Bisexual games and emotional sustainability in Ferzan Özpetek's queer films

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Abstract
In Hamam (1997) and The Ignorant Fairies (2001), Turkish-Italian director Ferzan Özpetek places a bisexual/bicultural game at the centre of the diegetic space. Three characters whose emotions are in flux become psychologically intimate in honest, non-competitive ways. In the process, each discovers a new self within. In Hamam, a successful, married male professional from Italy discovers bisexual pleasure while in Istanbul. In The Ignorant Fairies, a successful female physician in Rome becomes part of the gay/immigrant community. Players define happiness in their own terms and learn to generate the emotional environment that will sustain it. By modelling erotic behaviours that are conducive of cognitive explorations, the bi-games address global issues like religious intolerance, immigration, and cultural difference. In the context of queer theory, my article analyses the bi-tropes at the centre of Özpetek’s films as ludic structures conducive of self-knowledge and self-definition, and as cooperative games in which players maximize their chances for emotional sustainability.

Introduction
In his two films Hamam (1997) and The Ignorant Fairies (2001), Turkish-Italian director Ferzan Özpetek places a bisexual/bicultural game at the centre of the diegetic space. This trope presents three characters whose emotions are in flux as they become psychologically intimate in honest, non-competitive ways. In the process, each character discovers a new self within. For example, in Hamam, Francesco, a successful, married male professional from Italy, discovers bisexual pleasure while in Istanbul. As he visits a men’s steam bath with the son of the Turkish family that hosts him, Francesco indulges in erotic intimacies with him, while he is also aware of the family’s daughter’s attraction for him. In The Ignorant Fairies, the death of her bisexual husband causes Antonia, an established female physician in Rome, to become part of his lover’s elective family of queers. This family includes a male-to-female transsexual from Southern Italy, an ailing gay man, an older woman from Turkey who fits the type of the fag hag, a younger woman from Naples who may be described as an ‘ethical slut’, and a number of not otherwise descript members, many of whom are extracomunitari, or non-European Union immigrants. In the process, players define
happiness in their own terms and learn to generate the emotional environment that will make it possible. By modelling behaviours that are conducive of cognitive explorations and emotional sustainability, the bi-games enable the director to also address global issues like religious tolerance, or lack thereof, immigration, and cultural difference. My study analyses the bi-ropes at the centre of Özpetek’s films as ludic structures conducive of self-knowledge and self-definition, and as cooperative games in which players maximize their chances for emotional sustainability.

Özpetek’s bicultural diegetic spaces are hospitable to multiple mechanisms of suture. For example, in Hamam, the central character starts monosexual and becomes bisexual in the course of the story. Unaware of his queer tendencies in the beginning, Francesco discovers them in the course of the story, namely he realizes that the conventional heterosexuality he has lived by so far is no longer enough. So, while he initially accepts the cultural construct according to which sexual identity is constituted around the gender of one’s object of desire, he becomes aware of his ability to love persons of either gender, and eventually realizes that desire - much like a Deleuzian flux - is but a current of erotic energy flowing between people. This allows viewers with a wide spectrum of sexual and erotic inclinations to identify with Francesco at varying points during the course of his transformation. It also destabilizes discrete categories like homosexual and heterosexual, inasmuch as it foregrounds bisexual behaviour and the process of becoming a queer, namely a person aware of how one’s normative sexual and erotic practices define one’s sexual identity as nonnormative too. In The Ignorant Fairies, a woman of the Roman bourgeoisie finds out that her late husband had a lover. As she searches for the culprit, she finds out that the presumed she is a he, and stumbles upon the elective family of her husband’s lover, made of ‘fairies’, immigrants, and queers - presented sympathetically through her surprised and bewildered gaze. In Hamam there is an emphasis on Istanbul as a run-down, but mysteriously charming city which is reminiscent of an older Italy - the Italy of neorealismo before the economic boom turned the country into a Mecca of style, design, and consumerism. While this sense of indulgence renders the Bosphorus city exotic, it also drives home the point that, like Francesco, Italian viewers are imprisoned by the narrow definition of success based on style and consumerism in today’s Italy. The cosiness of The Ignorant Fairies’s elective family of queers does romanticize the often harsh existence of extracomunitari immigrants in today’s Italy, who often resort to being sex workers due to their lack of access to more dignified professional venues. But it also shows the good influence that these immigrants have on each other, and their awareness of pressing issues in the society they have elected to live in. Bisexual and bicultural games are played in a counterpoint rhythm. Özpetek’s Italian voice summons orientalism to attract ‘straight’ western viewers, while his Turkish voice confronts them with their limited self-knowledge and outright ignorance about who lives next door and shares their cities. These are subdued interpellations to viewers who share the values based on which bi-games are played, including non-violence, empathy, good listening, curiosity, creativeness, and inclusiveness. They provide interesting interpellations for viewers with multiple
elective homelands, sexual curiosity, ecological awareness, and a sense of elective kinship. The idealization of Istanbul presented in *Hamam* qualifies as orientalism based on Said’s theory that insists on how western eyes construct the ‘Orient’ as ‘other’. However, Öztepek is an ‘oriental’ with respect to his audiences in Italy, and accusing him of orientalism only belittles his creativity. Istanbul’s sensual beauty in *Hamam* is better understood as a measure of Öztepek’s nostalgia for it, as a transcultural person who now lives in Italy.³

