

INTRODUCTION

Taking Michel Foucault's dictum that "the relation of language to painting is an infinite relation"¹ as a premise, I set out to explore what can be called a boundless interplay of modern literature and art. However, I do not do this in the Western context that Foucault was writing in and of but propose to read across modern Arabic literature and art.

In *Interrelations of Literature* (New York 1982), Jean-Pierre Barricelli and Joseph Gibaldi highlight the "centrifugal spirit" of literature: "its tendency not only to cross international borders, both artistically and intellectually, but also to intersect with other forms of art and knowledge."² Since the publication of their book thirty years ago, conventional readings of literature within the field of literary studies only have increasingly been called into question and interdisciplinary approaches have gained ground. Interrelations of modern literature and art today constitute an established interdisciplinary field of research in comparative literature, albeit in a predominantly Western context, encompassing studies on such famous writers and artists as William Blake, Stéphane Mallarmé, Gertrude Stein, Pablo Picasso, Franz Kafka, Ezra Pound, Marcel Duchamp, Cindy Sherman, and many others.³ At a time when literary studies question not only the boundaries of their discipline but increasingly go global, delineating the field of world literature,⁴ it is astounding that interrelations of modern Arabic literature and art are unheard of for most people. This has to do with the fact that Arabic literature, and especially modern Arabic literature, remains much understudied in comparison to other literatures. As regards the study of modern art in the Arab world, the situation is even worse, although interest in modern and contemporary art in the Middle East, and more broadly, in visual culture, has increased significantly over the last decade. These are problems that have to be taken into account but they are no obstacles. Studying interrelations of modern Arabic literature and art is promising, not only because it would be anachronistic to continue reading Arabic literature within the rigid frames of the single disciplines, while these are increasingly being called into question, but also because it sheds new light on literary as well as artistic practices in the Arab world, and enhances the possibilities for comparative study.

Reading across Modern Arabic Literature and Art consists of five chapters. In chapter one "Methodological Considerations," I give a brief description of interarts studies in comparative literature, focusing on interrelations of literature and visual art, before introducing interarts studies as a new field of research in Middle Eastern studies and, at the same time, aiming at opening up interarts studies to a broader non-Western context. I start by outlining

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- 1 Michel Foucault, *Les mots et les choses: Une archéologie des sciences humaines*, Paris: Gallimard, 1966, 25, English translation: *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*, translated by Charles Ruas, London: Tavistock, 1970, 9.
 - 2 Jean-Pierre Barricelli and Joseph Gibaldi (eds.), *Interrelations of Literature*, New York: MLAA, 1982, iv.
 - 3 See, for instance, Ulrich Weisstein (ed.), *Literatur und bildende Kunst: Ein Handbuch zur Theorie und Praxis eines komparatistischen Grenzgebiets*, Berlin: Erich Schmidt Verlag, 1992, 12. An English version of the introductory chapter entitled "Literature and the Visual Arts" chapter was published in Jean-Pierre Barricelli and Joseph Gibaldi (eds.), *Interrelations of Literature*, 251–277.
 - 4 See, for instance, Theo D'haen, David Damrosch and Djelal Kadir (eds.), *The Routledge Companion to World Literature*, London: Routledge, 2011; David Damrosch, *What is World Literature?*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003.

the philosophical debate about what came to be called the sister arts (poetry and painting) in the European Renaissance and by giving a brief survey of interarts studies in Western academia. I then turn to the discussion that took place about the relations between the arts in medieval Arabic-Islamic culture and to research carried out on interrelations of Arabic literature and visual art. Interarts studies present a genuinely new approach to studying literary and artistic practices in the Arab world. As mentioned above, *Reading across Modern Arabic Literature and Art* is set against the background of a reorientation of research in both comparative literature and Middle Eastern studies. This reorientation is characterized by an increased readiness to contextualize literary studies, bringing them closer to cultural studies, and to overcome geographical as well as disciplinary boundaries. Methodologically, I am not interested in interartistic comparison, pointing to the differences or similarities between literary and artistic practices, but in the juxtaposition of word and image, textuality and visuality, which as W.J.T. Mitchell argues in *Picture Theory* (Chicago 1994) designate not only different but also highly contested ways of representation.⁵ I draw especially on Laurie Edson's approach of *reading relationally* across the fields of literature and visual art as put forward in her *Reading Relationally: Postmodern Perspectives on Literature and Art* (Ann Arbor 2000). As a strategy to be used between texts as well as within texts – texts understood as both verbal and visual – her approach brings to the fore the centrifugal spirit of literature, mentioned above, as taking place across as well as within literature's confines and is introduced more thoroughly in chapter one.⁶

In chapter two “Changing Notions of Literature and Art,” I address transformations in the understanding of what constitutes cultural production in general and literature and art in particular since the *nahḍa*, the so-called Arab renaissance or awakening of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The term *nahḍa* is problematic as it assumes a rupture, foregrounding the colonial encounter with European powers, first and foremost France and Great Britain, whereas cultural change and exchange have a significantly longer history. This history has been neglected primarily for political reasons, delegating pre-*nahḍa* cultural production to a presumed inferiority, as is elaborated in this chapter. Tracing changing notions of literature and art is an undertaking that is bound to remain fragmentary. But it provides a framework for placing literary and artistic practices and their interplay in the broader context of a cultural history that takes into account the emergence of a public interested in modern Arabic literature and art as well as the transnational character of literary and artistic practices in the Arab world that could possibly serve as a contra-model to the model of national literatures as it was developed and has dominated literary studies in Western academia until recently.

