

## **Aesthetics, Politics, and Cultural Practices in Arab Societies Today**

“Europe in the Middle East – the Middle East in Europe” (EUME)

July 14-16, 2010

Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin, Villa Jaffé, Wallotstr. 10, 14193 Berlin

### **Conveners**

Kirsten Scheid, American University in Beirut, Fellow of EUME 2009/10

Jessica Winegar, Northwestern University

### **Participants**

Katrin Bromber, Zentrum Moderner Orient and Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin

Vanessa Diaz, Johannes Gutenberg University of Mainz

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Deborah Kapchan, New York University

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Sonali Pahwa, Fellow of EUME 2009/10

Samuli Schielke, Zentrum Moderner Orient

Jonathan Shannon, Hunter College of The City University of New York



## Preliminary Schedule

Wednesday, 14 July

Theme: Consumption Practices

- 10:00– 10:30 Introduction: Kirsten Scheid and Jessica Winegar  
10:30 –12:00 Reading Session 1 led by Samuli Schielke  
Texts: Veblen, Bourdieu, Meneley, and Steiner (De Koning optional)  
12:00 – 1:30 Lunch at the Wissenschaftskolleg  
1:30 – 3:00 Research Presentation by Research Presentation by Mona Harb (& Lara Deeb), “Taste and Aesthetics in/of the Pious Leisure Industry in Beirut”  
3:00 – 3:30 Coffee Break  
3:30 – 5:00 Research Presentation by Katrin Bromber, “‘Hyperreality’ as conceptual gateway to understand iconographic trends in the Gulf Region”  
7:30 Dinner in Kufürstendamm area

Thursday, 15 July

Theme: Institutional Projects

- 10:00 – 11:30 Reading Session 2 led by Jessica Winegar  
Texts: Foucault, Rancière, and Abu-Lughod  
11:30 – 11:45 Coffee Break  
11:45 – 1:15 Research Presentation by Sonali Pahwa, “Theatres of Citizenship: Performance and Identity in Globalized Egypt”  
1:15 – 2:45 Lunch at the Wissenschaftskolleg  
2:45 – 4:15 Research Presentation by Chiara De Cesari, “Cultural Governmentality Through Heritage: The Palestinian Biennale and Defiant Arts of Government”  
7:30 Dinner in Kreuzberg area

Friday, 16 July

Theme: Bodily Ritual

- 10:00 – 11:30 Reading Session 3 led by Kirsten Scheid  
Texts: Csordas, Howes and Classen, Porcello et al, Allen and Hamdy (Peterson optional)  
11:30 – 1:00 Research Presentation by Jonathan Shannon, “Slow Turning, Fast Music: Consuming Syrian Sufi Music”  
1:00 – 2:00 Lunch at the Wissenschaftskolleg  
2:00 – 3:30 Research Presentation by Deborah Kapchan, “*At-tariqa as-sufiyya, at-tariqa al-jamaliyya*, Sufi Order/Order(s) of Beauty: Re-Orienting the Body through Song and Sense”  
3:30 – 4:00 Coffee Break  
4:00 Concluding remarks by Ghassan Hage



## Workshop Abstract

Immediately following the take-over of Beirut's central district and elite shopping area by Lebanese opposition groups, a text message circulated among local cellular phones: "A miracle happened yesterday – the statue of Sheikh Riyad al-Solh... raised his hand over his face in disgust, covering his mouth and closing his nose!" Among supporters of the government, a main way to discredit the political demands of the opposition was to emphasize its distastefulness, its lack of aesthetic and civilizational merit. Photographs in pro-government newspapers focused on the eating, leisure, and behavioral habits of the new inhabitants of downtown, presenting non-shoppers and "uncivilized."

