

Fecha de recepción: 15 diciembre 2018
Fecha de aceptación: 15 diciembre 2019
Fecha de publicación: 9 febrero 2020
URL: <https://oceanide.es/index.php/012020/article/view/26/171>
Océanide número 12, ISSN 1989-6328
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.37668/oceanide.v12i.26>

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Building Up Steam: Gaze, Gateways, and Gays in Ferzan Özpetek's Hamam

≈ Resumen

En el presente artículo, mi intención es concentrarme en lo que podría denominarse “cruces transgresivos de frontera” acometidos por los protagonistas del filme Hamam de Ferzan Özpetek en dos poderosos ejemplos de “espionaje en el hamam”, los cuales – aunque configurados de manera diferente, por distintas razones, y con consecuencias radicalmente diferentes – introducen posiciones de novicios no iniciados que miran hacia dentro desde fuera. Lo que trato de abordar es Estambul como un “tercer espacio”; un espacio liminal que se presenta como un reto para el individuo, que tanto inspira miedo como da rienda suelta a la tentación, representando la vaga promesa o riesgo de descubrir y ser descubierto, de revelar, absorber, desnudarse, tener una experiencia social e incluso perderse. Observando a Francesco y Mehmet observar secretamente (desde arriba) a mujeres en el bagno, y observando a Marta observar (desde abajo) cómo Francesco y Mehmet se miran mutuamente en el refugio que es el hamam que el primero ha heredado contra su voluntad, me planteo investigar las implicaciones de revertir la mirada masculina en lo que puede parecer una acción de “homosexualización” del hamam pero que bien pudiera también verse como una descolonización del espacio y un intento de reclamarlo.

Palabras clave:

fronteras; Ferzan Özpetek; mirada; Estambul; Occidente; Oriente; subjetividades queer; Tercer Espacio; transgresiones; baño turco

≈ Abstract

In the present article, I wish to concentrate on what may be called “transgressive border-crossings” engaged in by the protagonists of Ferzan Özpetek's Hamam in two poignant instances of “hamam spying”, which – though effected in different configurations, for different purposes, and with drastically different consequences – introduce positions of “uninitiated” novices kept outside looking in. What I intend to engage with is Istanbul as a “third space”; a liminal space looming as a challenge to the individual, instilling fear as much as unleashing temptation and a faint promise or threat of finding out and being found out, of revealing, taking in, laying bare, getting laid, getting lost. By looking at Francesco and Mehmet looking (from above) at unsuspecting women in the bagno, and Marta looking (from below) at Francesco and Mehmet looking at one another in the shelter of Francesco's originally unwanted inherited hamam, I wish to investigate the implications of reversing the male gaze in what may seem as downright “queering” the hamam but what might just as well turn out to be a decolonisation of the space and an attempt at reclaiming it.

Keywords:

Bisexuality; borders; Ferzan Özpetek; gaze; Istanbul, Occident; Orient; queer subjectivities; Third Space; transgressions; Turkish bath

By the seashore near Naples, a poet seeks inspiration for the plot of his *drama buffo*. Down on his luck, he turns to a band of Gypsies hoping they would at least foretell a turn in his fortune. Among them, the beautiful Zaida steals his heart and muddles his mind teasing him with the fantastic story of her life – once a favourite of Prince Selim, master of a Turkish harem, Zaida had to flee for her life when jealous odalisques accused her of infidelity. Capricious and insatiably flirtatious Fiorilla is bored to death with her husband Geronio and decides to divert herself by seducing a veritable Turkish prince, who is rumoured to be arriving in Italy soon. A romance soon unfolds but Narciso – enamoured of the unfaithful Fiorilla – attempts to thwart it. When a masked ball is announced, all hell breaks loose and everyone gets confused over who is who, and with whom. All that – and much more – is offered in Rossini’s opera buffa *Il Turco in Italia* (1814), to the libretto by Felice Romani.

Improbable, serendipitous, comic and tragic at once, two hundred years onwards, the motifs and passions have lost none of their appeal, with the mis/adventures of the protagonists serving as a source of inspiration to the Turkish-Italian film director, Ferzan Özpetek, himself a flesh-and-blood “Turk in Italy.” Actually, Özpetek’s link to opera is a genuine and quite an organic one – apart from authoring films, Özpetek has directed several opera productions for renowned opera theatres, with stellar casts of performers. In 2011 he made his musical theatre debut with Verdi’s *Aida*, staged during the Maggio Fiorentino season and conducted by none other than maestro Zubin Mehta. In 2012, he was asked to direct another of Verdi’s gems – *La Traviata* – at Teatro di San Carlo in Naples, which was filmed for TV and later on released on DVD by Unitel Classica. Most recently, Özpetek prepared one of the 2019 premieres for San Carlo, Puccini’s *Madama Butterfly*, in which Cio-Cio-San was performed by the Polish super-star soprano Aleksandra Kurzak. Rossini’s *Il Turco in Italia* is not yet on Özpetek’s record, but perhaps one day it too will make it to his success list.

