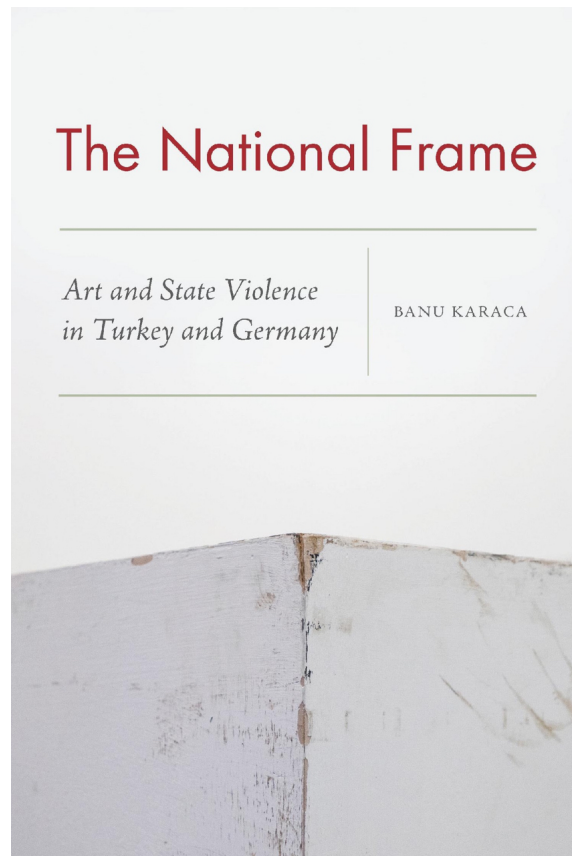


BOOK REVIEW: Banu Karaca,  
*The National Frame: Art and  
State Violence in Turkey and  
Germany*

Verena Niepel



Isolated views in discourse on arts and politics are widespread in research that holds on to the nation as a subject for analysis.

Contemporary perspectives in the Humanities may be interdisciplinary, but they still tend to emphasise country-specific particularities rather than an investigation into any broader significance of the parallels between countries. In *The National Frame: Art and State Violence in Turkey and Germany*, Banu Karaca suggests a comparison of Turkey and Germany to rethink the nation as a concept by investigating the formative and equally destructive relationship between political and cultural actors. She demonstrates how politicians, city officials, scholars and exhibition-makers construct a national narrative through actively dispossessing minorities of their cultural expressions, and how artworks are not only part of these ‘decivilizing moments’<sup>1</sup> but can, at the same time, resist and challenge censoring operations. Her broad focus also includes a sharp analysis of key historical and political moments in Germany and Turkey.

Most significant is Karaca’s method: she uses a comparative approach and consistently applies this throughout the book. This differentiates her study from anthropological research which often focuses on differences and oppositions. In contrast, Karaca looks for parallels by asking the same questions regarding the ‘civilizing function accorded to art’ (p 22) with regard to both national frames, which, she argues, is how art is seen from the perspective of national cultural politics. Looking back into history, she finds remarkable similarities in how Turkey and Germany use art for forming a national frame. Arguably, it is ‘violent’ acts that mark this process. As Karaca unfolds her argument, she specifies violence as different practices of

<sup>1</sup> Banu Karaca, *The National Frame. Art and State Violence in Turkey and Germany*, Fordham University Press, New York, 2021, p 5

appropriating, silencing and censoring cultural expressions for the purpose of modernisation. Her unusual method illuminates problematic continuities instead of historical breaking points, and stresses silences or gaps in academic and public discourse based on different perceptions or conceptualisations of what is modern and civilised.

