76. From the Neighbourhood of Firuzağa down the Rabbit Hole

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Abstract

Intermediality is a term to investigate the dialogues between imaginative texts from various types of media. Being a product of postmodern discourse, it has a massive influence on comparative literary studies, in that analyses with regard to intermedial considerations reinforce the impact area of the examined texts. This article aims at analysing *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865) by Lewis Carroll and *Serial Cook* (2017) by Ümit Ünal in order to show how an old canonical literary work demonstrates itself in a contemporary imaginative text on a cognitive level. It is obvious that artists build up such textual connections on purpose as well, but such an interaction achieved undeliberately, though the receivers of texts can never be confident, is another issue that requires attention. I argue that *Serial Cook* can be considered as a 21st century reception of *AAW* in that it exhibits certain aspects of Lewis Carroll's style and content. It is apparent that the main character, Neslihan becomes a contemporary version of Alice in the face of a serial killer who has difficulties in adjusting to the mechanisms of the community she is part of. Throughout the movie, we see her relentless efforts to speak for herself and settle a new life. Furthermore, in both texts one can observe presence of dream imagery, which appears as an apparatus of initiation of both characters.

Keywords: Intermediality, *Serial Cook*, Ümit Ünal, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, Lewis Carroll

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Öz

Medyalararasılık farklı medyalardan kurmaca metinler arasındaki diyaloğu anlatan bir terimdir. Postmodern söylemin bir ürünü olarak, medyalararası değerlendirmeler, çalışılan metinlerin etki alanını kuvvetlendirmesi açısından karşılaştırmalı edebiyat çalışmaları üzerinde büyük bir etkiye sahiptir. Bu makalenin amacı, Lewis Carroll tarafından yazılmış *Alice Harikalar Diyarında* ve 2017 yılında gösterime girmiş bir Ümit Ünal filmi olan *Sofra Sırlar*ı'nı inceleyerek kanona dair eski bir metnin çağdaş bir kurmaca metinde kendisini bilişsel düzeyde ne şekilde gösterdiğini analiz etmektir. Sanatçıların bu tür metinsel bağlantıları bilinci olarak kurdukları aşikârdır; ancak özellikle oluşturulmamış bir etkileşimin incelenmesi, ki bir yandan da metinlerin alıcılarının asla emin olamadıkları bir durumdur, dikkate alınması gereken bir noktadır. Buradaki tartışma konum *Sofra Sırları*'nın Lewis Carroll'ın üslup ve içeriğinin belirli kısımlarını yansıtmak suretiyle *Alice Harikalar Diyarında*'nın yirmi birinci yüzyıldaki bir alımlanma biçimi olduğudur. Neslihan'ın, bir parçası olduğu topluluğun mekanizmalarına ayak uydurmakta güçlük çeken Alice'in seri katil kimliğinde çağdaş bir versiyonu olduğu açık edilmektedir. Film boyunca, Neslihan'ın sesini duyurmak ve kendisine yeni bir yaşam kurabilmek için amansız bir çaba içerisine girdiğini görüyoruz. Ayrıca, her

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Firuzaga Mahallesinden Tavşan Deliginin Derinliklerine / Civelekoglu, F.

iki metinde de rüya imgesinin her iki karakterin inisiyasyonu için bir araç olarak kullanıldığı gözlemlenmektedir.

Anahtar kelimeler: Medyalararasılık, *Sofra Sırları*, Ümit Ünal, *Alice Harikalar Diyarında*, Lewis Carroll

Introduction

Intertextuality and intermediality are terms that were coined with the influence of postmodern tendencies in cultural theory and provide the possible grounds for thorough analyses in comparative literature. Though reception of any text is amongst the main concerns of literary criticism along the way, the naming of these phenomena can be regarded as one of the results of the period following World War II. The emergence of cultural studies marks a breakthrough in the way comparative literary studies is performed, which can be explained through the relation between the interaction of cultures and dialogues between and among texts.

