

CIRCULATING GENRES:
LITERATURE, HISTORY AND THE POLITICS OF TRANSLATION
AKMI-Panel
DAVO-Kongress 2005, 27. bis 29. Oktober 2005, Hamburg

Chair: Dr. Samah Selim (Fellow of the Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin 2005/6)

Since the early 19th century at least, new narrative and cultural genres have emerged in the Middle East. These new forms have usually been positioned within Europe-centred genealogies that privilege elite cultural discourses while obscuring the complexity of textual itineraries. As a result, popular or syncretic texts and movements have been excluded from canonical literary and cultural history. Against teleological approaches to these histories, this panel offers a comparativist approach to genre that eschews the limitations of Area Studies and situates its disciplinary concerns within broader transregional contexts. Emphasis will be placed on the basic 'transportability' of genres across national and cultural borders.

The vertical and horizontal movement of narrative and performative genres such as history, fiction, memoir and autobiography, and drama will be addressed by the panel. The formative role of translation and popular cultural praxes in the production of modern Arabic genres will be central to the papers presented, as will the historical and textual tensions generated by nationalism, canon discourse and the colonial encounter.

Nouveau Literacy in 18th Century Damascus: A Barber Among the Scholars
Dr. Dana Sajdi (Concordia University, Fellow of the Working Group Modernity and Islam 2005/6)

This paper deals, first, with a process of literary appropriation of the scholarly historical form, the chronicle (or simply *tārikh*) by a commoner living in 18th century Damascus, and then with the reverse process of restoration, or rehabilitation of the genre to its scholarly status by an *`ālim* in the same city a century later. The paper treats the literary and social-historical dimensions of this process of cultural circulation.

I view the act of authorship of a history book by the barber, Shihāb al-Dīn Ahmad Ibn Budayr al-Hallāq (fl. 1762) as a part of a larger 18th century trend, which I term "nouveau literacy." This term denotes not a sudden rise in technical literacy by commoners, but rather commoners' (attempts at the) acquisition of the elite culture of scholars and scholarship. The barber infuses the genre of the chronicle with the non-scholarly literary elements of the oral popular epic. The resultant hybrid text is could be considered a potential "novel" in the Bakhtinian definition. However, the potentiality of the barber's text ceases upon the intervention a century later of the scholar, Muhammad Sa`īd al-Qāsimī (d.1900). Al-Qāsimī evidently detected Ibn Budayr's nouveau literacy, and in his effort to normalize the text, he effectively "translated" and re-ordered it, thereby restoring it to the established and recognizable scholarly form of the chronicle. The "re-ordered" text thwarts Ibn Budayr's aspiration to rise through literary appropriation.

Musamarat al-Sha'b:
Popular Fiction, World Literature and the Politics of Translation
Dr. Samah Selim
(Fellow of the Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin, 2005/6)

This paper will examine the historical circulation of the novel genre across Europe and the Middle East as a worldly literary and cultural project essentially mediated by popular forms of narrativity and non-canonical translation practices.

The paper first reflects on the rigid cultural teleologies that produce modern literary canons particularly in the Arabic context, where the dialectics of the colonial encounter have made the production of such canons yet more urgent. It then moves on to suggest an alternate set of textual itineraries in which popular narrative forms circulate back and forth across national borders and converge in that most modern of literary genres – the novel.

Examples will be offered that span the period historically associated with the rise of the novel (18th – 20th century). The travels of the Thousand and One Nights, from Antoine Galland's adaptation to Chavis and Cazotte's plagiarism/forgery and beyond offers an instance of this worldly and popular circulation, as does the great fin de siècle wave of detective fiction that swept Europe and the Middle East.

The paper will explore the politics of what is normally considered to be a kind of 'illegitimate' translation practice in relation to this type of textual circulation. The Romantic reification of authorship and originality, and the consequent conceptualizations of imitation, plagiarism and forgery that continue to colour the writing of modern (Arabic) literary history will thus be addressed. The paper will end with a discussion of popular narrative modes - most notably romance - and the modernity of the novel genre in Arabic through a brief reading of two novels (1906) published in Musamarat al-Sha'b (The People's Entertainments 1904-1911), one of the most successful fiction periodicals of the period.

