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## Photography, representation and movement in the Ottoman Empire and contemporary Turkey

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## **Photography, representation and movement in the late Ottoman Empire and contemporary Turkey.**

This paper is about photography and representation in Ottoman and contemporary Turkey. More specifically, it is about the environment that shaped and was shaped by the new medium of photography in the first decades of its integration into the Ottoman Empire and how visual patterns that were set in place at this time re-appear in more recent practices, as Turkish contemporary artist Inci Eviner returns to and re-appropriates visual tropes of old. The discussion concerns photography as a “raw” and ambiguous medium that is essentially shaped by the specificities of the many different worlds in which it lives, a still underexplored aspect in studies of different photographic practices around the world.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, it concerns the power of the “raw” photograph to open up fixed understandings or assumptions and return to the movement that is an inevitable a part of the experience of subjectivity and identity, beyond their representations. I will argue that this aspect of the photograph, as an object of revelation, is another often overlooked potential in favor of the medium’s assumed role to serve as evidence for already existing claims. Rather than argue for closure around the issues of representation and photography, I will suggest that the most potent power of photographic research lies in its potential to break open set ideas and direct the mind and body to alternative ways of conceiving of matters of history, identity and representation.

Some years ago, Chistopher Pinney pointed to a need for the critical debate within photographic practice to shift focus; rather than a Western technology whose progress has been the reward of singular individuals, photography needs to (also) be understood as a “globally disseminated and locally appropriated medium”.<sup>2</sup> Instead of approaching the individual photograph with either the intent of extending already extensive discussions on the indexicality of the photograph, or looking towards a certain kind of photograph as demonstrations of ready-made political theories, photographs need to be perceived within their differing local contexts and with a much greater complexity. As Pinney describes, a photograph needs to be understood as “a completely textured artifact (concealing many different depths) inviting the viewer to assume many possible

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<sup>1</sup> As Elizabeth Edwards expressed ten years ago and which still rings true today: “Photographs are a major historical form for the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and arguably we have hardly started to grasp what they are about, and how to deal with the rawness” in *Raw Histories, Photographs, Anthropology and Museums* Berg, Oxford & New York: 2001, p.5

<sup>2</sup> Christopher Pinney and Nicolas Peterson *Photography’s Other Histories* Duke University Press, 2003, p.1

different standpoints – both spatial and temporal – in respect to it”.<sup>3</sup> In terms of the Euro-American context of photographic practices over the past 150 years, Pinney refers to Heidegger’s notion of the “world as picture” to describe the Western version of modernity in which the world is perceived as graspable and under the control of human subjects.<sup>4</sup> A visual metaphor is used to describe a relationship with the external world, already firmly in place at the time of the invention of photography, in which nature is mastered with increasing sophistication, and in which new technologies of visualization are perceived and incorporated according to this pursuit. As relevant and perceptive as it has been to analyze photographic practices in relation to the more deep reaching cultural idiosyncrasies of Western modernity, Pinney makes the apparent but necessary point that photography “lives in many other cultural worlds as well”.<sup>5</sup> And while contemporary Turkish art is to a very large extent a European practice, more so than is often assumed by external perceivers, in the mid-nineteenth century Ottoman Empire, photography did live in another world.

In contrast to the European context, in which photography was to a large extent incorporated into an already strong tradition of visual mimesis from which it inherited much of its visual language and purpose, photography’s arrival into the Ottoman Empire coincided with the introduction of mimetic painting into the empire.<sup>6</sup> Without having to relate to a long history of mimetic painting, it is possible to recognize, at least in the more central or governmental reception of the medium, a more pragmatic approach to the photographic apparatus, as a technological tool of concern solely for the practical purpose of recording the subjects and objects of the empire.<sup>7</sup> In the same way as painting was taught largely in the military academies, photography was recognized by the nineteenth century Sultans and the ruling elite of the Ottoman state as another highly useful technological tool in the governing of the lands and its subjects. As mid-nineteenth century central Ottoman painting are conspicuously devoid of narrative and symbolism, usually depicting the palace and scenes of Istanbul in a straight forward visual language devoid of any romanticizing tendencies,<sup>8</sup> early Ottoman photography is often similarly direct and unsentimental. An early portrait of the Sultan Abdülasiz (1830-1876)

