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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Homonationalism and Western progressive narrative: locating ‘conservative heartlands’ with *Zenne Dancer* (2012) and its Western reviews

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In this paper, we analyze the Turkish film *Zenne Dancer* (2012), which is largely based on what has been called a first gay honor killing in Turkey. We employ a framing analysis to both the film’s content and its Western reviews to compare how different media texts frame the murder. The results indicate that while both the film and the reviews recognize tradition, understood here as native and archaic values as well as Islamic religion, as a key factor behind the murder, they locate this tradition quite differently: the film relegates it to the eastern Turkey, and thus implicitly to Kurds, while the reviews tend to extend it to the entire country or even the whole Middle East. We relate these results to the Western progressive narrative that positions the West as a civic and moral ideal that could be achieved by others over time. In particular, we employ Puar’s concept of homonationalism to show how different media texts challenge or exploit the Western imperative to ‘come out’ and what effects it has for the East–West juxtapositions.

Keywords: film; homonationalism; Islam; Middle East; Turkey; orientalism

Introduction

Turkey is at the heart of many current discussions about modernity and the Middle East. The country’s unique location between Europe and Asia, the complex place of Islam in Turkish society and the 2013 Gezi protests frequently lead to ill-considered questions such as ‘How Western is Turkey?’ (Purvis, 2006), or ‘Is Turkey becoming more Western or less?’ (Carnegie Europe, 2013). Behind such questions often lies an implicit and deep-rooted progressive narrative, that is, a cultural construct which assumes that societies – in particular those beyond the ‘Western world’ – evolve in a progressive way toward more liberalism, secularism, and democracy. This *evolution* is supposed to lead to greater civil and political rights as well as Western ethics. In other words, the level of Western civilization is seen as an ideal, which can be achieved by non-Western civilizations over time. The notion of universal human rights plays a major role in the progressive narrative, at both a theoretical and a practical level (Donnelly, 1998). In particular, the status of sexual minorities is often regarded as a crucial indicator of modernity or ‘Westernness.’ Puar names this phenomenon homonationalism, the term which refers to ‘a rhetoric of sexual modernization that is simultaneously able to castigate the other as homophobic and perverse, and construct the imperialist center as “tolerant” but sexually, racially, and

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gendered normal' (2005, p. 122) as well as to 'the gay identity politics' embrace of patriotic, promilitary nationalism as a vehicle for emancipation' (Amar & El Shakry, 2013, p. 332).

The fields of media and cinema may show us a great deal about how such narratives of progress and modernity crystallize in cultural circuits, especially with regards to the representation of sexual minorities. There is a wide range of studies that look into the representations of sexual minorities, mainly homosexuality, in particular media texts such as popular sitcoms or feature films. Plenty of studies provide empirical evidence of how homosexuality is represented in media across genres, time periods, and regions (e.g. Avila-Saavedra, 2009; Gross, 2001; Lang, 2002; Lim, 2007). In that respect, queer-themed independent filmmaking has received growing scholarly attention (Aaron, 2004). Moreover, some studies have started to reveal how these processes of cinematic representation and production relate to national identities (Corber, 2011; Gopinath, 2005; Grossman, 2000). Although the concept of homonationalism has not yet been fully established within cinema studies (for recent analyses using the concept in relation to other media than cinema, see Aydemir, 2012; Yue, 2012), some studies do head in that direction.

One notable example is Gopinath's (2002) piece on Deep Mehta's 1996 film *Fire*. Referring to what anthropologist Manalansan (1995) called the 'developmental rhetorics' of international lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) organizations, Gopinath (2002, p. 151) studies how the film 'both adheres to and challenges this developmental narrative of gay and lesbian identity, which underlies dominant Euro-American discourses on non-Western sexualities.' Gopinath (2002, p. 153) shows that through its dichotomies between tradition and modernity, the film signposts a 'familiar teleological narrative of progress toward the individual "freedom" offered by the West, against which "the non-West" can only be read as premodern.' At the same time, she argues that by depicting a lesbian relationship in 'the privatized, seemingly sanitized "domestic space"' of a Muslim household, *Fire* interrogates 'the teleological Euro-American narrative according to which lesbian sexuality must emerge from a private, domestic sphere into a public, visible subjectivity' (2002, p. 55). Furthermore, Gopinath examines not only the film's content but also the transnational 'trajectories' accompanying its controversial release and concludes that *Fire* offered critics with 'an occasion to replay colonial constructions of India as a site of [...] repression, against which "the West" stands for enlightened egalitarianism' (2002).

