

From Melling's Harem to Eviner's:

displacement as *parrhesia*

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Introduction: Melling's Harem

Melling came to İstanbul at the end of the eighteenth century. He had grown up in an artist family and was trained in sculpture, pattern, mathematics and architecture. Joining the community of travelers in Istanbul, he established contact with the Royal Court. His first project was the planning of a seaside palace garden for the Sultan III. Selim's sister. Then he was appointed as the Sultan's architect.¹ Beside a large number of engraving works that describe Istanbul's landscape and panorama, he made a number of commissioned perspective drawings of the Sultan's court. One of these is his controversial harem drawing.

¹ See Ekrem Işın, *Long Stories: Istanbul in the Panoramas of Melling and Dunn*, Ed, Suna ve İnan Kırac Vakfı İstanbul Araştırmaları Enstitüsü, İstanbul, 2010, p 30-31.



In the drawing, action taking place in different rooms and on different floors of the harem is shown to the audience through a sectional perspective. The rooms are arranged on both sides of a three-floor space which receives light from its frontal trellis windows on the left hand side. The open corridors, which connect the rooms, open to the three-floor high central gallery system. In this hole-like space we see harem's female inhabitants in action, some working, some eating together, carrying packs, folding blankets. Some women are conversing, others yawning, kissing or idling around. Located in the center of the picture, the Master Women, the steward of the dormitory, is giving orders to a black eunuch. In the ground floor, on the left, food is being served. In the prayer room on the middle floor women are praying, each performing the prayers in a different position. Upstairs, one can see that mattresses are laid on beds or gathered. On the left side of the open space on the ground floor there are women who are chatting around the tandoori.

Considering the level of the detail, it is easy to believe that Melling did not only have a chance to see the harem, a place where 'horror kept watch over lust', under safe and comfortable

circumstances, but also had ‘many conversations with’ the women in the harem.² However, despite watching and listening to the actors, Melling was not, could not be involved in the harem as a lived space. In a certain sense, therefore, this high ceiled, multilayered, wide-span wooden structure containing the female servants of the harem is an imaginary space. Nevertheless, as Orhan Pamuk emphasizes,³ Melling’s description of the harem within a sharp ‘Gothic’ perspective is distanced to and differs from other Western fantasies of the harem and invokes a ‘sense of reality and seriousness’ immanent to the space. Dominated by the principles of Cartesian architectural design, the drawing suspends the standard expectations. Thus the quest for eroticism, lesbian relation and desire, which is typical of Orientalist depictions of the harem, is delimited to a pair of female figures standing cheek to cheek, without occupying a central position.⁴

As such, Melling’s harem neither contains enough sexuality to accommodate the Western fantasies of the East nor is pompous enough to emphasize his master’s transgressive pleasures. Instead, at a first glance at least, it gives the impression of a rather ordinary daily life. However, this ordinariness, the realist simulation of a Cartesian space inhabited by anonymous figures and rhythmic everyday life movements, masks significant realities. The most important of which is the relationship between the despotic power and gender.

In its origin, in ancient Greece, the rule of the despot designated a specific power relation that takes place in the household, in the *oikos*. ‘Political’ power, in contrast, was seen as something that pertains to the *polis*, as a relationship between free men concerning the common good. In the household, the despot governs three kinds of subjects: his children, his wife, and

² Antoine Ignace Melling, *İstanbul ve Boğaz Kıyılarına Pitoresk Seyahat*, Rezan Benatar, Ed, İrvin Cemil Schick and Ece Zerman, tr, Denizler Kitabevi, İstanbul, 2012, p 88.

³ See Orhan Pamuk, *İstanbul Hatırlar ve Şehir*, İletişim Yayınları, İstanbul, 2007, p. 68 and Ayşegül Baykan, ‘Visiting the Harem of İnci Eviner: A Journey to Utopia’, in *Tactics of Visibility Contemporary Artistic Positions from Turkey*, Verlag der Buchhandlung, Köln, 2010, pp 72-78.

⁴ Ibid

his slaves. As such, the concept of despotism cannot refer to a political category. But already in Melling's time a shift had occurred in Europe, and the concept started to signify the perversion of regal power (the king ruling his 'people' as if they were his 'slaves'). As such, 'despotism' came to signify a ground zero, not merely a political form as monarchy, tyranny, and democracy, but rather an *apolitical* 'formlessness.'⁵ It is also in the same period that the concept became the cornerstone in Orientalism, which perceives the Orient as a space of perversion, a space in which the despot is the sole owner of all enjoyment.⁶ Being part of this libidinal economy, the multitude of harem women is totally subjected to the despot's desire. And when the despot does not require them, they are kept in harem, overseen by a eunuch. As such, the harem is an enclosed, prison-like space. Indeed, as a relation between the one (despot/man) and the multitude (slave/women), harem is a paradigmatic space regarding slavery in general.

