



CULTURE MADE IN ARABIA

April 5-8, 2021
(UAE timezone)

MONDAY, APRIL 5

5pm - Keynote #1

Tarek El-Ariss, "Arabic Culture in the Gulf: From the Nahda to the Digital Age"

moderator: Maya Kesrouany

Arabic culture in the digital age is intimately tied to new centers of production that are fundamentally tied to the Gulf. The Gulf is not simply a place or a location but is also a model of circulation and experimentation involving both local and external agents. This forces us to move beyond the perception of the Gulf as a place where tribal and ethnic identity is the framework for citizenship and cultural production. With its large building and cultural projects, the Gulf today reminds us of Egypt during the *Nahda* or the Arab renaissance in the 19th century, which attracted other Arabs from the Levant but also Europeans who came to work and produce culture. From journalism to publishing houses, these projects forged the meaning of Arabic culture at the time. Despite this continuity, the meaning of Arabic culture today has moved away from the *Nahda* and the 1950s. Today, there is something about the very notion of Arabic culture that has shifted both geographically and epistemologically. This shift needs to be theorized and explained and the role of the Gulf in this shift is fundamental.

TUESDAY, APRIL 6

10am – 12pm

PANEL A: Cultural Centralities of the Arabian Peninsula: A Historical Perspective
moderator: Philippe Pétriat

Gabriel Lavin, “Early Record Industry in Aden c. 1930-1960: Musical Exchange, Business, and the Regional Influence of an Arabian Port City”

This paper attempts to historicize popular music in the Arabian Peninsula by examining the early production of commercial music in Aden during the interwar and postwar eras. The cosmopolitan flavor of current Gulf popular music, which blends a variety of local and regional Arab musical styles with more global popular music trends from jazz to electronic music, is perhaps reflective of the Gulf’s more recent rise to cultural prominence. Yet since the dawn of commercial music in the Arabian Peninsula, which began in the late 1920s and blossomed through the postwar era, musicians and record company owners have always been immersed in global networks of exchange. During this time, their activities connected the Eastern Mediterranean with the Indian Ocean arena including East Africa, India, and Southeast Asia. Aden assumed a pivotal position in this early history, becoming the first city in the Arabian Peninsula to have a commercial recording industry beginning in 1937. Building on Lambert and Akouri’s (2019) recent survey of early Adeni recording industry, this paper suggests that the industry practices and the musical melanges that defined Aden’s early commercial music scene helped set the stage for the dawn of Khaleeji music during the late twentieth century. In this sense, recent trends in popular music in the Gulf region can be seen as building on previous eras of industrial production and global exchange, rather than being simply a story of post-oil financial and industrial success.

Tareq Alrabei & Talal Al Rashoud, “Bridging the Divide Between Margin and Center: The 1958 Arab Men of Letters Conference in Kuwait”

The recent rise of the Gulf monarchies on the Arab cultural scene is often regarded as an unprecedented development, yet this ignores the long history of ambitious cultural projects emanating from the region. Even while still under British protection, the nascent Gulf states used cultural production to establish their credentials as active participants in what was then seen as a Pan-Arab renaissance. This paper explores one such attempt at bridging the divide between the margins and center of Arab culture: the 1958 *Mu’tamar al-Udaba’ al-‘Arab* (Arab Men of Letters Conference) in Kuwait. An Arab League affiliated event held annually since 1954, the conference was at the forefront of regional efforts to coordinate cultural production on nationalist lines. As the first meeting of its kind in the Arabian Peninsula, it allowed for the participation of representatives from Oman, Qatar, Dubai, and South Yemen for the first time. Moreover, it formed part of a broader effort by Kuwait, which was then approaching independence, to present itself as a progressive Pan-Arab cultural center and a leading light amongst its neighbors. The conference was a forerunner of 21st century developments, but also provides a window onto a markedly different regional cultural environment in which modernism was tied to nativism and anti-imperialism, and concord was emphasized over competition.

Laura Hindelang & Bettina Gräf, “The Kuwaiti Magazine al-‘Arabī as Cultural Diplomat in the 1950 and 1960s”

The urban culture of the Gulf region is often regarded as a recent, contemporary phenomenon, although its beginnings can be traced back to the eighteenth century. The systematic production of oil in the mid-twentieth century was the final crucial factor in the emergence of rapidly



transforming cityscapes in the Gulf region. Alongside the rise of diverse modern urban cultures, cultural initiatives became an asset in the growing influence of the Gulf in the Arab speaking regions and beyond.

This paper proposes to show how the cultural magazine *al-'Arabī* that was founded in December 1958 in Kuwait portrayed the Arabian Peninsula as a new player on the Arab cultural scene in the 1950s and 60s. Although produced in Kuwait, *al-'Arabī* was distributed widely across the Arabian Peninsula, the Levante and North Africa at an affordable price displaying a progressive image of the Arab regions in general and of Kuwait in particular. *Al-'Arabī* stood out for at least two reasons: because of its rich graphic and up-to-date travel reports, some of which were also in color, and its aspiration to provide the latest scientific innovations and modern Arabic literature for a broader public.

