

OVERCOMING CENSORSHIP WITH CREATIVE TACTICS
THE TV SERIES LEYLA ILE MECNUN AS A CULT SERIES OF THE YOUTH
CULTURE IN TURKEY

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Résumé

Cet article analyse la série télévisée *Leyla ile Mecnun* (L&M) qui est devenue une série «culte» de la culture de jeunesse en Turquie. Les producteurs de la série ont dû, en effet, inventer un nouveau jargon afin de pouvoir surmonter la censure dans la télévision turque. Ce nouveau jargon a été, par la suite, adopté par la jeunesse qui l'a incorporé dans sa culture.

Mots-clés

Leyla ile Mecnun, séries télévisés, tactiques, culture de jeunesse, Turquie

Abstract

This paper analyses the television (TV) series, *Leyla ile Mecnun* (L&M), which was one of the 'cult' series of the youth culture in Turkey. The producers of the series, in order to overcome censorship in Turkish television, invented a new 'jargon', which was actively appropriated by the young viewers of the series, and was immersed into the youth culture.

Keywords

Leyla ile Mecnun, TV series, tactics, youth culture, Turkey

Introduction

The TV series *Leyla ile Mecnun* (*L&M*) started its journey in February 2011 and aired for three seasons on the public channel, TRT1, and was supposed to continue for its fourth season under normal circumstances. However, the TRT officials announced, unexpectedly, in August 2013, right after the Gezi Park protests in June 2013 and right before the beginning of the new season, that they would not be renewing the series. Since *L&M* was produced for the public channel, TRT1, the producers of the series had to meet not only the regulations of the channel, but also those of the state agency responsible for monitoring, regulating, and sanctioning radio and TV broadcasts in Turkey, the Radio and Television Supreme Council (RTÜK), and thus, a certain censorship. The tactic used in order to overcome this censorship was to invent new 'jargon', the jargon of the series, in order to refer to 'banned' alcohol, cigarettes, or swearing and cursing. Even though the series never got high ratings (since the older generations seemed to have difficulty understanding this 'absurd' comedy), it became a cult series for the young generation. In fact, *L&M* was not really a phenomenon of 'classic TV', but of the internet, since young people were mostly watching it online and commenting on it using new information technologies (online dictionaries, Facebook, twitter, etc.). It is, in fact, this immersion of the series into the youth culture that turned it into one of the important components of the Gezi Park protests in June 2013, and what brought about the decision of the public channel to not continue the series.

Invention of L&M jargon as a tactic for overcoming the censorship

L&M, as the name of the series, refers to the love story from ancient Arabia, Layla, and Mejnun. The script writer of the series, Burak Aksak, explains that he came up with the idea of an absurd comedy with the question: "What would it be like if a white-bearded old man (*ak sakallı dede*) helped Mecnun in his love affair? Even though discussing the masculinity issue in the series is not the real focus of this article, it is important to underline that the series was mostly Mecnun's story and the main characters (Mecnun; Mecnun's father, Iskender; and Mecnun's friends: Yavuz, Brother Ismail, and the grocer of the neighbour Erdal) were all males. Even Leyla's character changed from one season to the other, being portrayed by different actresses and there were no main female characters.

L&M is a good example for discussing the production of a series under numerous constraints. Since *L&M* was produced for the public channel, TRT1, the producers of the series had to face the censorship of the channel as well as that of the RTÜK. Interestingly, the series invented some creative 'tactics' to overcome these difficulties and constraints. It is important to underline that Michel de Certeau (1988) distinguished between 'tactic' and 'strategy'. He defined tactic as the 'art of the weak', whereas strategy is the 'art of the powerful'. According to de Certeau, tactics emerge in a space controlled by the enemy:

It [the tactic] does not, therefore, have the options of planning general strategy and viewing the adversary as a whole within a district, visible, and objectifiable space. It operates in isolated actions,

blow by blow... This nowhere gives a tactic mobility, to be sure, but a mobility that must accept the chance offerings of the moment, and seize on the wing the possibilities that offer themselves at any given moment. It must vigilantly make use of the cracks that particular conjunctions open in the surveillance of the proprietary powers. It poaches in them. It creates surprises in them. It can be where it is least expected. It is a guileful ruse (de Certeau, 1988: 37).