The cultural theory of play by Dutch historian Johan Huizinga, and John Nash’s mathematical game theory will serve to analyse these interpellations here. In the late 1930s, Huizinga argued that playing is conducive of harmonious modes of cultural development. Ludic structures are at the basis of healthy social formations for they enable diverse people to know each other, and expand their cultural horizon and cognitive abilities (Huizinga 1977). In the 1950s, Nobel laureate mathematician John Nash independently confirmed Huizinga’s ideas by claiming that cooperative games are the ones in which all players win, for the full potential at the core of the game itself is realized in them. To switch from win/lose games to win/win games, the dominant strategy of competition has to change too. Trust and mutual knowledge have to be established for players to feel they can collaborate (Nasar 1998; McCain n.d.). Huizinga’s cultural notion of play can be seen as the social dimension where the dominant strategy of competition is defeated, and the collaborative alliances that will generate the new win/win strategies begin. Öztepek’s bisexual and bicultural films model games that enable collaborative strategies to prevail.

Before I apply game theory to these bisexual films, I want to elaborate on my theoretical definition of bisexuality and its emotional sustainability, by invoking a founding voice in queer theory, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick. Her work, I believe, opens the way for a theoretical elaboration of bisexuality as a mode of epistemological inquiry, even as it rejects it as an identity. In ‘The Beast in the Closet: James and the Writing of Homosexual Panic’, Sedgwick describes male homosexual panic as the paralysis of sexual activity that ensues when men become prisoners of the secret of possibly having a homosexual secret. She claims that their sexual anaesthesia is a result of the sexological definitions of desire made prevalent by nineteenth-century science. The famous confirmed bachelors of Barrie, James, and Thackeray chose not to externalize any desire for a woman, out of fear that she would find out about the secret of the secret in the intimacy that would ensue (Sedgwick 1976: 155–68).

My claim is that the vestiges of this panic that are visible in the bicultural diegetic spaces of post Cold War-era films like Öztepek’s, are bisexual, namely they present a sexual desire that is in flux and oscillates between same-gender and opposite-gender objects. As Sedgwick admits,

There has so far seemed no reason, or little reason, why what I have been calling ‘male homosexual panic’ could not just as descriptively have been called ‘male heterosexual panic’ – or, simply, ‘male sexual panic’ ... [when] [i]n fact, it is, explicitly, a male panic in the face of heterosexuality that many of those books most describe (Sedgwick 1976: 169).

³ For a discussion of orientalism, see Edward Said’s *Orientalism*. For more information about Öztepek’s life and film production, see Manetti (n.d.) and biography. IMDB (n.d.).
This sexual panic, I argue, is epistemological inasmuch as it denotes the fear that the closet, where the secret of the secret is hidden, will define our ways of knowing ourselves and others.

