The Center for Arab & Middle Eastern Studies American University of Beirut

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The Insomniac Feast: Ahmad Faris al-Shidyaq's Literary Digest

Dr. Rana Issa, Department of English, AUB

As an emblem for a period of cultural iterations, the temporality of the *nahda* synchronizes around key events, and a unified narrative. The metaphor of awakening synchronizes the literary output of the *nahda* around a shared temporal starting point that separates them from the time of stupor. Al-Shidyaq by contrast rejected the enlightenment as a metaphor for scholarly value and pursuit, and with that he also rejected the binaries of rupture and continuity that framed the entire nahdawi problematics of canon. Replacing the *nahda* with the excessive wakefulness of insomnia, al-Shidyaq would suffer the pressures of the nights' *raḥṣ* and *ḍaghṭ* as the only critical temporality available in an age known for its insistence on temporal synchronizations and awakenings. Rather than rupture with the past to celebrate the Abbasids' mythological glories, as his contemporaries were doing, al-Shidyaq's insomnia makes no grand proclamations about the past. In his attitude towards the canon, tradition is no longer approached through the binaries of rupture and continuity, but against an insomniac temporality of excess that seeks transgression.

Video Dealers in Iran:
The Labor of Informal Media Distribution

Dr. Blake Atwood, Department of Sociology, Anthropology and Media Studies, AUB

In 1983 the newly established Islamic Republic banned all video technology. Until 1994 the personal use of home video equipment, including videocassettes and VCRs, constituted a crime, punishable with fines, jail time, and even lashings. In reality, this extreme form of regulation did little to curtail the use of home video. Instead, it drove the circulation of videocassettes underground, where a robust distribution network emerged, renting everything from Hollywood action films to Indian musicals. At the heart of this system were video dealers, who moved quietly through city streets with briefcases full of videocassettes, delivering movies for rent to their customers. Video dealers bore the responsibility of transporting contraband items between private and through public spaces. Beyond this crucial act, they also served as tastemakers by curating the content people consumed and instructing them on how to interact with a new media technology. It would be easy to disregard video dealers as middlemen responsible only for the logistics of moving videocassettes from one place to another. In this presentation, however, I demonstrate that video dealers were actually cultural laborers, even as they worked informally outside the bounds of state and corporate regulation. I show that to understand video dealing as a unique form of media work, we need to foreground the creativity implicit in the labor they performed. Today's new economy—which treats creativity as a commodity—has transformed many forms of cultural work into invisible, unregulated labor. A historical case like the Iranian video dealer attunes us to the many entanglements between creativity, labor, and subjectivity.

Worlds in Motion:
Al-Bustani's Arabic Encyclopedia (*Da'irat al-Ma'arif*) and the Global Production of Knowledge in the Late Ottoman Levant and Egypt (1870s-1900)

Dr. Ilham Khuri-Makdisi, Department of History and Archaeology, AUB

My paper examines the making of the first modern Arabic encyclopedia, *Da'irat al- Ma'arif*, which was launched by Butrus al Bustani in 1876, and over the following quarter of a century, produced eleven volumes covering the first ten letters of the Arabic alphabet. It analyzes the *Da'ira*'s role as a major marker and maker of its times, and as an oeuvre that sheds light on the production and hierarchy of knowledge Bustani and the *nahda* were actively shaping and promoting. The *Da'ira* was a self-consciously global project: it sought to represent the world and provide information about it, both past and present; and, in the late 19th century, it relied on, absorbed, synthesized, selectively included, and engaged with works produced in different parts of the world and different languages through a vast project of translation. At the same time, the *Da'ira* was naturally heavily reliant on local Arabic (and less so, Ottoman Turkish) sources, both contemporary and historical. The paper examines the interplay between these various sources, their place, weight and the way they were woven together to create a new, unique narrative in the Encyclopedia. More broadly, it argues that late 19th century encyclopedias were a privileged site and medium for the making of global knowledge, and that their study sheds light on the circulation, translation, transformation and adaptation of words, concepts, discourses, information and texts that were becoming current currency, and in the case of texts, canonical, throughout the world in the late 19th century.