

Workshop

بنيامين عربياً

**“On the Ruins of History”
A Walter Benjamin Moment in Arab Thought?**

1-2 December 2017

Venue: Forum Transregionale Studien, Wallotstr. 14, 14193 Berlin

This workshop explores the increasing attention to the work of German philosopher and critic Walter Benjamin (1892-1940) in Arab thought. Interest in Benjamin’s thought and work has been steadily on the rise among scholars, philosophers, and culture theorists and practitioners, but particularly intriguing synchronicities of intellectual and creative work began to take shape in the wake of the Arab uprisings of 2011. Dedicated workshops (notably between Ramallah, Cairo and Alexandria), and new translations directly from the German original work into Arabic, performances and creative adaptations among collectives and activists, narrative and poetic adaptations, etc. are among the activities that significantly expanded and transformed the interest in the Arab academy and among Arab intellectuals. This rise of interest in engaging with Benjamin’s thought on multiple sites and in different circles has gained such a momentum that it now warrants a reflective pause and a deeper look on the current conditions of the Arab world that draws our critical attention to a seminal thinker who died as refugee in exile.

Conceived as a reflective pause, the workshop will explore the contexts of the Arab cultural concern about Benjamin’s notions of ‘history’, ‘violence’, ‘law’, ‘language’, ‘time’, and ‘revolution’ among others. These meditations on life, history, and death in the “here-and-now” (“Jetztzeit”) of the post-revolutionary moment in the Middle East and North Africa and its diasporas disclose the ambivalent futures of memory, the reverberations of the disintegration of entire states and cultures, and the possibilities of critical thought and practice. Concerned with the translatability of conceptual language and thought, the workshop also approaches the memories of the future in contemporary Arab thought, art, and history through close readings of Benjamin’s writings.

Convenors:

**Atef Botros al-Attar & Ayman El-Desouky (Doha Institute for Graduate Studies),
Georges Khalil (EUME / Forum Transregionale Studien)**

Program

Friday, 01 December 2017

10:00-10:15 **Introductory Remarks**

Georges Khalil (EUME / Forum Transregionale Studien) & Ayman El-Desouky (Doha Institute for Graduate Studies)

10:15-10:45 **The Benjamin Moment: Arab Contexts and Backgrounds**

Atef Botros al-Attar (Doha Institute for Graduate Studies)

11:00-14:30 **Session One: Benjamin in Palestine**

Chair: Georges Khalil (EUME / Forum Transregionale Studien)

Sinan Antoon (New York University / EUME Fellow 2008/09): Before the Ruins: When Darwish Met Benjamin

Issam Nassar (Illinois State University): Benjamin's Concept of the Aura of Photography: Reflections on Early Images of Palestine in European Photography

Sami Khatib (Leuphana Universität Lüneburg): The 'Tradition of the Oppressed' and its Discontents: Benjamin, Palestine, and the Non-Place of Radical Thought

Jens Hanssen (University of Toronto / EUME Fellow 2017/18): The Question of Secular Critique: Edward Said's Unease with Walter Benjamin

14:30-15:30 **Lunch Break**

15:30-18:30 **Session Two: History and Tradition**

Chair: Islam Dayeh (Freie Universität Berlin)

Fouad Halbouni (John Hopkins University /Cairo): Grievance and History: Reading Coptic History as Tradition of the Oppressed

Ahmad Hamam (Georgetown U / Cairo): Cutting through Tradition

Asmaa Essakouti (Doha Institute for Graduate Studies): Walter Benjamin and Seeking an Alternative History of the Oppressed

Sonja Mejcher-Atassi (American University of Beirut / Fellow of the Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin 2017/18): Unpacking Sa'dallah Wannous' Private Library: On the (After)Lives of Books

Saturday, 02 December 2017

10:00-12:30 Session Three: Ruins of History

Chair: Ayman El-Desouky (Doha Institute for Graduate Studies)

Ismail Nashef (Doha Institute for Graduate Studies): Ruins Replayed: Speer, Benjamin, and a Deferred Arab Action

Mohammed Ezzeldin (City University of New York / Cairo): Resisting Postcolonial Melancholia: Arwa Salih and the Post-1967 Generations in Egypt

Hamid Dabashi (Doha Institute for Graduate Studies / Columbia University): On Pure and Invisible Violence: Fanon as the Missing Link between Benjamin and Agamben

12:30-13:30 Lunch Break

13:30-16:30 Session Four: Revolution

Chair: Elisabeth Suzanne Kassab (Doha Institute for Graduate Studies)

Walid El Khachab (York University): Spectacle as Sole Signifier and Producer of Value: Benjamin, Debord and the Arab Spring

