

Mass Culture and Television: Quiz and Game Shows on TV Channels of Turkey, Lost Cultural Identities

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Abstract: *In the latest years, the number of quiz and game shows aired on Turkish TV channels has increased significantly. These shows serve as a shelter where people can escape from the disturbing pressure of their daily realities. The values and structures of these programs derive from certain facets of the capitalist ideology and feed it, encouraging the greed and the competitive individual inherent in capitalism. People participating in certain game shows are scored according to what they know. The capital of the game show is the knowledge which functions in the same way as money. Here, knowledge is like the capital of the manufacturing process. It is not to the benefit of the society but solely to the person participating in the quiz show. In addition to this, what's actually valuable and important in the game shows is the way knowledge is used, not the knowledge itself. The contestants are from low social and economic levels. In the same manner, the viewers at the studio directed to applause constantly. On the other hand, the viewers in front of the TV forget the barbarity and the resentments of day to day life by spending their time in front of an empty and unnecessary game show. What can these people acting as spectators do instead? For instance, as citizens, they may prefer to watch other TV programs by which they may achieve greater consciousness of their rights and responsibilities. This way our hopes, culture and identity bygone in this 'happy idiots' society. The understanding resulting from such polarity causes issues to be taken out of the context of social and historical complexities and be profiled simplistically. Quiz shows, which are examples of mass culture, are also tools for ideological canalization and exploitation. These programs confirm the faith of the masses in the system and integrate them into it. Attempting to study the quiz show and game show such as "Who Wants to be a Millionaire ?" or "Will You Marry Me ?" with a theoretical approach as well as an empirical method, taking the idea that such shows aired on Turkish TV channels are a tool of cultural imperialism and that they serve the settling down of the consumer society.*

Keywords: *Television, mass culture, popular culture, media, identity*

1. Introduction

"Nothing is as before television anymore" George Comstock.

Television, apart from being a technical object resulting from the advanced technologies of the modern age, is also a phenomenon shaping and popularizing the mass culture. What kind of a world construct is being shaped, the parallelism between the real world we live in and the world construct put forth the television and what the utopic world of the humankind is, namely how hopes and dreams have been lost after television enters into people's homes, regardless of people's cultural groups, development levels and social structures, is also within the scope of our subject matter.

Television, with the technical possibilities presented by the modern age and modern way of living, has become a part of our homes and daily lives and has not presented us with many alternatives while doing this. It has such a significant and essential place in our daily lives that we can currently discuss only the ethics of a life with television rather than being able to imagine a life without television. We all know that the modern age is the information age and believe that the emergence of television as a mass media tool serves the purpose of informing people. We also know that besides informing people, television also serves the purpose of entertaining them. In which manner does television serve both purposes at the same time? Even if we claim that television truly serves the function of spreading information through certain programs and meets people's needs to communicate, this communication is incomplete since the information is not real, in order words only fictional and no actual contribution is ensured from the receivers of the information, and thus the communication is "misleading." What the television provides is "disinformation" or misleading information and creates the illusion of being informed while producing and delivering information that keeps people from being informed.

The subject matter of this study is the quiz and game shows that are highly popular in Turkey recently. One of the main characteristics of quiz shows is that they are patented by channels such as BBC and ITV, which are leaders in international program flow. TV programs are broadcasted in numerous countries of the world simultaneously and with the same format. However, when the common format is evaluated in terms of the concerning global/local framework, different local elements can come into play in each country and the questions asked can differ according to the economic and

political agenda, history, art, tradition and linguistic knowledge of that country. The analysis of these programs display that these shows are deployed in accordance with the free market principles and with an emphasis on speed and agility. Competition is accentuated and knowledge is reduced to possessing certain pieces of information through answers that are to be chosen among a pre-selected set of answers to questions about various subject matters. In other words, it can be claimed that what actually is the case is the creation of an illusion of knowledge.

The purpose of our study is to further comprehend the influence of the big monetary rewards to be awarded in the popular quiz shows, which are predominant on our TV screens, on how we make sense of knowledge and the relationship between this meaning and the new power structures. The study also serves a further purpose concerning the transformation of the meaning of information and the way new power structures established by means of this transformed meaning is also ensured on a global level and this purpose can also be claimed to lead to an evaluation of the relationship between money and power in terms of an ideological analysis of quiz shows within the scope of cultural discussions. The emphasis in these quiz shows is placed on being viewed and giving away awards and the fundamental tool for winning the monetary award is information. Possessing information enables people to earn money and TV shows that provide the highest awards will also be the ones most viewed. However it must also be indicated that the information required in these quiz shows are collections of fragmented pieces of information that are impossible to define as holistic knowledge. Thus the information-money-power triangle is specifically ensured in the quiz shows. This new relationship type is ideological and is constantly being reproduced with the occasional diversities. In quiz and game shows, information is reproduced via big monetary awards and speed performance, and contributes to the ideology producing a new way of living.