Significantly, such invocations of tastefulness and civilization have not been confined to parties at one end of the political spectrum. In contemporary Arab societies, discourses of taste are a powerful force in everyday interactions, political projects, and social transformations. Because taste seems to be both trivial and natural, as something that is self-evident and therefore irrefutable, it plays a central role in naturalizing and justifying social categories and hierarchies, particularly when wedded to notions of national or high culture or to ideologies of civilizational difference or advancement. The centrality of taste suggests the benefits of using an altogether ignored lens on Arab society: aesthetics.

This workshop aims to bring together scholars who are increasingly paying attention to how people use discourses of aesthetics to constitute their social positions vis-à-vis other groups, to advance political and economic agendas, and to stake claims on culturally valued resources. We will read together foundational anthropological, sociological, art, and philosophical texts discussing aesthetics as sensual perception or the production of virtuous selves and bring that literature into conversation with studies of the modern Arab world by giving ground to some participants to present current research. The goal is dual: to advance understanding of contemporary Arab societies, and to push the boundaries of current theorizing of aesthetics in political and cultural studies.

While aesthetics tends to be functionalized as an epiphenomenal means by which cultural-political structures are reproduced, the contested, heterogeneous, cosmopolitan post-colonial societies of the Arab world today provide a rich arena for exploring aesthetics in action, as social agents in the emergence of new cultural forms. Recent work on aesthetics in media studies has begun to demonstrate the advantage of aesthetics as an analytic that can capture at once ideological and (willfully) unarticulated levels of sociality. This attention to aesthetics brings the materiality of social interactions to the fore, as the very technology that abducts social beings. In particular, the relationship between Arab societies as the peripheries of their metropolitan colonizers (in terms of politics and consumption systems), and Arab societies as key arenas in the global struggle for wealth and dominance should allow a consideration of the importance of aesthetics in situations where belonging and hegemony are unstable yet vital.

Questions to be asked include: what are the different notions of "taste" (dhawq) in Arab societies, and how are they constituted and inculcated in various institutions, from the family to the school to the mosque and church? How do certain discourses of bodily knowing emerge in relationship to particular socio-cultural contexts, such as economic restructuring, struggles for political control, and the rise of public piety? How do embodied notions of aesthetics shape social and political subjectivities in relationship to local and regional struggles and transformations? How might notions of aesthetically justified communities, rather than affirm social hierarchies or align with dominant political projects, be used to disrupt them? These are key questions whose answers will provide an entirely new angle on politics in the Middle East.

In studying cultural categories, Mary Douglas noted that the violation of conceptual boundaries often produces the experience of distaste, sensual repulsion, which in turn produces resistance to the violation of boundaries. For Bourdieu (1984), taste is a culturally and bodily inscribed phenomenon that is key to the reproduction of social hierarchies as connected to politics and economics. These insights suggest that unstable social settings where values and virtues are contested would benefit from analysis of the role of discourses of aesthetics, and their relation to notions of culture and civilization. However, both the scholarship on political-economic tensions and that on the appeal of specific ideologies in politicized struggles have largely ignored the important point that battles are often played out through



the idiom of aesthetics and that people are often compelled by concepts of naturalized, bodily values. Research into the emergence of ideas about aesthetics and their instantiation in contemporary social practices is crucial for our understanding of how different groups become attracted to the various political, economic, and social projects that vie for dominance in the Arab world.

This workshop aims to understand the work that the concept of aesthetics has been made to do in different contexts and to see how this concept has fundamentally shaped contemporary ideologies, subjectivities, and models for social action in contemporary Arab societies. We will focus our discussion of aesthetics in three dimensions: institutional projects; consumption practices; and bodily ritual. We have selected these three areas because they are connected to the larger literature on aesthetics in other parts of the world and because these are the areas of vibrant research in the Middle East that would most benefit from a consideration of the important role of aesthetics. We hope to bring scholars working in these three areas together to consider the ways in which their research interests overlap, and to bring different theoretical approaches into conversation with one another.