Funded by the Government of Kuwait, the Arabic monthly served as tool of cultural diplomacy to reshape relations between the newly emerging nation state Kuwait and long-established states like Egypt and Iraq beyond investments of the Kuwaiti Oil Fund. Using a multi-disciplinary approach that combines textual analysis and an image/graphic design analysis of 1950s/1960s issues of the magazine, the paper explores not only the establishment and cultural agenda of *al-'Arabī* but also the magazine's intellectual and visual contribution to laying the first stepping stones for the Arabian Peninsula to become a major player on the Arab cultural scene.

1pm – 3pm

PANEL B: Multiculturalism, Language and Identity in the Contemporary Gulf

moderator: Laure Assaf

Emanuela Buscemi, “Culture(s) and belonging: Identity and citizenship in contemporary Gulf literature”

Literary works can allow for valuable insights into closed or authoritarian societies by engaging the reader into the quotidian and the exceptional. Researching literature can, thus, provide a glimpse and a novel perspective on divided, complex societies, to examine prejudices and taboos, social structures and cultures.

In recent years an increasing literary production from Gulf countries, either written directly in English or translated to it, has progressively addressed pressing social, ethnic and cultural issues and cleavages. These intellectuals, going beyond the Foucauldian “regime of truth”, inhabit the in-betweenness of their precarious position as mediators and interpreters. Vaclav Havel argues that the intellectual should stand on the side of the dispossessed and powerless, engaging in balancing social inequalities and cleavages. Similarly, Edward Said urges intellectuals “to be embarrassing, contrary, even unpleasant” through a “vocation [that] involves both commitment and risk, boldness and vulnerability” (Said, 1996: 11-13).

The paper examines culture(s) and belonging through the prism of literature, exploring the different positions afforded by the novel. On the one hand, the Khaleeji (woman) writer adopts a diasporic stance in order to depict and critically examine her society. On the other hand, the novel as a literary form allows to address pressing social issues like the othering of expats and migrant workers, while employing the “foreign escape” as a literary device for character development.

Adopting Bhabha's concept of the *unhomely* as a “tension of home”, as well as Braidotti's notion of the diasporic subject, and privileging a postcolonial and decolonial framework of interpretation, the paper investigates the contribution of culture, and literature in particular, to the simultaneous problematization and construction of a Khaleeji identity. Three main literary works will be here analyzed: Layla AlAmmar's *The Pact We Made*, Saud Alsanousi's *The Bamboo Stalk*, and Mai Al Nakib's *The Hidden Light of Objects*.



Magdalena Karolak, “Popular culture in the classroom: what can we learn about local culture from the superhero project?”

The aim of this paper is to assess a method of teaching popular culture at a local university at undergraduate level, specifically to analyze the outcomes of the superhero development project implemented as part of the class requirements. During the semester, students are introduced in detail to the development of superhero genre in the US comic books, TV shows, and movies. They study the impact of historical events on the characters, their characteristics, the differences in the creations of DC Comics and Marvel Studios, the aesthetics, and the intersections of gender and race in the superhero characters. The class culminates with a research and a creative project that both, help students come up with their own ideas of an Emirati superhero. This paper analyzes the outcomes of the task looking at the perceptions of how students would connect popular culture to their own environment, their understanding of leadership and the important task the superhero would tackle. Through a qualitative analysis of the projects, the researchers strives to obtain the insights of the consumers of popular culture in the Gulf, and reflect on the outcomes of such assignments as part of teaching at UG level. In addition, the paper analyzes the already existing superheroes in the GCC region.

Corinne Stokes & Sarah Al Kaabi, “Instagram in the UAE: Identity Categories & Linguistic Style”

A number of UAE-based influencers have built highly interactive Instagram accounts around Arabic-language video narratives and skits that blend marketing, social commentary, and imitations of various personae. These influencers are in dialogue with one another, as evidenced by appearances and tags in each other’s posts, comments, and shared followers. Their linguistic performances feature stylization, crossing, heightened reflexivity, and are accompanied by evaluative commentary, making them a rich site for studying language ideology, sociolinguistic style and category identities in the UAE’s social media sphere (Coupland 2007; Eckert 2008; Rampton 1995, 1999).

In this paper, we report on online ethnographic research focused on six particular influencers: bin_baz, a.sharif92, bovlx, mohanadalhattab, 3freetoo, and MaxofArabia. We focus in particular on a range of metapragmatic commentary, including portrayals of cross-dialect and cross-linguistic interactions, skits that link particular ‘ways of speaking’ to social types, consumer behaviors, national or ethnic identity, and social class, and evaluative feedback on stylized performances. Our analysis examines the role of the posts in constructing, reproducing, or challenging existing social hierarchies in the UAE.

Frédéric Lagrange, “Ma fi gerger ziyada: the Indo-Pakistani character in Gulf cultural productions”

The dominant trend in cultural anthropology of the Arabian Peninsula argues that Gulf States initiated a strategy of cultural response to the massive presence of foreigners on their soil by defending a Khaleeji identity solely based on Arabic and Islamic elements of *turāth*, often emphasizing the beduin lore, thus building the nation on an invented/reinvented tradition that partly obscures other components of the national melting pot. The category of citizen and the national imagined community are therefore “produced precisely against the foreign resident bodies” (Neha Vora), which are predominantly originating from the Indian subcontinent.

