Introduction:

Living 2016 and the In 2016 Project

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Abstract

This introduction presents the idea as well as the theoretical, methodological and ethical background of the In 2016 project, a research project that looks into the realities of everyday life and other post-revolutionary lifeworlds (Lebenswelten) in Egypt and Tunisia. Its aim is to provide a kind of ‘encyclopedia of 2016’ that enables users, in a snapshot portrait of one year, to ‘jump right into’ and move around (via cross-references) in post-revolutionary Arab realities; a tool that allows readers to approximate the experience of ‘how it feels/felt’ to live in these countries in this period of transition and historic change that the Arab World is currently going through. Taking its inspiration from Hans Ulrich GUMBRECHT’S In 1926, an “essay on historical simultaneity,” the project focuses on two key fields of cultural production where salient issues and ‘the meaning of life’ are regularly discussed and from where reflections of bodily experiences, emotions and affects can be collected: fiction and social media.

The present dossier special emerged from a first, exploratory workshop connected to the In 2016 project. The dossier’s objective is twofold: while the introduction will give the reader an idea of background of the project in general, the contributions will mirror a first stage in the project group’s experience: the collection of an overwhelmingly huge amount of fresh relevant material, its ‘close reading’ or ‘thick description’, and the individual researchers’ first, preliminary attempts to find the “arrays”, “codes” and “collapsed codes” that seem to be typical of living the ‘2016 experience’.

Keywords: Historiography of the ‘Arab Spring’, social media, fiction

The present dossier contains the ‘proceedings’, enriched by a few additional contributions, of a workshop, held in May 2016 at the University of Oslo, Norway, under the title Living 2016: Cultural codes and arrays in Arab everyday worlds. The workshop was the first in a series of both smaller and larger gatherings, to be continued in 2017 and 2018, connected to the NRC1-funded research project In 2016: How it felt to live in the Arab World five years after the ‘Arab Spring’; 2 It gathered a number of researchers who share an interest in everyday life and popular culture in the contemporary Arab world, with a particular focus on Egypt and Tunisia, with the aim of an initial collection of observations and impressions as well as a preliminary discussion of some theoretical and methodological issues arising from the project’s objective to produce a historiographical work on life in the present-day Arab world.

1 Norwegian Research Council (NRC) / Norges forskningsråd (NFR), <www.forskningsradet.no>.

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In the Call for Papers, the organizers had explained the case of the project as follows:

In contrast to the overwhelming focus on political and security issues that dominates not only Western media reports but also much of the research on the contemporary Middle East, the In 2016 project places the socio-cultural sphere at the core of its interests. It aims to foreground salient aspects of the everyday life, the concerns and the expectations of ordinary Arabs five years after the 2011 uprisings.

Instead of assuming that 2011 is a threshold year and the 2011 uprisings are a turning point, the project deals with ordinary time lived by ordinary people. The target year—2016—was chosen on this basis, when it was still to come. The arbitrariness of this choice aims to enable a look at cultural dynamics without a prefixed set of topics and a pre-oriented reading frame.

The main incentive behind the effort the project designers made to submit an application to the NFR–NRC was indeed to try to get funding for a kind of research that seemed to be almost completely lacking from the media coverage on the contemporary Middle East, but to a large extent also from academia, an approach that would go beyond the mostly superficial day-to-day reporting about elections, a focus on ‘big politics’ and attempts at political prophesy, the sensationalist accounts of violent clashes, the many clichés that regrettably often border on something one is tempted to term ‘neo-Orientalism’.3

As specialists in modern Arabic Literature (Stephan Guth) and Arabic Media studies (Albrecht Hofheinz), the two main project designers were, and still are, convinced that a look into cultural production and social media has a high potential to fill evident gaps, mainly because, in our opinion, these spheres are closer to what matters most—the individual human being;—because they are much richer and therefore also more adequate; and also because we have some tools at hand already that allow for a deeper analysis.

