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Book Reviews

SEEING THE MODERNIST TURN BEYOND THE VERNACULAR PHOTOGRAPH

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Calafato, Ö.B. (2022). *Making the Modern Turkish Citizen Vernacular Photography in the Early Republican Era*. London, New York, Oxford, New Delhi and Sydney: I.B. Tauris. 248 pages. ISBN: 9780755643271

This review is based on Özge Baykan Calafato's book "*Making the Modern Turkish Citizen Vernacular Photography in the Early Republican Era*" published in 2022, supported by Tamkeen under the NYA Abu Dhabi Research Institute Award CG006, and al Mawrid, the Arab Center for the Study of Art. The title of this review refers to the scope of the research shaped by Calafato via the selection of vernacular photographs within the Turkey Collection in Akkasah Center for Photography (NYUAD); which is entitled as the *Özge Calafato Collection* later in 2020 (p. 296).

The very first sparkle of Calafato's research begins with a single photograph (fig. 1) from 1941 that she has found in an antique shop in İzmir (p. 15). This image thus becomes the impetus for her research and she collects more photographs on several trips to Turkey



Fig. 1 A couple posing in a hall, May 1, 1941. 8.5 × 13.3 cm. Courtesy of Akkasah, the photography archive at al Mawrid, NYUAD. Copyright al Mawrid

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between the years of 2014 and 2018. This journey grows into a collection as she purchased over 17,000 photographs from antique stores and secondhand booksellers in Istanbul and Izmir from the late Ottoman era and the modern Turkish Republic (p. 21). While these photographs were primarily composed of individual and group portraits taken by studio and itinerant photographers, as well as amateur snapshots taken in a wide range of social settings, Calafato builds the corpus of her research around the detailed analysis of 60 selected photographs from the Akkasah Collection. With this selection featuring individual and group portraits taken on a variety of occasions, the book reflects the changing social and political scenery of the country in the early Republican era and it provides insight into the newly modern Turkish secular public life that was taking shape through a host of social practices (p. 36).

Examining the relationship between photography, nation-building, and identity formation, the research focusses specifically on the evolution of photographic representations and their relation to the Turkish modernization project in the early Republican years. Calafato aims to scrutinize the role of middle-class representations in the making of the modern Turkish citizen in order to demonstrate the classed and gendered nature of the emerging Republican Turkish identity with an intention to show how urban middle-class men and women used photography to construct a modern identity, and how that identity was negotiated in relation to the desired citizen image propagated by the Kemalist state (p. 18). Accordingly, she constructs this research recognizing gender, body, space, and language as four focal points for the construction of the modern Turkish citizen, to show how photographic practices evolved in the context of wider global sociopolitical changes in the 1920s and 1930s, to probe how these broader shifts also contributed to the shaping of modern Turkish identity (p. 19).

The first part of the book (Fig.2) *Photography, Gender and Modernity* focusses on gender roles and representations while looking at “The Construction of The New Turkish Woman” in Chapter I, and “Modern Turkish Masculinities” in Chapter II.

In the second part Calafato analyses *The Making of The Modern Body* while focusing in the “Pose, Posture, and Props as Worldmaking” in Chapter III, in addition to examining “The Bodies of The Republic” in Chapter IV. The third part of the book *Photography and Space-Making*, includes Chapter V on “Photography’s Domestication”. The study ends with part four on *Photography, Materiality, and Language* including Chapter VI on “Disseminating Citizenship”.