Ismail Fayed (Cairo): *Jetztzeit* and Grasping the Messianic Moment of the 2011 Uprisings

Hala Makhoulf (Cairo / London): Toward a Kairology of the Egyptian Revolution

Kholoud Said Amer (Alexandria): Benjamin and the City (Again): The *Flaneur*

16:30-17:00 Coffee Break

17:00-18:30 Session Five: Translating Benjamin

Chair: Atef Botros al-Attar (Doha Institute for Graduate Studies)

Ahmed Farouk (Berlin): Translating Walter Benjamin's *Berliner Kindheit um 1900* into Arabic

Ayman El-Desouky (Doha Institute for Graduate Studies): *Urvernehmen*: On the Translatability of Originary Listening Beyond Naming

18:30-19:00 Final Discussion

Abstracts and Contributors

Sinan Antoon (New York University)

Before the Ruins: When Darwish Met Benjamin

This paper is part of a longer work in progress on Mahmoud Darwish's late poetry, particularly what I call "return" poems in which the poetic persona returns to Palestine. In these poems Darwish grapples with and confronts "the bulldozers of history." My reading juxtaposes these poems with some Benjaminian notions and concepts and suggests a "meeting" of sorts.

Sinan Antoon is a professor of pre-modern and modern Arabic literature and contemporary Arab culture and politics at the NYU. His scholarly works include *The Poetics of the Obscene: Ibn al-Hajjaj and Sukhf* (Palgrave-Macmillan, 2014) and numerous essays on the poetry of Mahmoud Darwish, Sargon Boulus, and on contemporary Iraqi culture. He was a 2008/09 postdoctoral fellow of EUME, a program at the Forum Transregionale Studien, and a 2013 fellow of the American Academy in Berlin. In 2014, Antoon was the Distinguished Visiting Creative Writer at the American University in Cairo. And in 2016/17, he was a fellow at the Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin.

Atef Botros al-Attar (Doha Institute for Graduate Studies)

The Benjamin Moment: Arab Contexts and Backgrounds

Why would a group of scholars meet in Berlin to discuss the growing and intensifying Arab intellectual interest in Walter Benjamin who lived most of his life in this city, and who committed suicide 67 years ago as a refugee, having escaped from Berlin, heading to the safe west? Today's Berlin is not dangerous any more, it has become whereas a desired destination for refugees from a part of the world which is literary going to present the stage of the new "ruins of history".

While Benjamin's city has now become a cultural capital for many Arab intellectuals, artistes, writers and other exiles, Benjamin' "always radical but never consistent" thought continues to attract more and more artists, poets, novelists, academics and writers from the Arab world. Was it the Palestinian "ruins of history" which attracted and inspired Mahmoud Darwish to Benjamin in his last years? What does it mean when Benjamin goes to Ramallah in 2015 and what message are we to construe here? Was it the wars on Iraq and the everyday violence and victims that presented the background ruins for Sinan Antoon when he wrote his last novel *Fihris*? In this novel Antoon is namely not only inspired by Benjamin's philosophy of history but he refers explicitly to him. We can ask the same questions regarding the increasing interest in Benjamin in the form of workshops, translations and cultural events in Arab cities. What is Benjamin doing in Alexandria or Cairo in the last 2 Years, shortly after the Egyptian revolution has failed and its protagonists have been imprisoned? Is this defeated Arab reality today portraying the new ruins of history and provoking the interest in Benjamin? A final and perhaps more intriguing question in this setting is, can we translate his ideas

into Arabic in the way he argued in his essay on “the Task of the translator”? Can we bring his ideas and concepts from the past to expose and understand our present moment?

Atef Botros Al Attar is Assistant Professor of Comparative Literature at the Doha Institute for Graduate Studies, Qatar, and affiliated to the research project “Figures of Thought | Turning Points. Cultural Practices and Social Change in the Arab World” at CNMS, University of Marburg. He studied German Literature, and obtained his PhD from the University of Leipzig/Erfurt in Comparative Literature with a dissertation on the Arab preoccupation with Kafka. From November 2007 until 2015, he taught modern and comparative literature at the Arabic Studies Department of the Center for Near and Middle Eastern Studies at the Philipps University of Marburg (CNMS). Botros is author of *Kafka – a Jewish Writer from an Arab Perspective* (Wiesbaden 2009), and editor of *The Middle East – a Part of Europe? Reflections on Space and Cultural Conceptions in the Modern Middle East* (Würzburg 2006). Among his most recent publications is “Rewriting Resistance: The Revival of Poetry of Dissent in Egypt after January 2011”, in Pannewick, Friederike and Khalil, Georges, *Commitment and Beyond*, (Wiesbaden 2015).