In relation to the Orientalist fantasy of despotism, Melling's drawing constitutes an 'official' response that tends to normalize the harem, the despotic space par excellence, by depicting it in terms of the 'ordinary' rather than the perverted. Eviner's *Harem*, in contrast, is a cipher of despotism.

... and Eviner's

İnci Eviner's video instalment *Harem* (2009) opens with showing, approximately ten seconds, Melling's harem and its inhabitants. After this introduction, the background enabled by Melling's sectional perspective remains unchanged, but his frozen characters are transformed. What happens if these women speak, disclose what they hide, if they take action? – This

⁵ See Alain Grosrichard, *The Sultan's Court*, Verso, London, 1998 and Inge E Boer, 'Despotism from Under the Veil: Masculine and Feminine Readings of the Despot and the Harem', *Cultural Critique*, 32(1), 1996, pp.43–73, here quoted p 46.

⁶ Op. cit. Grosrichard, 1998, pp 141-6.



question is *Harem's* leitmotif.⁷ Consequently, the imagined everyday life in the foreground turns into a thrilling scene made up of unexpected tactics produced by modern figures.

Melling was an eye-witness. But since visual experience is never certain, an 'eyewitness is not enough' to understand: it is 'necessary for the body to be "*written by the other, engraved, pierced, or, more precisely, transverbated.*"⁸ Hence, already in the beginning, in a mirror held in hand by one of the transformed female figures, a replacement for the woman carrying a pack in Melling, (the image of) Eviner's own face appears. In this detail, reminiscent of Diego Velázquez in *Las Meninas*, Eviner includes herself 'out' in the picture, looking at the spectator. This is a gesture of truth-telling, and the truth of the *Harem*, it is signaled, will be coming from the image in which Eviner herself is imprisoned.

Soon after, however, Melling's harem appears once more and we are delivered to silence, the ambivalence of which short-circuits the expectation of a naked truth and the anticipation of dystopia. And so the everyday life in the harem transpires in a new light. Harem is really a

⁷ See İnci Eviner, 'Mekan ve Tarih Arasında,' 2008, <http://www.inceviner.net/metin-mekan-ve-tarih-arasinda.html>, accessed 14.09.2017.

⁸ Micheal De Certeau, *Heterologies*, Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1986, p162.

‘camp’⁹ in which the female figures full of anger, hatred, lust, shame, violence but also a will to resist are trapped into their own actions. As an exclusionary space, harem is revealed as a dispositif through which the bare life of the female slave is abandoned from social and political life to biological existence, taken out of the circulation of ordinary life and has become an exclusive, sacred property of the despot. Thus the primary meaning of ‘harem’ is intimately associated with another Arabic word ‘haram’, that is, prohibited, forbidden or made unlawful.¹⁰

And yet, despite the female slave is ‘outside’ ordinary circulation, her life is strictly regulated and restricted. Paradoxically, therefore, the harem is internal to the processes of ordering. To use Agamben’s terminology,¹¹ she is a figure of ‘exception’, a figure that stands in symmetry to the figure of the despot-sovereign whose practice consists in abandoning subjects. As such, the female slaves are products of an ‘untying’ rather than bonding; subjects banned, excluded and forced to survive outside the society. Without peace.

Thus Eviner’s female slaves are about to die, to hide or to escape. Indeed, the female slave, the sexual object of biopolitical power, appears in *Harem* as an abject. All women are in uniforms or pajamas, like anonymous subjects of a total institution. On the left hand side of the ground floor, we see women who sneak knives to each other. One of the standing women is eating another woman’s arm. At the door, women whose heads are cut off serve each other raw, bloody meat treats. Similarly, the middle area, women sitting together try to knife one another and to die. All of the women, who are eating together peacefully in Melling’s official account, are here at the verge of insanity, obviously preferring death and killing to the pleasures and satisfactions of eating. One woman is trying to commit suicide by hanging herself in her hair.

⁹ We use the concept in the sense of Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer. Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 1998.

¹⁰ Jalal Toufic, *What Is the Sum of Recurrently?*, Galeri Nev, İstanbul, 2010, p. 24.

¹¹ See op. cit. Agamben, 1998.

There are two women whose heads are covered with paper bags and masks. This facelessness directly signifies a lack of inter-subjective relations in the harem. The subjects of the harem are devoid of any expressive power. This brings to mind the torture pictures from Abu Ghraib. In Eviner's *Harem*, too, the spectator is forced to look at the bodies and the traces of torture with the same disgust and fear vis-à-vis abjection.

