

Workshop

The 'Silences' of Syrian Literature and Arts: Strategies of Concealing and Revealing in the Face of Political Repression

University of Münster, 24-25 November 2023

Until recently, Western academia has shown little interest in literature and arts from Syria, with the exception of a few major figures, such as Adūnīs, Zakariyyā Tāmīr and Sa'dallāh Wannūs. Syrian literature was perceived as stuck between (social) realism and political repression, lacking the experimental character of postmodern literary texts.

With the uprisings of the 'Arab Spring', Syrian literary and cultural production – especially popular forms of dissent – caught the attention of researchers and media, especially with many authors and artists moving to Europe. Critics emphasized the unreserved criticism that defined large segments of post-2011 Syrian literature and arts, as compared to authors in earlier decades – especially those that stayed in Syria – who had turned to more subversive forms of expressing social and political criticism, while also experimenting with 'silence' as a performative device.

This workshop, which complements the master's seminar with the same title, brings together international scholars based in Germany to explore forms and strategies Syrian writers and artists of different generations have employed to conceal or reveal critical perspectives on society, demonstrating how the new wave of open protest did not materialize in a cultural and political vacuum, but had its roots in earlier decades. The presentations will challenge paradigms of 'resistance' or 'protest', suggest new approaches to memory, cultural heritage and trauma dynamics, and add aspects of social and material conditions of cultural production. While the focus will be on fictional and non-fictional texts, such as poetry, novels and memoirs, alternative modes of intellectual and cultural production, such as songs and underground music, will also be explored. Academic presentations are complemented by poetry reading and a conversation with Syrian poet Hanadi Zarka.

A Symbol of Silence: The Memory of 'Hama' in Syrian Literature

Anna Christina Scheiter, University of Marburg

Interrogating Cultural Heritage during the Syrian War:

Critical Reflections on Khālīd Khalīfa's *al-Mawtu 'amalun shāqq*

Dani Nassif, University of Regensburg

Trauma Dynamics in Modern and Contemporary Syrian Literature:

The Case of Muḥammad al-Māghūṭ as Prose Poet

Stephan Milich, University of Cologne

New Readers, Actors and Institutions:

The Changing Conditions of Syrian Literary Production after 2011

Felix Lang, Berlin

Deconstructing the Paradigm of Resistance:

Commodification, Exotification and the Political in the Post-2011 Arab Underground Music

Fernanda Fischione, Sapienza University of Rome / University of Münster

"Sorrow is a Heavy Guest / الحزن ضيف ثقيل"

Poetry Reading & Reflections on War and Other Existential Crises (Arabic/German/English)

Hanadi Zarka, Latakia, Syria / fellow of the DAAD Artists-in-Berlin Program

in conversation with Barbara Winckler, University of Münster

The workshop is organized by
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<https://www.uni-muenster.de/ArabistikIslam/Mitarbeiter/winckler.html>

Venue / Registration

RS 2
Schlaunstraße 2 (Hofgebäude),
access via Rosenstraße 2/9
48143 Münster

To attend the workshop remotely, please join us on Zoom via the following link: <https://www.zoom-x.de/j/64310839081> (all times are CET).

To register and access the readings for the workshop, please send an email to the organizer. Registration is not mandatory, but warmly recommended.

For further information, visit our website: <https://www.uni-muenster.de/ArabistikIslam/tagungen>

Abstracts, bios & preparatory readings

A Symbol of Silence: The Memory of 'Hama' in Syrian Literature

Anna Christina Scheiter, University of Marburg

To this day, the massacre of Hama in 1982 remains one of the strongest political taboos in Syria and is therefore often considered a symbol of silence in Syrian literature and society. In my presentation, I will look at different dimensions of silence, as they are represented and interpreted in literary works dealing with the memory of the Hama massacre. To contextualize the works I discuss within the discourse and negotiation processes related to 'Hama', I will give a short overview of the historical background and show in which ways the massacre can be considered an ongoing process of violence rather than a singular event. Based on an analysis of several novels and short stories, I will then show, how writers from the city of Hama offer a language for silenced memories and contest power structures related to the massacre's memory by revealing mechanisms of silencing.

Anna Christina Scheiter is a PhD candidate at the Center for Near and Middle Eastern Studies at University of Marburg. She completed her MA degree in Arabic Literature and Culture and is currently working on her dissertation project on literary representations and interpretations of the Hama massacre of 1982 in Syrian novels.

Preparatory Reading (optional)

Salwa Ismail, *The Rule of Violence: Subjectivity, Memory and Government in Syria*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018, chap. 4: "Memories of Violence: Hama 1982", 131–158.

