

# KEEP IT SIM- PLE MAKE IT FAST!

AN APPROACH  
TO UNDERGROUND  
MUSIC SCENES (VOL. 4)  
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***Keep it Simple, Make it Fast!***

An approach to underground music scenes (vol. 4)

Paula Guerra and Thiago Pereira Alberto (eds.)

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## 5.2. A humble introduction on music videos of Turkish immigrants: Case study #1: İsmail YK

Görkem Özdemir<sup>119</sup> e Aslı Bâla Aşkan<sup>120</sup>

### A b s t r a c t

The Turkish immigration that started on 30 October 1961 began a hybridity in German culture. Second and third generation Turks grew up in Germany created an underground cultural wave, which combines all the traditional and conservative features of Turkish culture with a postmodernist approach. Although referred as 'confused culture', this movement rapidly spread in musical scene amongst immigrant Turks in Germany, and Turkey. This paper mainly focuses on how German-Turks combined traditional musical elements with extreme postmodernist features in music videos. One of the most popular Germany born Turkish artist & project has been chosen to be the subject of this topic: İsmail YK. Even though the majority of Turkish press and mainstream popular music scene has considered artist's works as kitsch and even absurd, there is a significant amount of audience who admires İsmail YK's style and works. His popularity and stable position on TV is directly related with the audience's expectations. We will reflect our findings within the topics of traditional values, cultural hybridity and gender perspectives from the artist's video clips that involve industrial and near-futuristic elements.

**Keywords:** Popular music, postmodernism, industrial fashion, music videos.

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<sup>119</sup> Independent Research and Artist. Istanbul, Turkey. E-mail: ozd.gorkem@gmail.com.

<sup>120</sup> Independent Research and Artist. Istanbul, Turkey. E-mail: aslibalaaskan@gmail.com.

## 1. Introduction

In this paper, we tend to examine the impression and representation of the 'youth' and cultural hybridity caused by immigration on Ismail YK's music videos. YK's music videos represent us a very complicated relationship between a hybrid aesthetic perception and audience's perception of it. To clarify the difference and distinction between "cultural degeneration" and "cultural hybridity", we choose Ismail YK's music, his interpretation with visual communication through his music videos, his musical background and his audience. We knitted our research around some questions, such as: from which aspects do migration influences popular music? Who is the target audience? What are the elements in music they are responding? While the majority of Turkish music audience considering him as kitsch, how did he achieve his fame? What does he provide to Turkish immigrant audience to satisfy them?

Amongst with the answers to those questions, in this paper, the features in artist's presentation that make him create a strong bond with the audience will be analyzed. Why did we choose him? Even though his music is quite visible and on the surface level, many intellectual and academic circles ignore him. While our interest has been grown amongst YK's music, we also tend to take a brief look at the slum cultures in Turkey. He is substantially different than other immigrant Turkish musicians in Germany (Rafet El Roman, Cartel, Killa Hakan etc.). He directly reflects the hybridization of Turkish and German cultures. His dialect, lyrics and his music videos turn this cultural hybridization into a visual material. His use of visual media is very wise and a lot different than his peers. Even though some social and academic circles have ignored him, the esoteric features of his music are indisputable.

## 2. Brief history of Turkish immigration in Germany

The immigration started with a simple cause: 'labor suppl' after the Second World War. Agreements were signed with Italy, Spain, Greece, Turkey, Morocco, Portugal, Tunisia and Yugoslavia. In November 27, 1961 55 guest workers have been landed in Düsseldorf Airport. They were first ones to come to Germany. These workers were in the position of guest workers ("Gastarbeiter" in German), they need to return their homelands after a certain period. It should have been mentioned that neither German government nor German citizens expected Turkish immigrants to be permanently stay in Germany. In the words of Max Frisch "We wanted a labor force, but human beings came". We can flag this unforeseeable happening as one of the beginning points of cultural conflict. As in the beginning, immigrant workers were meant to be guests, not permanent residents (Kırmızı, 2016). They built an isolated life from the local German citizens, lived in their neighborhoods, with their own markets, social spaces, and continued their habits and lifestyles. It is a common phenomenon for diaspora communities to experience a "homesick" that makes them to load more meaning and values on their homeland. This may result with them carrying their own culture, and live according to it. In this sense Arabesk music has been seen (and maybe accepted) as the most familiar representation of Turkish music culture in Germany. While majority of the young population in Turkey, disapproves this idea.

