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Postal Economies of the Orient

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> Istanbul is what I was searching for. I have been here a week and it has taken my breath away, my slumber. How much time I wasted before reaching here! I have the feeling it was waiting for me, silently, while I chased for a life, as tiring as it was useless. Here things flow more slowly and soft, this light breeze dissolves your worries and vibrates your body. I finally feel that I can start again.

The above quotation is from a letter from the Orient, written by Madame Anita, a fictive character in the film Hamam.[1] Madame travels from Rome to Istanbul just after the Second World War and never returns. In her letters back to Rome she describes her life in Istanbul as 'one long holiday': transgressing the borderline between work and leisure, her life is light and joyful. In Istanbul she marries a local businessman, the owner of a series of coffeehouses, yet the marriage lasts only a few months. With the money she is entitled to after divorce, Madame Anita buys a decaying Turkish bath, a hamam. She restores it and runs it for many years, until hamams start losing their popularity in Istanbul.

In Hamam we do not meet Madame in person. The film opens with her death and we are informed about her life only through the letters she wrote to her sister in Rome. When Madame passes away, her only remaining Italian relative, her nephew Francesco, inherits her possessions. Francesco is the owner of a successful business (an interior design office) in Rome together with his wife, Marta, and their associate, Paolo. The film depicts none of these people as charming or warm: their habitus is characterised by a stressful, image-conscious and career-orientated lifestyle. The Italian personae of the film condense everything associated with the Orientalist image of the cold and rational Westerner. And then of course,

Istanbul, in stark contrast to Rome, stands in for the ancient, tantalising, erotic allure and idleness of the Orient. The film seeks to reveal the secrets of the old, labyrinth-like, narrow and intimate Istanbul streets, the feasts of circumcision, the sensuous atmosphere of the hamam and other excessive ways of bodily enjoyment. The Turkish bath itself is depicted as a house of pleasure and tranquillity, and it clearly symbolises the 'other' of Europe.

One could of course criticise Hamam for arranging everything in clean-cut, dichotomic terms: the West versus the East; Rome versus Istanbul; Francesco and Marta versus Madame Anita and Turks in her neighbourhood in Istanbul. But such a critique, which focuses on the juxtaposition of self and the other, misses something essential regarding Orientalism. Something has to mediate between the two poles, letters, persons, and objects, allowing for substitutions and metamorphoses. Hamam is also about mediators that bridge the West and the East, a mediation inscribed in travel narratives on the strange and the exotic. In this respect Hamam is a post-1968 version of Montesquieu's Persian Letters.[2] As in Montesquieu's work, Hamam allows the West and the East to be compared with a view to moralistic lessons. Both works are organised around letters. However, the letters in the film do not address the Orient to introduce it to the world of knowledge, rationality and reason as is the case with Montesquieu's letters; rather, they inversely address European travellers longing for escape from their stressful life constrained by social rules and prescriptions. In other words, the Orientalist dichotomy remains the same, while the positively valorised pole is changed; relaxation and enjoyment now beat rationality and wealth.

Let's now open up our question: how are we to read these postal economies? Are Montesquieu's Persian Letters and Madame Anita's letters to be interpreted as merely a variation on the same (Orientalism)? Accordingly, how are we to read the distinction between the West and the East, Europe and the Orient, as described through these letters? If we are dealing with one and the same postal economy, then how can this remarkable sameness between Hamam's and Montesquieu's letters be explained? And finally, how can our reading inform the way the self and the other, Europe and the Orient, are juxtaposed? To answer such questions, we first deal with an interrogation of Montesquieu's Persian Letters and Hamam. Second, we discuss the texture of Orientalism in general terms. Then, by counter-posing two different critical styles of reading Orientalism—a discourse analytical reading that focuses on the construction of binary distinctions, and a psychoanalytic reading that focuses on the construction of the Orient as a fantasy space—we want to stress the advantages of the latter for the study of International Relations (IR). After discussing narratives (in Hamam and Persian Letters), the theme (Orientalism) and methodology (discourse analysis and deconstruction versus psychoanalysis), we end with our considerations on the question of critique: is there an ethical, or, a genuinely critical way of reading the Orient? In this context we offer three different readings of the final scene of the Hamam, which are organised according to the Lacanian distinction between imaginary, symbolic and the real.

Hamam

Which images and narratives are deployed in Hamam? And is it justified to see them as representative of Orientalism? To begin with, let us interpret these images and narratives as elements of a distinction between the West and the East, the masculine and the feminine, or the normal and the pervert, a distinction that, as a rule, privileges the first term. Doing this, we read Orientalism in the way IR usually does it: by focusing on the construction of the self and the other and the accompanying strategies of stereotyping, devaluing, and disqualifying the other.[3]

The first letter of Hamam is informing Francesco about Madame Anita's death. Indeed, the longest sequence of the film, following the initial scene in which we are informed about Madame Anita's death, is based on the movements of this letter. We see the letter posted in Istanbul, stamped at several Turkish offices, sorted and finally delivered to Francesco in Rome. This might be seen as merely an introductory scene. However, as the film unfolds, it becomes clear that Hamam is in fact structured around the very circulation of letters, which is why the initial scene is especially significant. Most often these letters are read by the characters while they cross the Bosphorus that (dis)connects the two continents. Hence the

significance of postal economies in relation to Hamam: they effectively mediate between the East and the West.

The first letter urges Francesco to go to Istanbul to sell what he later discovers to be a Turkish bath. Yet the sale is continuously delayed: everything is in slow motion in the Orient. Finally, however, Francesco is ready to sign the sale contract with a greedy speculator. Yet he refuses to do so, because he is, by mistake, told that the company wants to demolish the area to build parking places, hotels, tennis courts, and so on. Francesco warns the poor neighborhood against the company's plans. Enlightened against the cold, calculating Western modernity, the people in the neighborhood now follow his example and refuse to sell their homes. And then again the same old Orientalist image surfaces: in the West people hardly know their neighbors; in the Orient you just need to open your window for an intense communication with others; everybody knows each other, news travel fast. Hamam focuses on a very specific area of Istanbul, presenting it as everything urbanism has destroyed in the West, as a big village untouched by modernity.

When modernity is brought to the Orient unreflectively, it gets awkward effects; what is needed is therefore more Western involvement. It is hence Francesco, the European hero, who saves the primitive and backward Oriental subjects from themselves (in this case from the speculator).[4] Istanbul is a beautifully decaying ruin waiting to be restored by entrepreneurial Europeans; first Madame, then Francesco and finally Marta. In a multi-culturalist manner, the Westerners save others' traditions; thanks to them, the hamam remains a beautiful and exotic place![5]

Enlightening the Orient and saving its cultural heritage is however only one side of the encounter. Francesco himself changes too. One of the reasons for his prolonged stay in Istanbul is his homosexual relationship to a Turk, Mehmet, who lives in the same neighborhood together with his family, obviously Madame's closest neighbors. Homosexuality is an important element in that the Orient, particularly the Turkish bath, is depicted as a site of perversion.[6] Whereas the West is entrapped in rigid rules and stiffened customs, desires flow smoothly in the Orient: 'Like a light breeze that vibrates your body'. The homosexuality of Mehmet and Francesco is perverted in the sense of transgressing the Western, heterosexual norm. This element of perversion is further underlined through Francesco, Mehmet, and Madame's practice of spying naked bodies from the roof of the hamam. This gaze is perverted not because it sustains a forbidden eroticism, but especially in relation to enjoying the multitude, just as the Sultan previously had enjoyed not just the female body but the multitude of harem women.[7]

Marta, who, suspicious of Francesco's excuses for being away, travels to Istanbul in order to see him, makes the next move. During her first night, she discovers the relationship between Francesco and Mehmet when she sees them passionately making love in the hamam. In intense relaxation, they enjoy each other's body while smoking together.[8] This glimpse of the Oriental hothouse of desire is an updated vision of the Harem: a space of limitless and intense enjoyment. Water, steam and heat are all symbols of relaxation and smooth movement. Intense ethnic music with fast drumbeats underpins this atmosphere of corporeal passion. The Oriental body has been heated and relaxed since Montesquieu developed his infamous climate theory.

The next day Marta and Francesco agree on divorce. Marta decides to leave Istanbul. On the same day, the Mafia murders Francesco; the building company that tries to speculate in the neighborhood arranges a contract hire murder. The Turkish mafia serves here as an updated version of despotic power (just as the hamam refers to the harem). What unites the Despot and the mafia is the omnipotent power characterised by a complete disrespect for human life. Everything did exist for the Sultan just as the Mafioso now is the absolute master. The neighborhood is hence terrorised just as the Oriental subject was terrified of the Sultan's power.[9] One does not go against the will of the Despot. In this respect, Francesco seems to remain a European: stubborn as he is, he goes against the rules of the game, which an effeminate, Oriental subject, motivated by fear rather than courage and individual will, would never do. The price paid for his stubbornness is life itself.