In the 1990s, also in conjunction with the bisexual movement, bisexual theorist Merl Storr argued that bisexuality is more interesting as an epistemological mode than as just another sexual identity. Similar claims have been made by other scholars of bisexuality, including Marjorie Garber (1995: 423–42) and Maria Pramaggiore (Pramaggiore and May 1996: 1–7). Storr’s position indicates that bisexual games can have a cognitive value based on their ludic character (Storr 1999: 8–11). Availing itself of this theoretical context, my study argues that Ózpetek’s films present ludic structures that play with people’s latent or denied bisexual desires to model an ethics of care, respect, and emotional sustainability.

The films

The credits list of The Ignorant Fairies is set against a background of scenes from the episcopal World Gay Pride parade in Rome, in July 2000, which gathered about 200,000 people from all over the world. This event has been dubbed the ‘gay jubilee’, due to its being orchestrated deliberately in coincidence with the ‘Holy Year’ of the Catholic Church, a confirmed homophobic institution based in the Eternal City, whose male sexual panic has been highly visible recently. In the film, this coda points to Ózpetek’s awareness that his work benefits from the changes brought about by the gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender liberation movements, that have granted legitimacy, visibility, and a human face to alternative sexualities and their ensuing relationships. Depending on the area or region, the effects of these movements are obviously different, but the movements have made sexual-orientation issues part of cultural discourse at the global level. This new situation is the premise upon which claims to a bisexual factor - be it identity, epistemological mode, or both - can be made. But, as opposed to the novels examined by Sedgwick, in Ózpetek’s works, the content of the closet - the recess where the secret of the secret is hidden - has become the film’s diegetic space, the situativeness in which the story unfolds.

In both discussed films, what enables the diegesis is the death of a person who may be described as queer or bisexual and is content with his/her way of being. In Human, Madame is a single, classy, Italian émigrée who has established her residence in historic Istanbul. In her letters, she describes herself as the first western mistress of a men’s bathhouse ‘in this city of “omnipotent pater familias”’, a Latin term used in Italian which can be rendered as ‘breeder’ in gay-lingo. She admits to having chosen this occupation because ‘surreptitiously witnessing [the men’s] private pleasures’ intrigues her, and because being their confidante makes her feel their peer. Indeed, Madame fits the stereotype of the fag hag in traditional gay lingo, a woman who lives her sexuality vicariously through the eroticism of gay men. However, as I have claimed elsewhere, a fag hag is often a repressed bisexual woman. It is her death that causes Francesco’s trip to Istanbul, where he enters her space and becomes bisexual too.
In accordance with Özpetek's noted nostalgia for eastern belief systems, a strong sense of reincarnation, the transmigration of souls, and rhythmic recurrance is present in his films. Individual death is presented as part of life's collective continuum, and a person's demise is the crisis that opens the space for another person's new beginning - this, whether the cause of death is a car accident, old age, or a mob murder. Indeed, while he is playing his new bi-life, Francesco gets killed by the Istanbul mob who oppose his plan to restore the steam bath because they want to destroy the old buildings and make a commercial centre in the area. During his agony, the transposition between subjects reoccurs. Francesco's newly discovered bisexuality intrigues his wife Marta. She admits this to another émigré when the news of the accident reaches her. The family's grief bonds her to them and she decides to stay in Istanbul. Now it is her turn to enter Madame's closet/space and give a new body to the expatriate Italian maîtresse of a man's steam bath in Turkey. Likewise, The Ignorant Fairies begins with the fatal accident that kills bisexual Massimo. The double life he has kept from his wife Antonia for fear of losing her becomes the living space where Antonia and Michele, his lover, meet and create the emotional sustainability that allows them to heal. It is through these erotic substitutions that bisexual energy enters the diegetic space. As bisexual theorist Maria Pramaggiore suggests,

often precariously perched atop a structure that divides and demarcates, bisexual epistemologies have the capacity to reframe regimes and regions of desire by deframing and/or reframing in porous, nonexclusive ways. . . . bisexual epistemologies are ways of apprehending, organizing, and intervening in the world that refuse one-to-one correspondences between sex acts and identity, between erotic objects and sexualities, between identification and desire . . . and which acknowledge fluid desires and their continual construction and deconstruction of the desiring subject (Pramaggiore and May 1996: 3).