Sales numbers in Germany shows the opposite (Wurm, 2006). The genre addresses to both old and young population at the same time. This genre of

music represents their social problems. Arabesk music mostly acts as a conveyor of shared emotions among Turkish immigrant communities, and creates a unity between them. Martin Greve (2006) have been briefly summarized the generations of Turkish Immigrants and change of musical styles during the 40 years of immigration.

Immigration Phases		Musical Styles
Until 1961	Pre-Immigration	European Art Music
1961-1973	Immigration	Anatolian Folk Music, immigrant Songs
From 1973	Family Merges	Popular music (especially 'arabesk')
1980s	Political Refugees	Political Songs
	Settlement Process	Turkish Art Music
1990s	Third Generation	Pop music, hiphop

Table 5.2.1 – The generations of Turkish immigrants

Source: Greve, 2006, p.23.

Ismail YK, involves in the third row. Even though hip-hop had a peak at mid-90s, and continue its popularity up to this day, Ismail YK have been producing pop songs with extremely expressive lyrics and a techno influenced arabesk music. In this case, we can define the “ethnic culture” has been used as a shield to prevent cultural degeneration. Over the generations, the sharp edges of the cultural definition have been shaped, merge of cultures have been visible in many artistic expressions. Even in the institutions that focus on artistic education, bi-culturalism and bi-musicality have been important topics to focus on (Kalyoncu, 2004, p.64-75). By the time, Turkish labors will start involving with the German social life and move their social status above the 'guest labors'. In the education phase, the distinction has been blurred out by time. Instead of “foreigners training”, “intercultural education” have been start to used as a term (Kalyoncu, 2004). Music education had an important role in removing the discrimination. Due to the unpredictably big immigration, Germany start involving Turkish cultural features into their media. Being an outsider in a community where one has to spend a part of their lives may lead them to experience their individuality in more expressive ways. In our case, the example will be an individual who moved into Europe from a 3rd world country [or a “developing country” back then] will lead them either to adopt the new music culture easily, or insist on protecting what they brought there from their 'home'. Being away from the culture they truly feel belong to make their home, country, culture and people more valuable for them. (Güney, Pekman & Kabaş, 2013).

### 2.1. A Short Description of Arabesk

Martin Stokes (1992) introduces the genre as follows:

*Arabesk is a music of the city and for the city. It portrays a world of complex and turbulent emotions peopled by lovers doomed to solitude and a violent*

*end. It describes a decaying city in which poverty-stricken migrant workers are exploited and abused, and calls on its listeners to pour another glass of drink, light another cigarette, and curse fate and the world* (Stokes, 1992, p. 7).

Arabesk music mostly features embellished melancholic vocals, domination of bağlama (a local instrument), dense string sections and idiosyncratic percussive elements. Turkish audience who lives in urban areas and mostly involved with popular music identifies arabesk as kitsch. Because of the extreme expression in lyrics and always-sad mood, genre directly appeals to blue collar and worker class in middle Anatolian regions. In Stokes (1992) definition, Turkish musicologists define arabesk as a manifestation of the negative values associated with the Islamic cultural heritage of the Turks. Which is a perspective where majority of the educated population related audience of this genre and their musical preferences with “lack of education”. Malinowski’s discussion on the conflict between *low-culture* and *high-culture* can be observed clearly in the Arabesk genre. However, Arabesk is not only a musical genre. It should be seen as an intricate culture. In Turkish cinema, between the 1970 and 1990, an undeniable section (approximately 30%) of movies identified as Arabesk. Glorifying the notion of *convict of fate* is the most common ornament of Arabesk lifestyle. Topics are mostly focused on the exaggerated pain, a platonic love, or low-quality living conditions directly caused by economic circumstances.

