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Encounters on the road to heritage and film in the UAE

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INTRODUCTION: Visualizing the Heritage of Tomorrow

This research is entitled *Coming Soon* for two reasons. Firstly, it is the phrase used in promoting a new film, with the trailer promising us that all the action and excitement is “coming soon.” Secondly, in the rapidly developing United Arab Emirates (UAE), undergoing one of the fastest building booms in current history, one is constantly finding signs on buildings promising that a new restaurant, luxury hotel, international school, bigger mall, and yes even a bigger cineplex is “coming soon.” Among all this rapid construction, there has also been a massive push in heritage building, with the implied promise that the past is also coming soon.

This research focuses on the decade from 2008 to 2018, in which UAE film was developing as a government-supported industry just as government-supported heritage was being staged throughout the country. In fact, the past often felt like a film location: New heritage villages and renovated neighborhoods of an unspecified collective past blossomed, just in time to meet the film boom. These new heritage sites have also acted as sets for television series and tourism films about the UAE’s heritage. Under these circumstances, this research questions the roles and challenges visual media—film, television and social media—have had in the construction of a heritage narrative and collective identity in the UAE. Essentially, through visual media, how does government-initiated heritage and public heritage come together or apart in creating national identity in the UAE? This is the main exploration of this dissertation.

This began for me in 2012, when two colleagues and I received a grant from Zayed University in Abu Dhabi to create the UAE National Film Library and Archive, with me as the principal investigator. Many people wondered why we would want to do this given a)

none of us were Emirati b) the quality of Emirati films was very low, mostly amateur filmmaking.¹

Few people would have had occasion to be aware of these films, let alone have seen them before the arrival of the UAE film festivals in the mid-2000s. Up until then, publicly-consumed Emirati film had essentially been news footage, footage from official events and government news documentaries, which are today housed in the archives of the UAE state television channels.² We ourselves were not thinking of Emirati film as worth saving until Emirati director Nawaf Al Janahi (*Sea Shadow*, 2011) told us that the first Emirati feature film was called *Abr Sabeel (The Wayfarer)* and had screened at a Dubai movie theatre in 1988, the year it was made.³ But he had never seen it, wasn't even sure what it was about. The print seemed to be lost to history. The filmmaker, Ali Al Abdul, had passed away, and we followed Al Janahi's numerous efforts to see if any of his relatives had a print, but to no avail. For a filmmaker such as myself, this is painful to hear. Out of respect for the years that often go into making a film, films deserve to be saved, to be revisited, much like a book can be revisited.

No other narrative features were made for several years, but as we began our detective work, we discovered hundreds of UAE short films (mostly on mini DV cassettes and DVDS) that were literally dissolving, sitting in humid boxes, sometimes lost to the

¹ The other principle investigator was Özge Calafato, a film programmer and photography archivist, and we were assisted by David Oldenkamp, then the Zayed University media librarian.

² These are not curated archives, but more like storage rooms. They are not open to the public, even for academic research, but I was able to go into one through a student who was interning at Abu Dhabi TV in 2010. It felt more like a warehouse and no database at that time. When I asked if I could see some footage from the early 1990s, the librarian told me that no one could look through the footage without permission from high up, and even then, not likely. There are always rumors that the films will be sent to the UAE National Archives, but that has not happened to date.

³ Nawaf Al Janahi is one of the first friends I made in the UAE and we have had numerous conversations about Emirati film over the years.

filmmakers themselves amongst the rest of the things in his/her home. We ultimately created a database of 637 films as of 2018, which now make up the UAE National Film Library & Archive (UNFLA). The archive includes films made by Emiratis and expatriates, as well as films for which the UAE was only a financier, most often co-financing Hollywood films or those made in other Arab countries. The criteria for acceptance into the archive are that the film must have had at least one public screening, either at a festival, cinema or on TV.⁴ The archive opened in May 2013, housed at Zayed University, and is still a work in progress. The collection itself is not yet open to the public because of the challenges of film preservation and archive rights management in the region.^{5 6} (Appendix A)

But the archive is part of a much longer history of film in the region, although not the nation. As we will see in Chapter One, the first filmic images of the Gulf came from the amateur filmmaking of the housewives of the British officers stationed in the region in the 1930s. These British amateur films, often voyeuristic, offer a relatively uncensored representation of the people of the Gulf. The films in the UAE National Film Library and Archive do the same, but this time helmed by Emiratis. These Emirati films, made primarily by students or members of the grassroots Emirates Film Competition collective that began in 2002, are uncensored, aside from self-censoring.⁷ Most importantly, these films, as well

⁴ Perhaps in the near future, with so much original film premiering on social media platforms and going viral, the definition of what is eligible for a film archive will change.

⁵ The biggest challenge for us was getting filmmakers to submit release forms. Even when we try to explain why this is necessary, the response rate is low. In the UNFLA team's experience, the reasons are lack of understanding of the importance of archiving and release forms, and the library is also mainly unstaffed today, with no one dedicated to following up on these matters. It would be more accurate to call this a collection, not an archive. But I will continue to call it an archive in this research, as that is what it is officially named.

