



# Bourdieu, Latour and Rasha Abbas: The Uses of Actor-Network Theory for Studying the Field(s) of Cultural Production in the Middle East and North Africa

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## Abstract

Since the events of the ‘Arab Spring’ in 2011, the field(s) of cultural production of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) have attracted considerable scholarly attention. However, the conceptual and methodological tools of cultural sociology, mostly developed for and through research in western societies, often have limited purchase when it comes to the empirical reality of cultural production in the MENA. This article proposes to introduce concepts from actor-network theory (ANT) in order to adapt Bourdieu’s conceptual framework of analysis to the case of globally dominated, transnational and relatively unstable spaces of cultural production. Two main arguments are being pursued: (1) Conceiving the field as network(s) offers a way of opening up the rigid and nation-centred space to include transnational as well as transient relations between actors that may only briefly play a role in cultural production. (2) In a situation where the artwork is the most immediately visible expression of the field’s structure, the role of objects in constituting the field must be reassessed. ANT offers ways of making full use of the heuristic potential of material objects and thus provides a privileged starting point for the analysis of fields in flux.

## Keywords

Actor-network theory, Bourdieu, cultural production, field, Latour, literature, Middle East and North Africa, network, Rasha Abbas, Syria

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The MENA field(s) of cultural production have been undergoing major processes of transformation since the events of the ‘Arab spring’ of 2011. From Tunisia to Libya in the west to Syria and Yemen in the east, the role of the nation-state and its institutions in the professional formation and funding of writers, filmmakers and artists, as well as in the distribution of cultural products, has changed and in many cases decreased in importance. New forms of art, as in the much celebrated ‘revolutionary’ art of the Arab Spring, new types of actors such as European public diplomacy organisations taking centre stage, new technical possibilities as evidenced in the plethora of online archives and magazines, and a sizeable exile community of Syrian artists being formed in Paris and Berlin are just some of the more conspicuous changes. It should come as no surprise that this situation of political crisis and transformation, in a social, cultural and economic context quite different from the one from which Bourdieu’s conceptual framework of the field of cultural production was developed, stretches to its limits an orthodox Bourdieusian approach. Starting out from the case of the Syrian short story writer and journalist Rasha Abbas, I will attempt to conceptualise this space as a transnational and unstable field in flux in a contribution to an emergent cultural sociology of the Middle East and North Africa.<sup>1</sup> I propose to think of the field as a networked space delimited by the artists, position-takings and institutions of consecration which constitute it. In order to trace empirically the construction of these constitutive elements, I suggest using the concept of the actor-network developed by Bruno Latour, Michel Callon and John Law. Following their lead, I show that the existence of the constitutive elements of the field depends on the existence of material objects. The entities involved in producing these objects, I argue, help us to delimit the field and identify the artists and position-takings in relation to which a given artist and their work must be understood in a field in flux.

## Why Bourdieu? And Why Actor-Networks?

Before proceeding with the argument, two questions require an answer: if Bourdieu works so badly for this kind of space, why not use a different conceptual framework? And why use the actor-network, of all concepts, to address these shortcomings?

The MENA fields of cultural production are characterised by a great amount of interference by political powers. Censorship, wars, revolutions, civil wars, authoritarian regimes, western military intervention, as well as aid and public diplomacy programmes set the frame for cultural production. Bourdieu’s focus on power relations, dominated and dominant fields and segments of cultural production are, to my mind, better-suited to capture this aspect of cultural production than other conceptual frameworks, such as Becker’s art worlds, for instance.<sup>2</sup>

While Becker’s art worlds lend themselves to the conceptualisation of transnational spaces (albeit ones in which power disparities are not a central concern), Bourdieu’s and Becker’s approaches face similar problems in the context of fields in flux: just as it is unclear which field Rasha Abbas belongs to, which actors appear as institutions for consecration and whence their legitimacy derives, it is unclear which conventions exist, or which are the ‘*characteristic* kinds of workers’ and their ‘*traditional* “bundle of tasks”’ (Becker, 1982: 9, my emphasis) which form the basis of an art world. Just as with

Bourdieu's literary field, Becker's art world concept is moulded on practices in relatively stable spaces of cultural production.

In a situation where the structure of the field is in flux, where networks and collective actors fall apart and are in a process of being reconstituted in a different form, objects come into focus. It is the material existence of an e-book in German by a relatively unknown Syrian author, aimed at a German audience, which indicates that something has changed. The materiality of objects – not only artworks – produced in the context of artistic production is an important starting point for analysing fields in flux, and it is for this reason that actor-network theory (ANT), with its emphasis on the role of objects in the make-up of the social appears as a promising point of departure.