Hamid Dabashi (Doha Institute for Graduate Studies / Columbia University)

On Pure and Invisible Violence: Fanon as the Missing Link between Benjamin and Agamben

As two seminal European thinkers, Benjamin and Agamben’s respective and related thoughts on the nature and function of violence are historically interrupted by the work of Frantz Fanon on violence. What would happen to the link between Benjamin and Agamben if we interject Fanon? What if we brought Algeria and the rest of the Arab and colonial world to bear on Fanon co-thinking violence with Benjamin and Agamben?

In *Zur Kritik der Gewalt/Towards the Critique of Violence* (1921), Benjamin famously made a distinction between “lawmaking violence/Rechtsetzende Gewalt” and “law-preserving violence/Rechtserhaltende Gewalt.” Law therefore is institutionalized violence, both in making and sustaining violence as legal. This legality of violence identified Weber before Benjamin as the nucleus of legitimacy.

In a subsequent essay Agamben wrote “Sui limiti della violenza” in 1970 and sent it to Hannah Arendt in a letter by way of introducing himself to the great patroness of Benjamin readership in English, in which he wrote, “Fifty years after the publication of Walter Benjamin’s Critique of Violence, and more than sixty years after Georges Sorel’s Reflections on Violence, a reconsideration of the limits and the meaning of violence stands little risk of appearing untimely.” The principal point of departure for Agamben’s reflections on violence in 1970 and after was the enormity of the very idea of violence beyond anything that either Sorel or Benjamin could have imagined.

In between Benjamin's *Zur Kritik der Gewalt/Towards the Critique of Violence* (1921) and Agamben's "Sui limiti della violenza/On the Limits of Violence" (1970), Frantz Fanon had published his *Wretched of the Earth* (1961), in which he begins with a classical reflection on colonial and anticolonial violence. Why was Agamben unaware of Fanon a decade after the publication of that seminal text on colonialism? How come when Mussolini and Italian fascism go on a conquest Italians know where Libya and North Africa is but when an eminent Italian philosopher thinks philosophically he cannot see beyond his own nose? Why were Europeans before and after Agamben so blind to the domain of colonial violence? Would an awareness and/or attention to that colonial violence only have affected their legitimate fixation with European violence when perpetrated on other Europeans? That is a question worth considering.

Hamid Dabashi is Professor of Comparative Literature at the Doha Institute for Graduate Studies. He is the Hagop Kevorkian Professor of Iranian Studies and Comparative Literature at Columbia University in New York, the oldest and most prestigious Chair in his field. He has taught and delivered lectures in many North and Latin American, European, Arab, and Iranian universities. He is a founding member of the Institute for Comparative Literature and Society, as well as a founding member of the Center for Palestine Studies at Columbia University. He is the author of numerous books and articles, many of which have been translated into other languages. Among his most recent books is *Can Non-Europeans Think?* (2015).

Islam Dayeh is Assistant Professor of Arabic studies at the Freie Universität Berlin and Editor of the journal *Philological Encounters* (Brill). His research and teaching focus on Arabic-Islamic textual practices and intellectual history in the early modern period. Since 2010, he has been the academic director of the research program ZUKUNFTSPHILOLOGIE: REVISITING THE CANONS OF TEXTUAL SCHOLARSHIP (Forum Transregionale Studien).

Walid El Khachab (York University)

Spectacle as Sole Signifier and Producer of Value: Benjamin, Debord and the Arab Spring

According to Walter Benjamin, the spectacle of merchandise is one of the ultimate stages of capitalism. Guy Debord adopts a similar epistemological model in suggesting that spectacle is both the ultimate signifier and signified in late capitalist societies. I will pursue these two epistemological lines of thought in addressing the following question: is spectacle – conceived of as the main merchandise and the Arch-signified in capitalist societies – also the primary vehicle of value? Or is it the primary producer of value? Assuming that this hypothesis is valid in fully developed capitalist societies, can we apply it by the same token to developing Arab societies, which were home to the revolts of the Arab Spring? In other words, is the Arab Spring an empty shell, void of meaning, just a mere spectacle of sound and fury, whose value is measured in terms of the extent of distraction (and entertainment?) it creates?

Maybe the answer comes from Benjamin more than Debord. The latter explains terrorism through conspiracy theory. The same model may explain the rise, fall and outcomes of the Arab Spring as a conspiracy by the ruling classes' alliance to renew themselves and protect their client capitalist privilege, without altering the structure of hegemony in their respective societies. On the other hand, Benjamin's conception of photography as a subconscious prediction of the future may help to address the revolts of the Arab Spring, not as aborted revolutions, but as images in the subconscious of the relative societies, predicting future, more radical revolutions.

