

Introduction

Beirut in the Global Sixties: Design, Politics and Translocal Visuality

This is a study of how visuality, art, design and politics intersect under global configurations of postcolonial historical conditions. It probes the particularity of this nexus in the context of Beirut's 'long' 1960s, focusing specifically on printed matter to interrogate its role in the modern everyday.

As both aesthetic and functional public devices, printed media inform, instruct, seduce, amuse, inspire and repel; but more importantly, they call upon individuals to act as social subjects. They perform their everyday labour in the ephemeral form of posters, flyers, leaflets and cards; in relatively more permanent periodical publications; and in the authoritative form of books. At home, in the street, in shops and at work, the ubiquity of printed matter in the mediated spectacle of modern life – especially from the mid-twentieth century onwards – paradoxically renders it barely visible. It is precisely its mundane familiarity that constantly eludes the uninquisitive eye. And yet its visuality commands power. It is articulated in the semiotic work of images, photographs and illustrations, and embedded in the cultural meanings and symbolic codes they imply. It is embodied in typographic compositions, in the visual modality of reading that typography prescribes. It is at play in the intertextuality of image and text within and outside print; and in its decentred relations and referrals to other images, texts, practices, ideas, people, objects and places – real, imagined or promised – and the affective dimension – emotions, desires and anxieties – that these conjure. It is also in the aesthetic experience of the overall graphic composition, in the pleasure or distaste it provokes, that the everyday visuality of printed matter inconspicuously commands power; and, occasionally, incites reactions in the form of material interventions – censoring, subverting and tearing – to mute its visual impetus when that is particularly undesirable.

This book thus engages with printed matter as a specific cultural form that crosses between visual and material culture, defined by the reproducible image/printed object and its circulation in multiples. It is fundamentally concerned with the act of designing as a creative practice, with artists

and graphic designers, the aesthetic discourses that preoccupy their practice, their connection with particular institutions which commission, issue and circulate printed matter, the discursive relations that connect these prints to other cultural forms and practices and that connect visual artists with the publics who view, read and handle them. This whole web of social relations constitutes the realm of visual culture that I seek to unravel. My investigation is premised on an understanding of social relations as implicated in differential relations of power and of visual and material culture as sites of hegemonic struggle. Informed by an interdisciplinary framework that has preoccupied much of cultural studies, it takes a post-Marxist perspective that foregrounds a decentred account of power and hegemonic articulation of social relations. Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe's revision of the concept of hegemony (2001 [1985]) – drawing on poststructuralist theories of discourse and conceptualizing social relations as politically instituted – guides my study in scrutinizing the political dimension of visuality.

In arguing for an understanding of 'visuality' that does not reduce investigations in visual culture to linguistic models, W. J. T. Mitchell reverses the question from 'What do pictures mean?' to 'What do pictures want?' (1995: 544). While maintaining the relevance of a semiotic interpretive analysis (2005: 47), he presses the aesthetic and affective authority of images, the sensorial dimensions of visuality. His question can be taken as a provocation to reflect on 'the visual construction of the social' (48); in other words, to consider the mutually constitutive role of visuality as a field shaped by, and shaping, social relations. I propose that an understanding of political relations needs to account for visual and aesthetic fields in the hegemonic constitution of subjectivities in everyday life; and extend this framework to conceive of graphic design as a site of struggle – a visual practice and a place of politics, engaged in making meanings, embodying aesthetic sensibilities, and carrying them in and through the discursive and sensorial dimensions of the production and circulation of its everyday printed matter.

Modernity's Double Trouble: Decentring the West and the Nation

Modernist discourses in art and design, with their respective philosophical underpinnings, disciplinary formations and aesthetic canons, were on the move through different institutional channels and met different sites of

enunciation beyond Euro-American geographies. The desire for societal and cultural change, the embracing of new technologies and the rift with aesthetic traditions, artistic patronage and religious institutions have all had their appeal well beyond Europe. In the modern Middle East, new technologies of public mediation and capitalist economies, in tandem with European colonialism, precipitated these transformations and displaced Islamic art traditions from their aesthetic centrality in society. However, this global impetus did not go uncontested. It is with this dislocation that artists and intellectuals in the Arab world wrestled. While some embraced modernism's purported 'universal' paradigms, others contested its Euro-centric foundations and blamed it for the erosion of indigenous aesthetic traditions. On either view, modernism was widely debated in the tumultuous processes of mid-twentieth-century decolonization. My analysis probes precisely this anxious and multifaceted modernist dissensus at this historic moment, enabling an understanding of the ways in which Arab cultural practitioners struggled with colonial legacies, engaged in decolonization processes and ultimately wrestled with the disenchanting experiences of post-independence Arab states.