Meaning-making for constructing a national frame is at the core of her critique. Sometimes even contradictory explanations would be adopted by governments for the purpose of serving a civilising agenda. By comparing particular moments in the nation-making of both countries, Karaca illustrates how art was, and is, mobilised for this. While an operational use of art is at the heart of her criticism, she contends that art can be a site of resistance against ‘systematic forgetting’ (p 140). Examples of artworks by artists such as Halil Altındere or the duo Renata Stih and Frieder Schnock are mentioned as works that break a continuity of dispossession. The author’s findings demonstrate that forgetting can, indeed, be a strategic political move on a transnational level.

With examples from the artworlds of Germany and Turkey and by conceptualising violent acts more broadly as ‘decivilizing moments’ (p 5), Karaca gives visibility to the various forms of state violence. She refers to a notion found in a major work by Norbert Elias on the ‘civilizing process’,<sup>2</sup> and follows him by looking at particular moments in history that allow – in her interpretation of Elias – to question the ‘seeming linearity of the civilizing process’.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, this idea helps Karaca to convincingly challenge the belief in the ‘emancipatory potential’ (p 3) of art, which she argues is often implicit in formulations used by nation-state actors. She makes the point that decision-makers of national governments – and equally of supranational formations such as UNESCO – refer to art as a form of ‘civic cultivation’.

Karaca’s main critique is aimed at national cultural policies for assigning cultural expressions the function to promote humanistic values or a more ‘civilized past’, which divests artworks of their potential to account for ‘the many contradictions and tensions in the daily workings of the art world’ (p 214). Karaca introduces the term ‘decivilizing art’ (p 6) to aptly describe this crux of how, on the one hand, artworks are instrumentalised and, on the other, denied the ability to draw attention to injustices. For the author, the concept of ‘decivilizing art’ is therefore a strong ‘vehicle for critique’ but one which takes into account that mechanisms of censoring differ in Germany and Turkey, due, for example, to different funding structures in the cultural domain.

According to Karaca, such asymmetries call for a more comprehensive analysis of the daily workings in the ‘art world’. In the main chapters of the book, she critically analyses how, since the beginning of the nations of Turkey and Germany, artists have prepared, produced and acted within a national narrative. The author’s taking of different aspects of art-making into account demonstrates her holistic perspective. Besides this, she uses a definition of visual art in its broadest sense, which allows her to address state violence in the context of producing,

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<sup>2</sup> See Norbert Elias, *The Civilizing Process: The History of Manners*, Urizen, New York, 1969

<sup>3</sup> Karaca refers to and quotes from Elias’s *The Civilizing Process* on p 5 of *The National Frame*

for example, paintings, video works and installations. Furthermore, she includes the issue of self-censorship, in the sense that artists adapt their work and shield themselves from censoring mechanisms. However, she admits that this form of state violence is ‘notoriously hard to research’ (p 166).

This sociological and holistic approach to art corresponds with current trends in research for investigating the production process of an artwork. Leading scholars in this field such as Howard Becker, Robert Faulkner and Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett address variables that play into the creative process and suggest that an analysis of contemporary art should not ‘simply invokes class, race, organisation, or any other of the commonly summoned “social variables”’ but should pay attention to ‘recalcitrant physical, social, and economic realities’ and ‘to organizational constraints, collegial pressures, and career interests’.<sup>4</sup> Karaca agrees with this scholarly position in terms of critically investigating how actors ‘mediate their varying intentions and interests’ (p 8), but she expands those considerations by taking the historic context in relation to decisions in the cultural field into account. From this perspective she analyses how artists maintain and continue to produce critical works despite dominant national frames that are based on knowledge gaps created by different interest groups. Those gaps come in various forms: for example, as missing provenance research, in the case of Turkey (p 143), or the disappearance of censorship from public discourse in the German case (p 181) – both of which are evidence for Karaca’s critical investigation. Her straightforward focus on ‘systematic forgetting’ in the German and Turkish context cannot, for example, avoid such topics as the Armenian genocide or the mass killings under the National Socialist regime. Considering that she finds so many examples of artists, including writers, who have had to deal with the consequences of criticising historical atrocities, it is remarkable that the author also puts herself into that position.

