Ideological Representation in Turkish Cinema and Turkish Cinema During the AK Party Era

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Abstract

Cinema has long been recognized by governments for its societal influence, and Turkey is no exception. During the early years of the Republic, while all fine arts flourished under state protection, cinema did not receive the same level of support. However, Turkish cinema evolved in line with the Republic's official ideology, emphasizing values such as modernization and secularism. As the government acknowledged cinema's power, it began directing the industry to align with state interests, promoting a "Western" worldview. Following the rise of the Justice and Development Party (AK Party) in 2002, Turkey underwent a shift toward conservatism, with religious values influencing cultural and social life. This article examines how the AK Party's conservative and religious agenda has shaped Turkish cinema, focusing on whether the 20 highest-grossing films of the AK Party era contributed to a new cultural hegemony and whether Turkish cinema has become more religiously oriented in this period.

Keywords: *AK Party; secularism; cultural hegemony; westernization; cinema*

Introduction

Cinema, as both a cultural and sociological phenomenon, serves as a mirror of societal and political dynamics while contributing to the reproduction of the audience's values, culture, and political understanding. The interaction between cinema and society is bidirectional: films are products of their time's cultural, moral, political, and economic structures and play a role in shaping or transforming these structures. Even the most apolitical films reflect the political and social realities of their era, making cinema inherently political. Beyond mere representation, films, through embedded ideological and political discourses, can either accelerate social transformation or reinforce official ideologies. As Zizek argues, "A film is never 'just a film,' nor is it a light fiction aimed at distracting us from the real issues" (Diken & Lausten, 2010, p. 15). In Turkey, cinema has been politically charged since its inception, reflecting the country's prevailing political ideologies and cultural atmosphere. Social changes, directly or indirectly, have influenced cinema's development, making its history a product of these interactions (Güçhan, 1992).

It examines whether the cultural and ideological shift under the AK Party government (since 2002) represents continuity or change in Turkish cinema. This study primarily identifies the overlapping areas between the dominant ideology in Turkey since its establishment and mainstream Turkish cinema. It explores the portrayal of Westernism and secularism, ideologies that have shaped Turkey's cultural landscape since cinema's introduction, alongside

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the opposing ideology of Islamism in cinema. The study also evaluates how the ideological transformation since 2002 has been reflected in box-office trends and examines the role of "cultural hegemony" in shaping this shift. Ultimately, it considers how the ideological landscape has shifted under AK Party rule and how these changes are reflected in Turkish cinema.

The birth of Turkish cinema coincided with the development of world cinema and the founding of the Republic of Turkey. Initially, Turkish cinema lacked a guiding ideology or institutional support, and its development proceeded alongside the establishment of the Republic. Despite the absence of direct financial support, Turkey's foundational ideologies, particularly secular nationalism and Westernism, significantly shaped cinema from the outset. Cinema became a reflection of the founding ideology of the Republic, representing modernization and Western values. The late Ottoman period saw the rise of cinema as part of modernization efforts, coinciding with the Empire's decline and the transition to the Republic. The ruling elite, advocating for Westernization, recognized cinema's power, and it rapidly spread in Istanbul. Cinema was seen as a tool for modernization, exemplified by the creation of "National Cinema" (1914) and the "Cinema Department" (1915) under Enver Pasha's orders (Şahinboy & Doğan, 2010). With the establishment of the Republic, cinema continued to reflect Western values and modernization, aligning with the new secular-nationalist ideology. During the Republican era, ideological debates persisted, and cinema became a space where these tensions were represented. Films reflected political orientations and critiqued opposing views, thus turning Turkish cinema into a medium for ideological, political, and economic discourse. Cinema became a space to explore the complexities of society, including tradition, religion, and ideology. The creation of the modern Turkish nation-state, viewed as a triumph of Western-style modernization, was deeply connected to the Republican period. Atatürk's principles, which emphasized modernization, Westernism, and nationalism, profoundly influenced Turkish cinema. The cinema's evolution mirrored the development of the nation-state, which was founded on Western ideals (Hobsbawm, 2014; Mardin, 2015; Lewis, 1984).

In summary, Turkish cinema has always reflected the country's ideological and political developments. Initially shaped by Westernism and secularism under the Republic, Turkish cinema has evolved as a tool for ideological representation and debate. The AK Party era, marked by a shift toward conservatism and Islamic values, has introduced a new ideological framework in cinema, prompting a reexamination of the relationship between politics, culture, and cinema in Turkey.

Cinema plays a pivotal role in constructing societal meanings, addressing political, cultural, economic, and democratic conflicts, and shaping collective identity. Stuart Hall (2017) argues that societies rely on "systems of meaning" to construct identities and sustain shared cultural experiences (p. 13). According to Hall's "constructivist" view, identity, culture, and meaning are always in flux, and cinema contributes to this ongoing construction by representing and shaping these systems. In the case of Turkish cinema, this role has been central since its inception.