However, a closer examination of cultural productions from the region, whether highbrow such as fiction literature and arthouse cinema, or pop media objects such as TV drama, internet satire or slapstick comedy, reveals a highly ambiguous relationship with the Indian-Pakistani-Bengali other. Unlike other foreigners, either Arab, European or far-Asian who are also part of the daily scenery of Gulf societies, the Indian subcontinent character is conceived of as a homely figure of the original nodal *freej*. Citizens are acutely aware that their ancestors might have been linked to Sind, Balushistan or India and that the subcontinent is their natural cultural neighbor on the



eastern side, just as Africa on the southern side and the Arab world on the western and northern borders of the Peninsula. The Indian-Pakistani character can certainly be this funny ill-tempered bachelor speaking pidgin Arabic and defying his *kafīl*'s threats of canceling his visa, from Saudi rap songs to Bahreini webseries, with a harsh *ma fi gerger ziyāda* (don't talk too much); but he is also «one of us», ever since Abu Dhabi's pioneer television drama *Ashḥafān* (1978), until Kuwait's recent trip down memory lane with Ramadan TV fiction *Mohamed Ali Road*, tracking Gulf merchants and mixed traditions in mid-20th century Mumbai, or in *Tamr wa-Masālā* (Dates and Massala, 2019), an endearing first novel from the Emirates in which a young citizen from Sharjah tries to reconnect with his Indian ancestry through his passion for Kerala cuisine...

3:30pm – 6:30pm

PANEL C: Musical Productions Between the Margin and the Mainstream
moderator: Frédéric Lagrange

Coline Houssais, “The enduring “integrated marginality” of Gypsies in Middle Eastern entertainment circles, from Djezireh Bedouin camps to Dubai cabarets”

Zott, Nawar, Ghawazi, Qorbat, Kawliya, Hodjiat... Doms have played for centuries an important role in regard to Middle Eastern social dynamics, performing seemingly petty yet essential tasks for the smooth running of society. Female members of certain groups of Doms have engaged in public dancing, singing and music, filling a gap created by the religious and tribal interdictions made to women from non-Domari communities to offer services that are yet consumed by men from society at large. This led these gypsy communities to occupy an interesting position of «integrated marginality»: usually looked down upon by other groups, they are yet part of society through their very presence at its periphery. Due to the traditionally cross-border peripatetic nature of both Beduin and Domari tribes and the sustained level of interaction between the two groups, Doms are part of the collective memory and culture of Beduin tribes in the Middle East and northern Arabian peninsula. They remain popular in the entertainment industry, even as non-Domari women now lead artistic careers of various social standards, and as conflict and social unrest coupled with the rise of new entertainment capitals has led to a changing map of Domari entertainment. As a result, Domari entertainers who used to perform in Lebanon, Iraq or Syria in front of both local and Khaleeji audiences have started calling the Gulf -and particularly Dubai- their second home and stage.

Aziz El Massassi, “Hip-hop in the UAE: Rap with No Street Culture?”

The UAE has invested billions of dollars in cultural projects across its seven emirates, but the underground art scene, the kind found in Cairo, Ramallah, Casablanca, Amman or Beirut, is struggling to emerge amid the tightly-controlled Gulf country.

The hip hop community in particular has been struggling to find its own identity in a country made up mostly of foreigners from all over the world but with little street culture to speak of. Before making its way to the Gulf region, the genre made its mark in other Arab countries where rappers address sensitive political and social issues, defying in certain cases censorship, repression and possible reprisal.

Sticking to lyrics about daily life, rather than political and social issues, Emirati and UAE-based rappers stay clear of the genre's tradition of free expression. The wealthy country is one of the more open states in the Gulf region, but its security laws remain stringent. Like the wider cultural scene, the hip hop community is trying to find its place in a conservative nation where locals as well as expatriates tend to avoid provocative or explicit topics.



Maho Sebiane, “Make popular music! From ‘traditional’ music to the cultural industry in the Gulf”

While the heritageization of intangible cultural practices in the Gulf countries has highlighted traditional music and dance with an important symbolic and social function for local populations, their broadcast in a format giving them a sound signature similar to what is produced on the commercial music market seems to weigh on the quality of their transmission and safeguard. This phenomenon, designated under the label of Developed Popular Arts (*al-funūn al-sha‘biyya al-mutaṭawwira*), invites the young generation of musicians to reorient its production and explore new expressions while remaining attached to musical references from the *turāth*.

My paper will attempt to describe, through located examples, the multifactorial dimension of the shift of so-called «traditional» musicians into the economy of culture and pop music sphere. It first presents how the junction between these two musical worlds unfolded over the past two decades. It will then question how the local conception of heritage associated with the notion of brand image informs us about the underlying issues of the phenomenon observed today.

Pierre France, “Rotana Music’: Grasping an impossible object through its critics”

The Gulf and the Arab world have experienced the emergence from the 1990s of an omnipresent media giant of Saudi origin: Rotana. This company exercised a unique regional monopoly on a musical production for its musical branch, unparalleled globally along the years 1990-2010. Despite this singularity and the number of studies that have focused on Rotana’s cultural production, very little is known about this company, recently under the spotlight of a new international deal with Warner in 2021. Through research based on the business press and a series of interviews, this paper unfolds parts of the history and functioning of Rotana while taking seriously the myths surrounding it, in two ways: both as a source of - critical - information but also as a source of reflection on what is known about the Arab world in the music industry and the circulation and daily use of culturalist clichés within it.

