

# THE SPY OF NETFLIX: AN EXAMPLE OF THE ROLE OF DIGITAL MYTHS IN THE FORMATION OF HISTORICAL MEMORY

---

[Netflix'in Casusu: Dijital Mitlerin Tarihsel Belleğin Oluşumundaki Rolüne Bir  
Örnek]

Önder KULAK

Dr., Sofia Üniversitesi, Felsefe Bölümü  
[onderkulak@hotmail.com](mailto:onderkulak@hotmail.com)

## ABSTRACT

This article aims to examine the digitization of myths and the role of digital myths in the formation of historical memory. For that purpose, the article is divided into three parts. The main arguments of Adorno on industrial culture, such as the commodification of culture, the layered structure of the cultural commodity, the patterns and the clichés in the plot, the atomistic cultural habits, are explained in the first part. Then, digital myths and their connections with the historiography represented in the cultural commodity are discussed by depending on the ground formed in the previous part. After completing these discussions, the Netflix series *The Spy* is analysed in detail, as an example for the arguments explained in the previous sections. By the end of the article, a detailed evaluation regarding the example is given to show how the mechanism of industrial culture works.

**Keywords:** Adorno, Industrial Culture, Culture Industry, Cultural Commodity, Historical Memory, Historical Series, Historical Drama Series, Netflix, Digital Myths.

## ÖZET

Bu makale, mitlerin dijitalleşmesini ve dijital mitlerin tarihsel belleğin oluşumundaki rolünü incelemeyi amaçlamaktadır. Makale bu amaçla üç bölüme ayrılmıştır. Birinci bölümde, Adorno'nun kültürün metalaşması, kültürel metanın katmanlı yapısı, olay örgüsündeki kalıplar ve klişeler, atomistik kültürel alışkanlıklar gibi endüstriyel kültür hakkındaki temel savlarını açıklanmaktadır. Sonrasında, dijital mitler ve kültürel metada temsil edilen tarih yazımıyla ilişkileri, önceki kısımda oluşturulan zemine dayanılarak tartışılmaktadır. Bu tartışmaların tamamlanmasının ardından, Netflix dizisi *The Spy*, önceki bölümlerde açıklanan savlar için bir örnek olarak, ayrıntılı biçimde incelenmektedir. Makalenin sonuna gelindiğinde, endüstriyel kültür mekanizmasının nasıl işlediğini göstermek amacıyla, örnekle ilişkili ayrıntılı bir değerlendirme sunulmaktadır.

**Anahtar Sözcükler:** Adorno, Endüstriyel Kültür, Kültür Endüstrisi, Kültürel Meta, Tarihsel Bellek, Tarih Dizileri, Tarihsel Drama Dizileri, Netflix, Dijital Mitler.

## Giriş

The original productions of the streaming platforms, such as Netflix, HBO and Amazon Prime, have made history popular among viewers again. For example, the historical drama series like *Chernobyl*, *The Crown*, *The Spy* and the historical period series like *Narcos* and *Peaky Blinders* have become one of the prominent topics of daily conversations, together with the historical facts presented in the series. The platform series thus have been representing an important factor in the formation of historical memory for at least a half of decade. So much so that individuals do not hesitate to justify or support their claims on history through the digital representations of the platform series. But does the digital representation in the platform series always reflect reality?

If the digital representation does not reflect reality but a misleading fiction integrated with myths, individuals, who take them as an authority, then form their historical memories through misinformation. This is an obvious conflict between the truth and the untruth. Therefore, the analysis to distinguish the fact from such a misleading fiction in the platform series has become much more important than ever, due to the popularity of the original productions of the streaming platforms.

Analysing a cultural commodity properly is only possible by following three main steps. The first step is to specify the essentials of industrial culture through own arguments or the arguments of the philosophers such as Theodor Adorno, Walter Benjamin, Guy Debord, and Jean Baudrillard, whose ideas are relatively still up to date to explain the present industrial culture. However, industrial culture is a structure changing day by day, and the changes are not always covered by the arguments at hand.

The second step is thus to examine the recent developments in industrial culture and then include them to the theory. It is an enormously important requirement to understand the contemporary situation of the matter. By depending on such a requirement, this article aims to focus on digital myths and their role in the formation of historical memory.

After the first two steps, the third step is to analyse the cultural commodity by depending on the arguments provided. Demonstrating the concrete equivalents of the abstract arguments in the theory is the essential part of this step. Therefore, the theory becomes able to explain the cultural

commodity belonging to the present industrial culture better. For that purpose, *The Spy* is chosen as an example for this article to demonstrate the role of digital myths in the formation of historical memory.

The article is also separated into three parts for the analysis of the example. The main arguments of Adorno on industrial culture, such as the commodification of culture, the layered structure of the cultural commodity, the patterns and the clichés in the plot, the changing cultural habits, are explained in the first part. Then, digital myths and their connections with the historiography represented in the cultural commodity are discussed by depending on the ground formed in the previous part. After completing these discussions, the Netflix series *The Spy* is analysed in detail, as an example for the arguments explained in the previous sections. By the end of the article, a detailed evaluation is given to show how the mechanism of industrial culture works regarding the example.

## **Industrial Culture**

The discussions on culture have significantly changed after the arising of the concepts, *industrial culture* and *mass culture*.<sup>1</sup> Before these concepts, the main issue in the discussions was whether culture could be defined as the common asset of society or not. For such an issue, the main questions should be considered as: Is culture built as a homogenous structure by the collective participation of all individuals or as a heterogeneous structure by the constitutions of different theoretical and practical experiences. Now there is one more question related to the latter: Is culture built as a result of an imposition undertaken by a specific group of people in society to the other individuals?