After Francesco's death, Marta returns to Istanbul. As his wife, Marta receives Francesco's wedding ring (she had given her own to a poor lady after she discovered Francesco's betrayal). This reconciliation is significant since Marta, in the final scene, decides to run the hamam. However, the reconciliation is not only with Francesco but also with the repressed, 'Orientalised', side of her own personality. Hence Marta is in the final scene depicted smoking with Madame's cigarette holder, while the narrator reads her letter, remarkably similar to Madame Anita's letters. She writes to Mehmet, who has left Istanbul after Francesco's death, to say that the hamam is now completely renovated and:

> Sometimes at sunset I get melancholy, but then suddenly this cold breeze raises and takes it far away. It is a strange breeze, like no other I have ever felt. A light breeze and it loves me.

One could say that Madame Anita's letters did reach their destination, that their true addressee was Marta, allowing her to take her position and realise her latent 'Orientalism'. Marta becomes the new Madame, and Francesco is thus reduced to a vanishing mediator. In this context, too, letters play a significant role: they allow the metamorphosis of the characters to be completed and their 'fate' to be realised. 'Lost' letters finally reach their destination, even though were initially returned to the sender.

Writing Persian Letters

It is no coincidence that Montesquieu's Persian Letters, perhaps the most famous Orientalist piece, and Özpetek's Hamam have the form of postal economies. Why? The letter of course has a mediating function; it unites home and abroad. This, however, is not the only reason. When Montesquieu wrote his Persian Letters the choice of form was well considered. Whereas The Spirit of the Laws is written as a tractatus proceeding according to the logic of reason, the Persian Letters is deliberately excessive in its style.[10] The Persian Letters is not just about Persia, they are also written in an 'Oriental' style:[11] the composition of the letters does not follow a logic and the story is not told as a linear narrative; rather, they give body to a polyphony of voices.[12] There is not one narrative or one topic, but many. The letters shift from serious political business to reflections on ways of dressing. Sometimes a moralistic tone is applied while at others letters are supposed to be funny. The most important aspect is the way the letters are selected: we are left with the impression that some letters are lost, others lack a sender or some parts of their contents. Sometimes it is as if we have obscure letters within letters. In a similar way, we have in Hamam the returned letters of Madame Anita which later are included in Francesco's and Marta's narratives. Why this form? And why this consistent attempt to describe the Orient according to a characteristic lack of form?

To answer this question, a short detour to Jacques Derrida's The Post Card: From Socrates to Freud and Beyond is useful.[13] This work can be read in accordance with Persian Letters and Hamam for it introduces the same economy of lost letters: as in Montesquieu's narrative some letters lack parts of their content, their sender or addressee. Derrida's book is among other things an ironic critique of the teleological underpinning of many of Jacques Lacan's concepts. Derrida argues that, no matter how enigmatic meaning is, for Lacan it is always ready to be interpreted: everything fits into the psychoanalytic scheme. Once, in a commentary on Edgar Allan Poe's the Purloined Letter, Lacan even argued that the letter always reaches its destination.[14] To illustrate the role of the performative misfire through the economy of lost letters is hence well done. Derrida further claims that this teleological structure, present in all of Lacan's concepts, is deeply mistaken. Hence, he has written some unfinished and undelivered letters, some post cards, in order to subvert Lacan's teleology.

Thus, Lacan is for Derrida a representative of Western tradition's falling prey to 'logocentrism'. Logocentrism has many faces: the privileging of writing over speech, teleology over dissemination through time, the masculine over the feminine, the West over the East, and so on. Everybody falls prey to such a logocentrism, except Derrida of course, who is most aware of the 'other' of this tradition. Through his impressive work, Derrida is capable of uncovering this repressed other (speech, woman, the hyperbolic, etc.). This is literally shown in Derrida's overwhelmingly difficult book, Glas.[15] In Glas all pages are divided into two parts. The left part of the page is stuffed with quotes from Hegel, who is according to Derrida the Western logocentric philosopher per se, while the right part primarily contains references to the French

author, Jean Genet. Genet was a homosexual living on the margin of society, and Derrida takes his voice as a genuine other, as a voice that subverts Hegel's text. While the Postcard can be read as written in an 'Oriental' style, the two columns in Glas can be read as referring to 'Western' and 'Eastern' ways of writing and being. The West is logocentric, rational, orderly, teleological, while the East is perversely hyperbolic. Genet is subversive and perverted just as the Orient is.

The question to be posed here is how genuinely critical Derrida's project is. Is this juxtaposition of logos and hyperbole not Orientalism at its purest? Has this 'other' of reason and rationality not always, at least since modernity, been present in Orientalist fantasies? Derrida has argued that Western logocentrism has been with us since Plato and the same goes for the 'other' of this tradition, 'Orientalism'. There is nothing subversive in stressing the existence of this other voice, in doing so one mainly consolidates a Western gaze. The Orient, the existence of this other voice, is nothing but an ideological supplement to Western logocentrism: it is a fantasy, a concept that is central for our reading. This orientalised voice is not 'other', marginal, or repressed. It does not take any deconstructive labor to uncover it.[16] To clarify this point, let's return to Montesquieu's Persian Letters.

Montesquieu's popular book was published in ten editions within a year.[17] The place of publication was Holland, which was a normal practice when a work could risk official disapproval.[18] It was published anonymously. Montesquieu's English translator J.C. Bett characterised it as one of the main anti-Establishment works of the early eighteenth century.[19] Still, it remains one of the classical examples of Orientalist discourse. The Persian Letters is not, however, a singular achievement: around thirty percent of all books published in Montesquieu's time had the Orient as their theme.[20]

The most important voice in the Persian Letters is Usbek, a rich man traveling to Europe to be enriched by whatever Europe offers. He leaves, putting his seraglio and harem under custody of the chief eunuch. In the book we also meet another traveler from Persia, Rica. The two men are usually interpreted as the two sides of Montesquieu's own personality: Usbek is the curious man seeking enlightenment, while Rica, constrained by traditional ways of seeing, is the Orientalised figure.[21] Taken together, their narratives offer a varied commentary on contemporary affairs and allow Montesquieu to contrast the West and the East.

The Persian Letters are highly moralistic in preaching a golden rule that can apply to everything from government to sexuality. Both the complete denial of freedom that supposedly pertains to the East and the unlimited pursuit of freedom as premised in the philosophy of Thomas Hobbes are under ruthless critique.[22] The women in the harem and the eunuchs unfold their sexuality in an unnatural and too restrained way.[23] Marriage as practiced in the West is a much better way of uniting man and woman. On the other hand, Montesquieu criticises monastery life and the Catholic Church in general for being too strict, recommending his readers to strive for the right balance in all aspects of life.[24]

This double-edged analysis is present in all Montesquieu's concerns. Montesquieu's letters are both 'Persanes' and 'Parisiennes'.[25] The main focus is a critique of the Orient; through the work of reason Usbek learns to appreciate knowledge, rationality and freedom. At the same time, however, an implicit critique of the abuse of privileges in France is offered. The emperor's abuse of government in France is claimed to mirror Oriental despotism.[26] Orientalism is not just, as Said often argues, a tool used to repress the Orient,[27] it is and has always been a double-edged sword.[28]

Three themes are central in this Orientalist discourse —religion, sex and politics—enabling a distinction between Islam and Christianity, between perversion and heterosexuality, and between despotism and republicanism.[29] Islam is a fake religion based on a lack of inner conviction. Mahomet is an impostor giving birth to a religion of empty rituals.[30] The image of sexuality relates to the eunuch, the harem and the fantasies of secret enjoyment in this space: lesbian relationships,[31] the unfulfilled sexual desires of the eunuchs, and so on.[32] The Sultan himself is a pervert turning his household into a house of lust and pleasures: a brothel where all women (and men)are brought in to please the Sultan. Finally, the Orient is described as a place where no separation of powers exists. Everything exists for and belongs to the Sultan; nothing has an independent being or existence.[33]

More than 250 years later, we find these narratives reappearing in films like Hamam. We have already mentioned that the mafia stands in for the Sultan (the complete disrespect of human life, the politics of fear…) and the hamam for the harem (the enjoyment of the manifold, the bodily pleasures, the illicit pleasure obtained through a hidden gaze…). Hamam is also an ambivalent narrative, as Montesquieu's Letters is. It contains not only a stereotypical image of a backward East but also a critique of contemporary Western culture. False gods are now Western (design, money, or excessive materialism). Furthermore, as is the case with Montesquieu's narrative, Hamam is about the metamorphosis of the West and the East; hence, the importance of letters in both narratives.

