

Film As Nation Building: The UAE Goes Into the Movie Business Alia Yunis

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Abstract

For the past 10 years, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) has been aggressively pioneering at a national, government-financed level the production of local films while also courting Hollywood producers as a financier and production center. As a young, wealthy nation still conflicted about how it defines itself to itself and how it wishes to be defined outside its border--and as a country with no previous history in the visual arts of any kind and no movie-going culture until the late 1990s--the UAE presents a unique approach to the building of a film industry, one that is not grounded in previous models of national film building. Through content analysis of UAE films and interviews with local filmmakers, framed through rhetoric scholar Kenneth Burke's writing on symbolism, we look at how the UAE government wishes to be perceived abroad versus how its filmmakers—who have a co-dependent relationship with the government--are portraying the country.

Keywords: Nationalism, International Film Finance, United Arab Emirates, Dubai, Abu Dhabi, Middle East



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INTRODUCTION: National Birth On Screen

The UAE today has the largest box office in the Middle East, most of it generated in its two biggest cities, Dubai and Abu Dhabi.¹ But citizens only started going to the movies as a social activity in the mid-1990s, when the multiplexes began opening at the mega malls that have become the country's signature. The films playing at the UAE's growing number of multiplexes are primarily Hollywood fare, with a handful of Bollywood and Egyptian films filling in the gaps.

Only three of the UAE's films have screened in the multiplexes, all made since 2010. The UAE, formed in 1971, is just starting to create a national identity on and off screen. In this paper we explore through locally made films how national perceptions, international perceptions, infrastructure, censorship and self-censorship are contributing to a creation of a UAE body of film—and a national identity.

Film has indeed become a subtle yet powerful tool for dissemination of a nation's self image domestically and internationally. If we look at the US, India and Egypt, each had hundreds of years of defining themselves as nations before the invention of cinema helped them further that definition. For example, in Hollywood films, Americanism is always about good, i.e. America, winning over bad, whether bad is the Jedi, Indians, Nazis, Arabs or the evil at home.

Even within even light-hearted Egyptian and Indian fare, the main sources of film in the UAE before the multiplexes, there is a definite reflection of the society's self image, defined early in the nation's film history. For example, *Layla* (1927), Egypt's first feature length film, and *The White Rose* (1933), the first musical that established Egyptian cinema in the rest of the

Arab world, “became prototypes of Egyptian melodrama, the first focusing on the a peasant girl who was seduced, only to find a better match after leaving home, and the second being a kind of male *Dame aux Camelias* drama, depicting the poor male hero who tragically falls in love with an upper class girl whom he eventually gives up for her own good.”² Variants of these tragic peasants as pillars of the nation remain the hallmark of Egyptian cinema,

UAE film, however, doesn’t fall conveniently into existing categories of national film, defined by Stephen Crofts as Third Cinema, European Model Art Cinemas, Third World and European Commercial Cinemas, Totalitarian Cinema and Regional/Ethnic Cinema.³ These categories and the theories around them were born of financial need an/or the need to break out of an existing pop cinema or Hollywood formula to explore taboo and divisive subjects, neither of which applies to UAE film. The UAE didn’t have a violent struggle for independence or nationhood, which molds so much of national cinema. So do tribal/ethnic differences and injustices, but these are not part of acceptable public discourse in the UAE. However, even though the UAE is an absolute monarchy, the government does not promote totalitarian-style films about its own glorification, such as those that spurred Chinese and Soviet films. Still, as essentially the sole financier of local film, the government does not green light films critical of the country or its leaders.

Thus, unlike other nations, there is very little for the fledgling film industry to comfortably build on in terms of story. So the UAE film community seems to be forming a national identity all its own, a cinematic world that exists at the movies separate from a “real life” identity. Indeed, as French film theorist Jean Mitry said, “cinema is a world that organizes itself into a narrative.”⁴

In what follows, we look at Emirati narrative films for the visual codes that are widely accepted among today's Emirati filmmakers and their audiences in contrast to how the UAE is portrayed in the Hollywood films it is encouraging to film on its soil.⁵

HOLLYWOOD LOVE AND HATE

Since the production of the award winning *Syriana* (Warner Bros, 2005) was filmed in part in Dubai, the UAE has been courting Hollywood to bring productions to the country as much as Hollywood has been courting the money the country has dedicated to making itself an international player in the film industry.

But not everyone in Hollywood is welcome. In the film *Sex and the City 2* (Warner Bros, 2010), Carrie Bradshaw (Sarah Jessica Parker) says "Girls, we're not in Kansas anymore"⁶ as she and her three friends revel in what is ostensibly Abu Dhabi's Emirates Palace Hotel. But in reality, they aren't in Abu Dhabi either. Originally meant to be set and shot in Dubai, the film's final script caused Dubai to pull out of the production. The movie instead was set in Abu Dhabi but shot in Morocco in a farcical orientalist mode, with some helicopter shots of Abu Dhabi serving for reality.

