



Federal Ministry  
of Education  
and Research



**“Practicing ‘Blickwechsel’: Entangled Perspectives on Theory, Arts and History in the Field of Arabic Literary Studies”, AGYA International Bilingual Summer School, American University of Beirut (AUB), 22-24 September, 2017.**

The summer school was organized by Bilal Orfali (American University of Beirut), Barbara Winckler (Westfälische Wilhelms-Universität Münster) and Christian Junge (Philipps-Universität Marburg) in the framework of the Arab-German Young Academy of Sciences and Humanities and funded by the German Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF). It brought together ten junior scholars and four senior scholars from Egypt, Germany, Italy, Lebanon, Morocco, Saudi Arabia and Sweden. The summer school is part of the international summer school program “Arabische Philologien im Blickwechsel – نحو دراسات عربية برؤى متعددة” ([www.arabic-philologies.de](http://www.arabic-philologies.de)), founded 2014. The next summer school is planned for September 2018 in Morocco on “Emotions That Matter”.

Can an exchange of perspectives and experiences between Western and Arab scholars take place in a purely academic context? Is it possible to elect Arabic as an academic language in the field of Arabic literature studies even outside Arab universities and research centres?

The answer to these two questions was the main goal of the AGYA International Bilingual Summer School “Practicing ‘Blickwechsel’: Entangled Perspectives on Theory, Arts and History in the Field of Arabic Literary Studies”, held at the American University of Beirut from September 22-24, 2017. Not only did the project succeed in the accomplishment of its goals, promoting a fruitful, bilingual English-Arabic debate about some pivotal issues concerning the Arabic studies, but it also proved to be an interesting experiment that should be replicated elsewhere.

The structure of the summer school favoured the positive result. The participants engaged in two plenary debate sessions: the first one was about Hans Belting’s work *Florence and Baghdad: Renaissance Art and Arab Science* and was held in English, while the second one, in Arabic, was focused on Abdelfattah Kilito’s *Thou Shalt Not Speak My Language*. Both of these books triggered a lively discussion. In particular, the questions aroused by Belting’s book revolved around the very nature of the book – does Belting’s

work really embrace a comparative approach, or does it rather resort to Arabic architectural forms in an ancillary way? – as well as the point of view of the author on Islamic art, which many of the discussants deemed to be affected by a certain aniconic bias. Kilito's book also inspired a hot debate, which eventually focused on a key point: Is Kilito's theory transmissible? Does it offer a viable critical method, or is it too anecdotal and subjective to be replicable and teachable?

Methodological issues were at the core of the project discussion sessions, in which the ten young scholars and PhD students were split into two groups and had the chance to present their research projects and discuss them at length with senior scholars from Lebanon, Germany, Italy, Egypt and Morocco. This was a very fruitful and unique moment, considering the fact that academic conferences rarely allow enough time for in-depth discussion of crucial issues. Among the problems raised by the debates, the lack of a shared methodology joining Arabic literary criticism and the non-Arabic one, turned out to be a major issue, which both young and senior scholars admitted had to be confronted. Besides the content of each single research project, indeed, the lack of a unified theoretical background was perceived as a substantial problem that needs to be overcome. The first step to achieving such a goal is the capability of exerting self-critique, and secondly, the will to start a real and effective cooperation between universities and research centres.

Finally, two keynote lectures were given in the frame of the summer school. The first lecture, given by Prof. Charbel Dagher and titled "The 'Visuality' of the Modern Arabic Ode" (in Arabic), focused on the sources of the poetic image, traditionally explained only in terms of rhetoric. Drawing on samples from the poetry of Badr Shaker al-Sayyab and Muhammad al-Maghout, Dagher shed light on the important role of other external sources in the construction of the poetic image, including visual art and chiefly cinema. In addition, he traced back this feature of the poetic image to the renewing poetic context of the 1940s and 1950s, asserting how the openness of the modern Arab poets "to the street" as well as to the other arts is one of the novelties of their poetry.

The second speaker was Prof. Mahmoud al-Batal, who gave a lecture titled "Towards a Linguistic Arab Spring" (in Arabic), in which he highlighted the necessity of tackling the new challenges brought by diglossia in the Arab world. In particular, Prof. al-Batal maintained the necessity of continuing using standard Arabic for communication while

enhancing the language teaching methods. Al-Batal explained how resorting to mixed Arabic in the classroom – a language which respects the correctness of the standard variety while not disdaining the use of some features closer to the vernacular – would be useful for the learners, as they could rely on the whole spectrum of their linguistic skills in order to achieve their goals in the most effective way.

The AGYA International Bilingual Summer School “Practicing ‘Blickwechsel’” succeeded in fostering the idea of using Arabic as an academic language. The school was effective in offering young Arab and Western scholars the opportunity to exchange knowledge and perspectives, creating an academic arena of shared and collaborative experience, and imbuing the participating scholars and PhD students with a range of different perspectives and methodologies not solely limited to Arabic literary studies, but expanded to include arts, history, philosophy, etc. The diversity experienced in the debate sessions’ readings, keynote lectures, and young scholars’ presentations validated the use of different academic approaches. From Belting’s insight on perspective, to Dagher’s “‘Visuality’ of the Modern Arabic Ode”, many allegorical paradigms were introduced offering an environment of interdisciplinary approaches, analyses, and philosophies, and thus achieving the main goal of the summer school’s “entangled perspective”.

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