Inspired by Gopinath's study on *Fire* and the critical analytic space of the homonationalism concept, this article looks at cinematic representation of male homosexuality in Turkey and its critical reception from the 'outside,' in the West. It does so by focusing on the 2012¹ feature film *Zenne Dancer*, directed by Caner Alper and Mehmet Binay. The film is partly based on the true story of what is referred to as Turkey's first gay honor killing, of Ahmet Yıldız in 2008,² offering a timely criticism on the situation of sexual minorities in Turkey. The film's critical message about homosexuality in Turkey is an excellent starting point to explore how the country is perceived, by both the film's directors and its Western reviewers, in terms of sexual minority rights and other supposedly Western civic achievements. In other words, it is our aim to investigate how the film's representations are not only significant as an individual cultural expression, but also how they are significant *beyond* the text, in discourses about Turkey, sexual minority rights, and East–West juxtapositions.

Our inquiry consists of a twofold analysis combining a textual study of *Zenne Dancer* and an analysis of the film's Western reviews. Importantly, we omit reviews from Turkey since we are mainly interested in how 'outsiders' construct narratives about the country (although we must note that some of the writers are correspondents based in Turkey or have roots in Turkey but live in Europe or the USA). The main focus of our analysis is on how the murder of Ahmet is framed. As Entman explains:

To frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, casual interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described. (1993, p. 52)

In the following sections we will first give an overview of the modernity discourse in Turkey and Turkish cinema and briefly describe *Zenne Dancer's* production and main storyline. Then we will move on to the discussion of our analyses of both the film and its reviews. Finally, in the discussion part, we will compare the framing of Ahmet's murder in the film and the reviews. We will argue that the case of *Zenne Dancer* is essential to understand Turkey's position within the progressive narrative, and that the film as well as its cultural reprocessing in the reviews highlights the complexity of this narrative.

Modernity and sexuality in Turkey and Turkish cinema

The Westernization process in Turkey gained impetus in the first years of the Turkish Republic, which was declared in 1923. At that time, the iconic figure of the modern Turkish history, Kemal Mustafa Atatürk, began to implement his project of modernization, also known as *Kemalism*. The core of this project was to Europeanize Turkey, which is probably best illustrated by an infamous case of the Hat Law (1925), which banned men from wearing traditional headgear in favor of a Western-style hat. The early republic was characterized by a strong 'quest for modern form' (Bozdoğan & Akcan, 2012, p. 7). However, the views on the modernization process of Turkey have been ambivalent: on the one hand, modernity has been perceived as progress and, on the other hand, people have recognized the dangers of excessive Westernization (such as selfishness and narcissism) as well as the importance of folk wisdom and traditional values (Kandiyoti, 1997). Probably, this is why the moderate version of modernity has gained most popularity in Turkey. This approach to modernity is best illustrated in *The Principles of Turkism* (1923) where Gökalp, the key ideologist of *Kemalism*, explains that Turkey should adopt the material civilization of the West but hold to the Turkish nonmaterial culture (Gürata, 2006).

Kandiyoti points out that 'sexuality, family relations, and gender identities came to occupy a central place in discourses about modernity' in Turkey (1997, p. 114). In fact, the Kemalist project of modernization initiated a top-down emancipation of Turkish women, which was symbolized by the image of 'Atatürk's adopted daughter Sabiha Gökçen [who] became the first military aviator in Turkey' (Arat, 1997, p. 98). However, as Arat (1997) points out, many changes toward equality between women and men were merely instrumental because they continued the reproduction of institutional patriarchy and repression of sexuality. Particularly, issues regarding sexuality were relegated to the discourse of morality and have been made the core of the Turkish nonmaterial culture, which is supposed to differentiate the new Turkey from the West. İlkcaracan emphasizes

that the post-9/11 context, which has been marked by the rise of homonationalism and Islamophobia in many Western countries, only intensified antagonisms against the West in the Middle East:

Over the last couple of decades in various Middle Eastern countries, as is the case in a number of African and Asian countries, homosexuality has increasingly been constructed as a ‘Western’ practice that is ‘imported’ from the West, which threatens the social and moral order [...] Ironically, centuries ago, claims were made in the West that homosexuality was an Oriental or Muslim vice. (2008, p. 1)

Such a discourse has also been adopted by the Justice and Development Party (AKP), which continues to hold the power in Turkey since 2002 (Szulc, 2011). Despite some efforts toward democratization, for instance by reducing the influence of the army in Turkish politics (İlkkaracan, 2014), AKP leaders remain highly conservative when it comes to gender equality and sexuality. İlkkaracan reports that the ‘AKP Government’s policy towards LGBT people has ranged from non-recognition to absolute discrimination, in a rather increasingly hostile fashion’ (2014, p. 171, see also Ataman, 2011). Some recent moralistic comments made by the AKP leader and Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, about abortion, alcohol consumption, cesarean section, public display of affections, or the desirable number of children, have been recognized as important, even if not direct, triggers for the Gezi Park protests, which raised in Istanbul in May 2013 (Tufekci, 2013). However, we should also note that sexual and gender minorities in Turkey have started to organize themselves already since the late 1980s and have managed to establish a number of professional organizations such as Lambda Istanbul, Kaos GL, and Pembe Hayat (Gecim, 2004; Szulc, 2011). LGBT activists were also much involved in the organization of the Gezi Park protests, gaining more respect from other groups which numerously joined the 2013 Pride March in Istanbul (Szulc, 2014).

