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Encounters on the road to heritage and film in the UAE

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CHAPTER ONE: Visualizing the Nation

Introduction

We wait for no one

You might say

No more Bedouins

They disappeared

All of them

Before we knew them

Or wrote their names

On the skins of our tent....

-Khaled Al Bodoor ¹⁸

Khaled Al Bodoor, a contemporary UAE poet who has been writing since the 1980s, mourns a lost heritage in this poem, using the region's traditional storytelling method. Poetry, particularly Nabati Bedouin poetry, which dates back to the 16th century, is an obsession in the Gulf to this day as reflected in *Sha'ar Al Million/Million's Poet* (2008—present), an Abu Dhabi-based poetry competition with over 100 million people who have

¹⁸ Translation provided by Al Boodor.

tuned in, making it the most viewed local production in our decade of study. (Baynounah TV, 2020)

Several UAE leaders have even dabbled in poetry, including the UAE's founding father, Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan, and Mohamed bin Rashid Al Maktoum, the current ruler of the UAE's most populous emirate, Dubai, who unabashedly writes about the glory of the nation, as well as love and romance, as in the poem, "Oh Fire, Extinguish":

The heat of flames in my heart over you prevailed,
And I conceal the hell, fearing people may know.¹⁹

This "fear people might know" is deeply embedded in Arab culture when it comes to affairs of the heart and family secrets, as in Sheikh Mohamed's poem. No person, family or tribe wants to be vulnerable by letting others know too much.²⁰ This is also a national story: The UAE and its leaders, despite having open *majlis*' for citizens and residents and aggressively courting events that bring the country international attention, like the Special Olympics World Games in 2019 and Expo 2021, offer the minimal transparency required to its citizens and to its international partners and visitors.²¹ This is a manifestation of what I will call *neoglobalism*.

¹⁹ This poem and several other poems by Sheikh Mohamed are available on his website <https://sheikhmohammed.ae/en-us/poetry>

²⁰ The importance in Middle Eastern culture of families keeping anything shameful secret has become a debated topic in recent years as the battle between keeping the mental illness of a family member secret or getting them professional help has grown. Zolezzi et al offer a comprehensive survey of this matter in "Stigma associated with mental illness and its treatment in the Arab culture," *International Journal of Social Psychology*, 64, no. 6 (2018).

²¹ Majlis is a public gathering room that is tribal in origins. Most prominent family members and government officials have a majlis, an open space where anyone is welcome to discuss public matters or file complaints. Most Emirati government leaders have a majlis that they are present at once a week or for certain events, depending on their style. Both men and women have majlis and traditionally they are separated. But for UAE government leaders, the majlis is open to either gender today.

The Neoglobal Nation

In this section, I will explain what I mean by the word *neoglobal*. It was not my goal in this research to have the arrogance to create a new word. However, words like post colonialism, globalization, neocolonialism and post modernity do not accurately describe the unique circumstances of this 21st century nation. Postmodernism, which embraces hyper-reality, is a key element in the UAE's *neoglobalism*. The UAE was born in a neocolonial era without an anti-colonial discourse upon which to build a heritage narrative, and having never been fully (or more appropriately, officially) colonized, it is a state that has been until recently focused on hyper-reality at the expense of collective identity and heritage, as if unable to find a heritage without the anti-colonial tale to tell or a common external enemy to have fought off.

To elaborate further, the UAE and its neighboring Gulf countries don't have the post-colonial narrative of the other Arab countries, as well as the African nations and Indian subcontinent to which the region is so closely connected. While semi-colonized by the British, the present-day UAE never had a battle for freedom or independence. However, today, somewhat uniquely, the UAE is both a neocolonized nation and a neocolonizer. Neocolonialism exists within the UAE through multinational corporations, security companies, foreign educational institutions, and European and American NGOs. At the same time, the UAE has established its own neocolonial power in many countries where its businesses—including the government-owned telecommunications company, Etisalat, and the crown prince of Abu Dhabi's investment company, Mubadala—have strong presences in Latin America, Africa and other parts of the Middle East, often capitalizing natural

resources there.²² Additionally, the UAE government funds and/or operates the construction of numerous national projects in other countries, such as the Disi Pipeline in Jordan and a new capital city now under construction in Egypt.²³

The UAE's globalization comes into conflict with the notion of tolerance in defining the structure of the UAE. The UAE leaders often talk proudly about how many people of different nationalities live in the UAE in harmony. In fact, 2019 was the Year of Tolerance, with many festivals and celebrations honoring the word. We will see in this research "tolerance" is a natural outgrowth of the 2008-2018 decade and the desire for heritage. However, the word "tolerance" itself is problematic in that it implies a superiority of one over another in agreeing to accept him/her, rather than being about equality or universal love.²⁴ But no matter how one defines tolerance, one cannot call the UAE an open country, given there is limited freedom of speech, and the government makes no apology nor allows inquiry into its human rights records or forms of punishment for certain crimes. Taking all of above into consideration, I call it a *neoglobal* state: it is both a neocolonized and neocolonizing state that promotes its benevolence, hypermodernity and hyper-reality (the world's tallest building, the world's first seven-star hotel) to attract the world, which speaks of globalism; but, as we will see later in this chapter, it is a country that doesn't wish anyone

²² As examples, when I was teaching employees at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, they told me of agricultural projects they were working on in Mozambique and Colombia for food security and in Gabon for building infrastructure for the exploitation of natural resources there. The National also wrote about UAE investments abroad: <https://www.thenational.ae/business/uae-companies-going-global-1.247281>

²³ The Disi project started pumping clean water at full capacity to the Jordanian capital, Amman in 2014. It is a 325-kilometre pipeline to convey water from the ancient Disi aquifer in southern Jordan to the capital, partially funded by the Abu Dhabi Investment Fund. In 2015, UAE signed a deal with Egypt to build a new administrative capital at a cost of \$45 billion, in which the main contractor will be the UAE-based Emaar.

²⁴ The Oxford Dictionary definition of tolerance is "the ability or willingness to tolerate the existence of opinions or behavior that one dislikes or disagrees with."

to come close enough to question its reality or its hyper-reality and heritage, becoming hostile if any one tries to look too closely.

Reality vs. Heritage

Reality and heritage were both lost in the UAE's hyperreal mix, and so too are the citizens of the country. They are a minority population, uprooted and reorganized into the equivalent of a film set in which they have been dictated a role or asked to merely be extras, under the direction of a benevolent authoritarian government that stops anyone from questioning the script. The government has also scripted out heritage for its population, which is a common practice throughout the world, as Hobsbawn & Ranger illustrate in *The Invention of Tradition* (1972). When the UAE was established in 1971, in order for the ruling families to maintain control, narrative space was given only for stories about an Arab Bedouin heritage that matched the ruling families' identity. This came at the expense of the heritage of the citizens who do not fall under the Arab Bedouin label. In discussing the history of the Gulf, Potter notes:

Newly independent states sought to impose a new identity, manipulate history, and exploit sectarian cleavages to solidify the power of ruling dynasties. The historic cosmopolitanism of the Gulf was ignored by the states that privileged the tribal, Bedouin heritage of their leaders. (Potter, 2017:1)

Thus, the Bedouin narrative, which has its origins with the British, as we will see in Chapter Two, became the heritage narrative.