On a more serious note, the operatic bond might well be approached from a more complex angle. Operas like Rossini’s *Il Turco in Italia* and its 1813 woman-led counterpart *L’Italiana in Algeri*, or countless “exotic” others by composers as temporally and spatially diverse as Monteverdi, Haendel, Vivaldi, Hase, Mozart, Delibes, Bizet, Verdi and Puccini testify to the strong appeal of “oriental” stories, moods and atmospheres to Western representatives and producers as well as consumers of culture¹.

The “Oriental fantasy”, generated by rumour and hearsay passed between travellers and recorded by writers and artists, gradually penetrated wider circles of Western societies, propelling the exoticisation machinery. Said’s *Orientalism* (dates) cannot be omitted in any discussion of encounters and projections along the Occident – Orient line; however, over the four decades since Said’s publication a very diverse body of works has emerged which “writes back” to Said and/or takes his thoughts and ideas to new realms. Perhaps the most interesting here are the feminist and queer voices which have recently become much more significant in the post/colonialism debate, addressing questions such as the male (colonial) gaze, divisions of power and socio-cultural positions they breed. Both Reina Lewis and Rana Kabbani² take up from the Saidian premise of the traditional colonial male gaze directed at a beautiful, exotic and, importantly, passive woman, and try to shed light on other configurations with

regards to who looks at whom, how, why, and to what effect. In a similar vein, talking about Western Orientalist painting Mary Roberts’ points out that the notorious harem or hamam scenes, so popular with Western artists and their European patrons, have relied almost exclusively on only one type of narrative – that of the seductive but docile and obedient odalisque lying negligently in wait for her master and subduer, a narrative which Roberts deconstructs and proves to be but a fantasy, frequently sexualised and built on a nearly master-slave relationship. Lewis, Kabbani and Roberts, among others, have tried to demystify those instances of gazing – and, by extension – its social and ideological foundations. In the present article I begin by treading the same path: in an attempt to investigate the implications of reversing the male gaze, I focus on the hamam as one of the most persistent “Orientalist” tropes established in Western culture, functioning in accordance to conventions which determine the roles enacted within the hamam space; however, what interests me more than a straightforward dismantling of the stereotype is “queering” the hamam in an effort to decolonise its space and reclaim it for other(s) gazes.

It is at this point that opera as a genre comes in particularly handy – its exotic allure is of course nothing new, and can be easily linked to the general interest of the West in all things “Eastern” – what with *chinoiserie* or *turquerie*, or other similar “fashions”; the case for opera, however, conceals yet a deeper significance which remains closely bound with the question of opera’s artifice. In contrast to theatre or film, which also operate on the premise of re-enactment, opera does not seek to cover its artificiality by mimetic means. It is, for all intents and purposes, artificiality, which is exactly where its strength and continuous attractiveness come from. For these reasons, opera as a genre has always lent itself particularly gracefully to being “colonised” by what today might be called “camp”, with elements such as cross-dressing, gender ambiguity and oftentimes transgressive aesthetics playing a vital role in operatic performances. Importantly, these would permeate the very essence of operas, capitalising on the performers’ bodies, in the pursuit of the most unearthly sounds without, however, any technical amplification; a desire which culminated in the unprecedented popularity of *il castrati* in late Baroque, effectively creating a wounded third gender, fluid and permanently in-between, not quite male, not really female. The adoration the castrati drew from audiences more often than not came hand in hand with a fascination with their signature roles: to name but a few, Artaserse, King of Persia; Bajazet, the Turkish Sultan; Tamerlano, the Emperor of the Tartars, whose stories had all been adapted by many a Baroque composer, brought together the sensual and queer allure of the castrati, and the oriental fantasies of empires, battles, betrayals, lust, licence and gratification of desires forbidden “at home” even if only vicariously.

In this sense – if by a somewhat long shot – the orientalist and “exoticist” motifs used in *Il Turco in Italia* deeply resonate with Özpetek’s “immediate reality” – he is, or rather, might be perceived as, an “Oriental” in the sense proposed by Edward Said – like many before and after him, he too left his homeland looking for better prospects of personal growth and development, comfort and safety; ultimately, he became a self-made, successful “Turk in Italy” who felt comfortable in the duality such a position entailed. In *Rosso Istanbul* (2013), his semi-autobiographical work, maintained in a loosely memoiristic manner, Özpetek thus comments on his predicament:

~ Turkey and Italy, Italy and Turkey, they permeate my life, the way azure and red melt into one another in a Bosphorus sunset. I do get asked from time to time whether having two homelands does not feel confusing, but no, I do not feel confused. I'm not afraid of being a foreigner. Deep within, I love being a Turk in Rome and a Roman in Istanbul. (114)