The abject is an object that provokes disgust, and the reaction towards it is guided by a distinction between purity and impurity. Yet the 'abject' is not merely a pathological figure. It threatens normality, but it is more than a negativity created through the differentiation between the normal and the pathological. Rather, the abject is marked by a primary indistinctness or formlessness. The abject is, in other words, not a pole in distinctions but the lack of distinction. The abject is without form, indistinct, and here lies its danger. The abject is what crosses boundaries of 'distinct' entities or territories, e.g. the body.¹² By the same token the practice of avoiding the abject serves to uphold a distinction, a culture or a tradition.

Tellingly in this respect, a woman is reading the *Dictionary of Western Terms* and is trying to govern the crazy crowd in the harem. This Western figure who is attempting to restrain and educate the uncontrollable East is making hand movements specific to the conductor of an orchestra and shouting, occasionally, 'sculpture!'. Ordering activity can only consist in giving a form to the formless. The harem, however, refuses accurate definitions and definitive forms, remaining an indistinct space. Hence the main feature of the harem is its anomie. Does it, then, consist of an undifferentiated fluidity?

Impossible sacrifice

¹² Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror, An Essay on Abjection*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1982, p. 75.

Indeed, the harem is not only a spatio-temporal entity but also a social and (bio)political machine of ordering identified with the production of the female slave's naked life as *homo sacer*.¹³ But the term 'sacred' here does not refer to the religious domain. *Homo sacer* is excluded from both the *ius humanum* and the *ius divinum*, from both the sphere of the profane and the religious.¹⁴ The female slave's bare life belongs to the domain of (bio)politics, not religion. In this sense the harem is a place in which sacrifice is impossible.

Apropos of Girard,¹⁵ the female slaves, as other human beings, are driven by a desire to imitate their fellow beings, that is, by mimesis. Desire is the other's desire. The significance of sacrifice, of sacrificing the scapegoat, emerges at this point, because hatred towards a scapegoat can be shared. Thanks to the scapegoat, people can mimic the other's hatred, which often culminates in violence. Through this projection, the problem of conflict and difference is resolved and unity is re-established. Therefore, Girard sees scapegoating as the foundation of all cultures sociality is constructed through the sacrifice of the scapegoat. Along the same lines, if sacrifice is impossible, the social bond remains impossible too. The female slave is the one who disrupts the mechanism of sacrifice, which is why he or she is abandoned from the community in the first place. Thus in Eviner's *Harem* the only sacrifice can be sacrificing the sacrifice itself, that is, forgiving the scapegoat. Girard himself finds this motif in Christianity (in the innocence of Christ) and generalizes it to all scapegoats. Yet, the scapegoat can be forgiven or pardoned instead of lynching but precisely as such remains under the sway of sovereignty. For this reason, the motif of sacrifice does not appeal to Eviner.¹⁶ Instead, she goes

¹³ See Agamben, 1998.

¹⁴ Ibid, 82

¹⁵ Renè Girard, *The Scapegoat*, The University of John Hopkins Press, Baltimore, 1986.

¹⁶ Eviner says in an interview that she is not interested in sacrifice as such. 'There is no sacrifice in my painting.' See: <http://www.radikal.com.tr/kultur/haremi-basan-pijamali-kizlar-963245/>, accessed 14.09.2017.

for becoming, particularly becoming animal, which serves as an apparatus of undoing the Harem as it is conceived by Melling, as a space of ordering.

Becoming and Resistance

On the middle floor, protestors have taken the place of the women performing prayers. In their banners, there are bones, monkey and bowel patterns from Eviner's vocabulary¹⁷. The space of praying, of obedience, in Melling's harem has been transformed into a space of resistance, a silent one that can only be read from the banners. While protest is going on, though, another woman is drilling the ground with a hammer in rhythmic strokes audible in the video. She is trying to escape rather than resist, die, or resort to violence. Indeed, it seems that Eviner's *Harem* is constructed along different lines of flight, which all attempt break disorganize the despotic bond.

In his *Programme*, Bataille had advised 'Assume the function of destruction and decomposition.... Take part in the destruction of the existing world... Fight for the decomposition ... of all communities...'.¹⁸ Assuming the value of violence, *Harem* lifts the curse. It is no coincidence that the social space of Eviner's *Harem*, in which everything metamorphoses, is a smooth social space. Losing the social bond is freedom, and in this sense *Harem* is a free assemblage oriented along an exodus.