Until recently, the heritage stories were a distant second to hyper-reality in the nation's narrative. Indeed, postmodernism works against creating identity. Since the word "postmodernism" was coined in 1979 by Jean-François Lyotard, it has been used in many

discourses, but the basic principles include creating difference, repetition, the trace, the simulacrum and hyper-reality to upset the balance of presence, identity, historical progress and the definition of place. (Lyodtardis, 1984)

While the UAE's hyper-reality continues to generate for it international fame and fortune, it has allowed little space for an Emirati identity that reflects historical progress and that predates the hyper-reality. Postmodernism has indeed worked conveniently against heritage building. Citing the works of Jean Baudrillard and Umberto Eco, film scholar Alfio Leotta summarizes the "reality" of postmodernism, in which I would like to show that the word "reality" could be replaced with the word "heritage" to make the statement even more accurate in terms of the UAE. I show this by inserting "heritage" where "reality" is used:

Postmodernism also problematizes the relationship between reality [*heritage*] and representation. The ability to distinguish reality [*heritage*] from its images has gradually disappeared, leading to the fictionalization of reality [*heritage*]. In order to explain this phenomenon, Baudrillard employs the notion of 'simulacra': representations of material reality [*heritage*] that substitute that very material reality [*heritage*], to the extent that so many copies have been made of copies that an original no longer exists (Baudrillard, 1983). Similarly, Umberto Eco uses the term 'hyper-reality' to describe those situations in which the copy is constructed as more real and more desirable than the original. Eco's analysis refers in particular to the theme park, a space in which authenticity and illusion merge, creating hyper-real experiences (Eco, 1986). His 'travels in hyper-reality' are mainly

inspired by American cultural locations such as Disneyland. (Leotta, 2011:17)

Eco would have been overwhelmed with the UAE's tourism spots, in which the whole country sometimes seems to operate as a hyperreal theme park, recreating spaces with more appeal and availability than the original, such as the recreated stops of the great Tunisian voyager Ibn Battuta at the Dubai mall bearing his name and the indoor ski slope at the Mall of the Emirates. Many of these hyperreal attractions imply a heritage connection, as in the Ibn Battuta Mall, named after an Arab figure with no connection to the UAE region. But this ode to Arab heritage is overshadowed by the mall's hyper-reality, with its fantastical recreations of Andalusia, Mughal India and Ming Dynasty China as elaborate sets for fast food courts.

Hollywood & Bollywood Come to the UAE

The UAE in the 2008-2018 decade, in its *neoglobal* ambitions, heavily promoted itself as a place for others to make films, capitalizing on its readymade set of the hyperreal, its theme park-like settings.

The UAE's big push into film production began in August 2008, when Abu Dhabi launched a \$1 billion fund to establish the film company, Image Nation (formerly spelled Imagenation), "to create opportunities for local talent to tell their stories and work on projects that provide them with the tools to establish and sustain a local industry." (Image Nation website, 2020). That year also saw the opening of the media free zone, TwoFour54 in Abu Dhabi, joining Dubai's Studio City as entities courting productions to come to the UAE. In 2016 Image Nation became a part of TwoFour54.

Since the George Clooney-starrer *Syriana* (USA 2005) was filmed in part in Dubai, the UAE has hosted numerous Hollywood and Bollywood productions through generous tax incentives. (Yunis, 2014:52). Films shot at least in part in the UAE between 2008 and 2018 include *Race* (India 2008), *Dabangg* (India 2010), *Mission: Impossible – Ghost Protocol* (USA 2011), *Bang Bang* (India 2014), *Star Wars: The Force Awakens* (USA 2015), *Fast and the Furious 7* (USA 2015), and with a return visit from Tom Cruise, *Mission Impossible—Fallout* (USA 2019, filmed in Abu Dhabi in 2018).

Star Wars used Abu Dhabi's desert to create a sci-fi dune-scape, but the other films capitalized on the hyper-fun, hyper-luxury of the UAE, showing no engagement with either the local population or the expat community. In fact, much like *Star Wars*, the stories in these films aren't related to the UAE. They interpret the UAE not as a country or city but as a luxury landscape, a symbolic landscape. In these films, the UAE becomes a set for hyper-reality: It offers everything, including every human fantasy, but belongs to no one, aside from the people on screen having a wild and wacky five-star adventure.

For example, in *Kung Fu Yoga* (USA 2017), Jackie Chan and his team come to Dubai to auction a diamond, with Dubai itself being a shiny, glorious diamond in an eight-minute fight/car chase that involves five-star hotels, a fleet of Italian sports cars and a lion. Dubai seems to be a land with no local population. Even the Dubai police, who finally surround the criminals, are not seen. They are hidden behind the tinted windows of their luxury police cars. In this scene, Dubai has no heritage, no identity beyond luxury—and an efficient, faceless security/police force. (Figure 1)

Similarly, Dubai enthusiastically welcomed the production of *Mission Impossible 4: Ghost Protocol* (USA 2011), even soliciting the producers to have the movie's world

premiere at the Dubai International Film Festival, with Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid, walking the red carpet with star Tom Cruise. The film was successful worldwide (\$639 million to date, 2019)²⁵ and put a positive light on Dubai, with magnificent shots of Cruise scaling the Burj Khalifa, the world's tallest building. Indeed, the only local characters in these Hollywood films are the buildings. (Yunis, 2014: 53) (Figure 2)

Dubai was quite happy with its most famous building being the star in *Mission Impossible*, as recorded in the *Gulf News*, the biggest English-language newspaper produced in Dubai:

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. (*Gulf News*, 2011)²⁶

Like *Kung Fu Yoga*, *Mission Impossible-Ghost Protocol* recognizes the landscape as specifically Dubai cool, even if the characters are buildings in a city seemingly without a native population as part of its identity. We do not meet any locals or even expats living in the city.(Yunis, 2014:54) Similarly, in *Fast and the Furious*, we see bikini-clad Western women getting splashed in the process of a five-star hotel chase scene in Abu Dhabi. No Emiratis appear in this film, once again separating the citizens from the land. This is a land of hypermodernity, in these films, in which the citizens don't disturb one's embrace of luxury with Emirati culture and identity, a culture that in reality doesn't include citizens of different genders mixing together in swimming suits at the pool. It's a kind of different Orientalism, where the exotic is not the people and heritage but the hyper-reality. It is easy

²⁵ Mojo Box Office, 2018

²⁶ This information was first used by author in her above-referenced article (Cine J, 2014)

to delete heritage and people from this mix. Emiratis don't fit in with the wild party life of these films' hyper-reality stories.

Nor are Emiratis likely to interfere with the exterior city scenes. The modern UAE is not designed for pedestrians and public transportation is limited, and the weather also makes walking outside a challenge for much of the year. Thus, the glistening towers, not people, are what the camera sees, and any physical heritage, like the Dubai Creek, is towered over by the buildings, becoming invisible, as in *Mission Impossible: Ghost Protocol*.

This is in sharp contrast to Hollywood films made in South and East Asia, which freely use—and primarily orientalize—the native population, making them part of the story, such as Bangkok in *The Hangover Part Two* (2011) and India in *The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel* (2011), which the UAE ironically partially-funded.

Orientalism and Self-Orientalism on Set

Kung Fu Yoga does give a salute to Orientalism with a few shots of the desert sand dunes with camels. *Mission Impossible—Ghost Protocol* also has a camel encounter, albeit 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. (Yunis, 2014: 53). Even though camels are an Arab desert cliché, a cinematic Arabia trope, the shot is a small nod to the existence of a life here before superhighways and glitz, an orientalist nod.