⁶ While the archive's database is an essentially complete record of all non-governmental films made in the UAE or with its financial support, including titles, dates, genres, loglines and distribution information, the collection of films itself is not complete, with roughly 25% of the films listed in the database unrecoverable due to damage, loss of the film by the filmmaker or the inability to locate the filmmaker.

⁷ I wrote more extensively than I will in this dissertation on self-censorship in "The UAE Goes into the Movie Business" (CineJ, 2014), included in bibliography, but in summary, Emiratis practice self-censorship so as not to upset government's narrative of the nation or contest the government in anyway.

as videos on social media, open another window into identity and storytelling. In fact, I would call these films “contact zones,” a term developed by Mary Louise Pratt to define “social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery or their aftermaths as they are lived out in many parts of the world today” (1991:34). As I will show in Chapter Three, the asymmetrical relations of power in the UAE circulate around conflicts between heritage and modernity.

Indeed, these films are independent of—and often in conflict with—the heritage narrative and collective identity of feature films the government supports in its efforts to create a national cinema. This decade of study begins with the UAE following the lead of many governments around the world who have understood the importance of supporting a national cinema in conjunction with national heritage and collective memory.

The Global Heritage of National Film

French film theorist Jean Mitry said, “Cinema is a world that organizes itself into a narrative.” (Mitry, 1971:8). In other words, the perceptions of the filmmaker and the spectator create a new story that can become a world of its own, a world that could be seen as creating a “real identity” for the audience. The same can be said of heritage. Both heritage and film are invented cultural spaces that when combined can have powerful implications, and the state often provides the “largest stage” for the invention of identity and tradition, as noted by Eric Hobsbawm in *The Invention of Tradition* (1983).

Heritage, collective memory and film have a long partnership. Almost 100 years ago, in the early days of cinema as the entertainment form for the masses— as opposed to the more elitist art forms of theater, ballet and concerts—Soviet leader Vladimir Lenin is

often quoted as having said, “Of all the arts, for us, the cinema is the most important.”⁸ Film in Soviet Union was both entertainment and propaganda at the same time, keeping the masses entertained while subtly committed to the national narrative, as in films like *Battleship Potemkin* (1925), which showed the brutality of the Czars, from which the Russian revolution had saved the people.

Unlike national narratives told through a book, film doesn’t require literacy and education for its consumption, and it brings people of all backgrounds together in one comfortable space, be it a physical theatre or a website, to hear one story collectively, i.e. Mitry’s world organized into a narrative. As such, national film can be defined by Benedict Anderson’s seminal *Imagined Communities* (1983), if we just replace “nationalism” with “film”:

...Nationalism [*or read with “film”*] has to be understood by aligning it, not with self-consciously held political ideologies, but with the large cultural systems that preceded it, out of which—as well as against which—it came into being. (Anderson, 1983/98:12)

As examples, in the US, India and Egypt—the three countries whose films occupy the UAE’s multiplex screens—there is an imagined community, defined in each nation’s heritage and film history. Films also have the mass appeal to speak to the people of other nations. In her book *Indian Films in Soviet Cinemas: The Culture of Movie-Going After Stalin*, Sudha Rajagopalan illustrates how for both India and the Soviet Union, cinema played an important role in uniting incredibly diverse local populations to create a sense of

⁸ Vance Kepley (1990) notes that Lenin himself probably never uttered these words and that they were written a year after Lenin’s death of a letter by a film executive, Anatoli Lucharsky, invoking Lenin’s memory and creating the Soviet narrative of film being a powerful tool.

national identity, but also in connecting the two nations. When the Soviet Union was trying to get closer to non-aligned countries, it began exhibiting Indian films because India was the largest non-aligned nation. The films became hugely popular in the USSR during the Cold War, with Russians emoting that the colorful Indian films “spoke to their souls.”

(Rajagopalan, 2009)

The US, also with a multi-cultural, vastly spread-out population, had the Hollywood Western as its national myth for consumption at home and abroad.⁹ This is still true today, even as the cowboy has transformed into a war hero and action hero. Viewing of just a handful of Hollywood films makes clear that Americanism is always about good, i.e. America, winning over bad, whether bad is the Jedi, Indians, Nazis or Muslims.¹⁰ Scott Forsyth argues that war films ultimately justified American wars in the Gulf to both the domestic and international audience:

What actually governed the production and consumption of these wars was the prototype of the Hollywood film today; the organizing spine of the event was the polygeneric, capital- and technology-intensive action blockbuster – its dramas and narrative expectations, images, military spectacles, its weaponry fetishism, its fixation on media technology itself, and its triumph of American Good over all Evil narratives that remain lastingly influential; in particular, the male combat group,

⁹The myth of the American West and Americans always needing another frontier to conquer as part of US identity is summarized in the classic essay, “The Significance of the Frontier in American History,” written by Frederick Turner in 1893.