Like global cinema, Turkish cinema should be seen as a societal and cultural phenomenon rather than individual productions. Filmmakers have not just conveyed historical or social events, but have examined broader societal issues, including customs, religion, and ideology. By situating their works within specific historical contexts, they have played a part in shaping

the new societal landscape. Kellner (2013) highlights that even in the most apolitical films, the political and social realities of the time are evident. Films inherently have an enlightening function, offering insights into reality and societal dynamics (Jung, 2020, p. 17). Cultural forms like films can present "dialectical images," revealing the social structures they belong to (Kellner, 2013, p. 33). Foucault (2017) emphasizes that ideology functions as "the knowledge of all knowledge," shaping how information is represented and structured in the media (p. 340).

This study focuses on how the ideological shifts during the AK Party government have influenced Turkish cinema. The representation theory framework will analyze the ideological changes in Turkish cinema, especially in relation to the Republican period's dominant ideologies. Ideologies are not fixed structures but are continually reconstructed through social processes, influencing identities and societal norms (Therborn, 2008, p. 90). This study explores the impact of these ideological shifts on social identity construction in Turkish cinema.

This study investigates whether this relationship has shifted under the AK Party government. While Turkish cinema has served as a tool for reflecting societal change, it has also critiqued dominant ideologies. Even in seemingly apolitical films, Turkish cinema has portrayed political developments such as transitions from one-party rule to multi-party life, secularism, urbanization, and coups. It has facilitated discussions about economic tensions, political debates, and social transformations, thus creating cultural and historical memory.

Mainstream Cinema: Secular and Western

Atatürkism, Turkey's dominant ideology since its foundation, aims to transform society along Western lines, with religion being the primary area of change. Debates about replacing religion with science or national values are reflected in cinema during Turkey's nation-building process. Şerif Mardin (1993) argues that Atatürk's Westernization movement introduced new cultural values to replace religion, including secular reforms in areas like the alphabet, music, painting, and sculpture. These reforms aimed at secularizing Turkish society. Mardin and Parla (2005) describe Atatürk's modernization as a model based on the nation-state, capitalism, industrialization, and individual freedom, in alignment with secular rationalism. Faroz Ahmad (2014) notes that Atatürk adopted secularism as a key element of state ideology, while restructuring Islam under state control to support secularization.

One of the first religious reforms in Turkey was the abolition of the Caliphate and the Ministry of Religious Affairs on March 3, 1924, replaced by the Directorate of Religious Affairs, bringing religion under state control (Koçak, 1995). Lewis (1997) considers this secularization project as the first attempt in the Islamic world to separate religion from the state. Atatürk's efforts completely removed religion from the political sphere, achieving what the Ottoman Empire could not (Mardin, 2015). Onur Atalay (2018) argues that Kemalist ideologists initially viewed Kemalism as a "secular religion," with its core values—science, civilization, nationalism, and Atatürk—becoming ideological pillars of the new order. Yıldız (2001) notes that while Atatürk distanced national values from Islam, he did not fully reject religion. Ünlü (2018) suggests that Atatürk's approach, based on a "Muslim contract," shaped the nation around Islam and Turkishness, transforming it into a "Turkish contract" after the Republic's establishment.

Taner Timur (1992) argues that Kemalism was not a reaction to the collapsing empire but aimed at creating an independent Turkish state. Atatürk defined the new nation-state's foundation as a secular "national culture" (Zileli, 2009). The core of Kemalist modernization can be summed up as "Westernization through Turkification," based on Western positivist Enlightenment and secular culture (Yıldız, 2001). Atatürk sought to integrate a Turkish nation, free from Islamic culture, with the West. Turkish cinema has explored the conflicts in constructing religious and national paradigms during nation-building. Akbulut (2012) notes that cinema's role in reflecting national identity remains unchallenged, while Yıldız (2021) highlights how nostalgia and a "loss of memory" shaped the construction of national identity. Cinema played a key role in cementing this loss. Turkish films often depict the secular "right vs. wrong" or "real vs. fake religion" dichotomy, supporting the state's ideological legitimacy, which emphasizes that "the state is not against religion, but against its misuse." Among these films, the following examples, where politicians or public officials play leading roles and directly address this topic, can be shown: Yılanların Öcü (1962), Yarın Bizimdir (1964), Buzlar Çözülmeden (1965), Hasip ile Nasip (1976), Kanal (1978), Zübük (1980), Üçkâğıtçı (1981), Kuyucaklı Yusuf (1985), Değirmen (1986), Selamsız Bandosu (1987).

Turkey's shift from Islam to pre-Islamic Turkish culture and its use of Westernization has sparked debate. Tanıl Bora (1997) argues that Kemalism is not rooted in Western humanism but represents a conservative modernization, with secularism softening during the founding process. Şerif Mardin (2004) traces Turkish enlightenment's conservative roots to the Young Turks, highlighting the rejection of Western moral values while adopting Western technology. Mardin suggests that after Atatürk's death, modernization shifted to a conservative model, combining Western technology with Eastern moral values. The Westernization embraced by Atatürk was later questioned by both right-wing conservatives and left-wing anti-imperialists. The 1942 Saraçoğlu government's emphasis on "blood unity" signaled a shift towards nationalism over Western humanism (Öndin, 2003). Bora (2005) views nationalism as a delayed modernization process, evolving into a cultural liberation struggle.