The UAE's media regulatory body, the National Media Council (NMC), as stated in the local newspapers, announced at the time of *Sex and the City 2's* theatrical release that it would not be shown in the UAE because "the theme of the film does not fit with our cultural values."⁷

This statement was in reference to the blatant sexual practices of the women, particularly the character Samantha. But certainly there was even more concern for the portrayal of the UAE. Abu Dhabi as a glamorous, luxury destination, something very much in line with the tourism agenda (and tourism authority films) of the country, certainly played out well. But the

film also makes an anachronistic Hollywood commitment to 1970s and 80s film stereotypes of greasy petrodollar sheikhs seeking out Western babes (all expenses paid), belly dancers, Indian servants who double as sages, and of course camels in sweeping desert vistas, in this case being ridden by stars wearing flimsy, fantastical Arabian outfits.

In a predictable post Iranian Revolution, post 9-11 Hollywood portrayal, *Sex and the City 2* also features a fully covered Arab woman being examined by the American stars like a zoo animal as she navigates eating French fries with her *niqab*; a disapproving group of Emirati men surrounding the Western women to arrest them for their loose behavior; and a clique of women hiding in a dark corner of a souq, who underneath their *abayas* and *niqabs* wear the latest runway fashions. These cloistered Arab women also put their *abayas* to good use to cover up Carrie and her friends so they can sneak past the angry men who had been circling them earlier. Hadley Freeman in her review of the film in the UK's *Daily Mail* said: "Not since 1942's *Arabian Nights* has orientalism been portrayed so unironically."⁸

Conversely, Dubai enthusiastically welcomed the production of *Mission Impossible 4: Ghost Protocol* (Paramount 2011), even soliciting the producers to make the movie's world premiere at the Dubai International Film Festival, with Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum, the ruler of Dubai, walking the red carpet with star Tom Cruise. The film has been successful worldwide (\$639 million to date, according to industry figures)⁹ In keeping with the government's agenda of creating an ultra cutting edge business and tourism destination, the film put a positive light on Dubai, with magnificent shots of Cruise scaling the Burj Khalifa, the world's tallest building. No Western film of Arabia would be seemingly complete without an encounter with camels—but in *Mission Impossible's* case, not in an oriental setting, but on a high speed highway, where Cruise and his co-stars almost drive head on into a herd of camels just

before they see Dubai's spectacular 21st century skyline.

The film does manage to squeeze in the Hollywood requisite covered woman: As Cruise struggles to see through a nearly blinding and wholly unrealistic urban sandstorm, we get a peek through a whirl of sand at an identifiable woman in an *abaya* and veil. However, minor stereotypes aside, the film made Dubai happy, as recorded in the *Gulf News*, the city's major English language newspaper:

Mission: Impossible — Ghost Protocol thrills with every intrigue, every punch thrown, every explosion, every deadpan line — and every shot of the city that is a major character in the film: Dubai.¹⁰

Indeed the main character in Dubai is the Burj Khalifa, not a human being. We do not meet any locals or even expats living in the city. More recently, *Fast and Furious 7* (Universal Studios, 2015) and *Star Wars, Episode VII* (Lucas Films, 2015) have both come to the UAE to film, lured by 30% rebates and first class treatment from Abu Dhabi government's media production entity, TwoFour54.

Given how the government responded to *Sex and the City 2*, we can see how much more comfortable the country is with a portrayal of its landscape in these latest productions, rather than its people, something that manifests in local film as well.

In fact, the Emirati filmmakers' depiction of the UAE and its people can also be viewed as a portrayal that defines life in the UAE as unrealistically as the West has. Additionally, it is not a portrayal necessarily in sync with the sleek, modern image the government is fostering through billions of dollars to host Expo 2020 and many other events.¹¹

HISTORY OF UAE FILM

The year 2004 is a turning point in the UAE film industry because it marks the start of the Dubai International Film Festival, which became the first incubator for regional film. Prior to 2004, few Emirati films were made, most of which were only seen by a small group of filmmakers who began the Emirates Film Competition in 2001 in order to have a place to show their shorts, mostly to each other. Up to that time, there is only one record of a feature film, *The Wayfarer*, made in 1988. Unfortunately, all prints of it have disappeared, although efforts are being made to find one.¹²

Until the opening of its government television stations in the early 1970s, the UAE had no history in any visual art, including photography, painting and drawing. UAE television, then and until today, offers limited original programming, mostly news, talk shows and the occasional Ramadan soap opera, all with limited production value.