## **Post-Bourdieuians and ANT**

In the past 10 to 15 years we have seen a continuous debate over the (in)commensurability of the work of Pierre Bourdieu and actor-network theory pioneered by Bruno Latour, Michel Callon and John Law (Albert and Kleinman, 2011; Buzelin, 2005; Camic, 2011; Guggenheim and Potthast, 2011; Kale-Lostuvali, 2015; Mützel, 2009; Prior, 2008; Schinkel, 2007). Much has been made of the antagonism, of the epistemological differences of their respective approaches. Indeed, Bourdieu's sociology often appears as the theoretical 'Other' against which ANT is constructed: its emphasis on social structure, abstract social forces and categories of analysis are anathema for ANT's micro-sociological approach that seeks to conceptualise the social as a result of countless associations between humans and non-human actors. And yet, a number of scholars have found it useful to combine elements of the two approaches in their analysis of different domains of cultural production (Albertsen and Diken, 2004; Bennett, 2007; Buzelin, 2005; Dominguez Rubio and Silva, 2013; Prior, 2008). While the production of art and literature holds a comparatively minor place in Latour's oeuvre, with few articles dedicated entirely to the subject (Hennion and Latour, 1993), actor-network theory has a number of things to offer for a cultural sociology building on a Bourdieusian framework.<sup>3</sup>

Most of the publications which attempt a constructive dialogue between Bourdieusian field theory and ANT start out from a post-Bourdieuian perspective in the sense that their proponents engage with ANT to address what they perceive as shortcomings of the conceptual framework set out in Bourdieu's writing on the field of cultural production (Bourdieu, 1971, 1991, 2006) and the sociology of science (Bourdieu, 2004). Those articles, few in number, can be roughly divided between articles with a broader theoretical interest (e.g. Albertsen and Diken, 2004; Bennett, 2007; Camic, 2011),<sup>4</sup> and case studies (Dominguez Rubio and Silva, 2013; Prior, 2008) with a stronger empirical focus.

Across the board, it is ANT's inclusion of objects or non-humans as a defining element of the social that proves most attractive for researchers outside science studies. It is specifically the objects' capacity of mediation, through which they influence, shape and distort human action, posited by ANT (cf. Latour, 2007: 232–241) that caught the attention of cultural sociologists. For one, it offers a way to claim a more central space for the artwork as material object which is sidelined in Bourdieu's approach; the work of Albertsen (Albertsen and Diken, 2004), Bennett (2007) and Dominguez Rubio (Dominguez Rubio and Silva, 2013) make use of this possibility in different ways. For

another, the inclusion of objects makes it possible to refine the Bourdieusian framework of analysis for art forms that heavily rely on technical equipment in their production; the work of Prior (2008) and Hennion (1989, 2005) on music production stand out in this respect. In most of these cases, the consequences of introducing non-human actors in the concept of the field as conceived by Bourdieu for the conceptual framework as a whole are not pursued very far. Indeed, the question does not pose itself with the same urgency as the authors' use of the Bourdieusian conceptual toolkit is often eclectic in the first place and does not draw on the whole conceptual edifice.

These interventions are inscribed in a wider critical debate about overly deterministic sociological approaches to cultural production, where a number of scholars have advocated a more central place for the work of art and its (aesthetic) properties in the analysis of art as a social practice in an attempt to overcome the distinction between artwork and society as separate entities (e.g. de la Fuente, 2007; DeNora, 2000; Hennion and Grenier, 2000). The focus of the present article is somewhat different in that it is primarily concerned with adapting Bourdieu's concept of the field to the study of transnational fields and fields in flux, rather than taking issue with the role of the artwork in this conceptual framework.

As will become clear to the reader, my argument draws on a number of different publications from the vast and heterogeneous corpus of the ANT-canon produced by Latour, Callon and Law over a time-span of more than 30 years. In some instances, they might be viewed critically among the (post-) ANT community,<sup>5</sup> but nonetheless they offer a way to redress problems arising in the use of the Bourdieusian framework.