The clash between modernity and tradition has also been reflected in (and constructed by) different media. For example, Mardin (1974) points out that a problem of ‘super or over-Westernization’ was often raised in the late nineteenth-century Ottoman novels. Similarly, Gürata argues that in the remakes produced by the Turkish film industry between 1960 and 1975, ‘[t]he critique of over-Westernization was used to support a line of modernism more in consort with traditional values’ (2006, p. 246). In those films over-Westernization was usually marked by pop or rock music as opposed to Ottoman-Turkish music, *pavyon* (nightclub) as opposed to *gazino* (family places) and the excessive behavior of women symbolized by ‘showing-off, excessive make-up and accessories, gambling, drinking alcohol, balls, partying and new dances’ (2006, p. 249). Dönmez-Colin (2008) turns our attention to Yeşilçam, or Turkish Hollywood, with its heydays in the 1950s–1970s. Similarly to Kandiyoti (1997), who points to the ambivalent perception of modernity in Turkey, Dönmez-Colin argues that ‘[f]or Yeşilçam, whose widest audience was the lower middle class or the proletariat, the West and the lifestyles it promoted was both utopia and dystopia, an object of desire that could lead to loss of innocence’ (2008, p. 9). And again the dangers of the West were usually projected on non-normative sexualities, in particular a homosexual man. Yeşilçam endorsed a modern heteronormative family as the only medium for practicing respectable sexuality. If a homosexual man appears in Yeşilçam films, ‘[h]e often comes from the bourgeois class and works as a hairdresser, fashion designer or make-up artist. In general, homosexuality

is used as an expression of decadence in society and the loss of moral values' (Dönmez-Colin, 2008, p. 159).

However, already in the 1960s–1970s we can find Turkish films that touched upon the theme of homosexuality more seriously. The pioneer is Atıf Yılmaz's film from 1963, *İki Gemi Yanyana* (or *Two Ships Side by Side*), which showed for the first time two women kissing on the lips. Other remarkable examples include Nejat Saydam's *Köçek* (or *Dancing Boy*, 1975), Metin Erksan's *Kadın Hamlet* (or *Woman Hamlet*, 1976), and Osman Seden's *Beddua* (or *Curse*, 1980).³ Still, Dönmez-Colin (2014, p. 263) argues that queer cinema is 'new' for Turkey and more serious films on non-normative genders or sexualities began to appear only in the 1990s. Three directors, who emigrated from Turkey to Germany or Italy, stand out here: Fatih Akın (*Auf der anderen Seite*, English: *The Edge of Heaven*, 2007), Kutluğ Ataman, and Ferzan Özpetek. The first queer films of Ataman and Özpetek, *Lola und Bilidikid* (or *Lola and Bilidikid*, 1998) and *Il Bagno Turco* (or *Hamam*, 1997) respectively, were also screened in theaters in Turkey and received enthusiastic responses from Turkey's sexual minorities as well as a close attention from the Turkish mainstream media (Kılıçbay, 2008). In this context, *Zenne Dancer*, made by an openly gay couple based in Turkey, may be considered as truly exceptional. Dönmez-Colin states, in a somewhat exaggerated fashion, that '[t]he award-winning *Zenne Dancer* is probably the first bona fide queer film [in Turkey]' (2014, p. 264). In the last years queer cinema has become slightly more visible in Turkey: since 2011, LGBT organization Pembe Hayat organizes the film festival Kuir Fest, and the renowned Istanbul International Film Festival also has a 'Rainbow' section dedicated to LGBT-themed films.

***Zenne Dancer*: production, context, and storyline**

In the last decade, Turkish cinema has witnessed a vast expansion and internationalization (Smets, 2014). Although not showcasing the aesthetic refinement of the independent Turkish filmmakers that are in vogue internationally (such as Nuri Bilge Ceylan, Zeki Demirkubuz, Reha Erdem, Yeşim Ustaoglu, or Semih Kaplanoglu), *Zenne Dancer* is characteristic of this new openness in its own right. To start with, like many of these independent filmmakers in Turkey in the last years, *Zenne Dancer* proposes a critical view on major societal issues. While other contemporary filmmakers have tended to focus on such issues as corruption, ethnic minorities, war, and conflict, *Zenne Dancer* focuses on the position of sexual minorities in Turkey as another important concern in Turkish society. Like much of the young independent directors in Turkey, Binay, and Alper tell the story of a changing society through a deeply personal story. Furthermore, the film symbolizes the increased international visibility and transnational production mode of cinema in Turkey. It received foreign production support (from the Human Rights program of the Consulate General of the Netherlands) and had a highly international crew. Moreover, as our discussion of the film's online trajectories below will show, *Zenne Dancer* managed to attract international attention. However, the film has also demonstrated the different challenges that such critical films may face. For instance, its scheduled screening at Turkey's Malatya International Film Festival was canceled last minute due to the absence of a certain permit from the Culture and Tourism Ministry, spurring some to condemn such attempts at censorship (Güler, 2011). Yet the filmmakers managed to screen *Zenne Dancer* at different film festivals and events across Turkey and at a few international film festivals. The film garnered success, notably by winning four

awards (including Best First Film) at the Antalya Golden Orange Film Festival, one of Turkey's major film festivals, as well as the Turkish Film Critics Association Award for Best Film – both in 2011.

