

KARAGÖZ AND ORTAOYUNU
THE EFFECT OF MEDIUM ON TECHNIQUES
OF HUMOR

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The Turkish popular theater tradition was presented to the public historically by three classes of professional performers: puppeteers, actors, and storytellers.¹ This paper deals with the first two. The puppeteer's art was a shadow theater called *karagöz*.² The theatrical form performed by actors was a comedy called *ortaoyunu*. These two types of play are often referred to in the same breath, due to their similarities in text and context, often sharing many play titles, scenarios, and characters. They both make use of slapstick comedy, monologues and dialogues involving puns, ready responses, crude practical jokes, double meanings-- in short, a rough sort of comedy of manners and a general tendency toward mockery of the uncanny. Despite their similarities in text and context, however, there is an inevitable dissimilarity in texture due to the different medium that each one uses. The purpose of this paper is to investigate the distinctions that these different media create, particularly regarding techniques that provoke laughter. We will begin by establishing the similarities between the two forms of theater and then proceed to a discussion of their differences. In order to achieve an understanding of these devices

of humor, I will describe the basic techniques of the two traditions and give an account of the ethno-historical context.

The shadow comedy involves casting the shadow of two-dimensional translucent leather figures on a cloth screen. It is a one-man act-- the puppeteer's. He must account for the visual and oral techniques of the performance. He stands behind the screen holding the puppets flat against it with rods held horizontally and fixed at right angles to the puppets. An oil lamp is placed as a light source behind the puppets, between the puppeteer and the screen. The screen diffuses the light which shines through the multi-colored translucent material making the figures flicker and look like stained glass.³ The puppeteer animates the puppets and produces the dialogues between them using different tones and accents for each character. The main character of the shadow play is Karagöz, from whom the theater derives its name. He always enters from the right side of the screen facing left from the point of view of the puppeteer. His major partner and opponent is Hacivat who enters from the opposite side and faces right. All other characters also enter from the left and face Karagöz who remains on the screen for almost the entire length of the performance.

Ortaoyunu was a play with live comedians, performed in a circle with the audience surrounding the actors. There was no raised platform or stage and hardly any scenery. Actors would specialize in impersonating one particular character. The most famous players in the historical record are those playing the main characters of Kavuklu and Pişekar who generally correspond to the clowns, Karagöz and Hacivat, of the shadow play. Like **karagöz**, the plays consist of short episodic structures which do not require the compulsive attention of the audience.

These two theater forms flourished between the 17th and 19th centuries and held an important place as part of the popular theater tradition of old Istanbul as well as in the larger area of the Ottoman Empire. In addition to taking place in coffee houses, taverns, and public squares, the plays were performed in the palace on special festivals, holidays, weddings, and wherever else they could be accommodated, such as in the yards of inns and private residences.

Characteristic traits of both theater forms were imitation and mimicry of dialect peculiarities by stock characters called **taklit**, easily recognized by the audiences because of their standard costumes and by signature tunes and dances. The puppeteer and the comedian would memorize certain stock phrases and enact scenes from everyday life using the colorful idioms of their time. There are in fact many accounts of foreigner's disconcerting reports of this theater-- the main objective of which was political satire and social comment. No one, not even the Sultan, was spared the puppeteer's caustic attacks.⁴ For many years Turkish scholars have tried to hide the obscene and satirical aspects of this tradition and have attributed the obscenity to street corner puppeteers of the lower classes. This attitude does injustice to the theater traditions because in the biting satire lies the essence of the plays and the seat of their humor.

In the big cosmopolitan center of Istanbul were found numerous ethnic groups who practiced their special trade or profession. These groups were identified not only by their differences in ethnicity but neighborhood, language, religion, profession and each one's peculiar dialect of Turkish. The most important comical element in the plays, and the heart of the satire, was created by

the problems of communication among the ethnic groups and the tension caused by the conflicts between them. As a result, certain stock characters, firmly rooted in the culture of Istanbul, were created. Each group's ethnocentric mockery of the other ethnic groups was stereotyped by the stock characters in the plays and this open ridicule was the source of the humor.