Orientalism most notably is the title of Edward Said's 1979 book. Said's *Orientalism* revolves around questions of knowledge of the Other, the production of this knowledge, and the motivations behind its dissemination in the West. Said believed that Orientalism “production,” a word at the heart of the film industry, and knowledge of the Orient, or the

Other from the Orient, is the end-result of a process that reflects particular biased interests and a Western-centric worldview. (Said, 1979)

With most of the construction and design of the UAE being done by American and European (i.e. Western) conglomerates, the UAE embraces Western orientalism of the UAE as the nation's own creation, giving back to the West what it expects from an Arabia landscape. Much of UAE's borrowed Mughal and Andalusian architecture is a landscape-altering form of Orientalizing itself for Western expectations of Arabia, particularly in tourism. But the UAE doesn't always appreciate when others try to orientalize it.

Mission Impossible manages to squeeze in one other Orientalist trope of Western depictions of the Middle East: the covered woman. As Cruise struggles to see through a nearly blinding and wholly unrealistic urban sandstorm at the Burj Khalifa, we get a peek through a whirl of sand at an identifiable woman in an *abaya* (black robe) and veil. (Yunis, 2014:54)

This is rare appearance of a local woman because there is a dichotomy to the UAE's *neoglobalism*: The nation heavily solicits international productions, which often feature characters who drink, wear skimpy clothing and swear on the street, all things against the law for citizens and many residents—and perhaps more importantly, not part of the collective identity of the population. But if a Hollywood film takes on its citizen population, rather than hype the hypermodernity, that is not okay with the UAE. The most notable case of this is *Sex and the City 2* (USA, 2010). The main character, Carrie Bradshaw (Sarah Jessica Parker) says “Girls, we’re not in Kansas anymore”²⁷ 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, Warner Bros' claimed that after failing in several attempts to get shooting permits for the final script, it felt Dubai did not like the word "sex" in the title of the script (Hudson, 2010). Thus, in simulacra representation, the producers set the movie instead in Abu Dhabi but shot in Morocco in a farcical Orientalist mode, with some helicopter shots of Abu Dhabi serving for reality

At the time of *Sex and the City 2*'s theatrical release, the UAE's media regulatory body, the National Media Council (NMC), as stated in the local newspapers, announced that the film would not be shown in the UAE because "the theme of the film does not fit with our cultural values." (*The Guardian* 2010). This statement could be interpreted as being in reference to the blatant sexual practices of the women, particularly the character Samantha. But we know from other films shot in the UAE, that the behavior of Western visitors is not relevant to the UAE censors.

Unlike the films actually made in the UAE, *Sex and the City 2* shows plenty of alleged Emiratis, and most definitely not in a positive light. While Abu Dhabi as a glamorous, luxury destination, certainly plays out well, the film also makes an anachronistic Hollywood commitment to 1970s and 1980s 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 the stars wearing flimsy, fantastical Arabian outfits. (Yunis, 2014:53) (Figure 3)

Since the beginning of Hollywood film, orientalism has been particularly harsh on Arab women, when they were first portrayed as insatiable sexpots, but in contemporary times as black blobs to contrast with "free" Western women.²⁸ *Sex and the City 2* doesn't

²⁸ Jack Shaheen's *Reel Bad Arabs* (2009) discusses extensively the transformation of Arab women from sex-obsessed creatures into women covered in black, which began after the Iranian Revolution.

miss this opportunity either. It features a woman fully covered in black being examined by the American stars like a zoo animal as she navigates eating French fries with her *niqab* (face veil); 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. (Yunis, 2014:53) Even as the Arab women “save” Carrie and her friends, the suggestion is really the reverse. The Arab women are misunderstood by their men, and it takes these white women to recognize them. Further, the “saving” occurs by gesturing at fashion as a venue for freedom. The Arab women wear the latest trends under their *abayas*, suggesting that tradition is masculinist oppression and that the women yearn to break free via the secret power of being able to afford expensive fashions. But it takes fashionistas, Carrie and her friends, to recognize this, thus serving – if even for a brief moment – as white saviors. 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." (Freeman, 2010)

Sex in the City 2, additionally, is one of many Hollywood films set in the Middle East that deal with either morally corrupt oil sheikhs or terrorists.²⁹ The UAE has allowed two to be filmed here: *The Kingdom* (Universal, 2007), which was a fictionalized account of the bombings of US compounds in 1996 and 2003 in Saudi Arabia and was very specifically

²⁹ Examples include *Rules of Engagement* (2007), *Taken* (2008), *Taken 2* (2012), *Iron Man* (2008), *Killer Elite* (2011), and *G.I. Joe: Retaliation* (2013), as well as TV series such as *Tyrant* (2014-2016), *Homeland* (2011-2020), and *JAG* (1995-2005)

Saudi Arabia and not the UAE, and the far more problematic *Syriana* (Warner Bros, 2005). Based on CIA operative Robert Baer's memoir, the characters in *Syriana* include a Gulf ruler and his sons who live in extravagance and buy loyalty through blood money, running a repressive American-backed government trying to diversify from its oil economy. Inexplicably, as if not seeing the connection to the UAE, Dubai was so proud of being a filming location that it chose the film to open the first ever Dubai International Film Festival. But in local theatres, the National Media Council censored two minutes of the footage shot in Dubai because it highlighted labor issues and religious fanaticism. (Taylor, 2006)

Since *Syriana*, the UAE has become far more media savvy, as we will see throughout this research, and the government has not since hosted any dramas or thrillers related to contemporary Middle East politics of identity. Instead, the UAE's film commissions offer producers tax incentives to take advantage of the hyper-reality as a film set, but to overlook the people and heritage of the country, where even "traditional settings" are newly-made, pristine heritage villages that operate like Hollywood generic Arabia sets, as we will see further in the next chapter (www.filmdubai.gov.ae). In addition to having built it (the hyper-reality), so that they—filmmakers, tourists, businesspeople—would come, the UAE government wouldn't want the country to be portrayed as a place of deep discord and disconnect, particularly since 2008 when the rentier system, the foundation of the relationship between the citizens and the rulers, came under threat.

Cracks in the Rentier System: When Heritage Becomes Urgent

Film requires storytelling and a story requires critical thinking/creativity—and conflict. But critical thinking sits against the foundation of the UAE's management of

citizens: the rentier system, a sort of social welfare state for millionaires, the rentier system is a Gulf paradigm established by economist Hazem Beblawi in 1987:

A rentier economy is thus an economy where the creation of wealth is centered around a small fraction of the society: the rest of the society is only engaged in the distribution and utilization of the wealth. (Beblawi, 1987:385)

The creation of wealth in the UAE is in the hands of the ruling families. In return, the rentier state provides everything for the citizen, from birth to death. The government gives Emiratis money for being born, for going to school, for marriage, for having children and for housing. Beblawi even likened this to Marxism, a philosophy the UAE government and its neighbors have stridently disapproved of, having been supporters of wars to eliminate it in Afghanistan and Yemen.³⁰

Though utterly free enterprise-oriented, the number of government employees in the oil states is only matched by socialist-oriented states. Civil servant productivity is, understandably, not very high. They usually see their principal duty as being available in their office during working hours. (Beblawi,1987:388)

This lackadaisical approach to work survived relatively unquestioned until 2008. The system was formed to eliminate any political dissent, specifically the pan-Arabism. Pan Arabism has an anti-monarchy stance, and was sweeping the rest of the Arab world at the time of the formation of the UAE. Indeed, to make real the word “united” in its name, the

³⁰ Pre-nationhood, the emirates, specifically Dubai in the 1950s, struggled to quell pan-Arab nationalism rumblings from the financially-struggling citizens, who were being educated by recently arrived Levant, Egyptian and Iraqi teachers. These rumblings were quieted by the flood of oil revenues to the ruling families, which allowed for the development of the rentier system to pacify them. For a deeper look at political and diplomatic decisions of the UAE, “Arab Nationalism and British Opposition in Dubai” (Davidson, 2007) and *Change in the Persian Gulf* (Ehteshami, 2013) provide good overviews of the Gulf states in regional change going back to before the Cold War and their formation.

