Sunday, 12 January 2014

781. Trans-Mediterranean Literature and Film

1:45–3:00 p.m.

Program arranged by the Division on Arabic Literature and Culture and the Division on Francophone Literatures and Cultures

Presiding: Anne Donadey, San Diego State Univ.; Christopher Micklethwait, Saint Edward's Univ.

1. "Against 'Iberiacentrism': Notes toward a Cinematic Dialogue between Spain and Morocco," Ana Corbalan, Univ. of Alabama, Tuscaloosa

The physical location of North Africa is weighted with geopolitical significance: it marks the European borders and, simultaneously, questions border demarcations based on a shared historical past. Likewise, the Mediterranean Sea functions as a river that flows and connect Spain and North Africa. Benita Sampedro and Simon Doubleday suggest that “[u]nder the current cartographies of globalism, where frontiers mutate, vacillate, and mark the contiguity of discourse, interrogating the border seems an urgent task” (3). Echoing Derrida’s claim to give ghosts “a hospitable memory... out of a concern for justice” (175), this presentation analyzes the demand of ethical recognition made by many Spanish and Moroccan films in the 21st century, highlighting how this filmic trajectory attempts to accept the specters of the past by drawing attention to their haunting nature and their refusal to disappear. In this study I will first analyze the narrative function of ghostly apparitions because they address the voices of the past as well as their possibilities for the future. Next, I will examine the intercultural exchange that takes place in a recent Spanish-Moroccan film trajectory in which conventional notions of exclusionary borders are challenged and society’s fear for these ghosts of the past can be eliminated. I will emphasize how the Hispanic-Moroccan border can be a contesting form of resistance against an imaginary homogeneous national identity. Since this filmic panorama goes beyond established concepts of national borders by building a cultural bridge between two continents traditionally divided by social, ethnic, religious, and historical tensions, I will argue that these cultural productions seek to unsettle the viewers’ preconception of the African other and suggest a bidirectional encounter that serves to blur the geopolitical borders between Morocco and Spain, while attempting to offer ghosts of the past some kind of justice. In order to develop this analysis, this study will examine the hermeneutic function of ghostly apparitions in Spain as well as the intercultural exchange that challenges conventional notions of exclusionary borders. I will analyze the effect of people who live at and cross international borders that traditionally divide Spain and Morocco, arguing against this concept of “Iberiacentrism” that usually considers the African Other with an inferior lens. Therefore, these films construct a hybrid concept of the nation in which national identities can be altered by the interaction with other cultures from a broader world.
In recent years, the internationalization of so-called “honor killings” has forced Western anthropologists and sociologists to formulate broader theoretical explanations of how and why young migrant women face familial violence not only in the sending countries from which their immigrant communities hail, but also in the EU and North America. While European social scientists are now attempting to anchor their explanations in a framework of ethnicity and religion in relation to Turkish and Kurdish victims and are elaborating on the topics of a non-Western perspective and value judgments that are a legacy from colonial times, underdevelopment, poverty, and anti-Islamism; Turkish researchers in Europe are trying to further explain issues such as imported brides, dowry practices, forced marriages, blood feuds and honor killings in the context of hostility they see being expressed against Turkey and Islam in Europe, pointing to the fact that cultural values such as honor become a source of distinction and difference in a remote land where the diasporic individual encounters the other, and that these cultural values can sometimes be considered a resistance against assimilation. Meanwhile, the number of novels and films addressing the issue of honor killings, and in particular, giving voice to young Muslim victims/survivors, has increased significantly in the past 5-10 years; and many of these literary and cinematic narratives – including the works I will examine, Elif Sáfak’s 2012 novel Honour and Feo Aladag’s 2010 film Die Fremde (English title: When We Leave) – have reached a sizeable transnational audience. Unfortunately, some of these best-sellers and box office hits, although well-intentioned, have merely sensationalized this complicated issue, and moreover, reinforced many readers’/viewers’ belief in the “clash of civilizations” via their un-nuanced portrayal of Islamic characters that not only embody the problematic role of the ‘Other’, but that are also forced into stereotypes designed from a Western biased perspective to be the epitome of fundamentalism and hatred versus the civilization and modernity represented by white, wealthy westerners. In order to begin to connect critical analysis of particular fictional and semi-fictional “honor killing” narratives to the larger study of ways in which Muslim identities are shaped, dealt with, investigated and problematized in literary narratives and on the screen, this paper will examine the narrative logic and potential social impact of two well-received transnational “texts” about Turkish/Kurdish immigrants in Europe: the latest post-modern novel by Turkish writer Elif Sáfak, first published in English in Great Britain in 2012, and the feature film produced by Austrian filmmaker Feo Aladag and her team of German-Turkish actors in 2010, which became Germany’s selection for the 2011 Academy Awards. Ultimately, I will argue that the narrative logic of mythical realism in Aladag’s film, in which patriarchal violence toward “the Muslim woman” appears inevitable and omnipresent – regardless of whether she is in Turkey or Europe, whether she wears a headscarf or does not, or whether the perpetrator of that violence appears integrated into, or hostile toward, proper Northwest European secular liberalism – leaves little room for Western viewers to imagine an alternative life experience for Muslim women. Although the film’s emotional and aesthetic impact is undeniably visceral, its dialogic silence surrounding the complex cultural and intercultural forces at play in the narrative works against the viewer. Namely, instead of facilitating greater understanding of the complex web of values in which honor killings are embedded, When We Leave reinforces already well-established negative stereotypes about Turkish culture and Islam. Conversely, I will argue that
Saffak’s novel, in which the honor killing of a Kurdish immigrant woman by her teenage son is established in the very first chapter as a foregone fact, makes use of multiple narrator perspectives and more detailed exploration of the particular ethnic, socio-cultural, familial and individual dynamics which lead up to and compose the Toprak family’s multi-generational tragedy. Her narrative, particularly the segments set in the Kurdish village on the Euphrates, relies to a certain extent upon elements of magical realism to move the plot and offer a non-European perspective on appropriate responses to tragedy; yet the mapping and intertwining of destinies collectively, rather than any single consciousness portrayed, prompts the reader to search for a multi-faceted explanation for – and to even identify with – the choices each character makes, including the father Adem’s decision to marry and his son’s decision to kill for honor. Saffak’s depiction of particular Turkish/Kurdish and British localities and their social milieus and customs at various points in time between 1954 and 1992, which is significantly more detailed than Aladag’s cinematic portrayal of Turks and Germans’ lives in contemporary Istanbul and Berlin, also serves to demystify the ‘Other’ and make the unknown more accessible. Although both Saffak and Aladag walk a fine line between sensitizing their transnational audience to the international nature of honor killings and sensationalizing the very subject matter they intend to criticize, Saffak’s Honour displays more potential to positively impact European public opinion and Western/Turkish popular discourse on the issue of honor killings, bringing it in line with the broadened theoretical explanations currently being offered by anthropologists and sociologists around the world.