Zenne Dancer tells several interlocking stories, coming together in the friendship between Ahmet, Can, and Daniel. Ahmet, the character based on the murdered Ahmet Yıldız, is a masculine 'bear'⁴ who moved to Istanbul from eastern Turkey to study. His conservative family, who suspects Ahmet's homosexuality, tries to control him at a distance through his sister, who was ordered to share a flat with him, as well as through a private detective hired by Ahmet's mother. In Istanbul Ahmet starts a romantic relationship with Daniel, a middle-aged German photojournalist who came to Turkey after a traumatic mission as a war photographer in Afghanistan. Daniel wants to shoot pictures of Ahmet's eccentric and flamboyant friend Can. Can is a *zenne*, that is, a male belly dancer that was a traditional theater figure in the Ottoman Empire (see Ertin, 2012, p. 262). Can's family seems to be the opposite of Ahmet's family: while we do not learn much about Can's father who died in a military action in eastern Turkey, his mother expresses a nearly obsessive love for Can regardless his manifested eccentricity and flamboyance. Still, both men face the same dread when being called to carry out their compulsory military service. Hoping to get exempted from the service, they go through a process that is reported to be common in Turkey, at least until recently (Biricik, 2009): they appear for a commission dressed up in a feminine way, wearing make-up and, in case of Ahmet, showing photographic evidence of him being gay, that is, of being penetrated, which is how the Turkish army usually conceives of homosexuality. Can refuses to provide similar photographs and in consequence is forced to undergo a rectal examination. The story reaches its dramatic climax when Ahmet, encouraged by Daniel, comes out to his father over the phone. Not long after, we see Ahmet being murdered by his father, supposedly to save the family's honor. While the film is clearly inspired by real events of the murder on Ahmet Yıldız – a friend of the directors – Can's flamboyant *zenne* way of life and the Western character of Daniel are fictive additions that seem to have been included to sharpen the contrast between modernity and tradition as well as Turkey and the West.

Film analysis

In this and the following part, we will employ framing analysis to examine how the killing of Ahmet is framed in *Zenne Dancer* and Western reviews of the film, respectively. In particular, we will focus on what kind of answers different media texts offer to the question: who or what is responsible for Ahmet's death? For the film analysis, we opted for an inductive, qualitative content analysis focusing on both narrative and visual elements within the film text.

The film *Zenne Dancer* suggests there was a combination of different factors that together led to Ahmet's murder. At the most explicit level, it indicates Ahmet's father as the killer of his son. Even so, the father is depicted as a weak and subordinated figure who is under the control of his dominant wife, Kezban. She blames her husband for Ahmet's homosexuality and urges him to kill their son. Ahmet's father appears to be no more than an executor of his wife's will. In one conversation, Kezban says to her husband:

God damn you, you faggot! He took after you [...] You have no pride. You have no dignity, no honour. Look at your honour. It's been trampled on. You're an absolute disgrace [...] I told you when he was a little boy to get rid of the *zenne* then. You paid no heed. God forgive us for what we've done or about to do.

Kezban's husband responds that his conscious stops him from killing Ahmet, and that to do this, he needs a proof of his son's homosexuality. When Ahmet finally calls his father and comes out to him, it is Kezban again who brings her husband the gun.

At the same time, Kezban is depicted as the object of her own culture, in particular religion and tradition. Kezban is the most religious character in the film: she often refers to god, walks with prayer beads in her hands, and turns on a religious radio station when visiting Ahmet and his sister in Istanbul. Additionally, Kezban seems to be trapped in what is presented in the film as native and archaic traditional values. She expects from her daughter, Hatice, to take on a role traditionally assigned to women in a patriarchal system: she asks Hatice to clean after his brother and cook for him. She also explains to her that she favors her brother because, in accordance with some Turkish traditions, 'his children will be ours and yours somebody's else.' It is also only through these 'traditional' lenses that she can see Ahmet's homosexuality. In his work on homosexuality in Turkey, Tapınc writes that historically in Turkish culture male homosexuality has been based on strict schema of penetration: 'The key aspect of this model is the clear distinction between the masculine, "active" inserter and the feminine, "passive" insertee, the former one regards his sexual/gender identity as heterosexual and the latter as homosexual' (1992, p. 41). Tapınc argues that most recently a new, Western model of male homosexuality emerges in Turkey, 'the masculine gay,' who remains masculine regardless of his sex role. Kezban views Ahmet's homosexuality through the lenses of the former model. Even though Ahmet is a masculine bear, she denies his manhood: talking to her husband, she says 'Your son didn't turn out to be a man.'