UAE, a union of emirates of disparate wealth and resources, comprised of citizens made of several tribes with transnational borders and cultures, has operated on the rentier system since nationhood in 1971. Up until 2008, the seven emirates were able to exist together with just a binding founding moment under the wise leadership of Sheikh Zayed, thanks to oil prices and rentier system. But serious cracks to the system began in 2008, with economic trauma, and by 2011, the political strife in the greater Arab world. The UAE even endured its first attempt at a coup in the emirate of Ras Al Khaimah in 2010, in which Sheikh Khalid, the exiled oldest son of long-serving Sheikh Saqr, returned after his father's death to claim leadership from the heir apparent, his brother Sheikh Saud, claiming Sheikh Saud was too close to Iran. (*Financial Times*, 2010). The federal government sided with Sheikh Saud, who has ruled ever since, but not without Sheikh Khalid first saying that the faraway federal government in Abu Dhabi couldn't speak on behalf of the tribes and people of Ras Al Khaimah. Since then, the federal government has spent more money on the poorer northern emirates, to the tune of more than \$32 billion. (MEED, 2015)

But money is not always bottomless. The push into film and visual media that began in Abu Dhabi in August 2008 was not the reason that a couple of months later the world's attention turned to Dubai. In the fall of 2008, markets watched to see if Dubai would be the first global city to default in the global financial crisis. It did not—but barely:

It weathered the storm, thanks largely to a \$20bn bailout from its big brother Abu Dhabi, the UAE's oil-rich capital and by far the wealthiest member of the seven-strong federation. The lifeline exposed both Dubai's oversized dependence on credit — in 2009 it was saddled with \$109bn of debt, equivalent to 130 per cent of GDP —

and the opaque nature of a system where the lines between the government and state-related entities are poorly defined. (*Financial Times*, 2019)

The bailout included Abu Dhabi asking for the name of the tallest building in the world to be changed to Burj Khalifa, in honor of the ruler of Abu Dhabi, formalizing the competitive rivalry between the two and showing the clear winner. But by saving Dubai, Abu Dhabi, the capitol city, showed that the emirates were brothers-in-arms.

The financial crisis revealed the dark side of Dubai's hyper-modernism. Since the near financial crash, the rentier state, with its comfortable government jobs, is no longer a guarantee, a national unifier, and the government has been heavily pushing citizens to take jobs in the lower paying private sector, which does include the visual media producing companies.³¹

The Rentier System and Film

Political scientist Christopher Davidson (2005) popularized the phrase “ruling bargain,” which is now often used interchangeably with “rentier system.” I note this here because ruling bargain includes citizens working, but in the private sector that has become an issue. The rentier system has not been asset for traditional film production for two reasons. Firstly, film and visual media production is a labor-intensive profession, often involving long hours and physical work, out of sync with ethos of the rentier state as Beblawi explains its relationship with productivity or lack of:

The basic assumption of the rentier mentality and that which distinguishes it from conventional economic behaviors is that it embodies a break in the work-reward

³¹ Suliman & Hayat write extensively about the difficulties of encouraging Emiratis to take jobs in the private sector in *Leadership Development in the Middle East* (2011, pp 104-124), including having longer hours and more accountability than the government jobs, although that is somewhat changing with enforced clock punching now at all government institutions.

causation. Reward—income or wealth—is not related to work and risk bearing, rather chance or situation. For a rentier, reward becomes a windfall gain, an isolated fact, situational or accidental, as against the conventional outlook where reward is disintegrated in a process as the end result of a long, systematic and organized production circuit. The contradiction between production and rentier ethics is thus glaring. (Beblawi, 1987: 385)

Secondly, with the government providing everything, as Davidson notes, identity is not to be questioned in the UAE as its “very survival has rested upon a combination of cultural and religious resources combined with massive distributions of oil-rent-derived wealth to its citizens, who bask in a carefully constructed national identity.” (Davidson, 2011:54)

It’s a fragile identity indeed held together by gratitude, i.e., all that money can buy. In an interview I recorded in 2019 with Abdullah Al M, 24, an aspiring Emirati filmmaker, he complained that the country has yet to make one really good film about the UAE. Yet when I asked if it was because there was so little opportunity to talk about anything with conflict, he shrugged. “No, that’s not it. We get so much in return from the government for ignoring things we might not agree with, like a certain war, that we can’t really complain.”

As Abdullah’s statement implies, gratitude isn’t going to lead to exploration of national stories that go outside government-sanctioned heritage narratives. But gratitude might also have a tipping point, as the Arab Spring nearly proved for the UAE.

The Greater Neighborhood: The Arab Spring

The war Abdullah hinted at was Yemen. While Abdallah is not of Yemeni descent, many Emiratis are, and yet no citizen has uttered a word publicly against the UAE’s

bombing of Yemen.³² People learned their lesson in the Arab Spring. The Arab Spring began in the self-immolation of Mohamed Bouazizi in Tunisia on December 17, 2010 and quickly spread to Egypt, Libya and Syria. Closer to home, the fellow monarch of Bahrain brutally cracked down on protestors demanding better care from the government, framed in the UAE media as a story about Shiite agitators spurred on by Iran.

Still reeling from the aftermath of the Dubai financial crisis, the UAE, in response to the Arab Spring, cracked down on the Muslim Brotherhood, whose leader in Egypt had replaced the president after protests there. In a show of force, the UAE closed down Islah, the legal organization of the Muslim Brotherhood in the country.

In her book, appropriately titled *Rentier Islamism* (2018), Courtney Freer notes that for many years, the UAE supported the opening of Islah in 1994 as a counterbalance to the threat of pan-Arab nationalism, with its anti-monarchy position, but always using the rentier system to discourage citizen interest in it.

In an effort to dissuade Dubai citizens from Islamism, Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al-Maktoum, until the recent crackdown, met with them ‘to explain to them the error of their ways, and to tell them that if they are looking for a job, or land, or any other assistance, they should not hesitate to ask’. Apparently, this approach (direct appeal from the ruler) is often effective, especially for younger devotees.

Those who are resistant to change, however, are locked up, sometimes repeatedly,

³² Many Yemenis were given citizenship at the founding of the nation, to increase the UAE population with families from tribes that fit the Arab Bedouin heritage and/or as thanks for serving in the military. But after the war with Yemen started, the UAE’s official historian, Peter Hellyer, a long-time friend of Sheikh Zayed’s, in a piece for *The National* (“A 2,000-year Bond,” February 17, 2015), wrote that even the Al Nahyans have Yemeni roots from 1,500 years ago, stating that the UAE and Yemen would remain one no matter what the war brought, likely coopting this story to keep UAE citizens of Yemeni descent pacified by connecting them to the ruling family.

for months at a time in hopes that this will dissuade them from acting on their Islamist tendencies. (Freer, 2015:19) ³³

From April 2012 to December 2012, the UAE arrested 94 men, including online activists, and they were all put on trial at the same time, with sentences given from five years to life. The most famous of them would become known as the UAE 7—men who were stripped of their citizenship and told to leave the country. When they refused to leave, they were arrested again. The arrested UAE citizens came from families/tribes across the country, even a member the Al Qassimi, the ruling family of the Emirate of Sharjah and Ras Al Khaimah, and an Al Suwaidi, a tribe known to be very close to the ruling family of Abu Dhabi, thus implying that family and tribal heritage is not stronger than the will of the government, which is quite an affirmation of the state. But it also showed the potential power of Islam to transcend both tribe and government, which as we will see becomes a crucial factor in heritage creation.