Yet, lines of flight are neither good nor bad in themselves; they are open-ended processes which have their own dangers.¹⁹ One danger is that a line of flight can become re-stratified: in the fear of complete destratification, order and stratification may seem attractive. Hence the

¹⁷ In her personal correspondence, Eviner describes the word 'vocabulary' as the sum of common objects that are used in most of her works.

¹⁸ Georges Bataille, 'Architecture', in Neil Leach, Ed, *Rethinking Architecture: a Reader in Cultural Theory*, Routledge, London, 1997, p. 121.

¹⁹ See Gilles Deleuze & Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus. Capitalism and Schizophrenia II*. University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis & London, 1987, pp 229-230.

woman shouting ‘sculpture!’ in *Harem*. Another danger is emptying out of its creative potentials and its transformation into a line of death. This is precisely what happens in *Harem*: while some of the female slaves endeavor to resist the camp, some others are entrapped within a death drive, displaying a propensity for senseless violence; and some literally die. *Harem* is about death and the female slaves are death machines. Slavery, after all, is a life fated to death. Accordingly, when the female slave’s ‘life’ as such signifies death, the only reasonable option remains to turn fate into destiny, that is, to choose, to accept death. Since there can be no ethics without freedom, and since freedom necessitates accepting death as destiny, the female slaves’ concern is with life, with the fight for freedom – a fight one wins even in defeat. Thus the principle is exodus, even by dying, in order to become human again.

At any rate, the repetitive economy of signs in Eviner’s *Harem* brings with a refusal of the hegemonic understandings of the harem and ‘reclaims it through transgressive forms.’²⁰ One could even say that Eviner offers a spectacle of transgression experienced as ecstasy, ‘the quality proper to any body that spins until all sense is lost, and then shines forth in its pure and empty form’.²¹ While the body of the female slave as an object of desire and as an abject become indistinguishable, ‘the obscene’ feature of the harem transpires for there is no more any appeal to any value or depth. In the scenes Eviner describes the body is naked, metamorphosed into pure enjoyment and excess. Having left the social origin, stripped of all identity, the female slave in the harem inhabits a sort of state of nature, the aporia of which consists in the convergence between the biopolitics of the despot (abandonment to violence and death) and hedonism (abandonment to food, chatting and sex). Herein lies, perhaps, the hidden link

²⁰ Ayşegül Baykan, ‘Visiting the Harem of İnci Eviner: A Journey to Utopia’, in *Tactics of Visibility Contemporary Artistic Positions from Turkey*, Verlag der Buchhandlung, Köln, 2010, p 72.

²¹ Jean Baudrillard, *Fatal Strategies*. Semiotext(e)/Pluto, Paris, 1990, p 9.

between the harem and other camps and camp-like structures. The harem-camp as a (non)place of enjoyment works as catharsis of the *homo sacer*'s desire and fantasies.

But do the 'naked body' of the sexually transgressive figures really disturb the order of the harem? As Foucault remarks, what makes a sexuality 'disturbing' is not really the sexual act itself but the 'mode of life' related to it.²² Along the same lines, what is at stake in *Harem* is precisely the 'mode of life', whether the female slaves can escape from the dominant economy of bodies and enjoyment and establish another. However:

Like the concepts of sex and sexuality, the concept of the 'body' too is always already a biopolitical body and bare life, and nothing in it or the economy of its pleasure seems to allow us to find solid ground on which to oppose the demands of sovereign power.²³

Neither sex nor the naked body are 'outside' power. Thus the attempt to locate liberation in the liberation of the naked body from the 'mode of life' in the harem is destined to be ineffective. The sexual 'liberty' would merely open up for the inscription of the female slave's life within power yet in one more domain, hence extending the range of the biopolitical paradigm. As such, the relations of power concerning the harem and the opposing process of revolt converge insofar as bare life becomes both the object of power and the subject of emancipation.²⁴ Perhaps therefore, one of the women, lying on the ground, is bored. Yawning, she says that the power struggle has become meaningless for both parties. At any rate, it is no coincidence that in Eviner's rendition, the sexuality which the Orientalist image of the harem is associated with is replaced with a premature, if not infantile, adolescent sexuality stuck in the transition stage. In line with this, the female characters display not mature sexual enjoyment but rather unskillful

²² Micheal Foucault, 'Friendship as a way of life', In C Kraus & S Lotringer, eds, *Hatred of Capitalism*. New York: Semiotext(e), 2001, pp 297-302, the quoted page is 298.

²³ Giorgio Agamben 1998, p 187.

²⁴ See Ibid, p 9.

trials and errors of (non)sex. A pair of women are pushing each other around, one trying, unsuccessfully, to touch another's breasts, while the latter is trying to strangle her with the upper part her pyjamas. Another woman is trying to masturbate with the door, and so on.