It is, in this context, tempting to argue that Orientalism has remained unchanged. Indeed, this seems to be Said's conclusion in Orientalism.[34] A whole range of analyses in IR have taken this idea up and mapped the different ways in which the West constructs the non-western world. Much is gained through these analyses but one thing is always missing: scholars are not attentive to the ambivalence of the Orientalist discourse.[35] The Orient is neither near nor distant, but both, and at the same time. It is not necessarily a positively or negatively valorised social topology, but a utopia and a dystopia at the same time.

This ambivalence is clearly present in the famous concluding letter 161 of Montesquieu's Persian Letters.[36] Lacking the firm hand of Usbek, his seraglio and harem slowly but unavoidably disintegrates. There are indications of lesbian relationships among the harem women, and the hierarchy of power is turned upside down (power has moved from the powerful eunuchs to the manipulative harem women). Already in letter 156, Usbek's first wife reports: '[h]orror, darkness, and dread rule the seraglio: it is filled with terrible lamentation; it is subject at every moment to the unchecked rage of a tiger'.[37] Later, in letter 161, things become clearer when Roxanne explains to Usbek the reasons for her suicide:

> Yes, I deceived you. I suborned your eunuchs, outwitted your jealousy, and managed to turn your terrible seraglio into a place of delightful pleasures…How could you have thought me credulous enough to imagine that I was in the world only in order to worship your caprices? That while you allowed yourself everything, you had the right to thwart all my desires? No: I may have lived in servitude, but I have always been free. I have amended your laws according to the laws of nature, and my mind has always remained independent.[38]

Like Montesquieu's whole book, this ambivalent letter can read in two different ways.

The first reading focuses more on the geographical or the geophysical. In accordance with Montesquieu's climate theory, all power constructions in the Orient are permanently corrupted. At the same time, however, Montesquieu claims that the Oriental system, that is, despotism, is unnatural for it denies human freedom. How, then, is the persistence of the Oriental system explained? Obviously, it is a difficult question to answer and Montesquieu's way out is to argue that the climate makes people lazy and prone to accept domination: physical nature corrupts human nature.[39] Accordingly, the Western ideals of freedom and self-rule cannot be introduced in the Orient.[40] If they are introduced, they will have negative effects.[41] True freedom, as marked by the absence of Usbek, the master, is not possible in the Orient.

In a rather different, a feminist, reading, female enjoyment or female voices exist outside the reach of the Despot.[42] His power is never total. Hence, the image of despotic power is claimed to be Orientalism at its purest. The women (in Montesquieu's narrative: Roxane), are not completely controlled, there is always the possibility for them to take control over their own life and to manipulate the sultanate. Whereas the first reading assumes the need and possibility of complete domination, hence the collapse of the Harem with Usbek's absence, this second reading stresses a dialectics of master and bondsman.[43] Perhaps, it is the women who rule while the sultan remains tied to his role. Perhaps, the women have a secret enjoyment and a secret language and that bonds them.[44] To call this voice 'female' needs an extra qualification. It is female in the sense of escaping a male gaze. It is not defined in opposition to a male gaze, but rather as a strange voice beyond the symbolic order, beyond the patriarchal structure.

Focusing on the content of the Orientalist narrative, as we did in this section, one can conclude that Orientalist themes are both persistent and ambivalent. We started the above line of argumentation by ordering our discourse according to the distinctions between East and West, and went on to draw a more complex picture. However, something important is missing in this textual universe, which is organised according to the reifying logic of binaries. Hence the next section aims at reconstructing our analysis according to a theoretical scheme of Lacanian origin.

The Orient as a Zero-Institution

Europe's identity is defined in relation to its 'other', predominantly the Orient, and this is what cultural studies and post-structural IR commonly argue. Identity is not given through references to intrinsic qualities of objects, places, or people, but rather though a relational web of differences. Accordingly, the Orient condenses what Europe is not: a kind of negative photographic image, which operates through the logic of oppositional differences between normality and perversion, law and despotism, mind and body, reason and desire.[45] Following this, the argument is that such images of the Orient—as the hothouse of desires and cradle of despotic power—tell us more about the identity of Europe itself. They are images that unfold before a Western gaze. Through a power-knowledge nexus, the Orient is frozen in Western stereotypes.

Are Montesquieu and Hamam's letters, then, to be read along the same lines, as yet another version of a well-known story? We want to resist this temptation. Since its publication in 1978 Said's Orientalism has become a standard approach to the topic. Yet the following year, an equally interesting but much less known book on the Orient appeared in France: Alain Grosrichard's Structure du sérial: La fiction du despotisme Asiatique dans l'Occident classique.[46] Grosrichard's major source of inspiration was not Foucault but Lacan, this making a significant difference.[47] Alain Grosrichard was one of the first to utilise Lacanian psychoanalysis in political theory. Later, Slavoj Žižek made considerable contributions in this field.[48]. We want to bring together these references in order to focus on some less acknowledged and analysed aspects of Orientalism.

Our first argument is that the relationship between the West and the Orient is not merely that of a difference between two elements within the same space. Rather, the Orient signifies that which is prior to difference. In other words, the difference between Europe and the Orient is not that of the masculine and the feminine, but between (sexual) difference and the lack of difference. Hence, the eunuch, not the woman, is the emblem of the Orient.[49] Similarly, despotism is not merely a political form as monarchy, tyranny, and democracy, but rather an apolitical 'formlessness'; the Orient is defined by the lack of form as such.[50] It is constituted as a space, in which the distinction between the social and the political does not hold. The discourse on sex and power is thus intertwined: the Orient does not belong to the symbolic order; it is a narration of what is prior to or beyond the symbolic.

In Lacanian terms, the Orient is constituted as a fantasy space that both conditions and escapes the 'social'. Fantasies create objects of desire, but they create these objects as being out of reach. The law, that is, the prohibition of various activities, creates a desire to overcome constrains. The Orient is a product of such a desire to transgress. It is in this sense not a hallucination of fulfilled desire but rather an answer to the question: why this desire? Through the law the fantasy of a beyond (and before the law) is made possible. Fantasy is not primarily sustained through semantic interventions but through investments of psychic energies, desires and drives. Fantasy stages desire, freezes it in fixed patterns and hence protects the subject by keeping enjoyment at bay. The object of desire is transposed to another space, 'Orientalised', enabling it to remain sublime, that is, unreachable. (Indeed, as we will argue later, to realise one's fantasy is often to dissolve it.)

Concomitantly, the social bond has two sides.[51] Life within the domain of the law, that is, life organised by the separation of powers (the separation of the political and the domestic, male and female…) is sustained through fantasies of transgression. Such fantasies form the 'downside' of the social bond that guarantees the strength of its upper-side. In this sense, Western rationality, reason, and morality (the upper side) and its dark, 'Orientalised' downside

are parts of the same economy.[52] The downside however has to remain disavowed, 'Orientalised', in order to be able to function.

Against this background, Said à la Foucault and Grosrichard à la Lacan produce two different forms of critique. The first is discursive and focuses on a 'symptomal reading' of the ideological text to 'deconstruct' its meaning by showing how the text constructs a field organising a heterogeneous set of 'floating signifiers' around certain 'nodal points' and pushing other signifiers to the margin by devaluating them. Hence, it focuses on the upper side of the social bond, on the construction of dichotomies between the West and the East, and on how traces of these constructions can be uncovered when reading in the margins of classical texts. This is also how we have analysed Orientalism so far. The second mode of analysis, in contrast,

> aims at extracting the kernel of enjoyment, at articulating the way in which—beyond the field of meaning but at the same time internal to it—an ideology implies, manipulates, produces a pre-ideological enjoyment structured in fantasy.[53]

This is how we want to proceed.

Which status does the Orient have in this second reading? To answer this question, let's initially focus on Claude Levi-Strauss' Structural Anthropology as discussed by Slavoj Žižek.[54] Here, Levi-Strauss describes the behavior of the members of the Winnebago tribe. This tribe is divided into two subgroups, 'moieties'. Asked by an anthropologist to write a spatial representation of their town in the sand, the two groups draw different pictures. Whereas one group perceives the city as a circle with a central house in the middle, the other divides it into two halves. Žižek labels these two groups conservative-corporatists and revolutionary-antagonists. These two camps could likewise be labeled left and right, or man and women. The temptation to be resisted here is the straightforward claim that the West and the Orient, Rome and Istanbul…, are like moieties, like positions within the same symbolic space.[55] On the contrary, these two positions express two ways of dealing with a fundamental deadlock, they are two attempts at symbolising a traumatic kernel, or in other words, two ways of covering a primordially given and traumatic lack.