¹⁰ This assertion comes from an peer-reviewed article I wrote, in which one of the questions it raised for me, (Who owns the story?), inspired me to pursue this dissertation. Yunis, Alia. “Film As Nation Building: The UAE Goes Into the Movie Business.” *CineJ Cinema Journal* 3, no. 2 (October 13, 2014): 49–75.

isolated and endangered, representative of America, connected by bravery and camaraderie. (Forsyth, 2005:10)

I note this connection of Hollywood to wars in the Gulf because the UAE began to openly ally with the US in wars during this research's decade of study, most notably in Yemen. As we will see in Chapter One, the decision to be a nation openly at war has increased the UAE's need for heritage production.¹¹

Films can also bridge together different socioeconomic groups within a society, such as Egyptian cinema has done, mimicking Egypt's divide between rich and urban vs. poor and rural. For example, as explained by film historian Viola Shafik, *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 peasant girl who was seduced, only to find a better match after leaving home, and the second being a kind of male *Dame aux Camélias* 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." (Shafik, 2007:10). Variants of these tragic peasants as pillars of the nation remain the hallmark of Egyptian cinema. (Yunis, 2014:51)

It is additionally important to note that Egyptian film producers and directors (as well as filmmakers in other Arab countries) are generally from the higher socioeconomic classes of society.¹² Therefore, the Egyptian narrative of rich and poor coming together is a story that developed from within the wealthier classes. The lower classes are only asked to

¹¹ Prior to Yemen, the UAE had been a quieter ally of the US in the Gulf Wars, Libya, Afghanistan, Egypt, Somalia and Syria, being only vocal and creating a heroic film about its involvement in Bosnia in the 1990s.

¹² Rebecca Hillauer in her preface to *Encyclopedia of Arab Women Filmmakers* (2005:4) notes that the filmmakers' lives have been shaped by having lived abroad for many years and "by an upbringing in a privileged social class."

consume the story of this collective identity, in which the rich and poor are separate but equal. This top-down creation of national identity in film is not dissimilar from the development of heritage in the Gulf. As Lawrence G. Potter writes:

To create and reinforce identity, all the Gulf states have prioritized re-writing their history. And with good reason: as George Orwell has observed, ‘Who controls the past, controls the future, who controls the present controls the past’ In order to promote an ‘official version’ of the past, Gulf states are promoting the heritage industry.” (Potter, 2017: 24)

Indeed, heritage is how we choose to perceive the past, not what we know that history to be. The UAE’s official rewriting of the past has created the perception of a heritage devoid of diversity and conflict, as I will show in Chapters One and Two. But film in the digital age can now be made with limited funding, meaning a heritage narrative through visual media is not necessarily only in the hands of the elite or the government. With the arrival of social media and the internet, nor is the platform for showing content only in the hands of government. There are far more “contact zones.” The UAE entered film production in what we can call a *post cinema era*.

The UAE’s Post Cinema World

The UAE began actively pursuing a film industry in a media landscape in which traditional film exists within the bigger framework of visual media that has arrived via digital production and online platforms, transforming how film is made and consumed in what is often called a *post cinema era* (Denson & Leyda, 2016; Hegenar, Hediger & Strohmeir, 2016). Visual stories are no longer stuck to the idea of a 90- to 120-minute format with an Aristotelian three-act structure or as television serials, in which broadcasters

(and advertisers) decide for the audiences what they can watch, and when and how long it will be. Nor have those formats been erased. For the UAE, both visual media and national heritage are developing in a transnational and transcultural space, with both wanting to maintain a landscape that keeps traditional media and cultural identities but has also both needing to transform to meet new realities.

In speaking about European television in the 1990s, when satellite TV options were first proliferating, segmenting the audience, film historian Thomas Elsaesser writes of the new media options:

It is this paradox of simultaneously disarticulating the nation as a community of citizens, while rearticulating it as a collection of consumers (including consumers of ‘ethnic identity’) that, I would argue, has radicalized and compartmentalized European societies. (Elsaesser, 2006:651)

In the UAE, the challenge is even deeper. A unified collective heritage through visual media for a new nation today faces far more diverse media options than the already long-established European nations did in the 1990s. Since 2006, when Elsaesser wrote these words, audiences have become more fragmented, with communal watching no longer necessary for film. As the UAE tries to create an exclusive national identity, ethnically- and location-based, and a collective national heritage, it faces audiences split along different media and different national, cultural and religious lines. From these splits arise two fundamental questions, which we can see in the short films in the UAE National Film Library and Archive.

The overwhelming two questions in the independent Emirati short films, whether narratives or documentaries, is “Who are we?” and “What’s happening to us?” It’s a search

for national identity as residents get dwarfed by the ever-expanding skyline of towers and skyscrapers. We see this in the documentary short film *Rabbit Hole* (2011), by Fatima Ibrahim, in which the filmmaker asks young Emiratis where their identity comes from. The interviews are juxtaposed with images from Western and non-Emirati Arab popstars and products. When Ibrahim asks a young woman what identity means, the young woman repeats back, “Identity?” and looks at the camera, unable to give an answer. Amid the rapid change, the answer is a challenge for all.

