



ARAB CULTURAL STUDIES

Mapping the Field

EDITED BY

TARIK SABRY

I.B. TAURIS

Tarik Sabry is Senior Lecturer in Media and Communication Theory at the University of Westminster. He is the author of *Cultural Encounters in the Arab World: On Media, the Modern and the Everyday* (I.B.Tauris, 2010) and is co-editor of the *Middle East Journal of Culture and Communication*.

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This book is dedicated to Mohamed El-Bou'zizi
and others who sacrificed their lives for
a free and democratic Arab world.

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1

Introduction

Arab Cultural Studies: Between 'Reterritorialisation' and 'Deterritorialisation'

Tarik Sabry

[...] beginning with beginning will consist of an operation which [...] will have already begun. Even though this means that a procedure has already been identified, more will still be at stake here in this particular beginning than what would amount to nothing other than an assessment of the viability of a procedure which was itself advanced in terms of a beginning that did no more than concern itself with beginnings. In this instance there will be a different point of departure involving a substitution of that which is taken to be central. What this will mean at this stage is that the strategy that comes to be articulated within the terms set by the posited centrality of beginnings will itself be taken as central. (Andrew Benjamin, 1993: 3)

Beginning with *beginning*

Over the last decade, while many scholars researching 'Arab media', both in Western and Arab academe, worked ceaselessly thinking and writing about different aspects of this relatively new area of research, I found myself pre-occupied with epistemic questions, a persistent one being: how can the deficit in the contemporary Arab cultural repertoire benefit from a critical

Arab cultural studies¹ project? This intellectual interest was driven by even more nagging questions around the cultural *spatialities* and *temporalities* within which the field was being framed, its hermeneutics and the historical moment(s) to which it was responding. Grappling with such concerns, as a way of beginning with *beginning*, at a time when most scholars have been preoccupied with unpacking the structures of Arab transnational/digital media and their 'effects' on Arab societies, seemed in comparison to be far less urgent and, perhaps, discouragingly, unimportant. However, now that what I like to call the 'hyperbolic-fetishism' (that usually comes with technologically deterministic ways of seeing the world), has given way to a more sobering *analysis*, I hasten, like any opportunist, to exploit this *écart* (a swerve/gap), to use the Derridian terminology, as an opening or even *interlude*, in which to reflect and engage in a meta-narrative discussion on the nascent field of Arab cultural studies and its development. Taking on beginning with *beginning*, as a central object of enquiry, is by no means a strategy through which to re-do or undo what has already been said and written, nor is it, in any shape or form, an attempt to discredit any kind of *a priori* beginnings. Arab cultural studies is already 'there' in different treatises, PhD theses, journal articles and books, but the problem with such a compendium, I contend, is that it is not, epistemologically that is, 'conscious' of itself or its parts-of-the-whole. Nor is it, dare I add, conscious of the historical and conjunctural moments to which it is responding. Such consciousness and self-assuredness, I argue, can only take place once we, as scholars, begin to engage with our subject, Arab cultural studies, from a position of *différance*, and as a thinking-about-*thinking* sort of exercise – and this, I believe, has yet to be done in any meaningful or systematic way. Dealing with this *écart*, as a moment of reflection, is, by way of a *beginning*, the main *telos* of this book. The chapters that follow, that come from both established and emerging scholars in the field, engage, in an interdisciplinary and reflexive fashion, with what I think are key issues facing this area of study and its development. They allow for a reflexive articulation/rearticulation of the field's many facets, including, in no particular order, language and discourse, language and culture, media and modernity, gender studies, media historiography, culture and history, the state and cultural production, political economy of the media, popular culture, epistemology and institutionalisation. This book is, I believe, the first conscious effort to enunciate the parameters of, and visions for, a

critical and creative Arab cultural studies. Its main objective is thus one of reflexivity par excellence.

Reterritorialisation and deterritorialisation as ways of doing *beginning*

How does one acquire/institute an epistemologically 'connected creativity' without losing sight of the 'infinite-sieve': the plane on which human thought plunges, deterritorialises, moves and creates, without 'stealing' or alienating the thought of the other? In this introductory chapter, and as a way of *beginning* or, as Benjamin puts it, making the *beginning* central, I argue that to articulate the new kinds of hermeneutics and the new language upon which Arab cultural studies can rely to interpret social and cultural phenomena, all the while maintaining what Lalande calls '*la raison critique nécessaire*', it is essential to work through and follow a double-critique mechanism; ensuring that both *endogenous* and *exogenous* cultural phenomena, forms of knowledge, their interpretation and the types of conjunctural immanence/metaphysics they produce, are always subjected to a distanced double-refutation. However, this dual critical process is, by itself, I argue, not methodologically sufficient to help us meet our *telos*: the creation of a 'conscious' critical cultural project that is aware not only of its own temporality (*time-consciousness/a sense of historical time that looks towards the future*) and spatiality (*epistemic/theoretical situatedness*), but also of its relational positionality to the 'Other', to other temporalities, its 'being otherwise' and of being in and out of its time. This necessitates the invention and incorporation of a whole new ethics of 'otherness', not just in its ontological sense, but also as a necessary prerequisite for an ethical form of rationality. For it to function, this kind of ethical rationality must be articulated through a two-way epistemic trajectory: reterritorialisation and deterritorialisation. Here, the idea is to oscillate upon a *plane* of thoughts, ideas/concepts and paradigms, back and forth from 'immanence' to 'transcendence', and vice-versa; a ceaseless move from/between a culture of immanence to a culture of transcendence – and here I mean the transcendence of any form of immanence. The objective here is the initiation of an ethics and ontology of otherness, a 'transcendental kind of empiricism', where thought and being are determined not merely through the ontologising of *experience* and the championing of *creativity*, as I will later propose, but also through an unconditional form of engagement with