## Transnational Fields, Fields in Flux: The Field as Network

The Syrian writer Rasha Abbas (born in 1984) published her first collection of short stories in 2008. Until 2011 she worked as an editor for Syrian state television. As a supporter of the opposition, she moved to Lebanon in 2012 and left for Germany in 2014 for a writer's residency with Akademie Schloss Solitude, financed by the German state of Baden-Württemberg. She was granted refugee status and now lives in Berlin. In 2016 she published her second collection of short stories, *Die Erfindung der deutschen Grammatik* ('The Invention of German Grammar', Abbas, 2016), as an e-book in German. The Arabic original was only published half a year later with the support of the Böll Foundation, a foundation close to the German Green Party, which is strongly engaged in cultural diplomacy work and predominantly financed by the German state. Abbas has written for a number of online newspapers and magazines; a significant part of her work since 2011 has appeared with the *al-raseef22* online magazine.<sup>6</sup>

This very brief sketch of Abbas's career already contains the major points where an orthodox approach to the field of cultural production is bound to encounter serious problems: we see a transnational field which is very much in flux, with many new players and newly formed institutions. As with many of her contemporaries, it would make little sense to describe Abbas as a player in a national Syrian, German, or, for that matter, Lebanese literary field. She grew up in Syria, lives in Berlin, her Arabic publisher is based in Milan, her German translator lived in Beirut when they first made contact, she writes short stories intended for a German and Arabic speaking audience in Germany;

this transnational network, it must be noted, is the norm, rather than the exception, among artists from the MENA region once they have achieved a certain recognition.

As Giselle Sapiro has noted, the concept of the field, although being applied mostly in a national framework, is in principle by no means limited to the nation-state (Sapiro, 2013) – Bourdieu himself wrote that ‘il y a champ aussi loin qu’il y a effet de champ’ (‘the field extends as far as there are field effects’, Bourdieu, 1999). But while Sapiro acknowledges the advantages of a transnational perspective with respect to the history, emergence and differentiation of cultural fields in Europe, and the existence of transnational institutions and segments of production, she is mainly preoccupied with showing the rootedness of the field of cultural production in the nation-state. This argument is convincing for strongly integrated spaces of cultural production, like those of western Europe, but it becomes questionable when we are talking about the post-independence – and post-‘Arab Spring’ – states of the contemporary Middle East. To begin with, the nation-states of the MENA region, many of them established along the lines of arbitrary colonial partitions, have been much less involved in the national differentiation of cultural production. The pan-Arab, Baathist and left-wing ideology, on which countries like Syria, Iraq, Libya and Egypt relied in building their states after independence did not necessarily favour the production of a distinctly national body of work; a national publishing industry, which Sapiro identifies as an important part of ‘nationalising’ the field of cultural production, is in many states supplanted by Lebanon’s publishers, or, in the case of the Maghreb, French publishing houses. Finally, in the contemporary field, the states of the region rarely assume the role of guarantor for autonomous cultural production. Instead, it is European states which, through the tools of public diplomacy, are taking over that role. Yet, even in this context, the ‘autonomy’ of this segment of artistic production seems questionable.

Jacquemond, in his work on the Egyptian literary field, approached the problem of strong transnational ties by suggesting that writers simultaneously move in three overlapping fields, international, regional and local (Jacquemond, 2008). While this approach has considerable heuristic value, it still posits the existence of a national Egyptian, regional Arab and global literary space as a priori. Envisaging the author as switching between different ‘roles’ – novelist in the German field, novelist in the Syrian field – artificially upholds inherited national boundaries, glossing over the artists’ and the artworks’ relevance as significant nodes in a web of transnational connections.

A final consequence is that attaching national attributes to a given field is only helpful where they can act as a shorthand for describing the institutions of consecration, the positions which have historically evolved, the position-takings, the values and the history of the space in which the actors move. In a context where the artists are constantly moving between these bounded spaces, where the nation-state and national literary field are being fundamentally transformed to the point of disappearing (for example Libya), a conceptual and methodological toolkit that has been conceived and refined in the work on the exceptionally stable (on a global scale) and thoroughly institutionalised spaces of cultural production of western Europe and the USA is left wanting. In the Syrian case, for instance, many publications, such as *raseef22.com*, or *aljumhuriya.net*, which are now well-recognised institutions in the eyes of Syrian authors did not even exist eight years ago; the share of Syrian (government) publishing in works of fiction has dramatically

decreased as authors are migrating to Lebanese publishers.<sup>7</sup> Leading figures, such as the poet Adonis, or the singer Georges Wassouf have lost much of their standing among their peers as they had not distanced themselves sufficiently from the Assad regime; others, such as the novelist Samar Yazbek, have managed to achieve considerable recognition among their peers and western audiences.