Açıkel (1996) characterizes post-Atatürk nationalist discourse as "cultural restoration," a "second enlightenment" merging traditional cultural symbols with modern technology. Yıldız (2001) divides Atatürk's period into stages: religious nationalism (1919-1923), radical secularism (1924-1929), and ethnic-based national identity (1929-1938), reflected in Turkish cinema, where "the Other" is represented. Şen (2019) discusses how Turkish cinema shapes national identity through dominant cultural codes. Harvey (2012) critiques the Enlightenment's idea of immutable human nature, while Parla (2005) argues Turkish modernization was politically driven. Mardin (2005) sees Atatürkism as a Western-progressive ideology emphasizing individual honor, in contrast to Ottoman-Islamic civilization. Akşin (2019) defines Atatürkist nationalism as peaceful and progressive, recognizing all citizens as "Turkish" regardless of ethnic background.

İlhan Tekeli (2016) outlines the Republic's modernization and democracy in connection with Ottoman modernization, dividing it into four periods: 1860-1923 as "shy modernity," 1923-1948 as "fundamentalist modernization," 1948-1980 as "populist modernization," and post-1980 as "erosion of modernism." This periodization reflects changes in ideologies, including cinema history in Turkey. Tekeli argues that the enlightenment in Turkey was neither continuous nor irreversible, and after Atatürk's death, the "Westernization" ideology, central to the Republic, faced criticism from both right- and left-wing groups, especially by the late

1940s. The debate on Westernism also extended to cinema. Kahraman (2005) asserts that cultural change in Turkey was driven by political goals and social engineering, with cinema playing a key role. Arslan (2005) emphasizes Turkish cinema's role in the Republic's cultural policies, aiming to modernize and Westernize public thinking. Zürcher (2015) links the dominance of Turkishness to reforms in education, culture, and the fine arts, while Katoğlu (1995) observes that cinema was initially excluded from these early cultural arrangements.

It can be seen that the history of Turkish cinema is divided into sections parallel to Turkish political history. The categorizations made in terms of cinema technique roughly overlap with the schematics of democratic periods. Koncavar (2017: 33) states that many authors converge on the same point when dividing Turkish Cinema into historical periods. The periods that Koncavar claims to be generally accepted are listed as follows:

> First Period: 1914 – 1923: Introduction to cinema.
>
> Theatrical Period: 1923 – 1939: Films made under the leadership of Muhsin Ertuğrul, in alignment with the state's official ideology.
>
> Transitional Period: 1939 – 1950: The interest of the private sector in cinema and state loans.
>
> Young / New Cinematographers Period: 1970 – 1987, the formation of Yeşilçam and mainstream comedy style. The emergence of the white cinema.
>
> Post-1987: The Final Period of Turkish Cinema.

The classification of Turkish cinema shows striking parallels with the classification of Turkish political history. This is because Turkish cinema has been directly influenced by the prevailing economic and political system in the country, producing films that align with this system. The difference between the cinema of the single-party era and that of the 1950s is as noticeable as the difference between the cinema of the post-1980 military coup period and that of the 1970s. The reasons for this difference can be explained by the country's economic and political situation, or the country's modernity history. In Turkish cinema, besides the relationships established with the official ideology, the economic differences arising from periods of urbanization or political power changes have also been reflected in films.

The view that Turkish cinema began to move away from the dominant ideology that existed at the beginning after the transition to a multi-party life in 1950 is debated. This discussion is directly related to the change in Turkey's official ideology and political power shifts. It is also argued that Turkish cinema did not have a serious presence until the transition to a multi-party system, and this can be explained largely by economic theories.

The Regime Wants to Educate, Not Entertain

In the early years of the Republic, the innovations in education, fine arts, and other cultural fields held a significant place in line with the goals of the cultural revolution of the era. Kemalist leaders worked tirelessly to educate the people in accordance with the modern, secular, and independent vision for Turkey. However, in the early years of the Republic, cinema, which was seen as a form of entertainment from the West, was not considered a tool for public education. Additionally, the lack of cinema infrastructure in Turkey at the time, as

well as basic infrastructure deficiencies such as electricity, were obstacles to using cinema as a tool for spreading the new ideology.

The examination of Turkish cinema within the context of the Republic's cultural policies and the ideology of a classless society requires focusing on the cultural policies of the elites who governed the country since the establishment of the Republic and their approach to cinema. Kemalist elites argued that a new cultural policy needed to be developed to modernize and Westernize the intellectual evolution of the people (Katoğlu, 1995). In this context, Zürcher (2015) states that the political and cultural elites of the Young Republic radically redefined their identities and accepted Turkish identity as the foundation of the new national state. The ideological and cultural dominance of Turkishness was reinforced through reforms in areas such as education, cultural studies, and fine arts. The Republic, ignoring social class differences, emphasized the distinction between the enlightened and the unenlightened. This approach reflects the Republic's desire to shape society more through education than through social class differences. "In this cultural policy framework, education, culture, and the arts were seen as the cornerstones of the philosophy of modernization" (Katoğlu, 1995, p. 393). In this period, class differences or economically based contradictions were ignored in cinema. This is because the ideologues of the Republic believed that cultural equality would automatically eliminate economic inequalities. The cultural arrangements made in the early years of the Republic established the ideological foundations of the new regime, and the construction of Western, secular institutions was a defining feature of this period.