Walid El Khachab is Associate Professor and Coordinator of Arabic Studies, York University, Canada, and the co-director of ACANS, the Arab Canadian Studies Research Group. He edited the volume *Arabes: sortir du marasme?* (Paris: Éditions Corlet, 2004). Since then he has published in New York, Montreal, Toronto, Cairo, Paris, and Istanbul more than 50 chapters in books and academic articles on Arabic cultures and Islam, particularly national identities and modernity; the politics of mysticism; self-representation in cinema, literature and popular culture. His recent publications include "Secularism as "Madaneya": Is the Arabic Concept Better Suited for North American Multiculturalism?", in: Walid El Khachab and Ratiba Hadj-Moussa (ed.): *Home is Where Canada is: Transnationalism, Multiple Belonging, and Arab Canadians*, University of Ottawa Press (submitted June 2017).

Ayman El-Desouky (Doha Institute for Graduate Studies)

Urvernehmen: On the Translatability of Originary Listening Beyond Naming

This paper will focus on the possibility of conceptualizing the reception of Benjamin's language and conceptual reflections in a range of recent creative acts on the Egyptian post-January 2011 scene. The reception of Benjamin's work tends to focus either on a range of concepts – history and memory, time, revolution, language, violence, tragedy, and so on – or on the inspirational dimensions of his unique language and modes of expression. My focus here will be on the question of conceptual translatability, not in acts of naming in another language or extending the provenance of the insights to differing cultural spheres; rather I aim to first interrogate Benjamin's specific mode of conceptualizing phenomena (building on Samuel Weber's arguments, 2008), effecting a shift from naming to virtualizing in the pursuit of the singularity of phenomena, and then to examine recent creative translations in spatio-temporal configurations of language, walk and dance in the work of two Alexandria Collectives: *Tara al-Bahr* and *Naseem Al-Raqs*.

Ayman El-Desouky is Associate Professor of Modern Arabic and Comparative Literature at the Doha Institute for Graduate Studies and at SOAS, University of London. His most recent publications include: *The Intellectual and the People in Egyptian Literature and Culture: Amāra and the 2011 Revolution* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

Asmaa Essakouti (Doha Institute for Graduate Studies)

Walter Benjamin and Seeking an Alternative History of the Oppressed

Thinking about Walter Benjamin is thinking of the revolutionary act of switching the field of study from the official History with capital H and capital characters who are always drawn as powerful rulers and influential victors to the history of the voiceless who were negated their right to talk or write their own part of the story. This paper is about what if those oppressed who used to be encased and quietened by History decided to raise their voices? And by what means can they raise their voices?

However, Benjamin's revolutionary thinking wasn't only about "whom" does History represent, but also about what era it transcribes. Thus, he substituted the "once upon a time" with the "here and now", in order to defend one's own right to decide his history and be an active part of it. Therefore, the question is: how can the oppressed today in the Arab world express its voice and write its History?

Asmaa Essakouti is a master student in comparative literature at the Doha Institute for Graduate Studies. She is also a holder of a master's degree in arabic literature from Moulay Smail University, with a thesis on the topic of "Metafiction and the Question of Pleasure". Her main fields of research are narration, semantics and the novel.

Mohammed Ezzeldin (City University of New York / Cairo)

Resisting Postcolonial Melancholia: Arwa Salih and the Post-1967 Generations in Egypt

The questions of defeated uprisings and unfulfilled revolutions have been key analytical optics in the modernist and nationalist historiography in Egypt. Whether in the anticolonial struggle, postcolonial emancipation, 1970s uprisings or in the 2011 revolution, history was marked by the schemas of lack, incompleteness and premature foreclosures. Yet, one should not take the memory of mourning of these revolutionary afterlives or residual experiences for granted. In his seminal work on German tragic drama and the concept of history, Walter Benjamin pushes against a certain kind of leftist tradition that fails to grapple with defeat and the loss of political ideals in terms other than "empty homogenous time" or progress/decline, or what he defined as "left-wing melancholia." In other words, how can we orient ourselves critically to amputated openings and suppressed emancipatory potentials? And how are these traditions and experiences transmitted from a generation to another?

Shifting Benjamin's insight to a postcolonial context, one can engage the questions of defeat, left-wing melancholia and memory by revisiting the biography and personal accounts of Arwa Salih, one of the militant leaders of the student movement in 1970s Egypt. She belonged to a remarkable generation whose political activism began at the heels of the devastating military defeat of the Arab armies in the Six Day War in 1967 and was cut short with the implementation of draconian neoliberal policies following the crackdown on the popular uprising known as the bread riots in 1977, an event considered by some historians as a precursor to the 2011 revolutionary scenes.

