

Journal of American Studies of Turkey

37 (2013): 1-5

Continuities

Laurence Raw

As I tried to explain in the introduction to the *Journal of American Studies of Turkey* that I edited (no. 32), one of the *Journal's* main aims is to promote transdisciplinary as well as transcultural reflection on what the term "America" signifies as a psychological, social and political construct, and how it continues to shape our lives, irrespective of where we might reside (Raw 4-5). One of the ways in which we can promote this dialogue is through *continuity*, by maintaining our commitment to publish articles and reviews that concentrate specifically on cross-cultural and/or cross-media issues.

With this objective in mind, this issue of the *Journal of American Studies in Turkey* begins with a short piece by Fred Kaplan, the biographer of Gore Vidal, who argues that, while the author saw himself as a physician offering a cure to America's political diseases, he actually had little talent for politics. Kaplan believes that the author might have been better advised to write about political and social issues, rather than becoming actively involved; but vanity prevailed over intelligence. Kaplan's piece offers an interesting postscript to the contributions included in the special issue of the *Journal* devoted to Gore Vidal (nos. 35-36): if he had not been so concerned with his self-image, Vidal might have enhanced his reputation as a transmedial and/or transcultural figure of American life and letters.

In early 2013, NTV – a private news channel in the Republic of Turkey – aired Oliver Stone and Peter Kuznick's *The Untold History of the United States*. This ten-part documentary series re-examined some of the darkest parts of American modern history using little-known documents and previously undiscovered archival material, in order to show how the past inevitably exerts an influence over the present. Described by former Soviet president Mikhail Gorbachev as ground-breaking in the sense that it addresses the question of whether the United States wants to create a "Pax Americana," which is a recipe for disaster, "or partner with other

nations on the way to a safer, more sustainable future” (qtd. “Oliver Stone’s *Untold History*”), the series attracted substantial viewing figures on its Turkish broadcast. We have been fortunate enough to secure an interview with Kuznick, who explores the series’ aims and objectives, focusing in particular on American foreign policy past and present. He has little time for the *Pax Americana*, arguing instead that successive governments might have been better advised to follow the advice put forward by Vice President Henry Wallace in the mid-Forties, and listen to other nations rather than pursuing its own policies.¹ Kuznick calls for alternative ways of looking at the world based on redistribution of wealth as well as forging mutual understanding between cultures.²

This particular issue is taken up in the remaining contributions to the issue. Jonathan Stubbs takes a fresh look at David Lean’s *Lawrence of Arabia* (1962), showing how the film not only questions the myth of T. E. Lawrence as a youthful, dashing, if somewhat eccentric hero, but criticizes British colonial nationalism as an inept, doomed enterprise. More significantly the film questions notions of American exceptionalism and its expansionist ambitions. With hindsight, we might see the film as a portent of American foreign policy to come; a preview of Vietnam and a prequel to Oliver Stone’s *Platoon* (1986). If Lawrence had been less concerned with sustaining his own self-image as a freedom-fighter, and actually listened to others, perhaps he might have been more successful.

The act of listening is often difficult to perform. Ikram A. Elsherif’s piece on the experiences of Arab immigrants to the United States reveals how many of them suffer pain and isolation in communities that still believe in the stereotype of the Arab as “the enemy, fanatical terrorist, crazy Muslim [...] veiled Woman and exotic whore.” Elsherif shows how

-
- 1 Henry Wallace (1888-1965), was an unreconstructed liberal reformer, who gave a famous speech (that became known by the phrase “The Century of the Common Man,” on 8 May 1942 that laid out a positive vision for the aftermath of the Second World War based on shared prosperity, in which colonialism and economic exploitation would be banned. He was fired in September 1946 by President Harry S. Truman because of disagreements about the policy towards the Soviet Union.
 - 2 Kuznick’s ideas have been fiercely criticized by some American historians. At the Popular Culture Association (PCA) Conference in March 2013, Ronald Radosh described him as “a professional activist [...] who wants to convert moderate liberals to the path of socialist revolution” (“Oliver Stone, ‘History’.”) One wonders exactly how and why the process of forging mutual understanding between cultures could be described as “socialist” in intent.

Continuities

this stereotype can be negotiated through food; a familial, communal and cultural language beyond words that not only connects Arab emigrants to their source cultures, but provides a means for others to experience Arab cultures at first-hand. Mealtimes become social rituals accommodating hybridity and diversity in which new cultural spaces can be forged. More significantly Elsherif's piece shows how those binary oppositions (personal/ political, domestic/ professional, West/ East) that inhibit mutual understanding can be readily overcome.