The emphasis on film became increasingly important in 2008, when the government-owned Abu Dhabi Media Company opened Image Nation (formerly Imagenation), the billion dollar film fund to support both international co-productions and local productions with the stated purpose of diversifying the oil-based economy. After several multimillion dollar adventures in co-financing Hollywood films like *The Help* (Dreamworks, 2011), *Contagion* (Warner Bros, 2011), *My Name is Khan* (Dharma Productions, 2010), and many less successful films like *Shorts* (Warner Bros, 2009) Image Nation, much as its name implies, made the decision in 2011 to focus primarily on funding the development of Emirati scripts and productions.

UAE CINEMA: CONTENT ANALYSIS AND SELF EVALUATION

While the Western portrayal of Gulf Arabs in cinema is usually damning, even in its praise (i.e. *Syriana's* forward thinking Gulf leaders are tainted by hidden Islamists and unfair labor

practices), the Emirati cinematic self-portrayal definitely shares a bit of the purity of the nation implied in the American portrayal of self in early Westerns and war epics. It shares even more with the national innocence of early *Leave to Beaver*-type American television, which in its first few decades avoided social controversy whenever possible and, until the advent of pay TV, remained somewhat censored.

Few Emirati feature length narrative films have had public screenings. Ali Mostafa's *City of Life* (FilmWorks, 2010) and Nawaf al Janahi's *Sea Shadow* (Image Nation, 2011) reached local and regional multiplexes and international festivals. *Sun Dress* (2010) by Saeed Salman Al Murry is feature length and was released theatrically in the UAE by the filmmaker in May 2014. Al Janahi also directed *The Circle* (MBC Group, 2009), which screened in a handful of theatres locally and regional TV. *Djinn* (Image Nation, 2013) is a UAE set production that has done well theatrically in the UAE, but is helmed by an American director.

Most Emirati films are shorts. The UAE National Film Library & Archive has cataloged over 550 Emirati funded films, with two thirds of them being narratives and within narrative, only 14 are comedies, 10 are horror film, and nearly all the others classified as dramas.¹³ A look at the films shows limited production value, in large part because the country had little production infrastructure and virtually no film education until 2008. That year, several education divisions opened in media entities, including at Image Nation, the Abu Dhabi Film Festival, the Dubai International Film Festival, Emirates Foundation, New York Film Academy Abu Dhabi, and TwoFour54, all government supported and free to UAE citizens.¹⁴ Today about 50 UAE films get shown per year at the UAE film festivals, specifically at the Dubai Film Festival, Gulf Film Festival in Dubai and the Emirates Film Competition, which is part of the Abu Dhabi Film Festival. Some 300 Emirati shorts have played in these festivals.¹⁵

Khalid Al Mahmood's *Sabeel* (2011) is the most notable of the shorts. Al Mahmood is one of the pioneers of the UAE film community. He has directed six other shorts, but *Sabeel*, the story of two rural boys trying to save their sick grandmother, played in Locarno and Berlin in 2011, the first Emirati film to be shown at such major European festivals. Other narrative shorts that have screened outside the UAE include *Bint Mariam* (2008) by Saeed Salman, which won several regional awards, and *Arabyana* (2006) by Nayla Al Khaja, which played in the Durban International Film Festival.

Many Emirati filmmakers themselves are well aware of both their privileges and the limited production value of their work. With the push to be a player, including at the Dubai and Abu Dhabi film festivals, there has a push by governmental media companies to push the funding and mentorship of short films. Says a 22-year old Emirati filmmaker and festival administrator: We need to get out of our comfort zone. This whole Emiratization policy, that just because you are Emirati you should get all these things, this funding and support, is not good for us.¹⁶

Another filmmaker puts it this way: Emiratis shouldn't just be making films for fun. Emiratis can put together anything and know it will get shown. They need to get used having to do good work.¹⁷

Indeed, as film education develops and grows and more Emiratis make films, the selection process does get tighter each year, with Abu Dhabi Film Festival saying that there was only a 50% acceptance rate for UAE films in 2013, compared to nearly 100% just a few years ago.¹⁸

Following we will look at several Emirati films for content, coded for setting, characters, plot, story and dialogue. The films selected are those that have had the most exposure to audiences.