In the early years of the Republic, innovations in education, fine arts, and artistic fields, along with the schools and institutions established, played an important role in line with the era's cultural revolution goals, and these steps were state efforts to ensure the public received modern education. One of the main objectives of this cultural revolution was to modernize Turkey by introducing it to Western culture. For example, the Translation Bureau, established by Minister of Education Hasan Ali Yücel, was an important tool for this modernization goal. Yücel established this structure to help Turkey reach humanity's common cultural heritage, and in 1940, the Translation Bureau translated world literature into Turkish, aiming to increase social thought and cultural depth (Öndin, 2003). Kemalist leaders worked diligently to educate the people according to the understanding of a modern, secular, and independent Turkey. "These elites undertook a special mission to realize modernization projects and worked intensively to enlighten the rest of society" (Zürcher, 2005, pp. 263-264). However, although educational and production activities were carried out by the state in every area of cultural and artistic life during the Republic period, no institutional development regarding cinema was observed. Cinema was not considered a high art due to its origin as an entertainment tool in the West and because the Kemalist regime aimed to shape the people rather than entertain them. Vincenti (2014) questions whether cinema is a form of public spectacle and answers, "With its inception, cinema quickly found its place at the center of people's leisure time and soon dominated the entertainment market in both America and Europe" (p. 13). Adanır (2003) also states that "before the 1950s, cinema was generally seen as an entertainment tool, a spectacle" (p. 7). The Kemalist modernizers' goal of shaping the people rather than entertaining them is also related to the social conditions of the time. Additionally, factors such as insufficient cinema infrastructure, electricity shortages, and the lack of cinema halls outside of Istanbul contributed to the Kemalist elites' distance from cinema.

While the state's investments in cinema were limited compared to other art forms, the private sector understood the importance and market value of cinema and invested sufficiently in the sector. Moreover, during both the Ottoman period and the early years of the Republic, it is noteworthy that there was no restrictive state intervention in cinema. However, in both periods, cinema was defined as "cheap entertainment for the public" and was not seen as a cultural or artistic tool for a long time. Halit Refiğ (2009) emphasizes that cinema in Turkey developed independently of state and capital support, based on audience demands. According to Refiğ, "In Turkey, cinema showed a miraculous ability to survive based entirely on its audience's demands, with limited financial resources and restricted technology" (Zileli, 2009, p. 63). Without state support, Turkish cinema developed as a popular art and produced films in line with the fundamental values of the Republic (Arslan, 2005). The fact that Turkish cinema produced films that adhered to the state ideology without state support is directly related to the country's overall ideological hegemony. Although Turkish cinema developed entirely based on box office success and audience demand, it did not shape itself according to the ideological views of the cinema audience; rather, it shaped the views of its audience. In other words, Turkish cinema, despite developing in the civil sphere, went through a process in which the state's instrumental approach was clearly observed. Cinema naturally integrated into the state ideology and assumed the role of a voluntary advocate for the official ideology. Despite the development of cinema as a popular art, the determining effect of the state's ideological approach continued throughout the Republic period. Arslan (2005) mentions that while Turkish cinema became a part of popular culture after 1950, the weakening of the Republic's cultural modernization project was also a result of this process.

Despite the exclusionary official policies of the founding period and the economic weakness in the sector, the reasons for cinema's peaceful coexistence with the official ideology in Turkey are also based on the personal attitudes of the directors. Tarık Akan, defending the Westernized and secular nature of Turkish cinema, points out that films outside this ideology had no place in mainstream cinema, saying, "A Turkish Cinema film has never said 'the veil is good.' Look at the actresses older than me; they are quite modern and their heads are uncovered. Even without kissing, there are very beautiful love scenes" (Okur, 2006, p. 36), thus defending the Westernization of Turkish cinema. The Western ideological infrastructure secularized the art of cinema and played an important role in shaping both the artist and the work of art. According to Akan, Turkish cinema's directors and actors were directly influenced by the Westernization and secularization process of Kemalist ideology, and this ideology became one of the most significant achievements of the Republic's educational and cultural reforms. Popular culture products developed in harmony with the dominant culture of society, leading to the reproduction of the official ideology.

Yeşilçam cinema, while addressing social issues, generally followed a "conservative" line, and even when it criticized the system, these criticisms could not exceed certain limits. In this regard, the presence of oppositional elements in popular cultural products also highlights the importance of critically examining local cinema in understanding the "limits of conservatism" (Onaran, 1994, p. 11). The mainstream Turkish cinema of the early Republican period, aligned with Western, secular-modern, and enlightenment principles, became a tool of social transformation.