With the question of “Who are we?” hanging in the air in the Emirati films, it is not a surprise that the government heritage industry took off in the UAE as rapidly as the building boom in this decade of study. It is indeed a difficult question to answer, for both the government and the citizenship, and it is a question that became more urgent between 2008 to 2018, as we will discuss in Chapter One. It is also a question the government has tried to answer as quickly as possible with heritage production in the form of museums, festivals, and archaeological sites made visitor-friendly. It is a question even embedded in the country’s name.

The Complications of a Name: The Stakeholders

The UAE is only 48-years old, formed after the discovery of oil made this region a hub for a natural resource literally needed to fuel business around the world. It is a confederation of seven emirates, with separate but overlapping tribal families ruling each one. They are Britain’s formal Trucial States, seven Emirates who had signed the General Treaty of Peace with Britain in 1820 promising to work with the British to fight off the local piracy hurting British shipping and the local pearling industry. The treaty essentially gave the British the right to police the Gulf for the next century and a half. With the British ready

to leave in 1971, the late Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan, then the ruler of Abu Dhabi, negotiated with the other six emirates to form a nation, with Abu Dhabi as its capital.¹³

The United Arab Emirates seems like a rather straightforward name for a country—no linguist roots to explore, in comparison to the neighboring Gulf states of Qatar, Kuwait and Bahrain. But every word in the nation’s name begs an answer. How united is it? How Arab is it? How is it Emirati? And overall, for whom are these words being defined? In the UAE, there are three groups questioning the nation’s identity: First, the minority citizens, second the majority expats (88% of population), and thirdly, tourists and international business partners vital to the UAE’s economy.¹⁴¹⁵

The Expat Factor

The UAE is part of the unique transnationalism of the Gulf. Film scholars Ella Shohat and Robert Stam have developed a concept of transnational cinema, which they describe thus:

In an increasingly transnational world, characterized by nomadic images, sounds, goods and people, media spectatorship impacts completely on national identity, communal belonging, and political affiliations. To a certain extent, a negotiation with diverse national desires is built into cinema, in that most film industries,

¹³ The word “Trucial” comes from “truce,” as this was considered a truce rather colonization by the British, who made no attempt to “civilize” them, as they did in their colonies, until the discovery of oil. Frauke Heard-Bey’s *From Trucial States to the United Arab Emirates* (2004) gives a detailed account of the treaty and UAE, starting on p.283. Christopher Davidson’s *After the Sheikhs* (2013) offers a good overview of UAE history in Chapters One and Two.

¹⁴ Figures of the percentage of expats in the UAE varies from 85% to 90%. For this study, I use the medium data of the CIA, which is also what the UAE government cites its expat population as.

¹⁵ Expatriate (expat) is a word used by Americans and Europeans to express their status as long-time residents in another country. It has an assumption of wealth and whiteness in it, but I will use it throughout this dissertation, for lack of a better word, to describe all non-Emirati residents, regardless of nationality or income. For more on the concept of whiteness and the word “expatriate,” see Pauline Leonard’s *Expatriate Identities in Post Colonial Organizations* (2016)

especially those without strong domestic markets, have to consider the possible reactions of other nationalities. At times, collective memories and desires encounter one another in a kind of transcultural rendezvous. (Shohat & Stam, 2002:164)

In the UAE, the transnational world exists also exists off screen within its borders, very much impacting on how a national heritage, which includes a very small minority of the population, can be configured for spectatorship. Shohat and Stam refer to a “transcultural rendezvous,” implying the positive intrigue of the English use of the word “rendezvous.” But this rendezvous in the UAE is more of a complicated love/hate story in which a majority transnational and transient population and an Emirati collective identity are not necessarily mutually beneficial to the government.

The multinational expat community, numbered at 200 nationalities (UAE Government Portal, 2020), have been largely excluded from the heritage narrative of the country. But in reality, many of the producers of the content in the UAE National Film Library and Archive and in TV and social media production are not Emiratis, but rather the expats that have been part of the landscape for generations dating back well before the nation was formed in 1971.

In the short film *Robbama* (2017), made by Malak Mansoura, a young Palestinian woman born in the UAE city of Al Ain, the director asks both Emiratis and expats what the definition of home is. The people she interviews have their passport home, but, in reality, know no other home than the UAE. Yet they are not entitled to citizenship no matter how many generations they stay in the country. These expats are not a monolithic block. They are separated along national, racial and monetary divides, as well as divides along how

many generations they have been in the UAE. Yet through visual media, they become storytellers of the nation as they also struggle with the question of “Who are we?”