Edyta Wolny-Abouelwafa, “Relations between the United Arab Emirates and Egypt as presented in contemporary songs”

The history of relations between the United Arab Emirates and Arab Republic of Egypt stretches back to 1971 when Egypt was one of the first countries to recognize the new country of UAE on the map of the Gulf. From this moment strong political cooperation can be observed. To reach the highest level of cooperation between the two countries, in 2017 an agreement was made to meet every 6 months. While talking about deep-rooted relations it is worth mentioning words of Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan toward Egypt: *The awakening of Egypt is an awakening of all Arabs. I bequeath my sons to stay always on the side of Egypt and this is my will which I repeat in front of you. This is the correct way to affirm the honour of all Arabs. Definitely Egypt is the heart of Arabs and if the heart stops, there will not be life for Arabs.*

This presentation will show UAE-Egypt relations from a different side and present the results of a research based on contemporary songs created by Egyptian and Emirati artists and their video clips, answering such questions as: What are the messages sent by the lyrics and video clips of the Egyptian and Emirati songs? Who is the recipient of these songs? In which dialects are each of the analyzed songs?

Richard Nedjat Haiem, “The Dubai Effect: The Transnational Diva, The White Dialect and the Formation of Gulf Based Pan-Arabism”

In this presentation, I will discuss the current state of the mainstream music scene in contemporary Arabic pop culture and the shifting centers of its production through three case



studies: First, Assala [Aṣāla Naṣrī], the transnational Arab Diva. Assala is at the center of the transnational reality that is the current Arab world as a Syrian woman singing in Egyptian and Khaleeji dialects, living in Cairo with Bahraini citizenship. Second, I examine the white dialect or *al-lahja al-bayḍā*. Many forms of 'white dialect' can be found around the Arab world. I refer here to the mix of the Saudi Najdi, Iraqi Baghdadi and Kuwaiti dialect used in contemporary pop music in the Gulf, best exemplified through the Pan-Gulf singer, Balqees [Balqīs Fathī]. Lastly, I examine new trends in cultural Pan-Arabism that combine various regional dialects and sub-cultural tropes within a single musical composition. Examples of this include Hind al-Bahrainiya's '*Lahjat al-'Arab*' and Aḥlām al-Shamsī's '*Hādhā-lli shāyef nafsa.*' I argue that these case studies demonstrate significant shifts that are taking place in musical production in the Arab world that have powerful implications for national and regional identity formation.

WEDNESDAY, APR. 7

11am - 1pm

PANEL D: Changing Fashions: Clothing, Self-Presentation, and Khaleeji Subjectivities

moderator: Clio Chaveneau

Manami Goto, "Burqu' and Baṭūla: Diverse Cultural History in the Arabian Peninsula"

The female facemask, regionally known as *Burqu'* and *Baṭūla*, has been one of the most iconic items of female attire and symbols of Khaleeji identity in the Arabian Peninsula. Until the early 1970s, many women adopted the face mask from puberty or on their wedding day, and continued to wear it for the rest of their lives. Women traditionally made their own masks, but later some became professional seamstresses who now play an important role as bearers of skills and knowledge of the masking tradition. While each mask's size, design, color, and adornment once differed based on the wearer's facial features, background, and preferences, recently industrialization and the promotion of the mask as a symbol of national identity have resulted in a standardized version of the mask.

This standardization has contributed to the general assumption that the mask's meaning, function, and development over generations are uniform across the Gulf Arab states. However, the implications and roles of the mask differ from one country to another, reflecting socio-economic change, geographical characteristics, and the ethno-religious diversity of each Gulf state. Through ethnographic research, including personal interviews with masked women, and discussion of the social histories of the region, this paper investigates the diverse practices and meanings of the masking tradition in the UAE, Bahrain, Qatar, and Oman. This comparative study also aims to question the unified conception of a Khaleeji tradition, especially in dress, by shedding light on different social groups' varying relationships with the face mask.

Rana Almutawa, "Dishdasha Blues: Navigating Perceptions of Authenticity and Multiple Lived Experiences in the Gulf"

Scholars have demonstrated how the Gulf states use reinvented traditions, including the "national dress," to construct an image of "authentic" local culture and an idea of a homogeneous citizenry (Khalaf 2006; Kanna 2010; AlMutawa 2016; Akinci 2019). Such reinvented traditions help to promote national cohesion through narratives about shared cultures and values while simultaneously obfuscating ethnic diversity among the citizen population. Furthermore, national dress is sometimes also used to reinforce social hierarchies through visual markers of citizen and non-citizen (Khalaf 2006; Akinci 2019). Having previously written about this topic, I return to it to address issues I had neglected in my earlier research – on my and other Emiratis' lived experience and connections to the national dress. I ask how scholars, especially those *from* the Gulf, can explore these hierarchies and exclusions without eliding their own lived experiences. I highlight that for some non-citizens, the national dress is seen and experienced as a symbol of social hierarchy. For some citizens, meanwhile, it is also a reminder of home and familiarity. It can be at once a symbol of a top-down homogenization drive, and yet also provoke feelings of comfort for others – sometimes through its exclusionary nature, but sometimes also despite it. Through a discussion on national dress, I explore the complexity of navigating – and writing about – these multiple lived experiences.