It is precisely these kinds of interactions and reconfigurations that, I argue, can be best categorized as games. Let me briefly summarize this concept's theoretical history. The mathematical aspect of game theory has become a household name with the Oscar awarded to biographical film A Beautiful Mind and with the Nobel Prize to John Nash, theoretician of non-competitive, or win/win games. But the role of play in culture had already been analysed by Dutch historian/theorist Johan Huizinga, whose book Homo Ludens appeared in 1939, the fateful year when world peace was definitively broken by the beginning of the Second World War.

Huizinga's theory combines ethnographic, anthropological, historicist, and psychological (especially archetypal and Jungian) approaches and methodologies to claim that civilization, in the best forms of its expression, is play. Play, or ludus, which includes rituals, social and sports games, free play, artistic performances, and even fair exertions of military force, is not a by-product of civilization, argues Huizinga - it is its essence.

Play is a voluntary activity or occupation executed within certain fixed limits of time and place, according to rules freely accepted but absolutely binding, having [an] aim in itself and accompanied by a feeling of tension, joy, and the
The film’s original title was Bagno turco-Hamam. It was widely reviewed upon its release in Italy and is now available to anglophone viewers as Steam. More on this successful release in Silvestri (1997), Anselmi (1997), Fusco (1997), and Martinelli (n.d.).

consciousness that it is ‘different’ from ‘ordinary life’… We have to conclude that civilization… does not come from play like a babe detaching itself from the womb: it arises in and as play, and never leaves it. (Huizinga 1977: 47, 198, original emphasis.)

In many ways this theory is inapplicable today, when we are not sure what civilization means, and when our sense of subjectivity has widened much beyond Huizinga’s. His ‘homo ludens’, man the player, corresponds pretty much to the white, male, high-class subject of western history that feminism, post-colonialism, and postmodernity so vehemently critique. Yet Huizinga’s high respect for ancient Indian and Chinese cultures, and the continuum in play he establishes between the human and the animal world must be noted to his credit. His vision emphasizes the similarity between humans and other creatures often considered inferior. Hence, once we extend the reach of that human subjectivity, we find that Huizinga’s theory of cultural formation as play is useful.

In Hamam, for example, the diegetic space encompasses the bioregion that ranges from Rome to Istanbul. The title scene is organized as parallel cuts from Marta and Francesco’s life in Rome to that of Perran’s family in Istanbul, interspersed with brief cuts about news of Madame’s death on its way to Francesco. In the Rome cuts we see Marta, Francesco, and their partner Paolo. The décor is stylish, their terraced home with a breathtaking view. There is no time to relax and this has strained their relationships. The three Italian professionals are elegant, thin, and fit. Their domestics are Filipinos. In the Istanbul cuts we see the modest home of a two-generation family. The mother, Perran, is respected, central. The lifestyle is modest and content. There has been a death in the family, and we see surprise and grief.

The individuals and groups who meet in this expanded diegetic space play with each other. The games they engage in may not resolve the ideological conflicts related to the neo-colonial legacies each player brings with him or her, yet they enable players to get to know each other in compassionate and respectful ways — and hence keep irreducible fundamentalist hostilities at bay. In the process of getting to know the other through various forms of social, erotic, and sexual interplay, each subject — Italian, Turkish, male, female, straight, and queer — becomes a bit like the other. He or she discovers a part of the other within him/herself. For example, the straight, yuppy Francesco discovers he prefers the slower sense of time that prevails in Istanbul, as well as the homoerotic pleasures men enjoy with each other in its Turkish bathhouses.

