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Greece's Ottoman Heritage Bathing in the Ghost Hammam of Napflio

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Greece's Ottoman Heritage Bathing in the Ghost Hammam of Napflio

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Abstract

This paper presents a video performance co-created with Aycan Kızılkaya at the Performing Space Conference 2023 workshop. Our video performance unfolds against the atmospheric backdrop of the Kapodistriou square in Napflio, featuring the ruinous Hammam and the fountain: iconic water monuments representing Ottoman cultural heritage.

The video engages with the architectural legacy of the Ottoman era through performance art, recalling the rituals of the Hammam, which can no longer be performed at its original location in Napflio. As visitors to the site and participants in the workshop from Turkey, we bring with us the embodied knowledge of these rituals, and through our performance, we aimed to breathe life into their memory. Therefore, the video also seeks to highlight Modern Greece and Turkey's shared architectural/cultural heritage, serving an educational function and a performative way of engaging with history.

The video commences at the Hammam building, adorned with a painting, "La Grande Piscine de Brousse," by Jean-Léon Gérôme. Evoking the Hammam's traditional function, the Orientalist painting imbues the site with a layer of fiction and fantasy, reminiscent of the Western perception of the "East," including nineteenth-century Greece. The ambience is further enriched with the sound of water, enhancing the illusion of an Orientalist hammam setting. Subsequently, the narrative transitions to an awkward bath scene at the Ottoman fountain, grounding the viewer in the contemporary urban landscape with its everyday sounds and sights. By staging a bath within this public space, we aim to bridge the two monuments and provoke discomfort in the viewer, prompting them to question the fountain's ordinary function. This performative intervention activates the square both as a historical locus and a realm of imagination, rendering visible the connection of the Hammam and the fountain as sites of memory.

Keywords: Ottoman Heritage, bathing, embodiment, performance, ritual

Performative Encounters with Ottoman Heritage in Nafplio

The Ottoman era heritage in the Balkans has long been viewed as unwanted heritage (Kiel, 2005; Pateraki 2023). In Greece, the development of national historiographies and related heritage regimes is tied to categorizing Ottoman-era structures as unwelcome artifacts. The making of cultural heritage expected to construct a demarcated, unified material and cultural space that would enclose the Greek state's power and function as a reference point for Greek identity. In this spirit, purifying the Hellenic landscape from material vestiges and discursive perceptions that connected it with the Ottoman Empire rose as a dominant strategy.

Figure 1

The ruins of the Hammam in Nafplio.



This strategy seems to be at work at the ruins of the Turkish hammam at Kapodistriou Street in Nafplio (Figure 1). The small building, which was once a hammam is not even labelled with an inscription identifying the building. Rather, the name of Ioannis Kapodistrias, a politician who worked for the independence of Greece, is inscribed on the building. The street that runs through the small square of Aghios Spyridon, where one can see Ottoman houses from the 18th and 19th centuries is named after him (Figure 2). There are also two

Ottoman fountains on the same street. These bear inscriptions in Ottoman script. The inscription on the fountain next to the hammam and across the church of Aghios Spiridonas tells us that the Turk, Aga Mahmoud, had this beautiful fountain built in 1734 to 1735 for horses to drink from. There is another Ottoman fountain at the other end of the square, which was the location of our film together with the hammam (Figure2).

Figure 2

Ottoman fountain and houses at the square of Aghios Spyridon.



The typology of the Ottoman water monuments in Napflio goes back to Roman times when Greece and Asia Minor were both dominated by the Roman Empire. It was the strong suit of Roman engineers to bring water to cities by aqueducts to gain public support. The water was served to the inhabitants through public fountains and occasionally by hammams, which were centres of public life in ancient Roman cities. The Roman rulers built water infrastructure and monuments like fountains and baths that offer water for public use. This tradition was taken over by Ottomans, and the monuments in Napflio, the ruinous hammam, or the fountains at Aghios Spyridon Square are remnants of this tradition.

Figure 3

The screening of the film during the workshop at the Hammam in Napflio.



The video commences at the Hammam building, superimposed by a painting, “La grande piscine de Brousse,” by Jean Louis Gérôme (Figure 3). The Orientalist painting evokes the Hamam’s traditional function and permeates the site with a layer of fantasy. The painting represents the Western perception of the “East,” which included nineteenth-century Greece. The sound of water contributes to the film’s ambiance, enhancing the illusion of a hammam setting. The painting also stands as a symbol of the intrusion of Western ways of perception between the Greek and Ottoman cultures. The Western eye categorizes modern Greeks as representatives of ancient Greek culture while Ottomans as the Eastern other. This way of seeing them concurrently leads to value systems that categorizes and values cultural heritage according to nationalistic agendas in both Greece and Turkey.

Subsequently, the narrative transitions to the bath scene at the Ottoman fountain, grounding the viewer in the contemporary urban landscape with its everyday sounds and sights (Figure 4). By staging a bath within this public space, we aim to bridge the history with contemporary reality and the two monuments, the fountain and Hammam. The video links both monuments as part of the same heritage, reminding the viewer their shared infrastructure that carried water to both structures. The bath scene at the fountain aims to provoke discomfort in the viewers, prompting them to question the fountain's ordinary function. This performative intervention activates the square as a historical locus and a realm of imagination, rendering visible the connection of the Hammam and the fountain.

Figure 4

The scene from the movie, Aycan Kızılkaya bathing at the Ottoman fountain.



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