> Lévi-Strauss' central point is that this example should in no way entice us into cultural relativism, according to which the perception of social space depends on the observer's group membership: the very splitting into the two 'relative' perceptions implies a hidden reference to a constant—not the objective, 'actual' disposition of buildings but a traumatic kernel, a fundamental antagonism the inhabitants of the village were unable to symbolize, to account for, to 'internalize', to come to terms with—an imbalance in social relations that prevented the community from stabilizing itself into a harmonious whole. The two perceptions of the ground plan are simply two mutually exclusive endeavors to cope with this traumatic antagonism, to heal its wound via the imposition of a balanced symbolic structure.[56]

How are the two tribes brought together? Through what Levi-Strauss calls a 'zero-institution'. The zero-institution is 'a kind of institutional counterpart to the famous mana, the empty signifier with no determinate meaning, since it signifies only the presence of meaning as such'.[57] It is an institution that allows the symbolic to be installed and differences to be represented. The Orient works as a zero institution. To give an example, the Orient is not the vision of the suppression of freedom. The subjects of the sultan cannot distinguish their own will from the sultan's and thus no freedom can be felt as constrained. The vizier, for instance, is as the right hand of the sultan extremely powerful, while at the same time subjected to the sultan's whim. The sultan never gives a clear command and hence one never knows when a rule is transgressed. The most powerful position coincides for the vizier with total subjection.[58] In this sense, the Orient is characterised by a lack of difference; it is a fantasy of the pre-social, of what precedes difference.

It is worth taking Levi-Strauss' concept of the zero-institution literally here. The Orient functions as the number zero, as that which does not have an objective counterpart. It can only be represented as a lack, as a black hole, a desert.[59] As such, however, it lays the foundation for all series of numbers (all series of differences: man versus woman, ruler versus ruled…). Zero is involved in all rows of numbers even though it is literally not there. The

Orient is the zero degree of political order. ‘Despotism functions as the degree zero in Montesquieu’s system of ordering’.[60]

Yet, this ‘beyond the law’, the traumatic ‘Real’ prior to difference, can only be represented through the symbolic. Hence, it becomes a zero-institution. The concept of the letter is again useful here. The letters bridge and represent the beyond, the other space where no constraints are felt. They are, as are Montesquieu’s letters, fictions, or, imaginary simulacra. The fantasy space of Hamam is thus not an empirical Istanbul. Rather, it is a space constructed through Madame Anita’s letters. Yet, the stuff of the letter is literally letters, signifiers; it creates difference by way of signifiers, and as such the letter belongs to the symbolic register.[61] Thus, fantasy has a double, spectral, structure.[62] It is a discursive representation of a space beyond the symbolic.

The difference between the Lacanian concept of fantasy and the common understanding of ideology should be noted here. Fantasy is, as we mentioned, fundamental in staging desire. There is nothing, no truth, to be discovered behind it.[63] It only covers a traumatic abyss. There is no real Orient behind the Orient caught by the Western gaze. Said’s Orientalism implies that there is a true Orient distorted by the European gaze. In the Lacanian perspective, the Orient could be located anywhere, everything can be ‘Orientalised’. When one merely asks whether Orientalist fantasies are true or not, what one forgets is that desire, not truth, sustains ideological fantasies. Hence, the only function of the zero-institution:

> Is the purely negative one of signaling the presence and actuality of social institution as such, in opposition to its absence, to pre-social chaos. It is the reference to such a zero-institution that enables all members of the tribe to experience themselves as such, as members of the same tribe. Is not this zero-institution, then, ideology at its purest, that is, the direct embodiment of the ideological function of providing a neutral all-encompassing space in which social antagonism is obliterated, in which all members of society can recognize themselves?[64]

Fantasies and ideologies should be analysed as given in discursive practices in which signifiers are fixed. This would be the first, Foucauldian, mode of analysis mentioned above. Such operations are however only possible with reference to a more fundamental level. Fantasies and ideologies are sustained through desire.[65] Thus we now want to describe this interplay of desire and social taxonomies. To begin with, we take the final scene of the film as our point of departure and read the film as a meta-narrative about desire, enjoyment, drive and their social settings. Then we show a way of ‘going through fantasy’ that culminates in the ethical attitude of four female heroes: Marta, Antigone, Roxane, and Lady Montagu.

Returned to Sender

The interpretation of Marta’s position in the final scene of Hamam is essential allowing for a reading that is not linear and chronological. Reading the film backwards, it becomes clear that a Hegelian cunning of reason has lead each personal story to its true conclusion. If the film is read as an updated version of an ancient Greek tragedy, the core concept in this context is fate. Due to the mediating activities of Francesco, Marta realises her fate: through him, her transformation into Madame becomes possible. Francesco twice enables Marta’s arrival in Istanbul and makes it possible for Marta to read Madame’s letters. Finally, she is transformed from an addressee to a sender (the last letter of the film is, as we mentioned, sent by Marta).

In Hamam, we predominantly follow Francesco’s actions and hence he seems to be the main figure. The final scene, however, makes it perfectly clear that Francesco is a secondary figure, whose only aim is to enable Marta to take Madame’s position both socially and physically. Francesco is what Frederick Jameson has called a vanishing mediator.[66] It is he who allows the letters to reach their destination: he is a ‘postman’. In the beginning of the film we are informed that Madame’s letters to Rome were returned. Yet, focusing on the characters in the film, one could say that the letters finally reach their destination and Francesco and Marta finally realise their common fate. But what is this fate? Let’s begin by qualifying Lacan’s claim that ‘the letter always reaches its destination’ and by explaining the way in which letters allow for Francesco’s and Marta’s metamorphosis.

The reason why the letter always gets to its addressee is, firstly, with a reference to the imaginary, that everybody experiences herself or himself as an addressee.[67] A message in a bottle is the paradigmatic example. Louis Althusser's concept of interpellation describes this imaginary lure.[68] The person interpellated by a policeman shouting 'hey you' is interpellated, because by turning towards the policeman, he identifies himself with the addressee of the call. This 'I', which turns around, is created through the call; it is a product of the process of interpellation. The addressee of an interpellation is thus everyone who turns around recognising the policeman as an authority. Madame's letters reach their destination because persons who happen to read them are interpellated. Furthermore, Madame's letters also have the audience of the film as their addressee. Like the person interpellated by the policeman, the audience readily turns around, confirming the banal fantasies of the Orient. The film offers a fantasy structure accepted in so far as it helps us in overcoming our 'symbolic' castration. We find a 'self' in the film, and willingly accept it, because it fits our fantasies

'A letter always arrives at its destination since its destination is wherever it arrives'.[69] In this sense, the success of the letter has to be explained by the fact that it offers a screen for the projection of our fantasies. In Edgard Alan Poe's story the policeman never finds the letter of the criminal due to the fact that he has an already established image of how the letter of a criminal may look like.[70] Actually, the letter is in front of him but carries the seal of the chief police officer. That the letter always reaches its destination implies, with reference to 'the symbolic', that the letter is simply a signifier, which is interpreted according to the fantasies of its receiver. It is the police officer's image of a criminal mind that prevents him from finding the letter. The film is a chain of signifiers ready to be interpreted. Gays read the film in the context of gay liberation (the message of the film being in this case that no sexual practices can be claimed as sick or perverted: everyone has a sexuality which is just right for him or her). Communitarians read it as a narrative of cultural and social decline in the West. Some Turks take it as a celebration of Turkey's unacknowledged silent acceptance of sexual and cultural diversity, in opposition to the Western images of Eastern intolerance, while others dislike the film because of its homosexual scenes, Orientalism, and so on. Which reading to prefer, then? This question is however a false one in so far as one accepts that the Orient is a fantasy space. The film can confirm all spectators' fantasies.

Now, we can investigate how the letters in Hamam reach their destination allowing the main characters to change. We offer three different readings of the film. The first two readings confirm the Western construction of the Orient as a fantasy space, while the third attempts to go through fantasy, breaking its spell and its power to fascinate.