Adorno has been one of the most influential figures to explain the mentioned concepts and their positions in the discussions. He thinks that the third question has a positive answer when looking at the culture in the *consumer society*. The analyses of Adorno on “radio”, “cinema”, “television”, “astrology”, and “music” show that a cultural structure dependent on industrial culture cannot be

---

<sup>1</sup> Three relational definitions for the concept of culture may be given at this point: Culture; is all the activities of the human being that are against nature or different from nature; is the sum of forms of social consciousness and the related practices outside the economy; is a specific form of social consciousness that includes the activities such as aesthetics, entertainment, sports, etc. For more detailed definitions, see Kroeber & Kluckhohn 1952, pp. 9-83.

considered as monolithic or unique.<sup>2</sup> Because the existing culture has an *external*, in other words, externally built character for the individual.

The individual has no chance to participate in the constitution of such culture as an active subject (Adorno 1991, pp. 109-110; 2002b, p. 96; 2005b, pp. 200-201). She is *passive* toward cultural commodities at most times. For example, whatever the individual may be, a reader, a listener, or a viewer, she is either prevented or restricted from the beginning when attempting to change the character of the commodity. The commodity then remains *alien* to the individual all the time. She is not even allowed to be herself in the reception experience. So that the social relations among individuals are not presented as what it is, but in a content *planned* to be in the consciousness (Adorno 2002b, pp. 114-115). Through the commodities, the individual meets several fictional lives, which are the *archetypes* of conforming with the existing social relations. She is expected to identify herself with them and is thus manipulated by the fictional characters that are specified as the role models for her (Adorno 2002b, pp. 110-118; 2002c, p. 76).

Since, therefore, the individual forms an external relationship with industrial culture, as a consumer. Although there are some remarkable nuances, the case is also not much different for the individual who participates in the producing process of the cultural commodity (Adorno 1991, p. 168). The individual accepts the rules of industrial culture unconditionally from the very beginning when she wants to take an active role such as writer, composer or actor. Here, the content of the commodity prepared by her is expected to be compatible with the ongoing system of industrial culture. Otherwise, either *de facto* censorship measures are applied, or the possibilities are immediately limited. By considering all these cases, arguing that industrial culture prevents both individuals from being *constitutive* subjects is sensible.

After noticing the transformation of the culture in the consumer society, the main issue in the discussions has changed for many contemporary culture theorists.<sup>3</sup> It is now to accept or refuse *kitsch*, in other words, the cultural commodity. Here, some figures misinterpret industrial culture as

---

<sup>2</sup> Adorno focuses on different aspects of industrial culture while making analyses on the specific areas of culture. For example, Adorno takes the attention of the reader to the relation between the technical instrument and the individual in the radio analysis; to the patterns and the clichés in the cinema analysis; to the layered structure of the cultural commodity in the television analysis; to the standardisation of the cultural commodity in the music analysis; to the promises in the astrology analysis. For a detailed work about the matter, see Kulak 2018, pp. 103-157.

<sup>3</sup> For the discussions on the definitions of mass culture, see Strinati 2004, pp. 1-19.

part or successor of “folk culture”.<sup>4</sup> Adorno, in opposition to this interpretation, refuses industrial culture to protect all worthy historical accumulation in culture.

According to Adorno, the individual expects to be happy through the industrial culture’s intervention in her life.<sup>5</sup> The ground of this expectation is dependent on the material and spiritual deprivations of subjects and the chronic unhappiness resulting from them. Both are due to living in the object-dependent society. Individuals are always unhappy in the consumer society and neither modern society nor any other example gives them hope. This case is especially noticed by the individual’s complaints about own everydayness. The state of despair at this point may be thought of as pushing the individual to resist and create an alternative to the existing relations. However, the possibility is mostly prevented at the very beginning, when industrial culture imposes itself to the individual and offers her false happiness (Adorno 2002b, pp. 100, 113).

What is needed here is to replace the *unrealised* modern promises with the new ones.<sup>6</sup> These new promises are the fictional experiences presented in the cultural commodity. The individual is promised that one of the fictional lives may be her own life in the future. It is, in fact, an illusion in which the individual may wait for an indefinite time with hoping – or, even the promise is not met, she may believe that it is fulfilled (Adorno 2002b, pp. 111, 116-118). As to the crucial thing for industrial culture, it is only to ensure that the cultural commodity attracts the attention of the individual and then make possible the *identification*.

While the individual identifies herself with the fictional characters, she moves away from own everydayness and reaches what she cannot have and perform in real life, even though all are fictional (Adorno 2005b, pp. 201-203; 2002b, pp. 112-113). Through this identification, the individual experiences a state of false happiness each time.

The identification of the individual with the fictional characters does not only mean that she forgets own social problems for a while and moves away from possible “uprisings”. But, at the same time, it makes individuals compatible with the existing social relations (Adorno 1991, p. 104). As a *rationalisation* environment, industrial culture gives commands on what an individual can think, do

---

<sup>4</sup> For an example of this misinterpretation, see Storey 2009, pp. 5-8.

<sup>5</sup> For an example from music, see Adorno 2002a, p. 456.

<sup>6</sup> For what Adorno thinks on the promises of modern society, see Adorno & Horkheimer 2002, p. 1.

and consume (Adorno 2002c, p. 103).<sup>7</sup> It persuades or preaches individuals according to the functions attributed by each individual and then makes them adapt to the social relations voluntarily. Adorno thinks that the possibility of all these depends on the structure of cultural commodities. Above all, cultural commodities are *standardised* products.

Cultural commodities are produced according to the rules and thereof the standards set for them.<sup>8</sup> They thus become ready for market relations (Adorno 2002b, pp. 128, 130). Here, saying that each cultural commodity is similar enough to intertwine with another is not false, even if they belong to the other cultural areas (Adorno 2002b, pp. 98, 114). As Adorno puts, none of them is different from another like the “Yale Locks”, because each is produced within the same system (2002b, p. 125). This standardisation is a precondition to forming a *manipulative* content for the commodity.

