

Course Description/Invitation



Performing Stories with Neo-Dastangoi: Politics, Society, & Art in the Urban Fabric offers an immersive exploration into the intersections of politics, society, and artistic expression through the lens of *Neo-Dastangoi*, a modern revival of the ancient Urdu storytelling tradition, *Dastangoi*. Traditionally, *Dastangoi* captivated audiences through oral narratives of fantastical worlds and heroic adventures, blending poetry, history, and imagination. *Neo-Dastangoi* reimagines this practice for contemporary times, integrating multimedia, performance, and social commentary to address the complexities of today's world.

Central to this course is the philosophical framework of phenomenology, which examines how human experiences are shaped by the spaces we inhabit. By applying this lens, students will investigate how stories—rooted in

specific social, cultural, and political contexts—transform urban spaces into stages where power dynamics, identities, and memories are played out. Through this approach, students will uncover how performance-making and storytelling serve as potent tools of resistance, cultural preservation, and social engagement.

We will delve into the political struggles, social identities, and artistic innovation reflected in Cairo's urban fabric. Through field trips to prominent and marginal spaces, multimedia documentation, and weekly performance workshops, students will capture the narratives embedded in the city's architecture, streets, and people. Guided by local and global case studies, they will explore how political landscapes, social histories, and artistic forms intertwine in everyday spaces.

By the end of the course, students will create their own Neo-Dastan performances, engaging critically with Cairo's layered political and social realities, while exploring the transformative power of art. This course invites students with a passion for storytelling, regardless of their academic background, to explore how narratives shape the world around us.

Tentative Course Flow

Week 1: Welcome to Neo-Dastangoi & Cairo's 'Living' Spaces

Workshop: Introductory performance exercises focusing on storytelling through body language and voice.

Reading: Excerpts from *Tilism-e-Hoshruha*, Naguib Mahfouz's *On Art, Literature & History*

Viewing: Scenes from *Laila Majnu* (2018)

Exercise: Each student tells a 5-minute story based on an ordinary Cairo space.

Discussion: The evolution of *Dastangoi* and how space becomes a character in storytelling.

Week 1 Preliminary Reading/ Viewing Material

Compulsory:

- **Reading:** Introduction to Neo-Dastangoi (handout); excerpts from *Tilism-e-Hoshruha* (translated by Musharraf Ali Farooqi), excerpts from Sara Kazmi's *Radical Re-tellings of Hir: Gender & The Politics of Voice in Postcolonial Punjabi Poetry*
- **Reading:** Selections from Naguib Mahfouz's *On Art, Literature & History* – exploring his use of poetry and prose to critique Egyptian society.
- **Viewing:** Selected scenes from *Laila Majnu* (2018) by Sajid Ali, written by Imtiaz Ali – focusing on how the writer/director use storytelling and space.

Optional:

- **Reading:** Full article Sara Kazmi's article *Radical Re-tellings of Hir: Gender & The Politics of Voice in Postcolonial Punjabi Poetry* – for a deeper understanding of the subversive evolutionary histories of *Dastangoi* & folklore.
- **Viewing:** Full film *Laila Majnu* (2018) – how the film uses *Daastan* as a narrative device to address social and emotional struggles.

Week 2: Memory, Space & Identity through Phenomenology

Workshop: Creating performances inspired by personal memories of significant spaces.

Reading: Yi-Fu Tuan's *Space and Place* (Introduction) + local Egyptian oral storytelling traditions.

Exercise: Reflective journaling on a memorable Cairo space. Students reflect on spaces that hold social or cultural significance to them.

Discussion: How storytelling preserves social identity, using Cairo's marginalized communities and oral traditions as examples. How do spaces shape personal and collective identity? The juxtaposition of the individual with society, the 'micro,' & 'macro.' From the 'mundane' to the 'monumental – the personal being the political.

Week 2 Preliminary Reading/ Viewing Material

Compulsory:

- **Reading:** Yi-Fu Tuan's *Space and Place* (Introduction) – to introduce the phenomenology of space and how it shapes human experience.
- **Reading:** Naguib Mahfouz's *On Art, Literature & History* (selected essays) – focusing on how Mahfouz views Cairo and its social fabric.

Optional:

- **Reading:** Edward S. Casey's *The Fate of Place: A Philosophical History* (excerpts) – expanding on phenomenology's relation to memory and identity.
- **Viewing:** Documentary *Naguib Mahfouz: Passage of a Century* – exploring Mahfouz's views on Cairo's changing political and social identity.

Week 3: Visual Poetics in Film & Storytelling

Workshop: Storyboarding scenes using visuals and minimal text inspired by film.

Viewing: *The Mirror* (Tarkovsky) and *A Short Story* (Bi Gan)

Reading: Tarkovsky's *Sculpting in Time* (excerpts)

Exercise: Create a silent visual performance based on a Cairo street scene.

