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Encounters on the road to heritage and film in the UAE

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CHAPTER FOUR: Youth and the Big Screen

Introduction

In 2018, a fight broke out one evening during the Zayed University Middle East Film Festival (ZUMEFF), an annual Middle East-wide student film competition held in Abu Dhabi. It was a verbal fight between an Emirati male student and an Emirati female student during the Q & A of a 10-minute Emirati narrative film entitled *Arasian* (2018). The film is about Khalifa, an Emirati middle school boy who gets picked on because his mother is Filipino. To prove himself a true Emirati to the other boys in school, he bullies Rose, the kind Filipino cleaner, asking her to dig out of the toilet the cakes she had given him that morning and eat them.

After the film screened, the festival hosted a Q & A on stage with the filmmaker, Ahmed Al Tunaji, a student at New York University Abu Dhabi (NYUAD). Right away, a male Emirati stood up, speaking in Arabic, to say he found the film so offensive and the filmmaker should be ashamed of himself showing a film that makes Emiratis look so bad to an audience that includes non-Emiratis. To which a female Emirati stood up and said that film didn't even show how bad it really is. She said her mother was Filipino and she and her brother were ridiculed at school for being a *nus-nus* (which literally means 'half-half' in Arabic but is an expression used to describe students who are not "pure" Emirati.) She said some of the scenes were not so different from stories her brother had told her. The male student apologized to her for having had that experience, as if on behalf of all Emiratis, and pointed out that he would never do such a thing, but as a nation, Emiratis shouldn't let the foreigners in the audience, including visiting filmmakers from other Arab countries, see them like this. The debate got heated before the filmmaker, Al Tunaji, was asked to weigh

in. The first thing he said was, “I’m personally not half Emirati. Both my parents are Emirati, but I wanted to show what it must feel like to not be full Emirati.”

NYUAD is an American university campus funded by the de facto ruler of Abu Dhabi, Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed, the half-brother of the official ruler, Sheikh Khalifa bin Zayed, and it has the toughest entrance standards in the UAE. Al Tunaji’s response was almost colonial, a person trying to explain the world for lesser people. This further angered the male Emirati, who said, “You can’t even answer in Arabic? That is our language, and yet here you are talking in English.” This young man was a student at Zayed University, which has a nearly 100% Emirati student body, with easier entry requirements and is segregated by gender, but classes are held in English. Arabic is the language of both the society and the religion and yet it is not the language spoken at most public events. This heated debate carried on, with each maintaining his/her position, until the faculty person in charge, me, cued the host to move on so we didn’t fall behind with the schedule. I was concerned about the time, but I also didn’t want the conversation to get any more intense, as I knew that would not please the administration of Zayed University, which as a federal university, is part of promoting the sanitized Emirati culture, much like the male student was advocating for. (Figure 32)

But the debate showed two things. Firstly, that *neoglobalism* is imbedded not just in the government but in its young citizens: The Zayed University student didn’t want the non-Emiratis in the audience seeing Emirati discord and bad behavior in the film. He wanted to maintain the homogenization of the government narrative. For example, the Zayed student who spoke up looks forward to the festival every year and meeting the other Arab

filmmakers who attend, but he couldn't handle a critical view of the nation.¹⁵⁰ Secondly, narrative filmmaking offers a canvas to paint and debate identity and heritage that this country's young population is craving.

Referring back to the dissertation's main research question, this chapter looks at the challenges that the UAE has had in creating a traditional national cinema (theatrical narrative feature films) through the perspective of youth and how they view gender, socioeconomic status and religion. These three factors have been pivotal to the perception, presentation and reality of the UAE as a nation internationally. Jack Shaheen's *Reel Bad Arabs*, looking at Hollywood's portrayal of Middle Easterners, also noted these subjects as well. To summarize Shaheen's research, in terms of gender, the objectification of Arab woman as sex objects in early Hollywood was replaced by the oppressed "blobs of black" in their veils after the 1979 Iranian Revolution; in terms of economic status, Arabs are portrayed as having an endless amount of money to squander; and in terms of religion, Islam is portrayed savagely and as the great oppressor of women. (Shaheen, 2012).

Views on gender, economic status and religion are factors that divide people, but they are also essential in creating a unified national narrative from a collection of transnational tribes and ethnic groups. Each tribe or ethnic group also often has its own relationship to gender, religion and economic status, with some being more conservative and others more liberal.

Looking at affect and effect, I explore the perception of youth to Emirati films and the heritage the films capture. I consider these youths to be the first generation to have parents that might not remember the formation of the country, let alone life before it, as they

¹⁵⁰ This student was one of my students and I know him quite well, but I am not using his name, as I do not have permission to do so.

were likely too young in 1971 or not yet born. This is also the first generation to come of age in the decade that the UAE began its launch into national cinema creation.

This chapter uses the framework of landscape. While the word “landscape” corresponds in many ways to the film word “setting,” Martin Lefebvre in *Landscape and Film* notes a distinction, in fact saying that landscape is the inverse of setting. He argues that setting is the place where the action takes place, a space “constructed by the spectator from audiovisual cues (framing, editing, sound volume, echo, etc.) and from the knowledge that he/she already possesses of the spatial characteristics of our world.” This includes action that happens off screen in settings we imagine exist. Landscape is a “space free from eventhood (e.g. war, expeditions, legends).” In other words, a place that has a unique identity without having to have any onscreen action define it. (Lefebvre, 2006). I would add that landscape also refers to the people, places and objects in the scene.

This chapter also expands on the framework of Shohat and Stam on the evolution of spectatorship and transnational film as national identity.

Just as nationalistic literary fictions inscribe onto a multitude of events the notion of a linear, comprehensible destiny, so films arrange events and actions in a temporal narrative that moves towards fulfillment, and thus shapes thinking about historical time and national history. Narrative models in film are not reflective microcosms of historical processes, then, they are also experiential grids or templates through which history can be written and national identity figured. (Shohat and Stam, 1996:368).

I will look at this grid through the rapid rise and fall of national film building in the decade between 2008 and 2018 and the new opportunities offered to young filmmakers.

National Film in Newer Nations

In 2009, when two capstone students, Alyazyah Al Falasi and Reema Majed, and I began developing ZUMEFF, the film boom that began in 2008 was in full bloom. Film education, along with filmmaking, was something that the government was heavily encouraging. In 2008, New York Film Academy in Abu Dhabi opened its doors, followed by NYUAD offering the UAE's first major in film and new media, and the federal universities and colleges all began promoting or expanding film production classes.¹⁵¹ In addition to the Dubai and Abu Dhabi film festivals, numerous film festivals announced their arrival in this decade, including imports from other countries, like TropFest Australia, and short-lived festivals, such as the Gulf Film Festival (2008-2013). Today, ZUMEFF is the only film festival still running, which mirrors the shift that happened with Image Nation's national filmmaking agenda during this decade. (Figure 33)

Image Nation, the governmental film entity, went from promoting narrative Emirati film in 2008 to promoting film made by Emiratis but not about Emiratis—and to mostly funding Hollywood films. By 2018, Image Nation had co-produced 31 Hollywood films, including *Shorts* (2009) *My Name Is Khan* (2010), *Furry Vengeance* (2010), *Lost Christmas* (2011), *The Beaver* (2011), *The Help* (2012), *Men in Black 3* (2012), *Best Exotic Marigold Hotel* (2013), *The Hundred Foot Journey* (2014), *Benji* (2017) and *Free Solo* (2018). Meanwhile, in 10 years, it only produced seven films directed by Emiratis. Not only do the majority of Image Nation's films have nothing to do with the UAE's geographic location, heritage or history, they are often out of sync with UAE culture. The UAE does not consider homosexuality legal, and yet Image Nation co-produced *Best Exotic Marigold Hotel*, which

¹⁵¹ More on film education during this decade, see Yunis & Duthler (2011)

gives a very positive portrayal of homosexuality; Christmas is not a holiday in the UAE, but Image Nation co-produced *Lost Christmas*.

Image Nation still remains the only significant UAE funder of film, and only a handful of low budget comedy and action feature films have been made without Image Nation's financial support. Yet the image of the nation through Image Nation has evolved into that of a Hollywood player, rather than promoting homegrown film, side-stepping its original mission to create a sustainable national cinema movement.

With a billion-dollar fund, money has certainly not been Image Nation's challenge. But money has not been a significant impediment to other relatively new nations, far poorer, who have turned to film to help create a national narrative. Nations younger than the UAE by some 20 years, such as the former Soviet Republics of Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan, have increasingly used film as the primary language in creating a national collective memory. They have had great success in comparison with the UAE, which has yet to produce a homegrown theatrical hit (a film with significant spectatorship), let alone one that depicts a national landscape story.