As to the content, each cultural commodity has a *layered structure* like the hieroglyphics of ancient Egypt (Adorno 2005a, p. 54). In this respect, cultural commodities form sometimes an open and sometimes an implicit language or a form of expression in order to convey the planned content to the “customer”. The layers mentioned here are respectively, “the vocal and visual stimuli that the individual encounter directly”, “the directions made through these stimuli”, and “the implicit messages given to the individual in the background” (Adorno 1991, pp. 164-169; 2005a, pp. 60-61). The fact that individuals are influenced by cultural commodities from childhood allows this structure within the commodities to settle in the consciousness.<sup>9</sup> Here, the supplementary condition is to present the content mostly through the *patterns* and the *clichés*.

The patterns consist of gestures, word and sentence choices and speech forms, while the clichés are the repetitions of thoughts and practices that are expected to be fulfilled under specific conditions (Adorno 1991, pp. 161, 169; 2002b, pp. 98, 99, 102, 109; 2010, p. 220). The individual experiences all these mentioned parts again and again in the same and different cultural commodities, owing to the standardisation. This familiarity provides a periodical or long-term continuity for the patterns and the clichés of the system. Hence, the planned content infiltrates and begins to transform the consciousness effectively by the help of the patterns and the clichés: the individual internalises the

---

<sup>7</sup> Rationalisation is a *manipulation* form to manipulate the masses by the replacement of every “incoherent” thought and practice in the existing social relations with the “coherent” ones.

<sup>8</sup> For the specific form of standardisation in music, see Adorno 2002a, p. 443; 2011b, p. 254.

<sup>9</sup> For Adorno’s famous Donald Duck example related to children, see 2002b, p. 110.

fictional world through the fictional model. This intervention in the consciousness causes the individual to copy the fictional model and then lose her *autonomy* and become an *automaton*, without realizing what is happening. The cultural commodity thus imposes itself as one of the authorities to decide how and under which conditions the social activities are performed.

The cultural habits of such an individual are in continuous harmony with industrial culture. These degenerated habits, which Adorno calls *atomistic habits*, become decisive for the individual's all cultural activities.<sup>10</sup> For example, cultural activities like listening to music or watching movies are not performed as ends in themselves but means to experience false happiness. So that the individual carries out such cultural activities to relieve boredom, mess around or spend time with other individuals, instead of making beneficial contributions to her theoretical or practical existence.<sup>11</sup>

The individual may often prefer partial receptions rather than perpetual receptions due to her daily responsibilities. So that she ceases or postpones the reception experience whenever she loses her attention to the commodity. However, industrial culture has a solution to that "problem". After taking part in cultural activities, the commodity jumps into daily life, especially through the patterns and the clichés, and then the content infiltrated in the consciousness begins to rearrange everydayness by the theoretical and practical experiences belonging to the individual. Hence, as a rationalization means, industrial culture gains one of the effective opportunities to rebuild society with the "voluntary" conformance of individuals. Although the individual seems to be an arbiter on cultural commodities in appearance, she then continues to be an extension of objects at leisure-time, just like at worktime (Adorno 2002b, pp. 98, 104).

Adorno thinks that industrial culture is not only limited to ordinary conditions, but also an effective means of indoctrination in extraordinary situations such as war, disaster and crisis. Adorno is anxious at this point. He argues that industrial culture can easily become a *gun* turned against humanity (1991, p. 150). It seems there are negative historical examples in his mind. The most important of these is certainly what happened in Germany between the years 1925 and 1945.<sup>12</sup> Adorno questions how individuals can remain silent to the catastrophes like Nazi Germany and then comes to a point

---

<sup>10</sup> For a comparison between the atomistic and holistic habits in music, see Adorno 2002a, p. 318.

<sup>11</sup> For the specific form of these examples in music, see Adorno 2009, pp. 101, 112.

<sup>12</sup> Another is the *Great Depression* (1929-1940). Adorno did not analyse it directly but indirectly in *The Authoritarian Personality* (2011a).

that industrial culture has an important influence here (2002b, p. 129). For example, all the streets of Berlin were equipped with speakers so that radio broadcasts could be heard everywhere in the city. Additionally, national newspapers and bulletins were distributed daily, weekly and monthly door-to-door. According to Adorno, with all these instruments, it was as easy as a pie to hide the grim face of the German fascism consisted of poverty, blood and death.

In the past, industrial culture was effective mostly in leisure-time. Due to the progress in technology and the arising of new forms in the system, it is now the arbiter of every moment of the individual. As part of this consequence, for example, the broadcast of television channels has become full-time and has reached all over the world through developments such as cable, satellite and internet broadcasting. These technical developments have made television more effective than before. It has gained much more impact on individuals than Adorno expected.

Adorno defines the television as a synthesis of the radio and the cinema (2002b, p. 97). He underlines the importance of the television because of this inclusive feature. However, the Internet combines all forms in “smart electronic devices” in comparison to classical television. A smart device thus becomes a radio, cinema, television, newspaper and much more, at the same time. Besides this, the Internet creates an environment where millions of people become able to meet in digital spaces. Individuals have the chance now to share unlimited songs, photos, videos, books and information through social media platforms. They are both consumers and producers of these activities in most cases.

Adorno could not imagine the impact of industrial culture on individuals after the Internet. The changes come with the Internet do not falsify Adorno’s arguments but push the boundaries. Hence it is critical to rethink and improve them in terms of innovations, for understanding the contemporary industrial culture. And the streaming platforms are the prominent part of these innovations.

