

# Researching digital narratives from the Middle East and North Africa: between multimodality and tradition

## Responsables

**Sarali Gintsburg**

(ICS, Université de Navarre)

**Rosa Pennisi**

(IREAMAM, Université  
Aix-Marseille)

**Mercredi 12 juillet 2023**

**14h30-16h30**

**Salle Clio 040**

## Intervenants

**Mike Baynham**

(Université de Leeds)

**Sarali Gintsburg**

(ICS, Université de Navarre)

**Ilenia Licitra**

(University for Foreigners "Dante  
Alighieri" of Reggio Calabria)

**Rosa Pennisi**

(IREAMAM, Université  
Aix-Marseille)

**Teresa Pepe**

(Université d'Oslo)

## Résumé de l'atelier

Narrative is a mode of communication that occurs in a large number of contexts and includes a wide array of genres. To be more precise, narrative, is a mode of thought that operates through stories "that create a reality of their own" (Bruner, 1986: 43). Narrative can operate through various means (stories, interviews, conversations, etc.) and can use different symbolic systems (spoken word, written text, drawings). Today, technology plays an increasing role in human communication, including producing and distributing narrative. The advent of digital/multimodal/multimedia content, has prompted new modes of analysis on featuring the interplay of technology and cultural practices (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2001 ; Georgakopoulou, 2007 ; Kress, 2009). However, these advances in research on multimodality and human communication mostly encompassed the Western culture, while non-Western world, including the Arabic-speaking world, received quite superficial attention from the scholarly world. It would be logical to assume that applying knowledge of literary canons in the Middle East, as well as other specific traits of semiotic systems existing in the Middle East would offer useful insights on the specifics of Middle Eastern digital narrative. With this panel we offer to look into ways of conducting multimodal analysis of Middle Eastern digital narrative.

## Programme

**Mike Baynham et Sarali Gintsburg**

*Many faces of Omar: integrative multimodal analysis of a story of migration found on Youtube. Focus on Positioning*

With this paper I aim to look into the issue of identities among the immigrant population living in the West using an innovative integrative multimodal approach. Although this topic has been in fashion for quite some time, most studies analyse either the political or mass-media discourse related to immigrants, or reflect on how immigrants see themselves, on the basis of textual analysis of immigrants' narratives and interviews. My study goes one step further and analyses a video recorded and published on YouTube, focusing not only on the text but also on the non-verbal aspect of the narrative. In particular, I examine identities/positions that the main protagonist, a Moroccan immigrant named Omar, assumes in the course of the story. I show how one particular gesture (pointing), coupled with other verbal and non-verbal markers, can signal a change of identity/position.

### **Ilenia Licitra**

*Lena Merhej and the languages of comics: images and words in multimodal texts*  
*Samandal* ("Salamander") is the first magazine of comics born in the Arab World, published since 2007 both online and in print. Its name was inspired by the amphibious nature of these creatures, as a metaphor of the dual nature of comics, a form of multimodal text based on the complementarity between verbal and visual codes. In the last twenty years, Lena Merhej, one of the co-founders of this magazine, deeply investigate the strong relation between images and words, experimenting different forms of multimodal representation: from the short animation *!Drawing the War* (2002), up to the silent book *!Salam* (2019), passing through her Ph.D research, several web comics published into the *Samandal's* project and the graphic novel *Murabbā wa laban (aw kayfa aṣbaḥat ummī lubnāniyya)* (2011). My contribution intends to analyse these autobiographical texts, in order to better explore the evolution of verbal and iconic languages in her artistic production, by focusing on the specific issue of social and personal crisis as a key experience in the search for a linguistic and cultural belonging.

### **Rosa Pennisi**

*Muḍakkirāt Mu'āḍ I-Hāqad "Min 'Okāša ilā Molenbeek": written, audiovisual and multimodal production*

This study aims at analysing multimodality (Kress 2010) as an expressive strategy of digital literature (Gendolla & Jörgen 2007; Lenze 2019, Pepe 2019) in the perspective of continuity and evolution of the autobiographical narrative genre. In particular, it will examine the production of Mouad Belghouate, aka L7a9d, "The Rancorous", who in 2016, when he was already a political refugee in Belgium, published in the Moroccan online newspaper *Goud*, a serialized novel entitled *Min 'Okāša ilā Molenbeek*, i.e., his memoirs (*muḍakkirāt*) in which he recounts his experience in Okacha prison (Morocco). In 2021, L7a9d, decided to re-tell himself, turning his serial novel into a *musalsala* ("serial") on YouTube. The change of modality, from written to audiovisual, allows the author to experiment with a multimodal communication, in which monologues and dialogues are interwoven with audio tracks, written quotations and images. Using the framework of multimodal theory and digital communication (Kress, 2010 ; Lundby, 2008) this paper explores the evolution of L7a9d's memoirs into a digital and multimodal storytelling.

### **Teresa Pepe**

*The Politics of the Visual in Contemporary Egyptian Literature*

This paper investigates the increasing use of visual elements (photos, drawings, artworks) in contemporary Egyptian literature, a technique largely employed by digital literary authors and that becomes more and more noticeable also in recent print publications. Some examples that will be mentioned are the literary works written by Mona Seif, Mohammad Farag, Ahmad Naji, Iman Mersal, Hassan Khan, and Youssef Rakha, that range from blogs to graphic novels, memoirs, poetry, and short stories collections. Using theories drawn from both visual cultures and cultural studies and using concepts such as "multimodality" (Abdel Messih, 2020 ; Kress, 2010) and "inter-mediation" (Hayles, 2007), the paper explores the functions of these images, which include: involving the reader in an active game of interpretation and establishing a dialogue between literature and other fields of cultural production in Egypt.