Interrogating Cultural Heritage during the Syrian War: Critical Reflections on Khālīd Khalīfa's *al-Mawtu 'amalun shāqq*

Dani Nassif, University of Regensburg

With the uprisings of the 'Arab Spring', a plethora of cultural productions were devoted to exposing military dictatorships in Arabic-speaking societies, condemning propagandists, while advocating change in the name of freedom and emancipation. However, few have emphasized the need to critically address the cultural heritage in those countries, which eventually resulted in having radical groups, such as the Muslim Brotherhood and ISIS, replacing ousted dictators in Tunisia, Egypt, and Syria. While Arabists refrain from criticizing the culture of the 'subaltern', local critics are faced with a predominantly sacred context, with religious texts written centuries ago forcibly making claims on present commitments in society, coercing the individual into collective practices that seek to revive a violent past through re-enactment. In his novel *al-Mawtu 'amalun shāqq*, which depicts traumatic experiences from the late Syrian war, Khālīd Khalīfa takes advantage of the disintegration of state and cultural institutions to lay bare the constructed nature of such a social order. Drawing on the universal concept of death, which is deprived of funeral processions during war, questions about the validity of the afterlife narrative become unavoidably crucial. This presentation will investigate Khalīfa's employment of a self-reflexive narrative technique to interrogate the transmission of inherited cultural and religious beliefs and practices.

Dani Nassif holds a PhD in Arabic studies from Universität Münster and is currently Project Coordinator and researcher at Universität Regensburg as well as adjunct lecturer at Universität Göttingen. His research interests include modern Arabic literature and culture, with a particular focus on postwar history and traumatic experiences. In addition to his forthcoming book *Trauma Memory and the*

Lebanese War Novel: Beirut's Invisible Histories in Rabee Jaber's Fiction, he has several academic publications in both Arabic and English, such as “The War, the Undead, and the Labyrinthine *aṭlāl*: The Case of Postwar Beirut in Rabee Jaber's Novel *The Mehli Report*” (2022), and الخيال وفجيرة الماضي: شهادات (2022). الموتى-الأحياء في رواية ربيع جابر 'بيروتوس: مدينة تحت الأرض

Preparatory Reading

خالد خليفة، الموت عمل شاق، بيروت: نوفل، 2016، ص 5-17، 66-69، 95-104.

Khaled Khalifa, *Death Is Hard Work*, trans. Leri Price, London: Faber & Faber, 2019, pp. 13-19, 79-82, 112-124.

In one of his lectures at the Collège de France, Pierre Bourdieu maintains that “the dissolution of a state makes it possible to see everything that is implicit and taken for granted in the functioning of a state, such as frontiers and everything that is unitary.” In fact, in times of civil war, the work of state institutions (e.g. schools and media outlets) that previously engineered social and cultural hierarchies in society comes to a halt, delivering individuals from the grip of inherited values and practices, and allowing alternative structures and narratives to emerge. This is particularly evident in the surge of critical novels, many of which reflect on the partial dissolution of the inherited system, marking a potential chance for transformation. Against this backdrop, kindly read the assigned excerpts from Khalid Khalifa's novel *al-Mawtu 'amalun shāqq* (2016, *Death Is Hard Work*) and mark the instances that illustrate (1) the toppling of old structures, practices, and beliefs and (2) the emergence of a more promising social order. In a separate Word document, in the form of bullet points, rephrase each of the marked instances in your own words, albeit more extensively to explain the various aspects in the scene – as if you need to tell your aunt about the scene. You are certainly encouraged to quote from the novel while mentioning the page numbers.

Trauma Dynamics in Modern and Contemporary Syrian Literature: The Case of Muḥammad al-Māghūṭ as Prose Poet

Stephan Milich, University of Cologne

In my session, I suggest taking the prose poetry and biography of Muḥammad al-Māghūṭ (1934–2006) as an example to reflect on the difficult relationship between text and social world, between literature, politics and the personal. I will first give a short introduction to the life and works of al-Māghūṭ, and then link his life and poetic writing to the notions of performance and staging one's self on the one hand, and authentic writing and traumatic life experiences and their impact on literature on the other. On the basis of a close reading of some of his poems (and a short screening of a documentary, produced some years before his death in 2006), we will jointly approach these and other questions, trying to discuss which methodological approaches and ways of reading modern Syrian literature can be adequate for doing justice to this literature.

Stephan Milich is a senior lecturer in Arabic and Islamic Studies at the ISKIW, University of Cologne. His research interests include modern Arabic literature, especially writings on prison, trauma and exile, decolonization, critical cultural heritage studies, and psychology in Arab societies. He has published on contemporary Arabic poetry and fiction, and is co-editor of three volumes: *Conflicting Narratives: War, Trauma and Memory in Modern Iraqi Culture* (2012), *Representations and Visions of Homeland in Arabic Literature* (2016), and *Creative Resistance: Political Humor in the Arab Uprisings* (2020), and a special issue on *Trauma: Social Realities and Cultural Texts* (<https://meta-journal.net/issue/view/229>).

Preparatory Reading

Salma Khadra Jayyusi, "Foreword", in Muhammad al-Maghut, *The Fan of Swords: Poems*, Washington: Three Continents Press, ix–xxi.

Muḥammad al-Māghūt, "The Tattoo" and "Executioner of Flowers", trans. Mayy Jayyousi and Naomi Shihab Nye, in Muhammad al-Maghut, *The Fan of Swords: Poems*, Washington: Three Continents Press, 21 – 22 and 56–59.