Discussion: Exploring the "dreamscape" in film and performance.

Week 3 Preliminary Reading/ Viewing Material

Compulsory:

- **Reading:** Tarkovsky's *Sculpting in Time* (excerpts on space and time in film) – understanding how film becomes a poetic narrative.
- **Viewing:** Session starts with class viewing of *A Short Story* (2022) by Bi Gan
- **Viewing:** Selected scenes from *Kaili Blues* (2015) by Bi Gan and *The Mirror* (1979) by Tarkovsky – focusing on how filmmakers use space as a narrative device.

Optional:

- **Reading:** *The Politics of Cultural Practice* by Rustom Bharucha (excerpts) – to understand the role of performance in social critique.
- **Viewing:** Full films *Kaili Blues* and *Stalker*.

Week 4: Field Trip – Exploring Cairo’s Spaces

Activity: Field trip through spaces like Tahrir Square, Garbage City, and Islamic Cairo, documenting political, social, and artistic layers.

Exercise: Audio-visual documentation of the trip.

Discussion: Capturing stories from the city through space, architecture, and people. How these spaces narrate the city’s political and social histories.

Week 4 Preliminary Reading/ Viewing Material

Compulsory:

- **Reading:** Kamran Rastegar’s *Surviving Images: Cinema, War, and Cultural Memory in the Middle East* (excerpts) – for context on how urban spaces and political histories shape narratives.

Optional:

- **Viewing:** *The Yacoubian Building* (2006) by Marwan Hamed – showing Cairo’s urban spaces and the political narratives within them.

Week 5: Poetry in Performance – Agha Shahid Ali & Vishal Bhardwaj

Workshop: Translating poetry into performance, focusing on rhythm, emotion, and body language. Translating political and social themes into performance using poetry.

Reading: Agha Shahid Ali’s *At the Ghat of the Only World* + works by Egyptian poets like Ahmed Fouad Negm.

Viewing: *Haider* (2018)

Exercise: Perform a short scene inspired by the poetry of Agha Shahid Ali.

Discussion: How poets reflect political and social realities, and how poetry influences performance-making. How does poetry inform the structure of storytelling in both film and live performance?

Week 5 Preliminary Reading/ Viewing Material

Compulsory:

- **Reading:** Agha Shahid Ali's *At the Ghat of the Only World* (full poem) – reflecting on the role of space and identity in poetry.
- **Viewing:** Full film *Haider* (2018) – to better understand its cultural context, translation and adaptation across cultures of common narratives (Shakespeare).

Optional:

- **Reading:** Poetry by Ahmed Fouad Negm – an Egyptian perspective on poetry as resistance and political commentary, & Faiz Ahmed Faiz – an Indian-Pakistani revolutionary poet for a comparative approach to art's function in dissent & communicating cultural sentiments.

Week 6: Urban Scenography – The City as Stage & Frame

Workshop: Improvisation and spatial storytelling exercises using the documented material from the field trip.

Reading: Articles on urban scenography and dramaturgy + *The Politics of Cultural Practice* by Rustom Bharucha.

Exercise: Students design performance pieces that reflect their interpretations of Cairo's urban spaces. Use elements of the city to build a performative story & bring Cairo within the studio/stage/performance space.

Discussion: The city as a stage for political and social expression—using Cairo's public spaces as examples. How can we think of the city itself as a narrative structure?

Week 6 Preliminary Reading/ Viewing Material

Compulsory:

- **Reading:** Articles on *Urban Scenography and Performance* (selected from academic journals) – understanding how public spaces serve as stages for social and political narratives.
- **Reading:** *The Politics of Cultural Practice* by Rustom Bharucha (excerpts) – applying performance theory to urban and public spaces.

Optional:

- **Viewing:** Selected scenes from *The Square* (2017) by Ruben Östlund – focusing on how public spaces become stages for social performance.

Week 7: Crafting the Neo-Daastan – From Idea to Performance

Workshop: Performance-making, focusing on creating a cohesive narrative using audio-visual material, poetry, and body movement. Students begin finalising their performance pieces.

Exercise: Develop a 10-minute Neo-Daastan performance based on Cairo's spaces.

Discussion: How performance can reflect and challenge political and social realities. How have students' understandings of space, identity, and memory evolved throughout the course.

Week 7 Preliminary Reading/ Viewing Material

Compulsory:

- **Reading:** Selections from *The Postcolonial City and its Subjects* by Rashmi Varma – examining how cities serve as sites of political and social contestation.
- **Reading:** Kaveh Safa's articles on *Transmedia Storytelling* (excerpts) – understanding how stories can extend across media platforms.
- **Viewing:** *Chamkila* (2024) by Imtiaz Ali, for how it uses the Dastangoi device and uses it to tell the story of art, artistry, politics, & culture.