The practice of honor killings, still being committed in Turkey in great majority against women (Kardam, 2005), is another element in the film that points to backward traditions as implicitly responsible for Ahmet's death. In the conversation with her husband, quoted earlier in this part, Kezban repeatedly refers to their family's honor, which must be protected by killing Ahmet. Savcı (2011) argues that in Turkey honor killings are usually attributed to people living in the East of the country, particularly to Kurds, and are presented as incompatible with modern Turkishness. Therefore, it is important to note that what the film blames for Ahmet's murder is not the Turkish traditional culture as such but rather the archaic and backward traditions as well as Islam which have been attributed to the eastern part of the country and to Kurds in particular. Ahmet's mother is contrasted with Can's mother who lives in Izmir, in the West of Turkey, and expresses nearly obsessive love to her *zenne* son. Similarly, the eastern city of Urfa, where Ahmet's parents live, is contrasted with the cosmopolitan city of Istanbul, where Ahmet moved for studies. In the film, Istanbul becomes a symbol of modern Turkey and progressive Turks, which is best illustrated in a scene in which Can thinks he is being chased by a group of men while walking back home in the evening. Can starts running away from the men but he stumbles and falls down. Yet, the men do not stop at Can but keep running and start shouting 'Taxi! Taxi!' The scene suggests that people of Istanbul do not mind Can's colorful clothes and flamboyant gestures, which are often cultural markers of male homosexuality. The film implies that if Can feels unsafe in the city, it is only because of his own unjust projections.

So far we have established that *Zenne Dancer* suggests that Ahmet was killed by his parents who hold onto their conservative values, presented here as typical for the eastern part of Turkey and Kurds in particular. However, the direct trigger for the murder was Ahmet's act of coming out. At the end of the film, Ahmet calls his father and explicitly states his homosexuality, providing him with the proof his father was looking for to commit the murder. This interpretation is also suggested by the filmmakers in the subtitle of the film: 'Honesty may kill you.' Importantly, coming out is depicted in the film as a Western practice. It is a Western character, Daniel, who cannot understand why Ahmet conceals his homosexuality from his parents and encourages him to come out to them:

Daniel: Why can't you be honest and tell the truth to your parents? Honesty is the easiest.

Ahmet: You don't understand. Honesty will kill me.

Daniel: (laughing) No, I can't understand. What could possibly happen? They are your parents. They love you.

No doubt, Daniel has good intentions and wants to truly help Ahmet. Yet, he does not seem to fully understand Ahmet's particular situation as well as the specificity of his cultural context. Daniel simply follows a Western model of being 'out and proud,' which suggests that coming out is the ultimate goal of every homosexual person: 'Coming out is acceptance, coming out is honesty, coming out is closeness' (Barnhurst, 2007, p. 3). However, as Barnhurst (2007) points out, coming out may also have serious negative consequences for gay people, including those in the West (for example, a teenager revealing her homosexuality to her parents could be thrown away from home).

The film thus suggests that some part of responsibility for Ahmet's death should be placed on the Western imperative to come out unthoughtfully enforced on gay people in Turkey. It is also evident in particular editing choices of the film's directors. Right after the scene in which Ahmet is murdered, the filmmakers show us a flashback of Daniel working as a photographer in Afghanistan. Daniel had been asked by his superiors to take pictures of children in order to show to the Western public a glimmer of hope at time of war. To get a better photograph, Daniel asks a group of children to move a bit to the back. A local man warns him that this is dangerous but Daniel ignores the warning and encourages the children to move still a little further to the back. When they do that, a landmine goes off and kills the children. This scene suggests that the children's death was, at least partially and surely indirectly, a consequence of newspaper editors in the West who asked Daniel to deliver a photograph of Afghan children. And because this scene is edited in the film right after the scene in which Ahmet is murdered, it suggests that at least one reason for which Ahmet died was that he listened to Daniel and came out to his parents, that he followed the Western imperative to come out even though he had realized that 'honesty may kill him.' The conclusion which emerges from *Zenne Dancer* seems to be that the Western model of gay visibility cannot be simply and unproblematically transposed to Turkey, or by extension elsewhere. The film does not necessarily object the importance of gay visibility in the non-West as such (as it is objected by some postcolonial authors, most prominently by Massad, 2002, 2007) but rather it objects the gay visibility as a universal model to be adopted by all homosexual people, or sexual minorities more broadly, in the world regardless their social, cultural, or national positioning. Even though the essence of the model is to provide sexual minorities with better quality of life, its implementation could have dramatic consequences for particular individuals located at particular geographies. Therefore, we may read the film

as criticizing Western homonationalisms for employing discourses of eastern homophobia in order to ask the East to catch up with the West and to ask eastern sexual minorities to become 'out and proud,' just like their counterparts in the West supposedly are.

