

XV Convegno SeSaMO

Università degli Studi di Napoli L'Orientale

22th-24th June 2022



TITLE: *Art, dissent and social change in the Middle Eastern and North African public space after the uprisings* SOCIETÀ PER GLI STUDI SUL MEDIO ORIENTE

PROPONENT: SARA BORRILLO (UNIVERSITY OF NAPLES "L'ORIENTALE")

LANGUAGE: ENGLISH

ABSTRACT

The panel aims at investigating the interplay between art, dissent and politics after 2011 mobilisations in the Middle East and North Africa, in order to explore if and how creative practices and methods of contention interact by producing new forms of political activism which claim the public space, a new public imagination and new trajectories of future.

In this perspective, the panel aims at:

- shedding a new light on the multiple emerging forms of activism which are relied on creative practices and on their socio-political implications in the authoritarian ebb that followed 2010-2011. In particular, we intend to observe how new forms of "aesthetic dissent" can politicize the physical and digital public space.
- Exploring how the politics of disenchantment (Bayat, 2015; Roney, 2021) could be interpreted as a trigger to face to multiple crises (political, economic, social, generational) through creative practices of citizenship which are capable of influencing the order of what can be said and seen in the public space (Rancière, 1998, 2000).
- Observing the reconfigurations of both political activism and the creative scene, bringing out the multiple political implications, interactions, influences and transnational connections of these phenomena.

When public space does not allow for direct confrontation with the authoritarian regimes, how does Artivism (i.e. artistic activism) make the revolutionary potential of social movements continue to flow beyond official politics? How is art interwoven into the patterns of political action for social and political transformation?

Possible dimensions of the analysis:

- Connection between art, cultural production and political change: "culture and politics, culture as politics", local and transnational phenomena.
 - Impact of cultural and artistic production on the reconfiguration of the public space.
 - Reconfigurations of social movements: historical continuities, turning points and changes in the chains of mobilization.
 - Interaction between cultural policies and cultural spaces (spaces of regime / dissidence) in the light of political change.
 - Independent productions, the state and the official institutions: cooperation or conflict?
 - Continuities and changes in the signification of the revolutionary temporalities and the objectives of the mobilization.
 - Memories from the future, (hi)story-telling, imagined communities: reinterpretations of the past between memory, tradition, identity.
 - Relationship between intimacy, self and global communities from a "global citizenship" perspective.
- Researchers are invited to examine case studies focused on the work of activists who deliberately use art as a political tool and of artists who politically connote their creations.

Researchers who use qualitative research, who employ interdisciplinary and inductive research methodologies, are particularly encouraged to participate. Possible empirical research fields are theatre, audio-visuals, comics, music, street art and graffiti, video mapping, digital activism and digital archives (...).

FINAL PANEL

Chair: **Sara Borrillo**, University of Naples "L'Orientale"

Discussant: **Jessica Winegar**, Northeastern University

PANELISTS

Shereen Abouelnaga, Cairo University: *Masks of Dissent: Teaching and Writing*

Marta Bellingreri, Independent researcher: *Beit Tarkib in Baghdad: Young Iraqi Artists Walking the "Most Dangerous City in the World" in a Playful and Artistic Communitarian Way*

Cathrine Cornet, The American University of Rome: *Negotiating a Contemporary Space in the Tunisian Public Sphere: the Political-Artistic Itinerary of the Kamal Lazaar Foundation*

Abed Al Wahab Kassir and Serena Tolino, University of Bern: *The Fragmentation of the Macho Man and the Rise of Queerness in Contemporary Lebanese Cinema*

Martino Lovato, University of Bologna: *The Cinema of Tareq Teguia: Dissent, Post-Arab Spring Disenchantment, and the Challenge of the Global Age.*

SHORT BIO OF THE PROPONENT

Sara Borrillo has been the 2021 laureate/holder of the Gender Chair of the GIS-Institute du Genre at the Sorbonne University Paris 1-Pantheon (IEDES-Institut du développement). She holds a PhD in Middle East Studies at University of Naples L'Orientale (2014), where she has been post-doctoral researcher (2015-2019). She obtained the Italian National Academic Qualification to function as Associate Professor in History of Islamic Countries (2018). She has been Adjunct Professor of Islamic Law at University Roma Tre (2021-2022) and Adjunct Professor of History of Islamic Countries at the University of Macerata (2016-2018). She has been associated researcher to the Centre Jacques Berque pour les Sciences Humaines et Sociales (CNRS) in Rabat (2012-2014) and visiting researcher at IRMC (Institute de Recherche sur le Maghreb Contemporain) in Tunis (2016). Her research interests are mainly focused on the history of women's movements in the Middle East and North Africa, on the interplay between gender politics and Islam, secular and Islamic feminisms, on the new female religious authorities' contribution to the contemporary Islamic thought, on activism, art and socio-political transformations after the 2010/2011 uprisings in MENA region. Among her main publications: the book *Femminismi e Islam in Marocco. Attiviste laiche, teologhe, predicatrici*, ESI, 2017. And the articles: "Returning the megaphone to the people. The Theatre of the Oppressed as activism in the public space for a new critical citizenry in Morocco", in N. Pratt et al. (eds.) *New directions on the Study of Popular culture and Politics after the Arab Spring*, *The British Journal for Middle Eastern Studies*, 2021; "Chouftouhunna festival: feminist and queer activism as transformative agency for a new politics of recognition in post-revolutionary Tunisia", in S. Borrillo - M. Soliman (eds.), *Studi Maghrebini Special Issue: Activism, Culture and Knowledge Production for Egalitarian Citizenship in the Middle East and North Africa post 2011*, 18, 2020/2; "Women's Movements and the Recognition of Gender Equality in the Constitution-Making Process in Morocco and Tunisia (2011-2014)", in H. Irving, R. Rubio Marin (eds.), *Women as Constitution Makers: Case Studies from the New Democratic Era*, Cambridge University Press, 2019.