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<sup>3</sup> Pinney, p.5

<sup>4</sup> Pinney, p.12

<sup>5</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> Wendy M. K Shaw “Ottoman Photography of the Late Nineteenth Century: An ‘Innocent’ Modernism?” in *History of Photography*, Vol.33, Nr.1, February 2009, p.80

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> Shaw, p.82

(image 1) is suggestive of the pragmatic approach to portrait photography as technological documentation, rather than the creation of an idealized reflection of the sitter. As Wendy Shaw recognizes in her analysis of this portrait, taken by inexperienced French photographer Derain in 1963, it seems unsatisfactory as the visual representation of a ruler, especially as compared with portraits of a Western ruler from the same era, for a number of reasons;<sup>9</sup> the Sultan seems to sit uncomfortably, with his weight uneven and with furrowed brow, and the lack of space around the Sultan makes him seem uncomfortably cramped into a space that is too small for him. Furthermore, the lack of attention to light shade and the random positioning of his hand and attributes give a haphazard and rather awkward impression.<sup>10</sup> Like other early Ottoman portraits, the image seems to be taken without any emphasis on its forthcoming role as a bearer of ideology. Instead, it seems to be simply a visual documentation of the emperor taken with the still relatively new visualizing tool of photography. However, as much as early Ottoman photography is revealing of a different way of relating to this new technology from that of the European context, it is important to remember that the Ottoman world that photography came to live in was also a rapidly changing world. As mimetic images, and in particular photographs, came to play an increasingly significant role in society, they gradually lost their position as being “just” a practical tool. By way of Ottoman society’s and eventually the Turkish republic’s continuous transformation into a modern society with its frenzy of visual signs, the photograph became increasingly charged and its power to influence and persuade, generate commercial interest, evoke desire, and so on, became more and more difficult to ignore.<sup>11</sup>

While more and more apparent in many politically commissioned photographs of the second half of the nineteenth century, it is arguably in the realm of the commercial that photography as increasingly ideologically laden asserted the most lasting influence. Parallel with the commissioned work, commercial photography studios began to open throughout the empire in the eighteen fifties, and became increasingly popular in the second half of the nineteenth century. Significantly, the popularity of the photography studios coincides with a drastically increasing popularity and accessibility of the Orient as a commodity in an increasingly culturally

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<sup>9</sup> Shaw, p.84

<sup>10</sup> *ibid*

<sup>11</sup> As a quote from Sultan Abdülhamid II (1842-1918) made towards the end of the century reveals: “Every picture is an idea. A picture can inspire political and emotional meanings which cannot be conveyed by an article of a hundred pages.” Quoted in Engin Çizgen *Photography in the Ottoman Empire, 1839-1919*, Istanbul: Haşet Kitabevi A.S, 1987, p.22. Also quoted by Shaw, p.83.