Laure Assaf, "From Hairdo to Internet Meme: The Cultural Fortunes of the *Gamboo3a*"

In the late 2000s, the *gambū'a* hairdo (or *gamboo3a* in its *Arabizi* form) made its apparition in the Gulf region. Akin to the beehive, this hairdo is characterized by a large hump above the head, giving the impression of long and voluminous hair under the *shayla*. Because of its extravagant height and its association with the consumerist environment of Khaleeji commercial spaces, the



gamboo3a soon became the object of various condemnations. Around 2010, at the same time as it started declining in popularity in the urban spaces of the Gulf, the hairdo gained in visibility on social media, effectively turning into an Internet meme. Based on interviews conducted at the time (between 2010 and 2014) with young Emirati women, and on an analysis of several cultural productions dedicated to the *gamboo3a*, this paper argues that the fortunes of this controversial hairdo shed light on some of the tensions at play in contemporary Emirati society, notably around representations of modernity and consumerism; tensions which often take on a gendered dimension. At the same time, as the *gamboo3a* moved online, it took on different meanings – thus attenuating the condemnations by inscribing the hairdo into a regional collective imaginary.

Nouf Alhimiary, “The Dialectic of Presence: A Virtual Ethnography of Online”

This paper examines the figure of the ‘fashionista’, and her emergence within the Saudi digital landscape as a cultural producer enacting presence. I ask, how have fashionistas acts of everyday presence worked to shape the Saudi Arabian public sphere through using digital modes of dissemination. Using Leanne Simpson’s decolonial feminist praxis of “presencing”, this paper illuminates the ways in which “fashionistas” create culture by articulating their everyday acts of presence in the Saudi Arabian digital sphere.

Through looking at social media posts and identity performances made for and by women in Saudi Arabia, this paper explores how fashionistas’ cultural productions enacts a different kind of presence, one located within Saba Mahmood’s conceptualization of a decolonial agency. To interrogate the the figure of the fashionista herself, this paper asks: who is the fashionista and what does she care about? In attempting to produce an analysis of fashionistas’ reclamation of space, this paper looks at: the adoption of fashionista vernacular into Saudi society, the creation of local trends, and accessing “coolness” from within Saudi. Finally, in attending to how women enact presence while negotiating social values, this paper enters an analysis of the recurrent demands for authenticity online, as well as online hate and questions of belonging that fashionistas are regularly subject to.

2pm – 4:30pm

PANEL E: Dealing Art, Producing Art. The Gulf as a New Hub

moderator: Coline Houssais

Névyne Zeineldin, “Creativity as a social inclusion model in the Gulf, the example of Bahrein”

“Art can provide the possibility to experience a new dimension, where no power relations exist and where new ways of seeing and feeling are made possible. It can hence foster the development of less primitive and richer personalities” (Pagani, 2016).

In recent years researchers demonstrated that GCC countries have undertaken a major shift in their cultural policies aiming at transnational and multicultural exchanges. Following this wave, some artists and entrepreneurs in Bahrain have chosen to use art to build bridges between communities and tackle the issue of social inclusion that is still problematic. As public cultural institutions struggle in bringing together its diverse population, Bahrainis and foreigners have been collaborating to build spaces in the peripheries that introduce a new definition of “otherness”, break social, religious and cultural borders through creative expression. In a country where networks, kinship and social class define the audience of cultural events, such spaces – defined as *alternative*, aim at stimulating people from different backgrounds to share opinions and creative skills as well as developing new ways of promoting artists. This presentation will offer an overview of these art spaces, analyzing their characteristics, the challenges they face, and questioning the extent of their endeavor.



Amin Moghadam, “Cosmopolitanism and Cultural entrepreneurship in Dubai and beyond”

The art world is commonly seen as conducive to cosmopolitan spaces and sociabilities. However, such cosmopolitanism may be more fully understood if we look at the specific characteristics of the artistic field and socio-political context in which it emerges, as these underpin the physical and social spaces of artistic practice. Based on ethnographic accounts of Art Dubai and drawing on theoretical framework that connects cosmopolitanism to “specific social engagements and lifestyle practices rather than to a tolerance for cultural difference or a universalist morality” (Schiller, Darieva, and Gruner-Domic, 2011), this presentation investigates how globalized spaces such as Art Dubai create and project an idea of diversity at various scales while they also contribute to the shaping of a ‘cosmopolitan ethos’ of involved individuals such as ‘cultural entrepreneurs’ who support and promote the art scene.