The purpose, then, of the project is to identify phenomena that are, or have the potential of becoming, cultural trends or ways of life, as well as concepts used by people to categorise and structure their experiences and to locate themselves in space and time. This ap-


– On the feeling of ‘unease’ that many researchers on the Middle East experienced already earlier, particularly after the 9/11 attacks, as academics whose expertise was challenged both by the events themselves but also by politicians and the media, cf. the collection Das Unbehagen in der Islamwissenschaft: Ein klassisches Fach im Scheinwerflicht der Politik und der Medien, edited by Abbas Poya and Maurus Reinikowski, Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, 2008 (available only in German, unfortunately); as an especially enlightening description, contained in this volume, of the challenges in face of all kinds of prejudices and neo-Orientalist discourses about Islam (‘Islam spectres/phantoms’, as the author labels them), I would like recommend Manfred Sing, “Auf dem Marktplatz der Islamgespenster: Die Islamwissenschaft in Zeiten des Erklärungsnotstandes” [roughly: At the Fair of Islam Phantoms: Islamwissenschaft in Urgent Need of Answers], ibid.: 171-192. – For an attempt at an update in light of recent developments, cf. my forthcoming article: Stephan Guth, “A Losing Battle? ‘Islamwissenschaft’ in the Times of Neoliberalism, IS, PEGIDA… and Trump,” scheduled for a festschrift to be published by E. J. Brill, Leiden, presumably in early 2018.
proach takes its intellectual inspiration from Hans Ulrich GUMBRECHT’s⁴ famous study *In 1926.*⁵ Published at a time when the writing of history was itself undergoing a severe crisis (in the wake of Hayden WHITE’s discovery of the fictional aspects of historiography and Francis FUKUYAMA’s proclamation of the ‘end of history’), Gumbrecht intended his book as “an essay on historical simultaneity”⁶ in which he as an author rather than writing about the past would retreat as far as possible behind his material and instead let the original sources ‘speak themselves’, as directly as possible. In this way, the reader should experience historical time as immediately as possible; when opening the book, s/he should become able to ‘jump right into’ the world of 1926.

Like any other world of a synchronous section, the year 1926 was of course a complex system of correspondences, oppositions, concepts, etc., a fact that Gumbrecht tried to accommodate by arranging his material like an ‘encyclopedia’, with entries in alphabetical order and the many cross-references between them mirroring the “myriad labyrinthine paths of contiguity, association, and implication”⁷ within the large variety of phenomena observable in the world of 1926. This arrangement would allow the reader to choose his/her own way through this world and to move around in it in an associative manner, exploring one phenomenon after the other.

Gumbrecht was also eager, and so are the contributors to the *In 2016* project that aspires to emulate his model, to underline the fact that the result of what can be achieved via such an approach can never claim to represent the totality of the worlds of 1926 or 2016; rather, what we can hope to get is “an asymmetrical network”, a “rhizome”⁸ of sometimes connected, sometimes unconnected individual aspects, phenomena, traits, structures, etc., a loosely woven fabric that, ideally, does cover a lot, but that also will always have considerable holes.

Like Gumbrecht, the contributors to the *In 2016* ‘encyclopedia’⁹ will try to describe “the most frequently observed phenomena and configurations” met in the ‘target year’, and

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6 GUMBRECHT 1997: 433.


9 Here and in the following, the term ‘encyclopedia’ is used for the sake of convenience only. The reader should however always remain aware of the fact that neither Gumbrecht nor the *In 2016* project have an ‘encyclopedia’ ambition (in the original sense of the word as a general, all-encompassing education and
with this the general cultural atmosphere—Gumbrecht would prefer the German term *Stimmung*—according to three main categories: arrays (French: *dispositifs*), binary codes, and codes collapsed.10

**Arrays** are ways in which “artifacts, roles, and activities influence bodies”, because these “artifacts, roles, and activities [...] require the human bodies to enter into specific spatial and functional relations to the everyday-worlds they inhabit”.11 For instance, for the year 1926 Gumbrecht identified the following arrays (my selection):

**Artifacts:** Airplanes | Assembly Lines | Automobiles | Bars | Elevators | Gomina | Gramophones | League of Nations | Movie Palaces | Mummies | Ocean Liners | Railroads | Revues | Roof Gardens | Telephones | Wireless Communication

**Roles:** Americans in Paris | Employees | Engineers | Hunger Artists | Reporters | Stars

**Activities:** Boxing | Bullfighting | Cremation | Dancing | Endurance | Jazz | Mountaineering | Murder | Six-Day Races | Strikes

What Gumbrecht calls **codes** are clusters of arrays that coexist and overlap in a space of simultaneity and “tend to generate discourses which transform [their] confusion into [...] alternative options”,12 e.g.,

