

IISMM Research Programme
AGNÈS DEVICTOR

The vocation of the IISMM (Institut d'Études de l'Islam et des Sociétés du Monde Musulman) is to make the contemporary world of Islam known and to stimulate the curiosity of a large audience while developing various high-level research programmes, the duration of which ranges from two to four years. 'La création artistique contemporaine en pays d'Islam' (The contemporary artistic creation in Islamic regions), a programme run by Jocelyne Dakhli, director of studies at the Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales (EHESS) in Paris, adheres to this perspective.

Several years ago, the West began to discover Algerian rai music, the films directed by Kiarostami, and the novels authored by Mahfouz. However, other artistic sectors, clearly less widespread, still remain little appreciated. Research in the domains of social science, sociology or the history of art are making but minor advancements in the field of contemporary art and in the phenomena of creative production and dissemination of works in the highly diversified political and cultural contexts of the Muslim world. Organized by the IISMM, special one-day seminars devoted to music, literature, cinema, theatre, architecture, painting, the plastic arts, and dance aim to explore the dynamics at work and to reveal the rapport between aesthetic modernity and tradition that is inherited or re-appropriated in the various Muslim societies.

The influence of Islam varies according to national contexts and geographic zones, but also according to the different aesthetic supports. It is through the joint perspective of specialists in the social sciences, those in charge of institutions, and artists, that questions arise concerning the dynamism of artistic creation, aesthetic and technical modernity, and also the role of the state and private actors (sponsorship, censure) in contemporary artistic creation in Muslim societies. The objective of the programme on 'The contemporary artistic creation in Islamic regions' is to present an overview of contemporary works in the various Islamic regions, so as to offer new insight into this phenomenon.

During a first meeting on 24 November 2000, the coordinators of the various one-day seminars formulated the most salient issues within contemporary artistic creation in Muslim countries, thus inaugurating the programme with ambitious research perspectives. Already, the relations that artistic creation maintains with the West, with tradition, and with Islam presented themselves as determining factors in the different systems of creative production.

Hadj Miliani, professor of literature at the University of Mostaganem, Algeria, in charge of the one-day seminars devoted to music and to theatre, encourages reflection centred more on the modes of production than on an aesthetic evaluation of the works at hand, which leads to favouring the collective rather than the individual. With the Maghreb as point of departure, he proposes four axes of reflection: the definitions of actors within a culture, the various competing registers and languages, the relations with the outside (whether that be an Arab foreigner or a Westerner), and the rapport with heritage, with cultural patrimony.

Sylviane Leprun, professor of plastic arts at the University of Bordeaux demonstrates that the nature of the relations between African artists and the West is such that it is as if the formers' creative production could not exist without reference to, or explicit markers of, the latter.

Contemporary African plastic arts appeared in the West with the Festival Mond-

al des Arts Africains (World Festival of African Arts) of 1966, indicating that Africa was perceived as a monolithic bloc in terms of creative production. Nonetheless, the question of an identity-based art was already present and still underlies artistic creation today. Professor Leprun, specializing in African arts, emphasizes the specificity of 'installation' art in Africa – a very dynamic branch since the 1970s – characterized by recuperation and re-use. The influence of Islam is difficult to situate in African cultures, since Western ethnography contributed for almost a century to erasing the traces. The remarkable use of calligraphy in these installations is certainly the most identifiable marker of Islamic influence on African art that exists today.

Silvia Naef, professor of Islamology at the University of Geneva, in charge of the seminars devoted to contemporary painting and to the work of gallery owners, also affirms the influence of the Western variable on the elaboration of a contemporary pictorial art in Islamic regions. Modern art is, for the Arab world in its entirety, a borrowed phenomenon and corresponds to the theme, developed in the 19th century, of *rattrapage civilisationnel* (civilizational catch-up). In 1951, with the Manifesto of the Bagdad group, a decisive movement towards a modern and authentic art was launched in Iraq – a country that was to remain a leader in terms of contemporary pictorial creation. Silvia Naef analyses the strategies developed by these artists, whose approach consisted in improving their knowledge of foreign countries and their local identity so as to enter the international market. Pre-Islamic and popular art was thus reinvested so as to create an aesthetic that broke away from tradition. The affirmation of a lay culture, indispensable to modernity, is recognizable by the absence of an Islamic referent. In the 1960s, abstract painting asserted itself, still following the Western influence. But already the pan-Arab character can be detected by its recourse to calligraphy that tended towards abstraction. The 1980s gave sanction to the Arab identity of these works, albeit without constituting a return to Islamic art, while the last decade has been witness to a vanishing of this identity-based characteristic. The *rattrapage civilisationnel* has occurred; the necessity of explicitly defining an Arab identity has faded. Aesthetic forms increasingly tend towards a hybridization of influences.

