

**GAME SHOWS AS RITUALIZATION IN SPECTACLE
SOCIETY: THE CASE OF
“VAR MISIN YOK
MUSUN”¹**

Pınar Umul

Izmir University of Economics

Faculty of Communication

Department of Public Relations and Advertising

+90 232 488 82 99

pinar.umul@ieu.edu.tr & pinarumul@gmail.com

Abstract

This study aims to shed light on the media perception of Turkish audience through the case of “Var mısın Yok musun”. The game show has become one of the biggest phenomena in recent years, differentiating itself from other shows in the same genre. The program is an adaptation from a format that has been watched with great interest abroad and while it was broadcasted for two years in Turkey, it got high ratings and became a program that has been watched and talked about.

The main concerns for the article revolve around examining the reasons behind the popularity of “Var mısın Yok musun”. Do the viewers of “Var mısın Yok musun” see the program as a spectacle or are they gathering around the community created by the program? Was this program only watched for entertainment purposes and as an escape from the problems of everyday life? What is the significance of cooperation and ritualization within the program? In this study, how “Var mısın Yok musun” generates a ‘spectacle’ will be analyzed with an ethnomethodological perspective and attempts to reveal how the audience perceives around these situations/rituals/emotions will be made.

Keywords: “Var mısın Yok musun”, spectacle society, game show, ethnomethodology

¹ This paper was presented in “İletişim ve Kültürel Çalışmalar Konferansı 2010” on July 18, 2010; held by Bilkent University in Ankara.

Özet

Bu çalışmada, “Var mısın Yok musun” örneği üzerinden Türk izleyicisinin medya algısına ışık tutulması amaçlanmıştır. Bahsi geçen yarışma programı, türündeki diğer programlardan sıyrılarak son yıllardaki en büyük fenomenlerden biri haline gelmiştir. Yurtdışında büyük ilgiyle izlenen bir formatın adaptasyonu olan program, Türkiye’de yayımlandığı iki yıl boyunca yüksek reytingler almış ve hem izlenen hem de konuşulan bir program haline gelmiştir.

Makale, “Var mısın Yok musun”un popülaritesinin nedenlerini açıklamak üzerine yoğunlaşmıştır. “Var mısın Yok musun”un izleyicileri programı bir gösteri olarak mı ele almakta, yoksa programın yarattığı cemaatin etrafında mı toplanmaktaydı? Program sadece eğlence amacıyla ve gündelik hayatın problemlerinden bir kaçış olarak mı izlenmekteydi? Program dahilindeki yardımlaşma ve ritüelleşmenin önemi nedir? Bu incelemede, “Var mısın Yok musun”un hangi yollarla bir 'gösteri' ürettiği etnometodolojik bir perspektifle ele alınacak ve izleyicilerin programdaki durum, ritüel ve duyguları nasıl algıladıkları açığa çıkarılmaya çalışılacaktır.

I – Introduction: Popular Culture and “Postmodern Television” in Turkey

Before talking about how popular culture has been transformed in Turkey, I have to define the use of popular culture and its connotations as a term. Popular culture can be defined differently according to different contexts. “Popular” refers to something that is liked by many people, to inferior work, to designs that attempt to address many people and culture *for* the people. The more pessimistic definitions are the second and the third ones, connotating something closer to mass culture, which is seen as the exact opposite of high culture. If we take television programs within popular culture, many of them fall into the first category; that is programs which are liked by a wide audience.

When we take television programs as a spectacle, this definition of popular culture resonates the most for me: “Popular culture is the culture of everyday life. In a narrow sense, it includes entertainment as an input for the reproduction of workforce. In a broader sense, it provides the preconditions for the ideological reproduction of a certain lifestyle.” (Oktay, 1993, s.15) Both popular culture and mass culture – which has been so much criticized – are very much related to everyday life. Still, mass culture holds a more negative connotation because consumers of mass culture are lulled into a false consciousness. Popular culture has more chance in surviving the dominance of ideology; it includes the potential of creation of culture *for* the people, as

stated earlier in the definitions of popular. Television as a leading tool in dissemination of popular culture also provides audiences with such freedom. In earlier studies, audience was perceived to be absorbing the inscribed, preferred meaning within media texts. It is still valid that media institutions or producers encode a certain preferred meaning inside a media text, but "once the social event has taken the form of televisual discourse, the formal rules of language and discourse are 'in dominance'; the message is now open to the play of polysemy." (Storey, 2003, s.11) Even though media texts are penetrated by implicit inscriptions of the dominant ideology, due to the polysemic nature of texts, that is being open to many readings and interpretations, there is a hegemonical interaction between the encoding and decoding processes. Popular culture is where we see the flow of this hegemonical interaction: The media text is subject to the reception of fragmented views of an active audience, not an absorbing one.

Even though popular culture seems to be enabling the different interpretations within the culture, we should keep in mind the criticism directed at Stuart Hall's Encoding/Decoding Model: there are only three ways of reading, dominant, negotiated and oppositional. As the most common reading is the negotiated one, it should be stressed that the society still operates within a frame; a frame that is drawn by the internalized values. In this case, we should not be surprised to see that there are a limited range of negotiated readings. Popular culture, due to its accessibility and appeal to a wider audience, is criticized as a means for creating an awareness that lacks critical thinking. Just like mass culture, popular culture is accused of ideologically manipulating people even in their leisure time. As I have stated earlier, popular culture is problematized as a base provider for the ideological reproduction of a certain lifestyle and "it creates the atmosphere for the validation and proliferation of daily ideology." (Oktay, 1993, s.35) In this case, popular culture is not the escape from false consciousness; it manipulates people into alienation that is perpetuated by certain apparatuses, entertainment industry having the most penetration into our everyday lives. Entertainment industry is the main source of spectacles that provide us with virtual spaces and illusions. Through these illusions, it becomes harder to distinguish between reality and representation. Television is the medium in which we experience those spectacles most, in an isolated manner.

