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VISA 3B35: The Writing on the Wall: Radical Graphics and the Culture of Protest

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Erasing the Typo- in the Typographic:

The Post-Ottoman Graphic Nationalism of Turkey

“If you take the sign away, there is no place.” —Robert Venturi, Steven Izenour and Denise Scott Brown, Learning from Las Vegas (1972)

In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries after the fall of the Ottoman Empire, cultures that were once under Ottoman rule encountered dramatic existential changes upon their contact with European modernity. The contact — whether externally imposed in a colonial context or self-determined in a conscious engagement¹ — became a vehicle through which cultures explored and critiqued themselves. The Republic of Turkey, established in the early 1920s, stands out as one of the most complex cases because of its radical self-imposed reformations; the Turkish National Movement, led by the army officer Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, called for a ‘reformation’ of Turkish society. With the help of all state apparatuses², Atatürk was able to promote a nationalist ideology by illustrating a literal departure from (and destruction of) the traditional Ottoman ‘backwards’ past to become a modern, ‘secular,’ and Western nation. The reformation was not merely ideological; its radicalism was intensified by its graphic nature (pun intended

¹ Jocelyn Hackforth-Jones and Mary Roberts, *Edges of Empire: Orientalism and Visual Culture* (Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), 3.

² The term ‘state apparatuses’ is used here in reference to French Marxist philosopher Louis Althusser’s best-known essay “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses” (1970).

— graphic in its visuality *and* explicit detail). Indeed, it is closer to being a revolution that overthrows its past than a reformation that modifies and builds on its past. As one of the most ubiquitous and disseminatory state apparatuses, graphic prints (as manifest in posters, newspapers, magazines, etc.) created a fundamental nationalist visual language that could be understood by all citizens. The efficacy of graphic prints is particularly heightened in Turkey’s case in the context of the language reforms that required all citizens to stop using Arabic letters and instead adopt “Turkish letters” — Atatürk never refers to the new alphabet as “Latin” nor invokes the concept of translation in his speeches.³ Graphic language does not require linguistic literacy to be understood and instead relies on a more fundamental visual literacy that remained unaffected with the language reforms. Given this orthographic iconoclasm of Arabic script as a visual form, different cartoons published in popular magazines and newspapers such as *Cumhuriyet* (The Republic) and the satirical *Akbaba* (Vulture) reveal the power of graphic language in establishing explicit binary hierarchies and self-orientalist attitudes of backwards/progressive, irrational/rational, and us/them, all without the need for words. By stripping away the typographic form of its linguistic code, we are left with the graphic.

First and foremost, it should be noted that the Ottoman Empire was a centre for calligraphic excellence⁴ and when taking into consideration the high status and logocentrism of Arabic calligraphy in Ottoman culture, the significance of Turkey’s abandonment of Arabic script is amplified. Within the iconoclastic position of Islamic art

³ Nergis Ertürk, *Grammatology and Literary Modernity in Turkey* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 92.

⁴ Gábor Ágoston and Bruce Masters, *Encyclopedia of the Ottoman Empire*, s.v. “calligraphy”, (New York, NY: Infobase Publishing, 2009), 115.

in Ottoman culture (Islamic art is less iconoclastic elsewhere), Arabic calligraphy comes to take on a leading aesthetic role whereby it is the primary form of ornamentation in Ottoman architecture, books, and scrolls. As well, there was and still is a widespread practice (especially among Sufis and Shi'ites) to shape Arabic calligraphy into figurative images ranging from animals to everyday objects like oil lamps, lions, camels, birds, etc.⁵ Shaping the calligraphy itself into a figurative form adds a new meaning to the message; it marries the message to its form and dilutes the difference between the linguistic and the visual.⁶ Likewise, in the context of the nineteenth-century cartoons in question, it is the calligraphy that adds meaning and cultural character to the form. However, in a typical modernist fashion, the letters are treated as mere abstract forms: meaning is reduced to and blocked by the surface.