Mohammed Ezzeldin is a PhD candidate at the History Department of City University of New York, The Graduate Center. He graduated from Political Science Department in Cairo University in 2005, and finished his MA in Arab Studies at Georgetown University in 2011. His MA thesis (defended in 2013) discussed the controversial history and memory of Adham al-Sharqawi, one of the most well-known bandits in Modern Egypt who was assassinated by the police in 1921 and whose life resembled the question of criminality after WWI and the 1919 anti-colonial revolt in Egypt.

Ahmed Farouk (Berlin)

Translating Walter Benjamin's *Berliner Kindheit um 1900* into Arabic

How much can we read and understand beneath the lines? In this presentation, I will recollect my personal experiences in translating Walter Benjamin from German into Arabic, to show the problems and possibilities of the translation process.

Ahmad Farouk is a literature translator. He translated and edited for the Goethe Institute Journal "Fikrun wa Fann". He translated many literary German works into Arabic. Among his latest translations: Günter Grass, *Dog Years (Hundejahre)*; Georg Klein, *Libidissi*; Walter Benjamin, *Berlin Childhood around 1900 (Berliner Kindheit um Neunzehnhundert)*.

Ismail Fayed (Cairo)

Jetztzeit and Grasping the Messianic Moment of the 2011 Uprisings

Walter Benjamin's 1940 essay "Theses on the Philosophy of History", written in the last year before he took his own life trying to escape the Nazis in France, reflects the author's preoccupation in finding ways of 'escaping', and he develops a critique of the inevitable progress of historical materialism of his time. By articulating the way in which time is differentiated, not temporally, but through the actions that are undertaken by us as agents, Benjamin argues that the past informs and illuminates the present, and that realizing the moments of 'interruption', where such action is possible, i.e. revolution, is the possibility to rectify the injustices faced by the oppressed. This contribution will focus on the ways that Benjamin's notions of action and weak messianism can explain the possibilities of mobilization in the context of Egypt in 2011 and the ways in which revolution can be seen as a moment of interruption rather than as an ideological project.

Ismail Fayed is an independent writer and researcher based in Cairo. He has written and researched on contemporary artistic and cultural practices of the Middle East since 2007. He has contributed to local and international publications, including MoMA's upcoming volume on *Modern Art in the Arab World: Primary Documents*. His writings appeared in *Muftah*, *Mada Masr*, *Nafas Art Magazine*, *ArteEast*, *Aperture* and many others.

Fouad Halbouni (John Hopkins University)

Grievance and History: Reading Coptic History as Tradition of the Oppressed

In our seminar “On History, Tradition and Revolution: Echoes of Benjamin”, which was held on October 2016 in Cairo, one of the attendants asked the presenters about the possibility of reading the history of Coptic orthodox community in Egypt ‘as a particular narrative of historical grievance (mazloumiya)’. More importantly, he asked whether the book *chronicle of John of Nikiu*, a controversial historical account of the Arab conquest of Egypt in the seventh century, could be read along the vein of Benjamin’s tradition of the oppressed. The chronicle offers an alternative version of the Arab conquest of Egypt, which goes against nationalist Egyptian accounts of the conquest, which is seen as representative of Islamic tolerance. The historical work itself focuses on the excesses of Arab conquest throughout the seventh century.

In this paper, I attend to the history of reading *the chronicle* itself among orientalist and Arab historians. I also examine the ways in which different Egyptian historians, both Coptic and Muslim, have reacted to and engaged with the work. On the one hand, how certain historians have found *the chronicle* as margin for writing an alternative history of communal suffering while others have based their criticism of the work as inflecting sectarian accounts of history. In other words, narratives of historical grievances never reflect pure historical accounts of communal suffering, yet those narratives are always summoned and reinterpreted in highly-charged political contexts and claims to exclusive notions of identity. More importantly, the re-emergence of such historical narratives also reflects the volatile sectarian tensions that pervade the Middle East following the Arab Spring in which a geopolitical reshaping of the region along sectarian entities with long established narratives of grievance is currently taking place (from the Kurdish population to the ongoing sectarian warfare in Iraq and Syria). In this paper, I ask in what ways could Benjamin’s meditation on traditions of the oppressed offer a critique of both nationalist historical narratives as well as historical narratives centered around exclusive identities.