A. Brotherhood and Setting

Like first screenings of Western cinema, when just seeing the feat of real people moving on a screen was fascinating, for Emiratis, just seeing Emiratis on screen is still a novelty. As such, Emirati film is at a stage where it can get away with limited plots and yet fill up theatres. It currently lacks a well-developed exploration of stories, whether in the comedy or drama genres. Criticism of society beyond the superficial has no place. Violence, sexual promiscuity, substance abuse, homosexuality, religious questioning, politics and corruption do not exist amongst Emiratis in Emirati films, much as they do not exist in public discourse in general. Global issues also have no place in UAE films. Nor do we see the UAE in juxtaposition to its neighbors and/or the rest of the world.

Most notably, we do NOT see terrorists, oil sheikhs, sweeping landscapes of the desert, camels, and luxury skylines, the stuff of the Western portrayal of the UAE.

For UAE filmmakers, there is seemingly a collective unconscious to not showcase the desert or the urban coolness. This reflects how very differently Emiratis view themselves—or wish to view themselves on film—compared to how they are viewed abroad or wish to be viewed abroad.

Indeed, simplicity and rural life, as portrayed in *Sea Shadow*, *Sabeel*, and *Sun Dress*, seem to be a revered element in Emirati film. The UAE as an agrarian or coastal society with little wealth abounds in UAE films. Even the Emirati families in the urban *City of Life* have decidedly humble homes by Dubai standards.

The films offer storylines that ask us to read a great deal into them, with the characters only showing that something is wrong by their tortured expressions. Plot, pacing and story take a backseat to creating a setting that favors the sea, sun and the virtues of purity and innocence.

Rhetoric scholar Kenneth Burke said, “Man is a symbol using (symbol making symbol misusing) animal, inventor of the negative (or moralized by the negative), separate from his natural condition by instruments of his own making, goaded by the spirit of hierarchy (removed by the sense of order), and rotten with perfection”¹⁹

Burke goes on to say that we create symbols that become things we can identify with and create order with, i.e. perfection. In Emirati films, national identity includes the benevolent mother, the angry but usually wise father, the innocent virgin girl, and anything else that can connote simplicity, something that in real life, Emiratis sense they have lost since the oil-funded, frenzied building boom that hasn’t stopped since the mid-1990s. This nostalgia for what was –or imagined to have been—is reinforced in articles in the UAE daily newspapers and at a plethora of heritage exhibitions intended for the native population.

Film seems to be following the national internal narrative of purity and nobility but shunning the reality of the skyline. Nobility is best shown through the bond of family, and family is to whom we should remain loyal.

But the strongest bond and the bond that is most tested and fully explored in Emirati films is the friendship between two males. This includes *City of Life*, *Sea Shadow*, *Sabeel*, Mostafa’s first film (the short *Under the Sun*, 2005), and even comedies such as Saeed Al Dhaheri’s *The Rescuers* (2010), in which a young man deals with the consequences of lending his buddy his car.

David Chaudoir, an American cultural anthropologist based in the UAE and currently researching a book on Emirati male relationships, says:

Emirati social life is quite segregated along gender lines, and accordingly films explore--or at least portray--that in order to be true to life. Emirati young men spend most of their waking hours socializing with family and friends of the same gender. They utilize and reframe "traditional" homosocial social spaces, such as cafes and even their own private majlis, incorporating contemporary technology, comforts and

conveniences while at the same time preserving the gendered separation that has been part of the cultural architecture of the Gulf for more than a hundred years. The social lives and pursuits of young men have been convincingly portrayed in Emirati films like *City of Life* and *Sea Shadow*, and I note that the most favorably boisterous reactions I've observed from young Emiratis watching those films are the moments they so identify with. For example, the scene in *City of Life* where the protagonist and his friend drive up to a small grocery shop and honk their horn for the worker to come out and take their order. A true Emirati moment.²⁰

Even male bonding has its purity. Nawaf Al Janahi, the director of *Sea Shadow*, is acutely aware of this. A key member of the early Emirati filmmaker group, Al Janahi directed the feature length *The Circle* in 2009. Production value aside, Al Janahi says it didn't receive theatrical distribution or good public reception because it was yes, about male bonding, which is acceptable, but male bonding between local gangsters. "We don't have gangsters," he says sarcastically.²¹

B. Story, Plot and The Other

Another missing element in most UAE films is the 85% to 90% of people who live in the UAE—the expatriate community.²² *City of Life* is a bit of an exception to this. The film includes storylines involving the Westerners living in the UAE, as well as the Indian working class. But it does not show these expats interacting with Emiratis—until the end, when the film's characters come together in a car crash. At this point, it is too late to share more in common than tragedy.