While anticolonial Arab nationalist politics have been widely studied as key forces of transformation in the region, very little attention has been given to the role of everyday visual and material cultures in the transnational circulation of decolonization discourses, cultural forms and associated aesthetic sensibilities. This book seeks to help fill that gap. The study expands the scope of historical analysis of the modern Middle East by drawing on hitherto uncharted archives of printed matter. With a few exceptions, media and cultural studies in the Arab Middle East have privileged two distinct historical moments in technologies of public mediation: the introduction of printing at the turn of the twentieth century and the advent of contemporary transnational satellite and digital media in the twenty-first century (Armbrust 2013).¹ But as Walter Armbrust (2013) rightly insists, this century-long gap in Arab media history, in which 'vision was nominally ascendant' (Armbrust 2012: 37), needs to be filled.

Art historians have paid scant attention to printed matter and graphic design, even when the Arab artists whose work they study themselves moved fluidly across disciplinary boundaries and socio-cultural categories that privilege narrow frameworks of 'art'. It was academically trained

¹ There is a growing scholarship in media histories of the twentieth-century Arab Middle East (e.g. Davis 2005; Douglas and Malti-Douglas 1994; Gordon 2002; Gruber and Haugbolle 2013; Kendall 2010; Ryzova 2015; Shafik 2007; Stanton 2013).

artists who commonly took on the design of printed matter. Key figures that populate this book thus include Dia al-Azzawi (b. 1939 Baghdad); Mouna Bassili Sehnaoui (b. 1945 Alexandria); Kamal Boullata (b. 1942 Jerusalem – 2019 Berlin); Mohieddine Ellabbad (1940–2010 Cairo); Wad-dah Faris (b. 1940 Aleppo); Burhan Karkutli (1932 Damascus – 2003 Bonn); Ismail Shammout (1930 Lod – 2006 Amman); and Helmi el-Touni (b. 1934 Cairo). While some maintained a hyphenated art and design practice, others espoused graphic design as a political praxis, expanding the purview of their art to the reproducible realm of everyday print culture. By being attentive to the fluidity across aesthetic practices in visual culture and to the political dimension of these practices, the analysis inevitably directs attention to the elephant in the room of modern art history: art's autonomy. To respond to this issue, I rely on critical debates within the tradition of Marxist aesthetics and politics and critical theory more broadly. On purported distinctions between art and design more specifically, I refer to Jacques Rancière's recent argument against the dominant paradigms of the modernist autonomy of art in the distinction drawn 'between art forms and life forms' (2009: 103). In a chapter entitled 'The Surface of Design' in *The Future of the Image*, he exemplifies his argument by looking at how modernist graphic design of the early twentieth century blurs the distinction between sign and form, and between the form of art and the form of the everyday object (103). He writes in conclusion:

Accordingly, the surface of graphic design is three things: firstly the equal footing on which everything lends itself to art; secondly, the surface of conversion where words, forms and things exchange roles; and thirdly, the surface of equivalence where the symbolic writing of forms equally lends itself to expressions of pure art and the schematization of instrumental art. (Rancière 2009: 106)

Shedding light on understudied aesthetic practices and cultures of the visual attached to print technologies, this book critically engages with another similarly ignored facet of Arab cultural history: the transnational movement of cultural actors and the fluidity of aesthetics and cultural forms across the borders of post-independence Arab states. I propose that these cross-border aesthetic experiences, mobile cultural practices and artefacts, need to be examined against the grain of post-independence nationally circumscribed frameworks of analysis.² My analysis instead

² My work joins emerging endeavours to reconsider the nation-based framework of enquiry in Middle East history; see in particular, the call for papers by Kirsten Scheid and Annela Lenssen (2013) in which they have rightly noted that 'The region's histories of travel, colonialism, religious and cultural diffusion, and anti-imperial activism all trample national boundaries.'

situates these printed artefacts within the disjunctive cultural flows (Appadurai 1996: 33–5) of the global 1960s – at the interface of new modes of consumption and leisure with cultural revolutions, amidst shifting geographies of imperial power and emerging radical forms of resistance and transnational solidarity.

Focusing on the city – Beirut – rather than on the nation – Lebanon – as my site of investigation, I adopt a non-essentialist understanding of place that takes into account, as Doreen Massey urged, a ‘global sense of the local’; a place formed by networks of social relations ‘meeting and weaving together at a particular space and time where a large portion of those social relations, experiences and understandings are constructed on a far larger scale than what we happen to define for that moment as the space itself, whether that be a street, or a region or even a continent’ (Massey 1991: 28–9).