There are strong similarities between the former Soviet republics and the UAE in heritage creation. Like the UAE, these Asian Soviet republics' citizens are members of tribes, which have transnational borders. They also face ethnic/tribal divisions that are not spoken of in public. Similarly, oral poetry until recently was their primary storytelling format. Like the UAE, these former Soviet republics have a very limited visual past to rely on, a limited tradition of visual arts (in part because of the shared religion of Islam and in part because of the harsh climate and nomadic culture), and censorship and self-censorship are deeply ingrained in the society, as is living in an authoritarian state. These former Soviet

Republics are also undergoing a huge building booms, involving expat workers at all employment levels, although not to the degree of the UAE. But they too have had to form a nation state and imbue it with heritage in the wake of the Soviet departure. Similarly, these Central Asian countries were not emerging out of official colonialization, just like the former Trucial States were not, but in both cases, it was de facto colonization.¹⁵²

Since the 2005 epic *Nomad*, Kazakhstan, the wealthiest of the “stans” because of its oil reserves, has produced several government-funded films, many mainly for local audiences, that delve into different periods of time in the country’s history, from fighting off Mongols to surviving the Soviets. As Rustem Abdrashov, Kazak director of *The Gift to Stalin* (2008) said, film offers a “chance to reassess the past”¹⁵³ (EuroAsia Net, 2011) In Kyrgyzstan, the government funded *Kurmanjan Datka: Queen of the Mountains* (2014), about the woman who unites the Kyrgyz tribes in the early 1900s, was made for \$1.5 million and broke national box office records despite its formulaic directing. (Aramco World, 2016)

According to Elmira Kuchumkulova, professor of heritage and literature at the University of Central Asia, “Kurmanjan Datka’s historical story became much more popular and relevant after the Soviet Union collapsed, But the story did not rise to the level of popularity that we had after the film. Many people looked forward to it because they read about her in history textbooks, but they did not have a clear picture of her.”¹⁵⁴

This is the power of film: film made a bigger-than-life hero out of a national heritage icon. To be fair, unlike the former Soviet republics, the UAE was not mentored in the

¹⁵² The parallels I’m making between the two regions are based on my experience in both. In 2016, I spent time in the “stans” working on an article for Aramco World on nation building and film. Aramco World Magazine, September <https://www.aramcoworld.com/Articles/September-2016/Epic-Nation>

¹⁵³ EuroAsia Net <https://eurasianet.org/kazakhstan-astana-harnesses-soft-power-of-silver-screen>

¹⁵⁴ Interview in Baku with me, April 2016, when I was on the writing assignment for Aramco World.

language of film for 70 years by the Russians, who left behind a film infrastructure and legacy and, as allegedly expressed by Lenin in the introduction of this dissertation, an understanding of the power of film in nation building. But to leave the difference between the UAE and the Central Asian Republics to a question of infrastructure would be too simple—international crews can be hired for productions from around the world, as is the reality in all the films made in the UAE, and post production can be done anywhere. Seemingly further to the advantage of the UAE, the former Soviet republics are vast in comparison and have much larger citizenship to reach with their stories. They also have much more varied landscapes (mountains, lakes, desert), which have created different tribal cultures. Kazakhstan’s citizenship is 18 million and Kyrgyzstan’s is 5 million, whereas the UAE has a citizenship of less than 1 million around which to create stories. But we cannot call the “stans” *neoglobal* states—no hyper-reality, no postmodernism, no neocolonial power—and perhaps therein lies the challenge the UAE has faced in creating home spectatorship for UAE film: It is equally concerned with its image abroad as its image at home and tries to serve both in almost everything, including film.

Nor can the UAE say it has had a lack of interest in going to the movies: The UAE has the largest box office in the Middle East. With more than half the entire population under the age of 25, youth bare also the largest demographic group also watching films.¹⁵⁵ Box office receipts in the UAE are the highest in the Middle East, averaging US\$2.2 million to US\$5 million per week. As a comparison, looking at data from Mojo Box Office during the second week of August 2018, Egypt, the most populous Arab country with 97.4 million people, had box receipts of US\$132.400, whereas the UAE, with a population of 9.4 million,

¹⁵⁵ Figures from report by Markaz (Kuwait Financial Center), 2012, which looked at the population pyramid of the GCC, projecting population will remain youth-based until at least 2050

less than 10% of Egypt's, took in US\$4 million in box office receipts. Even considering the different price for tickets, the UAE has highest movie theatre attendance not only in the Gulf, but in the Middle East. Unlike Egypt, however, most films are foreign productions from Hollywood and India, especially Bollywood (Hindi-language) and Mollywood (Malayalam-language) and commercial films from Egypt. But the increase in theaters in the UAE has had little impact on local production or viewership, despite educational efforts by the government.¹⁵⁶

Glamour Before Education

In August, 2008, I began teaching visual media production and media history at Zayed University in Abu Dhabi. Within weeks, I found myself overwhelmed by the flow of film festival executives calling me (and other film and media production professors at the federal universities, with our all-Emirati student bodies), offering free screening tickets for all my classes and the chance to meet the celebrities the festivals were flying in. Any one of my Emirati students was also welcome to volunteer to escort VIPs on the red carpet. The female students particularly were sought for photo ops with celebrities on the red carpet, often more the object of the cameras often than the celebrities, tapping into the Orientalist fantasy of seeing the Arab woman brought out of the darkness.¹⁵⁷ It was as if Laura Mulvey's work on the female gaze, that "women are simultaneously looked at and displayed," applies not only to what is onscreen but also to what is live on the red carpet. (Mulvey, 1975)¹⁵⁸

¹⁵⁶ Figures from Box Office Mojo, the film industry report on box office attendance globally.

¹⁵⁷ I was at these events, so this is based on my observations.

¹⁵⁸ Originally written in 1975, Mulvey's essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" has since been published in several books. I reference from its printing in *Visual and Other Pleasures* (Palgrave Macmillan, 1989)

The festivals also had the focus of nation building for an international/Hollywood audience: The festivals were anxious to fill up the seats and to have the venue spaces decorated with enough UAE nationals to give the country a local identity to the international attendees. The festivals offered my students tea with actress Susan Sarandon, front row seats with Naomi Watts and a workshop on directing with Spike Lee. This was a chance for the students to learn about film and a chance for Hollywood to see behind the Orientalism of the veil, as the majority of the students were female.

As someone who had just come from Los Angeles, where people are in a constant frenzy to get an actor's attention to pitch their latest projects, it was like a parallel universe: the prize was an audience with the students, rather than with the talent. By my second year, I was not surprised when the new director of the Abu Dhabi Film Festival, Peter Scarlet, the former head of the Tribeca Film Festival in New York, called to suggest that Catherine Deneuve have an audience with my students.

I could fit Deneuve into my class schedule but I couldn't find any student enthusiasm: They had no idea who she was, and didn't think that any film that was made before they were born could be relevant. The UAE was the world of the ultra-new, and that applied to film also.¹⁵⁹ Additionally, anything that was not a studio film from Hollywood, Bollywood or Egypt was a relatively alien concept. This lack of interest was perhaps even more shocking for the festival organizers, most of whom had been recruited from well-known festivals, particularly the Toronto International Film Festival, at very high salaries, around US\$22,000 a month for mid- and upper-level management.¹⁶⁰

¹⁵⁹ My first semester teaching in Abu Dhabi, fall 2008, I referenced the film *Forrest Gump* (1994), and the students didn't know it. When I told them more about it, one of the students summed up for the class by saying, "Why would we know a film that old?"

¹⁶⁰ Told me by someone who had worked in top management of ADFE, but did not allow me to use her name.

But like so much in the Gulf, in the first years of the festival boom, glamour came before education. The Dubai International Film Festival (DIFF) started out primarily promoting the UAE's hyperreal agenda of big and lavish showcases, and Abu Dhabi followed. At the launches of these festivals, the red carpets were packed with stars — including Omar Sharif, George Clooney, Demi Moore and the most famous actors of Arab cinema, such as Hind Sabry, Ahmed Helmy and Yusra. Many were paid to visit for a day or two to enliven parties and screenings, even though they did not have a film playing. The Abu Dhabi Film Festival (ADFF), then called Middle East International Film Festival, left attendees baffled in 2008 by a three-hour gala opening night that included random circus and dance acts, and an overwhelming amount of money given to relatively mediocre, mostly European films through the Black Pearl Awards, including over US\$400,000 in awards for documentaries and short films. Awards for Best Narrative Film (US\$100,000) and Best New Narrative Director (US\$50,000) were amounts unheard of anywhere else in the world. As a comparison point, with most festivals giving none or minimal prize money, aside from awards for young emerging filmmakers, prizes at the prestigious Cannes Film Festival are all under \$20,000. (Cannes Film Festival, 2019)

The UAE festivals themselves didn't seem to be bothered by their superficiality at the start. The following extract is typical of the local press coverage of DIFF's 2004 debut:

With DIFF, the Middle East confirms its move from chronic savouring of the purest imitation of life – cinema – to having finally sunk its teeth into the culture, décor and ambiance of this important medium of art [...] more than 800 VIP guests walked the 40-meter red carpet. (The Emirates Network, 2004)

But soon the festivals needed more substance behind them to generate international respect – and to prevent them from becoming merely free five-star junkets for even the most insignificant Hollywood guests. As Jay Weissberg, film critic for *Variety* who attended the festivals regularly, told me of the early days:

The films were almost an afterthought, and little attention was paid to fostering cinema culture in the region. Of course, there were lone voices working hard for the sake of cinema, but they were drowned out by the thirst for glitz. (Weissberg, 2013)

Budget was not an issue, but rather substance was. Thus, the festivals began education initiatives, creating training programs to create festival content. At a certain level, it worked, as did initiatives from Image Nation, TwoFour54, Tashkeel and Abu Dhabi Music and Arts Foundation. The students who didn't know who Spike Lee was in 2008 were starting to make their own films, and their films began to appear in the local festivals, where competition was not particularly tough for Emirati filmmakers.

When DIFF launched in 2004, there were virtually no film history or filmmaking courses in the country. But the development of film in higher education and the development of the festivals fed off each other, and helped the festivals foster their shared niche: local film education and funding. However, the festivals were not the beginning of UAE filmmaking. The first film festival in the Gulf was the Emirates Film Competition (EFC) held in Abu Dhabi in 2002. It was not a festival so much as a chance for a cooperative of young Emirati filmmakers, mostly self-taught, to have the opportunity to show the films they had been working on to a small audience of friends and family and to screen a collection of shorts and features from around the Arab world. These films, as mentioned earlier, often resemble home movies or high school projects, with limited

plotlines, budgets and character development. But as many filmmakers from that time have told me, the EFC was the only place in the Gulf where one could experience seeing Gulf Arabs on screen, through the eyes of Arabs, specifically Emirati, filmmakers. The concept of self-representation of Emiratis was foreign beyond the EFC shorts until the arrival of the film festivals, when the EFC was incorporated into the Abu Dhabi Film Festival.

