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PHOTOGRAPHS, MEMORIES, MONUMENTS AND MOVEMENTS

Black and White Istanbul in the Work of Orhan Pamuk and Ara Güler

ABSTRACT: Combining images and words when relating to a city has a long history; in Istanbul's case, it has its roots in the Orientalist tradition and in the great journeys to the "East." For the Istanbul of the twenty-first century, the most renowned combination of photography and literature is Orhan Pamuk's *Istanbul: Memories and the City* (2003), a portrait of the writer as a young artist accompanied with black-and-white photographs of Istanbul. Pamuk's use of the photographs of Ara Güler draws from the tradition of travel writing and autobiography, documenting both the lost city and, conversely, endowing the melancholy of the narrative with a reality effect that is difficult to trace in writing. This paper discusses Pamuk's use of photography in the memoir to address how his work supplies a heterogeneous archive of memories which both preserves and transforms the entangled pasts and presents of the city.

KEYWORDS: Memory, Nostalgia, Urban Space, Orhan Pamuk, Ara Güler.

In recent years, Istanbul has undergone a massive process of renovation, restoration and restructuring. An expanding population, the construction of new neighborhoods, the increase in building and rebuilding of various sites, the city's threatened history and its changing silhouette all create a struggle for identity and identification. In terms of the decline in the preservation of material urban spaces as well as the narratives attached to existing structures and location, artistic and literary works act as a means to trace the presence of what has been forgotten or lost in contemporary landscapes. These works critically and creatively produce new relations to the past.

Literary representations of Istanbul dating from the early twentieth century are characterized by the retrospective gaze, as if to echo the black-and-white images of the city, which, ironically, have been gaining popularity as the city center undergoes drastic changes. The most renowned example of this trend in twenty-first-century Turkish literature is by Turkey's foremost writer, Orhan Pamuk. In *Istanbul: Memories and the City* (2003, 2005), his memoir with visual, mostly photographic, and verbal representations of the city and of himself, Pamuk identifies with the city and offers it as his autobiography. Most of the photographs of the city, which are all in black and white, reveal the city's collective memory. The photographs were taken by renowned journalist-photographer Ara Güler,

whose photographs of Istanbul in the '50s and '60s have been praised for their aesthetics as well as for their documentary value.¹

Pamuk's representation of Istanbul became a trademark of his work and contributed to his renown, especially following the Nobel Prize he was awarded in 2006. In later years, Pamuk took his interest in visual images of the city further. In 2018, he published *Balkon*, a selection from the thousands of photographs he took from his balcony during the winter of 2013, a collection which is as much about the writer's emotional landscape as it is about the views of the city. The visual, even photographic turn in Pamuk's work was already manifest in 2015: the writer published an extended version of the memoir, enriched with an additional 230 black-and-white images of the city and a short introduction that elaborates on the function of the photographs in the text. This essay takes its cue from the increasing role of the visual in the verbal imagery of the memoir. It focuses on the dynamics between the verbal and the visual, the individual and the collective, the past and the present to discuss how black-and-white images shape our thoughts on everyday urban life, memory, monuments and movement, and how photographs and words complement each other in the search for the soul of the city.

Photographs and Memories

The immediate impression that Pamuk's memoir leaves on the reader is the preeminence of Istanbul. Indeed, in the first chapter of the memoir, we are told the writer's identity is inscribed with the history and identity of his immediate family and of the city into which he was born. Pamuk declares that his destiny was determined as much by Istanbul as by the family, body and gender he was born into. Indeed, the text combines images of the city in black and white with the story of how he decided to become a writer: by speaking of Istanbul, he speaks of himself and vice versa. This portrait of the artist as a young man is interwoven with the literary and artistic representations of Istanbul, notably by the nineteenth century French writers who travelled to the city, early twentieth-century Turkish writers who adopted the city as a bridge between the remains of the Ottoman Empire and the emerging culture of the Turkish Republic, and most notably with two hundred black-and-white photographs of the city.

In a *Paris Review* interview, Pamuk contends that the book's originality is the result of "put[ting] together two things that were not together before: [...] combined with [an] essay on the invention of Istanbul's romantic landscape is an autobiography" (Gurria-Quintana 2010, 377). Istanbul is not only the space in which he has lived all his life; it is also a space of imagination and representation,

¹ A renowned artist and, in his own words, a journalist-photographer, Ara Güler (1928-2018) compiled a portfolio of work that ranges from portraits of the internationally acclaimed figures in the 60s, to war journalism. The photographs included in this essay are published with the kind permission of Ara Güler Archival Centre (AGAVEM).

the sole constant in a world of fleeting experiences and sensations—a multifaceted entity which shapes the individual. Istanbul in the memoir is, therefore, more than an entity that the writer himself comes to terms with or sets himself against; it is an unparalleled companion, central to the self and to the human condition. The city writes the self, and Pamuk’s memoir is a peculiar combination of verbal and visual images.