I thus advance a two-fold decentred approach, which, through postcolonial critique, displaces the West from a privileged centrality in understanding global modernity (Mitchell 2000a, 2000b); and, through a translocal framework (Appadurai 1996), attends to the dislocation of the nation from a privileged site of cultural locality. This double decentring strategy seeks to trouble any putative binary between the ‘West’ and the ‘non-West’ and to destabilize understandings of these notions – and indeed that of the nation – as bounded localities wherein identities are firmly sealed and homogeneously enacted. Likewise, it seeks to complicate a bipolar interface between ‘global’ and ‘local’ cultural encounters. These categories are not impermeable to one another, let alone mutually exclusive; this two-fold decentring enables us instead to understand Arab actors’ anxious wrestling with modernity, appropriating and adapting modernist aesthetic forms and cultural flows – and at times radically subverting these as they cross national borders, form political solidarities and actively intervene in global politics. To configure this otherwise is to undercut the complexity in which modernity is sought, enacted and wrestled with in and through not only the everyday material culture of Beirut, but right across the politics that make up (post)colonial subjects more widely.

This critical framework is all the more pressing in the analysis of aesthetic practices of the Arab world, particularly of the decolonization period. As Prita Meier has pointed out, art historians have often too readily adopted the conceptual categories of nation and culture in triumphalist affirmation of a decolonial ‘modern’ yet ‘authentic’ Arab art (see Meier 2010). The inclusion of ‘non-Western modernism’ as a category of analysis in global art history scholarship since the 1990s, she writes, ‘often

inadvertently reproduces this geography of cultural difference, where the non-Western must be a real place of authenticity' (Meier 2010: 19). Artists themselves may very well have made such place-specific claims of cultural and national authenticity in their art practice at the time. But their artistic claims need to be historically situated in the modernist paradigm of aesthetic authenticity, and not conflated with the art historian's frameworks of analysis (Meier 2010: 22). What needs to be added to her analysis, however, is that place-specific claims of aesthetic authenticity need to be read in the contingency of the anticolonial nationalist moment and ensuing political subjectivity but 'beyond its intellectual project' (Shohat 2000: 134–5), beyond the binary mapping of power relations between colonizer–colonized and centre–periphery. In other words, anticolonial claims of Arab aesthetic authenticity need to be analysed, in postcolonial and post-Marxist terms, as politically contingent discourses rather than the expression of essential cultural attributes fixed in time and place. Historical analysis could then move towards decentred readings of power relations in global cultural encounters that allow for more nuanced analysis of movement and fluidity in everyday life. Far from constituting a depoliticized form of liberal pluralism,³ this approach accounts for the work of hegemony in the everyday, in which visual culture and its printed artefacts are important sites of struggle.

Beirut in the 'Long' 1960s

My focus is on Beirut's 'long' 1960s, caught as it was between two moments of violent civil strife in Lebanon's history. The first, a summer-long insurrection in 1958, occurred in the euphoric tide of anticolonial Arab nationalist

³ Most pertinent here is Ella Shohat's questioning of the political agency of 'the postcolonial' (Shohat 2000). She warns that in (US) academic contexts the term is subsumed under liberal multiculturalism and that the terminological shift since the 1980s eclipses another more politically potent paradigm, that of the Third World. Furthermore, Shohat is concerned that a generalized postcolonialism runs the risk of 'downplaying multiplicities of location and temporality' of decolonization (some of which still ongoing as she rightly points to the example of Palestine) and undermines the persistence of contemporary neo-colonial political, economic and military interventions and struggles against these (Shohat 2000: 130–1). I take on board her cautionary remark on the spatio-temporality of 'the postcolonial', yet hold on to the critical analytic framework that postcolonial theory enables, as a necessary intellectual project precisely against the persistent legacy of colonialism in the contemporary ossification of a 'Western civilizational' matrix, and one all too violently exclusionary since 9/11/2001. I understand postcolonial critique as a project aimed at destabilizing the 'West' as a bounded category and disrupting its homogenous narrative of and self-asserting claim over modernity's historical space and time (see Mitchell 2000b).

movements that swept the region in the aftermath of the Suez War. The second, Lebanon's protracted civil war (1975–90), developed in the aftermath of the 1967 Arab–Israeli war, in tandem with the rise of the Palestinian Resistance in a global framework of revolutionary anti-imperialism.