The next two contributions concentrate on how American literary texts have been consumed by different interest groups in the Republic of Turkey. İnci Bilgin looks at how a group of learners at Boğaziçi University, İstanbul, responded to Toni Morrison's story "Recitatif." What is most illuminating about her analysis is the way learners discover something about themselves and their own cultural preoccupations through exposure to Morrison's ideas: we see how they are involved in a perpetual process of redefining their notions of "Easternness" and "Westernness." Meltem Kiran-Raw looks at how the author Selim İleri's book *Bu Yalan Tango* (*This Delusive Tango*) (2010) draws on the ideas of Henry James to address questions of gender construction as well as the relationship between the personal and the political.

Dialogue can not only be sustained across cultures, but across different media. Rebecca Waese's analysis of Canadian writer Guy Vanderhaeghe's *The Englishman's Boy* (1997) shows how the writer incorporates intertexts drawn from film and drama into his work, prompting readers to consider the question of what "history" actually represents. Just like Kuznick and Stone in their documentary series, Vanderhaeghe wants readers to reflect on the past and its relationship to the present; it is "a textured, lived experience" – one that cannot be readily defined. Our perspective shifts as we read; our perspective on the past at the beginning of the novel might not be the same at the end. Once we become aware of this, then perhaps we can develop the kind of openness that can embrace the potentiality of the unknown. All three pieces by Bilgin, Kiran-Raw and Waese prove the truth of the assertion, expressed by writer Alberto Manguel, that while literature cannot always provide answers, it can offer a way forward for individuals of different cultures to understand themselves and their relationship to others (Manguel).

This issue rounds off with a piece by Jim Welsh centered on Baz Luhrmann's recent version of *The Great Gatsby*. While the film was criticized by many for being "unfaithful" to the source-text, Welsh recognizes that it is a good example of cultural dialogue between an Australian director and an American source-text. What emerges is a kind of *bricolage*, a reworking of a familiar tale with unexpected flourishes and surprises, inviting viewers to reflect on how the text can be read in different ways by different people. Like Selim İleri with Henry James, Luhrmann has engaged in a dialogue with Fitzgerald's text to produce his own reworking of the tale.

Following the precedent established in previous issues, the book and film review sections are designed to sustain that dialogue through an eclectic selection of texts. Themes addressed in the book review section include transmediality, cybercultures and their impact on globalization, cross-cultural (re-)constructions of "offensive" or "pornographic" material, Hawthorne and masculinity (forming an interesting contrast to James' ideas as addressed in Kiran-Raw's piece), Turkish foreign policy and the impact of women's studies on established disciplines in the humanities and social sciences. In the film section, we concentrate on reworked adaptations of old classics (*Alice in Wonderland*), as well as cross-cultural encounters in *Beasts of the Southern Wild* and *Salmon Fishing in the Yemen*.

Works Cited

- The Great Gatsby*. Dir. Baz Luhrmann. Perf. Leonardo DiCaprio, Carey Mulligan, Tobey Maguire. Warner Bros./ Village Roadshow Pictures, 2013. Film.
- İleri, Selim. *Bu Yalan Tango [This Delusive Tango]*. İstanbul: Everest, 2010. Print.
- Lawrence of Arabia*. Dir. David Lean. Perf. Peter O'Toole, Alec Guinness, Jack Hawkins. Columbia Pictures, 1962. Film.
- Manguel, Alberto. "Free Voices." Çağdaş Sanatlar Merkezi, Ankara. 6 Sep. 2013. Lecture.

Continuities

- Morrison, Toni. "Recitatif." *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*. Vol. 2: 1865 to the Present. 5th ed. Eds. Nina Baym et. al. New York and London: W. W. Norton & Co., 1998. 2077-92. Print.
- "Oliver Stone 'History' Rebutted at PCA Conference." *Accuracy in Media* 5 Apr. 2013. Web. 8 May 2013.
- "Oliver Stone's Untold History of the United States." *Wikipedia.org*. 12 Apr. 2013. Web. 8 May 2013.
- Platoon*. Dir. Oliver Stone. Perf. Charlie Sheen, Tom Berenger, Willem Dafoe. Hemdale Film/ Cinema 86, 1986. Film.
- Raw, Laurence. "Editorial Introduction: Forging New Collaborations." *Journal of American Studies of Turkey* 32 (2010): 1-9. Print.
- Vanderhaeghe, Guy. *The Englishman's Boy*. 1997. London: Anchor/ Transworld Publishers, 1998. Print.