Pamuk’s use of photographs scattered in the text is not unlike W.G. Sebald’s use of captionless photographs in *Austerlitz* (2001) and the desperate search for a lost past that characterizes the novel. The link between photographs and the unattainability of the past has been much discussed, particularly in relation to the work of Sebald, where it turned into a literary feature.² Sebald reveals that what he particularly likes about the insertion of photographs in the narrative is “when this lack of clarity enters the photos” (Jacobs 2015, 166). Images conceal rather than disclose the objects they represent; the distance between the object and its representation multiplies. Pamuk’s choice of black-and-white photos to accompany the text reinforces the dual position of self-invention through the city while the self is a participant in making the city. The writer’s reliance on visual memory recalls what Marianne Hirsch calls, after Aby Warburg, “pre-established forms,” which shape how we consider the past as well as the present. The much-cited passage in the novel on the link between memory and image, or “the pictures that make up the stock-in-trade of the spectacle of history forcing themselves upon us,” encapsulates the role of visual images on how we remember (Hirsch 2001, 71). The melancholy protagonist quotes his history teacher’s rendition of “our concern with history (as) a concern with preformed images already imprinted on our brains, images at which we keep staring while the truth lies elsewhere, away from it all, somewhere as yet undiscovered” (Hirsch 2001, 72).

Unlike *Austerlitz*, however, Pamuk’s memoir is not preoccupied with the “truth” of the photographs or of the account included in the text. Instead, it accentuates the palimpsestic, imprecise, and shifting nature of the object and subject of writing. In the memoir, an alternative is proposed: symmetry, not truth, is the *modus operandi* (guiding principle), and presides over truthfulness:

Bir ressam için şeylerin gerçekliği değil biçimi, romancı için olayların sırası değil düzeni ve hatıra yazarı için de geçmişin doğruluğu değil, simetrisi önemlidir (Pamuk 2003, 275).

What is important for a painter is not objects’ reality but their shape; and what is important for a novelist is not the sequence of events but their order; and what is important for a memoir writer is not the factual accuracy of the past but the symmetry of its account (Pamuk 2005, 265).

Symmetry, here, is a peculiar aesthetic sensibility; it concerns the arrangement and the relation between black and white, words and photographs, past and present,

² See Barthes 2010, Hirsch 2012, Sontag 2001. The most notable of these are *The Emigrants*, *The Rings of Saturn*, and *Austerlitz*.

form and content. The relation between seeing and understanding, or perception, is a theme that runs throughout the memoir. The limits of perception, and by extension confusion, is a major component of its aesthetics. The same principle is also at work with the use of photographs as part of the text, troubling cognition on both textual and conceptual levels.

Black-and-White Photographs

In the first edition of *Istanbul*, there are around two hundred photographs and illustrations, ranging from images of the city by foreign visitors to photographs by Turkish photographers and a collection of family photographs. Most of the photographs Pamuk chose to include in the memoir are depictions of the city in the 1950s and 1960s, by Ara Güler, and they are black and white. These are scattered, without captions, throughout the text. The choice of black and white here relates not only to Güler's choice, it also helps portray a feeling that Pamuk associates with the city. Indeed, the memoir contains an eponymous chapter where the writer contends that black and white convey the childhood memories of the city.³ Pamuk comments:

Bu siyah beyaz duygusunun bir yanı elbette şehrin yoksulluğu, tarihi ve güzel olanın ortaya çıkarılamayıp, eskimiş, solmuş, gözden düşmüş ve bir kenara itilmiş olmasıyla ilgilidir. Bir başka yanı ise, en gösterişli, debdebeli zamanlarında bile Osmanlı mimarisinin alçakgönüllü yalınlığıyla ilgilidir (Pamuk 2003, 48).

To see the city in black and white is to see it through the tarnish of history: the patina of what is old and faded and no longer matters to the rest of the world. Even the greatest Ottoman architecture has a humble simplicity that suggests an end-of-empire melancholy (Pamuk 2005, 38).

The city's Ottoman past peeks through black-and-white photographs. The decrepitude of the city, made more somber by the remnants of the Ottomans, also fed the nostalgia for past grandeur, which, ironically, even at the height of the Empire, retained modesty. This nostalgic feeling that borders on melancholy pervades the city and the memoir.