## Conceptualising Fields in Flux

In such fields in flux, how do we identify the players in the field? How can the field be best described and delimited? It would seem a little rash to assume that the institutions (publishers, criticism, schools etc.) and positions to which we are accustomed in the European cultural fields are present in the same form in the field(s) in which Abbas moves. Even the fundamental oppositions between autonomy and heteronomy on the one hand, and orthodoxy and heterodoxy on the other, which structure the field of cultural production as Bourdieu conceives of it should not be taken for granted, although there is evidence that they are operational, for instance in the literary fields of Egypt and Lebanon (cf. Jacquemond, 2008; Lang, 2016).

Instead of treating as a given the structure and institutions of the (national) field and despairing over the question in which national box to put the artist, I suggest we go back to deducing the set-up of the field from the interaction between the various entities involved. By tracing the relations between an artist, their artwork, other artworks produced in the same temporal frame, as well as other artists and institutions, we go back to Bourdieu's central tenet that the cultural field is constituted as a relational space. The use of network models in studies that rely on Bourdieu's conceptual framework in itself is not new (cf. Sapiro, 2006). Equally, affinities between the Bourdieusian approach and relational sociology have been noted in the literature (e.g. Emirbayer and Goodwin, 1994). But to understand the space in which Rasha Abbas moves – and other spaces like it – we have to go a step further. Bourdieu posits the existence of three entities the relations between which make up the field: artists, position-takings and institutions of consecration. Given the general indeterminacy of the field of cultural production, it will be necessary to trace the emergence of these actors in the first place. How did Rasha Abbas come to be identified as author, as an actor in 'the field of cultural production'? How did her short story collection become a position-taking? And how did the Böll-Foundation come to act as an institution of consecration?

In order to answer these questions I suggest resorting to the notion of the actor-network. Callon and Law's article 'After the Individual in Society' (1997) makes a case for dropping the distinction between individual and collective actors, and instead argues that all actors are 'simultaneously a point (an individual) and a network (a collective)'. This is a helpful summary of the work in STS/ANT in respect of the construction of actors. Their brief recapitulation of the case of Pasteur extensively studied by Latour (1988) helps us to grasp the main idea:

The argument is that Pasteur was not a single entity, not just a body and a soul. Or rather it is that he was much more than a body who interacted with other bodies. That, instead, he was a combination of a great number of different elements which produced Pasteur-the-great-researcher.

So the argument is also that outside this network Pasteur-the-great-researcher did not exist at all. To put it simply, Pasteur was a network. (Callon and Law, 1997: 169)

Among those different elements, objects are of central importance in the constitution of actor-networks. For Latour, the connections between humans and objects, the interaction through objects, affords a certain durability of social structures and prevents humans from having to constantly renegotiate them in the way that baboons do (Latour, 2007: 196–199). In the same vein they become essential elements in the constitution of social actors. Proceeding in parallel with the case of Pasteur, and paraphrasing Callon and Law, we can specify the question posed earlier: how did Rasha Abbas become Rasha-Abbas-the-author?

### Abbas-the-Author

The orthodox Bourdieusian explanation that Rasha Abbas becomes an author at the point when she is recognised by the field's institutions of consecration is of limited use when it is unclear how the field is delimited and which institutions we are talking about. Therefore we need to reconstruct the work that went into creating the author as an actor in the field of cultural production – and much of this work is vested in the creation of objects. Abbas published her first collection of short stories *Adam Hates Television* (Abbas, 2008) in the framework of Damascus Arab Capital of Culture in 2008, which was organised as part of the UNESCO Capitals of Culture Programme. The collection also won an award sponsored by the programme. These objects – a book whose cover lays claim to the existence of Abbas-the-author and the announcement of the award winners in the media – stabilised the existence of Abbas-the-author. Ten years on, these books, for instance the copy filed under the category “short stories, Arabic” in the Oxford library catalogue, assert the existence of Abbas-the-author, as do a number of further objects in the shape of reviews published in the wake of the award.

But when Abbas decided to leave Syria for Beirut in 2012 as a number of friends and colleagues had been harassed by the regime's security apparatus, she also lost an important part of the network that underpinned the existence of Abbas-the-author: Syrian publishers and newspapers would be unlikely to publish any of her stories, critics in Syria would be likely to refrain from discussing any new work. In Beirut, then, new actors had to be found to help sustain Abbas-the-author. Online platforms and magazines such as *Oxygen* or *raseef22* secured a precarious existence of Abbas-the-author for some time, but winning the Jean-Jacques-Rousseau scholarship of the Akademie Schloss Solitude was the next major step. An institution financed by the German state of Baden-Württemberg, the Akademie Schloss Solitude ran a programme of artists' residencies, and was instrumental in connecting Abbas to the German circuit of organisations devoted to the support of artists. It also made it possible for her to travel to Germany in 2014.