Among the primary reasons for Turkish cinema's role as a carrier of the state ideology are the developments related to capitalism in the country. Özön (2010) examined the impact of state

economic policies on the cinema industry since the early years of the Republic. In Turkey, the private sector economy was shaped not by the free market, but by state support, with the state exercising significant hegemony over capital through credit and subsidy systems. In this context, the cinema sector was also shaped by the state's economic and ideological interventions through credit, with artists and producers becoming dependent on production processes controlled first by the state and later by the bourgeoisie. According to Marx and Engels (2012, p. 43), with the development of capitalism, intellectuals became dependent on the bourgeoisie who controlled the means of production. Berman (2012, pp. 163-164), from Marx's perspective, suggests that intellectuals are part of modern culture as "paid workers," and creators must work under the influence of the bourgeoisie's power. This situation led Turkish cinema, while carrying the state ideology, to produce works that were in line with the ideological framework of the system. Turkish cinema, in harmony with the general culture of Turkish society and the state's ideology, for years ignored economic and class contradictions, highlighting the ideological conflict between the "enlightened" and "ignorant" segments.

The Effort to Re-Educate The Nation: "National Cinema"

Social changes outside the mainstream in Turkey are reflected in cinema, but not as deep ideological transformations. These changes manifest as trends within the mainstream rather than shifts away from it, and none have become fully mainstream. Turkish cinema generally aligns with the Republic's ideology, though this alignment is flexible and not all-encompassing. Power shifts within the system have influenced cinema, leading to ideological sub-branches. A key reason for these changes is the shift in capital with the rise of the Democrat Party, which brought societal changes in Anatolia, affecting the relationship between cinema and politics. This period marked the emergence of National Cinema, a movement seeking to establish a new cultural and political hegemony.

National Cinema defended religiosity and the role of religion in shaping social life, contrasting with Kemalism's Western universalism and promoting Ottomanism. This movement opposed the materialist-positivist mindset that had dominated earlier Turkish cinema, where religious figures were often depicted negatively. Religious characters were portrayed as liars, swindlers, and oppressors, with religion depicted as an opiate used to deceive the people (Coşkun, 2016). National Cinema aimed to revise this negative representation and instead highlight Turkish values and culture. Mesut Uçakan notes that Turkish cinema became ideologically driven after the May 27, 1960 coup. Uçakan argues that, before 1960, films lacked intellectual depth and were not ideologically focused, categorizing them as "mainstream films without an ideological purpose." He further divides non-mainstream cinema into "Revolutionary Cinema," which was Marxist, and "National Cinema," which emphasized Turkish values and national cultural heritage from a materialist perspective. Uçakan also refers to mainstream cinema as "Cosmopolitan Cinema," driven solely by profit and devoid of ideological purpose (Uçakan, 1977).

However, nationalists or mainstream cinema theorists also attempt to preserve the old position advocated by mainstream cinema. "Among the changes brought by the transition to the multi-party system, those that most affected cinema were the inflationary attitudes in the economy and the acceleration of the reactionary movements" (Özön, 1985, p. 358). "With the reflection of reactionary movements in cinema, films using religious elements like the call to prayer, prayers, cemeteries, mosques, and so on (especially in the melodramas of Muharrem

Gürses) are made. These films are watched by audiences in Anatolia, where political circumstances lead to protests, such as breaking statues of Atatürk" (Avcıoğlu, 1973, p. 387). Evaluating the cinema of this period, Sim and Yılmaz (2016) describe this form of cinema as "a genre that makes the spiritual evolution of the individual its central theme." The authors examine directors making films with this understanding in two different groups. The first group includes films by Yücel Çakmaklı, which are stated to take a stance against the social effects of Westernization and modernization policies and are seen as a response to popular culture. The second group includes films by Semih Kaplanoğlu and Derviş Zaim, which are described as presenting an artistic cinematic understanding focused on the spiritual experiences of the individual (Sim & Yılmaz, 2016, p. 416). Sim and Yılmaz (2016) also make the following evaluation:

> "While Yücel Çakmaklı adopts a more political cinematic approach against popular culture, Semih Kaplanoğlu and Derviş Zaim have embraced an approach that emphasizes the artistic side and focuses on the individual."

This distinction shows that the ideological reflections seen in popular cinema emerge in a way that criticizes one ideology while glorifying another, expressing itself indirectly with an artistic delicacy. Turkish cinema, shaped as the defender of modernization and Westernization projects since the founding of the Republic, saw a new orientation in the relationship between cinema and politics with the rise of non-secular Anatolian cinema during the Democrat Party period. The ideological break between the Republic and the Ottoman period was also reflected through cinema during this time, and cinema played a significant role in the construction process of the Republic's ideology.