If the West is guilty of simple stereotypes in portraying Arabs, the reverse accusation can be said about UAE films' depiction of the other: the expat. In *City of Life* the storylines of the Western and Indian characters seem to be borrowed from generic television plots from those countries rather than being organic to the Dubai setting. In the film, a pretty blond is pregnant and abandoned by her married lover and an Indian cab driver tries to win a talent contest. Perhaps this lack of insight and originality about the expats is actually an example of UAE film

playing it close to reality, in that the Emiratis and the rest of the nationalities residing in the UAE do not know each other very well. A Western executive at a media production entity put it this way:

The UAE people have become more insular as they have become so out numbered. When I first came here 20 years ago, the cultures weren't so far apart. They are still hospitable people, but they have walled up now and so fewer Westerners living here even get to know Emiratis. They are more comfortable now keeping to themselves. My days of joining them at the majlis are over.²³

Burke says that complete division negates conflict, which happens when expatriates are separated from the native population as in *City of Life*. Yes, we are introduced to the expatriates who live in the country, but their conflicts are among their own demographic group not with other ethnicities and nationalities. Therefore, a chance to explore the conflicts between the different nationalities and classes of the UAE (and its laws) is lost and characters of other nationalities become devices in undeveloped plots.

Of the more prolific filmmakers, Nayla Al Khaja's films come the closest to pursuing contemporary stories in contemporary settings. Al Khaja dubs herself the UAE's first female producer, and has directed several low budget shorts. But her pursuit of modern day stories in her short films has limited borders. For example, *Arabyana* shows a little girl wandering out of her house unnoticed. She is then lured by an Indian laborer into his shack. Next we see her leave his shack, singing and carrying a lollipop, skipping past her mother, who is still watching TV and talking on the phone. This certainly is not an authentic portrayal of a "candy from strangers" scenario and its effects on a child, as the child seems completely unperturbed by whatever we are to believe happened while she was behind closed doors with the Indian. It is an attempt to show parental neglect and self-centeredness, but it does so more in silent glances than in digging into story. It also dances around national self-criticism, in that the real evil is not the parents but the expats in their mist, thus keeping the Emirati innocent of his or her modern

circumstances. After all, it is not an Emirati who lures the girl away but an Indian.

Indeed, the scapegoat of modern UAE society is the non-Western expat, ironically the very people who have physically built the country under labor laws that have become international headlines. A non-speaking southern Asian is also the mysterious, frightening boogey man of *Sea Shadow* (although played by an Emirati actor). This can also be seen in other shorts, such as Hassan Kiyani's *TelePhoni* (2011), in which a young Emirati boy ominously follows a lazy Asian garbage collector as he saves a maid from rape at the hands of another Asian worker. The maid wears a hijab, therefore identifying her as a Muslim, so making the crime of this Asian expat, while not against an Emirati female, closer to home than had she been a Western woman.

C. Conflict, Dialogue, and Women And Men

Burke also says pure identification negates conflict, and as Aristotle told us millennia ago, story depends on conflict. But Emirati films, so intent on forming a moral order, end just as the conflict should start. In *Sabeel*, the grandsons taking care of their sick grandmother never once do anything but be perfect caretakers, not even for a moment is any opportunity offered to challenge their perfection. In Al Khaja's film *Once* (2009), a young woman meets up at an apartment with a fellow Emirati she has been secretly corresponding with. When she realizes that she is trapped with him in the stark and dark urban apartment about to become a fallen woman, her father storms in. Reasons why a young woman would be naïve enough or thrilled enough to meet a guy alone in an apartment are not explored, nor are the dramatic stakes of the narrative raised to a level that would force the film to discuss such matters. Indeed it is when the father storms in that we think the film is about to get interesting but that is

where it ends, with the authoritative parent taking her home, having the moral high ground and the ability to save his daughter's virtue. Idealized tradition plays out, and we never really get to know the motivation for the young woman's behavior.

Indeed, while the symbol of the Arab woman in Hollywood is a black clad blob, she doesn't get too much further in Emirati films. Female characters tend not to wear the religious hijab, but rather a loose headscarf (*shayla*), which is more grounded in tradition than religion. This emphasis on the importance of the culture over religion is symbolized by the headscarf. But once the director has his/her character dressed the way he wants, he gives her little room to develop.

We see plenty of tension between men and women who need to talk to each other as a core part of so many of these films—but the genders never really seem to go beyond glances and stares. Looking at *Sea Shadow*, *Sun Dress*, *Once* and many other films, we see storylines that ask us to read a great deal into them, with the characters only showing that something is wrong by their tortured expressions.

In *Sea Shadow*, it is the relatively loose female that does the talking, while the good girl rarely speaks or takes major actions that move the story forward. While the filmmaker's sympathies are with the good girl, he keeps the good girl "good" by not making her speak out of turn.