'otherness' – the other's thought/the other's technique, thus avoiding the traps, into which it is easy to fall, that come with 'reverse orientalisms' and battles associated with disciplinary boundaries. An ethical and critical and/or creative Arab cultural studies must transcend this kind of violence, and engage in processes of negotiation; an inter-marriage with the others' thought and perhaps even, why not, it may learn to stammer in his/her language(s). Navigating from reterritorialisation or 'connectivity' to deterritorialisation/dislocation, while concurrently building and destroying, is one way to protect *thinking* from the arborescence of the tree as a structure of power, cultural immanence, and types of 'ontological imperialisms', as well as the kinds of cultural 'salafisms' and rigid binaries that come with this. It is through the double take that arises from reterritorialising and deterritorialising that thought, as a tool, can again create, creating not only from within and for its repertoire, but also for-the-other.

Reterritorialising as necessary epistemic 'connectivity'

I have argued elsewhere (2007, 2010) that a 'conscious' articulation of Arab cultural studies/media studies cannot take place without connection to key debates and problematics that are inherent to contemporary Arab thought, for what epistemic purpose would Arab cultural studies have if it were unable to inform or deal with problems intrinsic to contemporary Arab thought and social theory? To not reterritorialise; to ignore this kind of epistemic dislocation – and I cannot make this point strongly enough – means to work upon a *plane* that is simply unconscious of its own history, its own time and even of the moments to which it may be responding. The result is likely to be a highly superficial repertoire – mere epiphenomenal froth: a baseless project and a failed *beginning*. Since 'the structures and processes of social communication are deeply embedded within the wider structures and processes of a given social formation'² and because the moral/rational subject is always socially formed, it is imperative when articulating the notion of an Arab cultural studies, not only to engage with social theory, but it is also equally necessary, in order to understand 'the wider processes and structures' that determine Arab media, culture and society, 'to make a diversion by way of philosophy in order to understand how and why the debates have been set up the way they have and what they are in fact about.'³ To reterritorialise Arab cultural studies on a *plateau* that

is conscious of the structures of its social formations, and since the discipline of cultural studies has developed elsewhere as a reaction to modernity's ambivalence, a serious engagement with key debates on modernity in contemporary Arab philosophical thought becomes a necessary intellectual exercise. It is only through this epistemic positioning, as a *beginning*, I would argue, that we can distil from the multiplicity of positions that which we think is sound enough to become the interlocutor of a critical/ethical Arab cultural studies project. It is important to add that this kind of exercise must not only be framed within the context of de-Westernisation, for it is fundamental to both Western and non-Western contexts that there is a diversion by way of philosophy. To engage with the task of reterritorialisation, by way of beginning from the beginning, I revisit, and quote in full, a typology that I devised elsewhere (2010: 30–35) to describe four key Arab philosophical standpoints, some more dominant than others, in relation to modernity and tradition, a relationship, which I think is still at the heart of contemporary Arab philosophical discourse.

The historicist/Marxist position

The key figure in this position is Abdullah Laroui, a Marxist historian who dedicated his cultural/historical project to the question of modernity.⁴ As he put it, in *Mafhum al-'aql* (The Meaning of Reason): 'All I have written so far can be considered as parts in one volume, on the meaning of modernity'.⁵ Laroui's call for a radical/decisive epistemological break with the past, what he calls *hassm*, has been a key contribution to the Arab philosophical discourse on modernity. Progress and development in the Arab world, asserts Laroui, can only be achieved if and when a decisive break with the past and its heritage takes place, and also when Arabs are conscious of their own history and their role in it. Western historical materialism (Marxist historicism, to be precise) and its revolutionary politics is, for Laroui, the only viable strategy to escape from cultural *salafism*, the superficialities of liberalism, technocracy, and the only route to modernity.⁶ However, Laroui's radical break with the past (Laroui 1973, 1996, 2001) must not be confused with an outright rejection of *ussul*, or cultural heritage. For Laroui, this still remains a very important object of enquiry. What he rejects, however, are the Arab-Islamic heritage's value systems. As he put it: 'If, as the theologian/philosopher thinks value is the absolute, then the modern man is the man of non-value, he who expects nothing to be definitive'.⁷ For Laroui,

the main reason for Arab intellectual digression is the Arab's inability to realise the historical split that took place between secular realities in the Arab world and its cultural heritage.