The Tourism Factor

If we consider a film’s success to be based on how large of a spectatorship it has had, then the UAE’s first and most successful genre of filmmaking is the tourist film. Some of the tourism videos the different UAE emirates have created have had more viewings on YouTube than most of the UAE short and feature films have had online and in festivals combined. In fact, one of Dubai’s tourism campaigns has had over 100 million views.¹⁶ These tourism films are geared toward outsiders, but since the competitive affordability of airfare in the late 1970s, scholars have noted the impact of the boom in tourism and the consequent tourism heritage efforts by governments around the world. These efforts allow nationals to see how others are being asked to view them, to commodify them, influencing the way they see themselves (MacCannell, 1976; Picard and Wood, 1997; Smith, 1989; Hitchcock and King, 2003; Urry, 2002; Leotta, 2011). Hitchcock and King describe the issue of the connection between the local and tourist as such:

Aside from the presentation of heritage in historical sites, urban landscapes, and museums, there is also the problem of the ways in which tradition and heritage are perceived at the local level, and the related problem of the conceptualization of ‘the local’ itself. (Hitchcock & King, 2003:9)

How Emiratis see themselves being commodified in these tourism films made for others, affects how they view their own heritage. It also commodifies how much space they take up

¹⁶ As a comparison, the trailer of *City of Life* (2010), the most widely seen UAE feature film, has only had only 352, 043 views on YouTube, and three versions available of the full film online do not have viewings over 42,000. *City of Life* will be discussed much further in Chapter Four.

in these films because for the UAE, the local population is a minute number in the tourism story: In 2017, approximately 23 million tourists visited the UAE, which has a total population of only 9.4 million, of which only 12% of that are nationals (UAE government, 2018).

What and who is local circulates as a question in tourism, visual media and UAE heritage. Tourism and film are two initiatives the Abu Dhabi government began to invest in as alternative industries to petroleum by the mid- 2000s, and both were at the heart of heritage and identity production from 2008 to 2018. In 2008, the beginning of this study, Abu Dhabi's government launched the Tourism Development & Investment Company (TDIC) "to be the dedicated tourism asset management and development arm of the Abu Dhabi Tourism and Culture Authority (now called Department of Culture and Tourism or DCT), in order to drive the investment, growth and development of the Emirate's tourism sector." (TDIC, 2018). The same year, Abu Dhabi also opened TwoFour54, its media zone, and launched a \$1 billion fund to establish the film company Image Nation "to create opportunities for local talent to tell their stories and work on projects that provide them the tools to establish and sustain a local industry" (Image Nation website, 2018). This followed on Dubai's launch of Dubai Studio City in 2005 to "provide an all-in-one solution to facilitate an easy, efficient and innovative production process." (Dubai Studio City, 2018). In addition, the Dubai International Film Festival (2005 to 2017) and the Abu Dhabi Film Festival (2009 to 2014) served the tourism industry. The festivals funded the trips of producers, actors, directors, and journalists, in which all were wined and dined and toured around. Social media videos from the festivals' red carpets further built the tourism goals of the country. Indeed, tourism needs both film and heritage to promote a destination.

The Citizen Factor

Gender, economic status and religion have also been pivotal in the perception, presentation and reality of the UAE as a nation domestically and internationally, with all three issues essential to creating a unified national narrative from a collection of transnational tribes and ethnic groups, each with their own relationship to gender, religion and economic status. In a country with a median age of 37-years old (CIA, 2018), youth are the largest demographic consumer of both heritage and film. Thus, it is of particular importance how youth negotiate a collective heritage amongst divisions within citizens along tribal and socioeconomic lines and division with and among expats. Youth attitudes to gender, economic status and religion in perceptions of heritage and identity in Emirati feature films can be unifiers and dividers of a collective identity, as I will show in Chapter Four. Gender, economic status and religion also provoke strong emotions when looking at tradition, invented or otherwise.

The Research Question

The title “Coming Soon” not only highlights the rapid spatial and visual transformations of the UAE, but also the paradox of the heritage past as gazing at a place one has never been.

This exploration of heritage and visual media from 2008 to 2018 is framed within the above-mentioned factors of tourism, expats and citizens and the other key issues the UAE faces in its creation of heritage on screen: lack of a unique identity separate from the rest of the Gulf, destabilization in parts of the Arab and Muslim worlds, with whom the UAE shares an identity and with whom it participates militarily, and economic threats to the unique form of socialism and postmodernity in the Gulf, issues detailed in Chapter One.

In examining UAE national film and other modes of visual media through these lenses, this dissertation's main question is: Why did the UAE fail to create a collective memory and identity through national cinema, despite the government heavily supporting and funding this goal from 2008 to 2018?

Sub Question 1: Through visual media for both local and international audiences, how has the government-supported Emirati heritage narrative negated the story of its 88% non-citizen population, as well as some of its own citizens?

Sub Question 2: How has the government's sanitized visualization of Emirati heritage stood up to the visualization of public heritage developing at the grassroots level online and in independent productions?