This is a choice, albeit seemingly unconsciously, made by the filmmakers to codify women as such and spare dialogue, even though daily UAE life, including at the malls, which do not appear in these films, is full of young men and women talking in public spaces.

In *Sea Shadow*, the father figure is actually not heroic, not even loving, breaking an archetype. But the lack of confrontation with the daughter beyond looks stagnates any possible

story build. For example, she never snaps at her sullen, verbally abusive father. She takes no action that could move the story forward or raise the stakes.

We understand that female protagonist is afraid of men, particularly one evidently Pakistani man she keeps running into, but we never know specifically why. Even more puzzling, we don't understand why her father refuses to support her and worry about her, aside from the assumption—from the glances at her photo--that he has never been able to love again after the loss of his wife. The lack of reaction or action fails to give momentum, build and pacing. Unlike for dialogue, this is not just the director's choice: Many directors struggle to find Emirati actors given the limitations of what they can do on screen. Indeed, *Sea Shadow's* female protagonist is played by Neven Madi, a Syrian who also served as the Emirati female protagonist in *Sun Dress* and *Bint Mariam*, to name a few. Says Al Janahi:

I'm aware of red line. Of course, I know. We have double standards. Emiratis are angels. I can have two foreigners kissing but not two Emiratis or even two people playing Emiratis. How do you share what your world looks like? We see it in other countries' films. Cinema isn't a reflection if it's not true or natural. I want to show you my life, and I expect a father to hug his daughter because that would be what Emiratis would do. But I can't have an Emirati actor hug an Emirati actress who is not his real daughter. So I had such a hard time with on my film on this issue.²⁴

Story is sacrificed for the purity of national self-image. The result is films with no climax. There are resolutions without climaxes. In *Sea Shadow*, the young woman's brother comes to take her away, but even his argument with the father doesn't go beyond just that scene in which he appears. There is no build to it, and the brother just appears at the end so the film can have a conclusion.

Following is a review of *Sea Shadow* from *Variety*, which would be fairly typical assessment of the film by outside critics. Note that the reviewer picked up on the strong male relationship and the lack of story.

Teen boys cope with first love while their female peer tries to negotiate the minefield of male attraction in Nawaf Al-Janahi's flat sophomore feature, "Sea Shadow." Part of the vanguard of the United Arab Emirates' burgeoning film industry, the pic has its sweet and sour moments but would benefit from tightening the way it builds and connects scenes. Regional play may benefit from locals excited to see homegrown product, yet the faux-naive script will bother some and hamper offshore fest appearances.

Set in Ras al-Khaimah, one of the more traditional, less-developed Emirati states, the story focuses on Mansoor (Omar Al Mulla), a poor young man with a domineering mom (Aisha Abdul Rahman). Motherless Kaltham (Neven Madi) is attracted to the teen, but she's also afraid of men; the script fails to clarify whether she was sexually assaulted or simply freaked out by sleazy advances. Mansoor isn't sure what love is, and asks his experienced friend Sultan (Abrar Al Hamad), though there's no straightforward answer. Scenes between the two friends are the strong point here, but simple dialogue crosses the line from unsophisticated to simplistic, and the pic rarely comes alive.²⁵

D. Genre and Horror Films

The reluctance to take on contemporary social issues head on may also explain why horror film is such a popular genre, to both watch and create, particularly for first time Emirati filmmakers. The horror movie, in its suspended reality, is relatively safe from censorship, safe from having to pursue reality-based conflict. Just as importantly, as film theorist Frank McConnell said:

A psychic history of culture...could be written very efficiently from the morphology of its monsters, the history of those personifications of the void which successive generations have selected as their central nightmares.²⁶

The monster and central nightmare of most Emirati horror films is modernity. Looking at local award-winning student shorts like *Enigma (2009)*, *The Signature (2011)*, and *The 11th Hour (2010)*, they all take place in building towers that appear to be haunted, dark, isolated. It is corporate life, whether at school or work, which motivates humans to behave badly or become trapped in a soulless world, haunted by demons.

Djinn (2013) is the first feature length film Image Nation released. *Djinn* is the Arabic word for demons, as they appear in the Quran and literature, and a belief in them is very

much a part of the Gulf region. The film was shelved for three years and then released in October 2013. To critics' surprise, it was a hit in the UAE, taking in over 1 million UAE dirhams (\$US 280,000) and shooting to number two at the box office its first weekend.²⁷ As one critic told me, "It is so bad it's not even fun to make fun of it."²⁸ Yet, it has been the most widely released UAE film to date and played in 22 screens across the country. The film is quasi-Emirati. It was filmed in and produced by a UAE institution but directed by American horror master Tobe Hooper (*Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, 1974) and with only one Emirati actor with a major role. However, it is based on a traditional Emirati tale transported to the sterile, modern UAE: a young couple's misfortunes begin once they move into a sleek new building complex in the abandoned rural neighborhood where the ghost of Om Dwais wanders looking for her stolen child. Again, the monster is modernity—the new building complex--which reawakens the djinn.

