

# You don't often see people running in Istanbul.

Movements are weighed and considered; abruptness or undue haste is invariably the object of comment or ridicule. Public pleasures are a sedentary business. Even social dancing is a poised and curiously static affair; a posture sculpted and monumentalised rather than mobilised by rhythm. Singers seldom work up a sweat even on a warm summer evening, their gestures concentrated in the shoulders, neck, face and hands, conveying inward rather than outward movement.

Mirkelâms' *Her Gece* ('Every Night'), which appeared early in the summer of 1995, was in many ways an unexceptional song. Even the singer's flamboyant good looks (according to his image consultant Serra d'Autry "a bit Ayhan Işık, a bit gypsy, a bit Che Guevara, a bit Freddie Mercury") were of a manufactured and somewhat routine variety. One would hear of the Mirkelâm proje (project) rather than of a person with any definable or engaging characteristics, and my friends often referred to him in a kind of collective formulation ("Tarkanlar, Mirkelâmlar – the Tarkans and Mirkelâms of this world –"); an instant and blanket dismissal of media blandness. If the summer of 1995 was the summer of Turkish Pop, pulsing through the clubs and rock bars of Taksim and Ortaköy, *Her Gece* was a characteristic product. Its rhythms were a distinctive blend of techno and Arabesk, a popular cassette genre of proletarian appeal and supposed Egyptian origins. The

melodic line was self-consciously 'alaturka', and the lyrics melancholic and abstract ("Tell me my love, tell me/were we never happy counting the swallows?/did we never dream/when we looked out to sea?")

For many people, though, *Her Gece* was an event. On the accompanying video, Mirkelâm ran. The backdrop was an anonymous Istanbul suburb, and the narrative rationale unclear. What was he running from? The issue became an extended joke, involving a spoof documentary on Sabah's Channel 6; according to Reuters, viewers were told Mirkelâm was preparing for the Olympics; according to CNN he was running from the receivers; according to WTN, he was running from the circumcision knife. The title of Mirkelâm's first biography, *Hulusi Tunca's Mirkelâm Nereye Kosuyor?* revolved around Mirkelâm's 'running', and echoed the title of the best-selling biography of tea-boy turned millionaire banker, Yalçın Doğan. Journalists and media pundits alike were inclined to see Turkish Pop as a kind of accelerated Arabesk, the ongoing sound-track of a radical and populist laissez-faire liberalism initiated a decade earlier by Turgut Özal. Özal's energetic efforts to bring a stigmatised and 'oriental' periphery back to the centre of Turkish cultural and political life and to 'leap into a new epoch' were regularly imagined in terms of breathlessness, haste, and exuberant physical exertion.

And where was Mirkelâm running? According to newspaper reports, he didn't know himself. "Umur Turagay (the producer) said 'run'. I didn't ask why. Let people make their own minds up," he told me, "walking whilst you are singing is just too suburban – so now you are going to run". I didn't say 'why am I running, abi?' (Hurriyet, 4 June 1995). Later, in a somewhat post-modern vein, he added, "Everyone is running towards something. People watching the video think in their own way and interpret accordingly. Wherever one wants to run to, think of that." (Hafta Sonu, 7 June 1995). There is little that differentiates *Her Gece* from the parallel 'projects' of Tarkan, Rafet el Roman, Mustafa Sandal, and half-a-dozen others, but Mirkelâm's 'running' came to stand for the arbitrariness and irrational authoritarianism of the newly-deregulated media, which operated like the national lottery, propelling people from obscurity to household names in a bewildering instant, releasing dangerous new currents of desire

into the city. Lives of utter insignificance and vastly-inflated oversignificance seemed to be compressed into too small a space. A friend had picked up a companion from an upmarket club in Ortaköy; their taxi driver had stared at the elegant denizens of Istanbul's clubland as he pulled out into the dense traffic, and this look of anger and jealousy had shaken her. "It was frightening", she told me the next day. "I've never seen that expression before". Mirkelâm was a joke, but at the same time a token of city life that was becoming inexplicable and unstable.

If the 'Mirkelâm business' (as the tabloids put it) elicited such response, it was because it drew on a longer tradition. For at least a century, popular music in Istanbul has been concerned with particular locales and movement around the city, creating places of nostalgia or moral concern, places for a walk on a Sunday afternoon or places to be avoided at all costs, places to fall in love or sit in solitude; a cityscape, every bit as real as that of planners and real estate speculators. Istanbul beauty-spots figured regularly in the new song forms in the last couple of decades of the nineteenth century, when the city's social and architectural fabric was being transformed by a modern, planned public transport system, initiating an elaborate popular culture of excursions and trips.

This was a period in which it was possible to move around and literally 'see' Istanbul in ways which had not been imagined before. The songs of Kemani Tatyos Efendi, Hacı Arif Bey, Lavtacı Hristo celebrated Kagithane, Heybli, Göksu; the popular music hall genre of Kanto at the turn of the century adapted similar themes to the music theatres of Direklararasi ('the Arcades'), today's Sehzadebasi Caddesi, for the Muslim bourgeoisie of the old city centre. These songs reflect a palpable excitement at the mere possibility of flirtation and illicit affairs that public transport made possible.

The establishment of the republic saw the collapse of this self-confident and largely indigenous urban popular culture, and the attempt by the Turkish intelligentsia to establish a national alternative. Entrepreneurs in Istanbul were quick to introduce western films and touring bands, and a minor local industry turned to the 'versionising' of imported genres. Tango was particularly popular from the late 1920s to the 1950s, and it is

striking that the first composer of Turkish tangos, Necip Celal, composed his first tango, *Boğazda Renkler Her Gece* ('The Colours on the Bosphorus Each Night'), in 1928 to words celebrating the city's main sight. The popular music market of this period was dominated by one voice; that of Münir Nurettin Selçuk, who drew on the 'new' classical repertoire, Kanto, Turkish tango, and the increasing vogue for Turkish translations of Umm Kulthum numbers and Mohammed Abdelwahhab's Egyptian film music.

