an impertinent and shameless son who, just born, swears in an obscene and blasphemous way.

**Meyhane (the Tavern)** - The adventures of the famous drunkard *Bekri Mustafa* are narrated.

**Hamam (The public bath)** - Çelebi, the dandy, has inherited two public baths, each of which is run by a woman known to be a lesbian. The woman gets angry and leaves the public baths unattended. Noting the profit they make, Çelebi wants to keep the baths functioning and asks Hacivat to help him. In this way the two are reconciled. The jealous Karagöz watches his wife from the window of the bath. A fire breaks out at the public bath and all run out, including Karagöz, who escapes with half of his beard burnt, because a Persian vendor of *henné* had mixed arsenic with the *henné*. Karagöz is desperate, because without the public bath he will lose all the clients of his spice shop situated right across.

**Odullu yahut Karagöz'un Pehlivanligi (Karagöz the Wrestler)** - A girl's rich father dies, having previously established that his future son-in-law would be one who succeeds in beating his daughter at showdown. This is no mean feat considering that the girl is very strong. Many have tried but without success. Finally the suitors ask Hacivat whether he knew anyone able to beat the

girl. Karagöz succeeds, but the girl's mother posits yet another condition: that he beats all the other contenders. Karagöz accepts this challenge also and beats all the other characters. Thus, Karagöz conquers the girl.

**Bahce (The Garden)** - Çelebi has a garden. He trusts Hacivat with the task of taking care of the garden and Hacivat assures him that he would transform it into a garden of pleasure. Karagöz asks Hacivat to employ him, but the latter refuses. Several persons enter the garden. When Matiz arrives, he says that a respectable neighbourhood cannot have a pleasure garden, so he closes it down until a license is obtained.

This gallery of stories, characters and incidents highlights the skill held by Karagöz and by the other characters to adapt and make do. Theft, fraud, travesties, chases, brawls, failures. Such a repertory, of course well known in film with the comedies of Charlie Chaplin and Buster Keaton, or in the already cited exploits of Totò, propose a social type and a diagram of relationships between men and women which constitute the *social drama* of a given society.

Moreover, all the settings, the developments of the schemes, constantly furnish, in fine filigree, a precise image of the articulate context of the characters' lives. Sacred and profane, idealism and material life are enmeshed in a context which is not a *naturalistic* representation of social relationships, but which, from a paradoxical and discontinuous perspective, is an estranging critical stand in relation to the living social context.

Adopting Turner's conceptual framework, we could say that the *liminoid* and the *liminal* represent *performative zones of social meta-commentary*.

Turner attempts to grasp the processual function of cultural symbols via a *comparative symbology*. Cultural symbols are considered by Turner to be dynamic socio-cultural systems, vehicles of active transformation within an active social and cultural sphere, one that is operative and legitimate.

Via the breaking down and putting back together of familiar cultural symbols it is possible to attribute meaning to *social dramas* which present themselves in the *liminal* phases of socio-cultural dynamics.

Following social mutation (which might also be dramatic), through *the staging of our-body-mind* and therefore via *performance*, it is possible to operate a *critical reflection* upon some crystallized social aspects and at times to bring forth change at some levels of society itself. It is evident, in this sense, that *performance* may be a critical response to socio-cultural change. This is extremely useful if the object of analysis is oriented, as in our case, on a subject (Turkey, the Near East, Islam, Ottoman culture) which is often pregnant with commonplaces.

According to Turner

the term *performance* derives from the old French *parfournir* which literally means "to furnish completely or exhaustively". *To perform* means, therefore, to produce something, to bring

something to its fulfillment, or to *execute* a drama, an order or a project. But in my view, in the course of the “execution” something new may be generated. Performance transforms itself. [...] Rules may “frame it”, but the “flux” of action and interaction within this framework may bring about unprecedented intuitions and also generate new symbols and meanings, incorporating them in subsequent performances.

*Performance*, therefore, has an experimental and, at the same time, a critical quality: by means of *psychophysical acting* it is possible to *live and fulfill an experience*, and in the *mise en scène* of our body it is possible to reflect upon that very *experience*.

One should, therefore, not neglect each transformation of the modality in which the body is represented during a given epoch. In this sense, the disappearance of the enormous phallus which characterised the figure of *Tarman* in many Karagöz scenes, at least until the 1920s, is of particular relevance. When did this censorship take place? What dynamic of domestication has determined the disappearance of such a clamorous and obscene trait?

On a more general level, *performance* constitutes a form of *social metacommentary*, that is, it represents «a story which a group narrates to itself and about itself». Therefore, on the one hand, it facilitates the reading of the group’s own *lived experience* via *the re-living of that same experience* or it permits to *live new experiences according to new modalities*. On the other hand, it favours a critical reflection on the real, allowing one to effect an *exploration, from the inside, of cultural symbols*, articulating the conflicts of the present and endowing them with meaning.

Turner himself affirms that «the anthropology of performance is an essential part of the anthropology of experience. In a way, each type of cultural performance, including ritual, ceremony, carnival, theatre and poetry, is an explanation and an explication of life itself».

Via specific *theatre performance practices* and by means of the *mise en scène of our body*, the match between art and life experiences becomes ever more close.

Another very significant problem which derives from the analysis of the constitutive elements of Karagöz resides in the relationship with the shamanic element. Throughout the past century, our European tradition, branded by French influence, has given prevalence to the theatrical form of possession (to cite a famous work by Leiris).

This element resulted in an unbridgeable distance from the forms of theatre grounded in shamanism. Such uncertainty is marked primarily by the prevalent African culture (on the side of possession) with regards to an *oriental* line (linked with the shamanic side). The evidence of the shamanic trait of Karagöz cannot but spring to attention, a trait that is evident both in its foundation myth and in the connotation of the central character, a *blacksmith*.

As Mircea Eliade has brilliantly underlined, there exists a link between the figure of the shaman and that of the blacksmith, as «by degree of importance, the craft of the blacksmith follows immediately that of the shaman». Again, according to Eliade, «blacksmiths have the power to heal and even to predict the future». Such a relationship with the figure of the blacksmith is obviously marked by metallurgy, that is by the transformation of metals through the use of fire. The element of

fire is clearly intimately linked with the production of shadows. It should, furthermore, be remembered that in many foundation myths pertaining to different traditions, the cave, fire, shadows are the constitutive elements in the birth of theatre (with Japan, China and India among the first).

As indicated by François Laplantine

identity and representation are not two distinct notions: instead they derive from a single affirmation, which tends towards the univocality and coherence of sense. From their point of view, there exists an already constituted sense, which is a matter of grasping and reproduction via language (in the case of representation), or of recovery and restoration (in the case of identity).