The transition from the secular and Westernized cinematic approach of the single-party era to the Anatolian-centered cinematic approach developed during the Democrat Party period can be considered the first significant ideological and political rupture in the history of cinema. Although the later ideological differences may not have been as influential as the great break that occurred with the founding of the Republic, the periodical divisions initiated by National Cinema continued under the influence of subsequent political changes and ideological movements.

AK Party Culture and Art Policies

In this context, the Justice and Development Party (AK Party), established in 2001 under the leadership of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, quickly became a significant force in Turkey's political arena. Although the party's program does not directly reference Islam, the concept of secularism was redefined as neutrality toward religion, rather than the state controlling religious affairs (White, 2011, p. 398). The AK Party won 34.43% of the vote in the 2002 general elections and has maintained uninterrupted power ever since. The AK Party defines itself as a "conservative democratic" party. However, there are various debates regarding the party's identity. Ahmad (2011) states that although the AK Party has its roots in political Islam, party leaders have expressed that they are positioned as secular, democratic, and conservative at the center. This approach reflects a "Muslim Democratic" understanding similar to Christian Democratic parties in Europe (Ahmad, 2011, p. 268-269). White (2011), on the other hand, states that the party presents itself as a conservative democratic party operating a secular governmental apparatus (p. 399).

The AK Party's approach to culture and art policies is clearly stated in the party's program. The current cultural and artistic structure in Turkey is assessed as "unhealthy," and it is stated that this structure will be changed. The program emphasizes the utmost effort will be made to preserve and develop national values (Justice and Development Party Program, n.d.). The core of the culture and art policies is to address issues such as cultural decay and obscenity while preserving traditional and conservative elements. Tuğal (2010) explains the AK Party's cultural policies through the cultural synthesis formed between Islam and Westernization in Turkey, arguing that the party's success is based on this cultural synthesis. However, criticisms have often been voiced that the party has failed to establish cultural hegemony. For example, in a speech in 2017, President and AK Party Chairman Recep Tayyip Erdoğan explicitly stated, "We have difficulties regarding our social and cultural power" (Hürriyet, 2017).

These discussions are directly related to the AK Party's efforts to establish cultural hegemony. Dinçer (2024) states that the search for hegemony is motivated by the internalization of the ideology, cultural beliefs, and values of the dominant classes by society. Among AK Party circles, there is a prevailing view that with the founding of the Republic, Turkey submitted to a Western and secular culture, and in this process, a historical-cultural rupture occurred (Cumhuriyet, 2015). After the 2011 elections, the changes in the AK Party's culture policies made the party's search for hegemony more visible. Nuray Mert characterizes the culture policies of the Republican era as a "cultural revolution" and argues that the AK Party aims to reverse this revolution. In this context, the AK Party's efforts to establish cultural hegemony can be seen as a reaction to the Republic's Western and secular cultural understanding.

Cinema and the Inability To Establish Cultural Hegemony Under The AK Party

According to Adorno (2017), the ideological influence of mass media plays a significant role in shaping the general cultural climate of society. Popular texts, including cinema, help in the formation of a societal mindset by intensifying individual thought structures. The products of this structure often have a stronger character than what is visible, and escaping the effects of popular culture is almost impossible (Adorno, 2017, p. 176). According to this view, visual culture products, particularly when they serve an ideological purpose, can be influential in determining new political approaches and reshaping individuals' political attitudes. Baudrillard (2020) also argues that the relationship between cinema and historical reality is based on a representation that shapes the impact of reality on the individual. Cinema, on the one hand, contributes to the shaping of collective memory with the political programs it represents, while on the other hand, it can become a tool for implementing the ideological goals of political powers (Baudrillard, 2020, p. 71). This situation led the AK Party government to expect that certain political programs and values would be represented in cinema. The government assumed that the political and cultural hegemony shaped in cinema should leave more lasting traces in societal memory. In this context, Michel Foucault's approaches to memory and political struggle are important. According to Foucault, controlling memory allows for the control of a society's future dynamics (Koçak & Koçak, 2014, p. 64). In this sense, historical narratives shaped through cinema have become a strategy highly valued by political powers. Erkılıç (2014) states that the narration of the past in cinema serves as a tool within the framework of current political objectives and state policies.

Within the framework of Gramsci's concept of hegemony, it can be seen that cinema and cultural products are interpreted as attempts to establish the hegemonic influence of the ruling

power. According to Gramsci, intellectuals can be defined as "agents" who spread the interests of the ruling class to society (Gramsci, 1971). Gramsci believed that the ruling class controls all social institutions, from schools to media, and uses them to disseminate its ideology. Everything, from the belief system of the population to their actions, is determined by the ideological and cultural hegemony of the ruling power. In other words, controlling culture means controlling political and social outcomes. However, Althusser (2016) emphasizes that ideological state apparatuses cannot be reduced to a single ideology, and individuals are subjected to multiple ideological apparatuses. In this context, the ideological influences established through cinema are not absolute, and it can be said that the audience has relative autonomy (Althusser, 2016, p. 138). When we look at the prominent cinematic products during the AK Party era (2004-2024), it cannot be said that cinema has been uniquely aligned with a conservative ideology. When examining the most-watched products of Turkish cinema, it is clear that their content generally aligns with a secular and Western ideological framework. This situation shows that historical memory, aesthetic possibilities, and audience memory have not allowed for the establishment of a new cultural climate as demanded by the government.