and politically powerful west.<sup>12</sup> Finding a lucrative business in creating stereotypical photographs for western tourists who wanted to bring home with them visual evidence of their travels, the early commercial studios often constructed photographs which spoke much louder of European imaginations of the Orient than of Ottoman life in the nineteenth century.<sup>13</sup> These photographs, apparently depicting the Ottoman subjects, would often be categorized into the different ‘types’ of Ottomans (with certain fixed characteristics) in the sales catalogues;<sup>14</sup> for example the young Turkish man (foremost interested in leisure and sensuous pleasures), the picturesque and timeless artisan, the mysterious dervish, or the sumptuous harem woman. Out of these, the ‘type’ most popular with foreign tourists was clearly the woman of the harem.<sup>15</sup> With particular conviction, the studio photograph of the Ottoman woman could recreate scenes that the visual consumer had come to know through orientalist painting and writing. The reality of the life of the Muslim woman, and in particular the women of the harem, was something that few foreigners could experience firsthand. Consequently, photographic depictions of the Turkish woman and the harem were, more than any other aspect of Ottoman society, left to the imagination of the photographers, who created the kinds of scenes that in particular Western tourist, but also increasingly local consumers, expected and dreamed of seeing.<sup>16</sup> In these studio constructions, the oriental setting was created with the familiar props of a backdrop with oriental pattern, the subject reclining on a divan, a water pipe in one hand and with refreshments near at hand, primarily suggestive of sensuous pleasures (image 2). For reasons of propriety, the sensuality that was more explicit in orientalist paintings and literary descriptions of harem and hamam scenes was more underplayed in these photographs, leaving it to the title, sometimes a suggestive pose or at times indicative clothing, to hint at what was assumed to be taking place behind the closed doors of these spaces. By the end of the century, these images of the Oriental would appear in the even more accessible and popular form of postcards, which soon became not only a basic and essential feature of tourism, but also a major item of consumption for local consumers.<sup>17</sup> The reproducibility of the photograph and its accessibility in the shape of postcards at this time allowed the apparent “documentation” of the oriental types to be dispersed outside of and within the Ottoman Empire at an unprecedented speed; creating

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<sup>12</sup> Edhem Eldem *Consuming the Orient* Ottoman Bank Archives and Research Centre, Istanbul: 2007, p.103

<sup>13</sup> Engin Özendes *Türkiye’de Fotoğraf, Photography in Turkey* History Foundation, Istanbul: 1999, p.14

<sup>14</sup> Ayshe Erdogdu “The Victorian Market for Ottoman Types” *History of Photography* Vol.23, No.3, Autumn 1999, p.269-273

<sup>15</sup> Engin Özendes *From Sédah & Joaillier to Foto Sabah, Orientalism in Photography* Yapı Kredi Publication, Istanbul: 2007, p. 215

<sup>16</sup> Özendes *From Sédah & Joaillier to Foto Sabah, Orientalism in Photography*, p.163

<sup>17</sup> Eldem, p.103

self-perceptions and visualizations of otherness whose life embodiments are negotiated still today.

While the particular role of photography in shaping orientalist visual tropes is an intriguing subject, the aim of this discussion, however, is not to recall the ideological framework of Orientalism. Edward Said did this with particular potency in the seventies and it has been repeated enough times since for it to be temporarily put to the side at this point. Furthermore, as Pinney argued above, there is a tendency in much theorization on non-western photography to look towards photographs as demonstrations of ready-made political theories. In the case of Orientalism, this tendency often proves particularly gratifying. Instead of continuing along this trodden path, we need to return to the images themselves, and pay attentions to the complexity of their utterances. Another studio photograph by the renowned Abdullah Brothers show two women portrayed as oriental beauties (image 3). The divans, the essential water pipe, as well as the elaborate oriental dresses are still there, but this time they seem to perform a different kind of act. The quality of the clothing and how they fit the subjects, the positions in which the women are seated and the composed sentience of their gazes, along with the attention paid to the lighting and composition creates a scene whose subjects appear to speak back to the perceiver, rather than just being fixed as representations of a certain preconceived utterance. As such, the photograph undermines the impulse to place the image within a simplified historical narrative of representation. The photograph may be another composition to be sold as a souvenir, or may even be an image of tourists posing in oriental garb, but the solemnity of its performance suggests that it may just as well be a local portrait<sup>18</sup> using the tropes of commercial orientalism but in a visualization that re-appropriates these symbols to become something of one's own. As Elizabeth Edwards tells, rather than concentrating on content alone, as is so often the case with historical images, "one should concentrate on the detail".<sup>19</sup> This involves paying attention to the image's formal aspects and how these participate in its perception or performance. Concentrating on content alone reveals only the obvious, while directing the focus instead towards the details, and not on the details of its contents alone but in its entire "performative quality",<sup>20</sup> the photograph becomes an object 'to think with', rather than just an piece of evidence. As raw material, photographs just as often complicate existing stories as they