At the end of the memoir, Pamuk adds a note about the photographs, registering some astonishment at his selection, and in his words, "a feeling in between nostalgia and amazement at the strangeness of the past" (Pamuk 2003, 347; trans. ours). Just like the relation between the words and images, the feelings that the photographs convey are also not easy to identify. It is accurate to say that Pamuk's sense of identity haunts the images presented. The images are immediately recognizable, these contradictory yet complementary feelings concerning the

³ "Çocukluğumun İstanbul'unu siyah-beyaz fotoğraflar gibi, iki renkli, yarı karanlık, kurşuni bir yer olarak yaşadım ve öyle de hatırlıyorum" (Pamuk 2003, 22). This is altogether omitted in the English translation, and the English in the text above is our own translation.

black-and-white past relate to the interplay between the old and the new. As urban regeneration increasingly affects the city's silhouette and topography, and as images and non-verbal elements have become increasingly significant in Pamuk's work, so has the writer's interest in photographs and memory objects. A recent collection of essays, *Manzaradan Parçalar: Hayat, Sokaklar, Edebiyat (Excerpts from the View: Life, Streets, Literature)*, includes "Güler's Istanbul," ("Ara Güler'in İstanbul'u"). In the essay Pamuk elaborates on his decision to include Güler's photographs in greater detail. Pamuk's discovery of Güler's archive after completing most of the text generated both despair and joy. These contrasting feelings, in a manner not unlike that of black and white, inform the general feeling Pamuk identifies with the city and with Güler's photographs. Pamuk's analysis of the uniqueness of Güler's photographs is worth quoting at length:

İstanbul'u bir Batılılaşma gayreti içinde olsa da, geleneksel hayatın sürdüğü, eski ile yeninin, bir yıpranma, yoksulluk ve alçakgönüllülük müziğiyle birleştiği ve manzaraları gibi insanların da yüzü aşırı hüzünlü bir yer olarak gösteren Ara Güler'in siyah-beyaz fotoğrafları; özellikle 1950'ler ve 60'larda, geçmişin şaşaaası artık iyice yıpranıp kabuk kabuk dökülürken ortaya çıkan özel dokuyu çok şiirsel bir duyarlılıkla saklamıştır (Pamuk 2003, 245).

Ara Güler's photographs show Istanbul to be a place where traditional life carries on regardless, where the old combines with the new to create a humble music that speaks of ruin and poverty, and where there is as much melancholy in the faces of the city's people as in its views, especially in the 1950s and 1960s, when the last brilliant remnants of the imperial city... were collapsing all around him, he caught the poetry of the ruins (Pamuk 2005, 234).

In a city that alienates its residents as much as it draws them to itself, aesthetic sensibility—here referred to as "humble music"—is not a luxury but a necessity for the city dwellers who take part in the city and its everyday reality. Güler's photographs provide visual representations of the memoir, revealing the city's contradictory yet complementary pasts, presents and its melancholy refrain. In a similar vein, coming across a scene on television from an old black-and-white film set in Istanbul makes him realize that the Bosphorus "glittering in the distance" (Pamuk 2005, 77) constituted the subject.

In 2017 Pamuk published a deluxe edition of the same memoir, with an additional 233 photographs, and a detailed note on the use of photographs in the memoir. The note provides an overview of Pamuk's experience with photography, tracing it back to the ritual of the family portrait. More importantly, it explains how photographs change the reading practice. The extended edition is thus "a book that lives by visual cues" (xvi), where photographs and words not only complement but also reiterate each other. For Pamuk this repetition means that the book could be leafed through for photographs only, and the feeling that the words convey would still be experienced. His introduction to the 2017 edition ends with the following comment:

The subtler pleasure that drew me to old photographs was the possibility of returning to certain

emotions, of feeling, if only for a moment, that I was still living in those times... It is ... full of the heartfelt conviction that these photographs and images will leave the reader with emotions not so far from those that I experienced, from 1950-75, when I wandered the streets of Istanbul (xxiii).

Beni eski fotoğrafiara bağlayan daha ince zevk ise, bazı duyguları yeniden yaşamak, kendimi bir an hala o zamanlarda yaşıyormuş gibi hissetme ihtiyacı idi... Çünkü bu fotoğraf ve resimlerden okura geçecek duygunun, 1950-75 arası İstanbul sokaklarından bana geçen duygulara yakın olacağına saflıkla inanıyorum (Pamuk 2015, 515).

