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Disorienting encounters : re-reading seventeenth and eighteenth century Ottoman miniature paintings = Desoriënterende ontmoetingen : een herlezing van zeventiende- en achttiende-eeuwse Ottomaanse miniaturen

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EPILOGUE *or* the AFTERLIFE

Given my approach in these chapters, it seems fitting to usher in my conclusions what I call the "afterlife" of Ottoman miniature paintings. This study has argued for the contemporary agency of these miniatures by drawing on their theoretical underpinnings. Such agency can further be detected in the realm of cultural practice through contemporary artworks that engage with miniature aesthetics long after the miniatures have lost their authentic context and meaning.[219]

Inspired by what Bal calls "preposterous history," an approach that inquires into the ways in which contemporary images rework past art forms, I will briefly focus on two recent works, the novel *My Name is Red* and the film *Waiting for Heaven*, which were introduced in the fourth and third chapters, respectively. These works envision the ways in which the art of miniature painting can become the objects of contemporary encounters in other media than painting. [220] In so doing, they provide the basis not only for "preposterous (hi)stories" but also for unique experiments of writing and filmmaking "in miniature" that explore both contemporary aesthetics and the expressive potentialities of the miniature itself. Moreover, they deem the miniatures to be their theoretical objects—objects that raise questions pertaining to alternative ways of creating literature and cinema. Therefore, these works resonate with the premises of this study in the realm of artistic practice, not only speaking back to this book but also opening up a realm of further inquiry into Ottoman miniatures.

Orhan Pamuk's novel *Benim Adim Kirmizi* (My Name is Red, 1998/2001) demonstrates the complex ways in which art can act upon the past. This active engagement manifests itself in the distinct style in which the novel is written. The story is recounted through the consciousness of twenty-one characters, ranging from

[219] My use of the term "afterlife" comes close to Aby Warburg's notion of *Nachleben*. Didi-Huberman explains that the term "refers to the survival (the continuity or afterlife and metamorphosis) of images and motifs—as opposed to their renascence after extinction or, conversely, their replacement by innovations in image and motif" (2003: 273). In this sense, Warburg proposed a temporal model for art history radically different from any employed at the time by introducing the problem of memory into the history of motifs and images.

[220] For the notion of "preposterous history" see Bal (1999). She writes: "The work performed by later images obliterates the older images as they were before that intervention and creates new versions of old images instead" (1). Such an inquiry points to a reversal, "which puts what came chronologically first ('pre') as an aftereffect behind ('post') its later recycling" (7). This understanding allows Bal to establish a coevalness between the contemporary artist she discusses and the historical subject through the "notion of a shared time, defined by concerns that are both of today and then" (7).

a corpse to the color red. This narrative technique can be called polyphonic, a musical notion adopted by Mikhail Bakhtin in his *Problems of Dostoyevsky's Art* (1929; 1984), which refers to a narrative in which many different voices can be heard and each voice represents a different view of the truth (see also Ecevit, 2001 and Peeren 2007). Of the novel's fifty-nine chapters, no consecutive ones are told in the same voice. Almost each episode starts with a re-telling of the events in the previous chapter, but the story proceeds from a different vantage point each time. This narrative style is analogous to the dismissal of a unifying perspective in miniatures. In this way, the polyphonic form reverberates with the way the miniature provides the viewer with contrasting and contesting views of the figures seen. Instead of a totalizing perspective, which can be associated with the overwhelming consciousness of the narrator in literature called "omniscience"(see Culler, 2007 for a critique), the novel alludes to the miniatures that offer the viewer different points of view.

Another narrative aspect of *My Name Is Red* that conveys the aesthetics of the miniature is the two-dimensional depiction of characters. According to Ecevit, this "miniature" novel does not have a main character writ large, as it were: all characters share the same scale, as would be the case in a miniature. Furthermore, they are devoid of spiritual depth (2001: 145). The negation of the uniqueness and three-dimensionality of the characters not only alludes to the depiction of figures in miniatures but also flattens the "space" of the novel.

The characters' direct address of the reader is another narrative aspect of *My Name Is Red* that relates to the art of miniature. This technique points to the representation at work by alluding to a visual strategy used in miniatures. Resembling miniature figures who look at each other while keeping an eye on the viewer, the characters of the novel talk back to the reader to remind her that she is reading a novel. These three traits of *My Name Is Red*—polyphony, two-dimensionality, and the direct address of the reader—demonstrate the ways in which a contemporary literary work can preposterously, in Bal's sense, refashion formal qualities of miniature painting for its own ends. These features make the miniatures models for a narrative modesty, a "humble aesthetics" that is willfully put in place.

The film *Cenneti Beklerken* (Waiting for Heaven, 2006), written and directed by Dervis Zaim, is a comparable attempt at filmmaking in miniature. As I touched upon in the third chapter, the film engages with the tradition of miniature painting as a propaedeutic model for developing a distinct cinematic language. According to

Feride Çicekoğlu, the Ottoman visual tradition had a substantial but unconstructive impact on Turkish cinema because the "lack of a tradition of visual narration where characters reveal themselves through dramatic action [has] present[ed] obstacles" for artists working with a contemporary medium (2003b: 133). Yet such restraints can provide an alternative cinematic language that would entail "a different track, which refuses the ready-made rules developed by Western tradition" and could evolve into an aesthetic genre of its own (133).