A cartoon [fig. 1] published in the daily newspaper *Cumhuriyet* in 1928 appears atop the following text, which bears great resemblance to Filippo Marinetti's Futurist rhetoric of early twentieth-century Europe:

The difference between Arabic letters, which we are burying today, and the Turkish letters that we shall start using tomorrow, is as big as that between a camel and a car. Just as the camel, which comes from the deserts of Arabia, is the symbol of primitivity, backwardness, and sluggishness, so is the car, which we have taken from the West, the emblem of progress, civilization, and speed... The camel

⁵ Irvin Cemil Schick, "The Iconicity of Islamic Calligraphy in Turkey", *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics* no. 53/54 (2008): 211.

⁶ This idea challenges what Roland Barthes establishes in his *Image, Music, Text* as the three levels of signified messages in the rhetoric of an image: a linguistic message, a coded iconic message, and a non-coded iconic message.

brought pilgrims to the Kaba in order for them to fulfil their obligation to perform the hajj. The car will bring our nation, which is thirsting for progress and advancement, to the Kaba of civilization.⁷

This cartoon appeared the day before the obligation to use Latin script went into effect. The Law Concerning the Adoption and the Application of Turkish Letters (*Türk Harflerinin Kabul ve Tatbiki Hakkındaki Kanun*), which was passed on November 1st 1928, declared that as of December 1st 1928, all public signs, newspapers, and magazines were required to be printed using the new Turkish alphabet, and

beginning January 1st 1929, all state institutions, banks, societies and corporations had to conduct their administrative business using it, as well. Ordinary citizens could submit documents to the government using the old script up until 1 June 1929, but by 1 June 1930, all public and private correspondence was to be conducted in the new alphabet, without exception.⁸

A photograph [fig. 2] taken in the transitional year of 1928 depicts a period of bilingual public signs before the complete abolishment of Arabic script. Likewise, the *Cumhuriyet* cartoon sets side by side both scripts, but instead of using words, it depends on the iconicity of the letters to symbolize the Other (Ottoman Empire) and the Self (Turkish Republic), proclaiming Turkey as Occident rather than Orient. The cartoon depicts a geometric angular automobile — which is arguably constructed of sans serif Latin letters and which is sporting a tiny Turkish flag on its hood — rushing westwards past a camel

⁷ Schick, “The Iconicity of Islamic Calligraphy in Turkey,” 218-219.

⁸ Ertürk, *Grammatology and Literary Modernity in Turkey*, 94.

constructed of calligraphic (hand-written) Arabic letters. Unlike the figurative tradition of Ottoman calligraphy, the anthropomorphic treatment of the camel is more self-reflexive; it is conscious of its lettered construction and mockingly references the tradition of tangled illegible Ottoman calligraphy. The automobile, which is less tangled, more legible, bolder, and faster, literally reaches Enlightenment (as symbolized by the sun rays) before the ‘sluggishness’ of the camel.⁹ Part of the Kemalist reformation was to make citizens aware of the illegibility of Arabic script and how it is hindering the nation’s race towards progress; in a speech Atatürk says, “You must understand the necessity of saving ourselves from the incomprehensible [*anlasılmayan*] signs we cannot understand, and which have imprisoned our minds in iron for centuries.”¹⁰ Arabic script is thus not only backwards and Other, it is also an obstacle to be overcome. The next cartoon illustrates not only the Republic advancing more quickly than the Ottoman, but the violent and complete annihilation of the Ottoman necessary for such advancement.

As the debates continued regarding the controversy of abolishing the Arabic script, another similar cartoon [fig. 3] was published in 1926 in the popular *Akbaba*, the longest running Turkish satirical journal which was published nearly continuously from 1922 to 1977 and was government-supported. The cartoon is captioned “Off with you! Go join the ruins of the Monarchy!”¹¹ The captioned language is more aggressive than the one used with the *Cumhuriyet* cartoon, and the *Akbaba* cartoon itself is more violent,

⁹ Yasemin Gencer, “Pushing Out Islam: Cartoons of the Reform Period in Turkey (1923-1928),” in *Visual Culture in the Modern Middle East: Rhetoric of the Image*, ed. Christine Gruber and Sune Haugbolle (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2013), 202.

¹⁰ Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, “Türk Yazı İnkılabı Hakkında Konuşma” in *Atatürk’ün Söylev ve Demeçleri I-III. Rpt. by Atatürk Araştırma Merkezi*. Vol. 2 (Ankara: Türk Tarih Kurumu Basımevi, 1997), 272.