Once in Germany, the number of entities which sustained Abbas-the-author multiplied in a matter of a less than a year: Abbas-the-author appeared on the Schloss Solitude website, was featured in roundtables and readings organised by the host institution, while all appearances were duly documented on websites and in the German press. In addition, the number of texts attributed to Abbas-the-author published in *raseef22*, *Oxygen*, as

well as on the author's Facebook page kept increasing. Most significant among these publications was her contribution to *Syria Speaks* in 2014 (Halasa, 2014), a collection of works by Syrian writers and intellectuals which has evolved to become a landmark publication frequently referred to by European and American researchers on Syrian art and literature and the conflict in Syria.

The next important building block was the intervention of translator Sandra Hetzl. Having read Abbas's humorous pieces on life as a refugee in Germany on Facebook, she proposed to make the texts into a book (interview with Sandra Hetzl, November 2018). A whole new set of entities were involved in the creation of this object: the Beirut office of the German Böll-Foundation from whom Hetzl secured the funding, the German e-publisher Mikrotex for the e-book (see Mikrotex, 2019), and later the Orlanda publishing house for the hardcopy version. With the publication of the *Invention of German Grammar* in 2016, the stability of the actor-network Abbas-the-author increased again: book readings around the whole of Germany, articles and interviews in the German press made her existence manifest. Hence, in 2016/2017 the entities which sustained her existence included: three publishing houses where her work had been published (Mikrotex, Orlanda, Seccession), academic institutions such Forum Transregionale Studien in Berlin (Forum, 2017) where she was invited for talks and to participate in roundtables, German quality media such as *Süddeutsche Zeitung* (Glottmann, 2016), *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (Jungen, 2016) which published interviews, reviews and portraits, public diplomacy institutions and public organisations for the support of the arts such as the Goethe Institut which organised readings (Goethe Institut, 2016), Heinrich Böll Stiftung which funded the production of the book, Literarisches Colloquium Berlin where Abbas held a residency as well as readings from her book (Literarisches Colloquium Berlin, 2016), literary festivals in Berlin (Read!, 2016) and Amsterdam (Morgenland Festival, 2016) as well as several public libraries (*Die Welt*, 2016) where she held book readings.

Yet, it was not exactly Abbas-the-author who was successfully created as an actor at this time, but rather Abbas-the-Syrian-author. The involvement of many of the German organisations at a time when the discussion around the influx of Syrian refugees was at its apex in 2016 significantly changed the actor they helped to create: Syrian artists were, and still are, frequently limited to a role of refugee artists called upon to explain Syria or their refugee experience. Reviews of books and films mainly treat the context and documentary aspects of their works rather than engaging with the stylistic and thematic choices of the artwork – a state of affairs that these artists frequently criticise.

This points us to an important feature of the entities involved in actor-networks: they are not (only) neutral intermediaries but (also) mediators which influence the course of action (Latour, 2007: 232–241; see also Akrich, 1992; Hennion, 2005; Hennion and Grenier, 2000; Latour, 1994[1991]). Arguably, this takes a little further Bourdieu's assertion that the artist is not an uncreated creator. The way Abbas-the-author is created is in no way fully controlled by the human being Rasha Abbas. In fact, the involvement of a whole array of different entities may mean that she is somewhat caught up in an actor-network which forms an actor quite different from what she had envisaged for herself. Thus it is not only the artist's habitus and their position in the field that predispose them towards certain choices, but also the entities on which they rely for their existence as an actor in the field in the first place.

## Text-as-Position-Taking

Just as Rasha-Abbas-the-author must first be constructed as an actor in the Bourdieusian field, so must the text-as-position-taking. As such, it is the effect of an association of various objects and human actors, as we can see from the example of the *Invention of German Grammar*. A great number of the objects which sustain Abbas-the-author simultaneously work to construct the *Invention of German Grammar* as a position-taking. The book, through its mere existence, lays claim to being literature. Reviews, as well as the blurb and other texts written for marketing purposes help to construct it as a claim to a more clearly defined position: for one thing, in the present case, it is constructed as ‘young Syrian literature’ (see e.g. the publisher’s website, Mikrotex, 2019) as opposed to ‘old Syrian literature’, of which Adonis or Rafiq Shami are quoted as representatives; for another thing, its humorous nature is pointed out (e.g. Glotzmann, 2016) and made to contrast with the bleak ‘war art’ by other Syrian artists. Events such as her reading in the framework of ‘Goethe Institut Damaskus im Exil’ which gathered a large number of Syrian artists for a cultural programme of several weeks in Berlin in November 2016 explicitly made her book a position-taking in the exile community, as opposed to the group of cultural producers active in Syria itself.