In summary, this research explores why visual media in the UAE has both failed and succeeded in creating what Shohat and Stam call "a provisional 'nation' forged by spectatorship" (Shohat and Stam, 1994:103). Borrowing a British idiom that applies to the landscape of the UAE, this is a state facing constant "shifting sands," not just from physical construction, but also in the dictionary definition of "something that changes frequently, making it difficult to deal with and/or make plans about."¹⁷

Literature Review & Methodology

This interdisciplinary research crosses the fields of heritage and memory studies, film and media studies, political science and anthropology to explore the inseparability of media from heritage and collective memory, which is a dialogue between two fictions interpreting reality.

¹⁷ Collins Dictionary definition of "shifting sands."

The phrase or term “collective memory” is believed to have been first used by Hugo von Hofmannsthal in 1902 (Olick and Robbins, 1998: 106). But the study of it was pioneered by Maurice Halbwachs (*On Collective Memory*, 1925). Neiger et al in the introduction to *On Media Memory* describe Halbwachs as “a devoted follower of the Durkheimian school, (whose) work identified individual memories and collective memories as tools through which social groups establish their centrality in individuals’ lives” (Neiger et al, 2011:2). In the UAE, the “individual memories” include those of tribes and ethnic groups who have a collective memory separate from a national memory and without national borders, and the new social group leader, the national government, which is instilling a new collective memory.

In the era of U.S. President Donald Trump’s “fake news” war with the media, we have seen the real and represented worlds cross over each other constantly, particularly in social media visualizations. As such, this dissertation benefits from Mikhail Bakhtin’s notion that there is no boundary in the dialogue between ‘real and represented worlds,’ and that both can simultaneously include differing voices:

However forcefully the real and the represented world resist fusion, however immutable the presence of that categorical boundary line between them, they are nevertheless indissolubly tied up with each other and find themselves in continual mutual interaction, uninterrupted exchange goes on between them, similar to uninterrupted exchange of matter between living organisms and the environment that surrounds them. (Bakhtin, 1981:254)

Heritage, as the represented world, faces a complicated reality in the UAE. While the government is building a very limited, sanitized heritage, as we will also see in the coming

two chapters, other heritage is developing organically through visual media. We will examine if these narratives, real and represented, can find Bakhtin's mutual interaction and a uniting uninterrupted interaction.

Media storytelling and reality, even hyper-reality, are heritage's friend and enemy in the UAE. But in defining the country, visual media has been overshadowed by topics of geopolitics. In addition to Saudi Arabia and Iran, the UAE has become one of the three main players in the Gulf region, in politics and business. Not surprisingly then, the UAE has been primarily plugged into area studies that have mostly focused on the petroleum geopolitics or the general Middle East, rather than the very unique circumstances of the UAE, even within the Gulf. This is best expressed by one of the leading historians on the Gulf, Nelida Fuccaro, speaking at the first Film and Visual Media in the Gulf Conference, held in Abu Dhabi in 2018. She noted in her opening remarks that we have to shift the paradigms of how we look at the Gulf, and she views film and visual media as a means to doing that:

This topic (film and visual media) has also the advantage to overcome the isolationist nature of earlier scholarship on the region dominated by paradigms such as rentierism, tribe/state relations, British imperialism, sectarianism, soft power and security-oriented studies. By virtue of the broad range of interlinked locations, perspectives and voices (film and visual media) challenge myths of Gulf exceptionalism, a notion also fueled in public media, political discourses etc. These comparative connectivities (in visual media) will definitely help to normalize the Gulf, to re-assess it critically, and to re-balance asymmetrical power narratives. (Fuccaro, 2018)

The conference was organized by Dale Hudson, an associate professor at New York University Abu Dhabi, and me in order to explore how so much of the UAE's identity could be found through visual media.

This research aims to expand the definition of the UAE from the inside out, rather than from a perspective in which the nation's content is looked at from a global and regional context in contemporary politics. As Fuccaro noted, area studies have largely ignored the development of UAE's collective memory and media, although both are relevant to comprehending its geopolitical choices.

In order to understand the connection between film and heritage in the UAE, we have to look beyond traditional postcolonial nation-building through film and media, as the Gulf doesn't fit the post-colonial narrative and because it enters the film business in the *post cinema era*, when digital filmmaking is not necessarily beholden to benefactors and government funding. In doing so, this research expands on the transnational film theory of Ella Shohat and Robert Stam (1994, 1996, 2002, 2019). I also consider the work of Fay Ginsburg (1995) on indigenous filmmaking, as Emiratis are in some ways an indigenous minority, albeit a privileged one; Patricia Zimmerman (1996) on amateur filmmaking as the post cinema age has opened the windows to amateur filmmaking and because the film heritage of this region is primarily amateur filmmaking; JoEllen Shively (1992) on minority spectatorship, as Emiratis are also the minority spectators of their own films; and Patricia Pisters (2011) on the "genre" of mosaic film, as it reflects the nomadic and transnational culture of the contemporary UAE, as well as its heritage. I also acknowledge the doors opened to this type of research by Mette Hjorts (2006, 2009) on cinema of small nations, Thomas Elsaesser (2006, 2013, 2018) on film and identity, and David Morley (2003) on

