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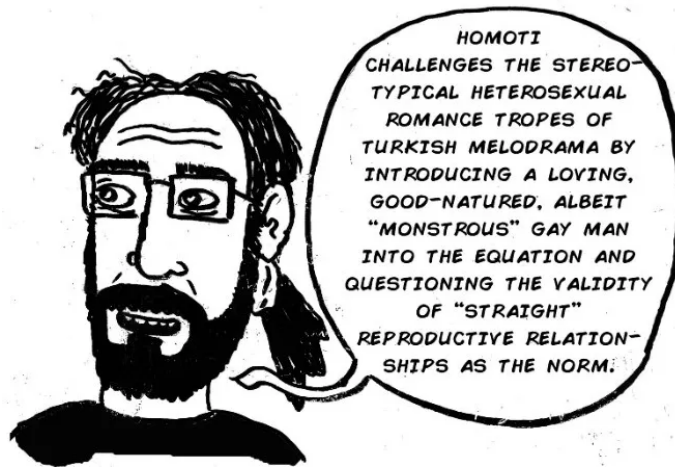
Tra ricerca e fabulazione

Can Yalçinkaya's comic scholarship against the zombification of academia

by Valentina Marcella

Introduction: *E.T.*'s journey from Hollywood to Turkey and Australia

«[A]n experiment in making scholarly comics»: this is how Can Yalçinkaya defines his publication titled *Homoti: The Turkish Gay E.T. Remake* (Yalçinkaya, 2018b), a first-person essay conveyed through comics about «the weird and wonderful story of the Turkish gay E.T. movie» [1]. Yalçinkaya is a Turkish-born, Sydney-based scholar, but also multidisciplinary artist, musician, translator, editor and curator. As a comic artist, he has authored and edited several comic projects, while – perhaps less predictably – resorting to comics also for academic purposes.



Homoti: The Turkish Gay E.T. Remake; © Can Yalçinkaya.

Yalçinkaya is part of an expanding community of scholars who experiment with the comic medium to deliver their research. This rising trend is testified, for instance, by the launch in 2017 of *Sequentials*, an online, peer reviewed, open-access academic journal for scholarly work conveyed in the comic form. This is precisely where the comic essay about *Homoti* was published, in 2018. Yet, there is more about this publication: in the same year Yalçinkaya self-published a limited number of copies for *Other Worlds*, a zine fair held in Sydney. This version is enriched with a cover and extra pages – from which the quotes in the opening sentence of the present work are taken.

Homoti is a crucial example of Yalçinkaya's contribution to scientific research through artistic imagination, and of his ability to push the boundaries of academic knowledge both in terms of content and dissemination. The present essay discusses Yalçinkaya's academic and creative work more broadly, to reflect on his endeavor to re-signify research and knowledge through alternative artistic practices and codes. The analysis is based on a selection of his publications in traditional text, comic, and hybrid form, and on conversations between Yalçinkaya and myself that took place through November and December 2024, above all a semi-structured video interview (Yalçinkaya, 2024b) and a written interview (Yalçinkaya, 2024c).

First seeds: comics as hobby

Yalçinkaya's experience with comics has a long history that predates his academic career and, as it is not hard to imagine, before turning into a comic maker he was a keen comics reader. According to his own recollection, he discovered comics around the age of five, «before knowing how to read» (Yalçinkaya, 2024b), through the Italian comic series *Diabolik*. It should be clarified that in the mid-1980s the Turkish newspaper *Günaydın* distributed *Diabolik* as a free supplement, an initiative that granted it reach to a wide audience. This circumstance explains young Yalçinkaya's access to this publication, that was (is) intended for an adult readership. After *Diabolik*, he recalls having discovered children's and young adult comics: initially the Belgian *Lucky Luke*, *The Adventures of Tintin*, *Spirou & Fantasio* and the French *Asterix*; later, the Italian *Mister No*, *Ken Parker*, *Zagor*, *Il Grande Blek* and the American *Spider-Man* and *Superman* (Yalçinkaya, 2024b).

In his teenage years Yalçinkaya began to experiment with comic making. This activity started as a hobby pursued with a group of friends, and included a sharing practice consisting in exchanging each other's comics (Yalçinkaya, 2024b). Looking back at this first amateur experience in perspective, it is possible to notice two essential characteristics of Yalçinkaya's later positioning; namely, the willingness to share his comic work and, nonetheless, the absence of commercial purposes.