Postmodern television is a concept that signifies the relation of media to postmodern culture. Postmodernism can be taken both as a negative and a positive view towards media, especially television, depending on the context:

If we take a negative view of postmodernism, as the domain of simulations, then television seems an obvious example of the process

– with its supposed reduction of the complexities of the world to

an ever-changing flow of depthless and banal visual imagery. If, on the other hand, we take a positive view of postmodernism, then the visual and verbal practices of television can be put forward, say, as the knowing play of intertextuality... encouraging and helping to produce, the sophisticated *bricoleur* of postmodern culture. (Storey, 2004, s.164)

If we take entertainment industry as our main focus and evaluate it under the light of spectacles, we have to take the negative view of postmodernism into consideration. Television is perceived as a commercial medium by entertainment business, and it incorporates the manipulation of masses for a commercial success. Certain strategies are used to attract the attention of the widest audience possible, and these strategies are manipulative in the sense that it gives the audience what it wants – or lacks. In our case, I hypothesize that “Var mısın Yok musun”, as a seemingly ordinary piece of the entertainment industry, aims to create a spectacle that penetrates our everyday lives and provides an unreal space that is more sacralized than the real thing. Even though there are both academic and popular debates on whether Turkey has become (or is becoming) a postmodern society or not, I believe that today's Turkey is not a postmodern society but a *postmodern-literate* society. Through entertainment industry and its products, the society became used to fragmented views and the togetherness of conflicting values. “Var mısın Yok musun” provides viewers with such conflicting values: a game show that is – or should be – based on competition but instead, there is cooperation, support and a welcoming atmosphere. In order to understand this togetherness of conflict, we should examine the format of the spectacle and its ritual.

II - Game Show as Spectacle: Debord and Bourdieu

The title of this article refers to Guy Debord's book *The Society of The Spectacle*, first published in French in 1967. In his theoretical book, Debord criticizes modern societies which are being dominated by spectacles that alienate them from productivity and critical thinking. Spectacle invades social life by representations that offer an illusion. The book has deep political and economical connections with Marxist ideology but for our purposes, I will be analyzing the spectacle as “media spectacle”, which also invades our everyday lives.

Throughout the book, there are references to entertainment industry and the mass media in general. Mass media, by its high level of penetration and impact on our lives, offer us images that resemble the social life but these images are highly mediated. According to Debord (2004), these images are representations of reality, “Everything that was directly lived has receded into a representation.” (s.7) Mass media offer us a pseudo-world of pleasure, images and illusion. In

fact, there is a hierarchy of the illusion over the reality; in a society which is mediated by spectacles, the spectacle becomes "more real" than the actual social life. Moreover, as entertainment industry has high access to our everyday lives since we are so used to its presence, this mutual habituality normalizes our view as a spectator. "The spectator does not feel at home anywhere, because the spectacle is everywhere." (Debord, 2004, s. 16) As the society of the spectacle, we become accustomed to such interventions in our lives and we do not realize its power as we have internalized such interactions. These interactions with television today have become "postmodernized", as I have suggested in the previous section. Today's spectacle is much more complex than it was in modern times of entertainment industry and even though Turkey is not so much familiar with postmodern culture in every aspect of life, audiences are used to watching the togetherness of such complex images and stimuli in entertainment shows; that is why I call Turkish society as postmodern-literate.

Fragmented views of reality regroup themselves into a new unity as a *separate pseudo-world* that can only be looked at. The specialization of images of the world evolves into a world of autonomised images where even the deceivers are deceived." (Debord, 2004, s.7) Indeed, this thesis of Debord is very much parallel to how entertainment industry works and how audience perceives these spectacles. Television spectacles offer us a united and virtual world that is definitely apart from the real world, but at the same time they consist of various elements or features that indicate to a "half-realness". By fragmented views of reality, we may take the example of our case and its ordinary group of people. 24 people who does not know each other – there is a big chance that they would never get to know each other under natural conditions too – get together under the same roof of the "Var mısın Yok musun" studio and by the help of media production we are subjected to an artificial realness that we often lose ourselves in. Debord's thesis is also valid for many products of the mass media; nearly everything we watch on television has become a spectacle: soap operas, sports games, political caucuses and even television news. Bourdieu (1998) in his book *On Television* also emphasizes the importance of everything being a spectacle and becoming ordinary:

The object – news – is constructed in accordance with the perceptual categories of the receiver.. [T]he collective activity I've described works so well precisely because of this homogenization, which smoothes over things, brings them into line, and depoliticizes them. And it works even though, strictly speaking, this activity is without a subject, that is, no one ever thought of or wished for it as such. This is something that is observed frequently in social life.(s. 44)

Bourdieu goes on with criticizing television shows in general and states that they offer “slices of life” to a large audience. These slices of life often reveal extreme behavior, aimed at satisfying a kind of voyeurism and exhibitionism. He notes that TV game shows that people are dying to get on, either as a contestant or as a member of the studio audience, to have some visibility in this spectacle are another example. (Bourdieu, 1998, s.48) When we consider “Var mısın Yok musun” in accordance with Bourdieu's points, we may really observe that what the audience gets from the TV show is fragmented slices of the contestants' lives and wanting to watch, to learn about these ordinary people's lives can be viewed as a kind of voyeurism. The demand for authenticity directs the society of the spectacle to look further into the personal details of contestants' lives.

Debord (2004) in his book argues that in order to understand how the spectacle works and to analyze it, “we are obliged to a certain extent to use the spectacle's own language, in the sense that we have to operate on the methodological terrain of the society that expresses itself in the spectacle.” (s.9) In this case, we have to get familiar with how “Var mısın Yok musun” has its own peculiar codes inscribed within its operation as a spectacle and how it uses ritualized forms in order to attract Turkish audience. With the power of the spectacle, separate individuals come together for the shared experience of mass entertainment.