Reviews analysis

After conducting the content analysis we became aware of the strong focus of the film on contrasts between modernity and tradition, and on East–West relations. This made us ponder on how the film was perceived and discussed outside Turkey, particularly in the West. We carried out an extensive search through online search engines and press databases and came up with a sample of 23 Western reviews of the film. Our sample contained a wide variety of reviews of *Zenne Dancer* from general news websites as well as specialized websites and blogs (which focus on topics such as film, Turkey, human rights, and/or sexual minorities). The selected reviews originate from different countries and are written in different languages (but mainly in English). For practical reasons we limited our search to the Western languages that we mastered, which include English, French, Dutch, and German. Moreover, we excluded all reviews about *Zenne Dancer* shorter than 300 words, since these were mostly very brief and standardized film descriptions on websites of film festivals.

The sample includes reviews in English (16), Dutch (5), French (1) and German (1), which we found on websites operated from the USA (11), the Netherlands (4), the UK (3), Austria (1), Australia (1), Belgium (1), France (1), and Germany (1). About half of these websites were general news websites, while the other half were portals or blogs with a particular focus on news on Turkey, human rights, LGBT activism, or queer cinema. The depth and scope of these reviews vary greatly. While one article (in *The Hollywood Reporter*) focuses on the aesthetic and technical features of the film, the bulk of the reviews instead concentrates on a range of issues such as honor killings and homophobic violence in Turkey, asylum for LGBTs and human rights for Kurdish minorities. A review released by Associated Press returned in various forms on several websites, interestingly with headlines that in some cases described the film as the first gay-themed film in Turkey (which is hardly the case, as we discussed above). [Table 1](#) provides some key details on the reviews in the sample, as well as the reference number that is used to refer to quotes from specific reviews.

It is striking to see how the reviews make use of the film and the story of the honor killing to open up discussions of a much wider scope. Depending on the focus of the reviews, different facets of Ahmet's murder are highlighted. For instance, the Madi Kazemi blog, which deals with LGBT asylum news, portrays the honor killing victim as a 'gay activist' (review 16). Similarly, the LGBT news website Edge Boston mentions Ahmet's activism, noting that he had attended an LGBT conference in San Francisco right before being murdered (review 9). Meanwhile on the pro-Kurdish website Kurd Net, Reuters reporter Ece Toksabay emphasizes the Kurdish background of both Ahmet and the actor playing the character, Erkan Avci (review 20). The way the reviews discuss the position of homosexual people in Turkey is quite diverse, as the 'activist' websites generally use a harsher language to describe the discrimination and violence faced by sexual minorities in Turkey. On the pro-Kurdish website E-Kurd, this discrimination and violence is extended to a general problem with human rights in Turkey. In tone with the film's dramatic and many-sided story, the concerned reviews present us with an

Table 1. Overview of reviews (all accessed March 2014).

Review #	Country (website host)	Website	Author	Date posted
1	USA	The Hollywood Reporter (entertainment news)	Karsten Kastelan	12/10/2011
2		The Economist (general news)	N/A	22/10/2011
3		CNN (general news)	Ivan Watson	13/1/2012
4		Huffington Post (general news)	Suzan Fraser	21/1/2012
5		EurasiaNet/Open Society Institute (regional news)	Dorian Jones	7/2/2012
6		Voices of America (general news)	Dorian Jones	9/2/2012
7		Queer & Feminist Film Studies (blog)	D. Hewitt	30/4/2013
8		San Diego Gay & Lesbian News (LGBT news)	Ken Williams	22/5/2012
9		Edge Boston (LGBT news)	Killian Melloy	18/6/2012
10		Variety (entertainment news)	Dennis Harvey	25/6/2012
11		Arne's Flicks (blog)	Arne Adolfsen	28/7/2012
12	The Netherlands	NRC Handelsblad (general news)	Niels Posthumus	13/1/2012
13		NOS op 3 (general news)	Emil (pseudonym)	13/1/2012
14		Journalist in Turkije (journalist blog)	Frédérique Geerdink	26/1/2012
15		Jessica Maas Istanbul (journalist blog)	Jessica Maas	25/5/2012
16	UK	Madi Kazemi Blog (LGBT asylum news)	Paul Canning	25/11/2011
17		The Guardian (general news)	Elif Shafak	18/1/2012
18		Pink News (general news)	Bradley Secker & Dan Littauer	09/2/2012
19	Australia	The Cue Dot Confessions (Melbourne Queer Film Festival Review)	Michael Scott	22/3/2013
20	Austria	E-Kurd (Kurdish news)	Ece Toksabay	21/1/2012
21	Belgium	Holebi Info (LGB news portal)	N/A	12/1/2012
22	France	Au Bonheur des Dams (blog)	SweetAngel (pseudonym)	17/1/2012
23	Germany	Deutsch-Türkische Nachrichten (German-Turkish general news)	N/A	24/10/2011

ambivalent message. For some authors, *Zenne Dancer* is the best proof that the situation of sexual minorities in Turkey is grim, while for others the mere fact that this film is produced is a reason for optimism. The discussion of issues related to *Zenne Dancer*'s story in the reviews thus shows very effectively how a singular cultural phenomenon may be mobilized and (re)framed differently, and very selectively, in order to suit a broader political agenda of the authors.