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<sup>18</sup> Although not likely to be of Turkish women, since it was not only socially unacceptable but also punishable for Muslim women to appear in such scenes. Engin Özendes *From Sédah & Joaillier to Foto Sabah, Orientalism in Photography*, p.166

<sup>19</sup> Edwards, p.2

<sup>20</sup> *ibid*

complete them. As such, they offer all the difficulties and possibilities of a “fracture, an opening up”,<sup>21</sup> towards a true cross-cultural experience that is not easily perceived from one perspective or definitely contained, but which opens up a myriad of possibilities yet to be explored.

In other words, this opening up through paying attention to the raw material of history can be understood as the creation of movement within that which had become stagnant. In modern visual society (including the nineteenth, twentieth, as well as the twenty-first century), some images, like the one discussed above by the Abdullah brothers, seem to contain in themselves the power to create movement in the fixed representations that make up the image world; if only given their due attention as active agents, rather than just as signifiers. Other images, like many of the commercial images and postcards whose visual language to a large extent was set in place in the second half of the nineteenth century, are more resistant to be engaged with. They remain stubbornly in their places as a certain type of representation which appears to confirm the identity of a particular group of worldly beings. It is in relation to these latter more resistant representations that I want to focus the rest of this discussion on the work of Turkish contemporary artist Inci Eviner, who has taken it upon herself to re-invigorate the more stubbornly frozen images of history. In particular, she is interested in making move those representations that have been the most formative and restrictive in relation to her own position as a female Turkish artist. In several of her works, she uses found photographs, which she manipulates in order to disturb the apparent fixity of their meaning. In other works, which I want to pay more attention to here, she uses her own photographs as motifs and transforms them into wall-paper. The appropriation of the wall-paper is significant in that, in its general function, wall-paper tends to exist beyond our deliberate gaze; like the patterns of representations that guide our perceptions of the beings of the world, the patterns of the wall-paper are “things that penetrate into our lives, things that are always around and infiltrate into our subconscious”.<sup>22</sup> In the wall paper series, Eviner plays with the power of the photographic and with image-space, in that as you get closer, that which appears as harmoniously flowing motifs are revealed in their hidden violence. For example, in “An explosive heart” (image 4) Eviner digitally assembles images of a host of innocent looking children who, as the viewer gest closer, are revealed to have explosives strapped to their chests in the manner of suicide bombers. In another more recent series, *New Citizen* video series from 2010 (image 5), she

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<sup>21</sup> Edwards, p.6

<sup>22</sup> Inci Eviner in interview with Nazlı Gürlek “Beauty, the Beast, and Other Broken Narratives” in *Inci Eviner 2000-2010* Galeri Nev, Istanbul: 2010, p.130

