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Wonderland Eurasia: Theme Parks and Neo-Ottoman Identity Politics in Ankara, Turkey

With an area of 1.3 km² or 320 acres, Wonderland Eurasia, which is located in Ankara, Turkey, has been advertised as the largest theme park in Europe and Asia. Almost a decade in the making, it was completed in 2019 at a cost of approximately \$250 to \$350 million USD (1.5 to 2 billion Turkish Lira) and is seen by supporters as having the potential to boost the sagging tourism industry. This study, which is based on a July 2019 site visit to the theme park, will illustrate, however, that Wonderland Eurasia is much more complicated than appearances suggest. The authors argue that by deploying the imperial glory of the Ottoman Empire, the park constructs an artificial narrative of continuity that connects the past (through Seljuk and even prehistoric themes), to the present, and future (through robotic themes). This is not only meant to symbolically reinforce Turkey's position as a regional 'wonderland'—a social, economic, and cultural powerhouse with grand foreign policy aspirations—but in the process, is also designed to promote a neoliberal Neo-Ottomanism that involves an identity politics of historical elision and selective erasure. Tanfer Emin Tunc is a Professor in the Department of American Culture and Literature at Hacettepe University in Ankara. Gokhan Tunc is an Assistant Professor in the Dept. Of Civil Engineering at the Atilim University in Ankara.

Keywords: Wonderland Eurasia, theme parks, neo-Ottomanism, identity, politics, Ankara, Turkey

Introduction

With an area of 1.3 km² or 320 acres, Wonderland Eurasia, or Ankapark as it was originally named and is still called by locals, has been advertised as the largest theme park in Europe and Asia.¹ Located in Ankara, Turkey, and promoted as the 'Turkish Disneyland,' the special project of former

mayor Melih Gökçek was over a decade in the making.² Plans were proposed in the late 2000s, construction started in 2013, and ‘finished’ in 2019 at a cost of approximately \$250 to \$350 million USD (1.5 to 2 billion Turkish Lira), though estimates have even reached the \$750 million USD range. Wonderland Eurasia opened its doors on March 20, 2019, with free admission, right before a major national election that was poised to—and ultimately did—result in a shift of political power in Ankara. This prompted critics to speculate that the incomplete park was opened for political reasons, namely, to persuade locals to vote for the mayoral candidate representing the conservative, Islamist ruling party, the Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*, or the AKP), to which Melih Gökçek also belonged.³ Built on protected land that was part of the Atatürk Forest Farm (*Atatürk Orman Çiftliği*) before being removed from protected status, redesignated as an urban renewal area, and used to build the theme park, Wonderland Eurasia has become the centre of a polarising political debate in the country.⁴ Supporters (mostly from the AKP) invariably praise the project as having the potential to boost the sagging tourism industry. On the other hand, detractors—generally from the opposition People’s Republican Party (*Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi*, or the CHP)—critique the theme park for a range of reasons, from its questionable safety record (rollercoasters have repeatedly malfunctioned), to its structural integrity (including rusty rides and deteriorating displays), Neo-Ottoman socio-political messages, kitschy, arabesque appearance, environmental impact, carbon footprint, and exorbitant cost.⁵

Nevertheless, this study, which is based on a July 2019 site visit to the theme park, will illustrate that Wonderland Eurasia is much more complicated than appearances suggest. Theming is relatively new in Turkey—whether restaurants, hotels, malls, museums, gated communities or parks—and predominantly a post-2000 phenomenon, borrowed, and often poorly adapted, from the United States.⁶ Yet, if as Salvador Anton Clavé suggests, a “theme park is a cultural product of entertainment that corresponds to the needs of late-modern capitalist society and only makes sense in this context,”⁷ then what place does such a theme park have in a developing country like Turkey? In other words, what needs does Wonderland Eurasia address? As an entertainment venue, it certainly builds on Turkey’s amusement and Luna park cultures, which are rooted in the early republican period of the interwar years (1920s and 1930s) that followed the demise of the Ottoman Empire, which was known for its adaptation of European and American architectural and landscape models. However, Wonderland Eurasia also commemorates the past, but a selective past, not of the early Republic, but of the Seljuk and Ottoman Empires.

While its pastiche of styles has prompted critics, such as Emre Sevim, to call Wonderland Eurasia a “theme park without a theme,”⁸ we argue that evoking former imperial power within a futuristic context is not simply a result of poor theme park planning. Rather, it is another example of Neo-Ottomanism, a socio-political strategy which suggests that, conscious of its past, Turkey, is, once again, pursuing its former leadership position in the Muslim, Turkic, and Eurasian worlds. This project is most apparent in the renaming of Ankapark. Embedded in Wonderland Eurasia is the extension of boundaries beyond Ankara, transnationally and transcontinentally, to Europe, Asia, and the Middle East.

Moreover, by deploying the imperial glory of the Ottoman Empire, the park constructs an artificial narrative of continuity that connects the past (through Seljuk and even prehistoric themes), to the present, and future (through robotic themes). This is not only meant to symbolically reinforce Turkey's position as a regional 'wonderland'—a social, economic, and cultural powerhouse with grand foreign policy aspirations—but in the process, is also designed to promote a neoliberal Neo-Ottomanism that involves an identity politics of historical elision and selective erasure.⁹

Laying the Foundation of Wonderland Eurasia

In Turkey, cultural and political identity have become spectacles to be consumed, not just at Wonderland Eurasia but in Ankara more generally. The city's topography itself has a theme park quality, with Neo-Ottoman overpasses, city gates, and green spaces acting as performative sites of cultural politics. Moreover, Ankara is oriented around malls, and as such, consumerism (of goods and identities) has been literally built into its urban fabric. While, within this context, Wonderland Eurasia seems fairly "normal," what makes it unique is its (re)branding as both a mega-theme park and a geopolitical project. However, parks—and their deployment for cultural and political purposes—are not a recent phenomenon and have a long history in Turkey. According to Kıvanç Kılınç and Duygu Kaçar, Turkish urban parks grew out of the ruins of the Ottoman Empire and "reflected the political agenda of the new nation-state"—namely, the secular, western agenda of the Republic of Turkey, which was established by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk in 1923.¹⁰ Turkish landscape architects looked to the West—particularly to Europe and the United States—for inspiration, and by the 1930s, parks in major cities like Istanbul and the new capital Ankara began to reflect western aesthetics and sensibilities, such as the use of green belts in urban planning.¹¹