While focusing on distinct aspects of the film's story, the sample reviews reveal the Western progressive narrative at work. The case of Ahmet's honor killing is used to highlight the juxtaposition of modernity and tradition, which in the reviews is very much presented as a contrast between the West and the East. The necessity for Turkey to progress and develop is often emphasized. In many cases, the reviews note that Turkey has a 'long way' to go before it reaches the necessary (i.e. Western) level of social, cultural, and political development. Reviews often followed a similar discursive pattern, stating that Turkey 'still has a long way to go before it overcomes deeply entrenched institutional homophobia' (review 3), 'has a long way to go when it comes to banning homophobia' (review 12) and that its society 'still has a long way ahead' (review 21).

The reviews are rather straightforward when it comes to identifying the reasons for this supposed backwardness, and the resulting lack of sexual minorities rights in Turkey. Conservatism, tradition, and Islam are seen as the key causes of backwardness are ostensibly used as synonyms. In her analysis of reactions to Ahmet's murder on the YouTube tribute video 'Ahmet is my family,' which was posted by presumably bear-identified gay men from around the world, Savcı (2011, pp. 153–156) revealed a similar process whereby Islam, conservatism, and homophobia are equated. Islam is mentioned as a cause of innate conservatism in the film reviews, especially in the ones posted on general news websites (the specialized blogs tend to be more nuanced). 'Islam' is used, often almost in passing, as a trope that is supposed to suggest to the reader *how* conservative and non-Western Turkey is. The following passages illustrate this:

the hot-button issue of gay rights (or the lack thereof) in Muslim nations. (review 10)
Islam disdains homosexuality as a sinful though curable disease. (review 23)
gays in a Muslim country that is seeking European Union membership. (review 4)

The analysis of the reviews also reveals that geography is an essential part of the progressive narrative – one that indeed complicates this cultural construct. Conservatism and Islam, as the supposed causes of the events depicted in the film, are associated with certain localities. In some cases, a specific part of Turkey is indicated as the home of these problems, albeit sometimes in vague wordings. Fraser (review 4) for instance writes that these issues are characteristic of Turkey's 'conservative heartland,' while other reviews specify that it is a mainly a problem of the 'impoverished and conservative southeast' (review 20; see also review 18). These conservative regions are then contrasted with Turkey's cosmopolitan cities, particularly Istanbul. In some cases, however, the reviews associate the problems raised by *Zenne Dancer* as *Middle Eastern* problems, and a result of 'Middle Eastern values' (review 22; see also review 8). The film and its portrayal of the honor killing are thus employed to sustain a familiar orientalist discourse that poses the Muslim Middle East against the modern West (see Lockman, 2010, pp. 38–65; Said, 1997) with particular focus on the rights of sexual minorities (Puar, 2013). Additionally, Turkey is sometimes believed to occupy an ambiguous middle position, as a 'bridge' country between the East and the West. Turkey is presented as a unique country that has the potential to move away from Middle Eastern traditionalism toward Western values, which again shows the particular role of Turkey in discourses about modernity and tradition.

Discussion

In this final part, we will compare the framing of Ahmet's murder in *Zenne Dancer* and the Western reviews of the film to gain more insights into the dynamics of Western progressive narrative in relation to homosexuality. Both the film and its Western reviews recognize tradition, understood here as native and archaic values, as a key, even if not direct, factor behind the Ahmet's murder, and by extension behind discrimination of sexual minorities and honor killings in Turkey. This focus on tradition is already problematic. Referring to what Koğacıoğlu (2004) calls a 'tradition effect,' Savcı points out that such a focus regarding honor killings, committed primarily against women, cast honor killings as traditional rather than structural problems:

violence against women is presented as a matter of tradition, which lets the role of institutions (such as the law, the state's negligence toward women's shelters etc.) fade into the background and causes questions about violence against women not to be seriously addressed. (2011, p. 63)

At the same time, both the film and its Western reviews recognize that the source of this tradition is, at least partially, Islam. The religion is presented as homogenous and backward in a clear Islamophobic fashion.