When it comes to feature films, DIFF and ADFE did partially fund numerous films helmed by Arab filmmakers that would go on to have long lives internationally, including the first feature length Saudi film, *Wadjda* (2012) and the Palestinian films *When I Saw You* (2012) and *Omar* (2013), which was awarded the Un Certain Regard Jury Prize at the Cannes Film Festival.

But these are Arab filmmakers, not Emirati, and because of the limited film exposure and education levels of Emiratis, the festivals' focus shifted to promoting short films by Emiratis, rather than feature films. This led to a huge outpouring of short films, created with the goal of being shown in the festivals. This was a result of an extraordinarily close collaboration and cross-pollination between the government, the festival management and staff and the students at the local universities. By the time ADFE shut down in 2014, it had gone from screening almost any Emirati film that was submitted, in order to be able to claim its full support of local film production, to being able to only accept around 50% of submissions, according to Adel Al Jabri, EFC head programmer at the time. (Interview, 2013)

But the audience for the festivals was largely expat, not Emirati, perhaps because festivals and independent films were still a new concept. But film can still be reviewed years

later, and perhaps with fresh perspectives on identity, at least among Emirati youth aware of everything being available online in a *post cinema* world.

Youth and Landscape

A film can confirm your identity (effect) but it can also make you identify emotionally with others (affect). In 2016, I began to question through Emirati youth if local film spectatorship's relatively slow development has been a missed opportunity or a blessing for a country trying to establish its collective heritage and identity. I wanted to explore if the landscapes depicted in two Emirati films could invoke a collective memory for Emirati youth.¹⁶¹

Using Ali Mostafa's *City of Life* (2009) and Nawaf Al Janahi's *Sea Shadow* (2011), this study looks at how landscape is portrayed to reveal social class, gender and religion, and if young Emiratis view these films as verification of their heritage as they believe it to be. To date, these two films have been the most successful films in terms of local box office revenue and international festival play. With a budget of \$7 million, *City of Life* played in UAE theatres for eight weeks and sold 80,000 tickets according to its late producer, Tim Smith, whom I interviewed a year after its release. *Sea Shadow*, with a budget of \$2 million, played for fewer weeks, but was number one at the box office for two weeks, beating out Hollywood films at the box office, according to its producer, Image Nation, as told to me by Frank Purtril, head of marketing and communications (Conversation, 2018).

City of Life chooses the urban setting and landscape of Dubai. and *Sea Shadow* chooses the rural setting of the northern Emirates. But which landscape or setting, if either,

¹⁶¹ In the field of sociology, there are quantitative and qualitative studies of affect and effect, but not necessarily based on film. My approach is qualitative and more to survey affect and effect, rather than to create numerical data as in a social sciences approach. In developing my method, I took guidance from *Research Agendas in the Sociology of Emotions* (Kemper, Ed, 1990).

rings true for young Emiratis as the nation works towards a collective heritage? And can you really separate the two landscapes? Borrowing from art historian Reindert Falkenburg's analysis of Joachim Patinir's landscapes, Lefebvre wrote:

Falkenburg maintains Patinir's landscapes have no autonomy and are linked to the whole of events and characters depicted in the painting, if only in a game of metaphor and complex subterranean symbolism. (Lefebvre, 2006: 26)

In film, characters and events, which move and make sounds, are even more likely to take control of the landscape. The youth that took part in this study grew up with the tourism heritage tropes invading their physical landscape in the form of the future, the grand new architecture. For example, Norman Foster, designing the Zayed National Museum (now under construction, scheduled to open in 2021, in time for the 50th anniversary of the UAE), said respect for the past reveals national uniqueness. His high-tech design for the museum is based on the wings of a falcon (Cooke, 2014:21). Likewise, a falcon inspired the design of main building of Expo 2020. Zayed University's Abu Dhabi campus was designed to look like a *shayla*, the female headscarf, or at least that is what faculty in my department were told when its doors opened in 2011.

But a heritage landscape is more than something that can be provided by physicality of buildings. Like the landscape of a film, it involves people—and how they depict themselves as artists and how they view themselves as spectators, including the drawbacks and opportunities the landscape provides.

Personality Types & Patriotism

Ahmed Kanna, in writing about Dubai's "orientalism in reverse," defined two Emirati types: the neo-orthodox citizen steeped in nostalgia for the past, an imagined place

with fewer foreigners; and the flexible citizen, neoliberal global citizens with a narrow definition of Emirati (Kanna, 2011:109). These latter I would describe as the true elites of the country, the young men and women who hold positions like Minister of Happiness (first in the world), Minister of Youth, and Minister of Possibilities (first in the world). The Ministry of Possibilities includes a Department of Behavioral Reward, which “aims to develop an approach for incentivizing positive behavior through a point-based rewards system that can be used in payments for government services.” (UAE Government official website, 2019).

This almost makes one feel that citizenship and belonging are psychological experiments, Pavlovian, as if run by some type of Orwellian organization or Foucault’s biopolitical management of bodies (Foucault, 1976). Citizens have responded enthusiastically to this rewards system, with a manifestation of overt patriotism. The streets almost feel like a competition to see who can put more decals of the UAE and its leaders and founding father on their cars and mobile phones or to see who has the most or the biggest flags hanging from one’s house on National Day as proof of how Emirati you are. Patriotism, symbolized by the flag, the Spirit of the Union image and photos of the rulers, has become identified as heritage, the collective memory of the collective nation. UAE history, and consequent patriotism, begins only with formation of the union, in which there has been space for only one larger than life hero, Sheikh Zayed, as well as his offspring and the rulers of the other Emirates, particularly Dubai, and the narratives they provide.

But heritage in the UAE is both older and younger than the nation state—and the images that the state has provided to chronicle it. While patriotism often requires a reward

from the government to keep you patriotic (i.e. the rentier system), heritage doesn't necessarily require that—it requires that one feels part of a bigger whole.

Political scientist Montserrat Guibernau states national identity has been defined as a phenomenon “by means of which a community sharing a particular set of characteristics is led to the subjective belief that its members are ancestrally related” and a belief “in a shared culture, history, traditions, symbols, kinship, language, religion, territory, founding moment, and destiny” (Guibernau, 2013:40).

These are the elements of a heritage landscape. The study in this chapter explores how (or if) young Emiratis of different personality types—flexible or neo-orthodox citizens—share these elements or at least believe they share them.

UAE Film Landscapes: *City of Life* and/or *Sea Shadow*?

City of Life played in theatres the spring of 2010, the first UAE film to play nationwide in cinemas. *Sea Shadow* played in theatres in the fall of 2011. In a rapidly changing country like the UAE, with a population increase from 6.9 million to 7.5 million people from 2010 to 2016 (World Bank, 2017) and from the perspective of youth, 2010 and 2011 were a long time ago. But *City of Life* and *Sea Shadow* were the two UAE films the students were most aware of, with approximately 25% of them having seen *City of Life* online before seeing it for class, and approximately 10% having seen *Sea Shadow* before. The rest of the youth in this study had not heard of either film, not surprising as they would have been preteens when these films were first released. Additionally, in my survey of young Emiratis(expats and older Emiratis for Chapter Three), very few people had ever seen an Emirati film, unless they worked in the film industry.

I created questionnaires and facilitated class discussions with my students after screening the films during the 2016 Fall semester, 2017 fall semester, 2018 spring semester and 2018 fall semester. All the classes were media history classes, four were female classes and two were male classes. In total, 84 students took part, and all were third- or fourth-year students, thus mostly between 20 and 24-years old.

The class sessions were three hours twice a week over 10-weeks. We watched both films together, so I could observe the students' reactions while watching.

Before each film, students formed groups of four and were asked to come up with 10 visual symbols of the UAE, with no guidance from me, aside from giving the example of the Eiffel Tower in Paris and the bald eagle in the US, so they would be clear on what I was asking. The consistent symbols were as in tourism films:

- Camels
- Falcons
- Dates
- Clothing (*kandoura* and *abaya*)

Burj Khalifa was the most often referenced modern image, followed by Ferrari World. However, descriptive words viewed as symbols were also listed, like “happiness,” “equality” and “safety.” No negative symbols or emotions were mentioned, nor was I expecting any. Not only did the prompts I had given them—the Eiffel Tower and the bald eagle—have positive connotations, it's very rare to hear Emiratis voice negative thoughts about the country.¹⁶²

¹⁶² On the two occasions in my UAE teaching career that I did have students stay negative things about the government or society, they were quickly told to shush by their friends, and these thoughts were only expressed to a small group and with the students having known me for more than a semester.