multimedia film and community. John B. Thompson's *The Media and Modernity* (1995) helped frame my concept of neoglobalism to explain the unique position of the UAE in relationship to media. Chapter Two frames tourism films and heritage through the work of tourism scholar John Urry's, *The Tourist Gaze* (2002), which overlaps with Laura Mulvey's (1975) discussion of "the film gaze," and the research of Alfio Leotta (2011), who explores the connection of film and tourism in New Zealand, another small nation that has successfully used film to create heritage and identity. Chapter Three explores "nostalgia as an emotion that allows for a form of cultural transformation of memory" (Saloul, 2012) through what Andrew Higson (2014, 2016) considers a postmodern nostalgia unique to the social media age, relevant in the UAE as the country with the highest penetration of social media in the world (Northwestern Qatar, 2019). This chapter also acknowledges the role of TV in fostering collective memory, as in Eyal Zandberg's (2013, 2014) and Marita Sturken's (1997) work, which suggests that television was for many decades the uncontested driver of national collective memory. Landscape also factors into the interpretation of heritage and film, and in Chapter Four, we frame this through Martin Lefebvre's *Landscape and Film* (2006), in which the plot serves the setting, rather than the other way around. George Katodrytis (2008, 2013) and his perspective on UAE architecture as a landscape of identity and/or lack thereof mirrors this idea as this dissertation looks at the future of UAE film.

Area studies and history are still important for giving a foundation to the exploration of heritage and visual media. In addition to Fuccaro's historical telling of the Gulf (*Histories of City and State in the Persian Gulf: Manama since 1800*, 2009), relevant geopolitical and history literature include the work of Hazem Beblawi (1987) on the rentier system, which is

the foundation of UAE government, and Christopher Davidson (2009, 2016) on the relationship of Emirati citizens to their government in the “ruling bargain” discussed in Chapter One. Farah al-Nakib (*Kuwait Transformed*, 2016), while focused on Kuwait, offers an excellent overview of the impact of oil on urbanization in the Gulf, as does Yasser Elsheshtawy, (*Dubai: Behind an Urban Spectacle*, 2009), Stephen Ramos (*Dubai Amplified: The Engineering of a Port Geography*, 2009), Miriam Cooke (*Tribal Modern* 2014), and Lawrence Potter (*Sectarian Politics in the Gulf*, 2014). The works of these scholars focus on the history, and as I will show later, consequently, the deleted heritage, of the region after the discovery of oil. Potter’s *The Persian Gulf in History* (2010) and Frauke Heard-Bey’s *From Trucial States to United Arab Emirates* (2004) provide detailed historical accounts of the transition to UAE nationhood. The journal articles of Samar Khalaf (1999), Matthew MacLean (2017), Islam Hassan (2017) and Beth Harrington-Deridian (2015) include valuable histories of heritage creation in the UAE, including the invention of traditions, the deletion of heritage space and the reshuffling of neighborhoods. Jonathan Friedman (2000) and Ahmed Kanna, (*City as a Cooperation*, 2011), provide definitions of citizenship in wealthy and hyper-real settings; and Edward Said’s *Orientalism* (1979) gives a window into the government’s self-orientalism of heritage.

The challenge of modernity looms large in the UAE and is put in context through Arjun Appadurai (*Modernity at Large*, 1996) and the foundational definitions of modernity from Karl Mark, Max Weber, and Emil Durkheim. Postmodernism is key to understanding the UAE, and for defining the concept we look to Umberto Eco and his focus on the hyper-real (*Travels in the Hyperreal*, 1990), in which he discusses the theme parks, which are akin to much of the UAE’s landscape, and the work of Jean Baudrillard (*The Precession of*

Simulacra, 1983), in which what is authentic and what is imitation of some notion of real becoming increasingly complicated, particularly in film and heritage.

While the above-mentioned scholars give the research its grounding, a large part of this dissertation is based on ten years of my research on the ground and the original visual media material I collected. In searching for and gathering the existing films and building a database for the UAE National Film Library and Archive, I have been able to chart the growth and decline of film in the decade between 2008 and 2018, as well the patterns of production, including genre and story. This dissertation includes an exemplar of Emirati-directed narrative and documentary films from the archive, both shorts and feature length films, which we will use to look at how heritage and identity have (and have not) been built through film and visual media. I also consider the narratives developed locally, in poetry, including Nabati poetry as translated by Marcel Kurpershoek, and contemporary UAE poets and spoken word artists. I also analyze television and social media productions related to heritage.