These first comics also feature a narrative choice that would become a trademark of his later production, i.e. the autobiographical element. Actually, Yalçinkaya explains that in this early production he often imagined his cartoon avatar in fantastical, rather than realistic situations. In this respect, he mentions several artists in Turkey's comic tradition – Ersin Karabulut, Memo Tembelçizer, Kemal Aratan and the late Galip Tekin and Oğuz Aral – who drew their cartoon avatars in stories that were also fictional and fantastical, and thus “gave [him] a taste of what is possible” (Yalçinkaya, 2024b). Conversely, in the following sections we will see that in Yalçinkaya's later, scholarly comics his avatar acts in realistic scenarios inspired by real situations.

The teenage years also provided Yalçinkaya with the first occasion to combine

his comics activity with the education dimension. In the framework of an English class, he recalls, he once made a comic story as a term project. In this story he narrated how he and his friends had spent a recent holiday (Yalçinkaya, 2024b); so, again, the autobiographical trait emerges as central. In addition, this experience counts as his first comic delivered as an assignment, as years later he would do more systematically with his comic and hybrid essays. Moreover, this is his first comic in English, which would then become his main working language.

Migration and academia, path to disillusion

The following years brought substantial changes in Yalçinkaya's life. After obtaining a Bachelor of Arts in American Culture and Literature and a Master of Science in Media and Cultural Studies, respectively from two prestigious universities in Ankara, he migrated to Australia. In Sydney he started a doctoral programme, researching the expressions of melancholy in Turkish cinema and popular music.

During the PhD years, Yalçinkaya started to work on a webcomic that appears particularly noteworthy for the present argument. In this humorous comic, titled *Macabresque*, a group of PhD students must face a zombie invasion of their university campus. The story features Yalçinkaya himself among the protagonist students, along with some actual friends. The invasion turns out to be a conspiracy to intentionally turn scholars into zombies, in order to ultimately exploit them as cheap labor (Yalçinkaya, 2024b).

In addition to aspects similar to those of Yalçinkaya's previous comics, like the author's presence as a character, *Macabresque* introduces important innovations, above all a reflection on the state of academia. The fact that a scholar who is familiar with comic making brings his profession into a comic story is not necessarily surprising; what is peculiar here is the decision to turn to this medium to reflect on academia itself. In other words, a comic story related to Yalçinkaya's PhD topic, or to a close research interest, would have been perfectly in line with his profile; instead, with *Macabresque* he recurred to comics to denounce neoliberal academia.

Indeed, the idea to problematize the professional field to which he belongs elevates the centrality of the autobiographical element to a new level. In fact, *Macabresque* may be deemed an expression of Yalçinkaya's disillusion with academia. This feeling will grow stronger after completing his PhD, when the challenges and contradictions of neoliberal university priorities will become all the more evident, especially in relation to publishing and employment dynamics. These dynamics will have a strong impact on Yalçinkaya's following path, coming to shape his scholarly production and critique of academia.

From “Academia” to “Zinetopia”

After obtaining his PhD, Yalçinkaya experienced the well-known difficulty of obtaining a permanent academic position. The sense of uncertainty for the future derived by short term contracts was amplified, in his case, by his migrant condition. As he explains in a hybrid essay published twelve years after *Macabresque*: «[i]n the case of migrant academics, casual contracts essentially make them ‘guest workers’, who are not only impermanent in their workplace but also temporary entrants in their host country» (Yalçinkaya, 2022, p. 915). Currently, Yalçinkaya is employed in an Australian university with a position that entails responsibilities in between academic and administrative. He defines this position «interstitial», perceiving himself as holding «an awkward space in the peripheries of academia» (Yalçinkaya, 2024c).

In the hybrid essay just mentioned, Yalçinkaya provides a thorough reflection on his personal trajectory. This highly self-conscious paper, titled *Autographics as Autoethnography: Comic Book Adventures of a Migrant Academic* (Yalçinkaya, 2022), discusses how the experience of migration pushed him to seek refuge in academia as a community to belong, and how, conversely, academic precarity produced a further sense of displacement. His familiarity with comics got him close to the Australian alternative comics and zine scene, where he found a diverse, mutually supportive community, that «elevate[s] each other's works and amplif[ies] the voices of minorities» (Yalçinkaya, 2022, p. 914). This scene proved to be the welcoming space he was looking for.