Ankara's new parks were part of the 1929 Jansen Plan, named after the German educator, urban planner, and architect Hermann Jansen, who was hired by the new nation to design the city. His plan involved incorporating as many green spaces as possible in order to promote a healthier urban environment, physical activity such as walking and biking, and a more public, interactive, 'modern' lifestyle. In Turkey, these newly-constructed landscapes came to be "seen as representations of the civilized world and the tendencies of the period; they symbolized the adoption of Western types of leisure and sporting facilities, based on new gender relations."¹² Urban parks were venues where sweeping reforms were enacted, and where men and women could interact freely. Thus, parks emerged as spaces of modernity, with early republican initiatives such as the Atatürk Forest Farm (*Atatürk Orman Çiftliği*), Youth Park (*Gençlik Park*), and Trust Park (*Güven Park*), serving as prime locations in Ankara, the capital of the Republic, where members of the Turkish middle and upper classes could perform these western identities, without the baggage of Istanbul, the capital of the Ottoman Empire.¹³

Like these earlier examples, Wonderland Eurasia has been shaped by the political and cultural ideologies of its era which, in the contemporary context,

invariably connect it to the conservative agenda of the AKP. According to opponents, this agenda strikes at the heart of secularism in the Turkish Republic, including symbolic venues such as the Atatürk Forest Farm. With respect to parks, they believe that conservatives “have taken deliberate steps to amend the model that Ankara created in the 1930s with a social democratic agenda,” replacing it with “an amalgam of public ownership (of mixed-class and mixed-use large urban parks) and a free-market economy.”¹⁴ This new model is undergirded by a neoliberal system that encourages theme park initiatives because of their potential to attract tourists and generate vast profits for investors. However, at the core of this new model is a Neo-Ottomanism that is obsessed with a glorious, culturally coherent past that lies on a continuum with the present and future. This ideology attracts conservative and religious Turks, many of whom feel as if they were excluded from, or stifled by, Atatürk’s ‘elitist’ secular republican project—even though it ended a hierarchical, hereditary monarchy—and still resent the dissolution of the Caliphate.¹⁵ Thus, Wonderland Eurasia was modeled on a Neo-Ottoman aesthetic not only for geopolitical reasons, but also to appeal to those who support the ruling party—a *yerli ve milli* (domestic and national) accessible version of Disneyland for those who cannot travel to the United States to experience the ‘real thing.’

Clearly, parks in Turkey have historically been rooted in political ideology, and Wonderland Eurasia is no exception. Today, the tensions between conservative, Islamist Neo-Ottomans and secular, liberal Republicans are literally and figuratively staged in these spaces. Moreover, it has reached the point where, according to opponents, destroying green spaces associated with republicanism and renovating the parks created by the Jansen Plan in Neo-Ottoman style have become part of the ‘conquering strategy’ of conservative Islamists. This neo-imperialist identity politics of historical elision and selective erasure have had a profound aesthetic impact on recreational and entertainment venues in Turkey. As Jason Wood expresses, “In its refurbishment, Ankara’s Youth Park has succumbed to a kind of Neo-Ottomanisation with its modernist buildings now replaced or clad in Seljuk and Ottoman architectural styles.”¹⁶ Other examples of this Neo-Ottomanisation include Eskişehir’s Sazova Park, with its Ottoman-esque Cinderella’s castle—which looks more like a mosque and has now become a staple of all Turkish theme parks, including Wonderland Eurasia—and Istanbul’s Miniaturk, a theme park that is a miniature 1:25 scale replica of the city (the ex-imperial capital) and other structures in Anatolia and former Ottoman territories.

Much like Wonderland Eurasia, Miniaturk constructs an artificial, mythologised, coherent ‘shared Turkish past’ that can ‘seamlessly’ be connected to the present and future—one of the major selling points of Neo-Ottomanism, which also seeks to unite Muslims geopolitically. Moreover, Miniaturk also represents Turkish neoliberal capitalism, which over the past two decades has increasingly deployed cultural heritage protection initiatives as a way to attract tourists and increase revenue. As Şeyda Barlas Bozkuş has maintained, in a “world where social values and condition[s] change extremely fast,” where culture has been industrialised, commodified, and globalised to the point where it is the same everywhere on the planet, Ottoman ‘anything’ emerges as more ‘authentically Turkish’ and marketable to Turks and tourists alike.¹⁷ Here, as in Wonderland

Eurasia and all theme parks in Turkey, ‘authentically Turkish’ is a fabricated, self-orientalist construct that promotes ethnic, religious and national homogeneity, even though the Ottoman Empire was, and the Turkish Republic is, comprised of individuals with diverse identities. By sublimating this diversity into a ‘unified’ architectural bricolage, Neo-Ottoman theme parks create an artificial synthesis that disembed and replicate structures and objects that are dehistoricised, decontextualised, and thus stripped of meaning. Nevertheless, for many Turks, especially conservative ones, Miniaturk is “a cultural commodity with commercial value ... a cultural resource with institutional and social value and ... a symbolic resource for displaying the value of the Anatolian–Turkish culture.”¹⁸ Wonderland Eurasia, much like Miniaturk, draws on this widely-shared pastiche of “myths to generate a sense of well-being” and provide “coherence—a theme—to the whole.”¹⁹