It is particularly interesting to see how this text-as-position-taking is related to the construction of the text as object. As has been shown by Becker (Becker, 1982), and, with a different emphasis, by scholars making use of ANT (e.g. Prior, 2008), technological equipment and machines from pens to laptop computers and the internet, ‘raw materials’ such as paper and paint, all the elements involved in assembling a novel, or a piece of music, or an article in an online magazine, impose limitations through their materiality and design, and shape the work of art in a way that social backgrounds and life trajectories shape the habitus of the artist. Thus, humorous writing, Abbas explained in an interview, was for her something connected to the medium of the social networking site and quite distinct from her more serious literary pursuits at the time (Pithan, 2016). Making use of a different array of material objects – a different technology – for her literary work contributed to opening up possibilities, such as the choice of a different genre, which, for whatever reasons, were not available to Abbas when she wrote for classic print publication. The social networking site acted as a mediator: it shaped the cultural product in the process of creation in a way comparable to human actors such as her translator or her editor. The intervention of the translator further consolidated this object, leading to the creation of a material object in the shape of short story collection in German, which then is constructed as a position-taking with the help of the objects produced by all sorts of entities, from the publishers to newspapers and the organisers of public readings.

We have seen that the construction of the artwork as position-taking takes much more to explain than a premeditated strategy on the part of the writer in order to claim a specific position. Incidentally, the two features that made Abbas’s work most remarkable for German reviewers, and ultimately successful, are intricately connected to the interference of a number of different entities. Arguably, paying attention to the material construction of artworks is particularly relevant in fields in flux where the customary means of production may become unavailable with little prior notice. For instance, the importance of Facebook as a news and publication platform for Syrian cultural producers is

clearly connected to the unavailability of other forms of publication because of the geographic dispersal of producers and their exclusion from many media in the Syrian national space as a result of the war.

## Institutions of Consecration

Whereas the artist and the artwork are elements of a Bourdieusian framework which are fairly easy to identify – in fact, their manifest existence is what makes us engage in a cultural sociology in the first place – institutions of consecration pose a number of problems. The publishers, reviewers, the Böll-Foundation, the translator (and, last but not least, the author of this article) all fulfil consecratory functions in the Bourdieusian perspective: through their recognition they bestow symbolic capital on the author. But then, ‘capital’ as such appeared nowhere in our accounts of Abbas-the-author and the text-as-position-taking. What we have seen instead is the importance of objects (texts, films and photographs mainly) as well as the objectified traces of readings and discussions which were produced by the organisations named in this article. These objects are crucial building blocks in constructing Abbas-the-author and the text-as-position-taking, and, importantly, they associate them with a large number of other actors and artworks. For instance, Akademie Schloss Solitude presents Abbas and her work alongside that of other artists. Quite literally, their website offers visualised networks of Abbas with other scholarship holders including authors, cultural managers and video artists (Akademie Schloss Solitude, 2019). Reviews of the *Invention of German Grammar* in major quality papers (e.g. Jungen, 2016; Glotzmann, 2016), make Abbas-the-author part of a network which includes the big names of world literature whose works have been reviewed on the same pages in the past. Any entity which has a share in extending the actor-networks Abbas-the-author and the text-as-position-taking by the production of objects can be understood as an ‘institution’ of consecration along those lines.

Given that the point of this article is to retain the notion of the field whose structure is eponymous with the structure of the distribution of capital (Bourdieu, 1999), the assertion that there is ‘no such thing as capital’ to be found in the elements of the actor-networks we analysed earlier would seem problematic. The argument I want to make is that, rather than leading us to debunk the idea of capital, the methods of ANT indeed help us to explore its nature and distribution. In Bourdieu’s work, capital appears as an attribute of the players in the field: ‘held’, ‘accumulated’, or ‘embodied’. If, as I have already argued, we need to consider the actors as heterogeneous entities, capital must be reconceptualised not as the attribute of a single player Rasha Abbas, but as residing in the actor-network Abbas-the-author. The notion that capital resides in the association of various entities over which the actor has, albeit limited, control is not a thought entirely foreign to Bourdieu. The way he conceives of social capital involves a similar notion of aggregate capital:

the amount of capital held by a particular agent thus corresponds to the size of the network of relations he can effectively mobilise and the amount of capital (economic, cultural or symbolic) held individually by each of those to whom he [sic] is related. (Bourdieu, 1980, my translation)