Resurrection

The top floor of *Harem* is populated by dead bodies who have gone beyond resistance, protest and violence. The dead are directed towards to the womb in the ground, to be reborn. Because sacrifice is impossible, returning to the womb is their only salvation. Eviner shows that the only hope for the female slaves lies in becoming, 'the only way of ... responding to what is intolerable.'²⁵ And becoming is repetition, re-appearing, a resurrection. Which can re-activate the subjectivity in a new context, according to a new logic, 'forgetting' the very forgetting (or failure) of the attempt at resisting.

It is plausible to suggest that *Harem's* female slaves objectively know that they do not have a chance against the despot/sultan in the long run, which is why exodus seems plausible. Yet they are not opportunists; they do not postpone any event with reference to 'objective facts', for such a position of the objective observer is the key obstacle to their salvation.²⁶ The event they are longing for consists in a leap of faith, and its spectral truth is 'perceptible only to those who accomplish this leap, not to neutral observers.'²⁷ One cannot feel the 'magic' of the event without already being part of it. And when the 'magic' disappears, when the subject falls back upon 'objective facts', everything changes again. Hence the compulsion to repeat: once more!

²⁵ Gilles Deleuze, *Negotiations*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1995, p 171.

²⁶ Slavoj Žižek, 'Introduction: Between the Two Revolutions', Introduction to Lenin, *Revolution at the Gates*. Selected Writings of Lenin from 1917. Verso, London, 2002, pp 1-14, here the quote is from p 9.

²⁷ Slavoj Žižek, 'Afterword: Lenin's Choice'. Introduction to Lenin, *Revolution at the Gates*. Selected Writings of Lenin from 1917, Verso, London, 2002, pp 165-336, here the quote is from p 187.

In this repetitive process, the 'sacred' character of the harem is also affected. As is well known, 'sacred' refers to 'things set apart and surrounded by prohibitions,'²⁸ as is the case with the female slaves of the harem. In its originary sense 'sacred' meant removing things from the domain of free use and commerce so that they could not be sold or bought nor held privately, that is, to 'consecrate' them for specific use in the religious domain; 'profane' in turn indicates returning that which is sacred to free use, making it common again.²⁹

Insofar as the harem is a spatial apparatus that seeks to keep the profane and the sacred distinct, Eviner's strategy is profanation. She ignores and thus neutralizes this separation by 'playing' with the harem, putting it into new, 'inappropriate' uses, and thus freeing the humanity of the female slaves from the domain of the sacred. Free play, after all, is an expression of the useless, of God's anti-utilitarian 'childlikeness.'³⁰

The virtual womb

Another problematique exposed in Eviner's *Harem* revolves around the performative limits of the female body. Hence *Harem* is crowded by enlarged, de-formed, amorphous bodies in (de)formation which push the boundaries of social hegemonic forms and norms. As such, Eviner seeks to open up a new space for the body and its potential movements. Thus, next to the women protesting, there is a woman who is trying to give birth to herself. Another woman, who is inserting her head between her legs, obviously refusing what she is, is trying to open up her body to another existence. Women who are folding in, playing with their bodily limits, are involved in an attempt at escaping their actual identity. Forcing the spectator to look at the

²⁸ Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, Oxford University Press, London, 2001, p 46.

²⁹ Giorgio Agamben, *Profanations*, Zone Books, New York, 2007, p 73.

³⁰ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, Vintage, New York, 1967, p 410.

familiar in an unfamiliar prism, each of these uncanny bodies de-territorialize the actual body in their own ways, linking it to the domain of the virtual potentialities.

Interestingly in this respect, the concept of the virtual is a basic concern of philosophy, often under other names. Derrida,³¹ for instance, when he considers the space of the event, returns to a Platonic text, *Timaeus*, more specifically to the concept of khora, which signifies ‘something’ that is real without existing as an actual thing that can be objectively known or recognized. Having no referent, as an amorphous, unformed ‘something’, khora is itself unrepresentable.³² As such, however, it is that which ‘receives’, or ‘gives place’ to, every representation, to all determinations, without possessing any of those determinations as its own properties.³³ Khora is the place which gives place to everything, but is itself not existent as an actual place; it is a giving place to taking place of the event. In this sense the place of the event, its topos, is khora, or the virtual. Or the womb.

Lady Montagu

Criticizing the relations of power in the harem, one must search for a new economy of power. Yet there is no way to escape the symbolic order, only a moment of death, sacrifice and revolt. To be sure, one could criticize Eviner for repeating the Orientalist fantasy of the omnipotent despot. But Eviner already testifies to the fact that there have been other voices within the harem. Thus, the inscription reads on a placard: ‘Lady Montagu was here’. Lady Mary Wortley Montagu’s *Turkish Embassy Letters* (1717–1718) constitute an example of a female narrative from within the harem. One of the letters, written from Adrianople on April 1717, reads:

³¹ Jacques Derrida, *On the Name*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 1995.

