The Politics of Images
Considerations on French Nineteenth-Century Orientalist Art
(ca. 1800 – ca. 1880) as a Paradigm of Narration and Translation

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This paper combines the analysis that emerged from the encounters between nineteenth-century French artists and the “Orient” with considerations on methodological issues that – almost inevitably – arise when dealing with visual source material in such a context. Regarding the latter topic, the perspective includes visual sources “narrating” twentieth-century and current Western perceptions of the “Orient.” The in-depth examination of these encounters reveals many points of mutual reference. Visual language and the corresponding codes and symbols realized by French nineteenth-century orientalist artists referred, in a double-bind manner, to both supposed orient “narratives” and modes of translation dependent on their own cultural traditions and contexts amalgamated with specific agendas, not only of a political but also of an artistic nature.¹

Proömium ante rem

In Turkish we have a special tense that allows us to distinguish hearsay from what we’ve seen with our own eyes; when we are relating dreams, fairy tales, or past events we could not have witnessed, we use this tense.

Orhan Pamuk²

… we anthropologists should perhaps not think of representation in the first place as some enabling capacity of the human mind […] but, more modestly, as something that we actually do, as our praxis. This would help us to realize that our ways of making the Other are ways of making ourselves.

Johannes Fabian³

The brush the painter employs should be dipped in reason, as someone says about Aristotle’s writing implement. It should leave behind more to think about than just what it reveals to the eye …

Johann Joachim Winckelmann⁴

Objects of French nineteenth-century visual culture with Oriental or Islamic subject matter offer a rich opportunity to study the way in which the “Oriental Other” was approached within a Western environment and what sort of mechanisms have been at work within the processes of convergence. Moreover, these objects deliver insights into Western European social and political power structures and the state of knowledge at the time, as well as into the divergence drawn in the representations of the “Oriental Other”
in a Western milieu. Finally the items produced in this framework provide insights into what Marc Augé called the imaginary of a society which – according to him – is created as a result of the symbiosis between the official “myths” and the private “dreams.”

Although formal-visual and iconographic analysis of the visual source material and aspects of its materiality is crucial for the exploration of the topic of this paper, it only forms the basis of a closer examination of the well-documented receptiveness for Orient subjects in Western European cultures. This analysis takes the visual representations circulating within culture as constructions of imaginaries and as a way of expression in its own right, i.e. to symbolize the world through collectively shared images. For the “image” is, as Gottfried Boehm has convincingly argued, “not simply some new topic, but rather concerns a different mode of thinking which is capable of revealing the long-neglected cognitive possibilities inherent in non-verbal representations.”

Even though I share with Boehm the conviction that images are able to endow sense and meaning by themselves, I am uneasy about too strong a

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3 Johannes Fabian, ‘Presence and Representation: The Other and Anthropological Writings’, *Critical Inquiry*, 16 (1990), 753–772 (p. 756).