It seems that for Özpetek, the plurality which results from how he has decided to lead his life is an enriching experience in the sense that transculturalism might in fact open up new realms and possibilities, a motif he frequently resorts to in his work. In the present article, by engaging with Istanbul as a “third space” in the sense suggested by Homi Bhabha⁴ I wish to first emphasise the city's peculiar function of a liminal space looming as a challenge to the individual, and then to probe and explicate the mechanism through which it manages to instil fear, at the same time unleashing temptations in the form of a faint promise – or threat – of finding out and being found out, of revealing, taking in, laying bare, getting laid, getting lost. In this light, Özpetek's out-of-the-closet homosexuality might further complicate matters, especially once the broader socio-cultural context is considered. In September 2016, Özpetek married Simone Pontesilli with whom he had lived for fourteen years. Still, one might hazard a stipulation that his non-heteronormativity actually adds another tenet to the transcultural experience, a theme which Özpetek addresses in virtually each and every one of his films, *Hamam* (1997) included.

A film like *Hamam* would make a powerful opening to any cinematographic career; in Özpetek's case the stakes were even higher. A relative fledgling, educated at the Sapienza University in Rome, apparently not fully anchored either here or there⁵, shoots a low-budget art house film with a conspicuously homosexual edge which almost becomes Turkey's submission for the Academy Awards for Best Foreign Language Film in 1998. Almost, because the then Minister of Culture did not give the film his official approval and the submission did not go through. Curiously enough, the Minister of Culture for the 1997–2002 term, who came from the Democratic Left Party, in the end did not submit any proposal for the 1998 Oscar competition. Even though the Turkish Republic ever since its founding in 1923 by Mustafa Kemal has been relatively open-minded in matters regarding the LGBTQ communities (the Ottoman Empire decriminalised homosexuality as early as 1858), today, under Erdogan's AKP, no legal protections or incentives exist and public opinion is gradually reverting to type in stigmatising homosexual activity, an attitude largely promoted by the Government.

At the opposite end of the spectrum, in America Özpetek's *Hamam* was released as *Steam* and largely marketed as a lustful, not to say – licentious – gay romance set in the notoriously nefarious Istanbul. The American film poster also advertises the film as one possessed of a happy ending which it does not really have, at least not in any straightforward sense. Interestingly, both these stances are fundamentally wrong. *Hamam* at once is – and is not – a “gay film” and labelling it thus reduces the work's ambition, emotional energy and socio-cultural significance. If by “gay film” we understand a film in which there are men kissing, then yes, it qualifies as such; however, selling the work as a major homoerotic experience misses the film's points and cheapens it in a reductionist way. In an article devoted to Özpetek's early works, Rebecca Bauman notes that *Hamam*

tells the tale of Francesco, a Rome-based architect dissatisfied with a cold and childless marriage, who travels to Istanbul, where he discovers love through a homosexual affair, as well as an attachment to Turkish customs and traditions. (Bauman 2015, 394)

To a degree, the plot situates the film among many works which draw on the inherent, albeit stereotypical, conflict between the cold and capitalist West, where relationships cannot last, life moves fast, and those who cannot catch up simply fail, and the more slow-paced, spiritual and peaceful East, which facilitates a reconnection with one's inner self through rejecting the demands of the culturally- and socially-conditioned ego⁶. What distinguishes Özpetek's film is probably the lack of (or a significantly lesser extent of) cynicism with regards to his protagonists who, despite their many failures, disappointments and a fair share of personal trauma, do not give in to embitterment or disillusionment but rather let themselves evolve around their tragedies to move on in potentially meaningful ways, even if these are to be painfully thwarted when they least expect them to, as in the case of Francesco. A strategic departure from other similarly-themed works is also Francesco's sexual transformation and the discovery of his bisexual sensitivities as the story unfolds. As Serena Anderlini-D'Onofrio notices, Francesco's gradual realisation of his queer tendencies

allows viewers with a wide spectrum of sexual and erotic inclinations to identify with Francesco at varying points during his transformation. It also destabilizes constructed categories like homosexual and heterosexual foregrounding bisexual behaviour and, significantly, the implied connection between bisexuality and biculturalism. (Anderlini-D'Onofrio 2004, 164)

The suggested doubling with regards to sexual and cultural spheres plays itself out also in relation to the film's settings – it is not insignificant that the story takes place in Rome and Istanbul, two grand imperial cities, invariably referred to throughout their millennia-spanning histories as “gateways” – to entire civilisations and cultures, and “walls” – against other systems, other “universes”. No wall or gate can ever be totally unbreachable, though given the specific location of the two metropolises, their inner and outer spaces have unavoidably served as territories of interpenetration and convergence between various, frequently inherently conflicted, influences and forces, many of which would be sexual in nature. After all, the singularity of Rome's and Istanbul's geolocation, and their certain inclination towards transgression, was ascertained already in 1886, when Sir Richard Burton proposed the hypothesis of the “Sotadic Zone” existing between northern latitudes of 30°N and 43°N, where same-sex activity was thought to be especially prevalent:

Within the Sotadic Zone the Vice is popular and endemic, held at the worst to be a mere peccadillo, whilst the races to the North and South of the limits here defined practise it only sporadically amid the opprobrium of their fellows who, as a rule, are physically incapable of performing the operation and look upon it with the liveliest disgust. (Burton 1886, n. pag.) ~

Given his thorough explorations and in-depth expertise, backed up by considerable experience of all matters sexual, Burton surely knew what he was speaking about. The Sotadic Zone encompassed only small areas of Europe and North Africa, larger areas of Asia, and all of North and South America. Persia – present-day Iran – would also be included in the zone.