Chapters three to five are at the core of *Reading across Modern Arabic Literature and Art*. They consist of case studies that focus on different Arab writers: Jabra Ibrahim Jabra, Abd al-Rahman Munif and Etel Adnan. Each of the case studies is divided into three parts. In the first part, I give an overview of their literary practices, situating these into a broader socio-political as well as cultural context. In the second part, I explore the writers' rapport with modern art, be it as an art critic in Jabra's case, in symbolic exchange with artists as regards Munif, or as an artist in her own right as for Adnan. On the basis of selected literary

5 W.J.T. Mitchell, *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994, 4 and 91.

6 Laurie Edson, *Reading Relationally: Postmodern Perspectives on Literature and Art*, Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2000.

texts, I demonstrate in the third part how reading across the fields of literature and visual art breaks with conventional ways of reading as well as seeing, and enriches our understanding of literary and artistic practices.

The Palestinian writer Jabra Ibrahim Jabra (b. 1920 in Bethlehem – d. 1994 in Baghdad) is well-known as an intellectual engaged in both modern literature and art. He was the author of numerous novels, collections of short stories, poetry, literary and art criticism. In addition, he translated many literary works from English literature into Arabic. Having found exile in Baghdad after the *nakba* of 1948, he contributed profoundly to Baghdad's cultural life. Together with the Iraqi artists Jewad Selim and Shakir Hassan Al Said, he founded the Baghdad Group for Modern Art (*Jamā'at Baghdad lil-fann al-ḥadīth*) in 1951. He participated in the group's exhibitions with paintings of his own well into the 1970s. His major contribution to modern art, however, has to be seen in his writings as an art critic, published in Arabic as well as in English, because it was in this capacity that he played a major role in introducing modern art in the Arab world to a broader public. Reading across the fields of literature and visual art, I explore two of his novels: *al-Baḥṭh 'an Walīd Mas'ūd* (*In Search of Walid Masoud*, Beirut 1978), which as an example of literary *ekphrasis* adds to its representational power by rendering its absent hero verbally present, and *'Ālam bi-lā kharā'it* (*A World without Maps*, Beirut 1982), co-authored with Abd al-Rahman Munif, which can be read as “a novel on the art of the novel,” as Muhsin Jassim al-Musawi says,⁷ and on aesthetic experience at large.

Abd al-Rahman Munif (b. 1933 in Amman – d. 2004 in Damascus) is remembered as “Arab citizen *par excellence*.”⁸ Deprived of his Saudi citizenship due to his political engagement, his life trajectory goes through a number of Arab capitals from Amman to Baghdad, Cairo, Beirut, Damascus, Baghdad, and after several years in Paris, again Damascus. His novels, especially his acclaimed five volume *Mudun al-milḥ* (*Cities of Salt*, Beirut 1984–89), are often read in relation to Middle Eastern history and politics. He is less known for his love of art. However, Munif engaged in close friendships and symbolic exchanges with a number of Arab artists, among them the Syrian painter Marwan Kassab Bachi and the Iraqi artist Dia Azzawi. A closer look at Munif's interest in modern art reveals that it was more than a pastime. He tried his own hand at drawing, as the special edition of his *Sīrat madīna* (*Story of a City: A Childhood in Amman*, Beirut 2001) shows. Moreover, he wrote many essays on art and artists. Inspired by his writing, a number of Arab artists in return provided him with drawings and paintings that figure as illustrations on the book covers as well as inside the pages of his books. After examining the special edition of his *Sīrat madīna* as not only encompassing different textual genres, ranging from autobiography to novel and historiography, but also juxtaposing both verbal and visual narratives, I read *Mudun al-milḥ* through the lens of Azzawi's book illustrations and the artist's book (*livre d'artiste*) he produced of the novel in 1994.