Undoubtedly, this sense of crossing the borders is accelerated through technology developing as fast as possible, especially for the last thirty years due to evolving internet possibilities and digitalisation thusly. This phase of civilisation has paved the way for not only endless possibilities in terms of the interaction between cultures and texts in the present time, but also for the reinvention of old, (non)canonical and (re)explored texts taking their parts on stage. The process of this reinvention brings about a relatively new interpretation of the concept of memory which has a way of working on the unconscious level as well. Any cultural phenomenon has the potential to turn into text; indeed, any artist has the potential to turn the text s/he has not come across personally into a new text. In other words, one can claim that dialogue among the cultural products has become more intense and efficient due to the rapid change observed in the last thirty years. Accessibility has never been that easy, the veil of mystery between past and present has never been remained undisclosed that straightforwardly.

Though the emergence of comparative literature dates back to more than two hundred years ago in Europe, coined with the need to compare the literatures and literary histories of different cultures, intermediality becomes a concept that enhances and provides in-depth analyses and interpretations in comparative studies with the involvement of different artistic media. As Jan Baetens and Domingo Sánchez-Mesa Martīnez assert, intermediality does not only signify the relationships between different media, but also analyses the internal plurality of each medium (Baetens & Martinez, 2015, 292). In that regard, they ponder intermediality in literary studies as follows:

the intermedial study of literature [...] does not only refer to the study of the relationships between the literary text and its "others" (for instance the illustrations that accompany it, to give an elementary example), it also includes the study of the literary as a heterogeneous material that conveys a more or less radical "semiotic rupture" within itself (for instance when we interpret aspects of typography, from typeface to page layout and book design, as aspects of the text's visuality—a dimension of literature that has always been at the center of visual and experimental poetry). (294)

What is intended in this paper is to scrutinise too seemingly unrelated fictional texts, one of which is Lewis Carroll's canonical novel *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865) and one of the most prominent independent Turkish directors, Ümit Ünal's 2017 movie *Serial Cook*. We, as people dealing with literary studies, are familiar with the fact that contemporary texts frequently make use of old texts — some of them very overtly, some of them in a more intricate manner — which can be theorised via certain literary devices, such as intertextuality and rewriting. However, in this article my claim will be that when

different mediums of imaginary texts are incorporated in the creation stage, it enhances the sphere of influence of all texts included in analysis. Such a study would also serve as a catalyst in the reception of these works. Furthermore, any work of fiction examined with regard to a literary production is significant in the sense that literature forms a sort of basis for the analyses of all artworks in that it presents a critical reading of them.

A work of children's literature transcending its borders

Much has been told, asserted, written, and taught about Lewis Carroll's magnum opus, the Alice books since the time they were written back towards the end of the 19th century. Ingenious mathematician and indeed a storyteller, Carroll first tells the story of Alice, then pens these books as an instrument to build a connection with the children he tutors, namely Alice Liddell and her siblings; Liddell was the character to be the source of Carroll's inspiration and also the main character of ongoing controversy on his so-called engagement with pedophilia. Having been translated into over 170 languages in over 300 editions, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking Glass* form one of the most canonical part of not only children's literature, but also world literature (Alice in translation). Apart from the space both novels take up in literary history, they have also been iconic pieces of art in that it brings about John Tenniel's illustrations that became an inseparable constituent of the work.