Now, coming back to Özpetek's *Hamam* – not only does the film take place in two cities located within the infamous zone; to make matters worse, substantial chunks of the story are enacted at a Turkish bath, *il bagno turco*, itself a “trans”-zone within a “trans”-zone, a “third space” at once traditional and blasphemous, liberating and constricting, light and dark. The hamam trope – alongside the harem motif – is probably one of the strongest, most exoticized and mis/appropriated symbols and constructs defining much of the relationship between West and East, Occident and Orient. The allure of the hamam has continuously worked its magic on generations of artists – painters, writers, poets... – who would give free reign to their imaginations and passions, spawning works of art and literature suffused to bursting with the sensuality of the bathers, the odalisques, indulging in *nefanda voluptas* and exposed to the spying gaze of a concealed observer. Significantly, the role divisions have for the most part been very clear-cut: the women bathe, the men watch them – and paint them or write about them. Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres, Eugène Delacroix or John Frederick Lewis, to name a few, had all tried their hand at painting the swooning veiled beauties in various states of disrobement, sometimes – as in the case of John Frederick Lewis – not even truly “Eastern” in their facial features. Writers subscribed to the “Oriental frenzy” as well – Edmondo de Amicis, sojourning in Constantinople in 1874, thus described the fantastic hamam scene which, if truth be told, he had had no chance of witnessing first-hand:

There, in those dimly lit marble halls, round the fountains, sometimes more than two hundred women gather, naked as nymphs, or semi-naked [...]. Here the snow-white hanım can be seen next to the ebony-black slave; the buxom matron who represents the old-fashioned Turkish ideal of beauty; slender brides hardly out of girlhood white short curly hair, looking like boys; fair-haired Circassians with long golden tresses falling to their knees, and Turkish women with their thick black hair hanging loose over breasts and shoulders, or in a frizzled tangle like an enormous wig ... half-savages with tattooed arms, and fashionable ladies whose waists and ankles are still red from their corsets and boots [...]. A hundred different elegant or unusual poses and groupings can be seen. Some are stretched out smoking upon their mats, some are having their hair combed by their slave-women, other are embroidering or singing; they laugh, splash and chase each other, shrieking in the showers, or sit in a circle eating and drinking. (de Amicis 2011, 162–3)

Of course, accounts by women describing their visits to the baths also exist, and funnily enough, they more often than not confront either point-blank or in a more suave manner the unspeakable eroticism of the scenes hinted at by many a male author – suffice it to mention Lady Mary Wortley Montagu writing of the hamam in the eighteenth century, or Gertrude Bell and her late nineteenth-century perspective. Importantly, these would

be eye-witness testimonies, in contrast to those given by many male authors who could only count – and that only in the most favourable circumstances – on a vicarious experience. Women's first-hand accounts effectively, sometimes even brusquely, did away with the revelations presented by their male counterparts; the “astonishment” Lady Mary Wortley Montagu wrote about at one point in her *Turkish Embassy Letters* (1763) had more to do with the surprising ordinariness of these scenes rather than with their sensual content. Later travellers, most notably of the Victorian era, like Gertrude Bell or Florence Nightingale, spoke even more bluntly about the sadness of harems and hamams as spaces where women were literally imprisoned, with their freedoms curtailed and monitored. In this way, these testimonies might be seen as serving the purpose of de-mystifying the Orient and bringing to broader attention the plight of women kept behind the golden bars of the *sarays*. What women writers (and travellers, archaeologists, and adventuresses) also noted – and what could not be found in works written by men – was the realisation of the reciprocity of the gaze, in that both the “haremites” and the Western lady visitors were simultaneously looking at one another and being looked at, building in the process a two-directional bond of exchange of expectations and the subsequent evaluation of their validity when confronted with reality. The moment of mutual gaze is brilliantly captured in Lady Mary Montagu's letter to an unnamed lady sent from Adrianople (present-day Edirne) on 1 April 1717:

The lady that seemed the most considerable amongst them entreated me to sit by her side and would fain have undressed me for the bath. I excused myself with some difficulty, they being however all so earnest in persuading me, I was at last forced to open my skirt, and show them my stays, which satisfied them very well, for I saw they believed I was so locked up in that machine, that it was not in my own power to open it, which contrivance they attributed to my husband. (2012, 59–60)