Instead of entering into direct confrontation with these constraints, the producers of *L&M* chose to transcend them with their creativity and inventing tactics instead of resisting openly against them.¹

First of all, there is censorship in Turkish television on the usage of certain products like alcohol and cigarettes. Burak Aksak, who wrote the *L&M* scenario, explained that he started to name these products differently, which brought about a redefinition of these products in order to overcome the censorship of the channel, and argued in an interview in August 2011, in a mocking way, that the censorship helps creativity (Aktuğ, 2011). For example, in *L&M* vocabulary: chewing gum represents cigarettes; grapes represent wine; to fall into grapes means to drink wine (to fall into wine); figs (*incir*) represent rakı; fruit juice (canned fruit juice wrapped with paper) represents beer (beer wrapped in paper); plums represent tequila, etc. Burak Aksak noted in an interview, that since in real life people smoke and drink alcohol, a world without those is a surreal world. In fact, the ‘absurdity’ or the ‘surreality’ of the series was, in a way, imposed or reinforced by the censorship of the channel.

The following extract from the series between Mecnun and his friend Yavuz, two main characters in the series, demonstrates the utilization of the tactic and shows how chewing gum signifies cigarettes:

Yavuz: Mecnun?

Mecnun: My brother, why are you coming so silently without notification? You see I am hiding here.

Yavuz: What happened? Are you in trouble?

Mecnun: I am in big trouble. I am depressed. I am feeling so low. I am in big trouble.

Yavuz: Take one.

Mecnun: Himm?

Yavuz: Take a chewing gum.

Mecnun: Wallah? My brother, thank you. What’s up? Did you start to chew gum?

Yavuz: No, not really, only when I am feeling blue.

Mecnun: But you are carrying a package?

Yavuz: No, no! I throw it up when its sugar is gone.

Mecnun: My goodness. That is not a good thing either. It damages the tongue.

Yavuz: But no, for God’s sake, those are all myths.

¹ It is important to underline that the new Iranian cinema had used various tactics for transcending censorship, and in that manner, it is interesting to study those tactics in a comparative manner. For an in-depth study of the Iranian cinema, see among others, Tapper (2002).

L&M as a TV series is an example of both humour of logic (with its absurdity) and also linguistic humour (with the play of words) according to Arthur Asa Berger's (1993) classification.² Since there is a censorship in Turkish television on the usage of slang/slang expressions on TV, the TV series chose to create new ways of swearing from the mouths of the characters to transcend this censorship. There was a jargon of new ways of swearing and cursing and once again, the motivation for their invention was to overcome the censorship of the channel. For example, shower curtain, bathroom slippers, plastic bags, and hole in a sock were all used as swearing. *Duş perdesi* (shower curtain) was used as a swear word and in the series, it was defined as 'disgusting, since it sticks on your back while having a shower; you try to get rid of it and then it becomes even more tangled'. *Tuvalet terliği* (bathroom slippers) were defined as 'yellow plastic low quality slippers, as ugly and dirty bathroom slippers'. *Poşet* (*plastic bags*) was also used as a swear word, as a 'black, low-quality plastic bag, which is smelly and cancer producing'. Similarly, *delik çorap* (*hole in a sock*) 'the hole in your sock that you see after taking off your shoes (especially if you are in someone else's house)' was used as swear word.

There were also curse words invented in the series, once again, to overcome the censorship, such as:

Pazartesi akşamı televizyonun karşısında kurul da, sevdiğin dizi gün değiştirmiş olsun: Be settled in front of the TV set and learn that the airdate of the series you like watching had been changed.

Çanak antenin ters dönsün (Your satellite is not facing the right direction).

Tuttuğun takım küme düşsün (The team you support is relegated).

At the end of both swear words and cursing, it was underlined that this was a curse/swear word, by the character saying "this is too heavy!". The following extract from the series between Mecnun and Brother Ismail, two important characters in the series, demonstrates how in the series, Sarkozy (with reference to Nicholas Sarkozy, the President of France at the period) signifies swear words:

Mecnun: Brother İsmail!