The Arab-American writer Etel Adnan (b. 1925 in Beirut) is known internationally mainly for her acclaimed novel *Sitt Marie Rose* (Paris 1977). A prolific writer of prose and poetry in the French and English languages, she is both a writer and an artist in her own right. Having turned to abstract art in the 1960s, as a way out of the *mal de la page blanche*,

7 Muhsin Jassim al-Musawi, *al-Riwāya al-'arabiyya – al-nash'a wal-taḥawwul*, Beirut: Dār al-ādāb, 2nd ed. 1988, 282.

8 Mona Anis, “Arab citizen *par excellence*,” in: *Al-Ahram Weekly* 19–24.02.2004, <http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/2004/678/bo32.htm>.

she has produced many small to medium size oil on canvas paintings but has also explored different media, such as ceramics, tapestry, and book art. With her artist's books (*dafātir*) in which she combines abstract painting with excerpts of Arabic literature reproduced in her own handwriting, she has taken part in what came to be perceived as an artistic movement characterized by the introduction of Arabic letters into art (usually referred to as *al-ḥurūfiyya al-‘arabiyya*). As I argue in chapter five, she has thus recovered part of her identity that had remained closed to her as a writer in the French and English languages and has literally re-inscribed herself into the Arab world. Examining her novel *Sitt Marie Rose*, I focus on the novel's affinity to cinematography in content and form. I then explore *L'Apocalypse arabe* (The Arab Apocalypse, Paris 1980), a book-length prose poem which Adnan herself translated from French into English and which stands out for its typographical playfulness, incorporating blank spaces as well as small hieroglyphic-like images. Last but not least, I read her *Journey to Mount Tamalpais* (Sausalito, 1986) as a philosophical essay on perception.

The literary works of Jabra, Munif and Adnan have met with international acclaim, many have been translated into other languages, and some have been relatively well studied – relatively, because, as pointed out above, Arabic literature remains much understudied in comparison to other literatures. However, the writers' interest in modern art has rarely been granted academic attention. Consequently, any impact this interest might have had on their literary practices – that is the overlap and exchange between the fields of literature and art – has been neglected. In reading across modern Arabic literature and art, I aim to bring this exchange to the fore, opening up new ways of reading and seeing.

The case studies do not give a comprehensive overview; rather, my choice aims at providing an idea of, or better, a glimpse into, the wide scope of interrelations of modern Arabic literature and art. I start with Jabra because his literary and artistic practices date back the longest, having their beginnings in late 1930s and early 1940s Palestine. In his capacity as a writer, an intellectual, and an art critic, Jabra became an important role model for a whole generation of Arab writers, among them Munif. Both exiled from their countries of origin in different ways, as is outlined further in chapters three and four, Jabra and Munif met in Baghdad in the early 1950s and again in the 1970s. They became close friends and together wrote *‘Ālam bi-lā kharā’iṭ* (A World without Maps, Beirut 1982), a novel that self-reflectively contemplates the art of the novel and that is studied closely in chapter three. At first sight, Adnan seems rather different from Jabra and Munif; less because of her being a woman writer than because of her writing not in Arabic but in French and English. However, she considers her writing part of Arabic literature which according to her does not make it any less part of French, Francophone, American, Arab-American, or world literature, whatever the label is, as is elaborated in chapter five.

Jabra, Munif and Adnan belong to the same generation, a generation of writers sometimes referred to as the sixties generation that contributed significantly to Arabic literature in the second half of the twentieth century, reaching, in the case of Munif and Adnan, into the twenty-first century. All three experienced exile, if in different ways, as is elaborated in the first parts of the case studies, and participated in the cultural life of various Arab cities East of the Mediterranean – an expression borrowed from Munif's famous novel *Sharq al-mutawassit* (East of the Mediterranean, Beirut 1975), a novel that denounces the horrible reality of political prisons not in one particular country but in the Arab world at large.

All three writers have chosen the novel as a major form of expression. Having in mind M.M. Bakhtin's understanding of the novel as breaking free from pre-existing categories,

encompassing disparate literary and non-literary genres into its composition,⁹ the novel seems to bring the above mentioned “centrifugal spirit” of literature more clearly to the fore than any other literary genre. In describing the novel as “the meeting point of the creative arts known to man since earliest times,”¹⁰ Jabra perceives the capacity to combine different art forms as a distinctive quality of the novel. As Munif remarks, referring to the second half of the twentieth century as “the era of the novel” (aṣr al-riwāya),¹¹ the novel has become the dominant genre in modern Arabic literature. It is time then to draw attention to modern Arabic literature’s interconnectedness with other forms of art and knowledge.

9 M.M. Bakhtin, “Discourse in the Novel,” in: *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays by M.M. Bakhtin* ed. Michael Holquist, translated by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981, 259–422.

10 Jabra Ibrahim Jabra, “On Interpoetics,” in: Ferial J. Ghazoul and Barbara Harlow (eds.), *The View from Within: Writers and Critics on Contemporary Arabic Literature*, Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 1994, 210.

11 ‘Abd al-Rahman Munif, *al-Kātib wal-manfā. Humūm wa-āfāq al-riwāya al-‘arabiyya*, Beirut: al-Mu’assasa al-‘arabiyya lil-dirāsāt wal-nashr, 2nd ed. 1994, 40.