Conniving husbands provided a tangible reference point for the sides involved in the encounter, in a sense relieving the realm of the hamam of all such disruptive influences and giving it an air of a veritable respite from external circumstances, a worthy goal in itself, regardless of the refuge-seekers' particulars such as race, class and perhaps gender. However, what appears quite peculiar is indeed the proliferation of hamam stories centred around the female experience modelled so as to cater to heterosexual men's fantasies, and a relative scarcity of corresponding tales about what men themselves might be up to when they visit a bagno. As Brian Whitaker observes, for a long time public bathhouses used to function as cleaning facilities, for men and women separately, until “most of them were closed for reasons of health and/or morality” (2011, n. pag.), which seemed to coincide with a surge in artistic interest in them as spaces for social and sexual transgression. Whitaker mentions a film by the Egyptian director Salah Abu Saif – *The Malatili Bath* (1973) – which tries to put across a message of tolerance and acceptance, a plea Whitaker finds not entirely successful.

That is yet another reason why Özpetek's *Hamam* proves particularly worthy of critical attention – the bathhouse in the film is unambiguously defined as a safe and discreet male-only space, even though its proprietor was a woman, the

~ mysterious Madame, Francesco's aunt, who in a letter to Francesco's mother, her sister, describes the motivation behind her decision to run the bath:

I found an old Turkish bath in the city centre. It's a little bit worn-out but it's classy. I really like the idea of organizing a diversion just for men. I'll be the sole Western woman owning a hamam in this city of omnipotent paterfamilias. This way, I'll be able to watch their most hidden pleasures secretly. A hamam is a strange place. It's a place where the steam loosens traditions along with the body. I have many friends who would be grateful if I offered them a discreet and welcome shelter for certain caprices. You know that I never miss an opportunity to make a man happy [...]. I consider this as a tribute to this city which has been so generous to this Italian adventuress. (Özpetek 1997, 0:43:37)

The element of shelter, a safe haven, emerges also in a recent film by the young Finnish director Mikko Makela, *A Moment in the Reeds* (2017), which employs a Finnish sauna as the setting for the first kiss of two men. Significantly, the men might be seen as representing the constructs of the West and East – a gay architect from Syria, forced by circumstances to earn a living in a capacity far below his talents, and a Finnish literature student just arrived for the summer from a scholarship in Paris. With a plotline reminiscent of Francis Lee's *God's Own Country* – minus the apparent happy end – Makela's film debut touches upon questions of an individual's identity and sexuality at a time when events like the 2015 immigrant crisis or the recent economic struggle of old Western democracies come intimately close and spawn a variety of hitherto largely ignored conflicts and encounters. By gracefully linking the global histories with local, small-scale dramas, Makela offers a story which moves and angers, shames and excites, unsettles and promises hope.

In a similar vein, Özpetek concocts a powerful plot, though he does not openly engage in “grand” politics, which is not to say it is not there. Quite the contrary – the global is signalled already early on in the film when, after the opening scenes from the Istanbul house of the Perran family and the discovery of Madame's death, we are treated to alternating sequences of fax messages and postal telegrams being processed between Turkey and Italy, with a focus on technology and speed of message transfer. The tiresome bureaucratic procedures, the fulfilment of which is required in such instances, hint at the distance between the countries – geographical as well as organisational, systemic or, indeed, political. Rome is modern Europe, fast, efficient, automatised and largely anonymous; Turkey still relies on a more direct interpersonal communication – letters still need to be brought to the addressee's doorstep by postmen on rickety bicycles who have been doing the rounds in a given neighbourhood for years now and can still chit-chat with those whom they bring the news. A death in one family is an occasion for the entire neighbourhood to spring to life and spread the message further. The same goes for the news of this family's long-lost relative announcing that he will be arriving shortly to sort out the legal issues regarding the assets and liabilities of the deceased. Everyone is involved and curious, if not apprehensive. The communal bonds have not lost any of their durability due to years of continual wear-and-tear.

Against such a background, Rome is decadence and anonymity writ large. Polished elegance, stylish design and clean modernity govern the well-arranged and well-kept space of silence sometimes shared between independent individuals joined together in relationships which, while they can very well be strong and complex, are all but blood ties. Francesco and his wife Marta sit at an expensive table in their elegant penthouse and argue. He must go to Istanbul and quickly sell the hamam he inherited to an entrepreneur who is planning to build a posh residential estate in the neighbourhood, against the outcry of protest from the inhabitants of the district. He is not happy with the prospect of such a long trip; there is his and Marta's thriving architecture business to attend to, a trip to Istanbul is bound to set him back on several of his Roman projects. Marta will not join him – she does not want to go to Turkey, arguing that “men are more respected there, it would be better if a man went” (Özpetek 1997, 0:07:02). Irritation over the unexpected errand quickly spreads over other issues, their failing marriage included. The next morning, Francesco leaves without having reconciled with Marta. But now he is in Istanbul. They do things differently there.