### 3. Ismail YK and his music

#### 3.1 Who is Ismail YK

The “YK” in his name references to his surname, and his previous band he performed with his siblings, “Yurtseven kardeşler” (Patriot Siblings). His family is originally from Sivas. YK was born in Germany, 1978. He is the youngest one of 5 siblings. He states that he never felt distant to Turkish culture, music and literature while growing up in Germany. His relationship with music started at a very young age, and he states that his father’s interest in music influenced him. He also indicated that Barış Manço, Orhan Gencebay, Ibrahim Tatlıses, Freddie Mercury, Santana, and Michael Jackson have been an influence for his music. His first job in the music industry was an internship as a sound technician, when he was at 10th grade. He learned the discipline from the jobs he worked at. His music career is based on Turkey’s music industry, and in his interviews he says that he chooses to invest all his money on his music, in a country where he believes he can be rewarded. In his opinion, songs he wrote are expressing people’s feelings through his personal experiences. His popularity had been increased at early 2000’s, right after he started his solo works apart from his previous band (Yurtseven Kardeşler).

#### 3.2 YK on mainstream media

Ismail YK took the biggest attention from his potential audience, with the help of his music videos. His emergence on Turkish mainstream media was ground breaking. He blended many musical genres into each other such as

pop, rock, r & b, reggae, techno, etc. with a sauce of arabesk. He revives the reproductions of certain characters in his music videos, and especially states those characters are not him, but someone else. In this sense, we can say that he also expresses his artistic outcome with acting in his videos. He also believes that he expresses not only his feelings, but also his audience's. The outfits, dances and additional visuals (lights, colour palettes, special effects etc.) were quite unusual for 2000's Turkey.

### 3.2.1 Early works of YK

As a musical project, his first debut in 2002 was unsuccessful. From album cover to music videos, it can be observed that a low budget musical production and a poor visual communication exist in this album. Instead of a mere solo debut, he preferred to stay in the music collective that he previously worked with his siblings, but took the lead role in "ISMAIL ve Yurtseven Kardeşler" solo album. Neither the melodies nor the lyrics along the album were catchy enough to be a hit on the charts. The instrumentation is mechanized and inanimate due to heavy use of MIDI. Ismail YK's music videos were not visually interesting enough to compete with local artists. He represented a rural image, rather than a modern urban figure at that time. In here, we would like to take a pause to note that many catastrophic political, social and economic crises happened in the first half of the 2000's Turkey. The effects of this period of economic imbalance were visible in the whole music industry. After a couple years, YK boomed with a second debut from another production company. Comparing to previous one, higher budgeted styling on his physical appearance and a more polished music were preeminent in his later albums. YK dominated the national music awards consecutively for three years, broadcasted several TV shows, and his music was playing across the country. His conflicting lyrics distinguished him from the mainstream musical scene.

### 3.3 Music videos of YK

He uses commonly referred fetishized elements as a sign for marginalization in his early music videos. Some of his music clips directly refer to the regular problems of daily life. He uses a wide variety of concepts in his audio/visual communication. YK uses notable sections in his videos for dance and special choreography with others in his early appearance on TV. Dances and themes existing in YK's videos have noticeable influences from well-known pop stars, such as Michael Jackson and Britney Spears. YK's music videos have female images in the 'attractive trap' role in his videos. But in his interviews and his song 'Radikal Feminist' (Radical Feminist), he expresses and states his approach to feminism. He uses the terms that haven't been used in Turkish pop music scene before.

Ismail YK inserted 'gynecocracy' and 'matriarchy' in a mainstream song, and involved these terms into Turkish pop music literacy. Although YK's lyrics involve terms that references to feminism, his music videos involve highly heteronormative roles. One of his first music videos 'bombabomba.com' has an undeniable Sean Paul influence. Beside the harmony, lyrics also references to Sean Paul, and even Shaggy. The use of Foley techniques in his music videos enriches the environment. With the help of sterile environments, references to Internet use, sharp and retro science-fiction clothing designs, and possible future scenarios about technology, he also draws a futuristic portrait in his music videos.

The dances and themes existing in YK's videos can be seen as either liberating for female figures, or extremely misogynist. In his music video '80 80 160', he portrays himself as a conservative character, while female character has been portrayed as a figure who extremely expresses her lust, who represents herself as a cliché high school girl. The threat between the pair is built on lust. One of the clearest references made in YK's music videos is the concept of online dating. Before the 'pre-tinder era' on online dating. Another one of his music videos, 'Şekerim' (can be translated as 'honey') shows that YK uses his masculine approach amongst women, again. The styling used on his video has many masculine features such as holster as an accessory, greased hair and leather outfits. Both the music and the video can be considered as multilingual.