2. The Cultural Climate of the Modern Era: Popular Culture and Mass Culture

Our approach to this subject matter will consist of first uncovering the cultural environment in which television as a mass media communication tool and thus the concepts of popular culture and mass culture into a theoretical framework. Another goal is to observe the impact of television on society as a device and to provide awareness on the subject.

2.1 Definition of and Approaches to Popular Culture

Popular culture is a definition that plays an important role in our daily lives and the positive and negative impacts of which are frequently discussed and regarding which different approaches are existent.

Raymond Williams explains the concepts of popular culture and mass culture through attributes other than periodic characteristics and argues that popular culture is the culture created by the public at large whereas mass culture is a culture developed by a certain social group for the public at large. (cited by Özbek 2008: 92 Raymond Williams)

On the other hand, Herbert J.Gans, in his book *Popular Culture and High Culture*, argues that society views its unprivileged section as classes and layers rather than a mass, and in other words, sees more than one popular culture. Gans defines high culture by comparing the definitions of high culture and popular culture to each other: the most significant difference between these two cultures is the number and variety of their spectators. While high culture appeals to a small group of people that is not larger than half a million, a popular television program can attract a greater number of people. Popular culture viewers form a more heterogenic group. (Gans 1974: 45)

Popular culture is accused for the following reasons: It is emotionally devastating, provides simulated pleasures and its emphasis of violence and sex encourages vulgarity in people and promotes savagery. Popular culture, which is mentally destructive, presents an imaginary content that provides an escape from the real world and harms people's capabilities to deal with reality. It is also culturally destructive since it diminishes people's opportunities for participating in high culture. In terms of the American society, most individuals are far from alienated atoms but rather members of families and other social groups. However, under high stress situations and in cases of events that threaten themselves, they may become unemotional and even violent. This point results in two main criticisms. The first criticism is that popular culture drops the level of good taste and therefore harms society's characteristics as a civilization. The second criticism is that mass media can 'desensitize' and 'atomize' people and thus make them more receptive to mass persuasion techniques and can repeal democracy through skillful demagogues. (Gans 1974:67)

2.2 Popular Culture: Television

When we study quiz and game shows in order to provide an example concerning the relationship between popular culture and television, we come to observe the following: quiz and game shows function as a shelter from the reality and

pressures of daily life. The values inherent in and the structures of these programs are a byproduct of certain characteristics of the capitalist culture and feed this ideology.

These quiz and game shows promote and encourage the “ambition of possession” and “competitive individualism,” which are fundamental values of capitalism. Moreover, they covertly present the capitalistic world view in a skillful fashion that is hard to detect. One example of this is that what is required from the contestants are the most apparent and popular answers. It should also be known that what is most ‘apparent’ is also the ideological. The power of ideology lies in the fact that it seems apparent. In quiz and game shows, the contestant who provides the most popular answer is the winner and the one who provides the less popular answer is the loser. Therefore it is those who conform to the majority that win. Thus an attempt is made in these shows to encourage people to conform to certain rules and points of view. The threatening message that the sheep which wanders away from the flock is eaten by the wolf is conveyed and the related fear is inflicted. (Alemdar and Erdoğan 1994:13)

2.3 Entertainment Shows on TV

Entertainment shows attract the greatest number of viewers. Quiz and game shows are the most popular among them. These shows test people’s knowledge or measure whether they conform to a certain socio-cultural environment or not. They act as a shelter from the disturbing constraints of day to day living, borrowing their values and structures from the capitalist ideology and feeding this ideology in return. *The ambition for possession and competition are the most fundamental indicators of capitalism and such hysteria are provoked by these shows as, a characteristic of these shows that can be readily observed.*

Another characteristic of these shows is that they present the capitalistic world view to the viewers skillfully and in a hard to detect fashion. (Alemdar and Erdoğan 1994:111)

Popular culture is highly ideological and extensive studies are currently being carried out concerning the subject. Nevertheless these products have displayed that they also, from time to time, are able to put forth accurate intuitions concerning the truth within their adapted contents and succeed in reflecting the spontaneous opposition of interdependent classes. For this reason, considering popular culture products to be ideological in terms of false consciousness, would in a sense be unwaryness. In class societies, even if the cultural phenomena seem to be finally meta-defined in accordance with the ideas of the dominant class, the exploited and governed classes also accomplish to produce works that express their hopes and rage and to infiltrate them into the upper culture.