### **Digitizing Myths**

The domination of Netflix and the other streaming platforms in mass culture is a pretty interesting discussion topic for some time now.<sup>13</sup> Although the past of streaming platforms reaches back to a

---

<sup>13</sup> For the detailed definitions and explanations of streaming platforms, see Jenner 2018, pp. 210-215; Lobato 2019, pp. 16-20, 37-44.

couple of decades, the potentiality to shape cultural structures has been obtained just in the last few years. Perhaps the turning point for this success was the shift from providing ready series and films to *original productions*.<sup>14</sup> There is an important point here that the leading role in original productions has always belonged to series, not films.<sup>15</sup>

*The platform series* is much more effective than the platform film because of various reasons. The most important among them is the time that the series occupies. The series has much time to process daily environment in the plot, in comparison to the film. It is important because the viewer always feels safe when meeting with familiar vocal and visual stimuli at the background and therefore, she increases her attention to the product.<sup>16</sup> Besides this, the series provokes the viewer to feel curious, due to the separation of the time frames into episodes. She thus becomes like an addicted person regarding new episodes. Curiosity pushes her to converse with others and spare much more time in comparison to the film. This may seem similar to the television series. However, there are some distinct differences.

Then, an important question arises here: What are the distinct points of platform series to separate them from their equivalents in TVs? Answering the question is possible by looking at the changes in watching habits. Excluding the advertisement form that suspends an ongoing plot and undertakes an independent staging is one of them. Another is emancipating viewers from programme guides and thereof providing them with the opportunity to choose suitable time slots by themselves (Jenner 2018, pp. 211, 223).

These new circumstances are persuasive for viewers in most cases (Havens 2018, pp. 326-327). However, there are much more effective factors: “the contentious contents in the series” and “the construction of a *controlled* discussion atmosphere on social media with the interactive participation of viewers”. These are the main factors that cause nuances between the platform series and the classic television series. The most significant examples to understand the nuances are about history and thereby the past or ongoing true-life or possible events.<sup>17</sup>

---

<sup>14</sup> For the history of this shift, see Osur 2016, pp. 96-102, 124-126, 129-144; McDonald 2016, pp. 210-218; Hiller 2017, p. 71.

<sup>15</sup> This is also the explanation of why many viewers have heard the names of platforms for the first time by the popularity of platform series.

<sup>16</sup> For the context “feeling safe when meeting with familiar vocal and visual stimuli”, see Adorno 2002b, pp. 99-100.

<sup>17</sup> For the latter, see Landsberg 2015, pp. 69, 70.

As is expected from every product of industrial culture of the same character, the historical series depends on a mainstream understanding of history and represents an adequate historiography to that (Adorno 2005b, pp. 104, 194; Kellner 2010, pp. 14-18; Tomasulo 1996, p. 71).<sup>18</sup> Here, placing myths to such content is also a *sine qua non*. Therefore, inventing myths or referring to ones at hand may be expected. Myths are imposed as if were real in both circumstances. What is different between the platform series and the classical examples at this point is to take *digital representation* as a source, as an authority while imposing myths. How this mechanism works may be explained after examining what the notion “myth” means from the angle of knowledge.

A myth is a kind of unique fiction relating to certain entities and existence forms in nature and society. It does not include any factual or logical basis and arguments depending on these. Due to being without a basis, what is expected from a reader, listener or viewer is not to affirm or falsify a presented narration by depending on a form of reasoning, but it is to accept a myth as it is and to believe the things provided. Although forming a myth begins with sensuous descriptions, the relation to sensation ceases after reshaping the descriptions by imagination. As a fiction, a myth has its own imaginative “repertory.” It consists of extraordinary time and space integrations, mystical figures, communities, events and actions, which are only meaningful inside the borders of a myth.

The main purpose of using myths in a historical plot is to consolidate the historiography represented. Hence facts are combined with myths. Or some facts are denied, and the gaps arisen by that are again filled by myths. After all myths become integrated with historical facts, a unique digital representation arises. It is then possible to see many fictional contents in such a plot – the positive or negative effects of never lived figures to history; secret communities and their hidden purposes; the unknown goodness or sacrifices behind historical evils; the other faces of good or bad people, etc. Facts also do not stay as what they are. Their meanings in history change by the integration with myths.

The myths seen in the platform series, in other words, *digital myths*, are different from the ones in classical forms because of two reasons. One of them is the distinct relation of myths with *virtual*

---

<sup>18</sup> For a detailed analysis of the historiography of Indian films, as an example, see Prasad 2013, pp. 55-87, 217-237.

*reality*. For example, what is more important is not the consistency of a plot that myths play an important role inside, but the glory of vocal and visual stimuli in a digital representation.

The platform series is generous on vocal and visual stimuli. First of all, music and sound choices for ambience and characters are expected to be of high quality. It is like a standard these days. What is more important are the visual background and the effects provided by computer technology. Due to the reason that viewers are so willing to experience a visual stimulus never witnessed before, their quality and novelty are decisive in most cases (Darley 2000, pp. 107-108). That is why the scenes exhibiting such effective visual stimuli are always filmed by considering social media sharings.

The other decisive reason is about the discussion atmosphere in social media formed by the platforms. The platforms use social media much more effective than all other authorities of industrial culture.<sup>19</sup> They share the materials transferred from the series with ready and possible viewers under different titles. Thus, all attention gathers on the platform series, and while the number of viewers increases, the content of the series is begun to be discussed.<sup>20</sup> This discussion is like dropping a snowball from a height. It is hard to determine who rolls the snowball first. But whoever makes the first move, the platforms organise all other areas of industrial culture for the aim of preparing suitable circumstances to form a controlled discussion atmosphere.

The content of the platform series is all-time contentious. It means it is popular at the same time because disputes generally increase publicity. Here, notable criticisms may be expected from the individuals who oppose the distortion of the historical facts in the plot. These criticisms affect several viewers by supporting critical aspects to refuse or at least be irrelevant to the plot. At the opposite side, the platforms develop another response instead of being a part of the discussion depending on knowledge.

The main interest of platforms is wide popularity among a high number of viewers. After the state of identifying the self with the fictional characters and of gaining an artificial experience, what is expected from a viewer is the approval of the digital representation presented. An obstacle is always a possibility here. For example, individuals may present intellectual resistance against the plot. If

---

<sup>19</sup> For analyses about the social media use of Netflix and HBO in Spain, see Gomez & Quevedo 2018, pp. 127-152; Quevedo & Gomez & Boj 2019, pp. 1-18.