In a scene emblematic of Huizinga’s theory, Mehmet, the son of the Turkish family, has invited Francesco to a bathhouse. The high ceilings of the hamam, and the curved lines of the steam room host vapours with the moist density of a womb. Its unpretentious antique style inspires joy and stability. Men in loin cloths play with warm fluids, they are idle, absorbed in their flesh, mollified by the steam. As Francesco observes all this, Mehmet offers a brief lesson in Turkish-bath philosophy. He explains that the hamam’s steam helps one to ‘relieve the flesh so that one can get to relieve the spirit’ (‘dare sollievo alla carne per dar sollievo allo spirito’).

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In The Ignorant Fairies too, players’ interactions have a strong erotic content. The title scene focuses on Antonia, a classy woman in a Roman art museum. The classical cut of her long dress bespeaks elegance and style. A man in a tuxedo arrives and plays Latin lover to her, as he gently follows and seduces her. The scene has a courtly-love flair, he the knight, she the dame, with the formal lei to keep the distance. When they finally break into the informal tu, we realize they’re married. The conversation alludes to how charming she is and how incautious of him to keep her waiting as often as he does.

Erotic energy is indeed the sacred vehicle of the partial, imperfect and transitory communions with each other the players experience. These communions, I claim, have an almost sacramental value in a world blown apart by globalization’s dire winds. Huizinga only offers a cursory observation on erotic energy and play, where he makes a distinction between the ‘biological process of pairing’ (Huizinga 1977: 63), namely sexual reproduction, which ‘does not answer the formal characteristics of play’ (Huizinga 1977: 63), and ‘erotic relationships’, to which his concept of play presumably applies, except that they sadly ‘fall [...] outside of [the] social norm’ (Huizinga 1977: 64). The bisexual games that I claim produce emotional sustainability in Özpetek’s films would be part of this group, and John Nash’s work on non-competitive game theory helps us focus on their role in the discursive economy of the films.

A bisexual game is the interaction that ensues from a situation in which three people are attracted to each other sexually, but are not, or at least not yet, envisioning themselves as bisexual and/or polyamorous, namely inclined to love several people at once. Bisexual games involve the bisexual triangles theorized by Garber in Vice Versa, where she argues that such triangles are empowering to sexual players who can easily change positions (Garber 1995: 431). Özpetek shows how transculturalism can make these games even more interesting. For example, in Hamam, Francesco knows his marriage is in a crisis, but he still sees his sexuality as normative. His transcultural homo-erotic experience in Istanbul hybridizes him and he becomes open to bisexuality as he visits a men’s bathhouse. His wife Marta follows him to Istanbul to get a divorce and marry Paolo, their partner and her male lover of two years. But she falls back in love with Francesco because she likes the way bisexuality and his experience in Istanbul have transformed him. He has mellowed down and has become more human. To capture some of that hybridity, after his death she decides to stay in Istanbul and becomes pen pals with his lover too.

In the crucial scene where Marta discovers Francesco’s bisexuality the viewer is sutured through her straight gaze. Marta wakes up in the middle of the night and realizes that she is alone in the canopied bed of Madame’s over-decorated boudoir room. She gets up and walks across the apartment to the door of the annexed hamam, where she finds Francesco and Mehmet. We see her see them play, lie down next to one another and smoke in a manner that to her, as an Italian woman, is not quite connoted as sexual. She withdraws then looks again, and we see her expression change. The camera cuts to what she is seeing while Mehmet and Francesco are hugging and French kissing in a definitively sexual way, as the Turkish music intensifies. Viewers ‘discover’ Francesco’s bisexuality as
Marta does. This perspective, while not unsympathetic to gay viewers, keeps in touch with a viewer who still thinks of him or herself as normatively monosexual. Through her transformation and decision to inhabit Madame’s queer space after Francesco’s death, this viewer is encouraged to question his/her monosexual identity too.