Having been translated many times into many languages, almost none of readers in the world have the possibility of not coming across with Alice books; if not the books, the cartoons and several adaptations must have attracted their attention occasionally. The main reason why Alice books have such a widespread aura is that they invite the readers into a comprehensive adventurous world of "nonsense" that can hardly be imagined by an ordinary writer, which sums up Lewis Carroll's genius in a familiar expression. Along with the quality of adventures told in the novels, the protagonist Alice is also of great importance in that she portrays an extraordinary child figure. M. O. Grenby asserts,

Equally, in his two Alice books (1865 and 1871), Lewis Carroll relied on the normality and common sense of Alice to give the reader some kind of perspective on the bizarre creatures he had invented. Without her, Wonderland would surely be not intriguing and amusing, but absurd and tiresome. Her curiosity, concern or impatience, and her struggle to make sense of what she finds, makes what would otherwise be baffling twaddle into captivating nonsense. (Grenby, 2008, 151)

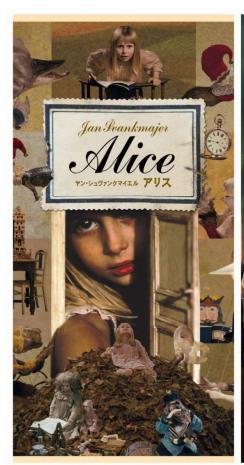
Though the novel was written during the Victorian era, it became a classical work that addresses people of all ages and cultures, and is still being read all over the world. At the same time, such a huge scope does not mean that the novel is detached from the cultural climate of the time it was born into; there are many aspects that one can consider the Alice books directly reveal Victorian characteristics. As it is acknowledged by many readers and critics, Alice books stand out as works that contribute to the development children's literature as a genre, also keeping in mind that due to increasing number of literacy and compulsory education that children must receive. Apart from the development of the genre as a consequence of the period's necessities, Alice books represent the establishment of a new type of children's books that transcends traditional limitations imposed by age range or gender. Furthermore, they offer a glimpse of what life was like in Victorian era regarding social relations and cultural attitudes. The uniqueness of the novels also stems from the very fact that they offer a humorous, playful, and creative way of handling the absurdity and rigidity of Victorian cultural norms; Carroll's response to absurdity is creating a world of nonsense in which a little girl becomes the authority.

Though the Alice books are frequently thought through together, within the scope of this article I will concentrate on the first book, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* due to its literary kinship with *Serial*

Firuzaga Mahallesinden Tavşan Deliginin Derinliklerine / Civelekoglu, F.

Cook. One of the most significant aspects of ADW is its unique narrative structure ornamented with dream-like sequences and non-linear storytelling, which is regarded ahead of its time in terms of traditional narrative structure of Victorian novels. the period undoubtedly witnessed tremendous development as far as the novel, as a genre is concerned. Yet, Carroll's work is considered as a groundbreaking step towards this development in that he defies conventional narrative structures through employing a fusion of various genres, including fantasy, satire, and children's literature. Alice's adventures start with her falling asleep on her elder sister's lap and follow a different set of challenges for her to achieve forming the narrative structure of each chapter. Due to the astounding use of nonsense, this structure allows for a sense of unpredictability, which stimulates the reader's excitement to a great extent.

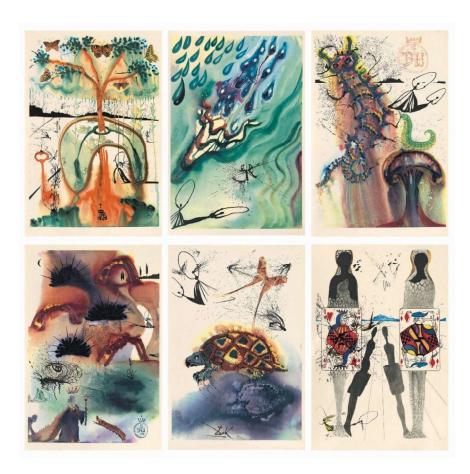
Another significant aspect of AAW is its impact on popular culture. There are many adaptations of the novel to cinema, stage as musicals and children's plays, along with songs, cartoons, fan fiction, photography and illustrations reminiscing Alice and her world and many literary works of different genres that in some way incorporate Alice or refer to her. Antonio Sanna, in the introduction of his edited book Alice in Wonderland in Film and Popular Culture, mentions several primary texts and critical volumes on Alice ranging from Neil Gaiman's novel Coraline (2002), Terry Gilliam's movie Tideland (2005) and Tim Burton's versions to Jefferson Airplane's "White Rabbit" and Beatles' "Lucy in the Sky with Diamond" as songs focusing on Alice books' interpretation of "intense drug experience" (Sanna, 2022, 5-7). As an extraordinary example, the surrealist Czech filmmaker Jan Svankmajer's 1988 fantasy film Alice is also worth mentioning as an out-of-the-box adaptation of AAW in that it brings together live action and stop motion animation. In this version, Alice finds herself in a darker and rather claustrophobic fantasy land. Another adaptation of the novel that attracts the attention of today's audience is a TV series entitled Alice in Borderland that premiered on Netflix in December, 2020. The dystopic storyline tells the "adventures" of a group of youngsters obsessed with video games. They have to hide from the police upon causing a dispute in Shibuya Crossing and find themselves in an empty city. Soon after, they follow the instructions of a billboard to find themselves within an alternative gameland.