¹¹ Schick, “The Iconicity of Islamic Calligraphy in Turkey,” 218.

alluding to images of police brutality so characteristic of fascist, nationalist regimes. Like the *Cumhuriyet* cartoon, the figure representing the modern Turkish Republic in the *Akbaba* cartoon is hierarchically placed above the backwards Ottoman-Arabic figure. The anthropomorphic treatment in this image dangerously equates man's culture with man's nature; it uses man's culture as the justification for their mistreatment. The abolishment of the Arabic script therefore also means the abolishment of the human who still uses Arabic script. The grayscale tone of the original cartoon makes it "impossible to determine whether the shading on the face of the man on the right was meant to indicate that he is blushing, or—more likely— if this was a racist reference to the Arab ("darkie" in colloquial Turkish) origins of Arabic script. Certainly his handlebar mustache was meant to connote unfashionable, 'oriental' grooming, as opposed to the new clean-shaven, Western look of the time."¹² This cartoon was published about two years before the official obligation to use the new Turkish script and illustrates the beginnings of a less-rationalized and more hot-blooded attitude towards Arabic script and 'Arab culture'.

No discussion of Arabic script is complete without addressing its relationship to Islam, especially in the context of the Ottoman Empire. Despite the fact that Arabic script since the first centuries of Islam enjoyed the exalted status as the script transmitting the "word of God,"¹³ opinions emerged after the fall of the Ottoman Empire which aimed to challenge the relationship between Islam and Arabic.¹⁴ In the same year the

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Gencer, "Pushing Out Islam," 203.

¹⁴ This is not surprising since the link between opinions and perceptions of a given religion or ideology to the empires which claim to represent those religions or ideologies is a history-old phenomenon.

Akbaba cartoon was published (1926), the Turkish essayist Kılıçzade Hakki published an article entitled “Gabriel didn’t bring the Arabic letters too, you know,” in which he argued that the sacred nature of the Qur’an did not extend to the alphabet in which it was written.¹⁵ The new secularism adopted by Turkey meant adhering to a different reference point, a different *qibla*.¹⁶ The new *qibla* is Europe, not the Arab world, as personified by the automobile and the camel in the *Cumhuriyet* cartoon, respectively: whereas the camel could only bring pilgrims to the Kaba, “the car will bring our nation, which is thirsting for progress and advancement, to the Kaba of civilization.”¹⁷

Instead of reforming the semi-existing Arabic literacy, the Kemalist government opted out and instead chose to create its own typographic system. The reason for this decision is not only based on the desire to politically and socially identify as Occident rather than Orient, but also to spread literacy by overcoming the difficulty in learning the Arabic script compared to other scripts. In Istanbul on August 1928, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, who later became the first president of the Republic of Turkey, stood before a large crowd to officially introduce the new alphabet to the public. Indulging in the significance of the historical moment, Kemal requested that a volunteer citizen [*vantandaş*] read aloud Kemal’s own notes for the speech.¹⁸ After proving unable to,

¹⁵ Geoffrey L. Lewis, *The Turkish Language Reform: A Catastrophic Success* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1999), 32, quoted in J. R. (Wayne) Osborn, “The Type of Calligraphy: Writing, Print, and Technologies of the Arabic Alphabet” (Ph.D. diss. University of California San Diego, 2008).

¹⁶ *Qibla* is an Arabic word that refers to the direction Muslims face when performing their prayers; this direction is fixed towards the Cube (Kaba) in *The Sacred Mosque* (Al-Masjid Al-Haram) of Mecca.

¹⁷ Schick, “The Iconicity of Islamic Calligraphy in Turkey,” 218-219.

¹⁸ Ertürk, *Grammatology and Literary Modernity in Turkey*, 91.