By the late 1940s, a somewhat nostalgic tone had entered these popular musical representations of the city. One of his most celebrated collaborations with Yayha Kemal Bayatlı, *Aziz İstanbul* ('Beloved İstanbul', recorded by HMV) has a particularly elegiac lyrical tone: "I have lived, I would say, in the sweetest and longest dream/Living many years with you, dying with you, lying with you/I looked down on you yesterday from a hilltop, beloved İstanbul". This reflected an İstanbul at the beginning of its transformation into an industrial megalopolis, and an İstanbul that had come to occupy an ambiguous place in the nationalist imagination, by now largely effaced by the rationalist modernism of Atatürk's capital, Ankara. The extrovert enthusiasm of earlier popular genres was replaced by something nostalgic and self-absorbed; Bayatlı and Selçuk's İstanbul was surveyed retrospectively, as memory, in a pained backward glance.

The more self-conscious cultural politics of the 1960s introduced quite different representations of İstanbul. A generation of radicalised singers who had learned European languages, studied at İstanbul's foreign language schools and travelled around Europe opposed the imitation of imported western popular genres and the regimented forms that had emerged under the tutelage of the state's media system. Many musicians turned simultaneously to the European rock counter-culture and to the music of Anatolia. The nation rather than the city provided the main source of inspiration in 'Anatolian Rock'. Many set the work of left-orientated poets, particularly Nazım Hikmet, to music; places in İstanbul figure incidentally and peripherally, as in Cem Karaca's versions of Nazım Hikmet's *Ben Bir Ceviz Ağacıym Gülhane Parkı'nda*, (I am a Walnut Tree in Gülhane Park), a witty reflection on surveillance, and Orhan Veli's elegy on industrial İstanbul, *İstanbul'u Dinliyorum*, (I am

listening to Istanbul). Otherwise, the city was conspicuous by its absence.

By contrast, the city was central in Arabesk. Where Anatolian Rock was marginalised and its musicians were harassed, Arabesk was tacitly encouraged (despite the fact that the Turkish radio and Television managed to exclude it from the official media systems on account of its purported 'Arabic' origins). Arabesk's Istanbul was an abstraction of crowds, mosques, car-jammed roads, dingy gecekondü squatter neighbourhoods, garages, meyhanes and kiraathanes and the elegant but equally abstract surroundings of the rich (offices, swimming pools, living rooms furnished with imitation Louis XV furniture and a profusion of gilt). Arabesk portrays a city fantasised by outsiders and marginals, and several generations of migrants who had, contrary to sociological optimism, failed to find their place in the city. The song texts scarcely give the city its name, let alone refer to places in it. The videos tended to spell things out more explicitly. In *Ayrilamam* ('I can't leave you'), the singer Emrah's wicked uncle lures the newly-orphaned singer and his beautiful mother to Istanbul with the clinching words 'Başka İstanbul Yok'— there is, after all, 'no other Istanbul', no other place to look to for the self-advancement, pleasures and excitements denied in the provinces, and no other focus for the fears that all of these cherished dreams might turn to dust or ruin. The films lead inexorably to disaster; exploitation, marginalisation, criminalisation and final incarceration; the protagonist is not even granted the release of death. Each clearly-defined point in this progressive and inexorable narrative (a terminal illness, a car crash, a seduction, a revenge killing) allows for a moment of musical reflection, inviting empathy with the singer's state of abjection and humiliation.

If there is one place in Istanbul that stood for Arabesk in its entirety, it was the (now demolished) bus station at the Topkapı gate, a liminal space in which the old city walls met the inner zone of squatter development to the west of the city, which became in the mid-1980s the centre of a vibrant informal market and the hub of both the municipality's transport system and a largely informal system of dolmuş, shared taxis. It was also the site of the old bus station; the first view that greeted the newly-

arrived migrant as he or she stepped off the bus from their Anatolian village. Many films of this period cast the protagonist as a cab or lorry driver (Ibrahim Tatlıses *Mavi Mavi*, Gökhan Güney's *Tutunamayanlar*, Ferdi Tayfur's *Ben de Özledim*), circling restlessly around the city, as if only able to come to rest in this betwixt-and-between spot. Pursuing my interest in Arabesk in the mid 1980s, I was invariably told that to 'encounter Arabesk' all I had to do was go to Topkapı, or even just sit in a dolmuş. The idea was given sociological weight in a number of studies that purported to link Arabesk with all manner of urban pathologies, and the notion of Arabesk as 'dolmuş music' stuck. The popular musician, Orhan Gencebay, who has always strenuously resisted his labelling as an 'Arabesk singer', even conducted his own research into the listening habits of dolmuş drivers at Topkapı in an attempt to break the almost instinctively made links between himself, Arabesk, Topkapı and the dolmuş.

Images of the Istanbul from Münir Nurettin Selçuk to Orhan Gencebay drew on an informed experience of the city that may have been inchoate and difficult to verbalise, but at least admitted a kind of legibility; few could have failed to know what Topkapı and the *gecekondu* 'meant'. The new 'varos' (suburbs) evoke a more uncertain future, and we still don't know where *Mirkelâm* is running.

---

*Martin Stokes*, completed his D. Phil in Social Anthropology at Oxford. He is currently a professor of Ethnomusicology at the University of Chicago.