Photographs do not simply document the past, nor do they only repeat the verbal story; they elaborate and transmit the feeling that Pamuk associates with the city, amplifying the visual dimension of the narrative. In the case of Güler's photography, the visual narrative in relation to the text produces disorientation, manifesting itself in movement. While the background image of the historical city is frozen, the foreground is in ongoing urban movement. The eye of the reader moves between the objects at the frame, and also in between the text and the image. In this sense, the image does not secure the text in generating the meaning; rather, the image and the text complement each other in generating unstable viewing positions, as the experience of walking in a city.

Photographs transcend time as they unite multiple layers of Istanbul's history in single frames, recalling Christine Boyer's contention that "our desire for authentic memories and city experiences reveals an empathy for lost totalities, even though no one actually speaks out in favour of a unified city" (Boyer 1996, 4). Pamuk and Güler's representations of Istanbul are both retrospective and future-oriented. Both emphasize, albeit in very different degrees, the spectacular aspects of the demoted metropolis. Yet in both the present also features as part of the narrative. In both, at times, the emphasis is on the current moment, where it is expressed through depictions of movements in the streets of Istanbul. Pedestrian experience, especially in Pamuk's work, represents actual encounters with the city, in the form of long walks in crowded streets, it weaving together the present moment with the past.

Everyday life experience in the metropolis has been rendered as a collection of snapshots or images, which lies on a narrative of the past intermingled with the present. These snapshots reawaken the memory, such as the memories awakened in Güler's photos; "the old" gaining presence in the form of an Ottoman mosque, a dilapidated streetscape or a monumental building that lost its previous life. Boyer contends that "Every discourse sets up a spatial order, a frozen image that captures the manner in which the transitory present is perceived" (Boyer 1996, 32). The urban experience for a spectator is described as travelling "through the city observing its architecture and constructed spaces, shifting contemporary scenes and reflections from the past until they thicken into a personalized vision" (Boyer 1996, 32). Güler and Pamuk's depictions of the city reveal a similar dynamic: framing Güler's photos, Pamuk's text implies the personalized in the frozen image.

In Güler's depiction of the urban landscape (Figure 1), it is possible to discern the ephemeral practice against a fixed form: the streets' affective intensity is a constant in a rapidly changing city, and the self is reinvented with an embodied reflection on the urban. At first glance the self is a passerby engaging with the city as a flaneur. The photos of Güler highlight precisely this relation between the monumental structures, in particular the mosques in the old city, along with the city itself as a monument forming the background, and the participants in the everyday hustle and bustle of the city in the foreground. Photographs, therefore, reveal the urban texture as a memoryscape, as the past in the present, and a constant interplay between past and present, monuments and movements. To cite an example, in his essay titled "Photos of the Bosphorus" in *Manzaradan Parçalar* (*Pieces from the View*), Pamuk comments on the layers of sentiments the photographs evoke. The fishing boats on the Bosphorus, in particular, make the viewer feel "the excitement of seeing the innocence of nature amidst the monuments and ruins of history and modernity"—"tarihin ve modernliğin anıtları ve yıkıntıları arasında, doğanın çocuksuluğunu görmenin heyecanını da hissederiz" (Pamuk 2010, 195). The fishing boats not only remind us of the innocence, but also of the surprising dynamism of the life that's included within. The city cycles between the monument (in ruin or poverty) and the exuberance of the people's acts within it.

Güler's Istanbul is a city of both splendor and poverty, with the ostentatious remnants of the Ottoman Empire providing a backdrop to the everyday activity of its inhabitants on land and water. His photographs document the daily life in its chaos and flux. Hence, the onlooker is not only the passerby but also an active observer of the constant movement with the activities of the people. In this way, despite a nostalgic feeling for the past, the photos give a sense of the city *with* the people moving through it. Hence, Güler's photographs capture not only the monuments or natural beauties of the city, but most particularly, the people who work with or against it. The photographer comments: "When I photograph Saint Sophia, what matters is the passerby; in other words, life" (Güler 2014, 2006). As Güler points out, a photograph is about life, about what lies beyond the object of the photograph, what invokes narratives feeding possible storylines:

Fotoğraf, herşeyden önce, mutlaka bir şey anlatmalıdır. Etrafında dönen bir dünya vardır, bu dünyanın içinde bana en duygu verecek, beni en zevklendirecek şey olunca deklanşöre basıyorum. Benim açımdan olay, 'an' çok önemlidir. Olay kaçmamalıdır. İnsanların fotoğrafçısı olarak insanların sevinçlerini dramlarını yaşama tarzlarını korkularını insana ait herşeyi kaydetmek istiyorum. Yani benim için daha önemli olan insanların dramlarının gelecek asırlara kalmasıdır. Çünkü fotoğraf bir kayıt aracıdır ve bir dram, bir şey anlatmalıdır ki, bir netice çıkabilsin, işte o zaman fotoğraf çekici olur (Güler 2014, 2006).