The UAE policy became a situation of either being placated (rentier system) or being silenced through arrest. This de facto policy led to condemnation by Human Rights Watch. Sarah Leah Whitson, the Middle East and North Africa director, said, “In the UAE, it’s now a case of you’re with us or you’re a terrorist.” (Human Rights Watch, 2014)

But what does it mean to be with us, if even family members of the ruling tribes were arrested in the crackdown on the Muslim Brotherhood? If being too Arab is a problem, and being too Muslim is, too, then what is the heritage of this place, as it was not formed as the result of a trauma, around which so much national narrative develops? This lack of a trauma separates the UAE from the postcolonial outlook common to national cinema,

³³ A New York Times Magazine cover story (“Mohammed Bin Zayed’s Dark Vision of the Middle East’s Future,” January 9, 2020) recounts a similar approach by Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed

sometimes called Third Cinema, which began in the rest of the Arab world in the 1960s, some 40 years before the UAE began investing heavily in film.³⁴

Additionally, in the *post cinema* world in which the state can no longer control information or the interpretation of information, especially visual media, being *neoglobal*, being seemingly transparent and tolerant but not, has become increasingly harder. Thus, so have the challenges to creating collective heritage and identity. In order to have a better framework for understanding this, we need to look briefly at the history and demographics of the UAE.

The Former Trucial States

Film is a permanent medium in the digital age and can be accessed from nearly anywhere anytime. It does not go away, it does not move, something alien to the Bedouin culture, in which place has not been permanent. But historically the land that is the UAE today has not only been the home of Bedouins, but also to other transient people, and not just today's expat population. This was not a land of vast, empty desert only. Going back to the Bronze Age, there is a long history of trade within the Gulf and along the Arabian trade routes of the Indian Ocean, which included trade for clothing, spices and slaves, with people of different races, religions and ethnicities intermixing. With no national or natural borders, this led to "a multiplicity of identities and considerable autonomy that the Gulf ports enjoyed until recent times led to a hybrid society that was unlike other parts of the Middle East." (Potter, 2017:5)

34 'Third Cinema' is a term originally used in 1970 by Argentine film-makers Fernando Solanas and Octavio Gettino and refers to postcolonial cinemas opposed to imperialist and colonialist cinema.

The government's monolithic Arab Bedouin heritage narrative ignores a great deal of the citizenship and the differences between socio-economic groups within the different emirates and between the emirates. In writing about Qatar, Islam Hassan notes:

The Arab states of the Persian Gulf use the heritage industry to reinforce their official national narratives and thus consolidate their legitimacy...Museums across the Arabian Peninsula have always neglected and excluded certain segments of the social fabric from a given state's national identity, most notably Persians, Abid (slave origins) and Huwalah (Persian Arabs/Ajami) (Hassan, 2019: 74).

This deletion of multiple identities makes storytelling a challenge for artists, including filmmakers, to find a comfortable space to explore heritage and identity. This may explain why Khaled Al Bodoor's contemporary poetry at the beginning of this chapter about lost heritage is rare: While poetry itself is part of the country's heritage, with the poet being a revered figure who traditionally would speak of the ills and issues of the tribe, the content of the majority of today's poems only has a memory that goes back to the founding of the country in 1971.³⁵ The new poetry is often about glorifying the present under a wise leadership that began with Sheikh Zayed, as in this poem, "A Bridge into Space," written in 2017 by Emirati Shamma Al Bastaki, when she was 21-years old:

My father is older than my country of birth

And yet my country of birth is wise beyond its years

³⁵ Marcel Kurpershoek, a former Dutch diplomat, is in the process of translating a third volume of Nabati poetry from the region. In the first two, particularly *Arabian Satire* (2017), the poetry skewers leaders and situations, something one does not see in today's poetry. Additionally, scholar Friederike Pannewick (2004:107) offers a very good overview of the role of poetry in the Arab socio-political identity in "The Martyred Poet on the Cross in Arabic Poetry," noting that it has been "a means of intellectual self-assertion against imposed systems of thinking, belief and behavior."

The tears that arise in our eyes when we

Think of the dream

That once seemed absurd to many

The dream that is the Emirates United

But also the Emirates that invited the universe

To its front lawn³⁶

Al Bastaki has read the poem at several public events. The very title of the poem, “A Bridge in Space,” while a reference to the UAE’s ambitious space program, also speaks to the suspension in time and place in its rapid transition, which the UAE is currently trying to bridge through the intense heritage building movement that began in earnest in 2008. Unlike Al Bodoor’s poem, this poem lacks any disquietude—in fact, quite the opposite. However, the last two lines of the poem, “But also the Emirates that invited the universe to its front lawn” speaks of the big “but” in UAE: The newness of a nation in which the nationals have increasingly become a minority.

However, not all emirates are equal: They are not all equal in size, economy, and population breakdowns. The seven emirates include Abu Dhabi, Dubai, Sharjah, and the four known together as the Northern Emirates—Ras Al Khaimah, Um Al Quwain, Fujairah and Ajman. Not only is Abu Dhabi the home of the ruler and crown prince and the federal capital, it the largest and richest of the emirates, containing 80% of the land mass and 34% its population. Its neighbor, Dubai, has a slightly larger population of 35% although far

³⁶ This poem was given to me by Al Bastaki. It is unpublished.

smaller in land mass. The other four emirates combined make up 30% of the country's population, all small in size, population and natural resources. Abu Dhabi is the only emirate with a significant oil reserve. According to the UAE government federal website (www.government.ae), the UAE's proven oil reserves are 97.8 billion barrels, with Abu Dhabi holding 92.2 billion barrels (or 5.8 percent of the world's supply). Consequently, Abu Dhabi and Dubai dominate this research because of their larger populations and economies, particularly in media, and, equally importantly, as we will see, the complications of leaving heritage in the hands of the smaller emirates. (Figure 4)

Very central to understanding the uniqueness of the UAE is its population mix: depending on whose statistics you use, the UAE's citizen population account for only 11.6% of the population. The rest of the population breaks down as follows: South Asian 59.4% (includes Indian 38.2%, Bangladeshi 9.5%, Pakistani 9.4%, other 2.3%), Egyptian 10.2%, Filipino 6.1%, other 12.8%.³⁷

The majority of the South Asians are male labor, as well as service workers, as are most of the Filipino men and women. South Asian women, specifically from Sri Lanka and Indonesia, are part of the female domestic workforce. There are also many successful South Asian and Iranian business people residing in the country, and they would be most closely affiliated to 12.8% "other" category, a group that includes Westerners (Europeans and Americans), who are white collar workers, to use an old term for skilled and educated labor that also plays into the racialized national divides of the country, in which white Americans

³⁷ This data is from the CIA World Factbook but is comparable to the UAE government's estimate of its population. Of the Western expats, the largest populations are white South Africans, British, Americans and Australians.

and Europeans hold the highest positions (after Emiratis) in most businesses and institutions.³⁸

The UAE also has unique population divides along religious and gender demographics. While Emiratis are 100% Muslim, primarily Sunni, the country also has a significant Shiite population (mostly Iranians), as well as various Christian denominations, Hindus and Buddhists, all of whom have places of worship in the country. It also has American and European Jewish residents, and as of this writing a synagogue is part of the Abrahamic Family House, announced during the Year of Tolerance and being built on Saadiyat Island and scheduled to open in 2022, which will also include a church and mosque. (*Gulf News*, 2019)