Brother Ismail: Hooop!

Mecnun: Brother I accept all you say, you are right. Here I am. Swear at me! I deserved it. I deserved it right!

Brother Ismail: How can I swear at you Mecnun? You are my brother. How can I do that?

Mecnun: No, I don't accept that I am sorry. I deserved a very heavy swearing and I will take it and leave. Let me get it. See, I am obediently listening to you.

² Arthur Asa Berger (1993) did a content analysis research on a wide range of materials (joke books, folklore books, comic books, books on humor, humorous plays, short stories, and comic novels, etc.) and examined the techniques that humourists used in creating humor. He found a total of 45 techniques and grouped them into four categories: humor of logic, humor of identity, linguistic humor, and visual or action humor.

Brother Ismail: Here it comes then.

Mecnun: I am waiting.

Brother Ismail: Are you ready?

Mecnun: Yes, my brother, send it!

Brother Ismail: Sarkozy!

Mecnun: What?

Brother Ismail: Sarkozy!

Mecnun: Sar kozy! But no! How do you swear my brother! How does one human being swear to another like that? That is too bad of you! How do you swear like that my brother!

Brother Ismail: But you deserved it.

Mecnun: Yes I deserved it, but this one was very heavy.

As a result of the tactics used in the series, *L&M* was like a naive tale with no images of alcohol or cigarettes, or swearing, violence, and harsh scenes. It is also possible to argue that even though it is an ‘absurd comedy’, with this naivety, there is a reference to the family melodramas of Turkish Yeşilçam³ cinema (for a critical discussion on the family issue and the role of women in Turkish cinema see Dönmez-Colin, 2010). *L&M* is in the same genre as Yeşilçam movies and other important TV series from the history of TV series in Turkey, since it was a TV series about a neighbourhood, ‘mahalle’ in Turkish (Tanrıöver, 2002). *Mahalle* had always been the place for successful Turkish TV series like *Perihan Abla*, *Süper Baba*, *Bizimkiler*, etc. In *L&M*, the neighbourhood was Kireçburnu, in İstanbul. In short, the series, having some continuity with the history of TV series in Turkey, succeeded to create a new jargon, the jargon of the series, in order to overcome the rules of the channel, and, in fact, it was this jargon that became popular in the youth culture.

The immersion of the series into the youth culture

This paper argues that there is also a link between the tactics used by the producers of the TV series and the characteristics of the youth of the post-1980 generation. It is argued that they both use the tactic of “necessary conformism” (Lüküslü, 2009; Lüküslü, 2013). It is important to note that the author of the scenario, Burak Aksak, was born in the second half of the 1980s, and as a person in his twenties, belongs to the post-1980 generation. Developed in my empirical research, I tried to transcend the engaged/disengaged dichotomy dominant in the analysis of young people and adopt the concept of necessary conformism. A new understanding of young people’s attitudes and experiences could eventually change not only our perceptions of the young generation but also how we define politics. As James C. Scott (1990, 20) suggests, understanding political life solely through the “command performances of consent or open rebellion” is far too narrow a view. Although Scott (1985, 1990) developed his theory primarily to analyse the experiences of the colonized, slaves, serfs, and subjugated races, it is possible to extend his concepts of the “weapons of the weak”, “hidden transcripts,” and “infrapolitics” to everyday life in contemporary societies and also to those groups who

³ Yeşilçam cinema refers to the old Turkish film industry, taking its name from Yeşilçam Street in Beyoğlu, İstanbul, similar to Hollywood in the United States. For a critical history of cinema in Turkey, see Arslan, 2011.