Picture I. The posters of Svankmajer's Alice and Alice in Borderland. The pictures are taken from IMDB and collaged by me.

Additionally, Salvador Dali's illustrations of AAW for each chapter of the work stand out as another representation of artwork. Dali recreates fundamental points of the novel on an intermedial level and demonstrates his own perception; below "Mad Tea Party", "Pool of Tears", "Advice from a Caterpillar", "The Lobster Quadrille", "The Mock Turtle's Story", and "The Queen's Croquet Ground" can respectively be seen:



Picture II. Dali illustrations (1969) in the 150th anniversary edition of AAW (Sierzputowski, 2016)

Without a doubt, there are countless other examples of works, video games, instruments such as theme parks, recalling Alice books. Lewis Carroll's works, being the core of a myriad of transmedial and intermedial texts, is a manifestation of their canonical aspect certainly, that draws a mechanism where these source texts are placed at the centre; however, these amalgamations reinforce the impact of "new" texts, which also forms the main argument of this article.

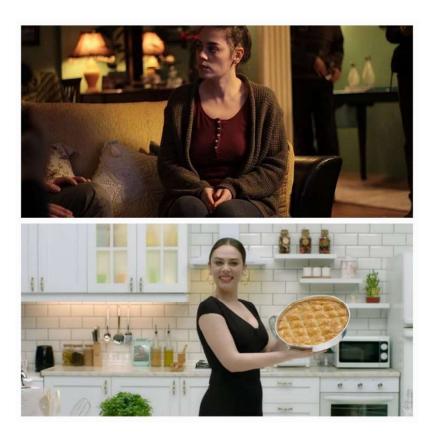
A Fatal Alice in a Different Space

As a prominent Turkish film director, screenwriter, and indeed a painter and an illustrator, Ümit Ünal's works can be regarded as idiosyncratic in that he is one of the artists who puts forward a certain artistic identity. His first appearance in cinema is with the evergreen movie of the history of Turkish cinema, *My Aunt* which marks his debut as a scriptwriter in 1986. The movie is directed by Halit Refig, another important name of Turkish cinema, but the story belongs to the fresh cinema graduate, Ümit Ünal with which he receives the script award given by Milliyet Newspaper. Until his debut as a director with the film 9 in 2001, he wrote many films, among which there is *The Billionaire* (1987), *My Dreams, My Love and You* (1987), *The Devil My Friend* (1988), *Piano Piano Shorty* (1989). His career as a director starts with his award winning film, 9 and he receives many more prestigious awards with his films such as *Istanbul Tales* (2005), *In Between* (2007), *Shadowless* (2009), *Captain Space* (2010), *The Voice* (2010), *The Pomegranate* (2011), *Love, Spells and All That* (2019) (International Movie Database).