The demographics of the country in terms of gender are particularly unique: While the Emirati citizen population is essentially 50/50 male and female, the country overall has a male population of 72% and a female population of 28%, because of the large South Asian labor force working in construction, most of whom are not allowed to bring their families with them and primarily live in worker camps. (Global Media Insight Report, 2018)

The expatriate diversity of the population is more visible on the landscape than the diversity within the UAE national minority. But within that diverse population, the pure-blooded Arab myth has not been publicly disputed by other ethnic groups as the country's identity for the sake of citizenship and all the benefits it brings, like the rentier system, with citizens opting to look towards a prosperous, stable future, rather than the deleted past. This "historical narrative that highlights the contributions to Arab tribes while disregarding

³⁸ "White collar" was first used by journalists in the early 20th century, a reference to the white shirts educated office workers/managers wore, as opposed to the blue collars of factory workers. In *White Collar Crimes and Criminal Careers* (2001), David Weisburd and Elin Waring give an extensive overview of the development of the word.

various other communities that share the same territory” (Hassan, 2019:71) has strong roots in the origins of film in the UAE.

UAE Storytelling and Film

Film is a universal language that can create and capture heritage, making possible an identity and cultural memory that is consumable at home and internationally, unlike many other forms of storytelling. In the *post cinema* era, Nabati poetry, for example, is not a universally used and understood format of storytelling, even within the greater Arab world. Additionally, while poetry is uncensored, it is also made specifically for the local population in a dialect most Arab speakers can’t understand, giving it an intimacy, almost a private language, not the kind that brings regional, let alone international attention, not to heritage and certainly not attention to the hyperreality the UAE fosters.

Nor does the UAE have an extensive body of written literature to fall back on for heritage creation. Most Nabati poetry has been lost to time, having been rarely written down, particularly since this was a highly illiterate population until the 1980s. Today, the UAE has a literacy rate of 93%, compared to 58% in 1975 (World Bank, 2019), but despite poetry’s role in the fabric of social life in the past and present, heritage storytelling is not being created and defined from old literature, as in the UK’s “heritage films.” A heritage film is an expression used in academic discourse, rather than in the film industry, where the film would be called a “period piece.” It is “a film that places its characters in a recognizable moment of the past, enhanced by the mise-en-scene of historical reconstruction.” (Belen, 2012:1) These films became extremely popular during the 1980s and 1990s in Great Britain, where the academic study of heritage film began during the economic upheaval of the Thatcher years. Andrew Higson, who has written extensively on heritage films, calls them

means of “re-presenting the national past.” (Higson, 2016:232) In the UK, the heritage films were often inspired by older novels, 19th and early 20th century literature, most notably the works of Jane Eyre and Jane Austen. When turned into films, they evoked a happier time, even if in reality that might not have been the case; they were steeped in uncritical nostalgia during a dark time in the UK.

But in the UAE, the happiest times have been promoted as the booming present and everything that is coming soon, as noted by the appointment of a Minister of State for Happiness (www.hw.gov.ae) to “enrich the greater happiness of the nation” and Ministry of Possibilities in 2018 (government.ae/en/about-the-uae/the-uae-government/ministry-of-possibilities).

However, increasingly there has been an understanding that without heritage, a source of happiness is missing and it needs to be visualized. Heritage engineered by the state has become a valuable counterbalance to both the economic crisis and the risk of grassroots heritage and nostalgia developing in opposition to the hyper-modernity, instead of in balance with it. For example, in 2018 on one’s way to passport control at the Abu Dhabi International Airport, one would have passed a three-meter poster with a black and white photo of the old airport in 1985, with the following text from Sheikh Zayed: “The younger generation should know how our grandparents suffered and what they did for us despite the lack of resources. Knowing this, they will double their efforts and productivity to build on this inheritance.”³⁹ Thus, the possibilities and the happiness that comes from it, as witnessed in the constant construction, can only be fostered by appreciating the past. But heritage

³⁹ The poster is still hanging at the Abu Dhabi International Airport as of this writing.

needs a story, and no other option is as far-reaching as than visual media, certainly more than poetry or written material or even physical monuments, to which one must travel.

Spectatorship in a Smart Phone World

The most unifying image of the UAE was taken by Indian photographer Ramesh Shuklar on December 2, 1971, when the rulers of the seven former British Trucial States came together to declare a new nation. That photo has become a posturized image on many government documents, serving as national branding at most events—from mugs to bumper stickers— as the country struggles to give its heritage images and stories that are unique and work not only domestically but also internationally. (Figure 5)

In a country where it is normal to see citizens carrying two or three smart phones, interest in film production in UAE coincides with one of the world's highest usages of social media to access information and entertainment, including the highest usage in the Arab world. According Northwestern Qatar's 2018 annual study *Media Use in the Middle East*, the UAE has 100% social media penetration, with 99% of citizens having at least one smart phone, and the highest usage of YouTube (78%), WhatsApp (95%), Snapchat (69%), Instagram (60%), Facebook (82%) and Twitter (55%) in the Middle East. (Northwestern Qatar, 2018) In comparison, smartphone penetration worldwide was projected at 66% in 2018, according to a report by the consulting firm of Zenith Media (2017).

In fact, much of TV and film are consumed on smart phones in the UAE, not traditional television sets. The Northwestern study revealed that Gulf citizens spend 45 hours per week online versus 15 hours per week watching television. Comparatively, across all age groups, the average weekly internet usage in the US was 23.6 hours, according to the USC Annenberg Center for the Digital Future survey in 2017. (USC, 2018)

Instagram, where many UAE celebrities, ruling family members and government officials have millions of followers, UAE usage is 24% higher than neighboring Qatar and 27% higher than neighboring Saudi Arabia. (Northwestern Qatar, 2018). The social media influencers with the largest following in the Gulf all reside in the UAE, particularly Dubai, with all them primarily communicating through photos and more often than not short videos.⁴⁰

Perhaps one of the reasons the UAE population has adapted so quickly to multimedia methods of visual storytelling, in addition to the Emiratis' high consumption of the internet, is that cinema going was not that common in the UAE until the multiplexes began opening at the megamalls in the 1990. In the late 1960s and 1970s, a handful of cinemas opened in UAE, primarily to show Indian and Egyptian films, with none of them left standing today after the closing of the El Dorado Cinema in Abu Dhabi in 2017.

Even after the arrival of the multiplexes at the malls, films were mostly viewed through home video and DVDs sold at small shops or door-to-door by young Chinese men and women and most were pirated but sold on the open market, as I remember well from my early days in the UAE, from 2008 to 2010. After 2010, TV and film were primarily being downloaded, also illegally, through online torrents. Thus, the idea of visual media, including the current blockbuster films, delivered right into one's home has been a part of UAE consumption for a longer time than in the West's adoption of platform TV.⁴¹

⁴⁰ Researching the top social influencers (people with the largest number of followers) in the UAE is an exercise I do often with my students. The top five UAE-based influencers at the end of 2018, the end of the decade of this study, were Huda Al Kattan (Iraqi beauty expert), Joelle Mardinian (Lebanese make-up artist), Taim Al Falasi (Emirati socialite), Bin Baz (Emirati comedian), and Hamdan bin Mohamed (heir apparent of Dubai)

⁴¹ Piracy would only become a public discussion when the UAE began welcoming international film productions and taking part in the profits of film and TV productions. According to STA, one of the biggest law firms in the UAE, the government amended to stricter piracy laws in 2011, not going after consumers, who

All this visual media came after the establishment of the UAE. Prior to that the country had limited visual literacy, a term coined by John Debes in 1969 and described here by Averignou and Ericson.