For the screenings, after the group activity, each student was given a questionnaire to fill out with short answers: 12 questions on gender, eight on socio-economic status, and six on religion. The questionnaires were identical for the two films, and the students were allowed to take them home to answer thoroughly and return them to me during the next class. None of the students had ever taken a film criticism class. (See Appendix D)

I also observed the students watching the films, recognizing that this is not how they would normally watch older films. They all said that they mostly watched films alone online, although they did go to the cinemas with friends and family. In analyzing their reactions, I kept in mind the conditions of spectatorship, as noted by Shohat and Stam:

Any comprehensive ethnography of spectatorship must distinguish multiple registers of spectatorship: (1) the spectator as fashioned by the text itself (through focalization, point-of-view conventions, narrative structuring, mise-en-scene); (2) the spectator as fashioned by the (diverse and evolving) technical apparatuses (movie theater, domestic VCR); (3) the spectator as fashioned by the institutional contexts for spectatorship (social ritual of movie going, classroom analysis, cinematheque); (4) the spectator as constituted by ambient discourses and ideologies (5) the actual spectator as embodied, raced, gendered, and geographically and historically situated. (Shohat & Stam, p.159)

Within these parameters of spectatorship, I took into consideration in my analysis that these youth were watching the films on a full screen in a class setting, among friends and classmates who they did not know well, looking at the films because they had to. For *City of Life*, this was not a challenge, despite the film's nearly two-hour length. Students were glued to the screen, particularly during scenes involving the two Emirati characters. For *Sea*

Shadow, there was more fidgeting, more reaching for mobile phones to check social media and more dozing.

After I had collected all the questionnaires, I then began looking through the answers for consistencies and discrepancies. I also held class discussions. In our conversations, the male students were more forthcoming, more verbal and more willing to debate the films. They needed little prompting and encouraging compared to the females. They also had a stronger understanding of cinema and how films are made from both the creative and business perspectives. The males were overall more familiar with the names of Hollywood directors, classic films and box office numbers. In writing, however, the males were less forthcoming, whereas the females were more expressive and self-aware in their written work.

The students also broke along socio-economic lines. In my experience and that of my colleagues at Zayed University, Emirati students self-segregate in class, sitting with and bonding with students who are of the same socio-economic class. The rentier system creates a socialist illusion of all people being equal because of government handouts, but in reality, families' wealth varies depending on family origin—those closer to the ruling families' bloodlines and whose fathers and grandfathers work/worked closely with the ruling families are the elite, as are wealthy business families, often of Iranian descent, although that heritage is not spoken of out loud, as noted in the previous chapter. The relatively less wealthy students, whose parents are often civil servants, particularly in the police and army, tend to have origins in Yemen and Oman and Saudi Arabia, but were living here at the time of nationalization of the Gulf populations or brought here to fulfill these civil servant jobs—

and as they are members of transnational tribes that also existed in the land that is now the UAE.¹⁶³

The wealthier students, particularly amongst female students, were decidedly more confident and more forthcoming with their opinions in conversations in class. The opposite was the case in written work. The wealthier students, not surprisingly, are stronger in English, having gone to private schools. Universities in the UAE are mostly conducted in English. Surprisingly, however, the students with less written command of English were actually far more forthcoming with their thoughts in writing, despite struggling with the language. It's as if they felt free on paper in ways they did not feel free in discussions with the wealthier classmates.

Most of the quotes from students that appear in this chapter are based on written work, unless stated otherwise, and to protect their privacy, I have not used their real names in this document. The students were also asked to breakdown the films through a basic film analysis style.¹⁶⁴

- Script/story
- Plot
- Mise-en-scene
- Setting
- Characters

¹⁶³ Heard Bey (2004) has a lengthy breakdown of the tribal families, the origins of different branches and their paths to citizenship. I learned these things in the course of teaching, as student are well aware of these factors and demonstrate it in the self-segregation I mentioned earlier.

¹⁶⁴ I was a script analyst for the studios for several years and used the template that we would use for that script analysis with the students.

Notably, when keeping with Lefebvre's point about the plot being secondary to other elements on screen, i.e. that landscape, when we look at the landscape of a place, we also break it down in these categories, although we just say "describe the location" to sum up the above.

The Plotlines

City of Life is the first feature film by director Ali Mostafa, born in 1981. It was produced by Tim Smith, a South African who was one of the UAE's largest commercial producers. It is a UAE version of Hollywood's *Crash* (Lions Gate, 2004), in which cars of unconnected people in LA crash into each other at the end of the film, bringing several storylines together, what Pisters describes as a mosaic film. In *City of Life*, twenty-something Emiratis Khalfan and Faisal are best friends, even though they come from different worlds in Dubai. Fatherless Khalfan lives in an older, rundown neighborhood (*freej*) with his mother and younger sister, Fatima. Motherless Faisal lives with his father, a wealthy businessman, in a plush villa. The two get into trouble, mostly because of Khalfan's short temper, including fighting with other young Emirati guys in public and partying hard. Faisal has an unspoken crush on Fatima, but doesn't act on it, and struggles with his father's disapproval of his wildness. The two friends' story of misadventures runs in parallel with two other storylines. One is the story, Basu, an Indian taxi driver who is a lookalike for a famous Bollywood star and is trying to use that to get auditions to be a singer himself. The other story is that of Natalia, an Eastern European Emirates airlines hostess living with Olga, a money-hungry Russian party girl. Natalia's life takes a turn for the worse when she falls in love with a British ad executive who abandons her when she falls pregnant. The three stories only come together at the end in a car accident, when the two Emiratis collide

their SUV into Basu's taxi and the car of the British businessman and Natalia. The only fatality in the crash is Khalfan. Basu's dreams come true, and Natalia decides to keep the baby and raise it on her own. Faisal, with his father's blessing, goes to see Khalfan's mother to ask, we can only assume, for permission to marry Fatima. The film ends with an East Asian street cleaner finding a winning lottery ticket the someone lost in the beginning of the film, and making the sign of the cross in thanks for the ticket—and we can assume, in thanks to this generous, welcoming, hospitable land— as we pan out to a nightscape of Dubai. (Figure 34)

Sea Shadow, Image Nation's first Emirati feature film, was directed by Nawaf Al Janahi, born in 1977, and written by Mohamed Hasan Ahmed, both of whom were among the founders of the EFC. It is set in a rural Emirati neighborhood in Ras Al Khaimah, where all but one family seems to be struggling with financial problems. The story focuses on teenager Mansoor and his crush on the troubled girl next door, Kaltham. Mansoor delivers iced juices that his tough-talking mother makes to sell to the neighbors. That is the families' only income because Mansoor's father is in a wheelchair. Mansoor's best friend, Sultan, is there to give him advice on girls, although he has no experience of his own. Neighbor Kaltham's mother has recently died and she is raising her younger sister, Maryam, basically on her own. Her father has shut them out since their mother died, showing no interest in them, while their older brother, Jassim, has gone to Abu Dhabi to work. There is no work in their rural area. The closest person to a mother Kaltham has is Mansoor's mother. (Figure 35)

In *City of Life*, nothing old is shown, aside from the home of Khalfan, but within that house traditional, i.e., good behavior, is being lived, exemplified in Khalfan's warm mother

and demur sister, both wearing *abaya* and *shayla*. The Emiratis don't collide, in this case literally, with 88% of the population, the expatriates, until the end. They are all living separate lives, with Emirati culture being superior and separate, as shown through the wisdom of the main character's late mother and his wise father, whom he ultimately obeys. In *Sea Shadow*, the father is the major antagonist for letting the foreigner, a creepy South Asian barber, near his family, thereby threatening its security.

While *City of Life* moves at the speed of Dubai, *Sea Shadow* meanders slowly, more in keeping with the lifestyle of the small neighborhoods of the northern Emirates. There is an underlying current of darkness in *Sea Shadow* that is never openly expressed, particularly when we see the fear that overtakes Kaltham whenever she sees the South Asian barber. Her father is completely oblivious to this, even when the barber comes to their home. The audience can assume that there is some sort of abuse happening, but we are left to guess what it is. In the conclusion of *Sea Shadow*, Mansoor watches as Jassim, her brother, comes home to take Kaltham and her sister back with him, far away from the father who has all but abandoned them, to Abu Dhabi, where he works and where there is a future for them.

The Responses

In looking at the responses from the students, in terms of gender, religion and socioeconomic status, these youths saw their identity as buried amidst the Dubai landscape in *City of Life* and as part of the past in *Sea Shadow's* landscape. As we dug deeper into these UAE films, the more I saw that amongst the students there was not a unified response to "our ways" or "identity," although there was a perception of a unified Emirati way in their responses, with many of them starting with "it is not our way," thus speaking of a collective whole.

But while they could all agree “our way” wasn’t Hollywood images, as in *Fast and the Furious*’ depiction of bikini-clad women luxuriating at a pool in Abu Dhabi, they didn’t have one image of who they were when we started to break down identity in *City of Life* and *Sea Shadow* by social class, gender and religion.

The female students somewhat fell into Emirati prototypes Kanna defines: the neoorthodox citizen steeped in nostalgia for the past, and the flexible citizen, neoliberal global citizens with a narrow definition of Emirati. (Kanna, 2011:109). The male students didn’t split across these lines—in fact, they seemed to be simultaneously the neoorthodox and flexible citizen; in other words, *neoglobal*, as their responses.

Socioeconomic Status: Effect and Affect

City of Life was chosen by all but two students, both female, as the more accurate portrayal of the UAE’s landscape, and certainly the one they watched with more interest.

In general, I enjoyed watching *City of Life* more than *Sea Shadow* although *City of Life* did not concentrate much on the Emirati culture, but the scenes that represented the culture were somehow true. (Ibrahim, 22)

The true parts, according the students, were the righteous Emiratis: Faisal’s father asking his son to go to the mosque and Fatima, Khalfan’s properly covered and demure sister. But the other actions of the Emiratis—the less “traditional” behaviors –were not viewed as Emirati. Seemingly, these youth felt that being a good Emirati was connected to values from the past, not behaviors in the present. Indeed, *City of Life* provided a reluctant effect, but no affect, as no one claimed a connection to the urban modern Emirati characters, particularly the “bad behavior” of the two Emirati buddies in the film:

As a group, we do not think alcohol, middle fingers, or cursing should be represented in Emirati culture. We do admit that there are such people in our culture, but we prefer not to affiliate with them and pray for them to be good men.