Interestingly, such nationalistic theme parks are part of a broader trend in Asia and the Middle East and, as a result, are never disinterested projects, but politically ambitious and economically costly. Wonderland Eurasia and its aspirations parallel other theme parks in Asia and the Middle East, but it is far more imposing in terms of its size and its sweeping historical narrative of Neo-Ottomanism. Egypt has similar over-the-top arabesque theme parks in varying states of disrepair (for example, Merryland Park in Heliopolis), and even has its own version of Miniaturk, Mini Egypt Park, a walkable outdoor museum that depicts Egypt’s most popular landmarks (the pyramids, sphynxes, and the Nile River) on a 1:25 scale. As Nermin Mokhtar Farrag and Ayman Hesham Elalfy argue, Mini Park Egypt is likewise deployed as a didactic tool, in this case one that promotes Egyptian architectural heritage and history.²⁰ Yet, conspicuously absent is the notion of reviving an ancient empire as a global power through foreign policy and cultural strategies. On the other hand, theme parks in China, perhaps the world leader of the Disneyfication of cultural heritage outside the United States (with Disneylands in Hong Kong and Shanghai), are closer to the Neo-Ottoman model. There is a great deal of similarity between Turkish and Chinese uses of theme parks to stoke nationalistic (Turkic/Han) pride and promote their respective nations as regional, if not global, leaders (Songcheng Park in Hangzhou, the Overseas Chinese Town cluster in Shenzhen, and the Happy Valley amusement parks come to mind).²¹ Moreover, these two countries have a shared history with, and contemporary stake in, Mongolia, the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, and Central Asia, with theme parks in Turkey (such as Miniaturk) and China (those mentioned above) attempting to fold these cultures into a unified national narrative.

For its critics, Neo-Ottomanism is particularly insidious when, as in the case of Wonderland Eurasia, it is extrapolated on the scale of a mega-theme park. In this context, it threatens republican landscape parks, green spaces, and traditional Luna parks; it also decimates the local environment and erases local identities in pursuit of a unified national narrative.²² Despite numerous protests, Wonderland Eurasia bulldozed through *Çubuk Çayı* (Çubuk Stream), partially destroyed the Atatürk Forest Farm, and completely demolished the Ankara Zoo (*Ankara Hayvanat Bahçesi*). Wonderland Eurasia also obliterated the original purpose of the Atatürk Forest Farm, which was to provide an environmentally-

conscious urban space for recreation that would promote agricultural production and education, ethical land conservation, and species protection, especially through its zoo. However, the zoo, much like the rest of the park, no longer exists: the animals were sold at auction and the property is now the location of massive rollercoasters and kitschy dinosaur statues.²³ Whereas entrance to the Atatürk Forest Farm and Ankara Zoo were free of charge, thereby democratising access to urban parks (one of the original goals of the Jansen plan), Wonderland Eurasia's ever-increasing entrance and ride fees gradually placed it out of reach of many low-income Turks. Perhaps, as Ayşe Öncü suggests, this ironically may also be part of the AKP's global, neoliberal project, for in Turkey, "[c]ity authorities constantly battle with the creeping tendency of the city's inhabitants to take over 'tourist sites,'" ruining the "cleanliness and order of 'tourist spaces.'" ²⁴ Eliminating, or at least reducing, their visibility through inaccessibility could therefore neutralise this 'threat.' Wonderland Eurasia is thus an example of "transformations of metropolitan space and urban culture," in which gentrification and other exclusionary measures are "driven by the deliberate creation of cultural-historical packages and marketable pastiches that offer 'entertainment value,'" especially for foreign tourists, at the expense of local constituencies.²⁵

While the latest, and certainly the largest, Wonderland Eurasia is not the first mega-theme park in Turkey. Located in Istanbul, Isfanbul (formerly known as Vialand) previously held the title of the largest theme park in Turkey when it opened its doors in 2013, and is one of the main models for Wonderland Eurasia, down to the Neo-Ottoman themes, logistics, and website design.²⁶ Isfanbul showcases dozens of attractions with multiple themes, including the ubiquitous dinosaur motif, which seems to be a required element in all Turkish theme parks (the now-defunct Jurassic Land, formerly located in Istanbul's Forum Shopping Mall, once led these *Jurassic Park* imitators). Isfanbul also houses a public park, open air theater, hotel, shopping mall, and a large zoo, 'Jungle Istanbul.' Much like Wonderland Eurasia, whose aims include 'educating' visitors about Turkey's gloried past through a Neo-Ottoman, auto-orientalist framework, Isfanbul

welcomes visitors through a striking castle structure, leading to a "Main Street" area with Ottoman-style shops, houses and other buildings designed to reflect daily life in old Istanbul. The Ottoman theme is continued in Fatih's Dream (*Fatih'in Rüyası*), a dark (enclosed) ride where passengers are invited to take "an exciting and educational trip" through the Empire and witness Fatih the Conqueror's capture of Istanbul.²⁷

Another notable example is the Land of Legends theme park and 'shopping avenue' in Belek, Antalya, which opened in 2016.²⁸ With its adventure park, aqua park, restaurants and bars, shows and events, and large onsite resort, it emulates the Disney model more closely than Isfanbul and Wonderland Eurasia, whose location makes it user-unfriendly in terms of public transportation and hotel accommodations. Nevertheless, much like Disney parks, all of these Turkish mega-theme parks have been designed to eliminate traditional Luna/amusement park patrons (working class teens and young adults), courting, instead, foreign tourists and the Turkish "middle-class family on wheels."²⁹

Wonderland Eurasia

Originally the special project of Ankara mayor Melih Gökçek (1994–2017), who envisioned the theme park as the crowning glory of the capital city and a tourist draw that would ensure his political legacy, Wonderland Eurasia took over a decade to plan and build. Initial disagreements about where to construct the theme park (inside or outside the city), lawsuits filed by opposition groups trying to protect the Atatürk Forest Farm, the sheer cost of completing such an enormous project, and the departure of Gökçek in 2017 caused numerous delays and hiatuses.³⁰ The fact that Wonderland Eurasia was planned and built piecemeal by countless actors, over such a long period, resulted in serious design flaws that have contributed to its unpopularity beyond the political realm.