III - Game Show as a Hybrid Genre

Game show genre occupies a big place both visually and financially in the entertainment industry. It is one of the most entertaining and most profitable genres in the popular culture globally. In addition to this, it is one of the genres that we “consume” the most in our everyday lives; while relaxing our minds, doing housework, gathering for a family night at home, we can be found watching these game shows. In Turkey, there is a long history of popular game shows, especially since 1990s. At first, word games and quiz shows conquered the hearts of many

television watchers such as Riziko, Turnike, Bir Kelime Bir İşlem, Çarkıfelek, Kim 500 Milyar İster? etc. The common point of those game shows was that they had a group of contestants that either had one chance to contest in the game – meaning that we did not see them more than once in our televisual experiences – or one individual that contests alone with the presenter of the game. With a few exceptions, none of the contestants remained in our minds for a long time or had the chance to get into entertainment business.

Game show as a genre started to evolve in time, both in global scale and in Turkey. I believe that the year 2000 marks the change in this genre from individual gaming to collective spectacles to be consumed, by the importation of Big Brother broadcasted as Biri Bizi Gözetliyor in Turkey. After the success of this format, combined with the demands from the popular culture – demanding more “real” televisual experiences - , other game shows had to adapt to this new phenomenon. What emerged at the end is the format which mixes game shows with another popular genre, reality TV. “Var mısın Yok musun” as my case for the game show constitutes such a hybrid format.

How can we relate reality TV genre to game show genre? Before comparing and contrasting these two genres, we shall see how reality TV as a genre is defined:

We define 'reality television' as an unabashedly commercial genre united less by aesthetic rules or certainties than by the fusion of popular entertainment with a self-conscious claim to the discourse of the real... [W]e have seen the rapid proliferation of television programming that promises to provide nonscripted access to “real” people in ordinary and extraordinary situations.” (Murray ve Ouelette, 2009, s.3)

There is a subgenre of reality TV known as “gamedoc”, referring to popular programs such as Survivor and Big Brother. The term combines the form of game shows and documentary features that serve for entertainment purposes. These programs feature ordinary people within artificial but real locations and their lives within that media platform. The audience has access to those people's lives while they are within ordinary situations (a group of people in a house in Big Brother) or extraordinary situations (people on an island in Survivor), as the authors suggest. In this case, “Var mısın Yok musun” is not categorized under gamedocs, but access to “real people” is definitely emphasized within the format. Compared to these gamedocs, “Var mısın Yok musun” is enacted in a virtual space, is composed of a live audience, a presenter, neon lights and big

screens and the program does not claim to be producing a reality discourse. Still, the program has “authenticity”, which is a very important feature in reality TV. Murray and Ouelette (2009) argue that the inclusion of authentic personalities, situations, problems and narratives are considered as reality TV's primary distinction among other genres and also its primary selling point as a product of entertainment industry (s.5). Similarly, “Var mısın Yok musun” as a distinct kind of game show deals with such authenticities and it is one of the main reasons why this program has been so much popular and became one of the recent television phenomenon. If we take 2000 as the marking point, ever since audiences have experienced many similar formats and therefore have become more able to identify between representation and reality:

Reality television appears to mark the point at which this form of television actually loses contact with the documentary roots which provided some signs of a relationship with reality. But perhaps such programs are popular because they are a way of both recognizing the mediations, performances and contortions of the mass media and still retaining the faith in notion of reality which has to be reached through constructions that are overtly fictional rather than documentary. (Geraghty, 2005, s.57)

Even though audiences have become used to these mediated experiences, they still prefer to believe in the authenticity of people and their actions in such shows. As the interviews I did for this research show, Turkish audiences also share the belief that “Var mısın Yok musun” is a scripted and mediated game show, nevertheless, it features ordinary and “real” people who are not afraid of revealing their true selves and emotions on television. For the regular audience of “Var mısın Yok musun”, what is important is the real-self within the mediated atmosphere and (sometimes extreme) emotional expression. The contestants are perceived as staying true to themselves and it is not so much important whether they are within a scripted game show or not.

IV - Why is this program worth studying?

In the academic field, especially after the celebration of postmodernist/post-structuralist era, fragmented cultures and views started to be taken more seriously and more worthy of studying. “Death of the author” brought about a new mindset to the communication field and audience became empowered ever since they gained the position to be active viewers rather than passive consumers. Television studies benefited from this new perspective and audience research became a popular study. Styles and tastes of individuals in their everyday lives have come to the forefront. This research aims to shed light on Turkish audience's media perception

while framing the study with a specific popular entertainment case. In addition to this, the particularity of this case among its genre also makes it worth studying. Many articles I have reviewed focused either on reality shows or on game shows as risk-taking practices, whereas this article deals with game show as a hybridized genre that combines media representation and everyday reality.

V - "“Var mısın Yok musun”?" Game Show Format

“Var mısın Yok musun” was a popular game show broadcasted between September 2007 and October 2009 in Turkish television channel Show TV. It was hosted by Acun Ilıcalı, who is a regular presenter of Show TV and is known for his successful adaptations of imported formats. “Var mısın Yok musun” is also an adaptation of the game show “Deal or No Deal”, which was founded first by Dutch production company Endemol, which has become a joint venture with shareholders around the world, including Turkey. Their most profitable format so far is “Deal or No Deal”; other successful television shows include Big Brother (BBG in Turkey), Wheel of Fortune (Çarkıfelek in Turkey) Extreme Makeover (can be watched by satellite TV in Turkey), Fear Factor, Survivor and Wipeout (all imported with same names in Turkey).

“Deal or No Deal” was imported to more than 100 countries around the world. With varying durations between several countries, “Var mısın Yok musun” lasts more than 2.5 hours. First broadcasted right before main news bulletin, with 22 contestants and 250.000 TL as the big prize, after increasing its ratings it was moved to the primetime with 24 contestants and 500.000 TL

money prize. The format is flexible in the countries broadcasted, with number of contestants, amount of the big prize or the prizes themselves varying. In “Var mısın Yok musun”, 24 contestants choose upon 24 cases with different amounts of money in them. The cases are sealed and are not opened until the contestant of the day tells them to be opened. Contestant of the day is chosen by drawing and gets his own case with him. Contestants do not know the amount of money they are holding in their cases.