(Abdullah, 24)

This statement again speaks of *neoglobalism*, with perception being more important than reality. Such unacceptable public behavior is not seen in *Sea Shadow*, making it more the film they felt non-Emiratis would be better off seeing:

In *City of Life*, the modern UAE was shown with the skyscrapers, new cars, big houses, Emirati traditional clothes, many nationalities living in the city of Dubai, businesses, and working women. All of these features are the reality of Dubai now, the filmmaker did not exaggerate anything...However, in the movie *Sea Shadow*, they portrayed the UAE in a traditional way which was all about the traditional house, traditional clothes, and traditional behaviors and beliefs. In *Sea Shadow*, more Emirati people felt comfortable watching it because they felt that it represents the real traditional UAE with real behaviors that men and women have towards each other. In *City of Life*, people felt that it sends a wrong message about the UAE, especially about the UAE's locals because it showed the bad part about the Emirati people, such as following girls, drinking alcohol, and going to nightclubs...I felt it was so real, despite the fact that it showed some bad behaviors from the Emirati people such as Khalfan and Faisal because all of us, whether we like or not, know that this group of Emirati people does exist in Dubai. (Eman, 23).

...Faisal goes to the disco and drinks alcohol. We can't generalize this because it isn't common in our society between Emiratis. Nevertheless, there are discos and alcohol sold in the UAE. (Maryam, 21)

Eman and Maryam are two female students who live in areas outside of the city of Abu Dhabi (Shahama and Bani Yas), meaning they are not from the elite families of the city. Male Emirati drinkers and partiers were viewed by these female students as a minority of the population, men who did not behave in the "traditional," i.e. proper way. In the language of most of the students, "tradition" is proper behavior, and bad behavior is viewed as "modern". It is notable that the students did not specify drinking and partying as Western, but rather as "other" amongst themselves, being not of their heritage. It is as if those taking part in modernity were a minority, separating them from the good citizens, who do not abuse modernity but exist with it while still maintaining Emirati heritage and identity, i.e. purity. And while female students had heard of Emiratis who engaged in this behavior, it was not Emiratis they knew, not their families and neighbors. It was "other" Emiratis, outliers. Thus, they also show a neo-orthodox tendency.

No male students openly admitted to drinking, but in conversations in class many acknowledged it happens in the circle of people they know, but they did not admit this in their written answers.

For female students, *Sea Shadow*, meant to be set in the present, was viewed as an accurate description of the past, and the past was a nicer place, despite less money. But it is a place that doesn't exist anymore—at least for the wealthier students living in the city center areas.

Sea Shadow had a more interesting story, of a young Emirati guy living a simple life in Ras Al Khaimah and falling in love with a girl and dreaming about marrying her. I enjoyed the movie and its story, but I found it unrealistic, especially for the life of Emirates nowadays. The boy worked selling (sherbet) to other houses, their house was very simple, they had no cars, which does not represent how the UAE is developed nowadays. Any local man or women can get a job and a good house; the government supports local families, especially those who are in need. But as a story, I really enjoyed the movie, and enjoyed its setting. It has that old traditional simple life. It reminds me of my grandparents' old love stories that always have a bad ending. (Zahra, 22)

This is where I began to see the divide between the students living in the city, like Zahra, and those on the outskirts, either in new housing areas or in still standing old *freejs*, like Farja is a student from the outskirts of Abu Dhabi. For Farja, Zahra's past is not the past, as she writes about the *freej* her family still lives in:

Sea Shadow...shows how the old houses still exist and people's economic status is normal, not poor. For example, my parents live in house like those in *Sea Shadow*, and they don't want to move out or build a new one. It's all about the memories that are carried with the house, unlike *City of Life*, which shows us Faisal's villa and Khalfan house (smaller, older), representing that he is poor...In *City of Life*, I think they exaggerate when the rich man has a lot of expensive cars that he can choose from, depending on the place he is going to. Yes, there are a lot of rich men, but we don't see this thing a lot. (Farja, 22)

Notably, Zahra and Farja defined modernity as money and flashy cars, as if those produce behaviors like drinking. But while Zahra considered lower income to be a thing of the past, a part of the past that has been made better by the rentier system in the present, Farja, saw it as a traditional way of life, including her own family's life. In fact, there are Emirati women who do have fairly decent businesses catering local food for parties and events outside the city centers, much like Mansoor's mother in *Sea Shadow*.¹⁶⁵ But in the wealthier neighborhoods, Emirati food has become a heritage trope for trendy restaurants, like Maylis and Fanar, opened by Kanna's flexible citizens, young, polished global Emiratis, who serve local rice dishes as expensive gourmet food to fellow flexible citizens, with expats, even wealthy ones, being rarely spotted in these places.

The female students were dividing themselves along the lines of Kanna's Emirati prototypes: the neoorthodox citizen and the flexible citizen, with the flexible citizen students being less connected to the past as something that has continued into the present and tending to be from the city area and more often than not, from one of the wealthier families.

I did not define socioeconomic status for the students. I expected them to comment on the different socioeconomic status of the Emiratis in the two films or the difference between the two Emirati buddies in *City of Life*. But while mixing of social classes within Emirati society is not common, as noted earlier in my observations of students in the classroom, none of the students mentioned the odd pairing of poor Khalfan and wealthy Faisal.

Instead, students saw socio-economic status as a marker of nationality, describing lower class as the Indian expat, middle class as the European expats and "high class" as the

¹⁶⁵ I have often ordered from these women for small events, and most of them work from a home kitchen or have a small storefront with a kitchen and staff, usually South Asian men.

Emiratis. In *City of Life*, the British expat is the most unlikeable character, a deceitful man who abandons his girlfriend. In contrast, the Indian character, a taxi driver aspiring to be a singer, is loveable and warm, like a Bollywood actor. All the expats in *Sea Shadow* are South Asians. But the only one that gets the spotlight is a seedy South Asian who Kaltham is scared of. The female students did not mention the South Asian in *Sea Shadow*, but the male students expressed disappointment in the portrayal.

The expats in the films were portrayed poorly in *Sea Shadow*. The scene in the barbershop did not give a good impression, which all of us disagreed with. Ibrahim [classmate] pointed out that expats are trustworthy, reliable and can even do their jobs better than the Emiratis. Hamdan [classmate] testified that he has good friends who are expats that taught him many things in life which are valuable. (Saif, 21)

This statement indicates the divide between the Emiratis and expats, with the students tending to find it noteworthy/special to have an expat friend. In fact, in another film by Emirati Ahmed Zain, *Uncle Naji* (2019), a Yemeni waiter shocks his fellow Yemeni co-workers when he tells them he has Emirati friends. “How did you do that?” one of them asks. Naji explains that he saved an Emirati in distress on the side of the road and then invited the Emirati and his friends to his restaurant. The friendship even feels fantastical in the film, indicating Emirati awareness of the disconnect with expats, as if a possible expat friendship is a token event.

All the students spoke fondly of the Indian taxi driver in *City of Life*, but the male students did not mention the European characters. The female students, however, felt sorry for Natalia.

The third and last main character (in *City of Life*) is the European cabin crew for Emirates Airlines. She had a normal job that involves a lot of travelling, but she was happy with it. In the story, she meets a single father and goes in a relationship with him, which is also realistic and normal. (Salama, 22)

That relationship is abusive and involved an unplanned out-of-wedlock pregnancy, so Salama's definition of a "normal" Western expat woman is a woman who allows herself to get taken in by abusive men and who lives in a party world, as manifested by Olga, the roommate in the film who looks at men as sources of income. Essentially, the Western women in the film are a simple Madonna/whore dichotomy, with no nuance. The film does play into broad voiced UAE stereotypes (shared by Emiratis and expats) of airline hostesses working for UAE airlines and Eastern European women as partiers and gold diggers, but the students didn't seem to have any issues with that.

Overall, the students didn't have a negative interpretation of expats, but rather saw them in broad strokes. For media scholar David Morley, this could be reason to be optimistic, as he advocates for "a future in which cohesive community that is created and consumed through media creates a progressive definition of home and nation that does not necessarily depend on the exclusion of all forms of otherness as inherently threatening to its own internally coherent self." (Morley, 1999:154)

It is an optimistic vision, but more rhetoric than reality with these Emirati youth. I believe that the students' overall positive response to the South Asian expats was affected by my presence as a foreigner and wanting me to embrace their notion of the pure, sanitized Emirati, and most importantly the hospitality trope. Indeed, unlike Kanna's neo-orthodox citizen, none of the students verbally expressed worry about expats. This is more in keeping

with *neoglobalism*, looking to deliver to me a positive image of the nation as an expat myself. In reality, I have had many conversations with young Emiratis who are deeply critical and wary of expats, while I have known very few who rave about them, or even acknowledge them much.

Additionally, looking at the Emirati short films in the UAE National Film Library & Archive, with the uncensored grassroots films, the South Asian expats are the boogiemens. In Hassan Kiyani's *TelePhoni* (2011), a young Emirati boy ominously follows a lazy Asian garbage collector as he saves a maid from rape at the hands of another Asian worker. The maid wears a hijab, therefore identifying her as a Muslim, so making the crime of this Asian expat, while not against an Emirati female, closer to home than had she been a Western woman. In Nayla Al Khaja's *Arabyana* (2009), a little girl wanders out of her house unnoticed. She is then lured by an Indian laborer into his shack. Next, we see her leave his shack, singing and carrying a lollipop, skipping past her mother, who is still watching TV and talking on the phone. The child seems completely unperturbed by her mother's lack of response to whatever we are to believe happened while she was behind closed doors with the Indian. (Yunis, 2014:62) On the one hand the film shows parental neglect, but it implies that the consequence of relying on so many domestic workers is dangerous because the domestic workers are not good people. They are the strangers amongst them.¹⁶⁶ I mention these shorts here because they were not made with government funding, showing that the South Asian expat is the scapegoat of the perils of modernity in Emirati storytelling, even though there were South Asians living and trading here for centuries before nationhood.