The cinema

Agnès Devictor, researcher at the Institut Politique in Aix-en-Provence, specialized in Iranian cinema, is currently attempting to inventorize the points of convergence amongst the cinematographies of Islamic countries and to open new venues of reflection with respect to the relationship between cinema, Islam and modernity.

One of the questions posed by cinema touches upon its very existence: there are regions that do not (or no longer) have national cinema productions, whether this be for economic or technical reasons – or for religious ones (as is the case in Taliban Afghanistan, where cinema is forbidden

based on theological arguments). If there is an inequality of the status of cinema and a great variety in the dynamics of national production, in those societies where cinema does exist, it presents a certain number of characteristics such as the way the body is dealt with on screen and most notably male-female relations.

Also interesting is the relationship between cinema and the representation of a Muslim culture on screen. The Islamic Republic of Iran is, until present, the only regime that has attempted to reform its national production so as to transform it into an Islamic cinema. Since the 1979 Revolution, the cultural leaders have been striving to establish a cinema competitive with that of Hollywood, totally detached from any Western references. The state implemented a censorship that contributed to the creation of a new cinematographic language and a new narrative style – the question of whether a genuinely new aesthetic had been born still remaining.

Aesthetic modernity, as found in the works of the Egyptian film director Salah Abu Saïf, or in the works of Abbas Kiarostami in Iran, distinguishes itself by its recourse to new types of narratives, by a more ambiguous rapport with reality and by a greater freedom conferred to the audience in the construction of the work.

As for technical modernity, reflection is necessary both to analyse the reception of new techniques in the production of images and to isolate the registers of the intellectual debates they evoke in the Muslim context. The broadcasting of images on new supports could comply with the lack of movie theatres, or resolve the question of prohibition of image consumption in groups (as in Saudi Arabia).

Gilles Ladkany, lecturer at the Ecole Normale Supérieure in Fontenay-aux-Roses, surrounded by Arab writers, gives perspective to the links between the birth of modern Arabic literature and its relations with the West. He investigates the correlation between the emergence of new themes with an elaboration of new forms and genres of literature.

Free verse, which appeared at the end of the 1940s, followed by the poem in prose in the 1960s, both carriers of literary modernity, provoked the most profound break known to the Arabic language in fourteen centuries by eliminating rhyme and metres. This literary revolution was accompanied by a political rupture in which the metaphor – symbolic detour – occupies the field of ideas and engagement.

The novel

The novel, new literary genre, from the beginning of the 1960s confronts the most severe taboos such as intimacy, sex, the relationship with God, and the rapport with the West. Fiction offered a view of daily life and unveiled the troubles of society, poverty and neuroses. Similar to Hadj Milani, Gilles Ladkany made apparent the renovation language had undergone by the claim to plurilingualism in fiction.

For the coordinator of the seminar devoted to architecture, Jean-Charles Depaule, di-

rector of research at the CNRS and specialist in urban sociology and architecture, what distinguishes architecture from other arts is that it is part and parcel of daily life – it is necessarily more frequented. With this observation, he opened three areas of reflection: the influence of architecture in the elaboration of mental structures, the weight of Islamic heritage, and the particular status of architects in Islamic regions.

Architecture gives order to space. It contributes to the structuring of the *habitus*, to organizing a certain way of life, and to the rapport with the 'other' within space. It gives coherence to space and thus to social relations. Not limiting itself to certain elements or landscapes, architecture is a veritable matrix of signs linked with a tradition. Islamic heritage in contemporary architecture is very present and the referent to Islam remains an obligatory discourse. However, as noted by Jean-Charles Depaule, the status of the architect is far inferior to what it was in France or in Renaissance Italy, never occupying a central place in the capital.

This programme will produce a collective publication prepared under the direction of Jocelyne Dakhli. The research axes and problematics presented will be developed and enriched by the confrontation of different regions of interest (Maghreb, Machrek, Black Africa, Central Asia, etc.) during the one-day seminars on the different sectors of contemporary creative production. Before the end of 2002, a dozen scheduled gatherings will offer forums for debate amongst artists and other creators, gallery owners, museum directors and art critics.

For a schedule of seminars, please contact the IISMM.
See e-mail address below.



Agnès Devictor, Ph.D. in political science, focused her doctoral thesis on 'The cultural policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran, the example of cinema (1979-1997)'. She currently directs seminars on 'Cinema, Islam and Modernity' at the IISMM, Paris, France.
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