In this vein, the amount of capital ‘held’ by Abbas-the-author can be thought of as a function of the number of objects created in her support, and the networks underpinning the actors which/who helped to create them. Thus the review in a newspaper such as the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* (Glutzmann, 2016) which has an archive of thousands of reviews, written by hundreds of journalists over more than 70 years will be valued higher than the review in the online magazine *FixPoetry* (Junk, 2016) which is not sustained by a similar number of humans and objects. This capital is quite literally embodied or built into the actor-network: Abbas-the-author would not exist if it were not for the objects in the form of books, reviews, videos, and programmes. The more such objects can be created, the more secure the existence of Abbas-the-author. Yet, it will never be secure once and for all as objects can disintegrate: for instance, more and more of the articles and webpages advertising readings which were still accessible in 2017 can no longer be found in 2019. Compared to the big names of literature, such as Nobel Prize winner Naguib Mahfouz, who are sustained by an enormous network of durable objects, Abbas-the-author has a very precarious existence, and may have all but disappeared 10 years from now. While this is the case with many young authors around the world, the fact that institutions of consecration for many artists from the Arab world are currently so diverse and it is difficult to predict their degree of involvement in the future (for instance in the case of public diplomacy organisations) makes their existence the more precarious.

## Delimitations

At this point, we can finally come back to the main question I set out to explore in this article: how do we conceptualise a field in flux? It will be clear from the foregoing discussion that the politico-geographical space of the nation-state is of little use in delimiting fields in flux and transnational fields in general. The field’s elements – Abbas-the-author, the text-as-position-taking, the institutions of consecration – only exist as such by virtue of the different entities which are associated in them – entities that can hardly be summarised along national lines. Rasha Abbas may be of Syrian nationality, but Abbas-the-Syrian-author is (ironically) the product of many different entities few of which can be qualified as Syrian. The same goes, of course, for the texts, which are either written in standard Arabic, which is no more Syrian than it is Moroccan or Egyptian, or in German and other European languages, and for the actors who play a role in consecration.

If the constitutive elements of the field cannot be qualified as Syrian, then what can be said of the field as such, as a space that is produced in and through the relations between these elements? As Latour reminds us:

the first advantage of thinking in terms of networks is that we get rid of ‘the tyranny of distance’ or proximity; elements which are close when disconnected may be infinitely remote if their connections are analyzed; conversely, elements which would appear as infinitely distant may be close when their connections are brought back into the picture. (Latour, 1996: 371)

Following this logic, the field would no longer be a space mapped on geographical space, which in turn is coupled with the territory of the nation state. Unfortunately, leaving behind the simplifying notion of the national space of production means that we can no

longer assume, for instance, that Abbas's work is necessarily produced in relation to, and connected to, other Syrian writers' work. In fact, looking at the events Abbas attended as a speaker, we could surmise that filmmakers or visual artists present an equally important point of reference. Simply being Syrian and writing texts are not sufficient preconditions to establish that the actors in relation to which Abbas-the-author is positioned will also be Syrian novelists – instead, we have to analyse the actor, as well as the artwork, to see which other actors they are connected to, via the entities of which they are constructed.

Looking at the objects on which Abbas-the-author and her texts-as-position-takings rely, we can see them being constructed in relation to various other actors and position-takings: one group indeed comprises Syrian authors and artists dealing with the war and refugee thematic. The publication *Syria Speaks* and the 'Goethe Institut Damascus in Exile' programme in 2016 are examples of objects through which this section of the field is drawn together. A second group consists of refugee/migrant artists more widely to which Abbas is, for instance, connected through the Berber author Asis Aynan who writes in Dutch via their appearance in a roundtable at the Morgenland Festival Amsterdam. A third group comprises the German and international artists with whom she is connected via her residencies at Akademie Schloss Solitude, Literarisches Colloquium Berlin and OMI Art Center in New York.

The space of which Abbas is part is not only transnational, it also cuts across art forms, and genres. Abbas's trajectory from Syria to Germany is clearly not a question of simply transplanting an author from one literary space to another. Rather, the analysis of the field's elements suggests that the space is continually being built by Abbas, her fellow artists, their work and all sorts of institutions and objects. While this would apply to all fields once we take seriously the notion of a relational space, the specificity of fields in flux lies with the great variety of actors involved, which, from a Bourdieusian point of view, is connected to the low degree of differentiation.