According to Erkılıç (2014), although narratives of the past in cinema can be considered as a space that serves the ideological and political goals of the ruling power, it has been observed that many of the popular films of this period still carry the influence of the previous dominant ideology. Therefore, it can be concluded that cinema during the AK Party era was not an effective tool in establishing a conservative cultural hegemony. Reading films as texts within all these contexts allows us to understand the background of the films and also compare the dominant ideology with opposing ideologies, which helps us grasp the direction of the country and the psychological state of the society. According to the view that life itself is a text, this text is reviewed, reflected upon, and interpreted throughout the process. As Sanders expressed, "Living is about weaving a series of events into a complex narrative model called life" (2014, p. 16).

Considering the dominant ideology and cultural hegemony in the country since its establishment, it is natural to think that the AK Party has had a strong influence over certain cultural institutions such as schools, cinema, book and newspaper publishing, and television. Looking at the AK Party's program, it also seems to be attempting to break this hegemony. However, despite all of this, cinema during the AK Party era has not shown a tendency to naturally align with the new government. Historical memory, audience memory, and aesthetic possibilities have not been conducive to the establishment of a new cultural climate during this period. When examining the films made between 2004 and 2024, which cover the AK Party era, it is clear that there has been no significant shift towards a conservative or religious change in the content of the films most watched by Turkish audiences.

Table 1: BoxOfficeTurkey's List of Box Office Record-Breaking Films in Turkey.

Ranking	Film Title	Total Audience in Cinema	Production/ Release Date	Film Genre/ Type
1	Recep İvedik 5	7.437.050	16. 02. 2017	Comedy – Apolitical – Secular
2	Recep İvedik 4	7.369.098	21. 02. 2014	Comedy – Apolitical – Secular
3	Düğün Dernek	6.980.070	6. 12. 2013	Comedy – Apolitical – Secular
4	Fetih 1453	6.572.618	16. 02.2012	Drama – Ottomanist
5	Müslüm	6.480.563	26. 10. 2018	Drama – Apolitical – Secular
6	Düğün Dernek 2: Sünnet	6.073.364	04. 12. 2015	Comedy – Apolitical – Secular
7	Ayla	5.589.872	27. 10. 2017	Dram – Secular
8	Bergen	5.484.798	04. 03.2022	Drama – Apolitical – Secular
9	7. Koğuştaki Mucize	5.365.522	11. 10. 2019	Drama – Apolitical – Secular
10	Aile Arasında	5.289.051	01.12. 2017	Comedy – Apolitical – Secular
11	Arif v 216	4.968.462	05. 01. 2018	Comedy – Apolitical – Secular
12	Recep İvedik 2	4.333.144	13. 02. 2009	Comedy – Apolitical – Secular
13	Recep İvedik	4.301.693	22. 02. 2008	Comedy – Apolitical – Secular
14	Kurtlar Vadisi: Irak	4.256.567	03. 02. 2006	Drama – Nationalist – Secular
15	Ailecek Şaşkınız	4.034.858	02. 03. 2018	Comedy – Apolitical – Secular
16	G.O.R.A.	4.001.711	12. 11. 2004	Comedy – Apolitical – Secular

17	Recep İvedik 6	3.986.797	08. 11. 2019	Comedy – Apolitical – Secular
18	Eyyvah Eyyah 2	3.947.988	07.01. 2011	Comedy – Apolitical – Secular
19	CM 101 MMXI Fundamentals	3.842.535	03.01.2013	Comedy – Apolitical – Secular
20	Babam ve Oğlum	3.839.883	18. 11. 2005	Dram – Secular

According to the Boxofficeturkiye[2] figures, all of the box-office record-breaking films, except for one, can be categorized as "secular and Western," in line with the previous dominant ideological framework. For instance, the Recep İvedik series, which is one of the popular comedy franchises in Turkish cinema, ranks among the most-watched films between 2004 and 2024. Recep İvedik reflects a mix of traditional Turkish social structure and modern life, revolving around a character who often exhibits reckless and crude behavior, and it is not a character that Islamists would directly endorse. The film does not explicitly highlight religious elements or secular values. However, the character's behavior and social interactions may align with concepts common in secular society, such as individual freedom, personal choices, and diverse lifestyles. Recep İvedik is not a role model for Muslims. In similar comedy films listed, such as Düğün Dernek, Aile Arasında, Ailecek Şaşkınız, Eyyah Eyyah, Arif v 216, and GORA, religious themes or elements are not explicitly addressed. In fact, behaviors like drinking alcohol, having a girlfriend or boyfriend, gender equality, and visiting entertainment venues align with a secular world view.