Marion Slitine, “‘Off-the-Walls’: The role of the Gulf Region in Trajectories of Palestinian Artists”

Palestinian artists, from the Occupied Palestinian Territories or from the diaspora, have invested since one decade already, the regional and international art market. In a context of artistic globalization, some cultural centers have emerged and have played a significant role in the phenomenon of externalization of the visual arts produced in the Occupied Territories. In this context, Dubai has played a major role in the promotion of Arab and Palestinian contemporary art, as evidenced in March 2015, by the Palestinian section in the catalog of Christie’s in Dubai. Art auctions, foundations or art galleries have been created progressively in this city. Thus, the mobility of the Palestinian artworks has increased substantially – but not the one of the Palestinians individuals -, that might overcome, on a symbolic level, the geopolitical borders and the fragmentation on the ground. In a diachronic perspective, I will explore the Palestinian worlds of art in Dubai and the cultural flows that it reveals, through an investigation with discourses and trajectories of Palestinian artists whose works were promoted in Dubai. My communication will analyze the constitution of a globalized artistic scene, the role of the Palestinian diaspora within these worlds and the relationships that these artists entertain with their homeland. Does the access to a marketing and internationalized scene have an impact on the political engagement of the artists ? More largely, how Palestinian art presence interrogates the ambivalence of the UAE politics towards Palestinians and Palestine ?

Clio Chaveneau, “Arabic Pop Art”: Co-construction of Arabness and Khaleeji Identities through Instagram”

Launched in 2010, Instagram, the second most widely used social networking platforms in the world, quickly became a privileged place for artists and art lovers to showcase artworks and visual content to a larger audience. In the Middle East, where 30% of the population is aged between 15 and 29, is one of the region where social media platforms are largely used: 187 million active monthly users of Facebook and more than 63 million users of Instagram. One account stands out in the region regarding the promotion of art work through this platform. Gathering currently 290K followers, the account, @arabic.pop.art, which is reposting artistic digital work from the MENA region, is actively participating in shaping representations of “Arab” digital art and creating a virtual community engaging with the artwork and the topics addressed in it (such as women’s rights, consumerist society, traditions and cultural heritage, war and conflict in the region, so on). Based on the analysis of all the posts published from March 2019 to March 2020 and interviews, I will focus in this paper on the strong presence of Gulf citizens among both the artists and the followers of this Instagram account and explore the uses of “arab” and “khaleeji” symbols, icons and consumerist items in the published artworks.

Eve Grinstead, “The Role of Women in the UAE’s Contemporary Art Scene”

The art scene in the United Arab Emirates boasts a surprisingly high number of women in



leadership positions. This information is striking considering how the Emirate's laws favor men, in concordance with Sharia Law, in addition to the fact that the international art leadership is generally male-dominated. What can explain this contradictory phenomenon? How and why is this taking place in the UAE? Preliminary research suggests that multiple waves of influence and historical phenomena explain these exceptional circumstances. In short, and to be developed during this presentation, a number of key—not just local, but royal—women established “art centers” (as a general term) in their own Emirates around the same time. The fact that these princesses of superlative pedigree intrepidly endeavored to create something untraditional and non-existent for earlier generations—and that those undertakings were accepted by their families—set a precedent for other women to continue in their footsteps. This “approval” of women leading in the arts seems to have bolstered the process for other locally-based, but foreign, women (whether UAE-born or not) to initiate similar projects by establishing galleries or foundations of their own. I will further postulate as to why this holds more truth in Dubai than some of the surrounding Emirates, and how while they compete with each other, they remain distinct and depend on their diversity.

5pm - Sultan Sooud Al Qassemi, “Artistic Hub or Creative Powerhouse? The Gulf’s newfound centrality on the Arab and Global art scene”, conclusive talk on the art panel

The UAE’s cultural scene has witnessed a dramatic shift over the past few decades, marked by rapid development of art initiatives, institutions, auction houses, galleries, and creative hubs. The country’s annual art fair, biennale, and a number of large-scale international partnerships have also garnered it global recognition. However—amidst this very fast progress—an important question arises in regards to the art scene’s connection to local communities and audiences, and its critical acknowledgement and representation of earlier artistic histories within the Emirates and the region. One may ponder, for example, if some of the art initiatives have developed in relative isolation from the general public, and have bypassed their needs and realities, catering instead to a select smaller audience. It is also important to consider, in the context of these rapid and ongoing developments, the longer histories of artistic practices in the region and cultivate a study and recognition of possible continuities, rather than only focus on building anew. This presentation will question the trajectory of the UAE’s cultural development, and address possible tactics of making its art sector more accessible and inclusive.

6pm - Keynote #2

**Walter Armbrust, “Mourning an Absent Archive: A History of Digitized Culture circa 2100”
moderator: Yann Rodier**

My first encounter with Emirati television came during a visit to al-Ain in 1994 during Ramadan. I made VHS recordings of a few segments of Emirati Ramadan shows—quiz and contest programs overtly employed in a nation-building agenda. I later digitized and preserved them on ancient hard drives. These recordings are my entry point to a discussion of preservation. Culture made in Arabia today, as in the rest of the world, will be preserved primarily on digital media, which any archivist will tell you are less stable than paper, the go-to medium of present-day historians. What would a history of our present written in the year 2100 be based on? Mostly digitized content. Will my 1994 Ramadan shows turn up rattling around on a future Youtube? Will private companies or governments put an end to the riotous jumble of sounds, images and texts currently at our fingertips? Will the technology that enabled cultural production on scales that scholars can barely grasp tame the monster it created by enabling us to simply preserve everything? My lecture will offer no definitive answers to such questions, but I do hope to pose provocative thoughts in the context of Gulf societies that have, over the past two decades, emerged as major patrons and producers of all varieties of culture.