In *The Ignorant Fairies*, Antonia decides to find out who her husband’s lover is and realizes the extent to which societal heterosexism has deceived her when she finds out her husband’s lover is not a woman. The irony of the situation does not altogether elude the viewer. In a scene at the wholesale markets a blonde woman is serving at Michele’s booth and Antonia’s inquisitive gaze focuses on her. But Michele walks towards Antonia. In the early morning, her husband’s male lover, played by Stefano Accorsi, is a handsome man in his prime years - Antonia surely has taste enough to notice how attractive he is. Later on, Antonia discovers Michele’s elective family of ‘fairies’, or queers, which includes Serra, a large older woman from Turkey who prefers the company of gay men; Ernesto, a gay man whose partner has died of AIDS; a FTM transie from Southern Italy; and various other non-normative members. This opens up a reality of immigration and marginalization in her own city that her bourgeois status had blinded her to. Antonia and Massimo did not have children or an extended family tribe around them, as many Italians do. The only relative we see around Antonia is her mother, a widow who unsuccessfully tries to connect with her daughter in positive ways. Hence, in her grieving, Antonia feels strongly drawn to Michele’s queer family, and in the course of the film this family becomes hers too. She takes care of Ernesto, who has AIDS, and becomes friends with Serra, who takes her under her arm with her good sense of humour. She also becomes acquainted with the sexual practices of the gay men in the group, including group sex, even as she keeps her distance from them.

Antonia and Michele first play at provoking each other erotically, then at insulting each other according to the different social stereotypes they embody. In the scene of Antonia’s initiation to Michele’s tribe, she has accepted his invitation to a party at a gay club. The camera opens on various images of desire and expectation, with much queerness in the air. Antonia and a member of Michele’s elective family, Emir, who is from Turkey, dance in a corner of the room. The rock music is loud. We see their mouths move, but do not hear them. Then an extradiegetic romantic music begins. More dancing to rock rhythms. We see Antonia see Michele who is dancing with a man in another area of the room. The dance is erotic, lascivious. Another man joins in and the three dance body to body and French kiss. Michele looks at Antonia, who, disturbed, wonders about her voyeuristic role in this high testosterone exhibition. A few seconds later, she and Emir leave.

During the evening of the party, Antonia and Michele have managed to hurt each other before they realize they matter to each other emotionally. Their next game is sorting out the stereotypes that cloud their respective perceptions. They meet again on a rainy day and shelter in the eaves of a closed street shop. A grey shutter with graffiti reflects the drab aggressiveness of their mood. They try to talk about their emotions but cannot. They end up hurling at each other a string of insults that correspond to the stereotypes

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each embodies and is perceived through. Michele claims that she could have imagined that he would get involved into some group sex after the party. She asks Michele who found the third parties when her husband was alive, Massimo or him? She claims that Michele is ‘unable to love’ (‘non sai amare’), and that he only loved Massimo because he was with her. Michele accuses her of having spent her entire life hiding behind Massimo (‘hai passato tutta la vita a nasconderti dietro Massimo’), like the mere petty bourgeois that she is (‘piccola, piccola borghese’). He claims that this living in the shadow of a man has made her ‘frigid’ (‘frigida’). When she gropes for a word to hurt him, he calls himself a faggot (‘un frocio’), ironically anticipating her homophobic feelings. Here we see how well the construct of monosexuality applies to Michele too, inasmuch as he believes that his love for Massimo was the only authentic one, and constructed Antonia and Massimo’s marriage as a front for social respectability. But the excoriating game is interrupted by the news that Ernesto, the AIDS patient, has disappeared.

In an ensuing scene, Antonia and Michele finally accept the fact that they are drawn to each other. On the one hand this enables them to get in touch with their grief for the loss of their shared partner, on the other the erotic game they play with each other changes their sense of themselves as sexual players, from monosexual towards at least doubtfully bisexual. Antonia has invited Michele to the beautiful villa she and Massimo used to share - a dimension of Massimo’s life from which Michele had always felt excluded. Michele looks around and notices, in the elegantly arranged décor, the two lounge chairs side by side in the garden next to the two swings, then the two armchairs half-way turned to face each other in the living room. All this bespeaks a harmonious, loving couple of equals.