In Istanbul, Francesco undergoes an evolution. Gradually, reluctantly, he embarks on a path towards a spiritual, personal, familial and sexual revelation. The city becomes an agent facilitating Francesco's development but, at the same time, it remains both the subject and object of this process – thanks to the initially scorned and unwanted hamam, Francesco opens up to challenges which have to do with his identity and sense of belonging. Talking about Istanbul in his seminal study *Homoerotics of Orientalism* (2014), Joseph A. Boone stresses how the space of the city is

[e]qually [the site] where the boundaries of self and other are as often confuted as they are confirmed, and where dreams of erotic transgression about the realities of bruising contact, misunderstanding, and failed connection. (111)

In Istanbul, Francesco seems to shed all of his former sense of self, just as the old hamam sheds layers of long-accumulated dust and peeling paint. The change does not come immediately; it is a process in which he becomes more and more involved. One afternoon, wandering the narrow streets of Istanbul, he passes by a dilapidated building with a rusty plaque on its door which reads: “Bu bina 1921 yılında İtalyan mimar Carlo Zanichelli tarafından yaptırılmıştır” (Özpetek 1997, 0:35:04)⁷. The once-splendid Art Deco edifice is now reduced to rubble and mould, and the desolation of the place hits Francesco hard. Perhaps it is also that, just like the mysterious Carlo Zanichelli, he too is an Italian architect. He seems to be thinking that maybe, after all, saving the old hamam from oblivion and obliteration will, with time, acquire a deeper purport and lead to something meaningful and permanent, something that will amount at least to a similar plaque, and perhaps much more. Through his devotion to the restoration project, he gradually arrives at truth about himself, and not just in relation to sexuality but much more broadly – the more beautiful the hamam gets, the more serene and peaceful Francesco becomes, learning to acknowledge and accept a set of principles and values contradicting his former beliefs and convictions. Dedicating himself to the hamam is a bit like journeying from dark to light which starts already on his first visit to the bath, when he ~

meets the Perran family. Mr Osman guides him through a back passage in the house to the door of the hamam crossing which they find themselves on the upper floor of the bath. From this vantage point, they look down at the forlorn beauty of the place. The nostalgic mood is enhanced by suggestive Oriental music which seems to be circling in around them. Despite layers of dirt, the space gives off an impression of having just been used; hamam utensils are still there, crumpled towels are strewn on the floor, old statues and barely visible wall paintings reflect in smudged mirrors. The decaying splendour is sad but the abandonment seems to conceal a promise as well, as if the splendid architecture – now in ruins – were beckoning at Francesco and asking him to put his doubts and fears aside, and take on this inheritance of loss. In the background, the Oriental music morphs into a classical violin sequence, the hamam lights up, and we see Francesco staring at the high dome of the ceiling dotted with tiny windows through which the sun breaks and irradiates the bath's interior. As Boone puts it, Francesco “has crossed a psychological threshold, has made an emotional connection to the sensual and interior world the bath signifies” (2014, 156). Having accomplished that, Francesco is ready to explore the realm of his desires, confronting them when he stands face to face with young Memo, the son of Mr Osman, whom he sees for the first time in yet another highly symptomatic space – his Aunt's boudoir. Özpetek stages their first encounter amidst Madame's possessions and personal belongings, which add a peculiar nostalgic gravitas to the two men's emerging closeness. Madame's paraphernalia – the bandette comb here, the empty perfume bottle there, the crumpled old satin ribbon – perform a magic all of their own, quite like the melancholic pull of stray objects that Orhan Pamuk speaks of much later as

[evoking] similar sentiments of how at one point in the past, some people had lived in a given street, neighbourhood, or city; and of how they had then departed, leaving behind old newspapers, masses of paper ... pictures, photographs, and furniture. An amateur collector, or one wealthy enough to set up a museum, who believed in the value of the objects abandoned by the people who had left or who had died, had then collected and conserved them. It was now up to new generations to reconstruct the lives and histories of these people of the past through the things that they had left behind. (2012, 51)

The objects speak to Francesco, who gives in to their power and begins to listen to the stories they conceal. The room has not been used since Madame's death; it is cluttered with heirlooms which create an ethereal air corresponding to the sensation of the melancholic yet “prospectful” neglect of the hamam itself. Memo and Francesco exchange but a glance, but its gravity pulls them close together, “pinning” them down to the space in much the same way as Madame's intricately-patterned cigarette holder kept her pipe firmly in place. Yet, there is purity and serenity to their gaze; the sensation seems to extend all the way across the screen to the viewer who is asked to become more than a mere spectator and join in the nascent closeness hinted at by the warmth and discretion of the scene, its privacy and smallness.

The affinity between Francesco and Memo at first takes on the form of the usual gruff man-to-man camaraderie which is especially evident in the scene when – after a relaxing stint at a nearby public hamam – Memo leads Francesco onto the roof of

the building where, from behind a loose tile, they may catch a surreptitious glance of the women's section of the bath. Francesco asks if it is true that Turkish women shave completely down there, to which Memo responds by playfully nudging Francesco towards the opening in the roof. Then, Memo gently places his hand at Francesco's back. One might wonder whether perhaps the entire sequence could be read as Özpetek's bow to the heterosexual viewer, maintained in the light, non-committal mood along the lines of “well, boys will be boys.” After all, Özpetek had serious difficulties finding a male lead for *Hamam* because of the non-normative sexual content. As Rebecca Bauman aptly observes, Özpetek is at once introducing “a visual subtext readable to gay audiences (the bathhouse; the importance of the exchange of looks associated with cruising), while also appealing to mainstream audiences through the celebration of the physical appeal of the male star” (Bauman 2015, 394).