That folklore is dynamic is evident in the disposition of these stock characters. An item of folklore usually changes in order to keep pace with its era. Likewise these stock characters are made to fit the spirit of their times. They comment upon and attack issues and attitudes familiar to the group they typify. However, there is a certain unyielding quality to their characterizations which help them become caricature-like. External events, time, aging, and experience do not affect their demeanor. Their clothes and movements represent the group they typify.

Kavuklu, the title role in *ortaoyunu*, and Karagöz are the spokesmen for the people and are both open, non-hypocritical, sincere, and seemingly stupid as opposed to Pişekar and Hacivat, who are more cautious, educated, opportunistic, and pedantic in their worldly ways and flowery prose. Karagöz and Kavuklu represent the commoners, and they are illiterate. They are sly and cannot stand injustice. Hence, they are notoriously outspoken. They ruin all of Pişekar's and Hacivat's intrigues and expose their ruses and tricks as they attack the establishment and the Empire. This freedom of expression was so extreme that one spectator remarked that it resembled a political newspaper, hurling jokes and nasty remarks at everyone. This political mudslinging came to an end with the censorship of Sultan Abdülaziz, but

the spirit of the satire continued after the ban through political magazines carrying the names of the shadow theater, **Hayal**, **Karakuş**, **Beberuhi**, **Hacivat**, and **Karagöz**.⁵

As for the obscenity, it can only be expected as a natural reaction to the tightly closed, pressure-cooked society in which social mobility was barely possible for the groups to whom this theatrical form was primarily oriented. In comparison to **karagöz**, **ortaoyunu** is less obscene probably due to the difference in the actor's relationship with his audience. The obscenity in **karagöz** is after all uttered by "puppets" and not live men, since the puppeteer is hidden behind a curtain and can more easily deliver profanities. Kavuklu Hamdi, a famous **ortaoyunu** actor of the turn of the century was once expelled from performing for twenty days because of his obscenities.⁶

There are different categories of technique in the laughter inducing art which are clearly seen in **karagöz** and **ortaoyunu**. These categories include the visual, kinetic (movement), and verbal levels of performance. The category shared by both traditions is the verbal. Incongruities with misunderstandings, inappropriate use of flowery language, and dialect imitations are a few of the verbal distortions which are common. In addition, the use of tertaological elements, hyperbole, and a general trend toward breaking the expectations in performance are also shared elements. On the other hand, the differences are particularly clear on the visual and kinetic level of performance. Devices such as facial expressions, enabling a sort of grotesque humor in some instances, are not possible in the shadow theater. The limitation of action in the shadow play causes particular problems and the need for a development of diverse techniques

that are manifest visually. For example, **karagöz** has the advantage of depicting some magical transformations of size, color, and movement made possible only through the shadow screen, and it presents the opportunity for a different kind of comical device. Now let us look at specific acts in plays to illustrate our point.

In explaining laughter inducing techniques, Baghbân states that the three levels of expression— verbal, kinetic (movement), and cosmetic (visual) may be combined in such a way as to produce an incongruous structure. Comedy results from the distortion of a norm, and the esthetic effect of comedy can be intensified if all these levels of expression are presented in an incongruous way.⁷ Further, there may be scenes in which the form and content of a passage are incongruous as well as the content and the context. The content of the first part of the dialogue can even be inconsistent with the retort. There are numerous examples of this technique in **karagöz**. First of all, Hacivat, learned man that he purports to be, begins the conversation in a flowery, poetic form usually directing a question to Karagöz. Karagöz invariably answers in the proper poetic form, but totally misinterpreting the question and in a highly obscene manner. This provides incongruity on the first level, that of poetic form versus obscene content. For example, in the play **Kanlı Kavak**, Hacivat asks Karagöz:

Hacivat: Desti-i ahmerde memlu olan ma-i berdi kim nuş etti?...
[Who drank the water in the red pitcher?]