Interestingly, the film and the reviews attribute this tradition to different geographical locations. *Zenne Dancer* explicitly relegates it to the eastern part of Turkey, and thus to Kurds (Savcı, 2011). The reviews become more ambivalent about the location of this tradition and while occasionally pointing to the 'conservative heartland' within Turkey, they also extend the territory (for which such tradition is supposed to be typical) to the entire country or even region, that is, the Middle East. While in the film we observe the *othering* of a particular group within Turkey, in the reviews we can recognize the Western progressive narrative, which opposes the West to the East, particularly by homogenizing and *othering* the latter. The reviews suggest that the problem of this particular case of gay honor killing, as well as other human rights-related problems in Turkey, stem from the country's embeddedness in the intrinsically conservative region of the Middle East. However, some reviews additionally emphasize the in-betweenness of Turkey suggesting that Turkey can become more welcoming for sexual minorities, that is, to become more modern – but only if it gets rid of its eastern roots and follows the Western trajectory of progress.

Not surprisingly thus the reviews create an either–or rhetoric as if sexual identities in Turkey could only emerge as a result of Westernization, and Americanization in particular (Altman, 1996), leaving no room for alternative processes such as hybridization (e.g. Martin, 2009; Özbay, 2010; Tan, 2001), creolization (Enteen, 2010), or what Boellstorff (2003) calls 'dubbed subject-positions.' Conversely, the film makes an attempt at providing such alternatives by juxtaposing the character of Ahmet with the character of Can. Unlike Ahmet, Can does not seem to be attracted by the Western model of 'out and proud' masculine gayness and nowhere in the film he suggests that he would like to migrate to the West for the allegedly better life. Instead, he seems to embrace the more traditional model of homosexuality in Turkey, as described by Tapınç (1992), in which homosexuality is associated with femininity and thus with emotions and passivity. This is already evident in the choice of the character's name – 'Can' means soul in Turkish – but also in how Ahmet occasionally refers to Can as a 'girl' or 'pussy boy.' Can tries to find a place for himself *within* the Turkish culture by taking on the traditional social roles in

which difference, including sexual difference, is more likely to be accepted, or even encouraged, such as fortune teller or, more remarkably, zenne dancer. It would be difficult to argue that Can's confinement to those 'extraordinary' social roles is the best world he can think about for himself but this is the best world he can make for himself in this particular culture at this particular moment of history. He embraces his agency by following the tactics of material and emotional survival (Georgis, 2013). In a similar vein, Mahmood, who writes about an urban women religious movement in Cairo, refuses to interpret the women's activity as 'false consciousness.' She suggests that 'we think of agency not as a synonym for resistance to relations of domination, but as a capacity for action that historically specific relations of subordination enable and create' (2001, p. 203).

Finally, while *Zenne Dancer* recognizes the complexity of factors that could lead to Ahmet's murder, the reviews analyzed in this article tend to greatly simplify the issue. From the film, we learn that it is not only native and archaic traditions, attributed to eastern Turkey, which led to Ahmet's murder. Some responsibility is also assigned to the individuals and their personality traits as well as, more interestingly, to the Western imperative to come out, particularly when it is blindly transposed to Turkey. To the contrary, the reviews identify only one cause of Ahmet's murder, that is, the backward tradition, including Islam, which is supposedly characteristic for the entire Middle East. Surprisingly, none of the reviews analyzed in this article pick up the film's evident critique of the universal character of the Western imperative to come out. This argument of the film seems to be simply ignored in the reviews. Such an omission is typical of a homonationalistic discourse (Puar, 2005), which attributes gay tolerance to the West and gay discrimination to the East while refusing to recognize the hypocrisy of the West as well as the potential negative consequences of Western missionary tendencies.

The strategies employed in Western reviews of *Zenne Dancer* show typical characteristics of what Said (1978) names orientalism. They reproduce the distinction between the West and the East in a way that the West becomes constructed as more democratic, modern, and tolerant than the East. Our analysis suggests that homonationalism is the latest update to orientalism because it creates a new axis of difference between the West and the East: sexuality in general and non-normative sexualities in particular. Modernity has recently become also understood as sexual modernity: "acceptance" and "tolerance" for gay and lesbian subjects have become a barometer by which the right to and capacity for national sovereignty is evaluated' (Puar, 2013, p. 336), and Huntington's (1993) 'clash of civilizations' becomes a 'sexual clash of civilizations' (Fassin, 2010, p. 509). As our analysis indicates, one of the key measurement of this 'acceptance' and 'tolerance' is visibility of sexual minorities, the 'out and proud' model of being gay in particular, which tends to be uncritically applauded in the West, even in reviews of a non-Western film that criticizes a blind implementation of that model.

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Notes

1. The film was officially released in 2012, but screened a few times already in 2011 (including at the Pink Life Queer Fest in Ankara in November 2011), which explains why some of the reviews in our sample date from 2011.
2. Ahmet's murder was not the first gay honor killing, but the first one to be discussed so widely in national and international media. In her work on 'sexual others' and the Turkish nation, Savcı (2011, pp. 134–163) makes an insightful analysis of the discourses surrounding the case.
3. For further examples see Arslan (2011) and Dönmez-Colin (2014, pp. 263–264).
4. The bear subculture gathers large and/or hairy gay and bisexual men as well as their admirers.

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