Wonderland Eurasia is organised into seven themed areas, each one corresponding to a time period and a separate zone within the park. The seven eras, as listed in order on Wonderland Eurasia's website, are: *Şimdiki Zaman* (Present Time), which includes the entrance gate, fountains, and statues of white Turkish Angora (Ankara's historic name) cats, set to Mozart's Turkish March; *Tarih Öncesi* (Prehistory), 65 million years ago, complete with a dinosaur museum, statues, and rides; *Taş Devri* (Stone Age), with cave dwellers and hunting/gathering Angora Cats (like the dinosaurs, the cats are a repeating theme in the park); *Tufandan Sonra* (After the Flood), whose main attraction is an earthquake-simulating ride, *Zelzele* (the Ottoman Turkish word for earthquake); *Kadim Uygarlıklar* (Ancient Civilizations), featuring architecture from the Seljuk and Ottoman periods; *Uzak Gelecek* (Distant Future), with robots, laser shows, digital games, and the imposing Lightspeed rollercoaster; and *Yeni Başlangıçlar* (New Beginnings), a colorful children's park that resembles Disney's Fantasyland.³¹ Each of these themed areas has its own distinct political and historical narrative that links back to the larger Neo-Ottoman framework—as represented by *Şimdiki Zaman* (Present Time) and its entrance gate—as well as to Islam in general (for example, the seven heavens and the seven gates of hell).

Wonderland Eurasia's entrance gate is essentially a 100-metre high Seljuk/Ottoman Cinderella's castle with extra elements, such as domes and spires, that add another 35 metres in height. (Figure 1)



Figure 1. Wonderland Eurasia, Entrance Gate. (Photo property of the authors)

Eyüboğlu describes this kitschy, arabesque, self-orientalist, Neo-Ottoman appropriation of the iconic Disney castle as “a collage of various elements from [the] unique mosques and madrasas of Anatolia with iwans, tombs, minarets, muqarnases, and domes,” culminating in a “cacophonous eclecticism.”³² The fantastic, surreal gate, which “emphasize[s] the dissociation from the ordinary, worldly and the daily” and the sensation of “traveling back in time,” sets the tone of the rest of Wonderland Eurasia.³³ Like in Disneyland parks, the gate is followed by a quaint pedestrian (in this case Ottoman) ‘Main Street.’ However, after passing through Wonderland Eurasia’s gate, visitors encounter a wide shopping plaza flanked by two nearly-identical gift shops on either side; these are essentially toy shops selling generic merchandise that could easily be found anywhere else in downtown Ankara. Branding, a hallmark of theme parks, is conspicuously absent at Wonderland Eurasia. No keychains, postcards, clothing, hats, mugs or, in restaurants, embossed paper napkins or cups can be found in this “theme park without a theme”—not even a toy Angora cat, despite its ubiquitous presence, potential mascot status (like Mickey Mouse), and the fact that it is one of the logos of the Ankara Metropolitan Municipality.³⁴ Most theme parks use themed products “to provide the customer with a sense of place. ... the smallest details, like fire hydrants to ... manhole covers, that might be noticed by a patron in the most obscure and unexpected places are redesigned to create comfort zones with the brand.”³⁵ Yet this does not exist at Wonderland Eurasia. While this could certainly be considered one of many design flaws in the theme park, there might be another, cultural reason. In general, Turks believe that sacred historical or religious narratives (Neo-Ottomanism included), even when packaged as consumer products, should not be blatantly commercialised through hard-sell tactics. This conviction is linked to the Muslim values of *tevazu* (modesty) and *israf* (waste), although Wonderland Eurasia, itself, manifestly contradicts these values.

The courtyard's architecture, with its eight-, ten-, and twelve-pointed star tiles and marble pools, evokes Seljuk and Ottoman streets and bazaars that de/re-historicise and re-narrate Ankara's past. However, the presence of a Gloria Jean's coffee shop, an immense, five-story high water fountain with cartoonish cat statues "playing various musical instruments that form an awkward orchestra,"³⁶ and constant loud speaker announcements in Turkish only, reminding patrons not to smoke or climb the architectural elements, undercut the experience and seem like more design flaws that destroy the immersive experience. Yet, when juxtaposed together through a Neo-Ottoman framework, all of these elements suddenly become compatible, suggesting that the past, present, and future can coexist in Wonderland Eurasia's monolingual, monocultural, hyperreal version of Turkey. (Figure 2)



Figure 2. Water Fountain with Angora Cat Statues. (Photo property of the authors)

Unlike most other theme parks, complete sensory immersion does not exist in Wonderland Eurasia, resulting in a sometimes absurd conflation of past, present and future that becomes progressively obvious as one walks throughout the park. Ankara, which is hilly, can be seen in the background, the music volume is lowered during *ezan*, or the Islamic call to prayer, and the mood is compromised by brides and grooms, in full dress, taking pictures near rollercoasters. Moreover, one area's attractions can readily be seen from another—for example, Skyliner (the Ferris wheel) and other elements from *Uzak Gelecek*, the futuristic zone, can be seen in *Tarih Öncesi*, or the prehistoric zone, corrupting the visual isolation expected in theme parks.³⁷ However, Wonderland Eurasia seems to thrive on such contradictions, engaging in a cognitive dissonance that speaks to different audiences simultaneously by bringing existing myths and sometimes even "opposite values together in one place [to] present them as a normal pairing."³⁸

The courtyard essentially serves as the 'main square' or hub of the park—a crossroads where guests can 'choose their own adventure,' or to which themed 'worlds' they would like to journey first.³⁹ While Disneyland parks—especially those structured on the Magic Kingdom/Cinderella's castle model—tend to follow a hub/spoke layout, Wonderland Eurasia is more like a butterfly, with a central body (the entrance/main square) and two large wings with three themed areas each.⁴⁰ The left wing of the butterfly (from the perspective of guests walking

through the entrance) is more densely structured, with more attractions per square kilometre than the right wing, which houses the larger rollercoasters. Through the middle of the right wing also runs a massive artificial lake that obliterated part of Çubuk Stream (*Çubuk Çayı*), one of Ankara's important natural waterways that empties out into a major reservoir.