Despite his dissatisfaction with university dynamics, Yalçinkaya did not abandon

his academic career in favor of an exclusively artistic path. Nor did he decide to keep his identity as researcher and as comic artist separate. On the contrary, he brought his academic self into this newly found scene, beginning to experiment with creative research. In *Autographics as Autoethnography*, he eloquently defines this transition as a «metaphorical migration from ‘Academia’ to ‘Zinetopia’» (Yalçinkaya, 2022, p. 911).

The academic subject in the comics

Yalçinkaya started to connect with the Australian alternative comics and zine scene in 2014 (Yalçinkaya, 2022 p. 914), that is one year after finishing his PhD. Looking at his production since then, it is possible to detect at least three levels at which said “metaphorical migration” took place, namely the subject, the methodology, and the dissemination level.

As far as the subject level is concerned, his creative research appears largely inspired by the topic of his PhD thesis. Turkish cinema and popular music, more broadly popular culture, emerge as a favorite subject, which he explores in connection with melancholy, like in his doctoral research, but also with migration.

A first example is *Wounds of Difference* (Yalçinkaya, 2016), a six-page comic that presents a sociological analysis of Turkish *arabesk* music from a migration perspective. Here Yalçinkaya observes that, while in Turkey this music genre is generally associated with working-class melancholy, middle class migrant Turks in Australia adopted it as a symbol of national identity.



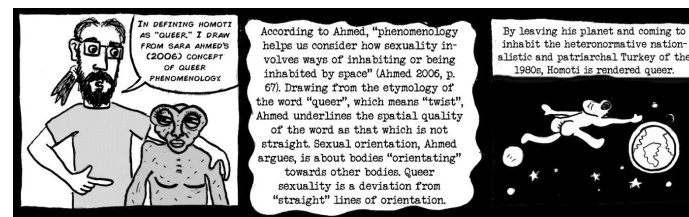
Wounds of Difference; © Can Yalçinkaya.

Music is central also to *Taksim/ταξιμι/ميسيق* (Yalçinkaya, 2017a; Yalçinkaya, 2017b), a fifty-two-page comic in two parts titled after a melodic musical improvisation common to Turkish, Greek and Arabic cultures. The comic addresses Turkish, Greek and Lebanese migration and mass migration through the biographies of famous singers from these countries, to reflect on migrants' feelings of belonging and estrangement, and how they connect to the homeland through music.



Taksim/تaksim/ميسيق; © Can Yalçinkaya.

Cinema, then, comes into play in the comic mentioned at the beginning of the present essay, in which Yalçinkaya provides a queer reading of Turkey's *E.T.* remake *Homoti* (Yalçinkaya, 2018b). This thirteen-page work analyses this movie in relation to the broader history of Turkey's cinema industry, while also stressing its particular importance in the framework of the 1980 military coup and the changing cultural norms that characterized the following decade.



Homoti: The Turkish Gay *E.T.* Remake; © Can Yalçinkaya.

The researcher's "self"

Methodology emerges as the level where Yalçinkaya's "metaphorical migration" produced the major break from traditional academia, and where his critique becomes most explicit. The autobiographical element was introduced in the previous sections as a peculiar trait since his first comics dating back to his teenage years, inspired by Turkish comic artists' experiments in this sense. Nonetheless, his later experience in academia prompted him to elaborate a

structured reflection on this aspect, especially in relation to the presence and visibility of the scholar into their research.

Drawing on theories of situated knowledge and standpoint epistemology (Yalçinkaya, 2024b), Yalçinkaya came to elaborate his critique of traditional scholarly writing practices, distancing himself from the idea of the scholar as an objective person able to establish distance between themselves and their research topic. Instead, he asserts his presence by drawing himself in the comics, adopting autobiographical comics as an autoethnographic research method. This shift explains why the fictional and fantastical dimensions that characterized his earlier production have disappeared from his more recent autobiographical comics. In his own words: «I am particularly drawn to the deeply personal, self-deprecating, humorous performances of honesty and authenticity that are often found in autobiographical comics, which can subvert the image of the all-knowing, confident and infallible academic researcher when applied in works of graphic scholarship» (Yalçinkaya, 2022 p. 916).