The atmosphere of the game show is such: there is a table where the presenter of the show, contestant of the day and a black telephone is situated. Around them, there are 23 contestants with their sealed cases in front of them. The show is also open to audience participation and relatives or friends of contestant of the day sit at the front. At the beginning, a VTR is shown about the contestant and he shares his personal story with help from his supporters there. There is a big screen where the contestants can see the “money tree”, with amounts of money between 1 TL and 500.000

TL. The contestant chooses among other contestants to open their cases and asks them “how they feel about their own cases”. The fellow contestant tells him if he feels big or little,

meaning the amount of money. If he “feels big”, he advises the contestant not to open that box. The game is actually based on pure luck but for the sake of entertainment, the contestants constantly ask them about their feelings on the cases and role-players advise them about the chances of the case being big or little. After every three opened case, the presenter calls “Hamdi Bey”, an imaginary banker

on the other side of the line symbolized by the black telephone on the table. Hamdi Bey makes an

offer roughly based on the combination of the remaining amount of money and cases, the audience reception and the contestant's own state of mind at that moment. After hearing Hamdi Bey's offer, the contestant either accepts the offer by replying “Varım” or reject the offer and continues to open the cases by saying “Yokum”. The structure of the game requires opening the cases which has little amount of money continuously and therefore increasing the amount of the offer by the banker. The higher the case is opened, the lower the offer becomes. If the contestant does not accept any of the offers during the game, he automatically gets the money in his own box. If he accepts an offer at a certain point, the game is continued to see how much money he would have if he had continued.

VI - Media Rituals and Ritualization in “Var mısın Yok musun”

Ritualization is a key concept in analyzing “Var mısın Yok musun” as a spectacle. Before examining how “Var mısın Yok musun” uses ritualized forms in order to normalize the mediated atmosphere, we have to get a grasp of what “media ritual” includes as a term. In anthropology, there are three approaches to the term ritual:

- 1) habitual action (any habit or repeated pattern, whether or not it has a particular meaning);
- 2) formalised action (for example, the regular and meaningful pattern by which a table is laid for food in a particular culture);
- 3) action involving transcendent values (such as the Holy Communion, which in Christian contexts is understood as embodying a sense of direct contact with the ultimate value, God). (Couldry, 2005, s.3)

The first definition of the term is not very much related to media ritualization, it is more concerned with everyday patterns of behavior, like drinking one glass of water after having Turkish coffee. The second term defines actions that are regularly done in a formalized way. By integrating

repetition and forming a pattern, they become reproduced. Third term is also somehow formalized, but it is much more related with an essential link between rituality and social values. In the second one, form of the action is more important whereas in the third one the aimed value is prior to form. In the light of these definitions, media rituals come to be a combination of (2) and (3). Nick Couldry (2008) defines media rituals as such: "Media rituals are formalized actions organized around key media- boundaries whose performances suggest a connection with wider, media-related values." (s.85) These rituals refer to a wide range of situations that stand for a more fundamental level that connects us as members of a society, that is the society of the spectacle. As I have stated in the section Game Show as Spectacle, separate individuals who have nothing (or at least close to nothing) in common are connected through "Var mısın Yok musun" and its ritualized form reveals itself in these separate households. Similar to Benedict Anderson's concept "imagined communities", spectacles with their integration of rituals, form communities that are bind together for a televisual experience.

When we take hybridized game show genre as a ritualized spectacle, we witness that the repetitive forms within the program induce and reproduce categories and patterns of thought. The popularity of "Var mısın Yok musun" mainly comes from its ritualized practices and codes that are inscribed within its course. At this point, I believe that it is useful to go on with the ethnomethodological analysis of the game show and to point out how and which rituals are integrated within the program.

VII - Neighborhood as a Metaphor for the "Var mısın Yok musun" Crew

One of the main reasons why "Var mısın Yok musun" has been appealing to a wide audience is that the crew symbolizes our own neighborhoods and the everyday happenings in them. Even though neighborhood metaphor is not stated explicitly, it can be observed both visually and in between the lines. The presenter Acun Ilıcalı refers to the crew and himself as "Var mısın Yok musun family" but the metaphor here goes much more beyond the family metaphor. Sometimes the contestants standing next to each other address one another as "neighbor" and while asking about how they feel about their cases, they playfully threaten each other by saying that they would call off their neighborhood. In addition to this, the interaction between the crew members and their mode of addressing each other indicate such a metaphor. With this metaphor, the setting becomes much more familiar and closer to us. In order to analyze the relationship between the crew and the metaphor, we must first get familiar with the crew members. For our purposes, I will be analyzing the ones who seem to be the leading ones during most of the programs.

The presenter Acun Ilıcalı is a household name in Turkey. He has done many commercially successful television shows that Turkish audience has liked a lot. Even though the presenter

does not seem to be a key figure in this show, implicitly he is involved within the neighborhood metaphor. Many game shows in Turkey are known for its notable presenters, but in “Var mısın Yok musun”, Acun Ilıcalı deliberately withdraws his presence as a television personality during the course of the show. This is persuasive to audience, in the sense that he has become such a public figure as an ordinary man who seemed to be “one of us”. His rise to stardom has been in such a way, he had a good interaction with the public back then. In “Var mısın Yok musun”, Acun Ilıcalı is the ideal presenter; he does not aim to “steal the show”, on the contrary he tries to integrate himself within this neighborhood. He intervenes with the course of action as little as possible during the game. His presence there is to continue the flow of the show by probing the contestants for more entertaining remarks or to encourage the contestants to aim at the big prize.

Every neighborhood inholds a supportive father/brother and mother/sister figure and the crew's knowledgeable figures are Kemal and Nilgün. Kemal is a white haired man who is 42 years old and Nilgün is a blonde woman who is more or less at the same age with Kemal. As most of the crew is around early 20s to late 30s, they seek advice from Kemal or Nilgün for both the age and experience-in-life factors. Even though there is not a direct division between genders here, as most people do in their neighborhoods, younger crew members choose to get advice from the one of the same gender.