Karagöz: Desteci Ahmet Ağanın oğlunu kim puşt etti, diyorsun?
[Who did you say made a pimp out of the son of Ahmet Ağa?]

In this passage the verb **olan** 'be' and **oğlan** 'boy' constitute minimal pairs and Karagöz purposefully mistakes one for the other. The same is true of **nuş** 'to drink' and **puşt** 'pimp' which is substituted in Karagöz's reply. This technique constitutes a semantic anomaly in the lines of poetic incongruity, but it also posits an inconsistency on the level of content and context because the social context of the shadow theater was one in which women and children were also present. This type of word play occurs in **ortaoyunu** too.

Another device of humor on the shared verbal level is imitation of dialects violating the norm of the traditional Istanbul accent. Henri Bergson explains that in imitation, one brings the ludicrous aspects of a personality to the fore, and this foregrounding makes it funny.⁸ One of the ways dialects are presented is in the lack of vowel harmony. Certain ethnic groups have set ways of causing vowel mutations within words. For example, the Laz from the Black Sea substitute /i/ for /u/, the Kurds add an extra vowel to words, and so on. The resulting lack of communication is epitomized by the Persian, stereotyped as stupid and always asking, "where," "why," "when," "who?" The Laz, in asking what city a person is from, recounts all the cities of the Black Sea region in one breath. The quickness of speech in his repartee intensifies the comic effect. Another technique involving word play is using a word ambiguously to have two meanings or purposefully understanding the opposite of what is meant, such as Karagöz mistaking the proper name Ferhat as **Berbat** (horrible).

Other shared comical devices are the use of teratological elements such as dwarfs or hunchbacks presenting incongruity on the

kinetic level. Karagöz imitates a hairlip and Kavuklu is followed by "Kavuklu's troupe" which consists of a dwarf who dresses like him. This technique may be compared to Karagöz and Hacivat's sons who are miniatures of their fathers and just as knowledgeable and obscene. Exaggeration is another technique, especially in costume. Motley appearance with long hats and shabby clothes present disproportion in dress. Other devices of exaggeration are Karagöz fainting when he sees a jinn, Ferhat fainting of love-sickness upon seeing Şirin, or Hirbo wanting to circumcise someone with an axe.

Ortaoyunu and **karagöz** are conducive to satire and commentary because they are in the category of presentational or non-illusionistic theater, an open form of art, as Metin And classifies it, enabling direct communication with the audience.⁹ **Ortaoyunu** like **karagöz** is highly improvisational and the actors adjust their performances according to audience requests and reactions, a feature of non-illusionistic theatre. Thus, the audience as well as the artist molds and develops the performance, which may vary in length and theme. Evliya Çelebi, a 17th century traveler, tells of fifteen-hour long dialogues in his travelogue.¹⁰

Comical effects are achieved through the buffoon building expectations, then shattering them. The favorite means of doing this is to violate the rules of play acting. In the **ortaoyunu**, **Büyücü Hoca**, **Pişekar** and **Kavuklu** go for an imaginary trolley car ride upon **Kavuklu**'s complaint that he is tired. When he gets carsick and disembarks, he tells **Pişekar** to go ahead: "I'll catch up with you- you're not going anywhere anyway." Other ways of breaking the illusion are found in the prologue and the epilogue in which **Pişekar** and **Karagöz** tell of coming

events and apologize for the slips of the tongue they have made. Another way of breaking the illusion is through **tekerleme**, a type of narrative that has been called "lie stories" (**yalan masallar**) by Boratav. The **tekerleme** are a stream of images going from surrealist to nonsensical and reminding the audience that what occurs is on play level. Karagöz's wild ramblings in the prologue (**mukaddime**) at the end of the battle of wits with Hacivat is an example. On the kinetic level, the illusion is broken by pantomime to create an atmosphere of play. Inappropriate sounds may be uttered while opening or closing a door, for example. Pişekar says "lap" before he sits, imitating the sound of sitting down. All of these show that the actors are aware of their play acting.