In order to understand some of the key components shaping gender normativities, and how these were reproduced and negotiated in photographs in the early Republican era, Chapters 1 and 2 primarily draw an argument on Judith Butler’s theory of gender performativity (p. 52). Chapter 3 investigates issues of

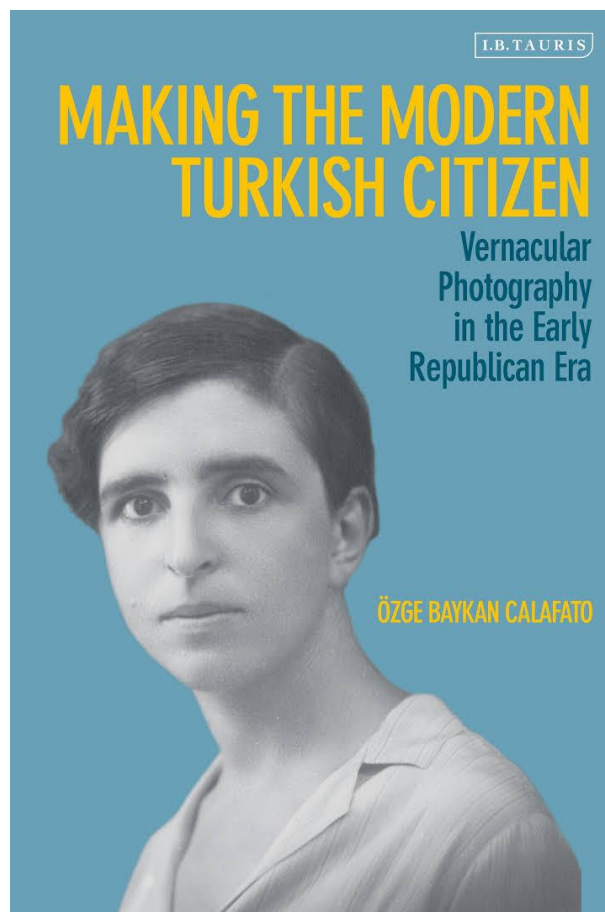


Fig. 2 The Book Cover, published by I.B. Tauris.

intimacy and agency, while studying how people explored the performative potential of photography as playfulness was gradually introduced in portraiture in the 1920s and 1930s (p. 53). Chapter 4 reveals the multilayered nature of the modern Turkish identity-building process, exploring classed identities and how postpartum and circumcisions were reimagined through photographic practices that signaled modernity but also allowed for the inclusion of the ancient Turkic and Ottoman customs (p. 54). Chapter 5 approaches the relationship between photography and space-making through the case study of a century-old photography studio from Izmir, the *Hamza Rüstem Studio*, which contributes to the making of a new Republican city and its social memory for a newly forged urban Turkish middle class (p. 54). In Chapter 6, through a series of portraits given or sent to one individual named Şükrü Bey in the late 1920s, the chapter reveals how middle-class Turkish citizens used photographic exchanges and inscriptions not only to build and share memories but also to promote a classed self-image by analyzing complex networks in which photographic prints were circulated within and outside family circles, serving multiple functions as effective modes of communication (p. 55).

In this context, vernacular photography, which remains a niche area of academic research in Turkey, provides a different, more quotidian and less institutional perspective on the modernization processes of the early Republic (p.19). The “ordinariness” of these images, which were part of people’s everyday lives, is what makes them a great resource for rethinking not only the history of Turkish modernity but also the history of photography in Turkey. Yet, for extensive periods of time, no great value was attributed to these photographs, so much so that they were thrown away and ended up circulating in the market for low prices. Indeed, it is only recently that they have started to evoke the interest of collectors and researchers (p.20).

With this study, Calafato aims to “contribute to a shift in the understanding of vernacular photography from seeing it as an absent presence to treating it, rather, as a principal subject for academic research” as she uses the term vernacular photography in the sense of popular photography. This is the popularity of daily photography that is produced in commercial studios, by itinerant photographers or in the home with hand-held consumer cameras (p. 16). In her work she discusses not only a selection of vernacular photographs created in the Late Ottoman - Early Republican Era, but builds a clear examination of each photograph via their indexical traces in order to fully understand the time frame with their socio-political atmosphere and everyday life dynamics in order to visualize the reflections of public sphere onto everyday photography. In doing so; Calafato gives enormous amounts of background information in addition to the visual analysis of photographs themselves while also “unpacking” the micro-histories and personal narratives around the photographs revealed in other visual and textual sources, and through oral histories (p. 42).