<sup>20</sup> For the individual's practice at this point, for example, see Matrix 2014, pp. 119-120.

everything goes without any obstacles, the manipulation of individuals to impose a digital representation and a historiography behind, as part of their historical memory, begins to process. This is also the moment that popularity becomes the power of approval.

### **The Spy Series (2019) as an Example**

*The Spy* is a Netflix series based on the biography of Eli Cohen, who was an Israeli spy infiltrated to Damascus in the 60s. It is inspired from the book, *The Spy Who Came from Israel* written by Uri Dan and Yeshayahu Ben Porat (1967).

The series begins with the daily routines of the Cohen family. Eli works as a filing clerk in an insurance company, while Nadia is a talented tailor. They live in a small but lovely house with limited resources. Here, what the series emphasises often are their love for each other and their happy lives in Tel Aviv. In the plot, Tel Aviv is shown as a quiet and well-organised city. Also, the social order in the city is presented as caring about people. It is like a demi-paradise, free from major social problems. Therefore, there is no reason to complain, except for the Syrian attacks. However, Eli has a perpetual problem that is seen often. He is an Egyptian-born Jew and thinks that other people see him as an Arab rather than a Jew. He is not pleased with own roots. He feels a little upset among people and wants to prove his patriotism every time to everyone. Meanwhile, Eli has a past that he is proud of.

Eli was a part of a secret network controlled by the Israeli intelligence service during his settlement in Egypt. The mission of the network was to help the Jews in Egypt when they want to escape to Israel. Yet the activities were uncovered over time by the Egyptian officials. The network was dissolved partially then. After a while, Eli could not find any other option than migrating to Israel. He applied to work for the intelligence twice but was refused each time, and so that began to a new ordinary life in Tel Aviv.

Besides the daily lives of Eli and Nadia, the series shows the viewer several violence visuals against the Israeli civilians. It is seen in the visuals that many peaceful individuals are wounded or killed by the Syrian attacks. The victims are just farmers, fishers, villagers, and ordinary urban people so that the viewer feels anger to the attacker, without asking who it is. The visuals are effective enough to

condemn what happens on the screen, unconditionally.<sup>21</sup> Moreover, these are consolidated often by the Israeli officials who say what they want is just “peace” and “security” in their homeland rather than interests. This is the most common cliché of the cultural commodity regarding the war. The cliché is supported by the fact that there is not a single scene of Israeli forces attacking civilians or settlements. Here, what is problematic is that the series imposes the *we-and-they* contradiction instead of criticising the main reasons and of discussing the possible solutions of the conflict. It pushes the viewer directly to accept the contradiction as the war between the good, who defends the homeland, and the evil, who attacks the homeland.

An important scene shows up then: Eli finds a letter from the intelligence at his worktable. He meets with the officials and learns that the intelligence has chosen him as a candidate for a special operation. The content of the operation is to place a spy to the headquarters of the Syrian state to prevent the attacks to Israel. It is not easy to find the right candidate for such an operation. He is an adequate candidate because of his origin, in other words, of physical appearance and good Arabic skills.

Eli accepts the offer immediately, without hesitation. He believes that this is an important opportunity to prove himself to the homeland. Hence, without wasting time, Eli begins a learning and an examination process to be a spy. After several months, the candidate is appointed as a member of the intelligence. He is reported as one of the best students ever in the programme. This scene is an important milestone to begin to make Eli legendary.

The intelligence starts the operation by preparing Eli for a fake profile in Zurich and Buenos Aires. His alias is specified as Kamel Amin Thaabet. Who is Kamel? Kamel is the only living member of a rich immigrant family in Buenos Aires, Argentina. He feels alone and gets tired of this feeling. The state of loneliness pushes him to contact with the Syrian community in the city. At this point, Kamel does not hesitate to use his wealth for making friends. For example, he does business with people from the community.

Kamel becomes popular over time among the high-profile rich people and officials in the city, as is expected. Amin al-Hafez, the military attaché of Syria in Argentina, is also one of them. The

---

<sup>21</sup> These visuals should be thought together with the scene that Kamel is allowed to look at Israeli civilians from the front sight of an automatic rifle when visiting the Syria front with Israel.

friendship of Kamel and Hafez and their talks about politics are emphasised as a milestone in the plot because the military attaché is expected to play an important role in the future of Syria.

Kamel decides to settle in Damascus, while time passes by. He takes a reference letter from Hafez for this purpose. However, the intelligence wants him to enter Syria with a well-known person to guarantee the entrance. Sheikh Majid Al-Ard is then chosen to deceive. Kamel achieves to enter Syria with the sheikh after several planned coincidences. The sheikh accepts him as a friend in a truly short time. Hence the Syria agenda begins for the spy 88.

Damascus is described as a neglected but an impressive city. The visuals are influential both for indoor and outdoor spaces. But also, an implicit problem often makes its presence felt. It is the *chaos* of the city.<sup>22</sup> Several scenes show that the chaos is because of the social order which is only dependent on the physical force.<sup>23</sup> Kamel is on the road for such a city.

Kamel searches for a suitable residence in Damascus first. He finds a house in a rich neighbourhood. The house is also close to a military centre in the city. Then, without wasting time, Thaabet Import and Export Company is established, and it starts to operate. Kamel begins to send hidden documents and photographs to the intelligence regularly while seeming to improve the company's business. As is expected, the success in business takes the attention of many people, especially the riches and the officials of the country. Kamel thus finds several new opportunities to make friends among important people and reaches much more confidential information by using these relationships. The plot especially takes the attention of the viewer to these relations.