The left wing of Wonderland Eurasia is comprised of three themed areas: *Tarih Öncesi* (Prehistory), *Taş Devri* (Stone Age), and *Kadim Uygarlıklar* (Ancient Civilizations). Visitors are introduced to the prehistorical era through a dinosaur museum and forest. Located directly behind the entrance area, the museum and forest lead to the rest of the attractions in the zone, which is dominated by dinosaurs, a motif that also extends to the other wing of the park, unifying both sides. Given the original use of the area (the Atatürk Forest Farm and Zoo), the omnipresence of the dinosaur statues is not only menacing, but also insulting to those who opposed the building of Wonderland Eurasia citing environmental concerns. However, the dinosaur theme was most likely chosen because of its familiarity, its relatability to the *Jurassic Park* films, and its ability to spark interest from different age groups. As Eyüboğlu notes, “The fundamental aim of the design [was] to create a realistic atmosphere” of the “landscapes, in which dinosaurs lived, with plants and artificial rocks with special effects”; the “rainforests, deserts, exotic lands, and jungles as habitats of mechanical creatures decontextualize the place.”⁴¹ This gives the dinosaur museum and forest “a placeless mood” that allows patrons to feel as if they have transcended history, and can be anywhere, at any time. This is enhanced by a “fun fair area, a sky garden (skywalk), a cinema and a dark ride” that narrates the dinosaur experience from “existence to extinction.”⁴² (Figure 3)



Figure 3. Dinosaur Forest. (Photo property of the authors)

The dinosaur attractions are followed by a number of water rides (Girdap Surfers' Coaster, Hyper Splash, and the Rapids Ride), with decor depicting dinosaurs and human beings as if they coexisted—an anachronistic, yet understandable oversight given Wonderland Eurasia's overarching social and political agenda as a space where historical accuracy, objectivity, and logic are suspended for larger purposes.⁴³ In this alternative spatio-temporal environment, or virtual reality, everything can and does coexist—all pasts, presents, and futures are possible, for Wonderland Eurasia is a Neo-Ottoman *simulacrum*, a “copy for which there is no original, emptily duplicating itself to infinity,” not “referr[ing] back to any standard measure or first instance, because it already contains all the information needed for its own replication.”⁴⁴

The theming in *Tarih Öncesi* (Prehistory) begins to deteriorate in the next area of the park, *Taş Devri* (Stone Age), which consists of statues of cave dwellers, hunting/gathering Angora Cats, synthetic trees, artificial ponds, crudely spray-painted concrete rock formations, and a random assortment of typical amusement park thrill rides that have very little in common with each other or with the supposed 'Flintstones' theme. (Figure 4)

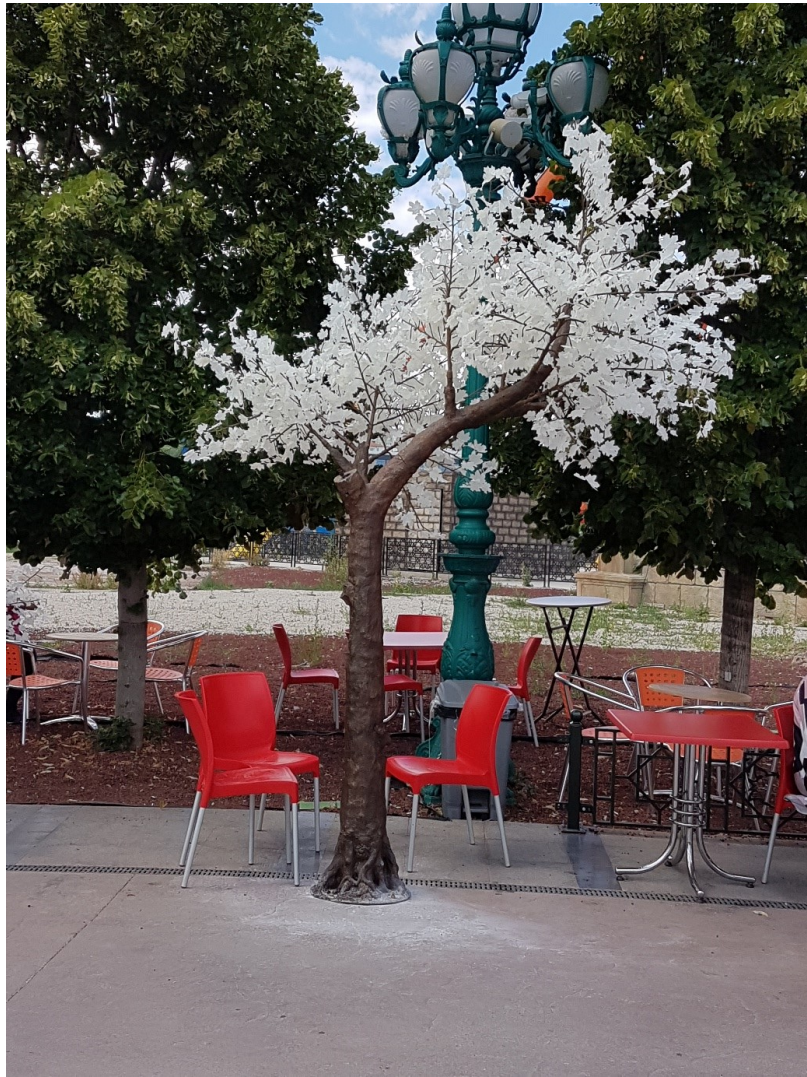


Figure 4. Wonderland Eurasia's Artificial Trees. (Photo property of the authors)

In this surreal area that is more like an elaborate fairground than part of a theme park, prefabricated rides fill the zone with physical gratification and nothing else, in a sort of absent presence. In between the rollercoasters are merry-go-rounds, bumper cars, go-carts, trains, flying aeroplanes, ships, time travel rides, jet-ski, surfing and tropical Polynesian rides, complete with Easter Island *mo'ai* statues. Pirate-themed rides, mythological creature rides (giants, cyclopes, dragons, pegasuses and serpents), and animal-themed rides (including elephants, horses, seals, sharks, octopuses, kangaroos and cats) can also be found in this area. Once again, this evokes the reality of how Wonderland Eurasia replaced a zoo with living animals and trees with cheap, artificial reproductions.⁴⁵ (Figure 5)



Figure 5. Wonderland Eurasia's Pegasus Ride. (Photo property of the authors)