The rationalist/structuralist position

Mohammed Abed al-Jabri (whose is the key voice in this position) has a different take on *turath* (heritage). Rather than breaking with the past aesthetically, ethically and epistemologically, al-Jabri repudiates Laroui's 'universalism' (Western historical materialism), arguing for the historicisation of *turath* by modernising it from within, so that it is reconciled with the present and with the new realities of Arab cultures. Al-Jabri calls for *al-infissal min ajl al-ittissal* (to disconnect in order to reconnect) as a strategy through which to solve the problem of the 'unconscious' in Arab cultural temporality. For al-Jabri, the main problems with Arab thought and the Arab intellectual crisis are inherent to a structural/epistemological problem in modes of Arab reasoning. The *turath* and modernity problematic, observes al-Jabri, is not moved by class struggle, but 'by cultural and conceptual issues dealing with thought and its structure'.⁸ Al-Jabri, like any intellectual, is the product of historical moments. He, like a number of the predominant pan-Arab intellectuals, Laroui included, have had their intellectual formations shaped by key historical events: the occupation of Palestine in 1948, the nationalisation of the Suez Canal by Nasser in July, 1956, and the Arab-Israeli wars of 1967 and 1973. These events have shaped a whole political consciousness, and have dictated the kind of hermeneutics relied upon to interpret 'Arabness' and 'Arab culture' by a whole generation of Arab intellectuals. The pan-Arab interpretation of culture's function is an interesting one. The term 'Arab world' is divided into two unifying terminologies: *Al-watan al-Arabi* and *al-ummah al-Arabiya*. The first denotes geographic unity; the second alludes to some sort of spiritual ('Din' religion) common experience.⁹ According to al-Jabri, the main historical characteristic of 'culture' is inherent to its function as a unifier. Here, the awakening of Arab consciousness is predicated on culture's ability to unify. Culture's historical function and purpose, according to al-Jabri, a pan-Arabist *par excellence*, is to help transform the Arab world from a mere geographic space (*al-watan al-Arabi*) to *al-ummah al-Arabiya*, a space bound by common experience and consciousness.¹⁰

The cultural *salafist/turatheya* position

The Arab-Islamic heritage is a key component of Arab culture and makes for the best, if not the only, possible and coherent civilisational model. This position is intricate¹¹ and contested and can easily be unpicked through a dozen different positions (some of which are even contradictory). The term '*turatheya*' comes from '*turath*', meaning heritage. Taha Abdurrahman (2006) differentiates between *turatheya* and *turathaweyah*. The former refers to schools of thought that privilege *turath* (cultural heritage) as a civilisational model and reference point. The latter (*turathaweyah*), however, is a more orthodox position within *turatheya* that considers Islamic heritage to be the *only* acceptable narrative for happiness, and it vehemently and defensively rejects all others. There is no room for otherness, tolerance or double-identity in this position. Abdurrahman also distinguishes between *hadathayah* and *hadathaweyah*. A *hadathi* refers to an intellectual who embraces modernity as a necessary phase of human development and who is prepared to negotiate a local narrative of the modern (al-Jabri is a good example of this). A *hadathawi*, however, is the kind of radical intellectual, perhaps like Laroui, who is not afraid to argue for a decisive break with the past. The culturally salafist position varies from the *turathi* to the *turathawi*. What gives the culturally salafist position some sort of coherence, as a discursive formation, is its adherents' hanging on to the 'utopian idea of a recoverable past',¹² the thinking/methodology, perhaps illusory, that answers to the Arab/Islamic world's present problems can be found in a past or timeless temporality (the golden Islamic era of *al-salaf al-salih*).¹³ From this position, the struggle is driven by the privileging of the past over the present and an illusory *authenticity over difference*.

The anti-essentialist position: deterritorialisation as double-critique

Running parallel to these three dominant positions lies a fourth discourse that has remained almost unnoticed at the margins of contemporary Arab thought. Its advocates call their philosophy that of *tajawuz* (a philosophy promising to surpass the duality problematic between modernity and tradition). This group may hold the key to the Arab intellectual impasse, but they face both endogenous and exogenous obstacles, and the two are inter-related. Historically, when under outside threat (and here I refer to imperialism), Arab scholars have tended to veer from being enlightened