Still, Kemal holds very much importance to both male and female contestants. He is frequently called as “Kemal Abi” and he addresses the younger members as “Kardeşim” in return. He symbolizes a conservative figure according to his use of language, but he is also the one who encourage the contestants to take risks in the show if he feels necessary. In the neighborhood, Kemal is the person who advises the young to think wisely and to be a good person in order to achieve the best for them. He is frequently quoted saying, “Allah gönlüne göre versin”, “Kalbin temizse cenab-ı Allah bir şekilde sana onu nasip ediyor”, “O senin kalbinin temizliğinden kaynaklanıyor” etc. If Kemal is right about his feelings about the case, the crew members thankfully go to his side and they are joined in a state of happiness. He is perceived as straightforward and sincere.

Furkan is another crew member that the contestants turn to most, but in contrast to all other members, he does not speak much about his “feelings” on the cases. From the beginning of the game show, he noted the numbers of cases and how much money they were holding in each program. After doing so, he started to talk about the chances of each case being blue, yellow or red. In the neighborhood, Furkan takes up the role of the cute guy with brains. With his rational explanations, he is another sympathetic figure in the spectacle. He is perceived as easygoing and joyful.

As many reality shows do, “Var mısın Yok musun” has also witnessed the flourishing of love

between two contestants. Hakan and Gizem are the good looking couple in the neighborhood who always look in love and who are seen as a match made in heaven by other crew members. They are neighboring in the sense that they have been standing next to each other since the beginning of the program and they have attracted each others' attention in time. Their love for one another gets the approval of the other neighbors.

The "odd one out" concept is an important stereotype for the reality shows as they offer the audience comical figures. Stereotypes for foreigners and silly ones are often displayed during the game show. Seda is the Barbie doll of the show; the symbol for the blonde, pretty but overly emotional and mindless girl whereas Metin is the overweight guy with big hair. The presenter often makes sarcastic remarks at them, he accuses Seda of blabbing too much whereas he aims at Metin as a naive guy. There are also two foreigners who are symbols for our sympathy in the neighborhood, Tony and Hekim. Whatever they do, they are either found likeable or named as "one of us". This is very much parallel to the general Turkish view towards foreign people living in Turkey and attempting to speak Turkish.

The most emphasized odd-one-out in the game is Emin, who generates the most amusement among the audience. The presenter Acun Ilıcalı frequently makes fun of him and his use of Turkish words and idioms whereas Emin does not seem to understand his position as the center of the joke. Emin is a central character in the game since he has the power to change the flow of the situation during critical times. He is outspoken in a presumptuous way, in the middle of an important debate he may be talking about his own problems in a comical manner. For example, in the program in which the contestant won the big prize (dated October 24, 2009), Emin is asked for his feelings on his own case by the contestant. Until then, the contestant's mood (so was the audience's) was down due to the recent cases being blue. Then, out of the blue, Emin starts complaining about another crew member for having him on. He wants Acun Ilıcalı to warn Uğur for doing such things. Asked about what he has done, Emin says that Uğur has done a prank on him by calling him as a representative of an advertising agency and offering a leading role in a television commercial. He had gotten ecstatic about it until he figured out that Uğur was behind all this. Emin says, "Uğur ekmeğime yağ sürdü", meaning that he was trying to interfere with his potential career. He was supposed to use the idiom "ekmeğine taş koymak" and the presenter asks him if he knows what "ekmeğine yağ sürmek" means. He gives the wrong answer and becomes the center of the joke both for the crew members and the spectator. Acun Ilıcalı comments on his regular misuse of Turkish and tells the audience that Emin probably figures out the meanings of Turkish idioms on his own at home. After this, the presenter wants Emin to act out his role in a commercial and this amusing interaction between them lasts about seven minutes, which is pretty long for a game show.

The neighborhood metaphor, while symbolizing traditional values such as cooperation, wishing people luck, collectivity, gratuity and fellowship, also serves for the continuation of the program until the time slot for "Var mısın Yok musun" ends. An example of this occurs in

The program dated August 26, 2009. Osman from Şanlıurfa is the contestant of the day and he is going very strong in the first half of the program. He opens many of the blue cases while five cases with

500.000 TL still remain. He gets a call from the banker Hamdi Bey and Hamdi Bey wants Acun Ilıcalı to deliver his note to Osman. Acun Ilıcalı says that Hamdi Bey advises Osman to get advice from Furkan after hearing the offer. The offer is very high for a ordinary person at the time, around

100.000 TLs. Furkan advises him to get the money at that moment if the offer covers his personal needs. He talks about the chances of opening red cases and following offers to be made if he says “Yokum” to this offer. The atmosphere gets very serious and Osman seems to be seriously contemplating to get the money and go home. The key role here is the presenter's; Acun Ilıcalı asks other contestants what they think or what they would do if they were in Osman's place. He deliberately recognizes the people who would probably advice him to go on with the game and the ones who choose to go with the flow of their chances. The presenter even goes with voting on Osman's destiny, he wants the ones who would advise him to go on to raise their hands. As pressure wears on Osman, he declines the offer made by Hamdi Bey, chooses not to listen to Furkan and in the end, he gets a lower prize from the offer he had declined, just like Furkan predicted. In the light of this episode, we can say that the neighborhood metaphor also provides the opposition between fatality and rationality. While Furkan is the only symbol of rationality in the game, many other contestants believe in their faith and they constantly pressure others to go on, since “it is their mission to give 500.000 TLs to one of them”. Indeed, “Var mısın Yok musun” stayed true to its mission; the program ended when one of the contestants got the big prize.