The reality of Massimo’s life with Antonia suddenly hits him. Massimo’s love for Antonia - he realizes - was just as authentic as his love for him. Michele cries. Antonia consoles him maternally. She hugs him and the hug gradually turns into a French kiss. The diegesis interjects the image of Massimo’s face in between cuts of the kiss. The camera frames Michele as he kisses Antonia. A brief shot of Michele and Massimo kissing is pasted in, symbolizing the erotic imaginary and transposition that turns Michele on to Antonia. Then the camera returns on Antonia’s response to Michele’s kiss. Another brief shot of Massimo is pasted in. This time he kisses Antonia, thus confirming the idea that Massimo is what turns Antonia on to Michele too. Massimo, the different memories that Antonia and Michele have of him, and their grief for his loss, is the force that connects Antonia and Michele erotically. It is his bisexuality that binds them erotically and now makes them bi too. Bewildered by their own imagination, then they stop kissing, look at each other, and laugh, embarrassed. The movie ends on an ambiguous note. Antonia finds out she may be pregnant from Massimo but keeps this information from Michele and the other members of her newly acquired queer family. We see her touch her mother’s charm necklace on the airport moving walkway, as she goes off on a trip to find herself. At home, Michele lets a glass fall on the floor to find out whether or not it will break. Özetek certainly will not deliver happy heterosexist endings in a Hollywood style, yet the superstition is that, by not breaking, the glass bodes that Antonia might return.
Conclusion

The bisexual/bicultural game placed at the centre of the diegetic space in the two discussed Özpetek movies enables the inner transformations that make the characters capable of creating a sustainable emotional environment around themselves. As they hybridize with cultures and people previously alien to them, they become aware of their bisexual potential and disengage from the monosexual/monocultural constructs that imprisoned them. The Deleuzian fluxes this frees from them provide the erotic energy they learn to play with, as their ‘straight’ consciousnesses gradually turn queer. Unlike his predecessors, John Nash believed that not all games add up to zero. Zero-sum games, studied by Nash’s predecessor John Von Neumann, are the ones in which if one player wins, the other player loses in proportion to his/her opponent’s victory. These are lose/win games, but one may as well say that, in the long run, they are lose/lose games, because the defeated player will try to get even, which will nullify the opponent’s previous victory, all of which at a considerable exertion of energies and for no durable gain on either side. Good examples are unilateral wars in which the loser will seek revenge and become the next winner. Non-competitive games are ones in which all players or groups of players win because they expand the core of the game by including more players and by negotiating part of the journey. Good examples are multilateral negotiations that help to avoid wars so that all parties are better off.

These non-competitive games do not per se resolve the problems of the post-Cold War era, including savage capitalism, threats to the life of the biosphere, financial empires, and growing poverty. But they certainly stave off fundamentalism and create the conditions in which these problems can be addressed respectfully, productively, and usefully. Özpetek’s bisexual games make players aware of their potential for loving people of both genders. They construct subjects whose boundaries are softened by their inner cognitive inquiry, and whose identity is in flux due to their cultural hybridity and movement within the diegetic space outlined by the film. They present postmodern complexities in a diegetic space that models care and respect, and produce emotional sustainability by virtue of the force of their epistemological inquiry.

By knowing who one is, one becomes a vehicle of emotional sustainability for one engages in what Judith Butler calls ‘giving an account of oneself’, being aware of one’s responsibility in co-creating a given situatedness. Francesco, Marta, and Antonia leave the glinness of upwardly mobile Italian couples for the mollifying vapours of Istanbul and for the company of foreigners, fairies and queers. In so doing, they choose a life of spiritual fulfiment rather than material acquisition. As they give up conventional dreams, they discover how much of the joy was in playing rather than in winning. In the process, they explore interlocking areas of human experience, like the continuities between life and death, the fluidities of erotic energies and emotional intimacies, and the interdependence of cultural identities and belief systems. These cognitive explorations empower them to define happiness in their own terms, and produce the environment that will bring it. As a result, ever so fleetingly, they win.
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Bisexual games and emotional sustainability in Ferzan Özpetek’s queer films
Suggested citation:
doi: 10.1386/nclin.2.3.163/1

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