Waiting for Heaven can be seen as an attempt to develop such an aesthetic genre. It does so, first, by incorporating miniatures as active visual elements in its filmic narrative —sometimes fading into the filmic image, and at times digitally animated. Moreover, the film employs what the director calls the "flexible temporality and spatiality" employed in Ottoman miniatures. The film overlaps incompatible spaces in a single scene and juxtaposes contesting temporalities just like the miniatures do. In so doing, it tries to challenge the normative temporal and spatial configuration of cinema.

Second, the film proposes the figure of the mirror as a metaphor for understanding the operation of the miniature. However, the mirror is not conceived as a metaphor for the painting's capability of reflecting reality; the truth of what is seen in the mirror is constantly questioned by way of the mottled stains that cover its surface. Rather than reflecting, the mirror opens itself to the world of the miniature, a realm in which the conventional perceptions of dimensionality and proportion are contested. It also provides a "distorted view" through which the film screen momentarily incorporates the spatial qualities of the miniature and thus subverts the standard, perspectival configuration.

By thus appropriating formal concerns of the art of miniature painting, *Waiting for Heaven* produces a novel cinematographic visuality. Just like *My Name Is Red*, the film does more than tell a story about miniatures; it visualizes the story by reworking the miniature imaginary. These two works preposterously act upon the forgotten tradition of miniature painting—its conventional motifs and modes of representation—so as to inquire into the ways in which it contributes to the construction of an unconventional language of artistic expression in their respective media. This way of engaging with past forms of art is not a nostalgic hope for the salvation of the deceased—hence, a requiem—but rather represents a way of writing and visualizing a preposterous view of history. Above all, these works attempt to

construct productive encounters not only between the past and present but also between different media that have previously been considered antagonistic.

Thus far, I have speculated on the "ultimate fate" of the collective protagonist of this study, Ottoman miniature paintings, in the fashion of a literary epilogue. By drafting these initial notes for further research I hope to have pointed out the destiny not only of the miniatures but also of this study—not a definite ending, but rather a new potential encounter.

This study began by arguing for the semantic function of ostensibly insignificant pictorial elements and culminated with a proposal for an alternative epistemology of painting. The process aspired not only to formulate a fresh approach for studying miniature painting but also to revisit concepts we work with in understanding visual phenomena. My discussions on intimate looking, horizontal viewing, ornamental aura, and the threshold are the conceptual contributions of this research that will be beneficial for the examination of other forms of manifestations of visual culture. I hope to contribute to our quest to envision alternative visual epistemologies through the diverse methods I adopted in my chapters—detailed reading, relooking, cross-media examination, an attentiveness to the object's materiality, and metaphorical inquiry.

I hope that my book will open up a productive discussion in the specific field of Ottoman art. I conceive my work as a committed response to the crisis of art history that has been observed in the last decade. Therefore, my appraisal of previous studies on Ottoman miniatures should be understood as an act of "critical intimacy" through which one can cast a fresh look at Ottoman miniatures (Spivak, 1999; Bal, 2002).

The contributions of this thesis can be summed up as follows:

i) *Materiality*: Even though there have been numerous works on the book as an object, these studies tend to examine only the processes of production and diverse aspects of bookmaking (such as paper-making and book-binding). My approach relied on an unremitting focus on the book as a portable, self-contained site for reading and seeing that affects the ways in which the viewer produces the meaning of the miniatures.

ii) *Narrative reading*: The relation between text and image has always been an important field of inquiry and it has been examined—though not systematically—by following the iconographic methodology, which has already been submitted to

scrutiny as a method of inquiry regarding non-Western visual production. Instead of insisting on iconographic analysis, I proposed that such an approach should be combined with narrative reading that privileges iconographically non-functional details.

iii) *Ornamentation*: Previous studies regarded the ornamental as a form of illumination. My approach on the ornamental relied on its constitutive function as a *parergon* as well as an auratic shield warding off the viewer's gaze. In this way I departed from the conventional understanding of the role of ornamentation as a vehicle of visual pleasure.

iv) *Representation of women*: Depiction of female figures have remained fairly marginal in the study of Ottoman miniatures, with the possible exception of Levnî's oeuvre. My study attempted to overcome this gender(ed) gap by putting the woman back in the picture and arguing for gender to be a primary dimension of visual representation.

v) *Orientalism*: The issue of Orientalism has never been addressed in relation to miniature painting, although it has become a subject of inquiry in the analysis of the Ottoman visual production of the nineteenth century. I demonstrated that the miniaturists engaged with Orientalist imagery and appropriated its specific language and style.

vi) *Western influence*: I argued that the so-called Frank painting was a constitutive part of the tradition of miniature painting since its institutionalization in the fifteenth century. However, instead of focusing on how certain forms and techniques were imitated or applied in miniatures, I proposed that the analyst should investigate the ways in which they were negotiated and at times negated.

Through these different angles, this study sought to disorient the conventional ways of researching non-Western visual production. Rather than exoticizing Ottoman miniatures as the "other" to the canon or essentializing them as mere products of a chronologically prior and geographically distant culture that remains outside the canon, I tried to underline the historical cross-cultural encounters between East and West. In this way, I framed miniature paintings not as uncontaminated, homogeneous cultural artifacts belonging to a certain visual regime but as sites where the productive process of cross-cultural negotiation is articulated. In addition to underscoring historical negotiations, I proposed that examining certain formal similarities as well as differences between modern painting and miniature

paintings—such as the reclaiming of the material support, flatness, and play with dimension and scale— enriches our understanding of the miniatures. This approach enables us to envision, and write, a non-linear and non-canonical history of art in which images, in their singularity, are conceived as sites where the essential questions of representation are articulated.