**Codes:** Action vs. Impotence | Authenticity vs. Artificiality | Center vs. Periphery | Immanence vs. Transcendence | Individuality vs. Collectivity | Male vs. Female | Present vs. Past | Silence vs. Noise | Sobriety vs. Exuberance | Uncertainty vs. Reality

Since such binary codes “provide principles of order within the unstructured simultaneity of everyday-worlds, one might”, according to Gumbrecht, “reserve the concept of ‘culture’ for the ensemble of such codes.”13

When the codes lose their de-paradoxifying function, Gumbrecht calls them **collapsed codes**. Collapsed codes, he says, “are particularly visible because, as areas of malfunction and entropy, they attract specific discursive attention and, often, specific emotional energy.”14 Here are the collapsed codes the author identified for his target year:

**Codes Collapsed:** Action = Impotence (Tragedy) | Authenticity = Artificiality (Life) | Center = Periphery (Infinitude) | Immanence = Transcendence (Death) | Individuality = Collectivity (Leader) | Male = Female (Gender Trouble) | Present = Past (Eternity)

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training in the essentials of liberal arts and sciences). What is meant here is simply a collection of articles/essays/entries, arranged alphabetically.

10 GUMBRECHT 1997: 434.
12 GUMBRECHT 1997: 434 (my emphasis, S.G.).
14 GUMBRECHT 1997: 434.
It goes without saying that work in the In 2016 project has not yet reached the stage where we would be able to identify the most prominent arrays, codes and collapsed codes of our target year—in the moment I write this introduction the group has just finished the first step—though a very important one: the collection of ‘raw data’—on its way to the final product (which is planned to come not only in book form but also as a website with the help of which the reader/user will have the possibility to re-visit the year 2016 by ‘clicking him/herself through’ it, the cross-references in the book corresponding to active links in the web version). Even less far had we arrived in May 2016 when the workshop from which the following papers emerged, was held. Yet, both the fruitful discussions triggered by the presentations as well as the time that has elapsed between the workshop and the submission and editing of the papers have without doubt contributed to a deepened engagement with the issues treated in the papers, not the least thanks to the fact that every contributor to the present dossier spécial has had the chance to be each other’s peer-reviewer and to profit from being peer-reviewed by everybody else.

As the dossier is now it mirrors very faithfully not only the large variety of the material that the project has to cope with and that will—I believe this can be said with some certainty already now—without doubt provide valuable insight into many aspects of life and many lifeworlds that until now are only rarely, if at all, written and talked about in the media (from language practices to dark humour, from the approach to the past to the imagination of the future, from soap operas to ‘New Age sufism’, from the feeling of alienation in one’s own country to attempts to uphold some sparks of humanity in an increasingly anti-human environment). But the dossier also provides some nice examples of the many ways of collecting our 2016 material and of somehow processing it. While Ragnhild J. ZORGATI and Mona ABAZA contribute with personal impressions and reflections, underlining the fact that (unlike Gumbrecht) the researcher is now also often a personally involved observer, other colleagues prefer to present their thoughts in a more ‘processed’ form, trying to identify at least some arrays, codes, or collapsed codes in a Gumbrecht’ian spirit, without however leaving the classical genre of a research article. Others, including myself and Albrecht HOFHEINZ, focus on a more or less uncommented presentation of the ‘material itself’ and the voices of the sources, while not refraining from suggesting some ‘candidates’ that seem to have the potential of deserving an entry in the final ‘2016 ency’. Furthermore, as will be clear from some contributions, both of the impressions- and the article-type, we, the editors, have ourselves often added a Gumbrecht’ian or pre-Gumbrecht’ian layer to the texts of our colleagues by highlighting in bold some terms that struck us, based on our experiences and readings of other 2016 material, as obviously worth to be taken into consideration and discussed when Stage II of the project will gather way.

There is probably no better way to conclude this introduction than to draw a list of all these terms. Together with the list of keywords and preliminary suggestions of arrays, codes and codes collapsed that has been created in another place—an online working platform we called our “In 2016 Researchers’ Notebook”—this list serve as one of the starting points from where we will set out in 2017. It goes without saying that the list is still unedited and not double-checked for those entries that could be treated as one. This, and many other things, will be subject to inspiring group discussions—as well as two other workshops… But first, the list:
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