The plot involves an extensive pattern for the Syrian official. He<sup>24</sup> is not a *devoted* person so that the official has not any ethical principles and values to protect. Moreover, he is alien to masses and all his relations among people depends on individual interests. For example, the official accepts bribe and shares information easily to gain statute, money or gift. He does not have any sense of responsibility to the public. What is important for him is only to protect his power and prosperity. This degeneration is explained in the plot as causing from both the individual and the state

---

<sup>22</sup> The series pushes the viewer at this point to follow the differences and to make a comparison with Tel Aviv. For example, the official statements in Damascus are made through the radio, not television, in comparison with Tel Aviv.

<sup>23</sup> The scenes that show the Syrian soldiers' negative attitudes against civilians in Syria should be considered at this point.

<sup>24</sup> The Syrian official is mostly shown as "he" rather than "she" or both.

mechanism. It is put as a vicious circle. The Syrian state is then presented as a group of bad people whose job is only to represent the evil. As to a comparison between a Syrian and an Israeli official, everything seems the opposite.

Kamel's attitude in Syrian politics is based on balance. He seems supporting the existing political power, while secretly being at the side of the Baath Party. So that there is no reason for Kamel to worry about a possible change of power. He expects, conversely, much better opportunities after such a change. Hafez, who is Kamel's close friend from Buenos Aires, then becomes the new president of Syria after a coup in Syria, as is expected.

Eli finds the most convenient conditions as a spy through the presidency of Hafez. He is even offered to be the deputy minister of defence by the president, after a while. However, Syria becomes a dangerous place for spies, after the appointment of the new intelligence chief, Ahmed Suweidani. Suweidani is suspicious of Kamel, too. Meanwhile, Eli makes several mistakes because of his impatience. After an extensive investigation following the mistakes of the spy 88, Suweidani becomes sure that Kamel is not "Kamel" but a spy. Hence the end of the plot comes through. Eli is tortured and executed "barbarously", along with the positive statements from the Israeli officials and the negative statements from the Syrian officials.

The plot in the series seems very certain about everything in the Cohen affair. However, in contradiction to the historiography in the series, there are not enough direct evidences but rather indirect evidences and some expressions about the issue. It is appropriate for both the Israeli and the Syrian sides. There are numerous ambiguities, and these ambiguities have made the issue open to myths. When looking at the indirect evidences and the expressions, it seems the Israeli officials do not hesitate to use the myths for their benefits (Bayat 2006, p. 5).<sup>25</sup> And what *The Spy* has made at this point is to *digitize* all these myths.

The prominent myth is about the friendship of Kamel and Hafez and the incidents regarding that. There is not even a single document or photograph that proves their mutual acquaintance.<sup>26</sup> Hafez, in opposition to the allegations, expressed in an interview that he met Eli once in prison after his arrest

---

<sup>25</sup> The sources that defend a position close to the series do not also care about any direct or indirect evidences. They are usually in novel or story format. For example, see Dan & Porat 1967; Ben-Hanan 1969; Thomas 2009, pp. 64-67; Melman 2019.

<sup>26</sup> For a short biography of Hafez, see Dam 2011, pp. 153-154.

in 1965 (Al Jazeera Arabic 2016).<sup>27</sup> Three facts support this expression. The date of the Hafez's appointment as a military attaché to Argentina is one of them. Hafez expressed in the interview that it was realised after Eli's departure from the city (Al Jazeera Arabic 2016). He was in Moscow before that date according to his expressions. And Hafez claimed that this was provable by the archives.

Another fact is the official position of Hafez by the change of power. He did not become the president but the interior minister on March 8, 1963 (Olson 1979, pp. 439-440). The president was Luay al-Atassi. Hafez's position was changed on July 27, 1963, after an interior debate in the state. Thus, the incidents in the plot regarding directly with the immediate presidency of Hafez becomes suspicious. There was a much more complicated atmosphere from 8 March to 27 July in comparison to the plot (Olson 1979, pp. 439-441). Besides these inconsistencies about the relationship between Kamel and Hafez, there is also not even single evidence that Kamel met with Michel Aflaq and accepted a list given by him before March 8, 1963 (AbuKhalil 2019, par. 11).

There is also one more problem with the Hafez's presidency. It is claimed in the series that Hafez offered Kamel the position of deputy defence minister. However, there was no official position such that in the Syrian state until the 70s (Olson 1979, p. 460; Hamidi 2019, par. 9; Moubayed 2019, par. 12). It came into force with Hafez al-Assad. Additionally, the positions of the defence ministry were always left to the military officers, but Kamel was a civilian. So that offering such a position to a civilian seems not sensible, even in an extraordinary condition. The reason is simple: Kamel had no experience in military issues.

These indirect evidences support the expressions of Hafez. They strengthen the hands of people who want to refute the myths.

Another myth is about Kamel's strong ties with the high-profile officials of the country. Here, the expressions of Salah al-Dalali may take into consideration (Hamidi 2019, par. 2, 15) because he was the judge of the Cohen case. According to Dalali, the investigation showed that Eli was an ordinary spy. If so, then he was only in contact with several businesspeople like Sheikh Majid Al-Ard and some ordinary officials like Maazi Zahreddine. However, it is claimed in the series that Kamel had

---

<sup>27</sup> Hafez speaks to Ahmad Mansour on "Shahed Ala al-Asr", Episode 12, "Al Jazeera", April 2001. Also, see Ahmed 2019, par. 9.

strong ties with many high-profile officials such as Abdul Karim Zahreddine, the chief of the army staff. But no evidence exists to prove any of them. What is only *provable* at this point is the mutual acquaintance of Kamel and Maazi, the nephew of Abdul Karim Zahreddine.<sup>28</sup> It is also provable that Maazi took Kamel to the Syrian front with Israel in 1962.

In the plot, a relation between Kamel's visit and the Six Days War is established through the myth of eucalyptus trees. However, there is no evidence about the planted eucalyptus trees showing the Syrian army posts. Moreover, there are five years between the visit and the war. There should be some changes in the front after the five years. It is then not sensible that Israel won the war by the information Eli provided (Hamidi 2019, par. 8). The plot, conversely, implies the visit as the main factor of the victory.