The scope of Karaca’s study goes far beyond the present state of national frames by beginning the discussion with the unification of Germany in 1871 and the foundation of the Turkish Republic in 1923. She reframes the historiographical theory of Germany’s *Sonderweg* and Turkey’s Westernisation by arguing that the particularities of both nations led to common ways of understanding culture. This change in perspective enables her to criticise how decision-makers in the cultural domain use historical exceptionalism as a justification for creating and maintaining an idealistic version of a nation. Language plays an important role in this context, as Karaca demonstrates with many examples. In Germany, for instance, there has been a ‘conceptual shift’ from *Kulturation* (Nation of Culture) to *Kulturstaat* (State of Culture) in cultural policies, diverting from an ‘organistic understanding of German citizenship’, which, according to the author, was conveyed in particular by policies at the end

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<sup>4</sup> ‘Editor’s Introduction’, in Howard S Becker, Robert Faulkner and Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, eds, *Art From Start to Finish: Jazz, Painting, Writing, and Other Improvisations*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 2006, p 3

of the twentieth century.<sup>5</sup> She compares this with the objective of Turkey's government from the 1930s onwards to form an ethnically homogenous nation, corresponding with the aim to 'align itself with Western modernity' (p 47). Even in the 2000s, the avoidance of the word 'Kurd' in everyday cultural work would signify a continuation of this nation framing (p 130).

Karaca's sensitivity for writing about state violence in its literal sense and about violence as an equivalent of dispossession, silence and invisibility is outstanding. Her abilities to do research in Turkish, German and English certainly contribute to this sensitivity and underline the strength of her position. At the same time, she writes that she felt 'frustrated' because her positionality as 'an immigrant kid' speaking 'accent-free German' who 'appeared in the shape of a researcher from the United States' seemed to be 'somewhat of a conceptual impossibility' for interview partners (p 16). While she emphasises her own voice, Karaca pays equal attention to keeping a distance and to situating her research in a wider geographical context. She shows, for example, that her cultural reading of the national frame can also be applied to other countries, such as the USA or France.

The book is divided into six chapters: 'Modernity, Nationalism, and Civilizing Arts', 'Art Worlds: of Friends, Foes, and Working for the Greater Good', 'Governing Culture, Producing Modern Citizens', 'The Art of Forgetting', 'The Politics of Art and Censorship' and 'Enterprising Art, Aestheticizing Business'. Each chapter is divided into sub-sections that deal alternately with the German and the Turkish context. Her comparative approach is thereby mirrored in the book's structure. The book also follows a chronological order that fits with the historical orientation of her study and its encompassing of the situation of the artworlds in Germany and Turkey of the past and of the present day. Arguably, 'global economic restructuring' has led to an incorporation of contemporary art that criticises governance structures into a national narration from the 2000s onwards (p 200). In this timely context, Karaca sees the global 'mirrored' in the local and she investigates notions such as the service economy and gentrification and how these aspects impact urban artistic practices and feed into 'repertoires of self-representation' (p 203). She argues that 'enterprising and the spectacularization of art are portrayed as both economically desirable and artistically viable' (p 206). By leaving this innovative turn to the final chapters, her elaboration on the possibilities of artistic critique in the present day is somewhat curtailed. Compared to the previous century, has art now become fully absorbed by the ever more globalised national frame? A lengthier discussion of issues related to this question would have been desirable, particularly because Karaca correctly assigns such urgency to changing (art)market dynamics and rising nationalism. Then again, this turn in her book awakens the reader's curiosity to read more and demonstrates Karaca's success in unfolding her argument through the lens of 'decivilizing art' throughout the book. It is impressive how she creates theoretical and

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<sup>5</sup> Karaca argues that *Kulturnation* ('nation of culture') was used pre-1945 and had a 'Prussian, Wilhelmine and National Socialist Connotation', whilst *Kulturstaat* ('state of culture'), which was used after 1945, deproblematized culture as the basis of a nation state (*The National Frame*, p 43)

thematic linkages between disciplines and timeframes, particularly from chapter three until the end.