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ABSTRACTS

PAPER 1: Shereen Abouelnaga, Cairo University

TITLE: *Masks of Dissent: Teaching and Writing*

Upon a visit to Egypt in 2015, Asef Bayat described the ambiance aptly: “These are uncharted political moments loaded with indefinite possibilities, in which meaningful social engagement would demand a creative fusion of the old and new ways of doing politics.” Although the present – 2022 - cannot be described as an uncharted moment, it remains true that any engagement with the public sphere requires some manoeuvres the regime is not aware of. The already co-opted public sphere denies the concept of voice in all its connotations to come out - let alone to be heard - in a full-fledged tone. Culture, cultural practices, and cultural productions were the last resort for the political activists who suffered most from the crackdown of the regime. These spaces - always overlooked and marginalized by the State - represented a safe hub for different forms of social engagements. Yet, it was not long before the regime was alerted to these spaces which led to their being fully state-controlled or rather colonized (in the sense of coloniality, not colonialism).

Activists had to revisit their strategies, re-navigate their options, and calculate their actions. They realized that the only safe path left and still untrodden is “a creative fusion of the old and new ways of doing politics”. The first step was to delink from any space of surveillance: street art, graffiti, theatre, film making, and book clubs. The second step was to re-inhabit the old traditional spaces not to simply revive the past but rather to invest in the old forms through infiltrating new content and vision. This paper engages with the emergence of teaching gender as a means of knowledge dissemination and production and fiction writing as not only a means of agency but also as a site that allows a dissenting discourse to be heard.

The research looks closely into *Salty Heart* (Qalb Maleh), a novel published in 2022 by the well-known activist Rasha Azab who has been part of the Revolution since 2011, and the School of Feminism, organized annually by the Foundation of Ganoubia Horra (A Southern Free Woman) based in Aswan and declared in 2015. Examining these two cultural products includes highlighting the main actors, the socio-political context which facilitates or obstructs the reception of their work, the vision behind the process of production, and the extent to which the poetics of the two works is politicised and dissenting. The aim is to highlight the new spaces of appearance activists are carving on the borders of culture and politics.

PAPER 2: Marta Bellingreri, Independent researcher

TITLE: *Beit Tarkib in Baghdad: Young Iraqi Artists Walking the "Most Dangerous City in the World" in a Playful and Artistic Communitarian Way*

Tarkib House in Baghdad is the first contemporary arts and creative space of this kind in Iraq, and through its initiatives, Iraqi young artists propose high-quality artworks in the city, to claim "the most dangerous city in the world" is alive and their arts re-signify in unpredictable ways a city and a country shattered by decades of war and divisions. Through the voices and artworks of Iraqi artists, and particularly two women artists, displayed at the Tarkib's Contemporary Arts Festival, the only one of contemporary arts in Iraq, this paper aims at telling how Iraqi artists depict and re-write the narrative of their city, their country and the public space, engaging audience and community in a public park, which was chosen as the site for the Festival in 2021. The women artists' artworks selected also show the connection they trace with the pasts, through memories, (hi)stories and sharing a feeling of nostalgia in performances and playful and creative ways. This is linked with the communitarian arts and creations process so much needed in a country raged by decades of wars and instability.

PAPER 3: Catherine Cornet, The American University of Rome

TITLE: *Negotiating a Contemporary Space in the Tunisian Public Sphere: the Political-Artistic Itinerary of the Kamal Lazaar Foundation*

Shortly after the start of Tunisian revolution of 2011, the Kamal Lazaar Foundation, one of the first independent artistic foundation of Tunisia, convened, on the 8th and 9th of October 2011, a conference entitled: '*Art and memory in the Maghreb*'. The Conference stated the urgent need to define a history of Tunisian public art and insisted on the importance of a post-revolutionary definition of a 'national art history', and in the negotiation of 'the right to occupy a space in the Tunisian public sphere'. The paper will question the construction process of a national discourse on contemporary art operated by the Kamal Lazar Foundation, which is not only at the antipodes of Ben Ali's Tunisia, but also unprecedented for the global Arab art scene. Specifically, the occupation of public space in 2017 during the holding of the first Tunisian pavilion since 1958 at the Venice Biennale further confirms the importance of the KLF in redefining postcolonial history and the Tunisian nationalist discourse, which passes through a new artistic approach to the public sphere in Tunisia and beyond.