³² *Ibid*, 95–7

³³ *Ibid*, 99

Tis very easy to see, they have in reality more liberty than we have. No woman, of what rank so ever, is permitted to go into the streets without two *murlins*, one that covers her face all but her eyes, and another, that hides the whole dress of her head, and hangs half way down her back. Their shapes are also wholly concealed, by a thing they call a *serigee*, which no woman of any sort appears without; this has strait sleeves, that reach to their fingers-ends, and it laps all round them, not unlike a riding-hood. In winter, 'tis of cloth; and in summer, of plain stuff or silk. You may guess then, how effectually this disguises them, so that there is no distinguishing the great lady from her slave. Tis impossible for the most jealous husband to know his wife, when he meets her; and no man dare touch or follow a woman in the street.³⁴

Certainly, there are specific female spaces that cannot be invaded by men and in which women enjoy more privileges than in the West.³⁵ The harem, following this logic, is not reducible to voyeuristic fantasies; it is '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.'³⁶ But the problem is that these practices do, as Eviner shows, bear the seal of death. No doubt they can be a focus of critique, but this critique can only be articulated in a negative way. What is crucial is that the fantasy of the Orient is not dissolved merely through critique that shows the contingency of articulation. Which is why it is necessary to de-territorialize the distinction between the self and the other, between West and East, but without forgetting that the socio-symbolic order is always supported by a downside, by fantasies of transgression and of unlimited enjoyment. There is no escape from the flowering of desires and the staging of enjoyment in fantasies. But there is a responsibility to attempt to install a new economy of desire less violent than the old ones. And this can only be done in the form of a

³⁴ Mary Wortley Montagu, Letters, 1724, <https://andromeda.rutgers.edu/~jlynch/Texts/montagu-letters.html>, (here quoted letter XXIX)

³⁵ Op. cit. Boer, 1996, p 57.

³⁶ Lisa Lowe, *Critical Terrains: French and British Orientalisms*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, New York, 1991, p 48.

smear campaign; hence the other placard the demonstrators carry, which reads: 'There's a smear on the wall.'

If there is a smear on the wall, if there is a stain (can there be jouissance without a stain? Is jouissance itself the stain?), a blot on the wall, then it is Eviner's *Harem* itself, for example while being screened at Nev gallery in Istanbul.³⁷

Smear is of course a 'binding of enjoyment', a 'stain',³⁸ which prevents the subject from collapsing into death drive, which is the fate of some of Eviner's figures. On the right side of the room on the bottom floor, three women are gossiping around the tandoori and drinking water. But the water is continuously spilling on the floor, none of them being able to drink it. The enjoyment which the three are searching for in one another is foreclosed.

Instead of Conclusion: From the Orient to Europe

Orientalism looks for sexuality, nudity, perversion and excessive enjoyment in the harem. In Melling's harem they are rare. But Eviner serves them, giving the West, so to speak, what it wants. 'Enjoy', she seems to be saying, 'if you can'! In *Harem* the images of the body, gender and sexuality, which the Western fantasies are fixated upon, are pushed into crisis. What we get is not a sexualized space in which the obedient, sensuous bodies make love continuously and unproblematically but a camp in which revolting subjects border on madness, desiring escape more than anything else, even in the form of self-destruction. Exposing the violence, death, resistance, and the adolescent desire embedded in the harem does not only articulate a repulsive response to the Western gaze but also constitutes a stumbling block in relation to the enjoyment it fantasizes about. Playing upon the Orientalist expectations, Eviner shows that what is desired is really a condition of madness, violence, and death.

³⁷ Op. cit. Toufic, 2010, p 25.

³⁸ Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, Verso, London, 1989, p 75

But what happens to the status of ‘despotism’ in this procedure? Traditionally, the concept of despotism is an instrument through which the Occident disavows its excesses. Its function is that of the real that returns in the guise of a fiction, as that which cannot be integrated into the socio-symbolic reality and therefore can only be experienced as an excessive, uncanny spectrality.³⁹ In this particular sense Orientalism is not simply a distortion of reality (Orientalism ‘fictionalizing’ the Orient) but also a symptom that reveals how the reality (of Western political power) itself is mistaken for fiction (as Oriental despotism). Fictionalizing the despot hides the fact that the tendency of despotism necessarily exists in every power relation.