Fouad Halbouni is currently a PhD Candidate at the Department of Anthropology of the John Hopkins University, Baltimore, USA. His research interests are centered around Coptic studies, anthropology of Islam and cultural memory. He has received his master’s degree in anthropology from the American University in Cairo in 2008. His ethnographic project focuses on how the clergy of the Coptic Orthodox church, the largest Christian community in the Middle East, engages with their laity over the concerns and grievances that envelope everyday interactions between Muslims and Copts amid a highly-charged sectarian atmosphere. More specifically, his research explores forms of ethical criticism that circulate within the vicinity of three Coptic churches in the districts of Al-Azbakiya and Al-Faggalah, which constitute historical venues for the Coptic community in Cairo, Egypt.

Ahmad Hamam (Georgetown U / Cairo)

Cutting through Tradition

Despite the temporal proximity between Walter Benjamin and Martin Heidegger, one cannot assume they were familiar of each other's work. Nevertheless, Benjamin's exchange with Scholem and Brecht reveals his animosity to Heidegger's thought. Lately, increased academic attention was directed to bring the two together and draw lines of contention between them. This provides the ground for my venture to critically engage with their shared concern for the concepts of tradition and temporality. I draw support from Andrew Benjamin and Paula Schwebel's studies on Benjamin and Heidegger's respective conceptualizations of time and the present.

Walter Benjamin's concern with history involves a reconfiguration of the past and how it is interconnected with our temporal experience of the present. In his critique of 'tradition', Benjamin's reading involves a latent criticism of Heidegger's understanding of tradition and how the destruction of tradition, in Heidegger's conceptualization, opens the way for authenticity. But what is meant by tradition for Benjamin and Heidegger? Benjamin conceives tradition as a violent attempt to establish a continuity that supersedes the temporal interruptions and discontinuities which characterize history. Heidegger's understanding of tradition premises the function of time in history. Time, for Heidegger, is the medium through which the object of history is realized. Heidegger identified this object as "the creation of culture" (*Kulturschaffen*) that is the "objectification of human spirit".

I aim here to contrast Benjamin and Heidegger's interpretation of the relationship between tradition and temporality; their temporal conceptualization of the retainment of the past and the anticipation of the future.

Ahmed Hamam is a graduate student at the History Department at Georgetown University, Washington DC.

Jens Hansen (University of Toronto / Universität Göttingen / EUME Fellow 2017/18)

The Question of Secular Critique: Edward Said's Unease with Walter Benjamin

Edward Said has often deployed quotes from Benjamin's *Thesen über den Begriff der Geschichte* most frequently in combination with his favourite poem, "Waiting for the Barbarians" by Konstantinos Kavafis (1904). But I always sensed that Said was uneasy with embracing Benjamin tout cours the way he affiliated with Vico and his fellow travellers Gramsci and Lukacs. And as Sami Khatib reminds us, in his self-identification as the last Jew, Said aligned himself with Adorno, not Benjamin. In my contribution I offer some thoughts on what it was in Benjamin's work that accounted for this reluctance and speculate that it may have to do with Said's unease with Benjamin's ambivalence towards the secular. Was Said channelling Brit Shalom's version of the mystic Benjamin, think Scholem? And was it perhaps Mahmoud Darwish's discovery of Benjamin – c. 1980, according to Sinan Antoon – that later swayed Said?

Jens Hanssen teaches Arab Civilization, modern Middle Eastern Studies and Mediterranean History at the University of Toronto. During his Sabbatical this year, he holds a Vertretungs-professur at the department of Arabic and Islamic Studies, University of Göttingen, and is a 2017/18 EUME Fellow at the Forum Transregionale Studien.

Elizabeth Suzanne Kassab is Associate Professor of Philosophy at the Doha Institute for Graduate Studies. Her teaching and research interests lie in contemporary Arab philosophy and thought and in philosophy of culture, both Western and postcolonial. She is the author of *Contemporary Arab Thought. Cultural Critique in Comparative Perspective* (Columbia University Press, 2010). Her new book project is entitled *Pre-Revolutionary Arab Enlightenment. The Cairo and Damascus Fin de Siècle Debates*.

Georges Khalil is the Academic Coordinator of the Forum Transregionale Studien. He is also responsible for the research program EUROPE IN THE MIDDLE EAST—THE MIDDLE EAST IN EUROPE (EUME). He was the Coordinator of the Working Group “Modernity and Islam” (AKMI) at the Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin from 1998–2006. Georges Khalil studied History, Political Science and Islamic Studies in Hamburg and Cairo, and European Studies at the Europa-Kolleg Hamburg. He was a fellow of the College for International Affairs, Robert Bosch Foundation. He was co-editor of *Di/Visions: Kultur und Politik des Nahen Ostens* (2009), *Islamic Art and the Museum. Approaches to Art and Archeology of the Muslim World in the Twenty-First Century* (2012) and *Commitment and Beyond: Reflections on/of the Political in Arabic Literature since the 1940s* (2015).