In any case, the manipulative aspect inherent constantly results in the necessity to be exposed. However it is also obvious that the culture that can be produced by exploited working classes being attempted to capitalize are guided by the ideology of the dominant classes and the inherently oppositional elements contained within the culture of the sub-groups are assimilated and thus desubjectified. (Oktay 1993: 20-21)

The fantasies expressed by the products of popular culture bear a manipulated/manipulating characteristic in our contemporary technological societies even if they were created by classes that oppose the dominant classes and since the social/individual expectancies they express are produced by the practices of the public and produced by and within the context of the hegemonic culture of the ruling class, in the final analysis, such prevent the truth from being seen.

2.4 Definition of Mass Culture

The concept of mass culture is associated with the “mass individual.” Since this concept is based on the mass society theory presupposing that masses consisting of atomized individuals are inherently stultified, unbalanced and impressionable, the cultural actions of the mass culture consumers are also considered to be passive as a whole. (Özbek 2008: 90)

Dwight MacDonald expressed the same opinion even more clearly: *“Mass Culture is imposed from above. It is fabricated by technicians hired by businessmen; its audiences are passive consumers, their participation limited to the choice between buying and not buying. In short, the masters of kitsch exploit the masses’ cultural needs to profit or to maintain their class hegemony.* (Gans 1974: 44)

2.5 Mass culture and Stultification

The concept of stultification was first introduced in early 1980’s and was used for the first time during the simplification of textbooks but began to be used in other cultural areas as well. It is possible to provide various examples for this concept: adding semi classical songs and Broadway musicals to the repertoires of concert halls, the public television channels

decreasing the number of documentaries and theater performances and instead broadcasting nature shows and popular music shows. (Gans 1974:90)

Another criticism of the mass culture concept presupposes that masses consisting of atomized individuals are inherently stultified, unbalanced and impressionable, the cultural actions of the mass culture consumers are also considered to be passive as a whole. Mass communication studies based on this theory cannot accomplish to be more than studies on 'influence' aiming to expose that mass communication tools such as music, film and television corrupt the spectators.(Carey 1982:411 cited by Özbek 2008:90)

According to Gans, who opposes the act of defining the masses as such 'cultural idiots,' most people do not resemble alienated atoms at all but are members of families, peer groups and social groups and display a tendency to be moral, polite, practical and occasionally philanthropic. However, under stressful conditions or against outsiders threatening them or whom they perceive to be threatening, they may become unemotional and even violent. (Gans 2007: 55)

As Özbek indicates in his book, mass culture theoreticians ignore the fact that humankind can write its own history and can attribute different meanings to cultural products as they are consuming them and evaluate human beings solely as passive creatures processed through the machinery of mass culture and reduce the practicability of history to the abstract motion of the technological rationale of capitalism. As stated by Karl Marx and cultural studies theoreticians: "Humankind writes its own history and yet not in the way they desire" and based on this idea, Özbek does not prefer to utilize mass culture and mass individual concepts in her study. However we feel the need for a definition of mass culture as well as a definition of popular culture in order to describe the cultural environment of the modern era.

2.6 A criticism of mass culture

Özbek, in her valuable study, presupposes that mass culture, as is defined by conservatives, supporters of classical culture or radical thinkers or defined based on Frankfurt School's theory of mass industry or ruling by stimulation, presumes that products of the modern culture industry have a total stimulation effect and that the people who have liking for such products are in a constant state of false awareness. Popular culture is a drug and people are 'cultural idiots.' However, as Stuart Hall indicates, the influence of cultural products is not the sort of influence that conquers and authors the minds of the people as if they were tabula rasa. On the contrary, the hegemonic influence of the dominant ideology can only be successful if they can utilize the internal conflicts in people's emotions and perceptions and reprocess such. In this sense, it is possible to mention an influence process that may be considered just the opposite, namely a process of alternative influence that is liberating. (Stuart Hall 1981: 233, cited by Özbek 2008: 91)

3. Quiz and Game Shows and Ideology

Quiz and game shows which have become immensely popular on television recently are broadcasted on numerous television channels broadcasting on a nation-wide level in Turkey. Almost all of these television channels are commercial channels that continue to exist by means of advertisement revenues. Their goal is to receive the support of advertisers by means of broadcasting these shows. Television has an important impact socially, namely its economic, political, cultural and ideological influences. When a television show is produced and broadcasted, this has both cultural and ideological consequences.