Notably in *Djinn*, the dark expat continues to be modernity's offspring: the mysterious concierge of the building, who is clear up to no good, is a black man with an unidentifiable foreign accent.

CONFLICT OFF SCREEN: Self-Censorship, Finances and Criticism

Unlike most other film industries, finance is not a major issue in the UAE. Numerous government-funded entities offer more opportunities for filmmakers than there are filmmakers interested in taking them. Free film education is also increasingly available.²⁹ This means that nearly all UAE films are government sponsored and it is the government that also decides, through the many government funded film incubators, which ones to promote.

Thus the conflict missing on screen can be found in conflict off screen, and not mainly with the government. In fact, few Emiratis reach a level of conflict with the government but rather with the audience. Says Al Mahmood (Sabeel):

Yes, I do a little bit of self- censorship. But I think the most important thing to remember is that our audience isn't ready to hear a lot of these things. In 2008, the audience gasped when someone in a film called his sister 'ya hamra' (you donkey). For other Arabs, like the Lebanese, this is no big deal at all but for us, it's a little uncomfortable.³⁰

A month after the release of *Sea Shadow*, we did an informal focus group with 20 Emirati female communications students at Zayed University in Abu Dhabi, asking them what they liked most about *Sea Shadow* and *City of Life* (as the only two feature length theatrical releases), and what they identified with and how they viewed the storyline, setting and characters. They tended to favor *Sea Shadow*. This is not because it is a stronger script or has higher production value. "We know a lot of our young men are not behaving as they should, but we shouldn't be making films about that," said one student with regard to the young men in *City of Life*, which shows the two main characters loafing around town purposelessly until their distance from their family base ends tragically. But, the two young men living by the family rules in a bucolic village atmosphere in *Sea Shadow* resulted in that film being "about who we really are," as one 20-year old student told us.³¹

This student has lived in the urban center of Abu Dhabi her whole life. *Sea Shadow*, however, is set in Ras Al Khamieh, one of the least populated Emirates, and relatively disconnected from the fast-paced, ever changing world the student is living in Abu Dhabi.

So how did she view a bucolic setting of Ras Al Khamieh as her world? Like for the UAE filmmakers, their audiences seemingly find it is easier to look back and fall into a common nostalgia than to have response to the present, which is changing too fast to capture

and define. One could argue that the citizens don't have a definition of themselves that rises above the rapid development of the country.

The idealized past doesn't have to be without story and plot. Al Mahmood says, "As we start tackling issues, we'll have to take the Iranian approach—get taboo topics in very subtly, implied."

But that requires good screenplays, a blue print that seems to be lacking in every UAE film viewed, without exception. Note that three of the films referenced in this paper were written by Mohammed Hassan (*Sea Shadow*, *Bint Mariam*, *Sabeel*), the only Emirati who identifies himself as a screenwriter, rather than director or producer.

This goes back to the history of the land. Writing, let alone the three-act structure, is not part of Bedouin storytelling, which is anecdotal and/or poetry based. It is also oral. In fact, the majority of the country was illiterate until past few decades.

Mostafa says screenwriting doesn't grab the local interest:

At the end of the day when someone says I want to be a filmmaker all they can think of is either be maybe the director of photography or the director. We don't have programs and education in place to tell them different or encourage them.³²

A film industry infrastructure begins with script development and ends with the audience and critics. The critics are just as absent. Overall, as long as it is not a negative portrayal, Emiratis are increasingly enjoying seeing themselves on the big screen. When the film festivals started in the UAE, the audiences, particularly Emirati audiences, were scarce. Today many films sell out, especially the UAE films. But there is no critical eye on filmmaking.

It is hard to even find reviews of any Emirati films within the country. Most reviews are

just factual accounts of what the film is about. “There is no criticism,” says a film programmer at one of the festivals. “The attitude is that it is better than nothing.”³³

Even the most critical review of *City of Life* (and one of the few we could find) seems limited in its scope. Mostafa worked with an international cast and crew but this review from *Time Out Abu Dhabi* alludes very well to the educational issues the UAE faces, which involves not just training but also cultural and societal limits:

...To make matters worse, some of their scenes are edited together in such an amateurish ‘just out of film school’ style as to invite ridicule. Erase them from the film, though, and it’s an impressive effort. Bearing in mind this is the first time anyone has made a big-budget movie in the UAE, and that Mostafa must surely have had to be very careful with the material to get his film into cinemas here, *City of Life* tells two engaging stories filled with funny and genuinely affecting moments. The local talent on display, too, is revealing of a rich home-grown resource ripe for picking.³⁴