Sami Khatib (Leuphana Universität Lüneburg)

The ‘Tradition of the Oppressed’ and its Discontents – Benjamin, Palestine, and the Non-Place of Radical Thought

Edward Said famously claimed: “I’m the last Jewish intellectual ... the only true follower of Adorno. Let me put it this way: I’m a Jewish-Palestinian.” Anachronism aside, Walter Benjamin could have said the same to Said, yet the other way around. Of course, one could argue that Benjamin is not anymore read as the radical leftist icon of the post-1968 years. Today, he seems to have arrived in the official pantheon of global humanities, his writings belong to the canon, countless conferences celebrating and claiming his legacy. Given the uncritical if not ideological role of the humanities in today’s neo-liberal capitalism, a merely academic discourse on Benjamin violates his thought. In terms of the legibility of his oeuvre, the questions of time and place matter to both the text and its reader.

Reflecting on the international conference and workshop “Benjamin in Palestine,” which took place in December 2015 in Ramallah, this paper revisits Benjamin’s radical thought with regard to the enforced living conditions that made him a refugee. His life and thought is irreconcilable with ideologies of state power, violence, and narratives of ‘victors’ history’. As a German Jew and Marxian

intellectual, Benjamin invoked the partisan, yet universal “tradition of the oppressed” against the history of the rulers and their forms of oppression. In this vein, Benjamin’s texts not only speak to the international community of Benjamin scholars and critical theorists but also to political struggles of the present.

Sami Khatib is author of the book *‘Teleologie ohne Endzweck’: Walter Benjamins Entstellung des Messianischen* (Marburg, 2013). His work spans the fields of critical theory, aesthetics and modern continental philosophy. He taught and researched at Freie Universität Berlin, Jan van Eyck Academie Maastricht, American University of Beirut and Akademie der Bildenden Künste Vienna. Currently, he is a postdoctoral researcher at Leuphana Universität Lüneburg.

Hala Makhoulf (Cairo/ London)

Toward a Kaiology of the Egyptian Revolution

Several documenting projects have been launched during and after the revolution to keep a record of the overwhelming events that have been happening. Some of these attempts have been successful, others have not seen light yet and some have lost their fight to keep the memory of the revolution in a certain form and reflected it on losing their bigger fight, the revolution itself. This imposes the question of time and history and how we are supposed to document and demoralize events that happened in the near past? What are we going to document? What can be dismissed? Who should write the Egyptian revolution and whose narrative shall prevail?

Walter Benjamin’s work on time and history fits perfectly here. His writings are very relatable to both the Egyptian and the global experience. The celebration of Walter Benjamin is not exclusive to the Arab world, it is actually universal. Hence the struggle is the same and the whole world is fighting against capitalism and its atrocities in a way or another.

This paper will investigate Benjamin’s work on time, history and remembrance in relation to the contested memory of the here-and-now of the Egyptian Revolution and the Arab Spring and will draw on Benjamin’s work on revolutions, unsettled times and spaces and on world order.

Hala Makhoulf holds an MSc from University College London and an MA from the University of Rome Tor Vergata with research focus on urban and human rights issues. She lectures in different places like the Netherlands-Flemish Institute in Cairo (NVIC), University of Leiden. She is also a consultant to different local and intentional organizations including UN Habitat.

Sonja Mejcher-Atassi (American University of Beirut / Fellow of the Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin 2017/18)

Unpacking Sa’dallah Wannous’ Private Library: On the (After)Lives of Books

The private library of the renowned Syrian playwright and public intellectual Sa’dallah Wannous (1941-1997) arrived at the American University of Beirut (AUB) in 2015. The gift and the library’s

move from Damascus to Beirut took place under dramatic political change as the 2011 Syrian revolution had turned into war.

Reading the library's move with Walter Benjamin's writing, in particular "Ich packe meine Bibliothek aus" ("Unpacking My Library: A Talk about Book Collecting"), this paper provides insight into the books in Wannous' life, the author's workshop, and the larger social and cultural conditions he was writing in, and sets out to trace the books' "Schicksale" (fates). I argue that Wannous' private library opened a marginal but safe space for self-criticism, creative output, and political dissidence inside Syria, and more precisely in private rooms, as the Ba'th party and the Asad regime tightly controlled cultural production and the public space. Having embarked on a new (after)life in Beirut, Wannous' private library continues to make room for humanistic inquiry and alternative cultural and political practices albeit from exile and in an institutional setting.