## Conclusion

The function of the historical series such as *The Spy* is to make people believe myths rather than to help them for understanding and interpreting facts from different perspectives. The consequence of this manipulation is the spread of misinformation about historical facts. Then, it is not false to say that the historical series is not a reanimation of the past, but a means to make people approve of a mainstream or an official attitude.

As to the example, *The Spy* depends on one of the *big clichés* that designate the whole plot. It is about the popular distinction between we-the-good and they-the-evil. The historiography represented in the plot was not prepared according to concrete evidences but such a distinction. Therefore, the plot consists of an extraordinary time and space integrity for the character belonging to "us". It seems then an *invisible hand* helps the character all the time, and this invisible hand is industrial culture, without a doubt. Hence, "Eli as a fictional character" becomes more than "Eli as a real person".<sup>29</sup>

The series pushes the individual to identify herself with Eli. He is presented as the *hero* that everyone wants to be. There is more than one supporting factor at this point for the individual to like and adopt the character.

---

<sup>28</sup> There are some photographs of Eli and Maazi together.

<sup>29</sup> For a contradiction similar to that, see Week 2017, pp. 87-96.

The love of Eli for Nadia is one of them. There are many conspicuous scenes that enthuse the individual to their legendary love. For example, the scenes showing that Eli or Nadia butters the bread are the most prominent ones. The ritual of “buttering the bread” seems to represent their ties to each other and their lives in Tel Aviv. It may also be understood as an equalisation between the homeland and the lover. Although such scenes are effective enough by themselves, they are usually supported with impressive songs like “Inconnu Mon Amour” to increase efficiency.<sup>30</sup>

Another factor is the ethical principles and values that Eli defends. Eli is shown as an honest, polite, thoughtful and humanitarian person. He presents that especially with the spot sentences and characteristic speech forms in the ongoing plot. The scenes about moths are also remarkable here. They refer to a metaphor that is used mostly in the Middle Eastern oriented philosophies to explain the process of *knowing the self*. It is about the story of the moth which wishes to become integrated with the light. The plot presents the journey from “old Eli” to “new Eli” and the tensions between Eli and Kamel (especially seen in the last scenes), in parallel to the moth metaphor.

Considering the patterns and the clichés of the mentioned scenes, all functions to persuade the individual for being on the side of we-the-good. If the individual is persuaded, it means she accepts what is presented as it is reality. The individual thus surrenders to the misinformation about the relevant historical facts. She is expected at this point not to undertake any critical thinking on the main reasons and possible solutions of the conflict but to take a political attitude against Syria. Thus, the political powers, who defend the same relevant historiography, use this negative attitude of the individual to justify their every diplomatic or military attack against Syria. So that the persuasion of more viewers is always for the benefit of their policies.

The Cohen affair has been always well known both in Israel and the Arab world. But it has not been popular for the rest of the world until the series. Here, the series may be seen as an attempt to introduce Eli Cohen to more people. It is now much close to reaching this goal.

The introduction process of the series was successful. Also, many news sites published several articles dependent on the historiography of *The Spy*.<sup>31</sup> These factors helped to draw the attention of

---

<sup>30</sup> For the other songs used in the series, see Marinuz n.d.

<sup>31</sup> For example, see Garza, 2019; Hall, 2019.

viewers. So that the series has become prominent on social media in a short time. It is now in the centre of the discussions about Eli Cohen, as an authority.

Besides the sharings directly about the historical facts, there are also many others just regarding the love of Eli and Nadia and the action scenes. It is seen that these are more important than the other sharings for popularity because they attract more attention and direct the viewer easily to the whole story. The myths thus become the “reality” of many more individuals by the digitization while hiding the historical facts.

## REFERENCES

- AbuKhalil, A. (2019, September 24) "Netflix's Mossad Propaganda", *Consortium News*.  
<https://consortiumnews.com/2019/09/24/the-angry-arab-netflixs-mossad-propaganda/>
- Adorno, T. (1991) *Culture Industry*, ed. Jay M. Bernstein, London: Routledge.
- Adorno, T. (2002a) *Essays on Music*, ed. Richard Leppert, California: University of California Press.
- Adorno, T. (2002b) "The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception", in *Dialectics of Enlightenment*, trans. Edmund Jephcott, Standford: Standford University Press, pp. 94-137.
- Adorno, T. (2002c) *The Stars Down to Earth and Other Essays on the Irrational in Culture*, ed. Stephen Crook, London: Routledge.
- Adorno, T. (2005a) *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*, trans. Henry W. Pickford, London: Routledge.
- Adorno, T. (2005b). *Minima Moralia*, trans. Edmund Jephcott, London: Verso.
- Adorno, T. (2009) *Current of Music*, ed. Robert Hullot-Kentor, Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Adorno, T. (2011a) *Otoritaryen Kişilik Üstüne: Niteliksel İdeoloji İncelemeleri* [The Authoritarian Personality: Qualitative Ideology Analyses, trans. Doğan Şahiner, Istanbul: Say Yayınları.
- Adorno, T. (2011b) *Quasi Una Fantasia: Essays on Modern Music*, trans. Rodney Livingstone, London: Verso.
- Adorno, T. & Horkheimer, M. (2002) *Dialectics of Enlightenment*, trans. Edmund Jephcott, Standford: Standford University Press.
- Adorno, T. & Horkheimer, M. (2010) *Sosyolojik Açılımlar* [Aspects of Sociology], trans. M. Sezai Durgun & Adnan Gümüş, Bilgesu Yayıncılık.
- Ahmed, T. (2019, September 10) "What Netflix's 'The Spy' Starring Sacha Baron Cohen Gets Wrong about Eli Cohen", *Newsweek*. <https://www.newsweek.com/netflix-spy-what-it-gets-wrong-eli-cohen-1458312>
- Al Jazeera Arabic (2016, September 5) "افظي تحدث عن ظروف اء تقال الجا سوس كوهين", *الج-ف-ي-ش-ر-أ*, *YouTube*. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=szSPmeeEa\\_Q&feature=youtu.be](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=szSPmeeEa_Q&feature=youtu.be)
- Bayat, A. (2006) "Conspiracies & Theories", *ISIM Review*, no: 18, p. 5.
- Ben-Hanan, E. (1969) *Our Man in Damascus: Elie Cohn*, Tel Aviv: Steimatzky, Citrus House.
- Dan, U. & Porat, Y. B. (1967) *L'espion qui venait d'Israël*, A. Fayard, DL.