occupy lower levels of the hierarchy of power. Also valuable is Asef Bayat's (2009) application of Scott's ideas in his empirical studies of the Middle East, which focus on "ordinary people," including globalized youth, who resort to "non-movements" rather than mass protests or full-scale revolutions but offer a political response through daily practice and action. Necessary conformist behaviour means acting in conformity with society's rules without really believing in them, paradoxically "killing" the rules while reviving them as "zombie categories" (Beck, 2008: 202-213), by inventing tactics rather than directly rebelling. It is important to note that "necessary conformism" is not synonymous with apathy, but rather hides a real and strong discontent, and can mask a profound agony. "According to the logic of necessary conformism, young people are only conformist when they believe to be necessary, but they try to escape being so whenever possible" (Lüküslü, 2014:79). A very good example of this necessary conformist behaviour is observed concerning Internet usage. It should be noted that access to the video-sharing website YouTube was blocked around 20 times between 2007 and 2010 (Freedom House, *Freedom on the Net 2011*, p. 330). However, users evaded this block by again inventing tactics that took advantage of the cracks in the system. They accessed the website by modifying their connection parameters to use alternative servers. In fact, according to the web information company Alexa, during the two-and-a-half-year block, YouTube remained the eighth most accessed site in Turkey (*Freedom on the Net*, p.333).

In television studies, there has been a debate around the passive or active audience. The underlying question concerns how active the audience is with the television text, which is answered in two opposite ways. On the one hand, there is scholarship defining the audience as a passive one, whereas the opposing scholarship defines the audience as active, discussing and analysing the text (see for further discussion, Abercrombie, 1996, 199-201). However, as argued by Nicholas Abercrombie:

To a very great extent the debate over the active audience is rather artificial. No one will argue for the absolute autonomy of the audience from the text and no one will argue for the absolute power of the text over the audience. Rather the debate is properly about the balance of text, audience and social context, and that is entirely a matter of empirical investigation. Within this debate the essential question concerns the mechanisms by which members of the audience turn a television programme into something recognisable by them" (Abercrombie, 1996, 204).

New information technologies help us see how viewers 'turn a TV programme into something recognisable by them; since people share their ideas and choose to comment on TV programmes on social media. *L&M* was one of the TV series that was popular on social media and not so popular according to the ratings. Ali Eyüboğlu (2012), a TV commentator for the *Milliyet* newspaper, confessed after the ending of the first season, that he never made it through watching an entire episode, since he did not laugh at absurd comedies. However, he underlined that the series did not have high ratings, but it became TT after each episode on Twitter, and whenever an online survey was conducted on TV series, *L&M* always had good scores, whereas in the ratings, the series was always situated in the middle or towards the end

of the rating list. For example, the final episode of the first season had a rating of 0.92 and was 78th in the overall and 48th in the AB group with a rating of 1.38.

My previous research (Lüküslü, 2014) showed that popular culture has an important place on websites and on comments on social media by young people. Intertextuality and the active usage of humour are equally important. Moreover, TV series like *L&M* feed the youth culture. Hence, the series' jargon is actively used and there are references to the series. It is also important to note that there were also 'offline' meetings regarding the series and the text, with the producers, crew, and viewers at the beginning of each season; they all met in Kireçburnu and watched the first episode of the series together. It is possible to say that the series was immersed into the youth culture, and, in fact, it was this immersion that made it one of the components of the Gezi Park events in late May and June of 2013.

For a series like *L&M*, which used as a set a neighbourhood in Bosphorus, Kireçburnu, and made references to the solidarity and friendships in the neighbourhood, it is no surprise to see that the series was in solidarity with the protection of the Gezi Park against a project aiming to transform the park into a shopping mall (see among others, Göle, 2013; Tuğal, 2013; Özkırımlı, 2014). The actors in *L&M* had contributed to a video against the project, a video that was seen as 'responsible' for the suspension of the series by the public channel. In this video, the characters of the series talked as characters in the series and showed the absurdity of the project in a sarcastic manner:

Iskender: They are very well demolishing Gezi Park.

(All together): Oh that is great!

Iskender: They are also cutting down the trees.

(All together): Hah!

Mecnun: I think they should build instead a go-kart arena.

Iskender: A go-kart arena?

Erdal: They should also build a shooting range.

[...]

Iskender: I say, what about building a Disneyland in the historical peninsula of İstanbul? Would it not be great? A Disneyland in the complete peninsula?

Mecnun: Great.

Iskender: By the view of the Bosphorus...

Mecnun: We don't have such a place.

Iskender: Where can I take my child? Will I take my child to the park with trees and so on? Should I take my child to such ridiculous, unhygienic places?

(All together): Children don't like parks.