¹⁶⁶ These films are part of the UAE National Film Library and Archive.

The Clothing Factor Again

The discussion of male dress inspired a great deal of affect. It is where most students expressed concern about the loss of identity. In *Sea Shadow*, Mansoor does not wear the *kandoura*. In a conversation in a male class, where half of the students were wearing jeans and t-shirts and the rest the *kandoura*, one male, Mohammed, wearing the *kandoura*, said, “We should always wear traditional dress, and the guys in the films should be wearing it, too.” Rashid, in jeans, replied, “It should be a choice.” “No, no,” Mohammed said. “If we lose our clothes, we lose our identity, what makes us Emirati.” To which Rashid replied, “Identity? But your girlfriend is British.”

The class laughed, but this conversation spoke to the conflicted feelings of many youth about staying exclusively “Emirati” or sharing the landscape with the expats, particularly when we consider the struggle to belong that *nus-nus* Emiratis face, as shown in the film *Arasian* at the beginning of this chapter. But even the male students not wearing the *kandoura* advocated for it, although some thought it only necessary to wear at work or special occasions. The female *abaya* was not brought up in discussions by either the male or female students. All the females were wearing it, albeit in different ways: The wealthier students tended to wear the *abaya*, with the *shayla* being optional or worn casually tossed over the hair otherwise, while the students from outside the city center tended to wear the *shayla* as a hijab, a religious interpretation in which no hair is visible. While the *kandoura* caused much discussion among the males, the issue of how the *shayla* and *abaya* are worn was not mentioned by either gender. In *City of Life*, it is worn as a hijab by the two Emirati females that briefly appear in the film, the kind forgiving sister of the lower income Emirati living in her simple house with her mother. In *Sea Shadow*, the film most considered closer

to Emirati heritage by the students, the women do not wear it as a hijab. But none of the students mentioned that, and I did not force the question. As long as the *shayla* and *abaya* were present in some form, the students did not have an issue with how it was worn. Thus, it is viewed as a marker of identity and heritage, not religion.

The implication that a divide between locals and foreigners (the different socioeconomic groups) must be maintained was reflected in these films: In *City of Life*, the Emirati didn't collide, literally, with the expatriates until the end—nationalities in the film are living separate lives, with Emirati culture being superior, as shown through the wisdom of Faisal's late mother and his sage father, whom he ultimately obeys.

While trying to show that people in the UAE share their landscape with many others, *City of Life* avoids any damning of the expat by making the different nationalities come together in a car crash, a *deus ex machina*, which takes away from the idea that expats—or any human—caused this particular crash. It reflects that all these UAE residents could not come together without this *deus ex machina*. It is an oddly optimistic film, even in its depiction of the South Asian character. Unlike other South Asians in Emirati narrative films, Basu, the Indian taxi driver, is loveable, looked at with affect, perhaps because the Indian taxi driver has been a staple of the UAE landscape going back to before nationhood. The taxi driver is the ideal foreigner: He comes when called and goes away when he has delivered you to your location. Perhaps the affection for this character is also linked to heritage and nostalgia. The South Asian driver is not so dominant in the UAE taxi world anymore. Since the making of *City of Life*, the UAE in its post financial crash/Arab Spring outlook, has brought in taxi drivers from many other countries, as if to avoid upsetting the expat balance in favor of one nationality or ethnic group. Today workers from countries like

Nepal, Uganda and Albania share in jobs such as driving, building maintenance and security, which had up until then been primarily done by Muslim South Asians and to a lesser degree, Egyptians.

City of Life combined different cultures and different nationalities in one movie where they showed the life of an Indian taxi driver, which here in the UAE we have a lot of taxi drivers that are from that nationality but most of us don't stop and think of how their life is whilst living in the UAE...In *Sea Shadow* I didn't get to see different nationalities it felt like the whole movie consisted of just Emiratis, but seemed like it was back in the day and not current. (Ayesha, 19)

It is notable that students considered expats part of the modern UAE, part of the discovery of modern wealth from oil, but not part of their heritage, although the land that is the UAE today has for centuries been part of a trade route that has brought foreigners here. As noted in Chapter Two, before the modern era, people of the region “shared a maritime culture based on pearling, fishing and long-distance trade and were part of an interlinked system that included agricultural villages and oases that sustained the caravan trade.” (Potter, 2017)

Neither film shows this heritage, not even *Sea Shadow*, which, as its very name suggests, is set in a coastal town. In *City of Life*, nothing older than the 2000s is shown, aside from the home of Khalfan, living in a rundown neighborhood with 1980s-style concrete houses, old by UAE standards. But, according to the students, within Khalfan's older house, traditional, i.e., good behavior, is being lived. Based on what Ayesha wrote above, however, the past is not sustainable, at least not the lifestyle shown in *Sea Shadow*. In *Sea Shadow* the major antagonist is Kaltham's father because he lets a foreigner near his family, thereby threatening their security, which his son tells him upon returning from the

big city of Abu Dhabi, where he has gone to work, abandoning his father and the unsustainable past that this village represents.

Gender: Affect and Effect

City of Life has two minor but no major Emirati female characters, while *Sea Shadow* offers three female Emiratis—a flirtatious, wealthier woman, a young woman trapped in her father’s grief, and a bossy mother holding her family together.

These are the living women characters. In both *City of Life* and *Sea Shadow*, it is the dead mother that represents the past perfect, what held life together once but can no longer does so, as if saying that the perfect past left them when the mother did. The late mother’s photo is part of the mise-en-scene in both Faisal and Kaltham’s houses, photos given a close-up when characters need guidance about what to do in the present. This plays into the Arabic language, in which the word for mother and nation (not nation state), “om,” is the same root word. Not unrelated, one of the Abu Dhabi’s biggest annual heritage festivals is called Mother of the Nation, named for Sheikh Zayed’s wife, Fatima bint Mubarak. Motherhood and nationhood overlap, with the mother representing the nation as the soul and backbone of identity, perpetuator of tradition, protector, like the title character in Nujoom Alghanem’s *Hamama* in the previous chapter.

Zahra’s earlier comment about how old love stories end badly, seemed to play secondary to the primary role the students saw for women in these films.

...Women are remembered especially as mothers. For instance, in *Sea Shadow*, Kaltham’s mother passed away and she has more responsibilities. In *City of Life*, Faisal’s mother passed away and his father keeps reminding him of her. As it was shown in both films, family is important in the UAE. (Fatima, 21)

That the students most revered the dead, virtuous mothers in these films is perhaps indication of the power of the lost past in their value system, and an example of the films having affect. None of the students mentioned Mansoor's hardworking, short tempered mother in *Sea Shadow*, who sustained her family by selling her homemade cold juice to the neighbors, and gave Kaltham, who had lost her mother, affection and concern. She did not have the pristine image of the lost mothers, of the past, even with many of the students thinking the film was set in the past.

Indeed, it is not for motherhood but rather for career that the students noted the modern Emirati woman is known today. But not just any career. Mansoor's juice-selling mother didn't fulfill the students' image of an Emirati working woman. For example, the male students did not like the portrayal of Kaltham in the film, who was raising her sister after her mother passed away and her father began spending his time away from home.

In fact, this character portrays woman as "weak" factor in society. She is represented with no ambitions and haunted only by one goal of getting married, which is a false representation of Emirati girls and women in general. The Emirati woman has achieved lots of success, and she has always had endless goals and ambitions. She is a significant element in society, and she has entered almost all the fields including diplomatic, police and army domains. (Salam, 21)

Kaltham actually never mentions marriage, but Salam's and his classmates' image of women is within keeping with the UAE's strong state feminism, which has placed women in visible positions to show the world that they are very much part of the modern workforce, as noted in Chapter One. Often, the male students tended to be ready with a polished response

to gender, sounding like government spokesmen at times. No female character in these films have high-level office jobs, which is how the students view women's work.

None of the females had strong feelings about Kaltham and her sister, showing no effect or affect. But they expressed similar words as Salam did: I asked all the students to write a one-page story about a movie they would make about the UAE, and the story most often involved a smart, ambitious Emirati woman who was doing great things, like going to space. Here is a rather typical response

My movie would be about an Emirati woman who becomes the president of a big corporation without any help from anyone. I want to show the world how strong an Emirati woman can be. (Reem, 23)

In an about face from Orientalism and Shaheen's black blobs, these students have come to identify an ideal Emirati woman as a career success story, almost devoid of any other factor, including the softness of lost mothers, as seen in these films. The late mothers represent the nostalgic past. But the working woman is postmodern and cold, as cold as her big corporate office, and strong and not to be disagreed with. This can be seen in other Emirati films, such as *Rashid and Rajab* (Image Nation, 2018), a trading places story in which the Emirati man works for an almost robotic, tough female Emirati boss.