Visual literacy refers to a group of vision-competencies a human being can develop by seeing and at the same time having and integrating other sensory experiences.

The development of these competencies is fundamental to normal human learning.

When developed, they enable a visually literate person to discriminate and interpret the visible actions, objects, symbols, natural or man-made, that he encounters in his environment. Through the creative use of these competencies, he is able to communicate with others. Through the appreciative use of these competencies, he is able to comprehend and enjoy the masterworks of visual communication.

(Averignou and Ericson, 1997: 280)

The rapid “development of these competencies” in the UAE is of particular interest when looking at visualizing heritage because a) it is part of a region that followed a form of Islam that, until the arrival of photography with the British officer during the Trucial States era, meant no depiction of human and other life forms through art or painting b) the UAE was established amidst a population that until the 1970s had spent centuries as a largely poor, uneducated and often nomadic culture, in which visual art forms were neither known nor practical for travel, nor could they survive in the harsh climate.

This gives a tabula rasa for creating a visualized heritage, but it hasn’t been that blank of canvas. While the Emiratis may not have had access to cameras until relatively

still quite liberally use illegal torrents, but rather those who upload content, with punishment including huge fine, jail time and deportation. (STA, 2017)

recently, the British did. Even before a *post cinema* world, these British also feared its power in the wrong hands, i.e. the people they colonized.

The Pointless Fear of Film and the National Brand

Art doesn't only require the artist to let go of boundaries— it means the funder must, too. An imagined community made by film can be unsettling for rulers who cannot control it, although the Gulf region has certainly tried before the *post cinema era* made that too problematic.

After the Iranian Revolution and the siege of Mecca's grand mosque in Saudi Arabia by militants wanting to overthrow the Saudi royal family in 1979, a wave of ultraconservatism swept through the Saudi government, including shutting down cinemas, not re-opening them until 2018. The ramifications were felt in the UAE when Egypt's film industry, whose biggest market was the Gulf in the video rental era, responded by creating of a new genre of film to please the leadership of the Gulf: first called contractor's cinema (*cinemat al muqawalat*) and later clean cinema (*cinema nazifaa*), with veiled women and pious lifestyles. These films were geared towards the Gulf video market, helping create an identity of religious fundamentalism in the region. The films reached their peak in 1986, with 95 productions that year, the highest rate ever for Egyptian cinema (Hillauer 2005: 40).

At the same time, another incident would show the Gulf rulers that without visual media of their own, their identity would continue to be formed by others. In 1980, British filmmaker Anthony Thomas directed a US-UK coproduction entitled *Death of a Princess*, a documentary about a Saudi princess who committed adultery while studying in Beirut and was executed at home for her crime. The deeply offended Saudis took their concerns about the film to the US State Department, and because of the strong relationship between the two

countries, particularly economically, acting U.S. Secretary of State Warren Christopher wrote to PBS, the channel airing the show, asking it to consider including the Saudi perspective. This led to a media uproar about freedom of speech, further damning the Saudis internationally. (White and Ganelly, 1983) (Figure 6)

But the Gulf response to films like *Death of a Princess* was not to counterbalance it by encouraging local filmmaking. Back in the 1980s, when the nations were still so young, particularly the UAE, that would have allowed a lens on heritage and national/cultural identity that still hadn't been solidified into the Arab Bedouin myth –and as delivered with post Iranian Revolution “clean cinema” —a conservative Muslim identity.

This anxiety over film goes back to the days of British administration in the Gulf, as Georgetown University Qatar researcher Firat Oruc discovered in a file at the India Office Records at the British Library. (Oruc, forthcoming book, 2021). The file, called “Bahrain Cinemas,” includes the stamped confidential letter (April 7, 1934) from Lieutenant Colonel Percy Gordon Loch, the political agent in Bahrain, to Charles Dalrymple Belgrave, the British Advisor to the Government of Bahrain. At the time, there were film screenings at Western compounds throughout the Gulf, particularly when oil prospecting began, subject to censoring. But Arabs were not allowed into the screenings, with most not even being allowed on the compounds. ⁴² ⁴³

I hear a rumor that an “Arab” is arranging to establish a cinema here.... If the rumor is true, I think that prohibiting the establishment of a cinema should be carefully considered, and in any case that censorship should be provided for. I cannot but

⁴² The Gulf was administered as part of Britain's India Office, and until each Gulf nation's independence the currency used in the Gulf countries was the Gulf Rupee.

⁴³ Oil was discovered in Bahrain in 1932, nearly 30 years before the UAE, thus making it the first of the Gulf countries to “modernize.”

think that His Excellency Shaikh Hamad would regard with distaste the type of film which experience elsewhere tells me is likely to be shown.⁴⁴

These officers feared, like their counterparts in the rest of the empire, that these Western films, with their brutal action sequences and overt sexuality, would make the colonized question their British rulers' culture, which could be destabilizing to the empire, as noted in a letter from writer Aldous Huxley in Malaya:

The violent imbecilities of the story flickered in silence against the background of the equatorial night. In silence, the Javanese looked on. What were they thinking? What were their private comments on this exhibition of Western civilization? I wondered. In North Africa, in India, I have also wondered. [The "untutored mind" of the poor Indian] sees the films, he thinks they represent Western reality, he cannot see why he should be ruled by criminal imbeciles (quoted in Larkin, 2017: 172)

The implication of Huxley is that the "natives" were too backwards to understand the violence in the films being produced by the British, as if the "natives" would have viewed the British in an idolizing manner, as they were not sophisticated enough to understand these basic action films.

The British fear that the local population might not understand its culture in film, to the detriment of the empire, is in keeping with the UAE's own fear of this, as the UAE has always carefully guarded how it is viewed by others—and even by its own subjects. The UAE continues to have a strong relationship with British advisors/consultants, and it is likely that British advisors advocated for media control, as Sheikh Zayed and his predecessors would not have had any knowledge of visual media until the early 1960s,

⁴⁴ File 32/7 (4/6) Bahrain Cinemas," IOR/R/15/2/817, India Office Records and Private Papers, British Library, as cited by Oruc.

whether for consumption or production. The fragile national identity, grounded in Arab Bedouins (and after 1979, Islam) has also been grounds for censorship in the UAE for as long as there has been a nation. In addition to censoring Hollywood films, the UAE's National Media Council censors Emirati scripts intended for local production. And filmmakers are well-aware of this, as Emirati film director Nawaf Al Janahi told me in an interview.

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. I had such a hard time with my own films on this issue. (Al Janahi, 2013)⁴⁵

Today, the fear of film content has switched from the colonial power to the national government. Oruc's research into the Indian Cinematography Committee Manual (1927-28), which would later be applied to British-managed territories in the Gulf, included material that doesn't seem so far off from the UAE's National Media Council today:

Crime films, for instance, could "normalize" certain illegal conducts as reoccurring incidents of everyday life, and thus "undermine the teachings of morality" among the native populations by "casting a halo...round heads of the vicious." Moralistic concerns aside, censorship in the colonial context reflected deeper political anxieties.

⁴⁵ I interviewed Nawaf Al Janahi for an article I wrote in 2014, "The UAE Goes Into the Film Business," *CineJ* (Vol 3, no. 2). He is also a personal friend, and we have many conversations about film.