Optional:

- **Viewing:** Clips from *Gully Boy* (2019) by Zoya Akhtar – highlighting how urban spaces in Mumbai shape personal and collective expression.

Week 8: Final Performances & Reflections

Workshop: Rehearsing and refining the Neo-Daastan performances with peer feedback.

Activity: Final performances and group reflection.

Discussion: The significance of space and performance in shaping memory and identity, how storytelling serves as a vehicle for political and social dialogue.

Week 8 Reading/ Viewing Material

Optional:

- **Reading:** Excerpts from *Performing the City* by Paula Serafini – examining how performance and urban spaces intersect.
- **Reading:** Naguib Mahfouz's *On Art, Literature & History* (selected essays) – reflecting on the role of Cairo's public spaces in artistic and political life.
- **Viewing:** Review of students' own documentation and materials from the course in preparation of/as part of final performances.

Discussion-Based Learning Approach:

In this course, discussion-based learning will be at the heart of every session. By incorporating the [Long Table Etiquette by Split Britches](#) I will begin each class by facilitating group discussions based on the readings, films, or field experiences, encouraging students to share their reflections, & their interpretations of how political, social, & artistic elements shape the urban spaces around them. These discussions (which will blur the lines between authentic engagement & documented performance) will then inform weekly performance workshops, where students will be applying insights from the dialogue to create live performances, improvisational scenes, or multimedia storytelling pieces. By weaving critical analysis with active, creative experimentation, I aim to foster a learning environment where ideas and art are in constant conversation. Peer feedback will be essential to refine these performances, emphasizing collective learning. This course will follow a discussion-based learning approach by fostering active engagement with both the theoretical/material & personal experiences. The goal is to help students explore the intersections between political and social narratives and their artistic expression.

Learning Objectives:

By the end of the course, students will be able to:

1. **Understand the Historical and Contemporary Significance of Dastangoi:**
 - Gain knowledge of *Dastangoi* as a traditional storytelling form and its evolution into *Neo-Dastangoi* as a modern performance practice.
 - Explore how *Neo-Dastangoi* serves as a tool for political, social, and artistic expression.
2. **Apply Phenomenological Concepts to Storytelling:**
 - Understand and apply the philosophical framework of phenomenology, particularly the relationship between space, identity, and human experience.
 - Analyze how urban spaces shape personal and collective narratives.
3. **Critically Analyze Political and Social Narratives in Performance:**
 - Examine how storytelling and performance are used as tools for resistance, cultural preservation, and social commentary.
 - Reflect on how political struggles, social identities, and artistic movements are intertwined with urban spaces, using Cairo as a primary case study.
4. **Create Performances That Engage with Urban Spaces:**
 - Develop the ability to document and interpret urban spaces through audio-visual methods, drawing out the political and social histories embedded within.
 - Use Cairo's urban fabric as a stage to craft original *Neo-Daastan* performances that reflect and challenge political and social realities.
5. **Blend Theory with Practice:**
 - Synthesize theoretical readings on space, identity, and performance with creative expression, producing performances that are both insightful and culturally resonant.
 - Use performance-making workshops to translate ideas from readings and discussions into live storytelling, integrating multimedia and movement.
6. **Collaborate and Reflect in a Participatory Learning Environment:**
 - Engage in peer feedback and collaborative discussions, using the *Long Table Etiquette* model to foster non-hierarchical dialogue and shared learning.
 - Reflect critically on the learning process and the intersections of personal, political, and artistic narratives through journaling, group discussion, and performance.

Learning Outcomes:

By the end of the course, students will have:

1. **Created a Final Neo-Daastan Performance:**
 - Produced an original performance that integrates political and social themes within a narrative framework, using multimedia tools and urban spaces as inspiration.
2. **Demonstrated a Deep Understanding of Space, Identity, and Memory:**
 - Showed proficiency in applying phenomenological theories to analyze how personal and collective identities are shaped by the spaces they inhabit.
3. **Engaged Critically with Cairo's Urban Fabric:**
 - Documented and analyzed the political, social, and artistic layers within Cairo's urban spaces, connecting these insights to their performance work.
4. **Contributed to Collaborative Learning:**
 - Actively participated in group discussions, feedback sessions, and collaborative performance-making, contributing to a collective understanding of the course material.
5. **Explored Artistic and Cultural Innovation:**
 - Explored how traditional and contemporary art forms, including *Neo-Daastangoi*, can be used to engage with contemporary issues such as political resistance, social identity, and cultural preservation.

These objectives and outcomes ensure that students are not only engaged with the theory and history of storytelling but are also empowered to translate these insights into their own creative work, using Cairo as a living canvas for performance.