### Areas of Focus

#### *Institutional Projects*

The text message that circulated Beirut in 2006 suggests that beyond Bourdieu's notion of corporeal and conceptual taste as a conservative factor in social interaction, the historically cultivated discourses of taste and civilizational merit are currently being deployed with more unsettling results in Arab societies. In addition to affirming seemingly natural social groupings and alliances, aesthetics discourses also contest these groupings and become vehicles of deliberate change and the refashioning of political alignment. Consequently, this workshop invites papers which examine how culture discourses become institutionalized by states, private businesses, political parties, and NGOs in order to serve particular purposes, often related to social uplift and concerns over social disorder. We note that many Arab governments have Ministries of Culture or Youth, or other administrative divisions charged with bringing aesthetic cultivation, culture, or civilization to particular social groups seen to lack these qualities. Often these projects are integral to the larger political project of containing or preventing social unrest among youth or the lower classes in response to other government policies, for example oppression of minorities, economic liberalization, imprisonment of religious activists. Yet now, opposition political parties, private businesses, and NGOs in different countries have also instituted cultural programs geared toward subordinate groups. Although sometimes such programs may also have the fear of social unrest at their core, they may also be intended to create a sense of "cultured" group solidarity in the face of oppression, or to create an alternative political agenda to that of the state. Workshop papers in this vein will examine how culture and aesthetic cultivation, as both ideologies and as sets of practices, are made to achieve particular politicized goals in different societal contexts.

#### *Consumption Practices*

The explicit reference to Beirut's central space as an elite shopping district in the text message cited above indicates that people often use and interpret consumption practices as indices of aesthetic virtue. In this sense, aesthetics is a mediating element between identity formation and political action. A burgeoning literature has considered practices of shopping, wearing, and using consumer goods as means for expressing and elaborating subjectivities. For Arab societies, ethnographic work has demonstrated the close links between the perceived indexing of aesthetics by interaction with consumer products and the construction of gender, social class, generational, religious, ethnic, and national identities and distinctions. This is an important area of study because it allows for attention to the formation of subjectivities that may be geographically unbounded but exclusive in other ways. But this research can benefit from a sustained analysis of how aesthetic virtue itself gets constructed and inscribed in myriad ways (e.g., materially, discursively, corporeally). We invite scholars to explore aesthetics not only as an instantiation or reflection of identities, but also as a means to resist certain ascribed identities or to refashion subjectivities with emergent everyday and practical meanings. Precisely how, in relation to particular regional histories of colonialism and revolution, modernism and



traditionalism, are consumer practices formative of one's aesthetics? And how do aesthetics as a practice of cultural belonging or civilizational merit become a form of opposition or accommodation to current global or national political formations and interventions?

### *Bodily Ritual*

The new directions in consumption studies are important for our interest in aesthetics as a concept that inhabits an ambiguous zone *between* natural and cultivated, essential and acquired. The recognition that culture affects all bodily sensations and movements has been complimented by recent work revealing the body as a dynamic component in the production of cultural meaning. Rethinking Bourdieu, scholars of Arab political and cultural movements have questioned his notion of hexis as a theory of culture's embodiment at the phenomenological level, specifically pointing to ways hexis may be articulate and intentional. Senses gain meaning from and return it to symbolic systems developed in specific, historically constituted social structures. Likewise, Bourdieu's argument that taste is "class culture turned into nature" can be questioned both in theorizing how bodies are naturalized nature, and in examining the processes of group formation related to work on sensual experiences of tastefulness and tastelessness. Thus, we are concerned with what Saba Mahmood calls the "human industry, assiduous practice, and discipline" (2005:136) that produce aesthetics systems in lived bodies, but also with the sense of fixity that this work imparts to tastefulness as a social claim. Particularly, we encourage exploration of rituals that produce aesthetically activated subjects. We expect that these subjects experience their bodies in particular ways which facilitate, deliberately, their participation in tangible communities. Paying more direct attention to the production and reproduction of aesthetics will give us a new perspective on both the shape and durability of such social structures, for example those related to social class, gender, and race/ethnicity.



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