Kurtlar Vadisi: Irak, which is also on the list and has political content, belongs more to the nationalist and nationalist-civic genre than to religious cinema. While the film contains both nationalist and religious elements, the nationalist aspects are more prominent and central. The main focus of the film is on protecting the rights and national honor of the Turkish nation, which is in line with the old nationalist cinema. The religious elements serve as a context that complements the political and nationalist themes of the film rather than being the primary driving force.

The drama films on the list also do not carry religious content. For example, movies like Bergen and Müslüm, which tell the stories of famous figures in popular music and the entertainment world, are essentially part of secular cinema. The film 7. Koğuştaki Mucize can be considered a secular film. In the movie, universal themes such as humanity, love, justice, and social prejudice are explored within a secular framework. Religious elements do not play a significant role in the narrative. In the film Ayla, which is based on a true story during the Korean War in the 1950s, where Turkish soldiers adopt an orphaned girl in Korea, the focus is on humanity, friendship, and cultural differences, rather than religious elements.

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[2] Cinemas report the daily number of viewers and box office revenue for the films they screen to the film's distributor. The distributor then aggregates these numbers from all cinemas and determines the film's Box Office. This process reveals the total audience count and box office revenue. The website boxofficeturkiye.com is considered a reliable platform for box office data in Turkey.

The only exception on the list is the film Fetih 1453 (Conquest 1453), ranked 4th. This film cannot be classified within mainstream Turkish cinema and is considered a non-secular film. It can be viewed as an Ottomanist film within the context of Beyaz Sinema (White Cinema). The film portrays the conquest of Istanbul not only as a military victory but also as a religious duty, reinforcing the religious dimension of the narrative. Additionally, it clearly emphasizes that Fatih Sultan Mehmet's desire to conquer Istanbul was rooted in a religious goal. This Ottomanist film has also been debated as one of Turkey's most expensive productions[3].

Conclusion

The films of Turkish cinema during the AK Party's rule provide significant representations of the psychological, familial, economic, political, and ideological characteristics and tendencies of Turkish society during that period. However, what the director emphasizes is not necessarily the ideological and cultural aspects that the government may desire, but rather the dramatic or comedic popular stories. According to the top-grossing films since 2004, the Turkish film audience generally consists of secularists, urbanites, pro-Western individuals, nationalists, and those seeking entertainment. In other words, as in the past, films during this period were presented to the tastes of these groups; ultimately, the Turkish film audience has developed accordingly. The films are made in line with audience expectations, and it can be observed that audience habits and film-watching practices formed in earlier periods have continued. Turkish cinema, guided by the dominant state ideology but not shaped by it, has remained in the civil sphere and can be seen as a form of cinema that often critiques everything through humor, perhaps even mocking it. This is because the most popular films, such as the Recep İvedik series, are neither films of the Islamist segments nor of the Atatürkist understanding that seeks to educate the public.

On the other hand, films that are not secular or pro-Western, and those that advocate ideologies opposing the dominant ideology, are believed to have a very low visibility and have not become mainstream. Even though governments have changed, and the system has shifted from the mainstream ideology to an opposing ideology, the old cultural hegemony has not been dismantled. It is still the secular cinema ideology that determines its audience. The society's form of entertainment resembles Western family entertainment, and the audience laughs at Western-style comedic patterns. It appears that a new cultural hegemony cannot be established in such a short period of 20 years.

Throughout Turkish cinema, including the Yeşilçam era, issues related to both individual and societal universal processes of modernization have been addressed and have existed in relation to these issues. As a result of modernization, the phenomenon of becoming an individual has found its place in cinema, and the individual's position in society has been depicted. Modernization, enlightenment, and secularism generally appear as a "decorative" element in cinema. However, the general storyline has aligned with the life of the Western, secular, and modern individual. At this point, it is necessary to move beyond the understanding that culture is determined by politics or that cultural hegemony is established by politics. At the very least, it is important to acknowledge that cinema has a dual influence in the process of cultural

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[3] With a budget of $18,200,000, the film holds the title of the most expensive Turkish film. The production company is Aksoy Film, with Tiglon as its distributor in Turkey, Kinostar as the distributor in Europe, and NeoClassics Films as the distributor in the United States. Source: Wikipedia

change. It has been found that Turkish cinema has not experienced a radical break from the ideological representation tradition of Yeşilçam or New Turkish Cinema in films that achieved box office success during the AK Party's rule. It is also striking that these films, which adopt a secular and pro-Western orientation, were produced during the AK Party period.

At the same time, it is known that Turkish citizens spend a significant time of their free time watching Turkish television series. The same methodical analysis can be made on these television series on their Ottoman and religious ideologism to illustrate any differences in the type of media consumed.

A country's economic position in the world, its politics, and the lifestyle of its people directly reflect on all popular culture products, including films produced in that country. Therefore, the production of films is directly influenced by the country's current reality, in other words, by the developments, events, and the dominant cultural and social life of the time. However, when examining the box-office record-breaking films during the 20 years of AK Party rule, some inconsistencies are observed. Either the AK Party has not been able to change society as much as anticipated, or the reflection of national realities on cultural products occurs not directly but through a long process of mediation.

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