VIII – Media Anthropology

As this article is concerned with shedding light on media perception of Turkish audience by the case of “Var mısın Yok musun”, I have chosen ethnomethodology as my perspective to analyze this particular case. Ethnomethodology is useful for understanding popular culture and its relationship with everyday life. It focuses on people's “common sense” knowledge of things around them and it aims to study everyday life and everyday interactions. I think that choosing ethnomethodology for examining this spectacle corresponds to our attempt at understanding the society of the spectacle, since spectacles help people internalize values and take them for granted, to integrate those into their common sense knowledge. As it is important to understand how the audience perceives and interprets media texts and spectacles, probing into their common sense values seems rational. Borrowing from A. A. Berger's (2000) content analysis of 45 techniques of humor (s.156) which are useful in ethnomethodological research, I have found out nine main themes that are coded within “Var mısın Yok musun”:

- Dramatization of personal stories/situations & Exposure
- Stereotypes
- Exaggeration

- Absurdity
- Sarcasm
- Disappointment
- Repetition
- Constructing themes

The use of rituals is also parallel to the categories above; the rituals I have identified within the program are such:

- Opening sequence
- Call for the contestant of day
- Life story
- Opening cases (seal, countdown, heightening of emotions, camera zooming up on other contestants)
- Collective disappointment or collective joy (sharing of success or failure)
- “How do you feel about your box?” (getting advice from fellow contestants before opening a box)
- Talk with the banker
- Cheering people up or dramatizing the salon

Dramatization of personal stories and situations are very much frequent during the course of the program. When the contestant of the day is called to the studio, he sits down with the presenter and the presenter asks for a short footage featuring the contestant's life to be shown in the big screen. The footage generally consists of a slide show of the contestant's pictures from his childhood to present day. The female narrator talks about the highpoints of the contestant's life; generally every contestant has two or three dramatic highpoints in his life. The dramatization of the life story is sometimes continued by the introduction of the contestant's relatives and friends in the audience if they are related to the story shown in the small footage. Exposure is also related to personal story telling, and it is sometimes demanded by the other contestants in order to “get to know him better” and to help him more to achieve his goal. For example, in the program dated August 26, 2009, Furkan asks Osman for more details of his life and says, “If we knew more about you we would be more of a help to you.” In this case, exposing one's life in the spectacle is one of the key factors that are demanded within the format.

Stereotypes are another important feature of the program. As I have stated in the previous section, most of the popular characters among the contestants are stereotypical, such as Seda, Metin, Emin, Tony etc. As I referred to them as the “odd one out(s)”, this is very much typical in an

entertainment show. Even the people involved in the production of reality shows admit that the crew members are deliberately chosen to symbolize stereotypes within the society and certain qualities or flaws are sought in cast members. (Essany, 2008, s.136) In “Var mısın Yok musun”, the formation of subjectivity through stereotypes normalizes the perception of the audience; they see these stereotypes as common people in their everyday lives. Acun Ilıcalı as a presenter is also stereotypical in this sense, he is presented to the audience as “one of them”. Some of these stereotypes are used in the rituals of changing the mood within the show. For example, Emin with his exaggerated behavior and absurdity warms up the atmosphere after the contestant opens red cases. The interventions these stereotypical people make during the show makes the show more convincing and authentic. Through these stereotypes, grounds for sarcasm are provided. The presenter uses sarcastic remarks at the absurdities within the show, for example he implies that he does not want to hear what Seda says since “what she usually says are intelligible”, or he continues Emin's unexpected lash outs for entertainment purposes.

Collective actions of the contestants are important in the game show. While the cases are being opened, the contestants count down from ten and clap their hands or drum with their fingers. As they do so, the camera shows each of them and invites the audience at home to behave similarly. Emotions are heightened with the help of camera movements and dramatic use of background music. The spectacle aims at enclosing the audience in the experience of the contestants. When the case is opened, the contestants either look at each other in deep sadness or they greet each other in the middle of the studio. If the contestant of the day makes his fellow contestant open a blue box, he cheerfully goes to his side and hugs him tightly, exclaiming “Kardeşim”. Opening a small amount of money is seen as a success and this success is shared within the neighborhood. It is valid for the reverse situation; they also share their failure if they open a red case and try to help the contestant of the day to regain his confidence. Their collective disappointment or collective joy is also ritualized by the spectacle.

Repetition as a category for the codes used in the show corresponds to the ritualization of the show; rituals by their nature are repetitive and by repetition, they are internalized and reproduced by the audience. In addition to this, I have indicated the use of themes as a category above. For example, in the program dated August 24, 2009, Tony dresses up like a Arabian sheikh and enacts in a certain way to liven up the mood when it is necessary. In the program dated August

26, 2009, Osman is the contestant of the day and he is from Şanlıurfa. In the middle of the program, when Osman continues to open yellow or red cases, we suddenly see a traditional group that enacts sira nights in the East and they start singing Şanlıurfa folk songs. The mood of the program changes instantly as they sing a joyful song and all of the contestants engage in the dance of halay. By constructing these special themes in some episodes, not only the spectacle intrigues and entertains the audience more but also they incorporate music in the spectacle, which is

something that everyone likes to see in such shows. When done so spontaneously, the spectacle becomes even more spectacular.

IX - Method, Sample Profile and Analysis

For the analysis, I have interviewed five regular followers of "Var mısın Yok musun". The ages of these five respondents vary between 24 and 80. Two of these respondents are male and three of them are female. They are either high school or university graduates, we can say that the sample represents A and B socio-economic status groups. The method I used for observing their common sense knowledge and behavior combines assessing them in their homes through a semi-structured interview and watching selected parts from the program together with the respondents. The reason for watching the game show is both to remind them of the program (since the program ended more than six months ago) and to note down their natural reactions while they are watching the interactions in the spectacle. In this section their answers and reactions in the interview will be quoted.

Three of the respondents (R1, R2 and R3) stated that they usually watch television for more than four hours daily, since they are either staying at home during the whole day or in the evenings. One respondent is a newly graduate who is working since last year (R5) and the other respondent is a university student (R4). These two respondents only have time to watch television in the evenings but still, they state that they watch television for more than three hours a day. In this case, we can say that most of the respondents are in the category of "heavy consumers". When asked about their choice of television programs, R1 and R2 said that they usually watch popular television dramas, news, talk shows and music shows, reality shows and game shows. R3 watches talk shows and game shows a lot and she also likes watching music channels. R4 and R5 watch sports games,

television dramas, reality shows and some game shows. All of the respondents said that they have watched most episodes of "Var mısın Yok musun", including the ones in which celebrities became the contestant of the day. R5 said, "I particularly enjoyed the episode with Cem Yılmaz and the Turkish National Team."