Scattered throughout the left wing of Wonderland Eurasia is the third theme, *Kadim Uygarlıklar* (Ancient Civilizations). On the surface, this seems like a perplexing title for the various groupings of Seljuk and Ottoman architectural elements, building facades, fountains, bazaars, food carts and local products, given the fact that both empires can hardly be considered ancient (the Seljuk Empire existed between 1037 and 1194 CE and the Ottoman Empire between 1299 and 1923 CE). However, in the Neo-Ottoman context of Wonderland Eurasia, 'Ancient Civilizations' crafts a deep-rooted imperial creation myth that extends back to antiquity and to the far corners of the globe. Perhaps that is why this theme is concentrated in the far reaches of the left wing of the park, where a large, fully-functioning mosque can also be found. Spreading Islam through religious and educational institutions was certainly a global aim of the Seljuk and Ottoman Empires, and now of Neo-Ottomanism. Whereas in a Disney park, a large church, synagogue or temple would be unthinkable, at Wonderland Eurasia, ethnic, religious and national homogeneity, and not diversity, is the overwhelming social, cultural and historical narrative. Hence, the presence of a single, sacred house of worship in the midst of the profane. (Figure 6)



Figure 6. *Wonderland Eurasia's Ottoman Town and Mosque.* (Photo property of the authors)

Kadim Uygarlıklar (Ancient Civilizations) is presented as an attempt to maintain 'Turkish' cultural identity in the midst of a very American enterprise (the theme park). Most importantly, however, it is what is historically excluded in *Wonderland Eurasia*—everything between the Stone Age and the Seljuks (other great Anatolian civilisations), as well as everything between the Ottoman Empire and the Distant Future (that is, the Turkish Republic)—that sets the mood, and theme of the park, and defines its Neo-Ottoman geopolitics.

The right wing of *Wonderland Eurasia* is also comprised of three themed areas: *Yeni Başlangıçlar* (New Beginnings), *Uzak Gelecek* (Distant Future), and *Tufandan Sonra* (After the Flood). The pavilion, 'Small World Türkiye,' is a Neo-Ottoman appropriation of Disney's famous 'It's a Small World' ride, and is featured prominently in *Yeni Başlangıçlar*, or New Beginnings, the children's area of the park. (Figure 7)



Figure 7. *Small World Türkiye*. (Photo property of the authors)

However, unlike the Disney ride, which was designed to represent internationalism and global solidarity (though this itself is debatable), ‘Small World Türkiye’ is a Neo-Ottoman pan-Turkic dream, decorated with “a collage of different Turkish archetypes like domes, arches, columns and carpets,” and statues of famous figures such as Keloğlan, Mevlana Rumi, and Nasreddin Hoca.⁴⁶ The Wonderland Eurasia manifestation of the famous boat ride does not stress the interconnectedness of humankind. Rather, it emphasises national unity and the interconnectedness of the different regions of Turkey, with a nod to global Turkic ethnic identity, while eliding racial, religious, cultural and gender diversity—in other words, the Neo-Ottoman version of a ‘new beginning.’ The seven regions of Turkey (*bölge*) are depicted along the five-minute boat tour that winds around a 2,400 m² area. Depictions of notable landmarks, natural formations, animated figures in indigenous costumes, local folk dances, foods, flora and fauna comprise most of the ride, which ‘educates’ patrons through a Neo-Ottoman interpretation of Turkish history, deploying cultural elements that are compatible with this narrative.

The next area, *Uzak Gelecek*, or the distant future-themed zone of the park, is a Neo-Ottoman appropriation of Disney’s Tomorrowland. The largest themed area of Wonderland Eurasia, this is where most of the mega-rides and attractions are housed, including: Skyliner (the 55 metre-high Ferris wheel); the Flying Theater (with 100 moving seats and a hot air balloon facade); a 10,000 m² digital game tent with LED light exteriors; a robot show center; a 5,000 m² laser tag tent; and the Space Mountain-esque, 110 km/hour Lightspeed rollercoaster, the largest

ride in the park—all of which are meant to create a futuristic mood and evoke a sense of time travel.⁴⁷ Yet in the middle of the artificial lake that runs through this part of Wonderland Eurasia is a ‘Flying Island,’ featuring white, stylized ‘whirling dervishes,’ or *semazen*. These flying figures symbolise the ability of the past to adapt to the present and future, and the continuity and homogeneity of Turkish history, culture and religion, all of which are strategically placed in this theme park ‘tomorrowland.’ (Figure 8)



Figure 8. One of Many Whirling Dervish Motifs on Flying Island. (Photo property of the authors)

The final area in the right wing of Wonderland Eurasia is the strangely dystopic, post-apocalyptic *Tufandan Sonra* (After the Flood) zone, which features an ‘end of the world’ theme. Here, glaciers melt, mountains crumble in landslides, and volcanic lava destroys plant, animal and human life. This catastrophic scenario, as the narrative in this section of the park posits, is caused by ‘the big one,’ an earthquake that is depicted in the dark ride *Zelzele* (the Ottoman Turkish word for earthquake; *deprem* is used in modern Turkish), which prompts climate change and the spiral of events that leads to Armageddon. Oddly enough, male and female Angora cats guard the ride, and children are supposed to entertain themselves in the middle of this disaster. Adjacent to *Zelzele* are a go-cart track, a show pavilion and family entertainment venues.⁴⁸ This, combined with the overpriced dead restaurants, empty shops and poorly attended or non-functioning rides, has already rendered Wonderland Eurasia, which should have been bustling with guests in July, a dashed Neo-Ottoman dream. (Figure 9)



Figure 9. One of Many 'Dead' Restaurants. (Photo property of the authors)

Conclusion

Theme parks are designed to be “symbolic landscapes of cultural narratives,” and as this study illustrates, Wonderland Eurasia is clearly a symbolic landscape of Neo-Ottoman cultural narratives.⁴⁹ Despite their varying states of disrepair and attendance, the rides, attractions and aesthetic elements of the theme park

expand the narrative experience with appropriate physical sensations, never for effect alone, but always to advance the storyline.... [A]rchitecture, public space design, landscaping, musical cueing, detailing, and the use of symbols, archetypes, and icons ... define the essence of theme parks.⁵⁰