A 'crossroads to civil war' (Salibi 1976), Lebanon's history from 1958 to 1976 has been amply studied by scholars who have advanced various perspectives on the genealogy of the conflict: sectarian political identities, economic disparities, competing national imaginaries, regional and international intervention. Very little work, however, is available on the cultural dimensions of political struggle. How did global configurations of the Cold War intersect with regional anticolonial struggle and in the everyday life of 1960s Beirut? What was the role of visibility in these complex (counter) hegemonic processes and discursive formations? And how did printed matter constitute a fraught site of struggle in the interlocking of global and local relations of power at this historical conjuncture?

The 1960s are foregrounded in retrospect, and often with a great deal of nostalgia, as Lebanon's 'golden years': a booming site of modern leisure and culture in the Middle East. The glamorous performances of the likes of the New York Philharmonic Orchestra at the International Festival of Ba'albek or images of bikini-clad young women posing fashionably in a prototypical Mediterranean beach setting are just two examples to conjure up the cosmopolitan spectacle of modernity that Lebanon staged. Equally promising was the scene of modernist experimentations in art and literature that made its imprint on the pages of *Shi'r* (Poetry 1957–64; 1967–70) and *Hiwar* (Dialogue 1962–7), or materialized in *Silsilat al-Nafa'is* (Precious Books Series, 1967–70) published by Dar an-Nahar, and hung on the walls of the city's burgeoning art galleries and salons. But at the same time Beirut was also developing as a platform for radical publishing in and for the Arab world, a beacon for dissenting voices and a nexus for anticolonial political commitment, *iltizam*, through the arts, from the literary journal *al-Adab* (Literature 1953–) to the radical children's books of Dar al-Fata al-Arabi (1974–94) and, not least, through the labyrinth of revolutionary signs posted on the city's walls. Many of these cultural practices and themes, which culminated in the 1960s, were launched in the 1950s and continued in fact to develop through the 1970s. The cultural fervour of 1960s Beirut is thus aptly described as 'long',⁴ an epoch that stretches beyond the artificially imposed historical boundaries of a decade.

⁴ This derives from Arthur Marwick's periodization in *The Sixties* (1998); however, it has been used more broadly to characterize the longevity of the 1960s specifically in Third Worldist anticolonial struggles (Christiansen and Scarlett 2013).

Despite this lustre of glory – or perhaps underlying it – the long 1960s were marked by domestic socio-economic disparities, institutionalized in liberal economic policies that established Beirut as an entrepôt – a node in the free circulation of goods, people and capital – in the Middle East (Gates 1998: 85–9). This political economy was conjugated with an institutionalized sectarian political system that concentrated ruling power and sustained it with Christian Lebanese at the expense of Muslim populations. These structural inequalities had no little role in triggering dissent and unfolding into violent conflict. Despite the reformist policies, state-building and developmental projects of the Shihabist era – the presidency of Fuad Shihab (1958–64) and his successor Charles Helou (1964–70) – socio-economic problems and political grievances would persist through the 1960s. While the two moments of civil strife, 1958 and 1975, share a domestic politics of contestation, their articulation within regional and global politics marks them apart. Indeed, Beirut's long 1960s were closely connected to regional processes of decolonization and complicated by shifting imperial powers in an emerging global Cold War order. It is on this account that it may be characterized as a nodal city in the global sixties.

A Nodal City in the Global Sixties

The year 1958 was a 'revolutionary year' in Arab anticolonial politics; its unfolding within Lebanon in particular staged the latter as a 'microcosm' in the Cold War (Louis 2002: 7). This former French mandate (1920–43) performed both an economic and strategic role for postwar US imperialism: the protection of oil interests and the exclusion of the USSR from the Middle East and Eastern Mediterranean region (Gendzier 1997: 41–2). Under the guise of 'development funds' and threats from 'international communism' and 'Soviet expansionism', the United States offered economic and technical assistance, such as President Harry Truman's Point IV programme, but also enacted military interventions under the Eisenhower Doctrine. Lebanon was on the receiving end of both economic and military US interventions that purportedly 'safeguarded' it from erring towards the left in the Cold War divide (Gates 1998: 102; Gendzier 1997).⁵ Less overtly, the United States assisted in counterinsurgency tactics

⁵ Lebanon first received technical assistance and large-scale grant aid under President Harry Truman's Point IV programme for developing countries (Gates 1998: 102) and later, following

in the Global South to contain popular revolts against compliant regimes. It protected unpopular ruling elites; manoeuvred to topple ‘unfriendly’ governments; and installed new compliant regimes, including military dictatorships (Westad 2005: Chapter 4). Instances such as those in Guatemala, Iran, the Philippines, Burma, Cambodia and Vietnam are not discrete cases of intervention, but are linked in the execution of US foreign policy during the Cold War (Gendzier 1997: 131). Lebanon was not spared this show of force when its compliant regime – under Camille Chamoun’s presidency (1952–8) – was under threat; on 15 July 1958, US marines landed on the shores of Beirut.⁶ The event marked the first full-scale US military operation in the Middle East and further confirmed its new imperial role since the events of Suez in 1956.