On the base of gender references, this is one of YK's most aggressive videos. Beside a short scene about body shaming against women, YK also tutors a child about how to approach to women. Conservative features in the Turkey's social structure is seen when YK runs away from the main girl's big brother. The hidden message on the video is an ode to masculinity. Video indicates that women will desire a man, if he is masculine enough. YK portrays a conservative image in his videos when he tells a love story. Otherwise, he uses foreign models as casting, and shows a lot of masculinity, female objectification, and male gaze. The children appeared in some of his videos involves an innocence to the messages in his videos.

One of the most significant changes in YK's style can be seen in 2 different versions of his music video, 'Allah Belanı Versin' (God Damn You). Increase of the budget YK (and the production team) spends on his videos is increased. From the outfits to the stage lighting, the car models that he 'tears up' in the name of express his anger shouts out that YK developed his audio-visual production phases. While YK shows extreme masculinity in his videos, his song 'Radikal Feminist' also shows that he is sensitive about gender equality. However, instead of gender equality, he says that gynecocracy will take over the system. Also the promotional video of this song shows female characters in leather clothes, in an extremely dominant role. Lyrics in this song, the representation of women and the futuristic environment on this promotional video can be interpreted as some kind of revenge.

We can say that the context in YK's music videos represents the confusion caused by multi-cultural habitat. However, YK stated that he always kept his bonds with Turkish culture with the help of his family, their approach to music, his cultural environment and the cultural hybridity in Germany. He carries the 'migrant Turk in Europe' image both in his lyrics, and music videos. While the futuristic images and cyber-punk environments represent the European identity, his approach to female-male relationship is mostly influenced by Turkish culture. On the sneak-peak of his last music video, the female character wears a headscarf (or hijab). This choice of casting caused some argument amongst his audience.

A section of his audiences say that he plays to the conservative Turkish audience, and the music industry that is under the influence of a dominant government. Beside the criticism against this representation of 'conservative love' of YK's, another part of his audience -and people who do not consider themselves as his fans or audience- supports the idea of women from different beliefs, cultures and social circles become more visible in music videos. Majority of Turkish musicians do not use religious implications or contradictory

representations of different cultures in their music videos. Around the same time with this sneak-peek of YK's new music video, another immigrant Turkish musician, Hadise had been faced with a ban for her music video due to 'inappropriate behavior and nudity'. This escalated the arguments of cultural representation, and their public acclaim in Turkish audience. Besides all the mixed messages, and even confused representations of those messages, İsmail YK have been identified himself as a Turkish musician who gives consequence to gender equality, and multiculturalism.

## 4. Conclusions

İsmail YK has been identified as a successful financial project by a portion of the music audience in Turkey. However we believe that he highlights an important issue in Turkish mainstream pop music once again: transculturalism. İsmail YK is a solid example of cultural complexity with his music and music videos. He uses different elements from European pop music and Turkish arabesk. YK shows his difference from other successful musical projects with his novel approach to local music (both in Germany and Turkey), current trends and his relationship with his audience.

YK communicates with his audience mostly on music and video streaming services. He adopted a more mature role by the time he gets older. Eventually, he started using more modest and daily accessories in his videos instead of futuristic elements, futuristic technological devices, and design clothes with near-future references. YK is a solid example of how popular music culture shaped by the current social trends, technological innovation, and political situation of the country where his music is sold. He also demonstrates the example of how the second generation of immigrants cannot be detached from Turkish culture, and merge that culture with the current culture they are living in. The audience from many countries, not limited to Australia, China, and Turkey, demands live concerts from İsmail YK's. We tried to demonstrate that the spread of a closed underground culture, around the globe in other immigrant Turk communities. İsmail YK used the right popular music elements to create his sustainable musical style. This case study was the first example of a research-series that we are planning to continue. Our future research will be focusing on the other immigrant Turkish musicians or collectives that is based in Europe.

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