As Babli Sinha notes, “although it was felt that licentious films were undermining British rule, the censorship board did not ban them. Most of the films that were banned outright either had overtly political content that was thought to promote revolution.” Films that represented British or Indian officers “in an odious light, and otherwise attempt[ed] to suggest the disloyalty of Native States or bringing into disrepute British prestige in the Empire,” that were “calculated...to foment social unrest and discontent,” that depicted “the violence that results in an actual conflict between capital and Labor,” and that “promote[d] disaffection or resistance to Government” were all subject to forms censorship. In such cases, the censors were authorized to remove subtitles, modify the narrative, or cut out portions of the film. (Oruc, forthcoming).

But it would be futile to have such fears in a *post cinema era*. Attempts to control film on social media has backfired on the UAE internationally. In 2013, Shezanne Cassim, a 29-year old Sri Lankan American who grew up in Dubai, was arrested and denied bail three times for making a mockumentary about Satwa, a middle class, primarily South Asian community. *Ultimate Combat System* shows resident youth street fighting with sandals, the traditional footwear worn with the Emirati *kandoura* (male white robe). Cassim posted it on YouTube. The 19-minute film is poorly made and not particularly engaging, but it does show a side of the UAE that is not sanitized Arabian hyper-reality, something that offended the government. Cassim was released from prison after nine months, but not without becoming an international media sensation. He wrote in the UK’s Guardian newspaper soon after his release:

In producing my comedy video in late 2012, I wanted to create something that celebrated the charming cultural peculiarities that make the city an enchanting place to live, and to show that Dubai is a much more interesting place than descriptions of it as a soulless artificial desert town might suggest. Dubai's diverse culture is worth exploring, and I wanted to show that Dubaians have the creativity and the sense of humor to create home-grown entertainment. (Guardian, 2014)⁴⁶

The international backlash against the UAE's treatment of Cassim caused more negative attention, exposed *neoglobalism*, than if the government had left a relatively banal film to disappear in the quagmire of internet videos. It also showed how Dubai's "diverse culture" was not to be highlighted, as it isn't part of the national brand. (Figure 7)

Having been born at the cusp of globalization, it is not surprising that the UAE looks upon itself as a brand, as well as a nation. In fact, in 2014, the ruler of Dubai, Sheikh Mohammed, issued a law establishing a new body, Dubai Corporation for Tourism and Commerce Marketing (DCTCM). "The corporation will be an affiliate of the Department of Tourism and Commerce Marketing (DTCM). This will include responsibility for promoting the Dubai brand." (Arabian Business, 2014)

Branding speaks of the contemporary language of advertising, even though it originates with branding of livestock to claim one's property or ownership. Both definitions are relevant to the UAE: Modern branding of buildings and resorts, as well as branding the landscape by the government, reminds its citizens who has ownership of this land's voice, i.e. the ruling families, and who gets to brand its heritage.

⁴⁶ To see *Ultimate Combat System*: https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=12&v=IUk5CB9kaBY

Sheikh Zayed passed away in 2004, with globalization in full force in the UAE, and heritage creation hard to find. Heritage, just like the citizens, had gotten lost in the retail and entertainment mix with US, Asia and European brands in malls throughout the UAE. Globalization in the UAE began in 1990s with brand name stores and restaurants in the malls, architecture (Dubai has two buildings that are replicas of New York's Chrysler Buildings), and entertainment spaces like Ferrari World. Relevant to notion of national film, the world's first Bollywood Theme Park competes with Warner Bros. Theme Park in the UAE, representing the two national cinemas that have dominated this country since the first semi-public film screenings in the 1950s in the oil camps.⁴⁷

One of the most quoted sentences in the UAE today is from the late Sheikh Zayed. It is ubiquitous, also welcoming people at the Abu Dhabi airport in a big poster featuring Sheikh Zayed: "He who does not know his past cannot make the best of his present and future, for it is from the past that we learn."⁴⁸ But while the Warner Bros and Bollywood theme parks know what national film and visual icons to promote, the UAE, which hosts them, is still struggling with its own heritage in film while succeeding as a brand.

Conclusion

In Qasr Al Hosn, the newly restored fort in Abu Dhabi, there is a photo Sheikh Shakhbout bin Sultan, the ruler of Abu Dhabi when oil was discovered in the late 1950s, looking in a camera. It was probably given to him by a British Petroleum photographer, likely

⁴⁷ Most of the first films in the Gulf were shown in the British oil camps in outdoor makeshift cinema screens, as documented by Fuccaro and others, but also in the Emirati memoir *From Rags to Riches* (Al Fahim, revised 2017) and in interviews I did with British expats who have been in the UAE since those days. Most of the films were American Westerns.

⁴⁸ As of this writing, it still hanging at the Abu Dhabi International Airport.

the first time he was introduced to one.⁴⁹ We don't know what he is seeing. It would be wonderful if we did know because it would give us a sense of the visual point-of-view of a native of the region then, which we don't have. We only know Shakhbout as the subject of a camera, a man learning modernity. He was the subject of the camera, not the director of it. What Sheikh Shakhbout certainly couldn't have known were coming soon were the complications to heritage creation and the future country's need for it—and the blank canvas to create it given the limited number of visuals. (Figure 8)

Even after the UAE became a nation, photography, official and otherwise, remained the province of expatriates, although not primarily European. The most prolific photographer was Pakistani-born Noor Ali Rashid, who arrived in the UAE in 1959, first working for the British. His archive, privately held by his daughter, includes over one million photos of what is now the UAE, as he told CNN's Reza Khan in 2010 shortly before his death. Many of Rashid's photos were commissioned by the ruling families, with whom he became close.⁵⁰ But those images have a limited view of the country, as most the archive is focused on official events or the families themselves, limiting the national narrative to a story about the ruling families, one that is unsustainable on its own, given the issues discussed in this chapter.

This chapter set out the seemingly unsurmountable challenges of creating heritage through film and visual media in the UAE. They include a) the financial limits of the rentier system b) political changes in the neighborhood c) the potential backlash of its growing

⁴⁹ The photo is part of the British Petroleum Archive but on permanent loan to the UAE National Archive.

⁵⁰ To see full Noor Ali Rashid's interview: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZVnTBxc4Xwg> Many photos in the archive have appeared in numerous government books, mostly of the rulers, but most of the archive has never been seen by the public.

military role in wars in the region, and to a lesser degree, d) dissent among citizens who favor religion as the rule of law, rather than an Arab-based authoritarian law.

The UAE also struggles with its association with the greater Arab and Muslim worlds. With some of these countries, the UAE would like to show its similarities when it comes to heritage, like the other member countries in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), the UAE's neighbors: Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Kuwait, Bahrain and Oman. But with multiple frictions between them and with tribal families being transnational (many of the tribes exist in multiple GCC countries today), uniqueness is also required, a uniqueness that supersedes the tribal and other ethnic divides. In order to continue to nurture international business and tourism, the UAE also needs to distance itself from the more troubled, war torn Arab countries without completely abandoning the shared language and/or religion.

On a more practical side, the UAE also faces the challenges of having a very small minimally-trained workforce in film and limited critical thinking to foster creative narratives that don't disturb the careful balance of the ruling bargain, as the young filmmaker Abdullah noted.

But at the same time, film creation has been embraced at the government level to create a national cinema from the top down, rather than allow this internet savvy population to begin to create a narrative for itself or to leave the story in the hands of Hollywood, with its glaring eye. Jailing filmmakers for their works doesn't benefit the nation long term, as one doesn't have to look too close to discover the censorship and repression. The questions then become what stories get told, who gets to tell them and how will these visualized stories create a collective memory without disenfranchising groups within the society, especially when there might not always be rentier system to placate them.