As admirable as the government's top placement of women in ministries, state feminism has sanitized women to the level of voiding them of any other issues. There is no talk in these films, or any government-funded films, of a patriarchal society when it comes to divorce, marriage and travel, for which a woman needs family permission. Gender imbalance in the UAE, because of the large number of workers here without their families, may be one of the most one-sided in the world. But not a single student mentioned the

scenes implying that Kaltham had been abused or at least threatened by the South Asian barber. When I asked a class of female students why they thought Kaltham was so afraid of the barber, I could not get a conversation going. None of the students offered any comments. I did not push it because I too had learned as a teacher to not speak critically of anything related to the UAE—I could only give my students the freedom to do that, although they know how to censor themselves, as noted earlier. Consequently, Kaltham produced no outward effect or affect. It's as sanitization was at play here, too, because in many private conversations I have had with female students, the subject of abuse and neglect is of course, like in any society, a passionate topic. But in the UAE not the stuff of public cinema.

Additionally, according to these youth, Emirati women should not be sexualized on screen. The males and females both responded in the same way to Osha, an older woman who flirts with Mansour. They did not note her authority over him by being from a wealthier class as indicated by her better home, but dismissed her sexuality:

Most of the group during the film were watching the movie without excitement or any reaction at all, until Osha's scene showed up when she invited Mansour inside her room. There were laughs and jokes, because the situation was unlikely in Emirati culture. (Rashid, 23)

The female students also laughed at this scene, and it was uncomfortable laughter for both genders. A sexualized Emirati woman on screen was clearly something they were not ready for. While the Western women in *City of Life* are in the Madonna/whore dichotomy, the Emirati woman was idealized by these youth as a career woman or a pure, departed mother, devoid of sexuality. However, students have often told me of romances on campus between and within genders, and one only has to go to certain places in the UAE to see the current

hook up spots for Emiratis to connect with each other romantically and/or sexually. For example, at the current moment in Abu Dhabi, it is the new beach area of Hudariyat Island, where you can see Emirati males and females cruising around in their cars, relying on texting to connect.

Rescue from the Old Landscape

Emirati females in these films are not career women. They are the girl needing to be rescued by a man, and that rescue means leaving the old behind: Fatima, Khalfan's sister, is rewarded for her innocence by what we can only assume is a marriage proposal from Faisal, a man who can take her way from the oldness and the poverty that her house represents. Likewise, in *Sea Shadow*, Kaltham and her sister are rescued from their backwards father and backwards village by their brother. The city represents the future, and the village the people stuck in the past, needing to leave.

In general, contemporary global cinema tends to be about character, but both the male and female characters in these two films react to the landscape, as if both the filmmakers and characters are being driven by location, rather than action.

Lefebvre says that the golden rule of classical cinema is that "everything must be subordinated to the narrative." (Lefebvre, 2006) But in these two films, the narrative is subordinated to the landscape. That is what drives the stories, not the characters. The landscape is in fact the character within which heritage and identity face off: the small-town vs the big city in *Sea Shadow* and the shiny city versus the old *freej* in *City of Life*.

In *Sea Shadow*, Mansoor, taking time out to buy a gift for Kaltham at the jewelry store, is the only main character that acts rather than reacts to what the landscape provides. It is the landscape that drives the action, not the characters. This is I would argue is an

example of the UAE still trying to understand its place and identity, in this case through film and landscape. This plays into gender as well. While the women do not have any starring roles in these films, their reactions are what cause us to pause, to gaze. As Mulvey notes:

The presence of the woman is an indispensable element of spectacle in normal narrative film, yet her visual presence tends to work against the storyline, to freeze the flow of action in moments of erotic contemplation. (Mulvey, 989:18)

But in talking about these films, it is not about “erotic contemplation.” The women remind us of the complexity of the landscape: the juxtaposition of traditional Fatima and her culturally lost brother in *City of Life*, the gentle, departed mother and her frightened, abandoned daughter in *Sea Shadow*, the strong, grandmother-like female breadwinner (Mansoor’s mother) in *Sea Shadow* juxtaposed against Osha, the modern, wealthy woman with time to flirt and pamper herself. The concept these films espouse is that leaving the past, defined by a poorer, more rural landscape, is the goal, with women representing the poorer but purer past and men inhabiting the untamed multicultural city that pulls them away from the past, for better and worse.

Unlike the women in these films, the men in these films are more integrated into a community, a community of brothers. Brotherhood is a major concept in these films. Both *Sea Shadow* and *City of Life* revolve around two male best friends. I expected someone to comment on how unlikely it would be that two young men of such different socioeconomic backgrounds would be best friends, but that did not come up. Male bonding is a recognizable pattern in these films and almost all the other Emirati feature films set in the UAE. David Chaudoir, an American cultural anthropologist, recently abandoned research on a book about Emirati male relationships, but he told me his research proved one thing:

Emirati social life is quite segregated along gender lines, and accordingly films explore—or at least portray—that in order to be true to life. Emirati young men spend most of their waking hours socializing with family and friends of the same gender. They utilize and reframe "traditional" homosocial social spaces, such as cafes and even their own private majlis, incorporating contemporary technology, comforts and conveniences while at the same time preserving the gendered separation that has been part of the cultural architecture of the Gulf for more than a hundred years. The social lives and pursuits of young men have been convincingly portrayed in Emirati films like *City of Life* and *Sea Shadow*, and I note that the most favorably boisterous reactions I've observed from young Emiratis watching those films are the moments they so identify with. For example, the scene in *City of Life* where the protagonist and his friend drive up to a small grocery shop and honk their horn for the worker to come out and take their order. A true Emirati moment.

(Interview, 2013)¹⁶⁷

There are many true Emirati moments between men and women as well, as I have observed here, like secret romances and hook ups, but as these students indicated in their reactions, not for consumption through film. No sisterhood is portrayed in these films. These films were directed by males, and I could attribute the brotherhood theme being a product of male direction. However, considering the short narrative films in the UAE Film Library and Archive, including those directed by women, there are no films that reflect a sisterhood or even a female buddy film.

¹⁶⁷ ¹⁶⁷ I interviewed David Chadoir for an article I wrote in 2014, "The UAE Goes Into the Film Business," *CineJ* (Vol 3, no. 2).

Religion: Affect and Effect

When it came to religion, there was little debate between the students, probably the most grounding element in their heritage, no matter how it is practiced by each of them as individuals or within their families. This is the element around which collective identity was solid, no matter the socioeconomic background or gender of the students. Additionally, in the case of the female respondents, religion remained a dominant force whether they were wearing the *shayla* as a religious hijab or merely tossed on as part of national dress.

All these youth recognized mosques as part of the landscape in each film, but only when they were specifically asked if they had seen any mosques. This took me back to Halima, the tourism student on the tour boss in Chapter Two: Mosques are so ingrained as culture and heritage that they actually go unremarked. In *City of Life*, the wealthy young man has lost his way because he has stopped heeding the call to prayer, which is part of the audio landscape of the UAE on and off screen.

In the movie *City of Life*, they showed a scene where the father was lecturing his son on how he is living his life wrongly. I connected to it because that scene had to do with how our culture is, the scene mentions that the father said to his son that he was ashamed whenever he goes to the mosque and the people from their neighborhood ask him where his son is and why he hasn't come to pray. That scene was totally accurate because its reality to us, in our religion each man should go to the mosque to pray five times a day, and merging culture with it, we can say that people notice whether you have been to the mosque or not and people talk about whether he is shameful or not which mostly has to do with our culture here in the UAE. (Ayesha, 19)

Thus, the demonstration of piety is part of collective identity in the UAE, whether sincere or not.

My classmate also felt strongly that it should be part of their international identity: ...it is very important to show the religion of Islam in Emirati movies because such movies are an opportunity to show Islam to the world and the religion of Islam is a very important part of the Emirati identity. (Ibrahim, 23)

Islam is the non-negotiable, the most uniting element in their lives, aside from the ruling bargain. Islam is something that they consider key to being Emirati, even if it is shared by 1.8 billion other people in the world, even if its interpretation is different within the country, as demonstrated in the various ways the young women wear the *abaya* and *shayla*. In one male class a student said:

In 10 years from now, the way we are going, we will not be a Muslim country.
(Omar, 21)

This brought rapid condemnation from his classmates, even though he wasn't saying it as if it were a good thing, but rather a response to how multinational the country had become, despite the majority of the population being Muslim. I did not hear such condemnation over any other element of the heritage landscape disappearing.

Language: Affect and Effect

From this study, being a Muslim is the most unquestionable, unifying part of the youth's heritage and collective identity, causing strong affect and effect across these youth, regardless of gender or social class. In fact, the United Muslim Emirates could be a more appropriate name for the country in terms of its collective identity.

The Quran is in a very specific, complex Arabic, and is the one text that is never studied in anything but Arabic by Emiratis. When I questioned the students in this study, I had not considered language as a factor in identity and heritage, but when I saw the strong pull of religion, I began to connect it with observations about the Arabic language I had gathered over 10 years with Emirati students. It also echoed much of the language debate brought up in faculty meetings because the language issues in the classroom, where students seem lost between two languages, unable to master either academically. You cannot separate Arabic from the Quran, but you can separate people from one or the other or both.

The word Arab in the nation's name connects it to all the other Arabic-speaking countries and the Arabic-speaking geographic region, although the UAE is more closely connected physically and through trade with non-Arab Iran and the Indian subcontinent, places with whom it does not share a language.

Emiratis are part of a linguistic minority in their country but not a religious minority. While Islam has remained a constant in the UAE, language has not. Emiratis are 100% Muslim, and the country over all has a Muslim population of 76%. However, while Arabic is the official language of the UAE, it is only the third most spoken language in the country, after English and Urdu. (CIA, 2019).