More than anything else, photographs must absolutely have something to say. There is a world that turns around me. And when something happens within this world that utterly moves or uplifts me, I press my shutter release. As I see it, the "event," the "moment" is all-important. The "event" should not be missed. As a photographer of people, I want to record people's joy, dramas, their attitudes toward life, their fears. Anything and everything that is human. In other

words, what matters to me more is that people's dramas live on in the centuries to come. After all, a photograph is a recording medium, and it should recount something, a drama, if it is to be of consequence. Only then will a photograph have appeal.

Similarly, the monumental structures of the city are brought to life by the everyday lives of the inhabitants who struggle to make ends meet. In this teeming—if decrepit—metropolis, the remnants of an imperial past acquire a looming presence, towering over the figures in the photographs, adding an air of Oriental allure as well as decay.



Fig. 1. Güler photograph (Pamuk 2015, 86).

In this black-and-white photograph of a nocturnal thoroughfare in the city center, the past and the present of the city coexist. It is probably the evening rush hour, with cars and trams cutting across the silhouette of the city: the signature minarets of the Blue Mosque, seen from a distance. The lights of the minarets blend in with the car lights—the old and the new, the monumental and everyday coexist in this shadowy metropolis.

Istanbul's old city remained mostly unchanged until the 1980s, and the historical peninsula kept its charms despite partial modernization. While the old communities were deterritorialized in line with political conflicts and urban policies, the city's population tripled due to the acceleration of immigration, after the 1980s in particular, leading to sudden expansion accompanied by new financial centers, gated communities and shanty towns. The physical spaces had to

transform rapidly, generating loss of memory both in regard to the physical environment and the stories of everyday life in the city. The retrospective imagery of the city has become part of the everyday since the ongoing large-scale construction projects in the city center are screened by these black-and-white photographic images of the area dating from a century ago. They confirm Svetlana Boym's contention that "the urban renewal taking place in the present is no longer futuristic but nostalgic; the city imagines its future by improvising on its past" (2011, 75). Since the rapid urban transformations cannot fulfill the promises for a better life (Huysen 1995), people look back at the past fondly. In regard to the rapid change in the city, Pamuk says in an interview that his objective in *Istanbul* is not to mourn the loss of empire and Ottoman Istanbul, but instead to critique the top-down nature of the republican project of modernization. In Pamuk's work, Istanbul is in flux, combining past glory and present decrepitude, extending over the many stories, lives, pasts and presents of its inhabitants and visitors. "Yet, Pamuk's critique, if and when situated within contemporary local debates, can also be interpreted as participating in a displaced critique of the state of urbanism in contemporary Istanbul that manifests itself as nostalgia" (Türeli 2010, 303).

The layers of the image are the clue to Pamuk's text. While the immediate feeling when reading the text is a nostalgia for the past, the book reveals much more. The character's walking throughout the memoir is a creative act inherent in exploring and formulating the urban. Despite the visual dominance of monumental history, Güler's photos embrace life in the city. The distant past of old Istanbul is materialized in the sublime Nuruosmaniye Mosque, showcasing Ottoman architecture in the nineteenth century. Nevertheless, in the foreground the constant movement of cars, pedestrians and their ephemeral practices, ruled by the demands of the everyday, stand in sharp contrast.

Conclusion

The Istanbul of today no longer peeks through Güler's black-and-white photographs. Yet many of the themes conveyed in the accompanying photographs of Ara Güler still mark the city. If not black-and-white, it is, nevertheless, a city of contrasts and change with a resulting indistinctness of cultural space. Black-and-white photographs convey a contemporary preoccupation with the lost Istanbul(s); nonetheless, they are instrumental for narrating the dynamism in the everyday life of the city. Through the words and the images in *Istanbul*, the conflicting, dislocated, and fragmentary stories of the urbanscape are both inscribed in the city's collective memory and transformed into an aesthetic whole.

Pamuk's memoir does not attempt to demonstrate the inaccessibility of the truth; instead, the memoir focuses on the aesthetics of the gap, materialized through the combination of word and image, black and white, promising pleasure to the eye and the I, all of which emerge in the text. The city is imagined as static

yet moving, monumental yet ephemeral, where the personalized visions intermingle with the pasts and the presents of the city. The tension between photographs and memories, movements and monuments, refers to the quintessential metropolitan dynamic of constant vacillation between past and present.

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