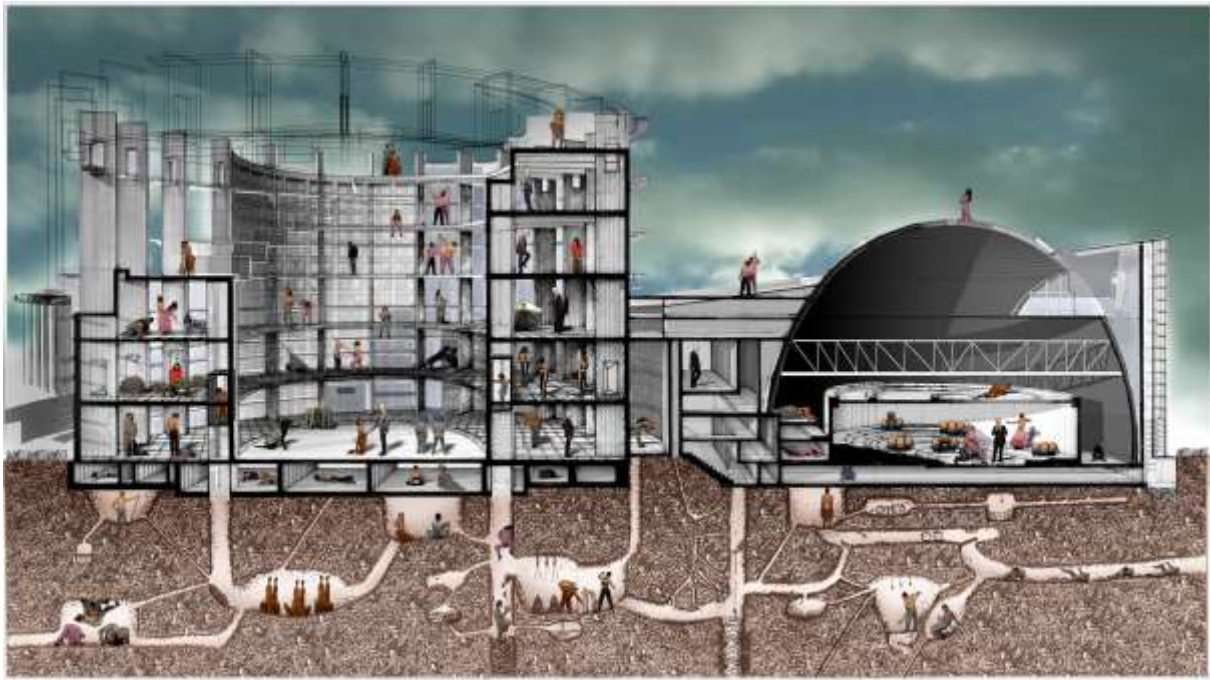
Despotism, then, appears very much as the negation of all forms of *government*, but this is all the better to highlight the kernel of *political power*, which is always masked and covered up in existing governments...⁴⁰

Take one of the most interesting figures in Eviner’s *Harem*: on the right side of the room on the top floor, two women are bonded together while, at the same time, they are repelling, pushing each other away. They are apparently trying to rescue themselves from the environment and from each other, and yet they get only closer to each other as they try to separate. This is an interesting bipolarity we meet often in Eviner’s work in the form of a disjunctive synthesis, a synthesis whose binary poles are mutually exclusive but nevertheless presuppose each other and are interlocked within the same frame. What is immediately provoking is that this paradoxical bipolarity captures not only an important feature of life in the harem but also something essential to the predicament of politics in the contemporary global society: a world characterized by false antagonisms between apparent enemies that feed upon each other; a

³⁹ Slavoj Žižek, *Welcome to the Desert of the Real*, Verso, London, 2002, p 19

⁴⁰ Op. cit. Grosrichard 1998, p. 51

transpolitical order in which the only antagonism imaginable is one between the Right (Macron) and the extreme Right (Le Pen), between the old establishments and neo-despotisms, between terror and the war against terror, and so on. Let us, to discuss this procedure of displacement, briefly turn to another video instalment of Eviner from 2010, *Parliament*,⁴¹ which visualizes a political, cultural and spatial critique by confronting European Union with its own utopia.