specifically uses subjects that echo those patterns that were once formed in the visual representations of oriental subjects, and places them on a background of colonial wallpaper motifs taken from post cards. In one piece from the series, we see the image of a young boy who is covering and caressing himself, apparently becoming a narcissist in the face of Europe's Islamophobia,<sup>23</sup> together with an image of a Chinese woman who has become suddenly preoccupied by the appearance of her own phallus. Replacing the original characters of the wallpaper, these subjects are given their own gestures and have literally been made to move and to turn their gazes inwards to what is behind the version of the self that has been turned into an image through the orientalist gaze. What the wall-paper and the subjects have in common is that they both belong to the European imperialist era and both show a version of the 'exotic east' turned into a motif. Eviner herself tells how for her, despite their innocent or impartial appearance, these wallpapers allow her to see what "Europe includes culturally but excludes politically".<sup>24</sup> Significantly, she explains how they cannot avoid sharing in this process of significations because they are a part of the representative system that determines what is seen and how we see. As Edhem Eldem explains, by the end of the nineteenth century, the near east was becoming increasingly "tamed" politically through a series of defeats, allowing it to be viewed with a comforting sense of safety and be turned into another consumer object for Western audiences.<sup>25</sup> Consequentially, Eviner goes on to clarify her ambition to find what is hidden in these representations by referring to the "momentary emergence of (...) an *untamed* difference".<sup>26</sup> The object of consumption, as that which is represented, be it the Orient, the Oriental, or the Woman, is tamed, controlled, or covered up by representations. In engaging with the images, sometimes interfering with them and rearranging them, that which was covered is momentarily made visible, and that which was frozen, tamed and controlled is made to move and speak. In another work, *Harem 2009* (image 6) Eviner brings this movement out with perhaps even further clarity, as she uses her own photographs in an intervention into one of Antoine-Ignace Melling's engravings depicting the Harem. The women of Melling's engraving, who have been drawn with extreme meticulousness and almost scientific attention to detail by a man who clearly never set a foot within the spaces that he has depicted, are replaced by Eviner's own images of women playing, demonstrating, biting each other and performing a range of other unexpected activities. This time, the stark and not always flattering reality of the

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<sup>23</sup> *Inci Eviner 2005-2009* (catalogue text) Galeri Nev, Istanbul: 2009

<sup>24</sup> *ibid*

<sup>25</sup> Eldem, p.18

<sup>26</sup> Eviner, *Inci Eviner 2000-2010* p.131-132 (my italics)



contemporary shots are used to contrast the idealized representations of the past. Through the work, Eviner “gives a voice to these frozen women and forces them to reveal whatever they have been hiding”.<sup>27</sup>

Photography does indeed live in many worlds. In the central Ottoman setting into which the new medium of photography was first received, it is possible to recognize how photography was grasped foremost as a practical tool without the ideological overtones that already inevitably engulfed the visual in the West. By the end of the nineteenth century, however, Ottoman photography had played a significant role in creating a new visual environment, beginning to resemble a more immediate understanding of Heidegger’s “world as an image,” in which technologies of visualization shape the objects and subjects of the world into images to be consumed. In particular the concept of the Orient and its subjects became put in their place as visual representations. Moving to the photographs of twenty-first century contemporary art practice, contemporary Turkish artist Inci Eviner takes it upon herself to negotiate these representations, in an attempt to break them open and re-invigorate them with motion. Elizabeth Edwards refers to Chris Jenks in pointing to the space that often exists between theorized vision and everyday empirical experience.<sup>28</sup> A space that is often enough left wide open, it seems possible to argue that attending to photography in its rawness becomes a way to bring focus towards this gap; thereby returning to theory the fluidity and movement that is such an intrinsic part of lived life, sometimes lives on in the photographs, but that so rarely survive their translation into theory.

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<sup>27</sup> Emre Baykal, “The energy that lies beneath the surface” in *Inci Eviner 2000-2010* Galeri Nev, Istanbul: 2010, p.13

<sup>28</sup> Edwards, p.3

Image 1: Derain *Sultan Abdülaziz* c. 1863. Reproduced from Özendes, *Photography in Ottoman Empire 1839-1919*.



Image 3: Abdullah Brothers *Women smoking nargile* 1890. Reproduced from Özendes, *Photography in Ottoman Empire 1839-1919*.



Image 2: Sebah & Joaillier *Woman in the harem* 1890 from Özendes, *From Sebah & Joaillier to Foto Sabah: Orientalism in Photography*.



Image 4: Inci Eviner *An explosive heart* 2002 (courtesy of the artist)



Image 5: Inci Eviner *New Citizen* video still 2010 (courtesy of the artist)



Image 6: inci Eviner *Harem* video still 2009 (courtesy of the artist)