The first chapter introduces the reader to her conceptual framing by explaining how terms such as ‘modernity’, ‘nation’ and ‘civilizing’ are used in her analysis. Such clear definitions mark her writing from the beginning. The geographical framework is the subject of the second chapter, in which Karaca outlines the artworlds in Germany and Turkey by focusing on Berlin and Istanbul. She does not claim that these two cities comply fully with the ‘general constitution’ of ‘national cultural policies’, and yet her long-term fieldwork provides evidence for parallels between the connection of these art centres in relation to the dynamics of the national frame (p 14). Karaca identifies various relevant actors and looks at a broad set of practices in the cultural domains of both cities, such as sponsoring, collecting and curating art, which she juxtaposes to question the making of the national frame. In doing this, these chapters provide new insights into the contemporary artworlds of both countries, which she brings to life within the text through detailed descriptions of events and by using excerpts from interviews with German and Turkish representatives – such as the head of the Istanbul municipality’s Department for Culture, or officials from the Berlin Senate’s cultural administration. Putting this interview data side by side in new and interesting ways is one aspect that makes Karaca’s analysis of the art world in Germany and Turkey differ significantly from other research that focuses on only one of these national contexts.

In chapter three and four, she carefully situates these snapshots in a wider context to explain operations, mechanisms and discourse that have informed the making of both the German and Turkish nations. This includes reactions from the public sphere towards ‘decivilizing moments’, and artworks that, again, shows her consistency in terms of applying a holistic view to art practice.

It should be noted that in general her emphasis on discursivity and social relationships, particularly in these chapters, corresponds well with scholarly work of the last decades on art in public space, highlighting that discourse analysis remains an important methodology to find out about power inequalities and interests in the art world. Globalisation and increased commercialisation in the field of art obscure categorical divisions between different actors. Yet, Anne Ring Petersen and Sabine Dahl Nielsen, amongst others, have argued that research corresponding with this ‘discursive trend’ can unravel entanglements.<sup>6</sup>

In times of war and crisis that put geographical borders in the focus, it becomes ever more important to understand how national frames are formed through the silencing of cultural expressions and discursive violence. In *The National Frame: Art and State Violence in Turkey and Germany*, Karaca raises awareness and critically analyses how these frames are imposed on societies in these two nations under the auspices of modernisation. Based on notions of dispossession and ‘decivilizing moments’, she argues that Germany and Turkey share a

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<sup>6</sup> See Anne Ring Petersen and Sabine Dahl Nielsen, ‘The Reconfiguration of Public Spaces Through Art: Strategies of Agitation and Amelioration’, *Journal of Aesthetics & Culture*, vol 13, no 1, 2021, p 5

common 'language' when it comes to perpetuating an exclusionary national narrative. This narrative is maintained through instrumentalising art practices for a civilising agenda in both nations. Karaca shifts occidental historiographical perspectives and gives visibility to art and cultural policy practices that do not yet hold a prominent position in existing research. The book is useful for a wide audience since its interdisciplinary approach helps to form an understanding of particularities that connect both countries and puts the complex relationship of art practices and the nation-state into a new light.

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**Verena Niepel** is a doctoral candidate and teacher at the School of Arts and Cultures, Newcastle University in the UK. She presented her most recent paper "'Turkish" Artists feel like (Non)-Belonging to Berlin' at the 'Arts in Movement' conference organised by the European Sociological Association at Lund University, Sweden, September 2022. She has previously published on learning through immersive art experiences, which corresponds with her interest in art mediation, relational aesthetics and the public. Her doctoral work is supported by the Northern Bridge DTP / AHRC.  
**[www.verenaniepel.de](http://www.verenaniepel.de)**