The shadow theater and live actors shared much on the level of text and style and so were similar in their repertoires. Although many of the **karagöz** plays were adopted to the **ortaoyunu**, however, there were certain plays which could not possibly be performed by live actors, just as there were certain comic devices used by the comedians which were impossible on the shadow screen. We will now examine these differences more closely.

First, **karagöz**, being a one man's act, was bound by the limitations of that one person. The first difficulty with the shadow theater is that the puppet master must be able to speak in at least two different tones of voice, change the inflection of and modulate his voice for various characters in the play, both male and female, and be able to stutter and nasalize his words for different word plays. There are instances in which he must imitate someone imitating someone else. In addition, he must know a good deal of poetry and possess the ingenuity to use

it both appropriately and in parody while at the same time manipulating the puppets, all of which requires a great deal of craftsmanship and artistry. These are problems which do not exist for the **ortaoyunu** actor whose repertoire hardly comes close to that of the puppet master.

The shadow theater is confined to those dialogues occurring only between a few people, as more than two or three figures on the shadow screen present problems of their running into each other and the technical problem of the figures leaving the screen without getting entwined. Second, the puppets are bound in their possibilities for mobility. For this reason the rod for manipulating the puppet may be attached in different places through a hole in the figure. For example, the imam's arm moves since he prays, the stutterer's head moves because he cannot speak well, the dancers' feet are mobile, and some cannot move at all, like *Beberuhi*, the dwarf, because of his shortness.

Other technical problems exist in the shadow theater. For example, the puppets fixed to the rod cannot be turned around to face the other direction. A puppet always enters from the same side, and when it has to go off stage, it faces two awkward possibilities: it has to continue either in the direction it entered and thus run into the other puppet facing it (which also creates a problem for the puppeteer because his other hand is busy with the second puppet), or has to exit backwards from the side it entered. In order to avoid both of these, the puppeteer usually takes them off by pulling them back slightly, away from the screen, which blurs the images, and then lifting them up. At times he can create a special comical effect by breaking this expectation of the spectator through a special device called **firdöndü**.¹¹ This is a leather

hinge attached at the back of the puppet. The rod is not fixed to the puppet directly but to the hinge so that the latter can be made to face either direction. When the lines of the character are finished,, the puppeteer instantly flips the puppet over so that the spectators see it suddenly turned around and leaving the screen on the side it entered. This is a most unusual sight given the immobility of the puppets, and never fails to provoke surprised laughter. It is an example of how a technical limitation of the shadow theater is used by the puppeteer to create a special comical effect.

Another technical limitation is that only two puppets at a time can be held by the puppet master. For this reason he had developed special techniques such as a device called *hayal ağacı* (puppet tree), a Y-shaped rod filled into holes on the ledge at the bottom of the screen. The horizontal rods holding the figures were then placed on the cleft of these rods so that the figures could remain stationary as the puppeteer pressed them against the screen with his chest or stomach, when his hands were busy with the protagonists of the scene. This device was useful for scenes with crowds.

Conversely, the devices of humor which *ortaoyunu* exploits to its fullest are on the kinetic level of performance. A grotesque kind of device using facial expressions is possible in the *ortaoyunu* whereas the set faces of the shadow puppets make this impossible. An example is the so-called "chin contest," an expression which has two meanings. It may refer to a contest of words in which the actors try to outdo each other in answering with witticisms and snide remarks; or it is a race of physical ability in which the person who brings his chin closest to his nose wins. In the second case, it almost looks as if the buffoon were eating his own

chin. This was such a popular laughter provoking technique that it is said that some actors went to the extreme of extracting all their teeth in order to win.¹² The standardized fixed faces of the shadow puppets, however, are such that they have captured a certain feature or deformity and made it into a caricature so as to compensate this lack of mobility. This freezing or crystallization into a fixed form is even more comic when it suggests a characteristic or action with which the figure would permanently be absorbed or identified.