The history of comparative literature in the Arab world is the history of trans-Mediterranean literary relations. Concentrating on the fortunes of comparative literature in the Arab world, this paper will examine how the discipline rose, waned and rose again over the course of the twentieth century. By paying close attention to books, journals and university curricula alongside political developments, this paper will argue that comparative literature in Arabic is a transcultural product of modernity and political crisis. It will show how the selective mid-twentieth-century assimilation of French comparativism in the Arab world was conditioned by the contradictory forces of post-World War II cosmopolitanism and regional crisis. The ongoing contestation eventually rebounded to Europe in the form of a literary criticism that was tributary to postcolonial theory a quarter-century later. It emerges from this study that just as art and literature are conditioned by history, so academic currents and fields of study in the Mediterranean are conditioned by ideological convictions and political forces.

4. "Toward a Trans-Mediterranean Acoustics of Loss in Edmond El-Maleh's A Thousand Years, One Day," Michal Raizen, Univ. of Texas, Austin
Edmond El-Maleh’s 1986 novel *A Thousand Years, One Day* chronicles the vertiginous journey of a Jewish Moroccan protagonist to his childhood home and to the dilapidated seaside cemetery where his grandfather is buried. Nessim’s voyage, which unfolds as a temporally and geographically fragmented series of sensory associations and involuntary memories, is precipitated by a desire to reconstitute in his mind the bygone Mediterranean world detailed in his grandfather’s letters. Composed in Judeo-Arabic and written in Hebrew script, these letters, which Nessim has committed to memory, offer an intimate glimpse into the comings and goings of a community whose millennial history was ruptured with the mass exodus of North African Jews in the mid-twentieth century. Among the striking features of El-Maleh’s labyrinthine meditation on this historical déchirure (tear), to borrow a term from the novel, is the author’s portrayal of the Mediterranean region as an acoustic chamber resounding with multiple and inextricably bound narratives of loss and displacement. This paper attends to the concept of a trans-regional acoustics of loss through a reading of a concept that I am characterizing as liturgical aphasia. As the narrator of *A Thousand Years, One Day* constantly reminds us, Nessim does not know Hebrew and therefore cannot recite the Mourner’s Kaddish, or Jewish prayer for the dead. Though Nessim’s introspection is marked by grief over the dissolution of the Moroccan Jewish community, his thoughts are continuously punctuated by the image of a Palestinian child wounded in the Sabra and Shatila massacre. Faced with an inability to recite the Mourner’s Kaddish, Nessim repeats the word Kaddish over and over again until the word itself starts to constitute a dirge, “a Hebrew word for the Arab child.” Through my reading of the theme of liturgical aphasia, I am exploring how El-Maleh refigures the act of mourning as a means of empathetic listening.