In the Arab world, Cold War interventions proceeded in the midst of national liberation struggles against French and British colonial powers and in the heat of an Arab–Israeli conflict. The anticolonial struggle was inextricably linked with nationalist movements and pan-Arab solidarities that swept the region. These movements were particularly strong in the aftermath of the 1956 Suez War – the failed Tripartite (Franco-British-Israeli) Aggression on Egypt following Gamal Abdel Nasser’s nationalization of the Suez Canal Company. This was a decisive blow to the declining hegemony of Britain and France in the Middle East, and encouraged Iraqis, Algerians, Yemenis and others to claim their national autonomy and put an end to decades of colonial rule (Khalidi 1993: 539). Moreover, after the 1956 Suez War the question of Palestine shifted from a problem of dispossessed Palestinians to a transnational interstate Arab–Israeli conflict (Khalidi 1993: 545). Led by Nasser, Egypt was a key actor in the Afro-Asian People’s Solidarity Organization initiated at the Asian-African Conference in Bandung in 1955; and Cairo became the headquarters of the Organization, with a number of conferences hosted there (see Prashad 2007: 51–61).

The Third World project of anticolonial solidarity that followed from Bandung articulated its contestation of the two world powers, bringing together struggles against colonialism, a history of shared grievances and people’s hopes for a new world order of dignity and social justice (see

US military intervention in 1958, the new regime was secured with US development loan funds (Gendzier 1997: Chapter 14).

⁶ The military intervention in Lebanon was coordinated with the UK under the code name ‘Operation Blue Bat’, which dispatched its own armed forces to Jordan. There were 15,000 US soldiers on Lebanese soil in 1958 (see Gendzier 1997).

Prashad 2007: 3–15; Westad 2005: 2–3). Historians point to two waves in the periodization of Third Worldist politics. The first, from 1945 to 1965, focused on anticolonial movements for national independence that relied on diplomatic institutional channels. The second espoused more revolutionary discourses of anti-imperialism a decade later and was concerned with neo-colonialism and the repression of the new post-independence nation-state (Christiansen and Scarlett 2013: 4). The success of armed liberation struggles in Cuba and Algiers displaced the non-violent paradigm of the earlier anticolonial struggles in India and Ghana (Prashad 2007: 43). Further afield, Maoist China offered an alternative model of anti-imperialism that supplied liberation movements and Marxist-Leninist groups with ideological impetus and material support, which bypassed the Soviet Union's strategic Cold War interests. Third World institutions and diplomacy gave way to a second wave of itinerant revolutionaries; 'insurgents that traveled the globe but also insurgents with respect to global order', notes Jeffrey James Byrne in his study of Algeria as 'The Mecca of Revolution' (Byrne 2016: 8). Their actions and movements, he adds, 'reveal a world far more complex than that allowed for in traditional Cold War narratives'. Enunciated by a new generation of Third World leftist intellectuals and militants, from Ernesto 'Che' Guevara, to Frantz Fanon and Mao Zedong, this itinerant discourse promised a revolutionary horizon of political solidarity spanning the three continents of the Global South, from Cuba to Algeria and all the way to Vietnam. As many scholars have argued, it was this radicalization of the Third World that informed a new generation of contestation in the global sixties and offered the New Left a new radical horizon of internationalism (Christiansen and Scarlett 2013; Ross 2002; Varon 2004; Young 2006). Asserting the crucial presence on the world stage of the Third World in 1968, Arif Dirlik notes: '1968 may well be described as the political coming of age of the Third World that had assumed visibility with the Bandung Conference of 1955, but now became a focal point of radical activity globally' (Dirlik 2013: viii).

A broadly similar periodization can be applied to the contemporary Arab world and to Beirut in particular. The disastrous 1967 Arab–Israeli war, however, constituted a disjuncture between the two waves of anti-colonial struggle. Post-independence Arab states had not only failed to keep to their promise of reclaiming the Palestine annexed by Israel in 1948, but in just a few days further Palestinian and Arab land (the Sinai in Egypt, the Golan Heights in Syria and the West Bank in Jordan) was lost to Israeli occupation. As a result, more Palestinians were displaced from their homes, compounding an already difficult refugee situation since 1948.