For those who encounter this image decades later, its iconicity feeds off its indexical quality, off what it represents as a historical document. In this regard, what the image offers as a performative space tends to be seen as secondary: we often focus on what people used to wear rather than on asking why they might have worn this particular dress for this particular picture. In focusing on the role of performativity, I aim to contribute to a multilayered reading of vernacular photographs, which goes beyond analyses based on indexicality, thus offering alternative ways in which to understand the functions and meanings of such photographs (p. 47).

Selected photographs were reflecting some key elements of the Kemalist reforms of that epoch, aiming to meet with the “level of contemporary civilizations” (*muasır medeniyetler seviyesi*) as the popular motto of that era which represents the ideals of the New Republic (p.16) Her discussion offers a glimpse into the impact of the then ongoing political atmosphere created over the individual bodies. One can see the public and private spheres were being redesigned for modern Turkish women and men in the 1920s and 1930s, as photography becomes a popular medium to capture significant milestones in the lives of modern families, like religious holidays, engagements, weddings, births, birthdays, and circumcision ceremonies (p.154). Accordingly, one can also see how amateur photography was becoming popular as studios became more affordable while photography was being promoted and was rapidly integrated into the public and private sphere among modern middle-class households as an art form and part of a modern middle-class lifestyle (p. 28, 35).

The changing structure of the family and the gender roles were clearly defined via constructed male and female roles of the modern nuclear family (p. 146). During this period, looking at how urban middle-class Turkish women negotiated the Republican ideal of the “perfect woman” in formal portraits taken in and outside studio settings as modern secular citizens, shows the transition from the Ottoman Empire to the Turkish Republic, thus reflects the drastic social and political transformations that the Turkish society went through under the Kemalist regime. The shift in the desired image of masculinity for urban middle-class men was less radical between the late Ottoman and early Republican periods than that in the normative image of femininity (p. 84), while soldier portraits reinforced and promulgated the image of the modern male citizen across geography, class, and age as photography served to perpetuate the military-nation myth across the country (p. 119). Calafato examines poses, postures and compositions to see the kinds of portrayals that were performed (p. 43).

I examine how the performativity of an image negotiates self-expression, agency, memory, identity, and nation-building. I also emphasize how the performative power of photography is not independent of the interventions of the photographer, the posing subject, and the camera as an apparatus. I discuss the nature of such interventions and their contribution to redefining individual, family and national narratives, as well as their impact on the evolution of photographic practices. (p. 45)

Calafato’s research reflects the relationship between photography and everyday life while looking at how the socio-political sphere has an impact on what’s happening in front of the camera; by analyzing these images with some crucial questions. She draws a socio-political portrait of an era in transformation and as the sum of what they represent and what they hide: these photographs are speaking louder than what they are showing. The structure of the research includes varying information to understand the time frame: historical details of photography studios, promotional implications like photography contests or advertisements, changing reforms creating an impact on the characteristics of social life from clothing to posing, from gender dynamics to family structures, etc. Following the footsteps of Calafato’s research in this sense, one can learn to practice studying photography in a stronger manner.

The book, which is based on Calafato’s PhD thesis, highly benefits from the academic heritage around photography studies, vernacular photography and feminist theory. She mentions that “even though many

scholars have explored the dynamics of late Ottoman-era photography, the scholarship on vernacular photography in modern Turkey, particularly from the early Republican era, remains scarce,” while the studio portraits and amateur snapshots are also not frequently discussed. Calafato also highlights how photography archives and collections in Turkey tend not to fully acknowledge the significance of the vernacular, as she mentions the ways in which she wants this research to contribute to this field of study. (p.48) She carefully uses the notes section of the book to guide the reader who might be interested in further details.

In conclusion, Calafato’s research opens a window towards the zeitgeist of an epoch for Turkish modernist turn via a selection of vernacular photographs. Accordingly, her work showcases a precious analysis that adds up to the vernacular photography studies. Following this examination, it’s clearly possible to feel the socio-political agenda of an era and the impact it creates on the social life by looking at the everyday photographs created within and beyond the norms of representation.

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