Ünal's 2017 film Serial Cook received four awards, Special Jury Award, Best Screenplay, Best Actress (Demet Evgar) and Best Editing in Istanbul Film Festival in 2018 and in 2019, Best Director in Yala International Film Festival, Nepal and Best Actress in Dhaka International Film Festival, Bangladesh (International Movie Database). It tells the story of an eccentric woman serial killer who is obsessed with cooking. The Turkish title of the movie is Secrets of the Turkish Cuisine which marks suspense, ambiguity along with the connotation of documentary content. All the undertones are indeed right; however, what the movie presents is more than that: a dream world of an ordinary woman in which she becomes an eccentric antihero.

Neslihan, the protagonist of the film, appears as a dedicated wife whose primary activity is feeding and relieving her husband, Ethem with various artefacts of Turkish cuisine. Her life flows as a vicious circle where she does the same things, in the same manner, at the same time. The only time she reveals her true self is when she daydreams of herself hosting a cooking show on TV where she tells her own story while giving the recipes of some classical examples of Turkish cuisine with a touch of her own way. In a way, she also performs the action of storytelling in the disguise of giving recipes; telling her story in front of her own audience becomes a way to reconcile with the betrayals she experiences and thus she unveils her emotions that she is unable to satisfy in her ordinary world. Before addressing to the reception of *AAW* throughout the movie, it is also significant to observe how, at this point, the movie, pays a tribute to another cult Turkish movie, *Fazilet* (the name of the female protagonist) which was directed by Irfan Tözüm in 1990 (International Movie Database).

The Victorian period when Carroll gives voice to Alice, on the one hand, is known for obeying the rules in order to exist in society; on the other hand, being a period that is influenced by the liberating romantic tendencies, it rather portrays a schizophrenic condition in that both society and the individual struggle to step forth. Such a psychocultural condition leads people to hypocrisy and children to cope with even more challenging mechanisms. Born into such conditions, Alice can be regarded as needing an alternative space where she can speak up for herself, which results in going to a dreamworld she has the total independence. Likewise, the immediate circle Neslihan has to breathe in is not much different than that of Alice's. She marries Ethem at an early age, leaves her family and Istanbul where she lives until then and moves to a relatively nearby small town, Tirilye. In the course of her marriage, she arrives at a point where her relationship becomes more than monotonous and her social life consists of merely a few conversations with her husband, mostly based on fulfilling his needs. In such a claustrophobic atmosphere, cooking becomes a passion for Neslihan; first, as an instrument to nourish Ethem, then a way to express what she cannot. She, just like Alice, creates herself a dream within a dream through herstory absorbed by the recipes she gives on TV; the audience sees her imagining herself as a TV star who hosts a cooking show.



Picture III: The photographs are taken from IMDB and collaged by me.

Likewise, in AAW, food and various drinks appear as a recurring image that opens the "the doorway" to Alice's upcoming adventures. Upon following the White Rabbit, while she was falling down the rabbit hole, the first thing she encounters is a jar labelled orange marmalade which she first takes from a shelf and puts into one of the cupboards she passes by, lest she might drop the jar and kill somebody Carroll, 1996, 16). After her fall is completed, she comes across a small door from which she cannot pass by with her current dimensions. Yet, this time a bottle with a label "Drink me" is written on appears for Alice's rescue. As a meticulous Victorian child, Alice first checks the label in case it might be marked poison, then ventures to drink it to come to the accurate size in order to fit the door. However, she forgets to take the golden key to open the door of the wonderland. Luckily, this time she finds a box in which there is a small piece of cake with label that reads "Eat me;" gradually becoming more flexible, she immediately eats the cake and opens out just like a telescope (19-21). Throughout AAW, there are several other references to food, edible things, and occasions such as Mad Tea Party, but one can infer that these food allusions stand for Alice's forthcoming initiation at the end of the novel. Neslihan's daydreams of herself as a cook show producer appears as an igniting force for her self-confidence which she gains back gradually. Her passion for food in her real life is associated with the mechanism of authority and responsibility. As an antonymous concept of nourishing, killing is also a manifestation of godly authority; Neslihan extends the moment of "not saving Ethem" to punish all the iniquitous characters around her. She prepares an elaborate dinner table for Meral and feeds her with the mushrooms she personally collects; while she is eating the mushroom dumplings, she utters the phenomenal words of the movie: "I killed you, too. These are your last moments in this world" (55.19). From this moment on, Neslihan has no mercy. She shoots one of Ethem's friends, Ahmet; she even kills Ramo towards the end,