In this light, male-to-male intimacy, at least up to a degree, is counterbalanced by sexually normative situations like the “spying” scene. Perhaps back in the 1990s such “subterfuge” strategies were necessary for a film like *Hamam* to reach broad spectatorships, especially in cultures as strongly attached to their “machismo” traditions as Italy's and Turkey's. Back then, representations of male intimacy were only beginning to make first progress, reaching the front row actually only as recently as 2016, when Berry Jenkins's *Moonlight* won three Academy Awards, including Best Picture. A year later Luca Guadagnino's *Call Me By Your Name* followed suit and won the Oscar for Best Adapted Screenplay (written by none other than James Ivory). Times are a-changing, audiences maturing and consequently gaining a greater openness and readiness to allow an experience other than that sanctioned by societal norms; still, it is the earlier work of directors less associated with Hollywood, like Özpetek, that should be credited with initiating this change in attitudes, especially given the subtle irony with which Özpetek in his *Hamam* works towards this effect. In the “spying” scene, Özpetek offers his viewers a largely traditional take on hamam representations, i.e. men peeping on naked women, totally unaware of being spied on. It seems the director is trying to make his audiences comfortable by giving them a familiar, relatable, not to say – clichéd – image, just before he moves on to the key scene of the film which is bound to ruffle them again.

What Özpetek does is, at a most immediate level, engage in a dialogue with the time-honoured Orientalist discourse, the strongest expression of which is indeed Western Orientalist art. In the film's climactic scene, he places Francesco, the protagonist, in the sweltering space of the hamam, and has him embrace and kiss Mehmet, positioning the two men strategically so that their entwined figures closely resemble the female odalisques from Western paintings. However, he goes even further in his destabilising of the discourse – Francesco and Memo are being looked at by Marta, Francesco's wife, who watches them from the vantage point traditionally granted to male observers. It is here that Özpetek critically responds to – and “deconstructs” – the “spying” scene, jerking the viewers from their comfort zones. Francesco's wife, Marta, having unexpectedly arrived in Istanbul, cannot sleep at night and, failing to find Francesco in bed beside her, goes to look for him. Again, light and darkness alternate in the scenes that follow, the chiaroscuro dominating the somewhat eerie space of the dormant space. Still a stranger to the house, Marta treads slowly; as she passes through seemingly unending corridors, crossing doors and thresholds, she follows a

passageway which takes her further down and deeper into the house. We watch her from behind, sharing in her hesitant pace, until perspective switches and we get to see with her eyes. She has almost reached the hamam; sensing someone's presence nearby, she hides behind a wall but can still look through a marble opening and see what is happening inside the bath. Just like Memo and Francesco earlier, she too is spying – hiding behind a door frame she sees her husband and Memo kissing. The traditional Orientalist – male – gaze is reversed, and along with this, also the roles of the subject and object, who “switch” places. Serena Anderlini-D'Onofrio calls this instant a “diegetic moment.” Özpetek invites the viewers to participate in through becoming one with Marta and her experience:

We see Marta see them play and lie down next to one another. She withdraws, then looks again, and we see her expression change. The camera cuts to what she is seeing while Mehmet and Francesco are hugging and French kissing in a definitively sexual way. The “discovery” of Francesco's bisexuality occurs simultaneously for Marta and for the viewers. (Anderlini-D'Onofrio 2004, 169–70)

Özpetek masterfully stages a gaze reversal here – from the dominant, normative, tradition-sanctioned instance of a man looking at women for the purpose of satisfying his urges, to the (no longer) “sub-standard” gaze of a woman who acquires legitimacy and power to transgress the norm and control her gaze which she directs at men caught in an intimate and vulnerable moment.

As might have been predicted, Marta's discovery sets her off-balance at first, and the next evening, after a disastrous dinner at a fancy restaurant with the Perran family and their guests, she sneers at Francesco, “doing things you were afraid to do in Rome?” (Özpetek 1997, 01:16:19), and has him sign divorce papers she has brought with her to Istanbul. In an emotional outburst, she cries out, “Francesco, I betrayed you with a man!,” to which he replies, “Me too!” (01:17:57), and the pun, intended or not, makes both of them smile, a herald of a reconciliation and renewed friendship.

It feels as though at this moment Francesco's evolution is coming to an end, and now it is Marta's turn to confront her sensibilities and values, as well as prejudices. The next morning Memo and Francesco are sitting at home, Francesco quite upset about how things have turned out between him and Marta, and the time they have wasted poisoning their relationship with each other's unhappiness. As Memo tries to console Francesco and cheer him up, the doorbell rings and Francesco goes to answer it. No sooner does he open the door than a stranger stabs him with a knife.