rationalists to becoming traditionalists (Laroui, 1976). Here, the first casualty is thought itself, as it shifts from the rational to the dogmatic. This also explains why the work of contemporary Arab thinkers, such as Abdelkabar Khatibi (1980),¹⁴ ‘Abdel-Salam Binabdal’ali (1983, 2000, 2002), Abdul-Aziz Boumesshouli (2001, 2003, 2005, 2006, 2007), Fatima Mernissi and the late Edward Said (there are, of course, other examples) has never found the same resonance or reception on the Arab intellectual scene, as work that is embedded in the essentialist ideologies of cultural unity: nationalism, pan-Islamism and pan-Arabism. The threat of imperialism prompted defensive reactionary positions; ones that justified intoxicated discourses of unity and salafism. Imperialism, it is important to add, is a system that subverts not only consciousness and institutional structures, but also thought and its development. This fourth position can be encapsulated in the philosophy of *tajawuz*.¹⁵ Its key intellectuals reject ideological discourses of identity, and situate heritage, and even modernity, within a position of *différance*, where both tradition and philosophy become objects of critique and subversion, thus Khatibi’s famous call for a double-semiotics and *double-critique* as *double death* (here, ‘death’ implies the birth of difference as the source of new questions, new *écarts* and ways of knowing). The advocates of this position, headed by Khatibi, constitute a very small minority in contemporary Arab thought. They champion otherness, alterity, pluralism, fragmentation, non-linearity and the constant questioning of essentialised Arab discourses around *becoming*. *Turath*, for them, to use Khatibi’s phrase, is nothing other than ‘the return of the forgotten dead’.¹⁶ Khatibi finds the ‘savage difference’ *vis-à-vis* the West and what he calls ‘blind identity’, naïve, patriotic, nationalist, ideological and leading to nothing but a theoretical trap. Instead, he calls for critical work that disturbs the metaphysical soils monopolising Arab thought, mainly: the metaphysics of God or *lahut*, the metaphysics of sects or *mazahib*, and the metaphysics of technique.¹⁷ Khatibi’s take on history and *turath* is different from Laroui’s, as he refuses to articulate *turath* through any philosophy of History.¹⁸ He critiques Laroui’s ideological take on history for its generalisations (*shumuleyat*) and considers it a type of metaphysics that champions organisation, continuity and *will*, but does not consider difference, otherness, chaos or non-linearity (1980). Binabdal’ali, on the other hand, stresses that Arab thought cannot move forward unless its problematics are framed within key changes or ‘revolutions’ in world

contemporary thought: a) a semiological revolution that led to a re-examination of *interpretation* and the creation of meaning; b) an epistemological revolution that disturbs the philosophy of the *cogito*, and c) the philosophical revolution that reversed Platonism, championing the truth of the body.¹⁹ Thought in the Arab cultural repertoire has become stagnant, affirms Binabdal'ali, because it has become disconnected from *event*²⁰ and thus calls for a reconnection between Arab philosophy and event. Both Khatibi and Binabdal'ali champion universalism and the deterritorialisation of thought. Binabdal'ali uses Heidegger's take on *metaphysics* and Derrida's deconstructionist approach to articulate his position in relation to *turath* and to other key aspects of thought in the Arab philosophical repertoire. He calls for a rereading of *turath* with *différance* as a way of surpassing it. His take on *différance*, as a way of dealing with essentialised forms of identity and *turath*, can also be traced back to Hegel's *dialectics*, but Binabdal'ali argues for a different kind of *dialectics*, one that liberates difference from fixed and absolute forms of oppositionality. He calls for a distancing of the two opposites, so they are brought nearer – and that is exactly what Heidegger means by 'ontological difference'.²¹ Binabdal'ali and his followers from the same intellectual position, seek to surpass not only naive *metaphysics*, as we live it in the Arab Islamic world, but also philosophical metaphysics.²²

To reiterate, it is this epistemic position within contemporary Arab thought; its ethics of 'otherness' and its nuanced take on knowledge and self-identity, which needs to be strengthened and developed. The task here is to reposition this school of thought, shifting it from the margins of Arab thought to the centre of our thinking about Arab culture and society and, indeed, Arab cultural studies. Of course, this typology by no means encompasses, or even represents contemporary Arab thought. It is merely a metonym for a vast compendium, and to pretend otherwise would be misleading. There remain many acts of 'divergence' yet to be attempted and, as such, the intellectual task of reterritorialisation has to be seen as a process, an ongoing project. Especially important to the development of a reterritorialised Arab cultural studies are debates centred on Arab modes of political reasoning, to which both Abdullah Laroui's work on the 'state' and Mohammed Abed al-Jabri's critique of 'Arab political reason' remain extremely important. Equally important is the work of Abdullah Al-Ghathami on Arab 'cultural criticism'.

On the necessity to ontologise and temporalise as creative processes

In his seminal work *A Critique of Arab Reason*, Mohammed Abed al-Jabri pointed to a major deficit in contemporary Arab thought: that of the confusion in Arab cultural temporality, or what he calls the unconscious in Arab thought. As he puts it:

The temporal in recent Arab cultural history is stagnant ... for it does not provide us with a development of Arab thought and its movement from one state to another, instead, it presents us with an exhibition or a market of past cultural products, which co-exist in the same temporality as the new, where the old and the new become contemporaries. The outcome is an overlapping between different cultural temporalities in our conception of our own cultural history ... This way, our present becomes an exhibition of our past, and we live our past in our present, without change and without history (al-Jabri, 1991: 47).

