

Lecture seminar Series Summer 2025

Face to Face with the Spirits: Paradox and the Anthropology of the Esoteric

What does it mean to be possessed, to become another?
What changes in the brain, in the body and emotions?
Does the ability to empathize increase, as in meditation?
And what of the capacity to listen, and to hear? In the vast literature on spirit possession, authors rarely inhabit the emic point of view. Some explain possession rationally (as catharsis, a reaction to trauma, symbolic play, a system of social cohesion or a means of gender-bending and temporary power inversion); others aesthetically, as musically-induced performance. The latter is perhaps closest to current understandings of entrainment and brain plasticity, though the question remains: why are scholars possessed with possession?



In this presentation, I examine the inter-semiotic translation of trance and oneiric consciousness through the prism of Ibn al-Arabi's Sufi philosophy, to reveal the paradoxical dance of immanence and transcendence in various densities of human existence.



Prof. Deborah Kapchan (Performance Studies, NYU)

Deborah Kapchan is a writer, translator and ethnographer specializing in North African Islam, art and poetry. A Guggenheim fellow, she is the author of six books as well as numerous essays on sound, narrative and poetics. Her authored, translated and edited volume, *Poetic Justice: An Anthology of Moroccan Contemporary Poetry* (2020), was shortlisted for ALTA's National Translation Prize for Poetry. Her latest work, *Taking Leave*, a memoir about her relation to the three religions of the book, is forthcoming from Duke University Press.

MAY 20 2025 | 6.15-7.45 PM



Big Seminar Room

Hartmannstr. 14, Building D1, Erlangen

Link for attendance: <https://fau.zoom-x.de/j/62556506187>