Francesco collapses onto the threshold, held tight by Memo. Within minutes, he dies in Memo's embrace on the stairs to the hamam (01:26:22). Taking account of the location, the timing and the circumstances of Francesco's death, it is hard to ignore the question of capitalism's striking back, an issue which for some reason seems largely overlooked by critics who tend to focus predominantly on the spiritual and rejuvenating aspect of Istanbul presented in stark contrast to Rome. And yet, it is in Istanbul that Francesco is stabbed to death, an incident which Özpetek had for sure carefully thought through. In this light, Francesco's revolt against the entrepreneur set on raising the whole district to the ground and building one of the many similar “model estates” might be seen as coming to naught, and his death as proof of the ultimate advantage of capitalist endeavours. Moreover, much as Özpetek himself might be nostalgic for Turkey, he has decided to leave it, and has not had second thoughts about the choice he made back when he was a student.

If it were an opera, it would have to end there and then, to the accompaniment of the orchestra going full-blast, Puccini-style. Unlike *Traviata*, *Aida*, or *Madama Butterfly*, though, *Hamam* does not end on a wistful note. Özpetek carries on with the story, shifting the focus for the remainder of the film to Marta. The film actually closes with a message of hope, and Marta's role becomes to step in and take over – both the story itself and the hamam. Marta, victorious and at peace with herself, now presides over the successfully restored bath and stays on in Istanbul, like Madame did before her. She keeps in touch with Memo, her late husband's lover, and forges a life for her in the city which turned all her certainties upside down forcing her to rearrange her priorities. This is not at all a benign, docile city; her husband was murdered there, his blood spilling onto the cobbled street which had witnessed many an atrocity in the city's millennia-spanning history. Still, it is a city which – despite its ruggedness and harshness – can in the end accept a woman who dares to do things she was afraid of doing elsewhere.

It is almost as though the film offers too much in terms of potential for critical enquiry, which is perhaps quite in line with the excess that defines Istanbul itself. The post/imperial city, though, allows for the emergence of a zone, or realm, in which the grand narrative of history and the micro-narratives of self-discovery, gender, identity and belonging constantly ebb and flow and, through clashing, re/invent one another. By looking at the hamam, a trans-zone within the trans-space of Istanbul, the present article has engaged with the dialectics of contemporary orientalism and its practices filtered through the socio-cultural lenses of art, music, text, and image, and their correlation to conventions and norms and the not infrequently liberating consequences of their breaching.

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~ Notes

¹ For an extensive discussion of the exotic in opera and in Western classical music see Locke (2009, 2015). The specific nineteenth century context and the Western "craving" for the Orient is in turn discussed at length in Ziter (2003).

² Cf. Lewis (2004) and Kabbani (1994) who discuss the legacy of Said's *Orientalism* and the complexities of how the Occident/Orient encounters have evolved since the publication of Said's work, noting the emergent directions and trends in the broadly understood field of postcolonial studies.

³ In two of her works – *Intimate Outsiders* (2007) and *Istanbul Exchanges* (2015) – Mary Roberts analyses the confluences of visual culture, power and colonialism, especially in the geopolitical context of the Middle East and the Ottoman Empire. Roberts focuses on that which remains hidden beneath the outer layer – be that of paint, cloth, or text – but which nonetheless affects attitudes and ideologies, and has had a significant bearing on the creation of the entire concept of the “Oriental fantasy”.

⁴ Homi Bhabha’s theory of “hybridity” has heavily informed the present text (cf. Bhabha 2004).

⁵ Back then, Özpetek was still dividing his time more or less equally between Istanbul and Rome and working towards striking a balance that would most suit him.

⁶ For an insightful discussion of these themes, see Bertolucci (1990), E. Freud (1992), Campion (1999), MacKinnon (1998) and Bowles (2004).

⁷ English: “This building was built by Italian architect Carlo Zanichelli in 1921.” Curiously, the building and the plaque appear yet again in the film. After an awkward breakfast with the Perrans and a failed attempt at telling Francesco that she wants to divorce him, Marta goes out into the streets, passing a wedding procession in one of the backyards. Suddenly, the weather changes and she is caught in a heavy downpour. At the moment she is right next to the Carlo Zanichelli building. The door is ajar and she slips inside to seek shelter from the rain. There, she sees an old woman, apparently homeless, sitting on the bare floor and smoking a cigarette, next to a makeshift fire built in what must have been the building’s grand hall. They exchange glances, Marta looking apprehensively at the old woman, and the latter giving Marta a guileless smile. On the spur of the moment, Marta takes off her wedding ring and gives it to the woman, who silently takes it. The events that follow lead directly to the film’s denouement, and Marta’s re-emergence as a transformed person, much in the like of Madame (Özpetek 1997, 1:09:01).