Sonja Mejcher-Atassi is an Associate Professor in the Department of English at the American University of Beirut and, in 2017-18, a Fellow at the Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin.

Ismail Nashef (Doha Institute for Graduate Studies)
Ruins Replayed: Speer, Benjamin, and a Deferred Arab Action

Albert Speer and Walter Benjamin represent two opposing modern projects in Germany between the two World Wars. And usually when we explore them, we take for granted the assumption that they negate each other's intellectual legacies. But comparing the phenomena and the themes that occupied them, one cannot ignore the intersections and the proximities of these two seemingly opposing projects. One such theme is the ruins. I contend that exploring the manners of approaching and conceptualizing 'ruins' by Speer and Benjamin could reveal much more complex and interrelated legacies than the perceived notions of each of them. Comparing these German intellectuals, it seems that Speer used 'ruins' as a spatial relation to shape future 'times', while Benjamin saw it as a temporal relation that could be used to redeem past 'spaces'. In both cases, ruins are an entry point for intervening in spheres other than the materiality of ruins itself.

The question that I want to address in this presentation is: how could we re-engage with the contemporary Arab scene(s) of ruins in light of the comparison between Speer and Benjamin? Specifically, I will argue that the dynamics of ruins in the Arab chain of events since 2011 is one of a dialectic of regression re-positioning matter and materiality at the center of these events. This, contrary to the conceptions of Speer and Benjamin, nullifies agency via spatio-temporal interventions. So, what could matter and materiality suggest for us at this moment of the late regime of ruins?

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Mask (2017); *June's Childhood* (2016); *Images of the Palestinian's Death* (2015); *On Palestinian Abstract Art* (2014).

Issam Nassar (Illinois State University)

Benjamin's Concept of the Aura of Photography: Reflections on Early Images of Palestine in European Photography

In the words of Walter Benjamin, "during long periods of history, the mode of human sense perception changes with humanity's entire mode of existence" ("The Work of Art"). The changes in art and industry bring with them a change in perception according to him. A work of art exists in time and space and has its unique history that relates to its birth, continued presence, and its physical conditions. Its authenticity depends not only on its existence as an original, but on its very own unique "aura."

The concept of the aura appears several times in the work of Benjamin, with perhaps various connotations. Among them in connection with historical objects, but he also uses it with reference to natural ones as well. An Old Photograph, according to Benjamin, has its own aura due to its uniqueness as an object as well as the distance in time to what it presents. Taking the concept of the aura associated with old photographs, I will examine the earliest photographic representations of Palestine from the 19th century. Although by the end of the century photography itself fell prey to the effects of the mechanical reproduction, which according to Benjamin destroys the aura, earlier images do not fall into this category due to their uniqueness, the kind of work that went into them, and their historical qualities.

The question that my presentation will raise relates to the nature of the aura in early photographs, and to what extent the aura can contribute to the creation of the historical imagination about depicted places.

Issam Nassar is a professor of Modern Middle History at Illinois State University in the USA. He specializes in early photography of the region, with a particular focus on the Levant. He is the author, or editor, of a number of books, the latest being *The Storyteller of Jerusalem*, with Salim Tamari (Olive Branch Press, 2013). His book *Laqatat Mughayirah* in Arabic is the first book devoted to the history of early local photography in Palestine (2006).

Kholoud Said Amer (Alexandria)

Benjamin and the City (Again): The *Flaneur*

Perhaps it is not what comes to mind first when listing his most significant contribution, but Walter Benjamin's work on cities in the 19th and early/mid-20th centuries is very crucial to our comprehension of post-revolutionary Arab cities in the second decade of the 21st century.

In *Berlin Childhood around 1900*, Benjamin suggested that to really know a city, it is necessary to get lost in it. He wrote in one fragment: “Not to find one’s way around a city does not mean much. But to lose one’s way in a city, as one loses one’s way in a forest, requires some practices”.

This short presentation stands on grounds of Benjamin’s depiction of Berlin around 1900 and 1932, Paris in the 19th century, and post-revolution enter-world-war Moscow to attempt a contemporary depiction of post-2011/2013 Alexandria. It will especially focus on the Benjaminian concept of *detour* to bring the past to the present moment in an attempt to deconstruct the sense of nostalgia that is a cornerstone in everything Alexandrian. Referring to another least-focused-on contribution, it will highlight what Benjamin might have had in mind when speaking of a *flaneur* photographer, based on the work done in several recent events held in Alexandria with Walter Benjamin as their focal point.

Kholoud Said Amer is a Researcher and Translator. She is Editorial Board Member of [Tara El-Bahr](#) (Sea View), an online platform and art magazine based in Alexandria.