Still pre-occupied with the body, Eviner's *Parliament* approaches bio-politics from another angle, this time by focusing on the refugee. Again, the scene is constructed through a sectional perspective taken from the Parliament building in Strasbourg. The building is depicted as a pile of fixated images and allegories. Though the most visible and striking element in the installment is the underground life which cannot be seen from outside the building. In this underground world, the refugees, excluded as citizens but included as naked bodies reduced to biological life, are digging under and infiltrate Europe. Bodies, whose heads are buried under sand, appear to be in an in-between condition between appearing and disappearing. Under the earth, there is

⁴¹ <http://www.incieviner.net/parlemento.html>, accessed 14.09. 2017

a man who is constantly digging the womb; another man is performing an abortion; another masturbating nonstop. Then we meet a woman who is ashamed, with falling panties. All the figures seem to be viciously suspended between inside and outside, and between different states of becoming. A man is repeatedly taking the elevator to the building, but he cannot come out of the elevator and enter the building which has no doors. Within the tower, there are figures who try to become monuments, bodies that are half-human, half-animal, and dogs that want to climb up in the class hierarchy by becoming Dalmatians. The building excludes the human; naked, reduced to bare life, humans are becoming animals.

There is a wandering albino director both in the tower and in the cube. The half-humans, kneeling and shaking hands with this white man, are apparently living on borrowed time. Another albino man is making a speech. But the audiences have turned their backs to him. It is as if the member of the parliament is speaking to an empty room. If this is democracy, it is a perverted one, one that has entered into a zone of indeterminacy.

What is striking in *Parliament* is its formal similarity to what is depicted in *Harem* in terms of spatiality, power and subjectivity. It is as if the camp-like structure, traditionally seen as the signature of 'oriental despotism,' has escaped the confines of the harem, turning the 'European' itself into an ambivalent zone of indistinction, a 'camp'. Along the same lines, the female slave, the paradigmatic subjectivity of the harem, seems to reappear as the refugee. Importantly in this respect, in sociological tradition, the refugee incarnates ambivalence and thus always provokes a fundamental undecidability. In terms of sociality, the asylum seeker is, like Simmel's stranger, 'both inside and outside.'⁴² If belonging to more than one category means ambivalence, belonging to one side of either/or means order.⁴³ However, as the asylum seeker rejects belonging neatly to 'us' or 'them', he or she becomes a threat to the image of order.

⁴² Georg Simmel, 'The Stranger', In D. N. Levine, ed, *On Individuality and Social Forms*. Chicago and The University of Chicago Press, London, 1971, pp. 143-49, here the quote is from p. 143

⁴³ Zygmunt Bauman, *Intimations of Postmodernity*, Routledge, London, 1992, p. 120

Consequently, s/he is excluded from politics: whereas s/he demands to ‘participate without identification’ s/he is forced to ‘identify without participation.’⁴⁴ However, Eviner’s refugees bear, alongside these characteristics, the mark of exception. The concept of exception is crucial to understand Eviner’s *Parliament* because, to put it in a nutshell, power does not work through the logic of a one-way exclusion. The refugee is excluded from the domain of the law but remains totally subject to it; even though she is ‘outside’, her life is strictly regulated and restricted by the law. Paradoxically, therefore, the refugee is internal to the processes of ordering. Ordering does not only seek to eliminate the ambivalence of the refugee but emerges and expands in a relation to this ambivalence. To use Agamben’s terminology, the refugee is included while being excluded and excluded while being included. Both excrescent and singular, her identity is characterized by a suspension between two horizons: between representation without presentation and presentation without representation. Therefore she is simultaneously the subject of total representation, a ‘word without body’, and of biopolitics, a ‘body without words’.

As such, Eviner’s *Parliament* seeks to ‘politicize’ this oscillation between life as specter and naked life. The terrain of this politicization, by the same token, is the zone of indiscernibility, in which the society of spectacle and biopolitics overlap. Exception is precisely what signifies the impossibility of automatically distinguishing *the word without body* from *the body without word*.⁴⁵

If politics involves seeing and staging things differently, its core is disagreement, which is, above all, a disagreement on consensus.⁴⁶ Politics in this sense is a process of separation, of displacement, vis-à-vis a given framework of the sensible. To politicize is to juxtapose sense to

⁴⁴ Richard Sennett, ‘The Foreigner’ In P. Heelas & S. Lash & P. Morris, eds, *Detraditionalization*, Blackwell, Cambridge, 1996, p. 193

⁴⁵ Giorgio Agamben, ‘Non au tatouage biopolitique’, *Le Monde*, 2004b, 10 January.

⁴⁶ Jacques Rancière, *Dissensus*, Continuum, New York, 2010, p. 144

sense, to contrast another sensibility to the given distribution of the sensible.⁴⁷ To open up a space for what can be said, seen and thought otherwise. What is truly political is, in short, a different way of seeing, a different way of staging the matters at hand, an intervention into a given order of the sensible. Precisely in this sense Eviner stages a conflict between different ways of seeing both the Orient and the West, between different regimes of sense.

⁴⁷ Ibid, p 212