Quiz shows, as other types and formats of television shows, are packages created by the dominant industrial structure and containing specific messages to be received by the spectators. Stories about competition and winning are narrated and the host, contestants and the spectators in the studio all have specific positions within a specific relationship framework. The spectators present at the studio during the show are stock characters. These shows rely simultaneously on oral narration and visual indicators. Most significant visual indicators are a famous and charismatic host, a décor designed using bright and lively illumination and electronic hardware. There are also certain stock situations specific to the narration conveyed. Whether the contestant shall be able to answer the question, earn the monetary award and the contestant's decision leading to winning or losing are all examples of these stock situations. (Yaylagül 2004: 4)

Narratives of this sort also convey certain values. These are values such as winning the competition and having a desire to obtain material wealth. Here, we can witness the creation of a consumer culture through entertainment. The relationship between the host and contestants and spectators is hierarchical. Hosts act as the representatives of the current industry and political system because all participants and spectators are obliged to conform to the rules defined by the industry. The values that are to be accepted as "dominant" and "normal" are conveyed to the society by means of game shows. The shows also provide us with dramatized accounts of the contestants' stories. The anticipation and curiosity as to whether the contestant shall win, glues the viewers to the screen.

The characters introduced during the game shows are young or middle aged adults. They do not have any identifiable political, religious or philosophical opinions (or such are not made known). These are naturally people looking out for themselves and are in pursuit of happiness. By this means, these shows also feed the subjectivity of the spectators (Berman, 1987:10).

Television shows are environments where social reality is symbolically reconstructed. As a result, the perceptual and interpretational frameworks of the spectators are shaped by means of mediated cultural values and this enables the hegemonic structure to reproduce itself. In television programs, success is glorified and it has an indicator. In quiz and game shows, this indicator is the amount of money won. How the program is prepared and presented also makes an emphasis on this theme. Television also shapes the spectators' points of view and the spectators are incorporated into the cultural rationale of the show. That is ensured by the fact that spectators can participate through their comments. An opportunity is provided to associate with the winners or to criticize the losers.

The emphasis of the show is not solely on success. This success is the end result of a competition and conflict. For this reason, in game shows, competition and conflict is glorified and ritualized. The contest is presented as an objective situation, the notion of an objective contest is placed at the center of a system of values and it is legitimized in the eyes of existing spectators. By means of the questions asked during the quiz and game shows and the information contained within the content, the hegemonic educational ideology is recreated.

During quiz and game shows, a call is made to the spectators to share the roles of the contestants and the host. However, it can be observed that the source of status here is not skill but knowledge. In every society, knowledge is the source of power. Those who have or control power have always been privileged. In quiz shows, knowledge is turned into a social value. Here, we can see knowledge being evaluated quantitatively and transformed into a competition format. The question connects the host and the expert evaluators together. The relationship between the host and the contestants take place within the framework of the rituals of the game. The competition forms a connection with real life by means of the evaluation phase and evaluation bonds the closed structure of the game to real life. The more knowledgeable the contestant is about real life, the more use he/she can make of this information during the competition. During quiz shows, knowledge and skills concerning real life are presented in a ritualized conflict.

The amount of the monetary awards given to the contestants is of great importance. The amount is much higher than a person can earn in the course of his/her work life. However, the organizers of the quiz shows can determine the rules and direct the program flow and this reminds the spectators to accept the existence of powers outside themselves that can set rules and that fact that they have to conform to such rules. Under the condition that they conform with the rules, quiz and game shows present the spectators two opportunities: one is a desire to win and the other is to be seen on the screen and be famous.

Quiz and game shows communicate with the spectators through televisual codes and certain rules and values are installed in the society by means of competition and entertainment. In time, these values start to seem legitimate and natural. The host acts as a social catalyst. Standing at an equal distance to the contestants and spectators, the host enables them to have a better time together by competing and sharing. The pleasure shared is the most important bond that keeps the society together. (Yaylagül 2004: 5)

After providing the correct answers, the contestants are asked whether they want to continue or not and risk taking and free enterprise is encouraged. They are presented with the idea that instead of working for a long time to accumulate wealth, they can accumulate it in a short time by their knowledge and courage. In such shows, losing is intolerable and the losers are eliminated with a consensus.

4. Conclusion

Quiz and game shows are indispensable parts of our contemporary media influencing our daily lives. People of the modern era are under an intense audio-visual bombardment by the media and it is the media that fully shapes our daily lives. Media makes us lose our cultural values and identities and the stereotypes it provides rob us of our souls, conquering our emotions and thoughts.

In conclusion, the human portrait shaped by the media is a mass consisting of cynical, consumption frenzy and selfish individuals who can readily accept anything.

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