Additionally, in 2010, I founded with two students the Zayed University Middle East Film Festival (ZUMEFF), now the longest running film festival in the Gulf. The festival plays films from around the Arab world and Iran, and over the years has given me a chance to compare narratives about identity coming from the UAE as opposed to those coming from other Arab countries and has given me insight into the evolution of ideas of youth in this decade of study. I was on the pre-selection committee of the Abu Dhabi Film Festival for three years, getting exposure to the range of filmmaking in the UAE and worked on numerous film and media festivals and programs in the country. This has all given me a participant-observer perspective for this research.

This research has also benefited from the rare closeness I have had with Emiratis because of my position as a bilingual professor at Zayed University, where I began teaching in 2008. In 2016, I began giving students in my Media History class at Zayed University an assignment to record oral histories from relatives and community members, nationals and expats, and create films, adding images to the audio of the oral histories. That work gave me a look into alternative heritage narratives, particularly those steeped in nostalgia, as we will see in Chapter Three. I spent several semesters studying young Emiratis' reactions to two Emirati films, *City of Life* (2009) and *Sea Shadow* (2011), the two UAE films that have played the most internationally and domestically. The results of surveys and focus groups from those views provide data for Chapter Four.

I come from a journalism background, and a great deal of this dissertation is based on interviews and oral histories I conducted over the past 10 years, including interviews with film executives, filmmakers, Emirati citizens from all the Emirates and expats living in all the Emirates. This includes expats from different the geographic areas of the world, as well as different age groups, genders, and socio-economic classes. From 2017-2019, those interviews were based on a specific set of questions aimed at gauging how people viewed film, heritage and identity in the UAE.

In analyzing the films discussed in this research, I bring in my experience as a script analyst for the studios in Los Angeles and my career as a filmmaker and working in the film industry in the Middle East and USA. My personal observations are involved here, too: Ten years of teaching Emirati university students and getting to know their families and friends has taught me that the constructed national identity is very thin, and breaks apart easily along the lines of gender, religion and social status. In fact, these observations are

what inspired this topic of research. Overall, I build on theories about the Gulf, heritage and media, through fieldwork which has taken advantage of the effort I have made to develop relationships with both Emiratis and expats from all backgrounds. For me, these anthropological and ethnographic parts of the research have been the most enriching and informative but I've also read the memoirs and papers of Emirati poets and citizens, such as Mohamed Al Fahim, and early British colonialists to the region, in order to compare them to the more contemporary interviews I have done to see how heritage narratives have changed (or not).

Organization

This research begins with a review of the history of visual media and heritage in the UAE and the challenges both began to face in the decade that begins in 2008. From there, it explores four types of film and visual media—tourism films, social media, television, and narrative feature films. The concluding chapter offers potential solutions to the obstacles the UAE has had in creating a national cinema.

Chapter One, “Visualizing the Nation,” gives a necessary overview of the UAE and the challenges it faces in creating a national identity and heritage on and off screen. This chapter introduces what I am calling *neoglobalism*, which enables framing the path of heritage creation and film in the UAE for the chapters that follow. Neoglobalism is the convergence of globalization and neocolonialism in a postmodern state.

Chapter Two, “The Tourism Genre: Placing Heritage in the Hyper Real,” looks at tourism films within the framework of how they came to be the earliest film form to create a heritage narrative, one geared towards potential tourists but also accessible to citizens. Film and tourism are not mutually exclusive industries: Both are leisure activities and both are

prisms for creating collective memory and a national narrative. This chapter explores the origins of what have become the UAE's heritage tropes, as manifested in each of the seven emirates' widely-viewed tourism films, as well as why the tropes have been maintained at the expense of other heritage narratives.

Chapter Three, "The UAE's Post Cinema World & Nostalgia" focuses on the response of independent film and social media to modernization and the impact that has had on changing the heritage narrative on government-run television. Modernization's consequent loss of the *freej* (neighborhood) has become the source of critical nostalgia narratives developing at grassroots levels, challenging the Arab Bedouin heritage narrative of the government. By 2008, in the internet and mobile phone savvy UAE, television had been a medium on the decline, but is still where the government was putting more effort. This chapter considers the fundamental differences between government-controlled TV documentaries and comedies and grassroots social media stories as they contribute to the national anxiety of rapid change and critical nostalgia in the UAE.

Chapter Four, "Youth and the Big Screen: Challenges of National Identity and Spectatorship," looks at effect and affect to explore if the landscapes depicted in the newly developed Emirati film industry can evoke a collective memory for UAE youth as they become the second wave of adults born after the formation of the nation state. Using Ali Mostafa's *City of Life* (2009) and Nawaf Al Janahi's *Sea Shadow* (2011), I look at how landscape is portrayed to reveal social class, gender and religion in government-supported feature films and how this resonates with young Emiratis as their heritage.

The concluding chapter, as a result of the analysis drawn in the other chapters, offers possible future approaches to heritage and collective memory creation in visual media,

focusing on the potential of looking at Emirati film as indigenous cinema, as a collective memory unique to the neighboring Gulf states, taking into consideration what genres would best suit a revived effort to build a national cinema.