the florist whom she loves in her own language. Within the borders of her own sense of justice, she rewards her woman friends, which also renders her the voice of women in more or less a similar situation. Additionally, the inspector, though he has certain suspicions, is never able to prove Neslihan's crimes, which again points to the superiority of woman intelligence.

One very crucial aspect that *AAW* and *Serial Cook* have in common is how they employ the dream motif to signify the concept of initiation. Dutch ethnologist Arnold Van Gennep in his prominent work, *The Rites of Passage* ponders initiation with regard to the relationship between the idea of death / rebirth and sleep. He acknowledges,

It is difficult to decide [...] whether the introduction of the idea of death and rebirth is a cause or a consequence. It seems to be a consequence in the ceremonies of initiation and ordination; which, among other elements, include ecstasies, externalisations, or, as among many American Indians, a dream or simply sleep. For instance, among the Fox on the last evening of the initiation (which lasts nine years) the novices lie down on the floor of the dance houses, go to sleep, and awaken as men. The presence of the idea of death and rebirth in the ritual is a consequence also in seasonal ceremonies, when "nature goes to sleep" and "awakens"; but it is the cause of special dramatic rituals customary in the worship of Osiris, Adonis, and Attis, for example, and it has an existence of its own in Christianity (the death and resurrection of the Saviour, which serves as a point of departure for Interpreting the symbolic death and rebirth of novices). (Van Gennep,1960, 183)

Upon this exemplification regarding ancient cults, he further attracts attention to the association between the unconscious state of mind and initiation as such:

From the very fact that this idea occurs not only in initiation rites, the conclusion should he drawn that it is not an interpretation of hypnotic states, catalepsies, temporary amnesias, and other pathological phenomena. The idea in question becomes simple and normal if one accepts the following view: the transition from one state to another is a serious step which could not he accomplished without special precautions; In some cases a ritual death and rebirth may result from an association of the stages of human life with the phases of the moon, for among a great many peoples- the origin or introduction of death is attributed to the moon. (184)

Van Gennep's description of initiation fits into the motif of dream in both AAW and Serial Cook. In AAW, dream imagery is overtly indicated both at the beginning and end of the novel; however, in Serial Cook it is rather complicated and open to various interpretations. Neslihan's story sets out in Firuzağa İstanbul, as an orphan of a wealthy family, raised by her aunt until she follows Ethem, her future husband and the White Rabbit in this case. Her aunt does not accept this marriage, nevertheless she runs away with Ethem at the age of eighteen and after living in several other cities they end up in Tirilye where they have been living for the last twelve years. Upon such an ostentatious start, their relationship soon turns out be one that drowns in wearisome routine for both sides. Yet, since Neslihan is the one to give all the time, it creates a sense of comfort zone on the part of Ethem. The course of the movie becomes a hassle for her especially following her realisation of her husband's betrayal. As soon as Neslihan comes to realise that her husband has stolen a big amount of money and is about to leave her to make a new life with his mistress Meral (who is also their neighbour). Neslihan starts to kill the people around her starting by not saving Ethem from choking. In the end, when Neslihan is done with everything and everyone and accomplishes to survive and go unpunished, in the last scene she is on a ship to İstanbul to return to her essence following the death of her aunt. She has woken up from her dream and enters a new phase in her life; her dream becomes the instrument of her triumph and renewal, in other words, initiation after a long, hypnotic state of mind.