In this regard, Wonderland Eurasia is no exception. Yet, despite predictions that millions of domestic and foreign tourists (including 500,000 from China) would visit Wonderland Eurasia annually,⁵¹ little interest was paid by the local population or by domestic and international tourists. After its grand opening in March 2019—which, incidentally, did not help the AKP win the mayoral election

in Ankara—the park was at best sparsely attended, with only a scattering of cars in its massive, usually empty, parking lot. Much like Ankara’s dozens of malls, which were rapidly overbuilt in the 2000s and are now dying, Wonderland Eurasia—overhyped and likewise overbuilt—is, as of this writing, on the verge of closing its doors permanently and being repurposed or dismantled, as sustaining the immense area seems less and less feasible, especially during Ankara’s long and usually harsh winters.⁵² (Figure 10)

The reasons for Wonderland Eurasia’s failure are varied, with insufficient public relations topping the list. This was exacerbated when the former AKP mayor of Ankara and the project’s most ardent supporter, Melih Gökçek, resigned from his position, and was replaced by an uninterested successor from the same party. Shortly after the park’s opening, the political locus of power in Ankara shifted from the AKP to the CHP, with the election of a mayor from the latter party, which did not help matters. In general, CHP politicians and constituents were never supportive of the initiative due to its exorbitant cost (particularly the dinosaur statues), which detracted from more urgent infrastructure concerns. Wonderland Eurasia’s damage to the Çubuk Stream, the Atatürk Forest Farm, and the Ankara Zoo, the rush to open the unfinished park for political reasons despite a questionable safety record and rusty, dangerous rides, and its politicised Neo-Ottoman aesthetics made the theme park unappealing to a significant portion of the population. The disjointed advertising campaign that was mostly limited to signs within Ankara and a few print ads and television spots also circumscribed the park’s success. The park was hardly advertised beyond the city, let alone to foreign tourists abroad, who are most likely still unaware of its existence. This was a major error since Ankara, unlike Istanbul and Izmir, is not a tourist city. Furthermore, the inaccessibility of the park via public transportation, confusion over fluctuating entrance and ride fees, serious design flaws, the unaffordability of food and amenities in the park, and closed attractions and restaurants kept locals and domestic tourists away, since all of these problems were aired on television and the social media.⁵³ In short, Wonderland Eurasia became a victim of its own grand political ambitions, poor planning and market research, spiraling costs and lack of public interest and support.



Figure 10. No Entry. (Photo property of the authors)

Nevertheless, Wonderland Eurasia can be read as a cautionary tale about the political, economic and nationalistic limits of theme parks, and especially “the relationship of architecture to culture, identity, consumption, exhibition, recreation, [and] fiction.”⁵⁴ Theme parks such as Wonderland Eurasia make constructions of the past digestible—accuracy is not important; just capturing the essence is often enough. However, today, Neo-Ottoman appropriations and (re)presentations of the past have their consequences. Whereas once, theme parks, as postmodern spaces, could deploy maximalism, exaggeration, kitsch, spectacle, pastiche, parody, irony, hybridity, fragmentation, eclecticism, escapism, and fantasy with little or no criticism, that is no longer the case. Couching Neo-Ottoman narratives, even in the theme park realm of absurdity and hyperreality, is, as Wonderland Eurasia exemplifies, no longer appealing or acceptable to significant parts of the population, especially to (social) media-savvy youth who can decode, and reject, such implicit and explicit messages. What determines the longevity, and ultimately the success of a theme park is its ability to respond to the needs of society. Young has claimed that if

new features and designs are not introduced, the landscape threatens to become an historic artifact, revealing the age of some messages. ... Alternately, an exhibition in a nationalist park that praises the current regime must disappear or be revised when it ends. Nothing should clearly declare that history led anywhere but directly to the positive, reassuring present.⁵⁵

This is not the situation with Wonderland Eurasia since it remains closely tied to the AKP. As long as *Şimdiki Zaman* (the present), as represented by the entrance

gate, remains a mélange of Neo-Ottoman narratives that glorify the past, the future of Wonderland Eurasia will remain doubtful.

¹ According to its website, Wonderland Eurasia includes 2,117 attractions, 110,000m² of enclosed space, 15,000m² of adult entertainment space for concerts and shows, 14 roller coasters, a 6,800 space solar- powered parking lot (purportedly the largest of its kind in the world), and 2 million trees, shrubs, plants and flowers. The last two statistics have been repeatedly questioned by critics who blame Wonderland Eurasia for the destruction of the Atatürk Forest Farm. <http://www.wonderlandeurasia.com/tr/hakkimizda>, accessed on July 5, 2020.

² Emre Sevim, “‘Götürüsü Yüksek’ Bir Proje: Ankapark,” *Mimarlık* 407 (2019): 12-15 (12).

³ Faruk Atalan, “Ankapark, ‘Wonderland Eurasia’ Oldu Açılıyor,” *Sozcu*, March 18, 2019. <https://www.sozcu.com.tr/2019/ekonomi/ankapark-wonderland-eurasia-oldu-aciliyor-3959171>, accessed on May 7, 2020; Andrea Romano, “This Massive New Theme Park in Turkey with over 2,000 Attractions is 3 Times Bigger than Disney’s Magic Kingdom,” *Travel+Leisure*, March 21, 2019. <https://www.travelandleisure.com/attractions/amusement-parks/wonderland-eurasia-turkey-europe-biggest-theme-park>, accessed on May 7, 2020.

⁴ Gün Su Eyüboğlu, “Theme Park as a Socio-Cultural and Architectural Program: A Critical Review of Ankapark, Ankara” (M.Arch. Thesis, Middle East Technical University, 2018), 107.

⁵ Sevim, 12. For more on the use of kitsch in urban parks in Turkey, see Osman Zeybek, “Kitsch Urban Landscapes,” *Inonu University Journal of Art and Design* 7.16 (2017): 96-111.

⁶ For examples of themed consumerism in Turkey, see Tanfer Emin Tunc, “‘How I Tried to Leave the Mall and Why the Mall Wouldn’t Let Me’: Thoughts on American Consumer Culture and the Mallification of Turkey,” *The Transnational Turn in American Studies: Turkey and the United States*, eds. Tanfer Emin Tunc and Bahar Gursel (Bern: Peter Lang Publishing, 2012), 225-251 and Buğra Altın, “Mekan Tasarımında Tema: Tematik Konut Örnekleri” (MS Thesis, Atılım University, 2015), 143.

⁷ Salvador Anton Clavé, *The Global Theme Park Industry* (Oxfordshire: CABI, 2007), 21.