Time Out Abu Dubai is run and operated by expatriates and mostly has a Western expatriate audience, not Emirati. Says a 25-year old Emirati filmmaker, “We’re a culture that doesn’t know how to criticize. It’s not considered okay. When I made my film no one gave me any feedback when it screened except to say it was ‘nice’ or ‘great’.”³⁵

Indeed, nearly every person interviewed for this paper, whether Emirati or expatriate, chose to speak on the condition of anonymity, as there is even a discomfort publically criticizing the film industry or the films themselves.

Between the scripts and the critics is the development and production, which is largely overseen by highly paid Americans and Europeans executives at the film entities. The oft-stated agenda of these expat film executives—and the reason they are hired-- is that the films they are developing will get international exposure. They are unaware of the complexities of Emirati life, and so they too might be more suited to the picturesque over substance. In interviews and conversations with several of them, most play up to their UAE government

employers, wanting to make them happy with promises of international fame without really knowing how to tap into the culture's stories.

Others feel the problem is a matter of quantity over quality. According to Alaa Karkouti, who runs Mad Solutions, a film marketing business based in Cairo, millions of dollars are being lost.

It would be better to have a properly budgeted film that is used well—otherwise having all the money without knowing how to make films will eventually reflect badly on the industry. The system of funding is okay but how tough is the criteria? They are making 50 films a year when they should be making two good ones.³⁶

Television has had more freedom, perhaps because foreign shows have been running uncensored on the satellite channels for years. *Sex and the City 2* may have been banned in theatres here, but the television show ran uncut on satellite TV. One director holds out hope that television will help pave the way (opposite of the Hollywood model, where TV has followed the doors film opens):

In 1990s we used to say the UAE TV was wearing hijab. No one thought it was important to make it realistic. We would show a woman lying in bed wearing a hijab. No woman anywhere is wearing a hijab to bed. Now that no longer happens.³⁷

But change is slow. Thirty years in, UAE television dramas still mostly revolve around a nostalgic Bedouin setting, although Dubai is airing some co-productions that explore its expat community, albeit minus Emiratis.

The internal censorship and self-censorship is in contrast to the films the UAE is willing to support abroad, as it carves itself on the international scene as a cutting edge business center. For example, Image Nation is one of the producers of *The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel (20th Century Fox, 2011)*, which includes a positive gay subplot, something that would not be okay in a locally made film.

CONCLUSION: Somewhere between Sex and the City and City of Life

In his essay “The Horror Film and the Horror of Film,” David Lavery writes about how the first public showings of film in 1895 in Paris caused terror, particularly one that was just about a train arriving at a station (*L’arrive d’un train en gare*, Lumiere Bros, 1895).

Such fear stemmed in part from the simple fact that the populace had not yet learned to watch movies and was unprepared for withstanding their realism. However, as Noel Burch has reminded, the reaction of that first audience was no mere aberration: for movies have from their inception been perceived as a kind of threat, "a veritable public menace"; hence the early and persistent demands throughout their history for censorship of them—for protection of the public against their aggression.³⁸

Lavery goes on to say the aggression was not in the films themselves but in the audience’s encounter with edited reality they may not have been prepared to see. One hundred and nineteen years later, this seems to be happening in the UAE.

The Emirati directed films have yet to reach a quality and level where they have significant distribution outside the Gulf, so they are not doing much to diversify the portrait of self abroad. However, they are helping define how Emiratis see themselves, very much an image in the making, both in reality and in film. While the government is not supporting films of national self-glorification, it is not allowing for self-criticism. The same is true for the audience.

Perhaps as the UAE becomes more confident and comfortable with its portrayal abroad, it will be more flexible with its portrayal at home. Part of that growth will depend on an acceptance of societal realities, as well as a commitment to screenwriting and story development.

So while the UAE undergoes its cinematic split personality—heavily soliciting productions like *Syriana* and then censoring in local theatres two minutes of the footage shot in Dubai because it highlighted labor issues and religious fanaticism—it is also developing an audience that will hopefully become more comfortable with seeing itself in the reality created by

film. In other words, ideally filmmakers will increasingly be able to pursue more engaging, fully realized stories that can look at critically at themselves rather than relying on expat boogie men to serve as the scapegoats of society.

The necessary film criticism and the national film language are just beginning, as is the formation of a national identity. For now, it is a journey the government, the filmmakers, and the UAE audience is on together, even at times when they seem in conflict—or in a lack of conflict.

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