Picture IV. The Last scene of Serial Cook, movie screenshot

AAW, in a similar vein, demonstrates the development of Alice and how she learns to cope with conflicts by activating her initiative; therefore, her experience in wonderland marks an initiation for her. The readers see a new Alice who is able to rebel against the nonsensical order right after giving her evidence. She then wakes up and is ready for the so-called symmetrical world of the glass. In this context, one can say that in spite of the magical experiences where the two characters accomplish to succeed, in the end they become so resilient that they can endure the difficulties of a dystopian world and transform it to a new, hopeful life space. Neslihan puts her own sense of justice into practice while killing the people who wrong her or have the potential to do so and the food she cooks is her main murder weapon. In this sense, we can say that she has the power to transform food, a nourishing element into a toxic one. In this respect, Neslihan can be considered as a rebel heroine and the food she cooks both metaphorically and literally becomes the mechanism of authority in dominating the men around her. Furthermore, similar to the part where Alice gives her evidence about who stole the tarts, Neslihan's imaginary live TV Show, an arena for her vibrant storytelling, becomes her trial where she gives the account of her whole life. The images of kitchen and food are mashed together with money as the semiotic indication of the material world in the name of the recipe, "dollar salad" to form the most striking symbol of Neslihan's rebellion. The below picture displays both Neslihan's and Alice's moments of manifesting their selfhood and total independence:



Picture V. Neslihan's and Alice's evidences

Conclusion

With such a storyline, Ümit Ünal, who is also the script writer, presents a 21st century interpretation of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, not only through the dream image that is open to different readings as well, but also the food image which opens a space for Neslihan to transform just like Alice. While Alice's adventure becomes an articulation of her self-realisation in her dream, Neslihan drops asleep in Firuzaga in Istanbul where she lives in a wealthy family before she encounters Ethem, finds herself in a small town called Tirilye, and creates her own autonomous world in the company of various clocks that do not belong to the White Rabbit. *Serial Cook*, as a film which can be read as a postmodern paratext of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, elucidates the traces of the Wonderland mainly due to the fact that it is based on the motif of food. While Alice can transform according to her needs upon eating the food and drinks she randomly comes across with, Neslihan herself enters the kitchen and transforms everyone taking place in her table along with herself. She creates such a "story" that she can even escape from law and keep her hands clean deceiving the detective who tries to solve the murder. Indeed, not surprisingly, once again the food she cooks becomes the main instrument. These incidents drive the film into an absurd realm sporadically, which can be interpreted as a proof that what Neslihan experiences is the product of her dream.

While the dream imagery becomes an articulation of Neslihan's coping mechanisms with her past traumas, her self-confidence restored through the atrocities she performs. In other words, atrocity within Neslihan becomes the expression of reconciliation in her life where she ends up with calmly gazing upon the sea of Bosphorus in a boat and returns to Istanbul where her dream started. Alice's manifested autonomy and transformation upon her adventure in the Wonderland and opening up her eyes on her elder sister's lap peacefully turns into Neslihan's discovering herself through revealing her

atrocity. Although the dream image is not made obvious by the director, the narrative also justifies this claim. The film makes the audience face with a two-dimensional narrative just as *The Truman Show*; we simultaneously witness Neslihan's dream in Tirilye and her imaginary show on TV, which she herself watches as well. While she dozes off, Neslihan follows Ethem into the underworld and declares herself the matriarch of the grotesque world she has created. In this respect, *Serial Cook*, puts forward a harsh social criticism referring to the present social status of women, their surrendering, and rebellion. However, Neslihan manages to survive in all conditions and get on the Istanbul boat to her own real world at the point where the ingredients of dollar salad also transform into playing cards.

In conclusion, *AAW* and Serial Cook, when examined from an intermedial perspective, provides the possible grounds for comprehending how the similarities between two imaginary texts of different media could be associated within a textual ecosystem. The more artistic texts are incorporated in other texts, their reception is enriched, and analyses made in accordance with the textual kinship with other texts result in a variety of possibilities that will serve for maintaining the legacy of artistic texts.

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