I gave the respondents some possible reasons that lead them to watching "Var mısın Yok musun" and requested to choose three among them. The reasons were such: entertainment purposes, big prize, relaxation, avoiding the loneliness at home, involvement of luck, personal stories of contestants, cooperation within contestants, contestants themselves, format of the program, presenter of the program, broadcasting hours and other reasons they would like to specify. R1 said, "I like watching game shows, I always have. For example, I used to watch Çarkıfelek a lot. After "Var mısın Yok musun" finished, I started watching Passaparola. But none of these programs give me the same pleasure as "Var mısın Yok musun" did. I liked how they (referring to

“Var mısın Yok musun” crew) all worked together, prayed together and wished the contestant luck. Other shows I watch for the presenter; but I watched “Var mısın Yok musun” for the unity there.” R2 stated his reasons for watching the program as excitement and the contestants themselves: “If there were no television dramas on, I watched “Var mısın Yok musun”. Sometimes I zapped between two programs. When I got bored with the drama, I returned to Show TV. I wanted to learn which contestant got advice from whom. For example if I were a contestant, I would never listen to Hekim. I don't get what he says anyway (laughs).” R3 stated that she liked the personal stories shared in the game show, “I watched the contestants and listened to their story, when my daughter got home I told her the details. Some of them were very touching for me but I still liked hearing them.” R4 and R5 told me that they started watching the program for entertainment purposes only and at first they were only turning this program on without giving their full attention, while doing homework or trying to complete a task for work. R4 says, “At first I didn't like the program at all. My mom and dad was watching it from time to time and I was coming across it while zapping in between other programs. It attracted my attention first when I was reading about it on Ekşi Sözlük. I wondered what it was all about and watched some episodes online. Next thing I knew I found myself clapping to the opening of cases! (laughs)” R5 says that he also did not know what was the program about, “I have only heard that it was a game show where 24 contestants got together and prayed for one another. I thought it was nonsense. I was seeing people cry for one another and get on top of each other in joy when they opened a low amount. After paying attention to some episodes, I started liking the show too.”

After these introductory questions, I started showing respondents some sections of the show I have collected over the Internet. Together with the respondents I watched the opening sequence and the video of the life story of Ülkühan, the contestant who finally got the big prize. As many of the contestants did, Ülkühan also had a problematic story. Respondents think that getting to know a contestant beforehand increase their sympathy for him. R1 said, “I have seen Ülkühan before in earlier seasons, he had surgeries that prevented him from working. I remember that I wanted him to get the big prize that night.” The video about him ended with such words: “Zor günleri geride bırakan Ülkühan, yarışmadan kazanacağı parayla ailesine yardım etmek istiyor.” As soon as the video ended, R2 said, “He looks like a good family man, I am happy that he got 500.000 TL.” Dramatization of personal stories and exposure were categories I have identified earlier and those categories provide the audience with higher identification. The dramatic a contestant's life is, the more he deserves the prize. This reasoning is parallel to what Bourdieu (1998) argues on television, its search for the sensational and the spectacular: “Television calls for *dramatization*, in both senses of the term: it puts an event on stage, puts it in images. In doing so, it exaggerates its importance of that event, its seriousness, and its dramatic, even tragic character.” (s.19) Other category I have identified also comes into prominence here; together with

dramatization, exaggeration or excessive emotions are both taken seriously and at the same time such depictions on television are normalized. When Ülkühan wants Zuhâl to open her case and the case was red, having 30.000 TL in it, all of the contestants became suddenly down and serious. R3 said, "What a shame, he had started so well." I asked the respondents what they thought of this sharing of joy or grief. R1 said that she believed in their cooperation, "My favorite is Furkan, if I were a contestant I would listen to what he says. He wants to help people there but they don't listen to him most of the time." R4 admits that at first she did not think the game was convincing, "I know how these games work. I thought that the contestants were chosen intentionally from different types. It may be so but their interaction in time developed and I think that most of these people became friends in the end. For example Nilgün says that her family will go on vacation with Kemal's. They also say that they call each other outside the game. I don't think that these are just said for the show." R5 commented on the contestants as such, "I think that the producers have chosen these people because they are ordinary. Look at Emin, who would cast him in such a television show? But I think he fits in here because he is someone I would come across while doing shopping in bazaar. I actually like his personality because he is so ridiculous. But he is not pretending." Emin's absurdity is one of the key points that the respondents like. R3 said that she enjoyed watching him a lot, "He is so weird that he can naturally play in a sit-com, like Gaffur in *Avrupa Yakası*." R2 remembers one of his antics, "Once he was so angry to open a red case that he threw the case to the other side of the studio." In overall evaluation of the interviews with the respondents, I can say that the coded categories are perceived as natural and common. The respondents believe that the reactions of the contestants are similar to what we may also do in everyday life if we did not get what we expected. R5 says, "If I were that much close to winning 500.000 TLs, I would overreact too." These unplanned and natural actions of ordinary people generate higher identification among the audience. I asked the respondents if they identified themselves with any of the contestants in "Var mısın Yok musun" and they either chose Kemal or Furkan. R1 chose Furkan since he was noting down all the possibilities around the cases since the beginning of the show and she commented on him as a "wise kid". R2 and R3 liked Kemal because he was advising the younger ones to think carefully. R4 and R5 also identified themselves with Furkan. R5 said, "He was the only rational one in the game. If I were him I would also think about the chances of a case being red or blue. After all there is someone who places those amounts of money in those cases and it is good to put yourself into another's place and think of what *you* would do." R4 asked me what other respondents have replied to this question and I told her they either said Furkan or Kemal. She said that she would have chosen Furkan too and said that Kemal was too fatalistic, "I remember he always says "Allah gönlüne göre versin kardeşim", I like Furkan over him because he is more helpful to others."