From the Symbolic to the Imaginary

Smoking is a central signifier of enjoyment in the film. In the final scene, for instance, Marta smokes on the rooftop of the hamam she now owns. This is the culmination of the process, in which she finds herself: she moves from a socially mediated desire (Rome) to enjoyment (Istanbul), from Marta to Madame. This would be a commonsensical reading of the scene. Marta has found what she was searching for just as Francesco and Madame had done previously. The Oriental life form is worth desiring, or better, enjoying, in contrast to the false and empty desires staged in Rome. Moving to Istanbul, both Marta and Francesco realise that this Western form of life is false and conformist: the European self is a surface self, a mask, in contrast to the Oriental self, which is based on inner truth and conviction. In this reading the film is about finding oneself behind the mask.

However, Rome is here associated with the symbolic in a second sense. Lacan wrote that the sexual relationship is impossible and that the partners are forced to play the role of partial objects for each other's desires.[71] The image of love as unity is a mystification.[72] Life in Rome is a precise manifestation of this impossibility. In their pursuit of great love both Marta and Francesco get caught in a game of betrayal. The desire for the sublime love only creates unhappiness, for the ideal partner is always somebody else; desire is always the other's desire. However, in Istanbul they approach the object of desire directly and accept that the socially mediated fantasy of the great love as hollow. Francesco finds true happiness by living

out his denigrated love. He lives out his fantasies, accepting the position of a pervert, falling short of the heterosexual norm. Istanbul is a way of escaping social taxonomies.

This reading, however, must be rejected too, or better, its ideological underpinnings have to be uncovered. For there is no true self to discover, there is nothing behind the mask. This reading is ideological in attempting to conceal the void on which all identities are based. In 'The mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I', Lacan claimed that the child misrecognises its unity.[73] When it watches its reflection in a mirror it sees an autonomous self, existing independently of its parents. This perception is a misperception for the child crucially depends on its parents and their care. Later, Althusser gave Lacan's idea a sociological twist by claiming that the bourgeois subject, defined through the concepts of autonomy and freedom, misperceived its unity and independence. The bourgeois subject is in reality formed by ideology, just as the gaze of the parents forms the child.[74] Along the same line, Lacan stated that 'the woman does not exist'.[75] The basic idea is the same as in Althusser's essay on ideology: of course people of the female sex exist, but the woman as such does not exists as an independent being given outside the play of sexual difference. In short, this reading falls prey to the lure of ego psychology, whose contemporary form is according to Žižek, 'Western Buddhism':

> The recourse to Taoism or Buddhism offers a way out of this predicament which definitely works better than the desperate escape into old traditions: instead of trying to cope with the accelerating rhythm of technological progress and social changes, one should rather renounce the very endeavor to retain control over what goes on, rejecting it as the expression of the modern logic of domination—one should, instead, 'let oneself go'. Drift along, while retaining an inner distance and indifference towards the mad dance of this accelerated process, a distance based on the insight that all this social and technological upheaval is ultimately just a non-substantial proliferation of semblances which do not really concern the innermost kernel of our being.[76]

Seen from this perspective, Hamam parallels Western Buddhism. Find your true self, give up the desire to express your self through commodities, career and prestige; let your self liquefy in the light, oriental, breeze. Such Western Buddhism is a fantasy used to conceal one's fundamental castration or lack.

From the Imaginary to the Symbolic

In contrast to the illusory life in Rome, tranquility, relaxation, and social and physical proximity characterise Istanbul. Everybody seems to know one another in what is portrayed as a gigantic village untouched by modernity and capitalism. The Mafiosi, through their violent attempts to introduce a capitalist logic, incarnate the evil that threatens Oriental enjoyment. Enjoyment is not tied to individualistic aspirations as in Rome, but rather it is a matter of occupying a place within community. No conflict between the individual and the social is experienced, no class divisions. We are within the symbolic order, not in the sense of a castrating and limiting law that puts constraints onto the subject, but in the sense of a spirituality shared by all members of the community. Whereas in the first reading the focus was on finding one's self, here the focus is on finding one's place within community. Hence, the scene of circumcision in Hamam is significant: in the East people are properly 'castrated', their entry into a given community is properly marked and secured. As such, the film is a critique of Western individualism and materialism, a tribute to community life. The lack of symbolic castration in the West only creates anxiety and insecurity, whereas it works successfully in the East, which is why it is, with its outstanding communitarian structures, a place of tranquility and comfort.

Again, the structure is redoubled in the relationship between Francesco and Marta. After Francesco's death, Marta and Francesco are reconciled, and their love culminates in the acceptance of each other's fantasies. The reconciliation is marked by Marta's acceptance of Francesco's wedding ring she is offered after his death. Francesco and Marta, so to say, 'marry' a second time, re-establishing the symbolic bond between them, and signaling the transcendence of difference. What we have here is the image of pure love, of two becoming one, just as community members become one by transcending their antagonisms.

We must, however, be critical towards this reading, too. Ernesto Laclau has stated that 'society does not exist'.[77] Not that Thatcher was right when she claimed 'there is no such thing as society'.[78] But 'society', as an image of a unity without antagonism, that is, society as one big individual continuously repeating some previously shown aporia, is an illusory idea; the 'social' is always already antagonistic. It is not easier to find one's place in the community than it is to find one's self.[79] The communitarian paradise is a melancholic construction.[80] It is something lost and mourned. Hamam mourns the loss of Gemeinschaft in the West. Žižek's discussion on the way Tibet functions in the Western narrative is useful in highlighting this melancholia.[81] Tibet is (as Istanbul in Hamam) a fantasy space where no antagonism is present. Again, we are not dealing with the empirical Tibet, but rather with a Tibet, which would have been if China had not invaded, polluted, and destroyed this precious and fragile little treasure. This takes us back to our previous account of the ambivalence of the Orientalist discourse:

> The very inconsistency of this image of Tibet, with its direct coincidence of opposites seems to bear witness to its fantasmatic status. Tibetans are portrayed as people leading a simple life of spiritual satisfaction, fully accepting their fate, liberated from the excessive craving of the Western subject who is always searching for more, AND as a bunch of filthy, cheating, cruel, sexually promiscuous primitives…This oscillation between jewel and shit is not the oscillation BETWEEN the idealized ethereal fantasy and the raw reality: in such an oscillation, BOTH extremes are fantasmatic, i.e. the fantasmatic space is the very space of this immediate passage from one extreme to the other. The first antidote against this topos of the raped jewel, of the isolated place of people who just wanted to be left alone, but were repeatedly penetrated by foreigners, is to remind ourselves that Tibet was already IN ITSELF an antagonistic, split society, not an organic Whole whose harmony was disturbed only by external intruders.[82]

And later:

> What characterizes the European civilization is, on the contrary, precisely its ex-centered character—the notion that the ultimate pillar of Wisdom, the secret agalma, the spiritual treasure, the lost object-cause of desire, which we in the West long ago betrayed, could be recuperated out there, in the forbidden exotic place. Colonization was never simply the imposition of Western values, the assimilation of the Oriental and other Others to the European Sameness; it was always also the search for the lost spiritual innocence of OUR OWN civilization.[83]

We are again within the domain of ideology. The Orient, Istanbul or Tibet, works as a fantasy space that conceals the antagonistic character of 'society'. Fantasy enables a melancholic attitude in which a lost paradise is mourned. In a similar way, the relationship between Marta and Francesco is a failure until Francesco's death. The film repeats the grand old Hollywood cliché in which the partners are reconciled just before the death of the beloved.[84] Marta has to lose Francesco in order to realise their love as pure, as given without conflicts, cheating and perverse fantasies.

Now, having demonstrated two different readings organised around the categories of the imaginary and the symbolic, let us develop the third reading by focusing on the concept of the real. Here, a central question is this: are the Orientalist fantasies of Persian Letters and Hamam really the same? Yes and no. They are the same but they work in different ways. Montesquieu's fantasy was hidden and censored; as such it reflected Montesquieu's split personality. The contemporary Orientalist fantasy is, in contrast, neither hidden nor censored. There is nothing to transgress; everything is already seen and approved. We are today not facing a strict superego bombarding us with demands and prescriptions, but rather an imperative to enjoy as illustrated in the critique of Western Buddhism.[85]

Yet, paradoxically, the lack of censoring weakens the hold of fantasy rather than the other way around. The worst thing that can happen to fantasy is to realise it. When realising a fantasy, what previously seemed sublime becomes just one more trash object. Hamam displays a nostalgic attitude that also reflects the anxiety related to loosing the Orient as a fantasmatic frame. A scene in the film is telling. Both Francesco and Marta, on different

occasions, visit a ravished house in the old part of Istanbul. What is interesting is that its missing parts make a 'void' visible.[86] Focusing on this scene, one could argue that the critical twist of the film lies in showing that behind the fantasy of the Orient there is merely a void. Let us now focus on this void by using the Lacanian concept of 'the real'.