Muḥammad al-Māghūt, "Eintätowiert / الوشم" and "Tod und Erinnerung an Saniyya Salih / مقطع من موت وإحتضار سنية صالح", trans. Stephan Milich, in Muhammad al-Maghut, *Geht auf Zehenspitzen, denn die Heimat liegt im Sterben*, Berlin & Tübingen 2021, 102–105 and 140–149.

Optional Reading

Huda J. Fakhreddine, "Muhammad al-Maghut and Poetic Detachment", in *The Arabic Prose Poem: Poetic Theory and Practice*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 107–137, <https://doi.org/10.3366/edinburgh/9781474474962.003.0005>.

Stephan Milich, "Nachwort", in Muhammad al-Maghut, *Geht auf Zehenspitzen, denn die Heimat liegt im Sterben*, Berlin & Tübingen 2021, 200–214.

New Readers, Actors and Institutions: The Changing Conditions of Syrian Literary Production after 2011

Felix Lang, Berlin

Aesthetic choices are influenced by the social – and by extension material – conditions of production. Theorising this aspect of artistic production is one of the main contributions of the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu to the study of literature. War, large-scale violence, and migration as experienced by a large part of Syrian writers certainly count among the most disruptive experiences when it comes to the social, psychological and material fabric in which literature is enmeshed. In this session we will trace some of the major structural changes for Syrian authors writing in exile after leaving Syria in the wake of the revolution in 2011 and the ensuing war as opposed to those writing before the revolution in 2011. Taking literary production as a social and cultural practice that unfolds in networks of people, objects, and institutions, we will ask in what ways such changes are liable to influence aesthetic choices in writing fiction.

Felix Lang specialises in the Cultural Sociology of the Middle East and North Africa, with a focus on Lebanon and Syria. His main research interests lie with theoretical and methodological approaches to spaces of cultural production and knowledge production, modern Arabic Literature, trauma and memory studies, as well as music and food studies. His publications include the monograph *The Lebanese Post-Civil War Novel: Memory, Trauma, and Capital* (Palgrave 2016) and "Bourdieu, Latour and Rasha Abbas. The Uses of Actor-Network Theory for Studying the Field(s) of Cultural Production in the Middle East and North Africa" (in *Cultural Sociology*, 13.4, 2019).

Preparatory Reading

Felix Lang, "Transformations of the 'Syrian' Literary Field Since 2011", in *Re-Configurations: Contextualising Transformation Processes and Lasting Crises in the Middle East and North Africa*, eds. Rachid Ouaisa, Friederike Pannewick, Alena Strohmaier, Wiesbaden 2021, 261–275.

**Deconstructing the Paradigm of Resistance:
Commodification, Exotification and the Political in the Post-2011 Arab Underground Music***

Fernanda Fischione, Sapienza University of Rome

A bias has long tainted the Western gaze on pop music from the Middle East in the last decade. On the one hand, both the media and the academia have dealt almost exclusively with the explicitly “militant” aspects of the subcultural productions and practices of the Arab youth; on the other hand, a cherry-picking attitude has led them to consider worthy of attention only those forms of political resistance that fit into neoliberal protest models.

In the aftermath of the 2011 uprisings, the obsessive focus on these aspects, while ignoring others altogether, has shaped distorted narratives about what was happening in the Arab music scenes. The explicit verbal proclamations and resounding acts of some artists, in fact, were magnified to the detriment of all other aspects relevant to the sphere of music production. Moreover, a “burden of collective representation” has been placed on Arab artists working or performing in Europe, exoticising and othering them to their audiences, as we witness in the case of many of what we call “*refugee* artists”.

This talk aims to shed light on the decline of the academic paradigm of resistance in music and cultural studies, departing from some recent studies that have tried to deconstruct it as a predominant interpretative framework. It will analyse case studies from Egypt, Morocco, Syria, Palestine, and Lebanon. It will also tackle the issue of the growing professionalization of the independent Arab music industry, which musicians and other professionals often see as an antidote to the obsolete rhetoric of resistance and a new form of agency.

Fernanda Fischione is a Marie Skłodowska-Curie research fellow at Sapienza University of Rome, the International University of Rabat and the University of Münster. Her current research project, TRANSECT (<https://www.transect.eu/>), explores the representation of pluralism in the contemporary Maghrebi novel in Arabic and its global circulation by means of the International Prize of Arabic Fiction (IPAF). Since 2015, she has carried out a side research project about protest music in the SWANA region, resulted in articles and conference presentations. She is a literary translator from Arabic into Italian and founder and editor of the magazine “Arabpop. Rivista di arti e letteratura contemporanee”.

Preparatory Reading (one of the following two texts)

Fredric Jameson, “Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism”, *Social Text* 15 (1986), 65–88.

Lila Abu-Lughod, “The Romance of Resistance: Tracing Transformations of Power Through Bedouin Women”, *American Ethnologist* 17.1 (1990), 41–55.

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