⁸ Sevim, 13.

⁹ Alexander Murinson, *Turkish Foreign Policy in the 21st Century: Neo-Ottomanism and the Strategic Depth Doctrine* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2020).

¹⁰ Kıvanç Kılınç and Duygu Kaçar, “In Pursuit of a European City: Competing Landscapes of Eskişehir’s Riverfront,” *Contemporary Urban Landscapes of the Middle East*, ed. Mohammad Gharipour (London: Routledge, 2016), 45-66 (47).

¹¹ Sinem Türkoglu Önge, *Spatial Representation of Power: Making the Urban Space of Ankara in the Early Republican Period* (Italy: Edizioni Plus, 2007); Duygu Saban Ökesli, “Hermann Jansen’s Planning Principles and His Urban Legacy in Adana,” *METU Journal of the Faculty of Architecture* 26.2 (2009): 45-67.

¹² Kılınç and Kaçar, 47.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 58.

¹⁵ For more on contemporary Neo-Ottoman culture, see Fatma Müge Göcek, *The Transformation of Turkey: Redefining State and Society from the Ottoman Empire to the Modern Era* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2011).

¹⁶ Jason Wood, ed. *The Amusement Park: History, Culture and the Heritage of Pleasure* (London: Routledge, 2017), 9.

¹⁷ Şeyda Barlas Bozkuş, “Consuming Cultural Heritage: Tourism and Cultural Policy in the Case of Turkey’s Miniaturk Theme Park,” *Global Media Journal: Turkish Edition* 3.6 (2013): 46-59 (47).

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 53.

¹⁹ Terence Young, “Grounding the Myth—Theme Park Landscapes in an Era of Commerce and Nationalism,” *Theme Park Landscapes: Antecedents and Variations*, eds. Terence Young and Robert Riley (Washington, DC: Dumbarton Oaks, 2002), 1-10 (5).

²⁰ Nermin Mokhtar Farrag and Ayman Hesham Elalfy, “The Use of Miniature Parks as a Museum for Egyptian Architectural Heritage,” *Current Science International* 8.4 (2019): 623-639.

- ²¹ Nick Stanley, "Chinese Theme Parks and National Identity," *Theme Park Landscapes: Antecedents and Variations*, eds. Terence Young and Robert Riley (Washington, DC: Dumbarton Oaks, 2002), 269-290.
- ²² Wood, 9.
- ²³ Deniz Kimyon and Gencay Serter, "Atatürk Orman Çiftliği'nin ve Ankara'nın Değişimi Dönüşümü," *Planlama* 25.1 (2015): 44-63 (55).
- ²⁴ Ayşe Öncü, "The Politics of Istanbul's Ottoman Heritage in the Era of Globalism: Refractions through the Prism of a Theme Park," *Cities of the South: Poverty, Citizenship and Exclusion in the 21st Century*, eds. Barbara Drieskens, Franck Mermier, and Heiko Wimmen (London: Saqi Books, 2007), 233-264 (234).
- ²⁵ *Ibid.*, 233.
- ²⁶ For more on Isfanbul, see its website: <https://www.isfanbul.com>, accessed on July 5, 2020.
- ²⁷ Wood, 9.
- ²⁸ For more on the Land of Legends, see its website: <https://thelandoflegendsthemepark.com>, accessed on July 5, 2020.
- ²⁹ Margaret J. King, "The Theme Park: Aspects of Experience in a Four-Dimensional Landscape," *Material Culture* 34.2 (2002): 1-15 (4). For more on the social threats posed by traditional Luna/amusement parks such as Coney Island, see Tanfer Emin Tunc, "Freaks and Geeks: Coney Island Sideshow Performers and Long Island Eugenicists, 1910-1935," *Human Zoos: From the Hottentot Venus to Reality Shows*, eds. Nicolas Bancel, et al. (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2008), 276-285.
- ³⁰ Sevim, 3; Eyüboğlu, 4-5.
- ³¹ This listing can be found on Wonderland Eurasia's main website: <http://www.wonderlandeurasia.com>, accessed on July 5, 2020.
- ³² Eyüboğlu, 115-116.
- ³³ *Ibid.*, 116.
- ³⁴ *Ibid.*, 119.
- ³⁵ *Ibid.*, 19.
- ³⁶ *Ibid.*, 118-119.
- ³⁷ *Ibid.*, 158.
- ³⁸ Young, 5.
- ³⁹ Eyüboğlu, 119.
- ⁴⁰ The map of Wonderland Eurasia can be found here: <http://www.wonderlandeurasia.com/tr/tema-park-haritasi>, accessed on July 5, 2020.
- ⁴¹ Eyüboğlu, 140.
- ⁴² *Ibid.*, 141, 143.
- ⁴³ *Ibid.*, 145.
- ⁴⁴ Steven Shaviro, *Doom Patrols: A Theoretical Fiction About Postmodernism* (London: Serpent's Tail, 1997), 103.
- ⁴⁵ Eyüboğlu, 150-151.
- ⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 121.
- ⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 127-128.
- ⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 136.
- ⁴⁹ King, 3.
- ⁵⁰ *Ibid.*
- ⁵¹ Sputnik Türkiye, "Ankapark Açılış Tarihi ve Ücretleri Belli Oldu," January 16, 2019, <https://tr.sputniknews.com/turkiye/201901161037126433-ankapark-acilis-tarih-ucret>, accessed on March 23, 2020.
- ⁵² Sözcü Ankara, "Ankapark'ın Şalteri İndi," December 5, 2019. <https://www.sozcu.com.tr/2019/gundem/ankaparkin-salteri-indi-5490595>, accessed on March 23, 2020. In February 2011, at the peak of Ankara's malling phenomenon, "a national Turkish newspaper declared Ankara...the 'champion' of consumerism with more mall space per person than the European average (217 m² per thousand people in Ankara compared to 200 m² per thousand people in Europe)" (Tunc, "How I Tried to Leave the Mall," 225). For more on dead malls, see Tunc, "How I Tried to Leave the Mall," 238.
- ⁵³ Sevim, 3.
- ⁵⁴ Eyüboğlu, v.
- ⁵⁵ Young, 7.