Four Heroines

As we have seen, Francesco's death is a prerequisite for the symbolic marital bond. Ultimately Marta comes to love what she has lost. However, Hamam is not as melancholic as it is tragic. Indeed, Marta could be compared to a classical Greek heroine, Antigone. She seems to have gone beyond any desire. While Francesco becomes 'like a son' in the Turkish family, she remains a stranger. She comes to occupy Madame's position, which is why she, in the final scene, stands alone on the roof of the hamam. The difference between Francesco and Marta can be illustrated if we compare the two smoking scenes in the film. Francesco and Mehmet are smoking together; Marta is alone. Francesco and Mehmet are making love in the hamam while Marta is standing on the rooftop, gazing the Oriental panorama. After being transformed into the new Madame, Marta becomes a kind of asexual being; living alone, as a stranger, embodying an a-social drive beyond the socially mediated desire.

Marta has sacrificed herself to fulfil Francesco's project. We should here distinguish between two kinds of sacrifice. The first aims at securing one's position within the symbolic: one sacrifices oneself for the good of a community and in return gets a place in it. In contrast, the second sacrifice aims at sacrificing this very place within the symbolic. It is, as such, sacrificing the sacrifice itself, accepting condemnation by and exclusion from the community. Antigone is a good example. She undertakes a mad, suicidal act burying her brother, Polyneikes, who has been condemned as an enemy of the city and hence denied burial. Antigone buries him, forcing Creon to punish her by imprisoning her in a cave with just as much food needed in order to survive. In this, Antigone comes to occupy the position of the neither dead nor alive. Is Marta a modern Antigone? She sacrifices her life in Rome in order to bury her husband and she stays in Istanbul to make sense of his heroic act, which is her sacrifice. Neither Antigone's nor Marta's space is, as in Hegel, given within the symbolic; it is not that of a 'family-ethics' but rather, they occupy a non-place, that of the real:

> In Hegel, the conflict is conceived as internal to the socio-symbolic order, as the tragic split of the ethical substance. Creon and Antigone stand for its two components, state and family, Day and Night, the human legal order and the divine subterranean order. Lacan, on the contrary, emphasizes how Antigone, far from standing for kinship assumes the limit-position of the very instituting gesture of the symbolic order, of the impossible zero-level of symbolization, which is why she stands for death drive. While still alive, she is already dead with regard to the symbolic order, excluded form the socio-symbolic co-ordinates.[87]

The concept of drive is crucial in this context. Drive enables desire to break out from the framework of fantasy, which freezes the metonymy of desire in fixed coordinates. Thus drive is disruptive. Death drive is Freud and Lacan's prime example. Lacan states that suicide is the only successful act, that it is the only act through which the subject undergoes a radical change. Suicide here does not have to be taken literally. Death drive is the force enabling the subject to redefine oneself, to be reborn, as somebody else: 'I finally feel I can start again'. 'Suicide' is not mere action (conditioned by a symbolic space) but an act (destroying this space and the fantasy that sustains it). Accordingly, the final scene of Hamam is not about desire or enjoyment, but about drive. Here, to use Lacan's phrase, Marta 'goes through fantasy'. This transition is not from the symbolic to the imaginary or from the imaginary to the symbolic as indicated in the first two readings but towards the real. Marta does as Antigone did: she has a debt to be paid and she pays it with her 'life'. She uncouples herself from the symbolic, and accepts a process of subjective destitution.

The space beyond fantasy is a non-space, the place of death. Marta comes to occupy such an impossible position. She invites us, the audience, to repeat her gesture, going through our fantasies.[88] This reading transforms the narrative of Hamam to a Greek tragedy: could one think of a better way to dissolve the fantasy space of the Orient than situating it in ancient Greece?

However, we have to be precise when describing 'going through fantasy'. Crucially, the fundamental move in this respect is not to re-arrange signifiers but to uncover the economy of desire and enjoyment underlying the Orientalised images. There is no way out of fantasy, no other space, for what is beyond fantasy is a void. Identity is basically about covering, hiding, this void through fantasy; hence dissolving fantasy brings with it the dissolution of the symbolic structure (and thus the identity) sustained by fantasy. Which is also to say that Europe will always have its 'Orient'. It can be situated anywhere. The critique of fantasy and ideology is therefore an endless process; we are urged to tarry with the negative despite that it is an infinite task. Still, we have to insist on it.

> Although ideology is already at work in everything we experience as 'reality', we must none the less maintain the tension that keeps the critique of ideology alive. Perhaps, following Kant, we could designate this impasse the 'antinomy of critico-ideological reason': ideology is not all: it is possible to assume a place that enables us to maintain a distance from it, but this place from which one can denounce ideology must remain empty, it cannot be occupied by any positively determines reality—the moment we yield to this temptation, we are back in ideology.[89]

Is this impossible space also the space occupied by Marta in the final scene? Does Marta transcend the symbolic frame or does the final scene merely confirm her inscription into it? Is it Marta or, rather, the narrator who comes to occupy the impossible space of the real? To be able to read the Orientalist discourse critically, one must insist on the existence of a 'female' drive beyond the socially mediated desire, be it Marta's or the narrator's drive. It is from this place that a new, critical story can unfold, dissolving the stereotypes about Europe's others. Not to replace them with more 'true' identities, but to highlight their fantasmatic status. It is only in this sense possible to articulate a critical project through an economy of letters, that is, from within the symbolic order.

Reading Hamam as a Greek tragedy, one could similarly read Roxane in Montesquieu's letters as a female heroine who breaks the spell of fantasy. Such a reading is characterised by the intention of giving women a voice and insists on subverting the male-dominated power relations. Men install and control the symbolic space and the economy of letters;[90] the female heroine is the one who challenges this monopoly. Katie Trumpener writes:

> In the Persian seraglio, gender—like sexual pleasure—is defined in terms of power. And power, in turn, is defined as letters. To write is to have power; those who are enslaved are denied access to language; they are written upon. The women in the seraglio are punished and controlled by the interception of 'leurs paroles les plus secretes', by enforced silence, by not being allowed to speak to one another or to write letters.[91]

Following this:

> At the end of Montesqueu's work, Usbek, the chief correspondent and the recipient of a huge body of letters, begins to lose control of his Lettre persanes: his letters of instruction and command are intercepted or lost or reach the seraglio only to sit unopened and unheeded for months of time. Meanwhile no one writes back to him; he sits in Paris month after month excepting at any moment the arrival of a 'letter fatale'. His wives, who resent him as the 'auteur' of the indignities they are suffering, have begun to carry on their own correspondence with the outside world: a mysterious letter, of which the chief eunuch can guess neither the author nor the intended recipient, circulates clandestinely in the seraglio.[92]

Criticising the dominant economy of letters that circulate between West and East, one must search for a new economy. It will be a new economy, for there is no way to escape the symbolic order, only a moment of death, sacrifice, and revolution that subverts the old economy and installs a new one. Inge E. Boer criticises Grosrichard for merely repeating the Orientalist fantasy of the almighty sultan, the effeminate subjects, and she searches for another voice from within the harem.[93] Grosrichard's work is, concomitantly, written from the despot's point of view.[94] The point is well taken, although Boer seems to be unaware of the crucial twist at the end of Grosrichard's book where he describes the power of the subjects, their secret language and the Sultan's mother, the real ruler.

Boer mentions Lady Mary Wortley Montagu's Turkish Embassy Letters (1717-1718) as an example of a female narrative from within the harem. The lady stresses that the veiling of the woman protects them from being looked upon and allows for masquerade and free movement.[95] To end with, let's consider one of her letters:

> It is very easy to see that they have more liberty than we have, no woman of what rank so ever being permitted to go in the streets without two muslins, one that covers her face all but her eyes and another that hides the whole dress…You may guess how effectively this disguises them, that there is no distinguishing the great lady form her slave, and 'it is impossible for the most jealous husband to know his wife when he meets her, and no man dare either touch or follow a women in the streets…the perpetual masquerade gives them entire liberty of following their inclinations without danger of discovery.[96]

There are specific female spaces, which cannot be invaded by men, and in which women enjoy more privileges than in the West.[97] The harem 'is not merely an Orientalist voyeur's fantasy of imagined female sexuality: it is also a possibility of an erotic universe in which there are no men, a site of social and sexual practices that are not organized around the phallus or a central male authority'.[98] Boer mentions the braiding of hair as a countering of the Despot's gaze. The braiding of hair is a secret female way of communicating and a specific female enjoyment.[99] It is a counter institution to the coffeehouse, which serves as a male forum for discussion, information exchange and male bonding.[100] But at the same time these practices do, as in the story of Roxanne, bear the zeal of death. It is a focus of critique, which however can only be articulated in a negative way.