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THURSDAY, APR. 8

10am – 1pm

PANEL F: Filming the Gulf: Images and Audiences

moderator: Clio Chaveneau

Hania Nashef, “Comedy and Horror: What do these genres reveal about Emirati culture?”

Despite the lack of a traditional cinema culture and a dearth in film production, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), has recently witnessed an increase in visual productions. The latter can be attributed to a number of factors, least of which, the opening of movie theaters, the establishment of international film festivals and the arrival of film companies. These ventures have helped nurture the nascent industry, promote a cinema culture and lead to a rise in the number of Emirati filmmakers. These few UAE productions are also attempting to construct the current Emirati identity, which finds itself at a cusp of a past that needs to be preserved and a young country that aspires to be part of the future. In addition, some of the works act as triggers for societal change, highlighting problems faced by this developing nation. My paper, which will begin with a brief history of Emirati cinema, followed by a short discussion of short films, will examine the prevalence of lighter popular genres, namely comedy and horror, not only to offer glimpses into the culture, but also to understand the role these genres play, albeit cautiously and selectively, in defining the UAE identity. For my argument, I will draw on films such as *Djinn* (2013), *Mazra‘et Yeddo* (2014, 2015), *Shabāb Sheyāb* (2018), *Azma Māliyya* (2020) and others.

Anna Chronopoulou, “‘The Perfect Candidate’: A Doctor, a Heroine and an Idea of Statehood in Saudi Arabian Cinemas”

Much academic ink has been spilt on professional lead characters in the Western cinematic traditions. Almost indiscriminately, this work focuses mainly on an examination, critical analysis and investigation of cinematic representations of male leads, leaving cinematic representations of professional women lead characters largely unexplored. On the other hand, recent celluloid representations of women lead, amongst them female professionals, in the Arab Peninsula cinematic traditions are more frequent. More specifically, the contemporary cinematic project in Saudi Arabia offers a wide range of female leads, distinguishing it in this sense from the rest of the GCC region. The purpose of this paper is twofold. First, it seeks to discuss the reception of the female lead celluloid representations in Saudi Arabia and in the wider region. Secondly it aims to discuss the reception of the representations of female professional leads in the recent Saudi cinematic project in the West. It puts forward the suggestion that despite the differences characterizing the relevant cinematic traditions, cinematic representations of women remain largely similar. Methodologically speaking, the examples used from the Arab Peninsula tradition are the recent, internationally acclaimed, Saudi Arabian movies “The Perfect Candidate” and “Wadjda” because they constitute rare examples of cinematic representations of a female lead character in the Arab Peninsula tradition.

This paper is confined within the restrictions of the ways both cinematic traditions, the Western and the Arab Peninsula tradition through the case study of recent Saudi Arabian films, promote cinematic portrayals of women as being role models and mavericks. It also examines the influence of the social parameters that make up for the women professionals in the relevant cinematic traditions. Finally, it suggests that the interplay between the concept of role model and social influences is inextricably linked to ideas of statehood.

Doris Hambuch, “Marital Dilemma as Sophisticated Comedy in Recent Emirati Short Films: Laymoon (2018) and Asli (2019)”



Young Emirati filmmakers have reacted in many creative ways to the rapid changes of their environment since their film movement gained momentum during the past two decades. “Furrows and Forks in Emirati Short Films” (2018) highlights the significance of the short film genre at the current juncture. Building on this study’s findings, the present comparative analysis of *Laymoon* [Laymūn] by Abdulrahman Al Madani and *Asli* [Aṣlī] by Mansour Ahmed demonstrates how the short format lends itself to reflect on changing family structures in a humorous manner. While *Laymoon* gives agency to an aging woman refusing to resign to invisibility in her stale marriage, *Asli* highlights pre-marital conditions. Both films criticize societal customs in original and witty ways. They both add to a steadily growing oeuvre of the respective directors.

Thomas Richard, “Cinema and the development of a youth cultural identity in the Arabian Peninsula”

With the recent development of the film industry in the Arabian Peninsula, a number of films were aimed at rather young audience, defining a Khaleeji youth visual culture, in turn itself a vehicle for the production of an image of youth identity in the Gulf countries.

This visual culture can be characterized as a local development of Arabic pop subcultures (Sabry and Ftouni 2016), but aiming at producing a local image, and at differentiating from its counterparts. It is transnational as it reinterprets staple images and genres of the Western youth subcultures, such as horror films, action movies, science-fiction, and comedy, but does so along extremely local narratives. At the same time, art films portrayed the Khaleeji youth in coming-of-age films along the same lines, especially when it comes to the issue of social transgression (La Caze 2015, Radovic 2017).

This cinema can be characterized as polyglot (Hambuch 2016), speaking the language of global youth cultures, but, deeply involved in the socio-political identities of the Gulf States (Alsharekh and Springborg 2012) while questioning the cultural images developed by Gulf states (Helmy 2008).

In turn, the expression of this youth culture is highly dependent of the cultural policies developed by the authorities, local festivals (Ciecko 2006), and the state-owned media (Hudson 2017, Leotta 2015), and, as such, may appear as an « authorized contestation », reserved to an elite.