Kemal continued, “Citizens, my notes are written in true [*asıl*], real [*bakiki*] Turkish words and Turkish letters. Your brother attempted to read them, but was unable to. Undoubtedly, however, he might be able to. I’d like that you all learn to do so in five to ten days”¹⁹. To address the widespread illiteracy of the Turkish population, the Kemalist government launched a massive literacy campaign requiring all male and female citizens between the ages of 16 and 40 to take a literacy course at the national public schools.²⁰ A 1930 literacy poster [fig. 4] by the People’s Republic Party (CHP) shows the transformation of Arabic letters into “Turkish” ones, with a focus on how the new letters are much simpler and have resulted in widespread literacy. The letter z, for instance, would replace four different Arabic letters. As well, the poster clearly demonstrates how, unlike the different shapes that Arabic letters take depending on their position within a word, the “Turkish” letter remains constant, devoid of complexity and irrationality. Two illustrations in the poster show citizens, young and old, lined up to enter literacy schools, and it is curious to note how the citizens are lined up in an assembly-line manner that alludes to images of industrialization and homogenization.²¹ The new literacy schools become factories that aim to shape people’s minds in the same way, a propaganda machine.

¹⁹ Atatürk, “Türk Yazı İnkılabı Hakkında Konuşma,” 272.

²⁰ Ertürk, *Grammatology and Literary Modernity in Turkey*, 15.

²¹ In his *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (1964), Marshall McLuhan, referring back to the Greek myth of Cadmus, claims that phonetic alphabetization is “the greatest predecessor of men for homogenized military life” (72). This powerful conclusion, which McLuhan makes at a time of intensified industrialization, implies that in opposition to oral culture, the uniformity of written language – especially when it comes with the added bonus of making people’s history inaccessible – serves a greater nationalist-military agenda.

For Turkey, the writing of a new history imposed cutting all relations with its Ottoman past. It was a divorce not only from its literary history, but a departure from the characteristic Ottoman aesthetic (the calligraphic as well as the architectural, and as a result, the overall ethos). That is not to say that Ottoman manuscripts and monuments were demolished, but that the people's perceptions were disoriented — *de-orientalized* — and distanced. What was typographic became only graphic. Philologically, Turkey has been able to “historically set [it]self off, as great artists do, from [its] time and an immediate past even as, paradoxically and antinomically, one characterizes one's modernity by doing so.”²² One could also say that the way Turkish script looks today is not only a result of its ‘modernization,’ which connotes the characteristic rupture from history, but that it is also a result of a certain post-modernization, a pastiche or blend of several cultures into one. The Turkish language reform is not only an annihilation of the old Arabic orthography, but a remix whose origins are difficult to classify; “[Atatürk] directly borrows a foreign element with mixed origins (incorporating diacritical marks used in German, Romanian, French, and Hungarian) — and in such a way that obscures doubly its inherent mediacy.”²³ The contemporary nation-state as an example of postmodernity is an interesting topic worthy of investigation, but it might stand as an unresolvable paradox, since the nation-state is still by definition characterized by clear borders between domestic and foreign (us/them), military and police violence, and the secrecy of security intelligence.

²² Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York, NY: Vintage Books, 1979), 132.

²³ Nergis Ertürk, *Grammatology and Literary Modernity in Turkey*, 92.

FIGURES



Figure 1. Ramiz Gökçe (1900-1953), The Turkish Alphabet Leaves the Arabic Alphabet in the Dust, *Cumhuriyet*, November 30, 1928, Atatürk Kitaplığı, Istanbul. Reproduced in Cüneyd Emiroğlu [pseud. of Kadir Misiroğlu], *Islam Yazısına Dair* (Istanbul: Sebil Yayınevi, 1977), p. 46



Figure 2. Arabic script vs. Latin “Turkish” script, 1928.
Source: <http://www.bougainville-turkey.com/turkish-phrases/>



Figure 3. Cartoon published in humor magazine *Akbaba*, 1926. Reproduced from Cüneyd Emiroğlu [pseud. of Kadir Mısıroğlu, *İslâm Yazısına Dâir*. Istanbul: Sebil Yayınevi], 1977, p. 21.

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YENİ YAZI
Okuma ve Yazmayı
Kolaylaştırdı



İNKILAPTAN SONRA MEKTEPLER ÇOĞALDI




Millet Mektepleri açıldı:
İHTİYAR, GENÇ Herkes okuma öğreniyor.

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Figure 4. Poster by the People's Republic Party (CHP), 1930. "The old alphabet was very difficult. The new alphabet has made reading and writing easier. Following the reform, schools have multiplied. The Schools of the Nation are open: Young and old, everyone is learning to read."
Source: <http://mashallahnews.com/?p=3572>

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