The most fully exploited devices of humor in *karagöz* are seen on the visual level. Easy changes of form, size, and color were advantages which were taken to their fullest and which were not possible in the actor's play. Furthermore, there are different categories of visual humor techniques, such as those depicting odd occurrences, which one is not likely to see on the live actor's stage; or magical transformations of characters. For example, the fact that *Karagöz* often enters the screen with a giant phallus that sways back and forth as part of his anatomy is hardly likely to occur with live actors. *Pişekar* was always seen with a wooden instrument called *şakşak*, an echo of an early phallus according to some scholars, but this remains on the level of euphemism. Certain visual effects which produce an uproar in *karagöz* would not in *ortaoyunu*. For example, *Karagöz*' phallus is bitten off by a dog as he approaches a house of prostitution. The same effect could not be achieved by a dog snatching *Pişekar*'s *şakşak*. In *Kanlı Nigar* (Bloody Nigar) and *Timarhane* (Madhouse), nudes and madmen are seen with oversized phalluses which are so long that they wrap them around their necks.¹³ Another example is in

Evliya Çelebi's Travelogue with an account of a **karagöz** play in which Gazi Boşnak raids a public bath and pulls Karagöz out by tying a rope to his phallus.

There are categories of visual humor techniques such as magical transformations of characters which are not easily depicted in **ortaoyunu**. For example, in the **karagöz** play **Cazular** (The Witches) people become animals through bewitching.¹⁴ Although this may be done with costumes, it is easier portrayed on the shadow screen when heads remain human and bodies take animal form. To achieve magical transformations like a character being changed into an animal, puppeteers used figures which had two heads pivoting around the neck, so that when the human head was visible, the animal's head was concealed behind the body. By turning the rod 180 degrees the animal's head takes the place of the actual head. This technique is employed in **Cazular** in which two rival witches change the heads of their daughters and sons respectively. In **Ferhad and Şirin**, the snake appears and bites Karagöz' donkey's head off¹⁵ and in **Kırgınlar** (The Heartbroken Ones) when the same situation occurs, Karagöz takes his donkey to the blacksmith to be fixed and the blacksmith glues it on backwards so that the donkey's head is at his rear. This kind of surrealistic portrayal is both comical and absurd as it is kinaesthetically incongruous. In **Yalova Sefası** (Yalova Holiday) the Lady and the Gallant pile all the characters into a large container to travel to Yalova. Although this compression of human beings is not actually shown on the screen in the handed down text, it would be quite impossible even to attempt to do this in an area which is open on all sides as the **ortaoyunu** stage.

The shadow play cast includes a whole series of animals and imaginary beings.

According to Metin And, historically, a set of wordless animal plays were performed in the prologue of **karagöz**, somewhat like the present day cartoons before the beginning feature at the movie theater. Richard Davey in the 19th century recounts such a scene: a camel with a humorous character on its back passes on the screen. Then a cat is seen chasing a mouse. The cat plays with the mouse and finally swallows it whole. The accompanying music is representative of the sounds of a mouse in the cat's stomach trying to escape. Finally the music subsides indicating the end of the cat's meal and the prelude is over.¹⁶ This kind of introduction to the play has nothing to do with the rest of the plot but simply functions to prepare the audience for the play they are about to see. It creates an air of imitation, suspense, and curiosity on the part of the spectator for what is about to occur. Later this practice must have disappeared, but a relic of it continued to exist till the end of the shadow theater tradition. Before the play starts, the image of a tree, mermaid, or cats would be cast on the lighted screen with music accompanying it (there was no curtain covering the screen). This image was called **göstermelik** (show item) and may have had the same purpose as the older animal pantomimes. The **göstermelik** is taken off the screen to the sound of a shrill whistle called **nareke** which signals the beginning of the play and alerts the audience. Both the animal pre-play and the **göstermelik** did not, of course, exist in **ortaoyunu**. A scene such as a stork swallowing a snake is obviously a rather difficult coincidence which could not occur on cue in real life for the **ortaoyunu** but was easily portrayed on the **karagöz** screen. A cat swallowing a mouse is not a rare occurrence but does not happen on cue as it did on