However, al-Jabri, who was convinced that the problem of ‘unconscious time’ was the result of a deficit in modes of reasoning (for which he provided the following epistemic solution: we solve the problem of ‘unconscious time’ by re-organising our cultural repertoire from within, in such a way that it is made answerable to the present, using answers and solutions from the present) has, nonetheless, failed to tackle a rather urgent question: how do we go about studying the present tense of Arab cultures, in all its sacredness and imperfections? Here, I do not suggest that there is no benefit to be gained from the study of Arab cultural history or the past, or let us say, the history of Arab media.²³ Nor am I suggesting that Arab cultural studies should only focus on the present (see Walter Armbrust’s contribution in this book). The past, as we learn from Hobsbawm, ‘remains the most useful analytical tool for coping with constant change.’²⁴ Rather, I argue that the deficit in Arab cultural temporality – its unconsciousness – cannot be resolved through the re-organisation of Arab cultural history alone. An anthropological approach is needed to claim the present tense of Arab everydayness in all its cultural manifestations, to bring it to the fore so that it is assured of its time, its being and this, I suggest, is a task for which Arab cultural studies is best suited. What the Arab discourse on the ‘modern’ is not about, as yet, however, is Man and lived experience. We

simply cannot make sense of modernity in the Arab world today without making sense of what it means to be modern, and if living in a mass mediated world is part of modern experience, then a philosophical discourse that ignores this is surely lacking in contemporaneity; a key component of modernity. Equally, the cultural time-consciousness of Arab modernity cannot be reassured of its time solely through *Cartesian* doubt or through its historicist/rationalist schools, and certainly not through its salafist schools. Furthermore, the Arab discourse on modernity is so influenced by Western thought and methodology, (especially the 'rationalist' and 'historicist' positions) that it has unwittingly inherited a much debated problematic in modern Western epistemology, which can be traced to Descartes whose starting point in thinking the world was not 'the facticity (the actual matter-of-factness) of the actually existing living world', but the 'contents of his own mind'.²⁵ This is, to quote Scannell, 'where an awful lot of modern philosophers and others start'.²⁶ The Arab philosophical discourse on modernity has yet to ontologise or humanise its take on modernity, that is, to become able to deal with its sociological and anthropological significance. Those who threaten to do just this (the anti-essentialist position) are sidelined as ahistorical and marginal, therefore, if we are to make use of the Arab discourse on modernity as a bridge by which we can understand contemporary Arab media, culture and society, we must then begin by removing it from its discourse or, should I say, metaphysics, making it an object of critique before it can become a tool of critique.

Deterritorialising articulations of Arab culture

The role of deterritorialisation is as important as that of reterritorialisation. Both serve a particular epistemic task, in which thought, as a creative tool, is able to be creative, always making space for swerves and gaps, and initiating new ways of seeing and interpreting the world. There are dozens of books, theses and journal articles on 'Arab culture', its modes, problems and future. The majority are written in Arabic, though there are also numerous publications on the subject in French, English and other European languages. The Centre for the Study of Arab Unity²⁷ alone has produced dozens of books (both single-authored and edited collections) that attempt to deal, through different capacities and specificities, with the future and challenges that face 'Arab culture'.²⁸ While the number of publications that deal with the challenges facing 'Arab culture' (and here I use the category

'Arab culture' in the most generic and unreflexive fashion), demonstrates the importance that this category occupies in the contemporary Arab cultural repertoire, it would be facile and simplistic to use 'abundance' or quantity as measures for, or assessments of, the quality of this repertoire. The undeniable richness and diversity of such work is undermined by key problems that have prevented the study of Arab culture's metamorphosis from a fragmented whole into a conscious and conjunctional intellectual project. When I say 'conscious', I do not exactly mean 'political consciousness', for much of the work on 'Arab culture' is driven by a clear historicist telos. What is somewhat ironic is that while the historicisation of the category 'Arab culture' has encouraged its development into a politically conscious and coherent intellectual project, it has simultaneously alienated other types of hermeneutics about 'culture', especially those competing for broader and non-essentialist definitions, thus limiting what can be said, thought and studied about this category beyond the prism of the ideological and the kinds of *metaphysics* this brings with it. This epistemic deficit has already had a clear effect on the level of media research in the Arab world, where academics tend to consider information/news-led research as being more important, let us say, than media research centred on entertainment or other aspects of popular culture (see Walter Armbrust's chapter in this book). The framing of 'Arab culture' within pan-Arabist, nationalist, Islamicist and Salafist discourses has indeed contributed to the historicisation of the category 'Arab culture', but this process, I contend, has, in the meantime, led to an *epistemological* impasse, underlined by the dominance of very few interpretations of 'Arab culture'. Here, the political historicisation of 'culture' becomes a mere philosophical metaphysics, as it limits what can be said about Arab culture or identity to a narrow and fixed frame of analysis. So, by the 'unconscious' in the discourse on 'Arab culture' in the first instance, I am referring to an epistemic and paradigmatic deficit, and not necessarily to a political one (although the two are, of course, not entirely unrelated). Just as there are multiple discourses on the 'modern' and 'modernity' in the Arab cultural repertoire (some more dominant than others), there are also different discourses on 'culture'. These two contested thought positions are relational, since those discourses that dominate debate on modernity and tradition also dictate how the category 'culture' is articulated, thought of and appropriated. All three dominant positions in Arab thought (the historicist, the rationalist/structuralist, the cultural