The breakdown of functioning spaces of cultural production as a result of the war in Syria leaves artists adrift. In the absence of established trajectories, access to resources and recognised institutions, associations with a wider range of actors become inevitable, while it will frequently be difficult for the artist to assess the viability of these associations, or their potential for mediation which might run counter to an individual's aims. When previously the building of a career could be likened to buying building materials for a house in a well-stocked hardware shop and employing a number of qualified craftsmen to do the work, in the fields in flux these stores and craftsmen have disappeared and the authors have to make do with what they find lying by the road side, often uncertain about the properties of these elements.

The micro-sociological approach suggested here investigates the construction of actors on the basis of material objects produced in process and thus allows us to delimit the space of cultural production constructed around a given artist. The actors and works grouped together in such a space are connected not as a function of their nationality, geographic proximity, or the specific artistic practice in which they engage. Instead of assuming that actors sharing similar features of this kind partake in a common space of cultural production, we consider their concrete empirical connections in the production of objects.<sup>8</sup> This is particularly interesting in cases like those of Syrian artists who have become dispersed as the result of large-scale political change, but it can also be

enlightening in other cases where artists cannot rely on a stable network of actors and institutions for building their career – one example that comes to mind is Anglophone fiction from sub-Saharan Africa (e.g. Griswold, 2000). Where well-integrated and stable spaces of production exist (nationally and transnationally), the objects produced and the entities involved may be more predictable, but still such an approach might help to understand connections and developments that an orthodox Bourdieusian approach renders invisible.

## Conclusion

In this article, I have proposed turning to ANT in order to adapt Bourdieusian field theory to the study of dominated, transnational and relatively unstable spaces of cultural production, such as the MENA cultural field(s). As a first step, I proposed thinking of the field as network, emphasising the relational character of this space. Because of the instability of fields in flux, the construction of its constitutive elements (artists, artworks, institutions of consecration) had to be analysed. Drawing on the work of Michel Callon, John Law and Bruno Latour in describing these elements as actor-networks led me to consider the role of objects for analysing spaces of cultural production in a state of flux. I argued that the social space in which an artist and the artwork exist is held together by the material objects that are produced in their support. The space that emerges cuts across political and geographical boundaries as well as across genres and art forms, which I argue is typical in situations where a well-integrated space of cultural production breaks down as a result of large-scale socio-political transformations. In such cases, it is only through the empirical tracing of links between all involved entities through relatively durable objects that we can understand in relation to which works and artists positions and position-takings are constructed, and gain an accurate idea of the space of cultural production.

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## Notes

1. In recent years, we have seen the emergence of a number of works investigating cultural production in the MENA region from different theoretical perspectives (e.g. Frishkopf, 2010; Jacquemond, 2008; Lang, 2016; Sabry, 2012; van Nieuwkerk et al., 2016).
2. For instance, the impact of large-scale socio-political changes such as war and revolution is largely ignored in the chapter on change in *Art Worlds* (Becker, 1982: 300–350).
3. See Magaouda (2014) for points of convergence between science and technology studies and cultural sociology more generally.

4. Camic's study relates to the scientific rather than the cultural field.
5. Consider for instance Law's reservations regarding the strong emphasis of early ANT work on the strategic/managerial side of assembling actor-networks – including, we can assume, Latour's piece on Pasteur on which I draw in my argument (Law, 2007: 5).
6. Much of this analysis builds on an archive of close to 100 texts by and about Rasha Abbas and her work published between 2013 and 2017, including 27 online announcements for events such as readings and roundtables.
7. While between 2007 and 2011 roughly 40% of novels published by Syrian authors appeared with Syrian publishers, the share fell to 15% for the years of 2012–2016. Data are based on publications by 210 Syrian authors who have published at least one work of fiction between 1980 and 2016.
8. The question of the rules and values to which these actors subscribe, and which distinguish this space from other spaces as 'a world apart' (Bourdieu, 1971) cannot be discussed here in detail. Suffice it to say that a number of objects sustaining Abbas-the-author show how political and economic aims have to be translated in the idiom of the field: for instance, the Goethe-Institut or British Council, despite their role as organisations of cultural diplomacy, need to frame their work as support for 'good' art rather than support for a secular elite of the Syrian upper-middle class who endorse an anti-Islamist and anti-regime political agenda.

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