Sending a Letter

We have argued that the Orientalist imagery is sustained through psychic investment. Therefore the fantasy of the Orient is not dissolved merely through critique that shows the contingency of articulation. Everybody knows that the image of the Orient is a semblance, but they still enjoy it; a cynicism is at work too in Orientalism. We do know that Montesquieu's letters are only literature or that Ingres never visited the Orient. But still we insist on these images. How can we explain the moderate success of Said's intervention otherwise? Why are we still insisting on the Orientalist discourse even though Said has already shown it to be fictitious? The answer is enjoyment. The image of the Orient works as a zero-institution enabling desire to proliferate in a smooth space.

The psychoanalytic reading de-territorialises the distinction between the self and the other, between West and East. It is not a difference between two poles within the same symbolic space, but between the two sides of the social bond. The symbolic is always supported by a dark downside, by fantasies of transgression and of unlimited enjoyment, working as the image of a degree-zero of civilisation. We find this downside set in motion everywhere: in popular culture, in Saddam's 'despotic' power, in the fundamentalist threat, in 'Balkan barbarism', in the political debate on immigration, foreigners, ghettoes, and so on. Likewise, the fantasy of the East is at work everywhere, in diplomacy, warfare, and intercultural exchanges: like letters.

The discourse on the self and the other within IR, cultural studies and other neighboring disciplines is still caught up in a fascination of the Orient, the avoidance of which can only take place by going through fantasies. It is necessary to supplement discourse analysis and semantic interventions with an analysis of fantasies operating in them. Relating Hamam to other narratives of female heroines, we constructed four attempts to go beyond the zero-institution of the Orient. We read the film as a meta-narrative and as a tragedy. In doing so, we focused on drive and sacrifice.

To conclude, there is no escape from the circulation of letters, the flowering of desires and the staging of enjoyment in fantasies, but there is a responsibility to make an attempt at installing a new economy of letters less violent than the old ones. That is the task of IR too. Well, it started as an essay and ended as a letter. We will post it right away.

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[1] The full title of the film is *Hamam: The Turkish Bath*. It occasionally carries the titles 'Steam' or 'The Turkish Bath'. The film is an Italian-Turkish-Spanish co-production by Sorpasso Film (Rome), Promete Film (Istanbul), and Asbrell Production (Madrid) in collaboration with Rai Radiotelevisione Italiana. Ferzan Özpetek has directed the film; Stefano Tummolini and Ferzan Özpetek have co-written the screenplay. In this article we focus on the narrative rather than visual aspects of the film.

[2] Charles de Secondat Montesquieu, *Persian Letters*, (London: Penguin, 1973 [1721]).

[3] For a survey of this literature, see Iver B. Neumann, *Uses of the Other: 'The East' in European Identity Formation*, (Minneapolis, MI: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 1-38. This tradition is inspired by the work of Edward Said (Foucauldian discourse analysis) and Jacques Derrida (deconstruction). It is true that Said occasionally mentions economies of desire and that Derrida in his latest work on psychoanalysis seems to be less hostile towards Lacan. This, however, does not change the fundamental structure of their arguments.

[4] This rescue fantasy – 'without the beneficial imperialism of the West the cultural heritage of the Eastern countries would have been destroyed' – is also present in films like Indiana Jones, the Mummy-series and in the Raiders of the Lost Ark.

[5] Compare, Slavoj Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject: The Empty Center of Political Ontology* (London: Verso, 1999), 215-221 and Slavoj Žižek: On Belief (London: Routledge, 2001), 69.

[6] For an account of the role of sexuality in Western films on the Orient, see Ella Shohat: 'Gender and Culture of Empire: Toward a Feminist Ethnography of Cimena', in *Visions of the East: Orientalism in Film*, Matthew Bernstein and Gaylyn Studlaw, eds. (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1997), 19-68.

[7] Alain Grosrichard, *The Sultan's Court* (London: Verso, 1998), 141-46.

[8] Smoking has persistently been associated with the Orient. Paintings and other images of smoking, especially water pipes, has been as popular as the images of the harem. In both cases, the Orient is a site of relaxation and enjoyment.

[9] Grosrichard: *The Sultan's Court*, 36-40.

[10] Charles de Secondat Montesquieu: *The Spirit of the Laws* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989 [1748]).

[11] Mary McAlpin, 'Between Men for All Eternity: Feminocentrism in Montesquieu's Lettres Persanes' in Eighteenth-Century *Life* 4, no. 1 (2000): 55.

[12] Ibid., 45.

[13] Jacques Derrida, *The Post Card: From Socrates to Freud and Beyond*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987 [1980]).

[14] This point will be qualified later. See Jacques Lacan, 'Seminar on "The Purloined Letter"', in *The Purloined Poe*, John Muller and William J. Richardson, eds. (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988), 28-54.

[15] Jacques Derrida, *Glas* (Lincoln, NB: University of Nebraska Press, 1986 [1974]).

[16] For a deconstructive reading of Montesquieu focusing on postal politics, see Geoffrey Bentington, *Legislations*. The Politics of Deconstruction (London: Verso, 1884), 240-258.

[17] Betts, 'Introduction', 19.

[18] Ibid., 18.

[19]. The book was, not unexpectedly, included in the Vatican's list of prohibited books. Ibid., 18-19.

[20] Kaiser, 'The Evil Empire?…', 16.

[21] Mary McAlpin, 'Between Men for All Eternity', 50.

[22] The famous letter 11-14 of Montesquieu's Persian Letters (containing the fable of the Troglodytes) is a critique of Hobbes. The unrestrained pursuit of self-interest leads to the

destruction of the whole valley. The story is intended to illustrate for the reader the contours of a virtuous life.

[23] Montesquieu, *Persian Letters*, letter 114, 206-08.

[24] Ibid., letter 116 & 117, 209-13.

[25] Katie Trumpener, 'Rewriting Roxane: Orientalism and Intertextuality in Montesquieu's *Lettres Persanes and Defoe's The Fortunate Mistres'*, Standford French Review 11, no. 2 (1987): 180.

[26] C.J. Betts, 'Introduction' in Montesquieu, *Persian Letters* (London: Penguin, 1973), 26-27, Grosrichard: The Sultan's Court, 26-27.

[27] Edward Said, *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient* (London: Penguin, 1978).

[28] Thomas Kaiser, 'The Evil Empire? The Debate on Turkish Despotism in Eighteenth-Century French Political Culture', *The Journal of Modern History*, 72, March, (2000): 6-34.

[29] Grosrichard, *The Sultan's Court*.

[30] Ibid., 85-119; Rebecca Joubin, 'Islam and Arabs through the Eyes of the Encyclopédie: The Other as a Case of French Cultural Self-Criticism', *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 32, no. 2, (2000): 197-217.

[31] Montesquieu, *Persian Letters*, letter 4 and 20, 44, 67-69.

[32] Ibid., letter 79 and 96, 157-158, 178-180.

[33] Grosrichard, *The Sultan's Court*, 55-70.

[34] Said, *Orientalism*.

[35] Homi Bhabha, 'The Other Question' in *Screen* 24, no. 6. (1972): 18-36.

[36] Montesquieu, *Persian Letters*, letter 161, 280-81.

[37] Ibid., letter 156, 276-77.

[38] Ibid., letter 161, 280.

[39] Grosrichard, *The Sultan's Court*, 40-46.

[40] A modern version of this argument is of course that of imperialism and enforced modernisation.

[41] For a discussion of Montesquieu's ambivalence on the possibility of freedom in the Orient, see Grosrichard, *The Sultan's Court*, 40-42.

[42] For examples of such a reading see, Mary McAlpin, 'Between Men for All Eternity', 45-61; Inge E. Boer, 'Despotism from Under the Veil: Masculine and Feminine Readings of the Despot and the Harem', *Cultural Critique* 32, winter, (1996): 43-73; and Trumpener: 'Rewriting Roxane', 177-91.

[43] McAlpin, 'Between Men for All Eternity….', 46 and Trumpener, 'Rewriting Roxane', 182-183.

[43] McAlpin, 'Between Men for All Eternity', 46.

[44] Compare, Slavoj Žižek 'The Feminine Excess: Can Women Who Hear Divine Voices Found a New Social Link?', *Millennium* 30, no. 1, (2001): 93-109.