salafist) articulate the category culture within frames that justify the *telos* of that ideological position. This leaves the fourth and less dominant position (the anti-essentialist position), discussed, yet again, on the margins of Arab cultural/identity discourse. The dominant discourses on 'Arab culture' are still frozen at a metaphysical, *Cartesian* and, one might add, an aesthetic/élitist stage, almost oblivious to the anthropological factors and the socio-economic and cultural transformations that determine contemporary Arab cultures and societies. What is required here is not so much a task of bridging or reterritorialisation, as argued above, but one of *dislocation* and deterritorialisation. Here, the intellectual task is to expose the artificial, discursive conjunction between Arab thought (the philosophical repertoire/its historicised discourses of becoming) and its articulations of culture – that is to say, to break and unveil this artificial conjunction by removing it from its discourse. The point of dislocating/disturbing the conjunction between articulations of culture and the discourses of Arab *becoming* should not be confused with an attack on any possible form of Arab historicity. This would be to miss the point. Nor should this be confused with an attempt to depoliticise Arab cultures or, indeed, discourses on Arab cultures. If we are to consider 'Arab cultures' as objects of scientific enquiry, we must be prepared for the archaeological task that comes with this. We must be prepared to implement Khatibi's *double-critique* (1980) by questioning, interrogating and disturbing the continuities, totalisations and teleologies inherent to Arab discourses on culture and identity. The task of *dislocation* is useful here, as it will open up space that allows broader and less totalising articulations of Arab culture/identity to emerge. Dislocation is also a way to accommodate and free new political expressions and new spaces of resistance. So, rather than *dislocation/deterritorialisation* being a tool of de-historicisation or de-politicisation, *dislocation/deterritorialisation* may lead to the creation of new and alternative discourses of *becoming* and may broaden the spectrum of research on Arab culture.

Framing 'Arab culture' within essentialist discourses of *authenticity* and unity masks difference (social and cultural stratification) and undermines anthropological interpretations of the everyday. Arab intellectuals' attempts to mobilise the masses through a historicised articulation of culture have ironically failed: a) to recognise the role of 'popular culture' as a site for the production of political meaning, and, b) by downplaying the centrality of 'the everyday' to the Arab masses and their cultures. A second problematic

is an outcome of the first, and is manifest in the analytical vacuum that exists between 'official', homogenising mediations of Arab cultures, and the extraordinary range of contemporary and resistant heterogeneous forms of artistic and carnivalesque expressions, which remain notoriously understudied. What is more, and to highlight a third methodological problematic, I am not convinced that Arab popular cultures have been thought of through a concrete structural framework that acknowledges the problematic conjunctions and the fluid, yet interdependent, moments that determine their nature. Arab popular cultures have yet to be rationalised within a relational/conjunctural structure, or through a concretised foregrounding that explores the conjunctions between the social, political, economic, existential and the anthropological, as well as the dynamics that result from the interface between the 'local' and the 'global' (see Sakr's analysis of Saudi Cinema in this book). Both rationalist and salafist positions attack popular culture. While the latter sees popular culture, especially mass mediated culture, as an extension of Western capitalist discourse and its consumerist culture,²⁹ the former sees everyday popular culture as 'unconscious' and ahistorical.³⁰ In these conditions, the culture that prevails (although it has always been resisted in different ways) is 'the culture of the ear',³¹ i.e., that of deference to the state, its intellectuals (both rationalists and salafists), their 'multiplex ideologies'³² and different discourses of *becoming*. The result is rather predictable: Arab popular cultures and lived experiences, profane culture, remain, not only on the periphery of Arab intellectual discourse and academic research, but also on the periphery of political discourses that, ironically, champion the Arab working classes and their concerns (see Sabry 2010).

The everyday

The everyday, asserts Lefebvre, is 'not only a concept but one that may be used as a guide-line for an understanding of society'.³³ However, 'doing everyday life', as we learn from Lefebvre and, much earlier, Adorno, who urged us to distinguish between popular or folk culture and the cultural industries (1991), can also be a site of control and ideology. Modernity and its institutions, Lefebvre maintains, are responsible for the reification of the everyday by detaching leisure from its festive nature and replacing the latter with a mere 'generalised display': television, cinema and tourism.³⁴ It is not difficult to find examples from within Arab 'popular cultures' where