PAPER 4: Abed Al Wahab Kassir and Serena Tolino, University of Bern

TITLE: *The Fragmentation of the Macho Man and the Rise of Queerness in Contemporary Lebanese Cinema*

The (post)-2011 revolutions had contributed to make visible two images of the Arab men that had been concealed for many years. On the one side, Islamist extremists who embody extreme patriarchal masculine toxicity appropriated the public space in many different contexts, on the other Arab queers unapologetically raised their voices. The radical changes reassure the connection between gender and the future nature of the state (Kahf 2021). In this paper, we focus on Queer masculinities as an integral part of potential activism and change. Queerness has recently gained momentum as an analytical category in Middle Eastern studies, but most importantly, it became central for both artists and activists who are articulating the will to challenge the heteronormative binaries while looking for new ways of being. We understand here queerness as a verb, an adjective, and an identity to unfold the unsettling of the normative understanding of the local sexual politics. Through conducting a content analysis of three contemporary Lebanese movies, we will analyze the construction of queer masculine identities. Our paper will show how the films contribute to deconstruct the hegemonic Arabic masculinity, while generating new queer realities, meanings, and embodiments. Our focus on cinema aims at contributing to contemporary discussions on forms of activism in the MENA region, namely forms of activism "which employ artistic and cultural practices to create new spaces for knowledge production and, consequently, new social and political possibilities that challenge the established norms" (Borrillo and Soliman 2020: 131). Corporality remains the central axis of our analysis, not only because the male body is an exceptional vehicle for sustaining both patriarchy and masculine heteronormative superiority, but also because "the rebellious young people ... view their bodies as a site of resistance against the governments" (Yaghoobi 2012: 53). Moreover, we agree with Borrillo and Soliman on the necessity to investigate the interrelation between "the body, sexual identity, and gender rights, and political commitment, social empowerment and transformative agency" in order to situate contemporary forms of activism (Borrillo and Soliman 2020: 132). In this sense, we understand the movies as spaces of resistance that make possible to "re-define the boundaries of legal and social normativity, to explore new performances of subjectivity and citizenship, and to re-imagine individual rights and freedoms" (Borrillo 2020: 206). Considering that masculinity is one of the main pillars of patriarchy, we look at how masculinity is renegotiated, with the aim to contribute to the discussions on the potentiality of art in allowing both social transformation and power shifts.

References:

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PAPER 5: Martino Lovato, University of Bologna

TITLE: *The Cinema of Tareq Tegua: Dissent, Post-Arab Spring Disenchantment, and the Challenge of the Global Age.*

The present paper focuses on the political cinema of the Algerian filmmaker Tareq Tegua, and particularly on his film *Révolution Zenj* (2013), in which the protagonist's investigation on the medieval slave rebellion of the Zenj—the greatest servile insurrection in the medieval Arab-Muslim World—leads him to a journey across different sites of oppression, disempowerment, and rebellion in the contemporary Arab World after 2011. As Jacques Rancière remarks, Tegua's cinema creates a space of dissent, outside the dominant discursive logics of representation by which "beauty and fiction are for the rich, and sad reality and the dry gaze of the documentary is for the poor." To resignify the lives of the dispossessed, the director "aestheticizes" the suffering of marginal communities in the Arab World, centering the frame of the camera on forgotten sites of the present; to inscribe the life of migrants, refugees, religious minorities, and oppressed communities, within national, regional and global relations of power.

The present paper focuses on the connections, established in the film, between the peripheral Algerian city of Ghardaia, the Palestinian refugee camp of Shatila in Beirut, and the marshes of Basra, in southern Iraq, where the Zenj rebellion was fought. It investigates the continuities the director traces between past and present forms of oppression and unrest in the Arab World. By analyzing his contemporary retelling of the Zenj Rebellion in the present, it points out the director's capturing the ambiguous meaning of the word *thawra* in the uncertain tension between "rebellion" and "revolution." Finally, the text follows the oblique interpretative paths traced by the director across audiences in Europe and the Middle East, pointing out the "latitudinal equivalences" he establishes between the Southern regions of Algeria and Iraq: both rich in natural resources and among the poorest regions in their countries. It underscores the director's choice of these sites to provide a lucid portrait of rebellion and its plights, as he urges his audience to question the causes that make exist the suffering of these communities, and to rebel against oppression and injustice.