Marwa Fakh, “The Saudi YouTube Phenomenon: From Anarchism to Institutionalism”

There has been a media revolution in Saudi Arabia, one that is tightly linked to Internet technologies. YouTube, in particular, enabled amateur Saudi youth to utilize popular culture and humor as potent vehicles to produce entertainment shows and engage with sensitive socio-political issues developing a virtual public sphere. These online productions represented a radical shift in the history of participation of Saudis in media and entertainment and sparked an influx of YouTube videos making Saudi Arabia the biggest user of the platform globally.

By focusing on three of the leading Saudi-produced shows, this paper analyzes the institutionalization of YouTube into an ad-friendly media space and the transformation of the amateur production into commercial entertainment in order to accommodate the dominant market logic of the platform and the public taste, which led to refashioning the Saudi content on YouTube and the disappearance of the critical content in these shows.

2pm – 4pm

PANEL G: Writing in the Gulf, Publishing in the Gulf, Prizing in the Gulf
moderator: Frédéric Lagrange

Ildiko Kaposi & Shahd Al Shammari, “My Voice, My Money: Literary Self-Publishing from Kuwait”



Arab self-publishing has been a growing phenomenon, yet it continues to have a bum rap as a last resort for would-be authors. Self-publishing grants authors autonomy over the publishing process, subverting established norms that govern creative industries. Challenging the hierarchies of the publishing industry this way may be a welcome development for allowing new voices to give artistic expression to issues that concern Khaleeji youth. But the lack of editorial quality control continues to plague the reputation of self-publishing in the Gulf.

This paper explores the literary self-publishing scene of Kuwait where numerous young authors have seized this opportunity to get their stories out to the public, in both Arabic and English. Through semi-structured interviews conducted with authors, we explore the experiences of Kuwaitis who decided to self-publish their literary efforts, along with the outcomes of their attempts to self-make culture in Arabia.

Letizia Lombezi, “Gulf on-line Arabic Literature. A New and Young Alternative to the Levantine and Egyptian Monopoly?”

The Arabian Peninsula embodies the sacred space where Arab culture was born, although Arabic literature has been mostly spread from Lebanon and Egypt in recent times. Probably making up with the original roots, in the Gulf we assist today to the birth of several literary productions, which represent spontaneous and vivid examples of professional as well as on-line citizens' literature. It is true that Gulf rulers have demonstrated to care a lot about traditional heritage and arts, as valid instruments to face globalization locally. Writers, in exchange for such an interest and funding- included the announcements of open prize competitions- have not been too challenging toward Power. Effectively, many blogs and forums emerged where short stories are posted and published. This has also attracted the attention of e-editors like Nashiri.net and Arab-ewriters.com. Given all the above, is the Gulf retaking its role in the cultural sphere and literature production? Does it represent a fresh alternative to the Levantine and Egyptian monopoly? Is women's literature gaining its place in the Gulf region? Is there any track of the ancient and glorious *nabaṭī* style in the works of young writers, including on-line manifestations? After a review of recent studies about on-line writings, this paper suggests a discussion and, tentatively, answers to such questions.

Rima Sleiman & Katia Al Tawil, “Gulf Region Literary prizes: The Gulf as a new center of legitimization for Arab authors”

Literary prizes help to create a healthy publishing industry by offering prestigious recognition to authors, promoting national sales of rewarded books and encouraging translation into foreign languages. In this globalized economic and cultural environment, the Gulf region has become the new center of legitimization for Arab authors.

In recent years, the Arab world has seen a proliferation of literary prizes hosted and financed by countries from the Gulf region. In numerous articles, Arab literary critics, writers and journalists have tried to analyze the effects of this new literary landscape, where prizes recompense and pay tribute to aesthetic value, but also shape literary taste and outline a new horizon of expectation. These literary prizes often include financial rewards running into the thousands of euros and are awarded by different Gulf countries, some of them involved in political and economic conflict. A tension therefore governs the relationship between the literary value attributed to a work and the process of institutional legitimization linked with political, economic and social factors, which necessarily channel the production of literary value. The Gulf region is no doubt today a major player in this process of literary legitimization by offering the structures of transmission, redeploying the modes of consecration and fixing standards for literary production.

5pm – Keynote conference #3



Franck Mermier, "The Arab Cultural Field Between National Arenas and Cultural Pan-Arabism"

moderator: Laure Assaf

Since the 1990s, the Arab cultural and media fields have undergone major transformations with the emergence of satellite televisions, internet and social networks. These new media have contributed to the creation of a public sphere "mosaic" in the Arab world and have been as much the relays of transnational flows as the vectors for the strengthening of national cultural arenas within this region. My presentation will focus on the constituents of this transnational Arab cultural field through the study of the transformations of cultural Pan-Arabism and its institutional forms of expression, whether they are the responsibility of state or private actors. I will examine the modalities of the formation of an alternative culture and how certain cultural and media enterprises succeed in benefiting from a margin of autonomy by playing with differences existing within the Arab space, particularly in terms of censorship. The notion of the Arab cultural field will therefore be studied in the light of the effects of Arab regional interconnections on the cultural field.



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Tarek El-Ariss

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Franck Mermier

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Sarah Al Kaabi

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