Wounds of Difference and *Taksim/ταξίμι/ميسق* are exemplary of this methodology, and of his continuous questioning and reinventing his role as researcher. In the former, the class analysis of *arabesk* music in Australia's Turkish migrant community is framed by a concert that Yalçinkaya attended in person in Sydney, that allowed him to observe middle class migrant Turks reacting to this music. His presence at the concert was not in the guise of an objective observer; on the contrary, at the very beginning his avatar states: «I'm here to have fun. But I have a second agenda as a Turkish pop culture scholar» (Yalçinkaya, 2016, p. 1). Provocatively, the comic ends with Yalçinkaya deciding to stop analyzing and simply enjoy the rest of the gig.



Wounds of Difference; © Can Yalçinkaya.

Similarly, the idea for *Taksim/ταξίμι/ميسق* was born when Yalçinkaya found some Greek records in a local charity shop, and decided to inquire their journey to Australia (Yalçinkaya, 2024b). The main subject of this comic, namely Greek, Turkish and Lebanese migration and music, is framed by Yalçinkaya's personal reflection on music and nostalgia, and on his growing collection of Turkish records as a form of Turkish heritage to pass on to his children. Here, too, his academic and non-academic self appear deeply intertwined, not without some challenges, especially as his avatar self-ironically admits: «I hear some *bağlama* or *arabesk* violin and the facade of the Western academic I constructed crumbles ...», (Yalçinkaya, 2017b, p. 16).



Taksim/تaksim/ميسيق; © Can Yalçınkaya.

Alternative publishing spaces

Yalçınkaya's critique of traditional academia translates also in the alternative practices that he came to elaborate for the dissemination of his creative research. Initially, his autobiographical comics were imagined primarily for the alternative comics and zine community, and contingently for an academic audience (Yalçınkaya, 2022, p. 91). *Wounds of Difference*, for instance, was published in a collection of illustrations, comics and cartoons made by over sixty authors from around the world and edited by Australian writer and illustrator Sam Wallman. *Taksim/تaksim/ميسيق* was even conceived as a self-publication from the outset, to be self-distributed at different zine fairs.

Whereas discontent with academic publishing logics may be deemed the general reason for this trajectory, another reason is that initially Yalçınkaya was not aware of academic journals that would accept comics (Yalçınkaya, 2024b). In

fact, later works like *Homoti* and *Autographics as Autoethnography* show that he does publish in academic journals that welcome comic and hybrid papers. It is worth stressing that the journals in question are available in open access, thus, to some extent, present ideals of free knowledge circulation similar to the ones promoted by alternative comics and zines communities.

It may be claimed that the discovery of academic publications open to alternative modes of scholarly production allowed Yalçinkaya to re-enter the academic publishing space at his own terms. His publishing choices show that he did not surrender to the logics of traditional academia; on the contrary, by bringing his alternative model into the academic sphere he carried his critique to its core. Clearly, the growing number of academic journals that accept, reflect on, and encourage creative research represents an important opportunity to build a more conscious academia, not only for him but for the whole scholarly community.

Conclusion: *E.T.*'s journey ends up in Italy

The present essay opens with *Homoti* and returns to this comic essay for some final considerations. As already stated, after *Homoti*'s official online, open-access, academic publication, Yalçinkaya adapted it into a print comic. We will now clarify that the adaptation entailed the creation of a front and back cover, and of a final paragraph acknowledging the genesis of each of the two versions. Yalçinkaya also modified his short bio, turning it from the third to the first person and adding more details, including his email address. Finally, this version has an additional two-page section titled *Some Other Turkish Sci-fi Movies*, that offers a panoramic look at Turkey's science fiction cinema from the 1950s to the 2010s and that – borrowing from the music world – appears as a sort of “bonus track”.

The adaptation of *Homoti* shows that not only Yalçinkaya's production in general, but also his single comics may move across several dimensions, from the

internet to festivals, from digital to analog. It also shows that the transition from one dimension to the other may represent an opportunity to enrich a single comic with additional elements. Last but not least, it shows that Yalçinkaya's ability to let his work transcend conventions and boundaries may create unexpected opportunities for further dissemination and discussion: in fact, adding my own autobiographical element, I will end by disclosing that the present essay was inspired by the print version of *Homoti* that Yalçinkaya kindly gifted me with when we first met in person, at a conference in Italy.

Note

[1] I wish to thank Can Yalçinkaya for his availability throughout the preparation phase of this contribution, for sharing his thoughts and experience, and for sharing his published and unpublished work with me.

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