Dam, N. V. (2011) *The Struggle for Power in Syria: Politics and Society under Asad and the Ba'th Party*, London: I. B. Tauris.

Darley, A. (2000) *Visual Digital Culture: Surface Play and Spectacle in New Media Genres*, Sussex: Sussex Studies in Culture and Communication.

Garza, A. (2019, September 5) "The True Story Behind the Netflix Series: The Spy", *Time*.  
<https://time.com/5669302/the-spy-netflix-true-story/>

Gomez, E. F. & Quevedo, J. M. (2018) "Connecting with Audiences in New Markets: Netflix's Twitter Strategy in Spain", *Journal of Media Business Studies*, vol. 15, no: 2, pp. 127-146.

Hall, D. (2019, September 13) "Netflix The Spy", *The Sun*.  
<https://www.thesun.co.uk/tvandshowbiz/9900461/netflix-the-spy-eli-cohen-mossad/>

Hamidi, I. (2019, September 19) "10 Factual Errors Committed by 'The Spy' Series on Eli Cohen", *Aawsat*.  
<https://aawsat.com/english/home/article/1909526/exclusive-10-factual-errors-committed-'-spy'-series-eli-cohen>

Havens, T. (2018) "Netflix: Streaming Channel Brands as Global Meaning Systems, in *From Networks to Netflix: A Guide to Changing Channels*, ed. Derek Johnson, London: Routledge, pp. 274-284.

Hiller, R. S. (2017) "Profitably Bundling Information Goods: Evidence from the Evolving Video Library of Netflix", *Journal of Media Economics*, vol. 30, no: 2, pp. 65-81.

Jenner, M. (2018) *Netflix & The Re-invention of Television*, Oxford: Palgrave Macmillan.

Kellner, D. (2010) *Cinema Wars: Hollywood Film and Politics in the Bush-Cheney Era*, New Jersey: Wiley Blackwell.

Kulak, O. (2018) *Theodor Adorno: Kültür Endüstrisinin Kıskaçında Kültür* [Theodor Adorno: The Culture Under the Grip of Culture Industry], Istanbul: İthaki Yayınları.

Kroeber A. L. & Kluckhohn C. (1952) *Culture*, Cambridge: The Museum.

Landsberg, A. (2015) *Engaging the Past: Mass Culture and the Production of Historical Knowledge*, Columbia: Columbia University Press.

Lobato, R. (2019) *Netflix Nations: The Geography of Digital Distribution*, New York: New York University Press.

Marinuz, (n.d.) "The Spy Soundtrack Netflix Mini-series", *Spotify*.  
<https://open.spotify.com/playlist/3QpPRdvMOS3sVtxZ4YjZth?si=RgyjJBpcRqmpM-lpTjA-Dg>

Matrix, S. (2014) "The Netflix Effect: Teens, Binge Watching, and On-demand Digital Media Trends, *Jeunesse: Young People, Texts, Cultures*, vol. 6, no: 1, pp. 119-138.

Melman, Y. (2019, September 25) "Israel's Legendary Spy", *The Jerusalem Post*.  
<https://www.jpost.com/Israel-News/Israels-legendary-spy-602806>

McDonald, K. (2016) "From Online Video Store to Global Internet TV Network: Netflix and the Future of Home Entertainment", in *The Netflix Effect: Technology and Entertainment in the 21st century*, ed. Kevin McDonald & Daniel Smith-Rowsey, London: Bloomsbury, pp. 170-180.

Moubayed, S. (2019, September 21) "Why 'The Spy' is a Blend of Fiction and Fable, *Gulf news*.  
<https://gulfnews.com/opinion/op-eds/why-the-spy-is-a-blend-of-fiction-and-fable-1.66550503>

Olson, R. (1978) "The Ba'th in Syria 1947-1979: An Interpretative Historical Essay (Part One), *Oriente Moderno*, vol. 58, no: 12, pp. 645-681.

Olson, R. (1979) "The Ba'th in Syria 1947-1979: An Interpretative Historical Essay (Part Two), *Oriente Moderno*, vol. 59, no: 6, pp. 439-474.

Osur, L. (2016) *Netflix and the Development of the Internet Television Network*, Unpublished Doctoral Dissertation, Syracuse University, New York.

Quevedo, J. M. & Gomez, E. F. & Boj, F. S. (2019) "How to Engage with Younger Users on Instagram: A Comparative Analysis of HBO and Netflix in the Spanish and US Markets, *International Journal on Media Management*, pp. 1-18.

Prasad, M. M. (2013) *Ideology of Hindi Film: A Historical Construction*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Strinati D. (2004) *An Introduction to Theories of Popular Culture*, London: Routledge.

Storey, J. (2009) *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: An introduction*, London: Longman.

Thomas, G. (2009) *Gideon's Spies: The Secret history of the Mossad*, New York: Thomas Dunne Books.

Tomasulo, F. P. (1996) "'I'll See it When I Believe It': Rodney King and The Prison-House of Video", in *The Persistence of History: Cinema, Television, and the Modern Event*, ed. Vivian C. Sobchack, London: Routledge, pp. 69-91.

Week, R. (2017) *History by HBO: Rendering the American Past in Serial Drama*, Unpublished Doctoral Dissertation, University of Auckland, Auckland.