One notable reason for watching "Var mısın Yok musun" that corresponds to the postmodern

television theory is related to its duration. The program was a combination of what they usually liked watching, it combined the excitement and pleasure of a television drama, music was integrated to the program (Tony was frequently singing Turkish and English songs when the mood of the program was down), it provided them with personal details of contestants' lives (very much similar to watching magazine programs) etc. As it started after the main news bulletin and lasted until 11 or

12 pm, respondents said that the program entertained them throughout the evening. R2 said, "When "Var mısın Yok musun" was on, I didn't have the time to watch TRT 4 to listen to Turkish classical music. By the time the program ended I was already sleepy." R5 replied in a similar manner, "After I came to like the program, I turned it on when I came back from work. It entertained me as I was getting some rest after a tiresome day." R1 said that after she was done with the dishes she would watch the program more intently, "“Var mısın Yok musun” filled my evenings, other days I would watch television series like Yaprak Dökümü." Even though the respondents liked to hear about the personal details of these people, they admit that they would not want to share their lives in such a television program. R5 said that he would not consider participating in such a show whereas R4 said that she would but, "my life would not be interesting". This shows us that the audience of "Var mısın Yok musun" is within the spectacle society, they want to gaze at the reality "that can only be looked at" (Debord, 2004, s.7).

X - Concluding Remarks

In this article I attempted to reveal the reasons why "Var mısın Yok musun" has been so much popular during the years it was broadcasted, both by shedding light on the inner dynamics of the format and by conducting interviews with regular audiences of the program. The program incorporates a familiar metaphor: the interactions within a neighborhood. Even though "Var mısın Yok musun" took place in a virtual space, in a media platform, the authenticity of the contestants made it a likable and pleasant experience for the audience. The strategic selection of the contestants as ordinary and spontaneous personalities both enlivens the program and provides grounds for higher identification with the contestants. We can clearly suggest that if the contestants of the program consisted of high profile celebrities or of people with superior abilities (such as Acun Ilıcalı's new program Yetenek Sizsiniz), the program may have still get high ratings but identification with the participants would not be established this much. In a game show where celebrities are competing with each other, people watch the program to see what they wear and how they interact with each other. In programs where ordinary people become the focus of the spectacle, the audience seeks for authenticity in them.

While the program's duration is over 2.5 hours (sometimes it started right after the main news bulletin and continued until 12.30 pm) and it may get boring for some people, the

respondents I have interviewed are quite content with it. The program provides the audience with their daily dose of entertainment after a long day, including pure depictions of emotions such as excitement, joy, fear, sadness, disappointment while covering other entertainment elements such as magazine-ish involvement in personal stories or live music. In this sense, the program itself is very much postmodern; various imagery and complex situations are incorporated within the course of the program like a collage and the audience does not have to zap in between channels. They just have to sit back and enjoy the spectacle.

The audience behavior and the nature of the format is very much parallel to Guy Debord's theses in *The Society of the Spectacle*; while the audience is placing significance on the illusion provided by the spectacle, they become integrated into the ideational community of "Var mısın Yok musun". Debord (2004) in the book states that spectacle contributes to the separation of people even though it seems to be linking them by an imagined community, "Spectators are linked solely by their one-way relationship to the very center that keeps them isolated from each other. The spectacle thus reunites the separated, but it reunites them only *in their separatedness*." (s.16) Considering that this book was written in the age of mass media in 1967, television being the dominant medium, this

thesis was very much correct. The isolation of the spectators and their high involvement in the spectacle that prevents them from questioning it resulted in a passivity and lack of critical thinking. With today's new media technologies, I believe that people are more enabled to overcome this state of passivity. In "Var mısın Yok musun" case, rather than experiencing isolated spectatorship, the audience is in interaction and dialogue via the Internet. If we take a look at the bulletin boards established by the fans of the program, we may see that they commented on the program in real time, while watching the program in their homes. While providing interaction, this system that arose naturally from the spectacle contributes a lot to the involvement in the community of "Var mısın Yok musun".

In conclusion, "Var mısın Yok musun" surely has been a commercial success that was beneficial for both its producers and its contestants. While some of the contestants sank into oblivion, some others continue to visit our homes through the magic box. Notable contestants have already taken their places in Acun Ilıcalı's new reality show Survivor. They are separated as "girls" and "boys" in two different islands. In contradiction with "Var mısın Yok musun", the contestants are now in an exciting battle on an island, against both their opposite gender and within themselves. We may ask what happened to the cooperation and fellowship; the answer lies within the reality of television production: the contestants do whatever the format requires. I myself am not so sure now about which depiction is/was "real", the fellowship in "Var mısın Yok musun" or the combat in Survivor. This proves us that the media spectacle does what it has to do through its strategies; to entertain people and get them involved in the process while it lasts.

References

- Berger, A. A. (2000). *Media and Communication Research Methods: An Introduction to Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches*. Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage Publications.
- Bourdieu, S. (1998). *On Television*. New York: New Press.
- Couldry, N. (2005). *Media Rituals: A Critical Approach*. New York: Routledge.
- Couldry, N. (2008). *Teaching Us to Fake It: The Ritualized Norms of Television's "Reality" Games*.
- Susan Murray ve Laurie Ouellette (Der.) içinde, *Reality TV: Remaking Television Culture*, (ss.82-99). New York: New York University Press.
- Debord, G. (2004). *The Society of The Spectacle*. London: Rebel Press.
- Essany, M. (2008). *Reality Check: The Business and Art of Producing Reality TV* Amsterdam: Boston: Focal Press/Elsevier.
- Geraghty, C. (2005). *Representation, Reality and Popular Culture: Semiotics and the Construction of Meaning*, James Curran ve Michael Gurevitch (Der.) içinde. *Mass Media and Society*, (ss.46-59). London: Hodder Arnold.
- Murray, S. ve Laurie Ouellette (Der.) (2009). *Reality TV: Remaking Television Culture*. New York: New York University Press.
- Oktay, A. (1993). *Türkiye'de Popüler Kültür*. İstanbul: Yapı Kredi Yayınları.
- Storey, J. (2003). *Cultural Studies and the Study of Popular Culture*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Storey, J. (2004). *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: An Introduction*. Harlow: Pearson Prentice Hall.