Andreas Pflitsch (FU Berlin)

'Transporting our literature from stagnation to life' Russian impact on early modern Arabic prose literature

The paper deals with the Russian impact on Arabic literary criticism in early 20th century. It is intended to shed some light on the encounter between Arab, mostly Lebanese and Palestinian writers and critics, and Russian culture in general and literature in particular. Whereas the influence of French and English literature upon the genesis of modern Arabic literature has been widely acknowledged, the role played by Russian literature has been largely neglected, irrespective of the fact that many writers, journalists and intellectuals in late Ottoman times were educated in schools established by the Russian Imperial Palestine Society in the last two decades of the 19th century. The graduates of these schools found their way to modern world literature and modernity through Russian literature and culture. Theories like those of the Russian critic Vissarion Grigorevich Belinskij (1811-48) and authors such as Tolstoj or Dostoevskij had a lasting influence on the development of Arabic literature.

Dr. Ilham Khuri-Makdisi

(Northeastern University, Fellow of Working Group Modernity and Islam 2005/6)

Subversive Acts: The Theater and Social Contestation in Beirut, Cairo and Alexandria , 1850-1914.

My paper analyzes the world of the theater in Syria and Egypt in the second half of the 19th century and until 1914, and specifically in Beirut, Cairo and Alexandria. It argues that, as textual genre, social space, profession, and performance, the theater represented and triggered multiple 'border crossings' or transgressions that seriously challenged existing social and cultural categories, and as such, was inextricably linked to the construction, formulation and dissemination of subversive and radical ideas and practices. It looks at the ways in which the theater, as a cultural genre initially promoted as 'foreign' and 'new', did not in fact mark a clean break with existing local practices --performances, popular art or literary genres, such as the shadow theater, the hakawati, poetic or musical recitations-- but rather regularly incorporated and reworked many of them, even seventy years after the local theater had found its own voice. A genre that wavered between (and usually combined) the high-brow and the popular, the oral and the written, the classical (fusha) and the colloquial ('ammiyya), the 'imported' and the 'indigenous', the faithfully translated and the whimsically interpreted, the theater was the medium par excellence for playful subversions and challenges to political, social and cultural authority. This project analyzes the various ways in which the local theatre inventively synthesized these various trends and traditions and allowed for large segments of the population to partake in the production and consumption of a popular and wide-reaching genre deemed 'novel' and 'civilizing'.

Furthermore, the paper investigates thematic, practice-related, and spatial developments of the theater in Egypt and Syria and argues that, by the early 20th century, a significant number of plays staged in Egypt and Syria shared certain characteristics whose evolution could be situated and mapped within the own "internal history" of the theater in the Eastern Mediterranean, and, just as significantly, within a specific social and political context. Thematically, the theatrical repertoire in Beirut, Cairo and Alexandria had, by the early 20th century, undergone a noticeable politicization and radicalization, as many of the play performed challenged existing class structures and promoted social justice, elements of socialism and anti-clericalism. They resolutely adapted contemporary, local and global events to the stage and turned the theater into 'a press for the masses', criticizing imperialism or scathingly attacking contemporary political, social and religious elites and questioning their authority. The paper also argues that, by the early 20th century, the theater had adopted or encouraged a number of specific practices that were transgressive, since in one way or another, they challenged accepted and neat physical and epistemological categories and acceptable behavioral norms. Such practices included the establishment of "trans-national", regional, and even global networks of actors and repertoire, spanning many continents and regularly linking cities of the Eastern Mediterranean to each another and to other parts of the world; the blurring of lines between audience and actors, amateurs and professionals; the participation of large numbers of "common people" --very often from the audience-- in the role of the Crowd on stage, battling against figures of authority; and the use of the theater for political dissent, strikes, speeches and rallies. The paper examines the implication of all these practices, and the theater's impact on the public sphere.