Iskender: Children don't like parks, they want shopping malls.

[...]

Mecnun: I have an idea. It is best to pour concrete into the Bosphorus.

Iskender: Pouring concrete into the Bosphorus.

Mecnun: Yes, it is not that difficult.

Iskender: So that you can traverse Bosphorus on foot.

Mecnun: You would solve the traffic issue, my brother.

There was also a photo that circulated many times on social media, in which we see the actors and the general director of the series, Onur Ünlü, with gas masks in Taksim during the Gezi Park protests. It seems that it was this presence of the series' actors and crew that offended the public channel authorities. However, it is also possible to talk about the presence of the jargon produced by the series, as well as the presence of the characters during the Gezi Park protests. There is a slogan that was seen during the Gezi Park protests, that was also seen on social media: “*Islak banyo terliğine çorapla basasın RTE* - That you put on wet bathroom slippers with your socks RTE [acronym for Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, the Prime Minister of Turkey during Gezi Park protests]”. Similarly, during the Gezi Park protests, there were also posters of one of the *L&M* characters, the grocer, Erdal, saying “*Esnafa zarar verme!* - Do not give harm to the tradesman!” [during the protests].

Even though the series was very popular in the youth culture, it was impossible for the series to find another channel. According to the director, Onur Ünlü, the channels were hesitant about continuing a series that had already lasted for three seasons, and were more open to a brand new one by the same team.⁴ That is how the same team, with few exceptions, started a new project called, *Ben de Özledim* (I also missed). The new series was focused on the actors' and production team's lives after the ending of *L&M*. It was also then that the spectators learned about *L&M*'s final episode. Burak Aksak, the script writer, announced in the series, that in the final episode of *L&M*, if the series had ever continued, the spectators would have learned that everything was, in fact, in Mecnun's imagination. Mecnun had an accident and was paralyzed, and the characters were all his imagination. Once again, the producers of the series chose to transcend the constraints by not rejecting the rules, but by playing within the system: *L&M* has its final episode in another series.

It is also important to note that the general director of *L&M*, Onur Ünlü, after losing his job, chose to make a new movie, *İtirazım Var* [the name of the movie was translated into English as *Let's Sin*, but a mot-a-mot translation would be *I have an objection*]. Ünlü, in a talk during a special screening of the movie on 29 April 2014 in İstanbul, said that if the series had not ended suddenly, he would have waited for some years to make the movie. *İtirazım Var* was a movie about an « *imam* » who took on the role of a detective after the killing of a man in his mosque. The *imam*, who was played by Serkan Keskin, who portrayed the character İsmail Ağbi in *L&M*, was a critical imam and it was through him that the new Islamic bourgeoisie was being criticised. The reporters asked Onur Ünlü whether the source of inspiration of the movie was the imam who opened the doors of his mosque in Dolmabahçe during the Gezi Park protests to the victims of the police brutality. Onur Ünlü answered that the idea of the movie had a long history dating back to before the Gezi Park protests; however, he was sure that “The imam in the movie too would open the doors of his mosque to these young people” (Topyıldız, 2014).

Conclusion

⁴ Here I am referring to the talk of the director during the special screening of the film on 29 April 2014 at Capitol Cinema in İstanbul.

As a sociologist of youth interested in understanding young people and youth culture, I find it interesting to observe tactics used for overcoming the censorship and immersion of the TV series *L&M* into the youth culture in Turkey. I believe that the series is a good metaphor for describing the young people in Turkey. For some, *L&M* is an absurd comedy that is difficult to grasp and does not have much meaning, and does not seem at first sight to have a political message. Whereas for some, it is a cult series that succeeded in creating new jargon and creative characters with a meaningful story, with the active participation of the production crew and the audience. The same can also be stated for the young generation in Turkey. For some, it is difficult to understand them and they do not seem to have a political standing, whereas if you look ‘closer’ or from a ‘different’ angle, it is possible to see the new political discourse as well as the meaning behind it. The Turkish television series *L&M* in that sense serves as a very good case study demonstrating the “political potential” of popular culture as argued by John Fiske (1989, 159-194) as well as the need for research reconciling television and youth studies.

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