the shadow theater.

On the other hand, even though the scenery and props were extremely few in the live actor play as well as in **karagöz**, in accordance with most folk theaters, there were certain possibilities of decorating the props they did have. The two main standard props used in **ortaoyunu** were the so-called **Yeni Dünya** (New World) and **Dükkan** (Store), both three or four winged partitions which are used to represent a house or whatever else is needed for a particular play. One of them can be a Turkish bath, Şirin's mansion or whatever the imagination permits. The store is the place Kavuklu looks for a job. It can be a telegraph office, a shoe store, a photography store according to the play's demands. In **karagöz**, props were used very sparsely and when absolutely necessary; for example, the corner of the sweetheart's mansion or the mountain that the hero is asked to drill. In this case they were drawn and painted like the other **karagöz** figures and were often fixed to the screen so they could not be altered. The **ortaoyunu** props could also be decorated such as in **Büyük Sünnet Dügünü** (The Circumcision Ceremony), in which they represent the child's bed decorated with colored papers and flowers. These devices may serve to hold the audience's attention but not to the extent of those in the shadow screen, which are out of proportion in that they are lopsided or inappropriate in size. The shadow theater props have a more powerful aesthetic and comical effect than the circumstantial scenery of the **ortaoyunu**; they provide for an incongruity manifest on the visual level.

In sum, both forms of theater present the opportunity for a different kind of technique of humor, each with its own drawbacks and advantages. The two types of performers, the **karagöz** puppeteers handling two-dimen-

sional images, and the **ortaoyunu** actors creating a live comedy, used the same thematic resources available to them in the traditional culture, but they also developed special laughter provoking techniques exploiting the peculiar technical potentialities of their own medium.

NOTES

1. The single most important source on the **karagöz** texts is Helmut Ritter's three volumes. Most of the plays are reprinted in Cevdet Kudret's **Karagöz** which is used in this paper. The best description of the Turkish shadow theater tradition in English is Metin And's **Karagöz: Turkish Shadow Theater**.
2. The name of the shadow theater comes from the name of its principal character. To distinguish the play, the capitalized form, **Karagöz**, is used only in reference to the character.
3. Metin And, **Karagöz: Turkish Shadow Theater** (Ankara, 1975), p. 42.
4. _____, **Geleneksel Türk Jiyatrosu** (Ankara, 1969), p. 127, 183.
5. Nicholas Martinovich, **The Turkish Theater** (New York and London, 1968), p. 37.
6. Cevdet Kudret, ed., **Ortaoyunu** (Ankara, 1973), p. 92.
7. Hafiz Baghban, **The Context and Concept of Humor in Magadi Theater** vol.2 (Ph.D. diss., Indiana University, 1976), p. 460.
8. Henri Bergson, "Laughter" in **Comedy** ed. Wylie Sypher (New York, 1956), p. 81.
9. And, **Karagöz**, p. 14.
10. And, **Geleneksel**, p. 244.
11. And, **Karagöz**, p. 31.
12. Kudret, **Ortaoyunu**, p. 90.

13. Cevdet Kudret, ed. **Karagöz** vol.2 (Ankara, 1969), pp. 299-343.
14. Kudret, **Karagöz** vol. 1, p. 372.
15. Kudret, **Karagöz** vol. 2, p. 135.
16. And, **Karagöz**, p. 27.