[45] Iver B. Neumann and Jennifer M. Welsh, 'The Other in European Self-Definition: An Addendum to the Literature on International Society', *Review of International Studies*, 17 (1991): 329, 331, 334. Methodologically, most scholars map different aspects of self-other relations. Quite a few are inspired by Tzvetan Todorov's distinction between the axiological, the praxiological and the epistemic level: see, Neumann, Uses of the Other, 21 and Lene Hansen, *Western Villains Or Balkan Barbarism? Representations and Responsibility in the Debate over Bosnia* (Copenhagen: Institute of Political Science, University of Copenhagen) forthcoming as *Security as Practice*, London: Routledge, 2003.

[46] Grosrichard, *The Sultan's Court*.

[47] Grosrichard's work was translated into English in 1998. Until then it was hardly known outside France.

[48] There are not that many indicators of Lacanian contribution within IR, particularly if one does not include post colonial studies, feminism and studies on nationalism. To mention some works produced by IR scholars: Jenny Edkins and Véronique Pin-Fat, 'The Subject of the Political' in *Sovereignty and Subjectivity*, Jenny Edkins, Nalini Persram, and Véronique Pin-Fat, ed. (London: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1999); Jenny Edkins, *Whose Hunger? Concepts of Famine, Practices of Aid* (Minnepolis, MI: University of Minnesota Press); Jenny Edkins, *Poststructuralism and International Relations: Bringing the Political Back In* (Boulder CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1999); Michael J. Shapiro, 'That Obscure Object of Violence: Logistics and Desire in the Golf War', in *The Political Subject of Violence*, David Cambell and Mike Dillon, eds. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1993); Alan Finlayson, 'Psychology, Psychoanalysis and Theories of Nationalism' in *Nations and Nationalism*, 4, no. 2, (1998): 145-162; Tom Morton, 'The Balkanised Subject: Enzensberger, Žižek and the Ecstasy of Violence' in *Debating Enzensberger: Great Migration and Civil War*, G. Fischer, ed. (Tübingen: Stauffenburg Verlag, 1996); Ole Wæver, 'Insécurité, Identité: une dialectique sans fin' in Entre Union et Nations: L' état en Europe, Anne-Marie Le Gloannec, ed. (Paris: Presses de Sciences Po, 1998); and Carsten Bagge Laustsen and Ole Wæver, 'In Defence of Religion: Sacred Referent Objects for Securitisation', *Millennium: Journal of International* Studies 29, no. 3, (2000): 705-40. See also, Slavoj Žižek: *Tarrying with the Negative. Kant, Hegel, and the Critique of Ideology* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993); *The Plague of Fantasies* (London: Verso, 1997); *The Fragile Absolute or, why is the Christian Legacy Worth Fighting For*? (London: Verso, 2000); 'Caught in Another's Dream in Bosnia' in Why Bosnia?, Rabia Ali and Lawrence Lifschultz, eds. (Stony Creek: Pamphleteers Press, 1993).

[49] Grosrichard, *The Sultan's Court and Trumpener*, 'Rewriting Roxanne'.

[49] McAlpin, 'Between Men for All Eternity', 46.

[50] Grosrichard, *The Sultan's Court and Boer*, 'Despotism form Under the Veil', 46.

[51] Žižek, 'The Feminine Excess', 93.

[52] Grosrichard, *The Sultan's Court*, 137-38.

[53] Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 1989), 125.

[54] This example is discussed in Slavoj Žižek, 'Class Struggle or Postmodernism? Yes Please!' in *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality. Contemporary Dialogues on the Left*, Judith Butler, Ernesto Laclau and Slavoj Žižek, ed. (London: Verso, 2000), 90-135 and Slavoj Žižek, 'Introduction. The Spectre of Ideology' in *Mapping Ideology*, Slavoj Žižek, ed. (London: Verso, 1994), 25-26.

[55] This temptation is of course the one that poststructuralist IR cannot resist.

[56] Žižek, 'Class struggle or Postmodernism?', 112-113

[57] Ibid., 113.

[58] Grosrichard, *The Sultan's Court*.

[59] Ibid.

[60] Boer, 'Despotism from Under the Veil', 47.

[61] Jacques Lacan, Écrits: *A Selection* (London: Routledge, 1977 [1966]), 146-178.

[62] Žižek, 'Introduction: The Specter of Ideology'.

[63] Ibid., 17.

[64] Žižek, 'Class Struggle or Postmodernism?', 113.

[65] A third level is a functional analysis of who or what these ideological fantasies serve, Laustsen and Wæver, 'In Defence of Religion'.

[66] Fredric Jameson, *The Ideologies of Theory: Essays 1971-1986, vol. 2, Syntax of History* (Minneapolis, MI: University of Minnesota Press, 1988).

[67] Slavoj Žižek, *Enjoy Your Symptom*: Jacques Lacan in Hollywood and Out (London: Routledge, 1992).

[68] Louis Althusser, 'Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes Towards an Investigation', in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, (London: NLR Books).

[69] Barbara Johnson, 'The Frame of Reference: Poe, Lacan, and Derrida', in John P. Muller & William J. Richardson (eds.) *The Purloined Poe. Lacan, Derrida & Psychoanalytic Reading*, Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1988, quoted in Žižek, *Enjoy Your Symptom*, 10.

[70] Edgar Allan Poe, 'The Purloined Letter' in John P. Muller & William J. Richardson (eds.) *The Purloined Poe. Lacan, Derrida & Psychoanalytic Reading*, Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1988, pp. 3-27.

[71] Jacques Lacan, *Le Séminaire: Livre XX*, Encore, 1972-73 (Paris, Seuil), 58

[72] Lacan, *Encore*, 17, 64.

[73] Lacan, *Ècrits*, 1-7.

[74] Althusser, 'Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses'.

[75] Jacques Lacan, *Télévision* (Paris, Seuil, 1973), 60.

[76] Žižek, *On Belief*, 12-13.

[77] Slavoj Žižek, 'Beyond Discourse-Analysis', in *New Reflections on the Revolution of Our Time*, ed., Ernesto Laclau (London: Verso, 1990), 249-60.

[78] Quoted from *Woman's Own*, 31 October 1987.

[79] For a critique of Althusser's concept of subject position, see Mladen Dolar, 'Beyond Interpellation', I *Qui Parle* 6, no. 2, (1993): 75-96.

[80] A common theme in Orientalist films is the search for a lost origin of the West in the East, or a search of a lost civilisation prior to Western contamination. See Shohat, 'Gender and Culture of Empire', 25-26.

[81] For a discussion of melancholia and fantasy, see Slavoj Žižek, *Did Somebody Say Totalitarianism? Five Interventions in the (Mis)Use of a Notion* (London: Verso, 2001), 141-189.

[82] Žižek, On Belief, p 64-65.

[83] Ibid., 67-68.

[84] In Žižek's narrative the prime example is Titanic where 'the iceberg catastrophe helps us to sustain the illusion that if the iceberg had not hit the ship, the couple would have lived happily ever after'. Slavoj Žižek, 'The Thing from Inner Space', in *Sexuation*, SIC 3, Renata Salecl, ed. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000), 223. See also, 'Hallucination as Ideology in Cinema' *Politologiske Studier* 4, no. 3 (2001): 17-25.

[85] Compare Bülent Diken and Carsten Bagge Laustsen, 'Enjoy your Fight! - "Fight Club" as a Symptom of the Network Society', forthcoming in *Cultural Values*, 5, no. 4 (2001).

[86] In other cases the film tries to conceal this gap by focusing exclusively on the old parts of the city.

[87] Žižek, 'The Feminine Excess', 101. Italics added.

[88] Thus, in the final scene, and for the first time, the camera identifies with Marta's gaze and invites the spectator to identity with it too.

[89] Žižek, 'Introduction: The Spectre of Ideology', 17.

[90] Grosrichard, *The Sultan's Court*, 63-67.

[91] Trumpener, ‘Rewriting Roxane’, 184.

[92] Ibid., 185.

[93] Boer, ‘Despotism From Under the Veil’, 51-55.

[94] Ibid., 53.

[95] Ibid., 56.

[96] Robert Halsband, ed., *The Complete Letters of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, vol. 1* (London, Oxford University Press, 1965), 96-97.

[97] Boer, ‘Despotism From Under the Veil’, 57.

[98] Lisa Lowe, *Critical Terrains: French and British Orientalisms* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991), 48. Quoted in Boer, ‘Despotism From Under the Veil’, 59.

[99] Ibid., 61. Others have emphasised the role of signing as a secret way of communicating among mutes and dwarfs that escapes the gaze of the Sultan. M. Miles, ‘Signing in the Seraglio: Mutes, Dwarfs and Gestures at the Ottoman Court 1500-1700’ *Disability and Society* 15, no. 1, (2000): 115-34.

[100] Boer, ‘Despotism From Under the Veil’, 64.