the 'popular' is reified to serve the state's ideological telos. However, are the articulations of 'the everyday' within discourses of reification, or 'false consciousness', in themselves types of ideological positioning that need to be questioned? Lefebvre's account of the everyday draws much from French structuralism, to be precise, from the one whom Scannell satirically calls the 'Pope of structuralist Marxism', Althusser. For this position, or positioning, of the everyday, 'lived experience cannot be taken as the ground for anything because it is unconscious in a double sense: it is unreflective (unselfconscious if you like) and therefore gives no account for itself. And it is also unconscious in psychoanalytical terms, and therefore cannot *account* for itself'.³⁵ Positioning everyday and lived experience along this line of thinking clearly limits what can be said about everyday, popular culture, and certainly has serious implications for the ways in which the media and their audiences are articulated (see Ferjani's contribution in this book). Perhaps, a more nuanced critique of the everyday that would be more useful is one that combines a critique of ideology with a more culturalist positioning, for instance, that advocated by Raymond Williams, who took lived experience as the ground for a conscious and reflective analysis of culture. Such a paradigmatic reconciliation was the objective of Hall's (1980) *Media, Culture and Society* article: 'Cultural Studies: Two Paradigms', but where, according to Scannell, Hall fails in this attempt, is in his privileging of Althusser over Williams. What I find more exciting about Lefebvre's critique of the 'quotidian' is his insistence on objectifying it by rediscovering it as a crucial arena for study, and also his prompting to find a new language or discourse with which to do so. 'The answer', observed Lefebvre 'is everyday life, to rediscover everyday life – no longer to neglect and disown it, elude and evade it – but actively to re-discover it while contributing to its transfiguration; this undertaking', he notes, 'involves the invention of a language... the transfiguration of everyday life is the creation of something new, something that requires new words'.³⁶ Reducing manifestations of the everyday, or everyday popular culture, to mass media is to also limit the everyday and its dynamics to the realm of the institutional. The 'everyday' or 'quotidian' is certainly a much wider and more varied phenomenon, as it encompasses a whole set of human activities and non-institutional social settings, from shopping to cooking, having sex, following fashion, queuing, worshipping and dancing. What kind of language, semiotics or even hermeneutics, do we rely on to study everyday Arab

popular cultures? Inventing a new language to deal with them can only succeed if preceded by another intellectual task, that of democratising and freeing the category 'Arab culture' from: a) the grip of the aesthetic as *discourse* (see Al-Ghathami's chapter in this book) and, b) the discourses of *becoming* that downplay all other forms of artistic and carnivalesque expressions, including entertainment (see Sabry 2010).

Otherness as ethics and ethics as otherness

An ethics of otherness does not have to conform to any immanent discourse of religiosity for it to be ethical. The focus here is on 'otherness' as a heuristic and necessary ethical modality, a kind of precursor to a more universally inclusive and non-immanent way of thinking the others or/and their cultures, ideas, languages and histories. Knowledge, in this case, would be described as 'the relation of man to exteriority, the relation of the same to the Other, in which the other finally finds itself stripped of its alterity, in which it becomes interior to my, in which transcendence makes itself immanence'.³⁷ An ethical Arab cultural studies project, as a form of knowledge, should not take as its role the need to preach 'otherness' and the kind of ethical disinterestedness that comes with it beyond what it already is: a fore-given ethical category – that of 'care'. I am, and everyone else is, always and everywhere, the 'other' since I am; and, we are always, the other's other. Otherness is, therefore, not just an ethical transcendental category, one that precedes the ontological, as Levinas would have us believe; it is also that which determines our being and is in this sense also an ontological category *par excellence*. By otherness, I am here referring to respect and engagement with for all forms of *othering*: religious, opinion, racial, gender, class, linguistic and intellectual. That is, by always making sure that our relation to exteriority is one of radical disinterestedness and respect, no matter how different the other is. Embracing 'otherness', as ethics and as an epistemic strategy, is a precursor not only to an ethical society, but also to an ethical rationality and even, to use Taha Abderrahman's words, an 'ethical modernity'. One of the key shortcomings of orthodox thought and thinking in contemporary Arab thought, be it that of the cultural salafist, the Marxist-historical materialist, the Pan-Islamist-Arabist, and there are other forms of essentialisms and salafisms, is their automatic alienation and exclusion of the other. They lay out a plane of immanence, an essentialised, teleological way of *becoming*, not realising that all planes of immanence are, in the end, always replaced or transcended. It

is, as Polyani puts it, 'almost axiomatic that the distinction between a free and totalitarian society lies exactly at this point: a free society is regarded as one that does *not* engage, on principle, in attempting to control what people find meaningful, and a totalitarian society is regarded as one that does, on principle, attempt such control'.³⁸ A radical ethics of otherness/difference/exteriority is the only way to avoid this intellectual/theoretical trap. An ethical-critical Arab cultural studies has to act as a plateau where the line of flight/escape, what Deleuze calls 'deterritorialisation', is always open, always prepared for flight; *escape*. Deterritorialisation, however, must not be understood as 'inaction', or as mere intellectual arbitrariness (bourgeois indifference), but as an intentional, creative mechanism. The flight here is not from responsibility or engagement/historicity, but from decaying and redundant ideas, from metaphysics and the myths that come with essentialised narratives of *becoming*. Nothing is, in fact, 'more active than a flight'.³⁹ Let us put the other/othering/*al-ghayriah* at the heart of Arab cultural studies; an ethics where the purpose of objectification is not one of mere reciprocity, but one of 'radical exteriority', of 'disinterestedness', otherness-as-care, an otherness 'for-the-other', and a way of 'being otherwise'.

On creativity, concepts and *planes*

It is within the manoeuvring processes of reterritorialisation and deterritorialisation and the operationalising of 'otherness' as a form of ethics, that creativity within Arab cultural studies, and Arab thought, in general, can take root. The usefulness of the double-critique method – as advanced by Khatibi – lies in its promise to engage with both local and universal concepts in a relation of *différance*, submitting both to a continuous active process of destruction and rebuilding. With this method, we are guaranteed flight or escape from all sorts of ontological imperialisms as well as from the many intoxicated discourses of *becoming* that are described above. It is, I contend, within this critical analytic frame and type of mechanisation that creativity can materialise. To be creative, or to create, is to be able to destroy and build anew, without being paralysed or rendered impotent by texts, thought or concepts, universal or local, which have, over time, acquired a status of immanence or sacredness. One way to de-sacralise (and desacralisation as an intellectual ritual has to be performed if we are to be creative) such forms of knowledge and to ensure their usefulness and relevance, is to put them to the empirical test. When

and if concepts prove irrelevant, redundant or out of sync with social and cultural realities, we then need to rethink them or to create new ones.

Here, it is important to differentiate between the creative process (the creation of concepts/paradigms) and the space (the *plane*) within which the creative process takes place. I have argued elsewhere (2007, 2009, 2010) that a serious articulation of Arab cultural studies, as a field of enquiry into Arab media, culture and society, cannot take place outside a conscious epistemic space, which then becomes the home or plane where concepts and paradigms co-exist and are created. This kind of epistemic historicity – if we can call it so – is fundamentally important for the coherence of the field and for the creation of concepts. A concept, as Deleuze and Guattari put it in their *Introduction to Philosophy*, is ‘a matter of articulation’; a ‘multiplicity of possible worlds’, ‘existing face’ and ‘real language or speech’. The creation of concepts can also take place through a rearticulation of borrowed/stolen concepts, which, because of the arbitrariness of historical moments, may not cohere in interpreting local cultural phenomena. This is because every concept has a history, and every concept is there, in the first place, to deal with specific problems. Since concepts require not only problems, but also a junction of problems that combine other existing concepts, it is fundamental that the articulation of borrowed or ‘stolen’ concepts, as a creative process, is performed with *a priori* awareness of their conjectural problematics. To give an example, before we borrow concepts, such as the ‘public sphere’, ‘habitus’, ‘post-modernity’ and the kind of ‘mad-hyper-textualities’ that come with them, we need to first trace the problems to which they were or are responding, and that is the *beginning* of rearticulation as a creative process. To further highlight the distinction between the creative process and the *plane* upon which it takes place, Deleuze and Guattari observe that concepts are:

concrete assemblages, like the configurations of a machine, but the plane is the abstract machine of which these assemblages are the working parts. Concepts are events, but the plane is the horizon of events, the reservoir or reserve of purely conceptual events: not the relative horizon that functions as a limit, which changes with an observer and encloses observable states of affairs, but the absolute horizon, independent of any observer, which makes the event as concept independent of a visible state of affairs in which it is brought about.⁴⁰

This differentiation between ‘concepts’, or their creation, and the ‘plane’, is key to understanding what I think is a fundamental epistemic deficit in the nascent field of Arab cultural studies; and by this I mean the confusion between a fragmented compendium of writings on Arab media, culture and society, as *events* for the *plane* itself which, in this instance is Arab cultural studies. The key reason for such a confusion or deficit is that the writing and thinking on Arab media, culture and society that has developed in the last decade did so outside a serious articulation of the epistemic problematics that come with the development of new fields of enquiry, and it is quite unfortunate to note that where attempts have been made to situate the field epistemologically, the prevailing objective has remained, largely, one of essentialisation and authentication. Once the *plane* upon which we are going to work becomes conscious of itself; once a definition of what it is, what it can do and how it can do it, is in place, we can then begin the process of connective creating; a kind of creativity that is conscious and assured of its own time and place. To be unable to identify the *plane* upon which one writes and creates (here, in our case, the enquiry into Arab media, culture and society) is to unconsciously, naïvely and glibly offer one’s services as a native orientalist.

To summarise, what I have set out to do in this opening chapter, and by way of a beginning, is to demarcate a double-critique, an analytic framework through which a critical and creative episteme, Arab cultural studies, can be thought and studied, in ways that make it, through ongoing processes of reterritorialisation (creative connectivity), grounded in and answerable to Arab contemporary thought and realities; and through deterritorialisation (dislocation), as a mechanism of *différance* and constant flight that guarantees self-reflexion and creativity. This double-critique, I maintained, must be motivated by a broadening of the notion of Arab culture and by the enunciation of an ethics of ‘otherness’, so that the creative process forms part of an ethical rationality that transcends binarisms, essentialisms and the teleological entrapments that come with authenticity and its intoxicated discourses of becoming.

The book

Capturing the moment of Arab cultural studies as a new field of enquiry into Arab media, culture and society is, in the first place, an epistemic task, a way of making the field conscious of its existence in time and space. It is exactly this epistemic *telos* that motivates the contributions in this book.