This is something that is captured in *City of Life*, and many students considered the scene in which Faisal's father tells him to return to the mosque as Emirati heritage and identity. *Sea Shadow* does not mention Islam at all, but it is an all-Emirati environment, aside from the seedy South Asian, and thus Islam is a given, whereas in *City of Life*, Islam is soul of the complex identity of a multicultural city.

In their study of the loss of Arabic language in the UAE, Raddawi and Meslem noted that the UAE rulers have put in place laws about Arabic language in government business because they “realized the paramount significance of the relationship of identity and heritage with the Arabic language.” (Raddawi and Meslem, 2015: 87) But from what I have seen in the classroom, this doesn’t consider the socioeconomic divide within the UAE, between privately-educated citizens, studying in English, and public school-educated citizens, studying in Arabic, which Raddawi and Meslem link to “cultural frame switching”:

The first language of an individual is the language is the person’s culture, the language of the individual’s thinking, and mentality. The beliefs people hold reflect a certain cultural background; the language of that culture is their first. It is however possible for an individual to become more proficient in their second language than in their first. In other words, what defines a first language is the culture and not proficiency. There is a chance that over time however, a second language becomes their first, based on Cultural Frame Switching. When the usage is increased, the person tends to be in the state of a personality switch for a longer time, therefore, the person with time will hold the mentality of a different culture. The mentality therefore changes and so does the language accordingly. (Raddawi & Meslem, 2015:87)

While this does not mean the more elite, English-first students have switched cultures, they have developed a lifestyle that is different from those educated in Arabic, in large part because they have developed more of an affinity for Western trends, as they were exposed to them every day in school—in English. You can often hear Emiratis speaking together in English at cafes, even though there are no non-Arabs with them. The disappearance of

Arabic has been noted by many others, including Davidson who wrote the “status of Arabic, another component of national identity, has declined.” (Davidson, 2011:54). I’ve seen numerous incidents of an Emirati mother speaking to her small child in English, because parents view English-fluency as going hand-in-hand with socioeconomic status, which is indeed the case. The richer you are, the more likely you will have had a private school education, which in the UAE means an English-language education.

Tribalism, Religion, and Language

In absence of Arabic, Islam risks becomes the stronger identity binder. I say risk in that Islam is broad in range, spilling way beyond the national border, something that could be a stronger source of identity and heritage than the relatively new state, as noted in Chapter One with the closing of UAE’s Muslim Brotherhood branch.

According to Laura U. Marks, Islam is what made the Bedouins sedentary, despite the myth of a land with only nomadic, wandering tribes until oil:

Early Islam enjoined a unity that surpassed tribal unity and facilitated urbanization and migration. As Islam replaced the nomadic worldview with its promise of a justice that surpassed life and tribe, the odes had an “ontological irrelevance” for the faithful. (Marks, 2006:126)

In Mark’s framework, the nation state was not what domesticated the people, as the national myth developed by the British implies. It was Islam. As I look out my window writing this, I see the site of a new mosque being built to hold up to 2,000 worshippers. Not so far away, another new church is being built. Yes, the church shows the tolerance of the UAE. But I would argue it also breaks up an all-Islamic landscape. We even see this in *City of Life*, in the closing scene, in which a Filipino-looking street cleaner makes the sign of the cross

upon finding a lottery ticket. Not a single student noted the sign of the cross as an odd closing shot for an Emirati film. For them, the presence of other religions didn't diminish or threaten the dominance of Islam.

Islam thus becomes the threat to national identity, unlike what area studies have long promoted as the enemy, tribalism.¹⁶⁸ The UAE government's national narrative, the notion of the pure-blooded Arab Bedouin as a national identity, is unquestionably tribal. While tribalism cannot supersede nationalism for the nation state's agenda, it is acknowledged as part of past identity. Indeed, tribalism is heritage not history: It is the past that the state has chosen to revere in the present. Which means it is not feared, as early post-oil writers originally stated. In *Tribal Modern* (2014), Miriam Cooke asserts that a new sanitized tribalism is now being encouraged to counterbalance Islam, after the 1970s efforts to disassemble tribal networks in favor of national affiliations. She adds that the tribe has been replaced by a tripartite name that recognizes only three generations—self, father and grandfather and not the tribal name.¹⁶⁹ Cooke cites this as official policy. But in fact, Zayed University's class rosters reveals up to the great grandfather's name or at least up to the grandfather's name—and they also show the family/tribal name in most cases. Thus, what Cooke suggests is not put in practice by government schools. In fact, in practice many students, particularly those from the elite families, the very ones embracing Kanna's flexible citizen, the ones educated in English, make it a point of letting you know their family/tribal name.

¹⁶⁸ This fragility of the nation in face of tribes has also been promoted in international media by journalists like American Tom Friedman ("Tribes with Flags," *New York Times*, March 22, 2011)

¹⁶⁹ In Arab culture, both boys and girls are given their father's first name as their middle name.

This contemporary flaunting of family/tribal names is not particularly tribal. It is no different than the use of such names in Western contexts, as in the Rockefeller family in the USA or the Rothschild family in Switzerland. These Western elites hold their cache based on the money they have accumulated, which is similar in the UAE. Families closer to the ruling families' bloodlines or from the originally Persian merchant class tend to be the wealthiest Emiratis and are happy to let you know their family names.

However, while recognizing tribal heritage is not necessarily as frowned upon as is commonly assumed, it is not encouraged in public discourse or media. Notably, no one in *Sea Shadow* or *City of Life*—or any UAE narrative film—includes a character with a family name, thus not allowing for a break in collective identity that comes up when family name is discussed or noted. But somewhere between the tribe and the religion is the common denominator of Arabic, and it is something that can be made unique to the nation for building a collective identity.

Finding Emirati Arabic

All Arabic is not equal. Non-Emirati Arabs fall into the expat category. The attitude towards non-Emirati Arabs is different between English-educated Emiratis and the Emiratis who went to public schools. I have observed that non-Emirati Arabs do have the ability to be closer to Emiratis educated in Arabic than they do with English-educated Emiratis. For example, when public school-educated students find out I can speak Arabic and am of Arab origin, they warm up to me much more quickly than they do to non-Arabic speaking faculty, even though my classes are held in English. I have noticed the same happening with other non-Emirati Arab colleagues, particularly one Palestinian colleague who is quite liberal but wears the hijab. These students, male and female, like to discuss their projects with me in

Arabic or tell me their personal problems in Arabic, without putting the issues in cultural context, as they would with the non-Arabic speaking faculty, even though I also come from a different culture. The language bonds them to me as having a shared identity. However, as I have observed, this is increasingly not the case with students from the wealthy inner circle. While Arabic is the official language, the country's lingua franca is English, and this particularly true of the elite Emiratis, who do not respond with as much enthusiasm to an Arabic-speaking teacher, as if, as stated by Raddawi and Meslem, they are not thinking like Arabic speakers.

The principle applies to Arab individuals as they tend to choose one side, either English and future, or Arabic and past. (Raddawi and Meslem, 2015:89)

But the UAE seems to have found a compromise to this. Sometimes it feels like Arabic in the UAE has almost become part of heritage rather than everyday life. But that would only be true if we were talking about classical Arabic. Collective UAE identity is not built around classical Arabic, but a new, unofficial language: Emirati Arabic. Language splits the students into Arabic- or English-centered, based on socioeconomics, but there has been a bridge between these two through Emirati Arabic, which could be described as the privileged language of the nation, the language of both *Sea Shadow* and *City of Life*.

Linguistically, there is no such language as Emirati Arabic. There are distinct dialects of Arabic spoken even within the borders of the UAE—there is even a separate language spoken in the mountains of RAK called Sheehi—but now expats will find advertisements in places like the campus of NYUAD offering classes in Emirati Arabic. It's a dialect that has developed over the decades since the union was formed in 1971. Prior to the union and prior to the push for nationalism and heritage, people living in the setting of

Sea Shadow would have spoken in a different dialect than the young men in Dubai, as I noted in Chapter Three when discussing the series *Freej*. In fact, you can still hear the differences when older generations speak, as I have in the oral histories I have collected. But Arabic has also been sanitized into something called Emirati Arabic, used on social media and in conversations in TV and film. Emirati Arabic is something that has evolved organically, and, with the heritage boom supporting a collective identity, it is the biggest unifier in the three words United Arab Emirates, besides Islam. Keeping Arabic strong further solidifies the Arab Bedouin heritage narrative, something that would be lost without the language. Arab Bedouin tropes would still exist—camels, falcon, sand dunes—but imagine Bedouins speaking English as heritage.

Emirati Arabic is an exclusive privilege. Western expats can amuse themselves taking Emirati Arabic classes, but for non-Emirati Arabs, even if they were born in the UAE, speaking Emirati Arabic is almost a taboo. Arab expats speak the dialects of their native countries, no matter how many generations they have lived in the UAE, partly as a result of limited mixing, but more because of dialect being seen as part of their own national heritage and identity.

A student in one of the classes in this study, Ahmed, has a Palestinian father and an Emirati mother. He did his oral history video project on his father, a schoolteacher who came to the UAE from Gaza when he was a young man in the early 1970s. After Ahmed screened the video for the class, I said, “Wow, your dad even sounds like an Emirati.” But he only sounded like one to me.

“No way, Miss,” the students told me. They accepted Ahmed, who lives in the precarious *nus-nus* category, as speaking Emirati Arabic, but not his father. Meanwhile,

Salama Al Qubaisi from Abu Dhabi's Delma Island, did an oral history on an Egyptian woman who had lived on the island with her Emirati husband for 40 years. "She can even speak Emirati," Salama told me with pride, giving the woman authenticity. Perhaps this welcoming of the woman as Emirati is also practical: An Emirati woman cannot pass her nationality on to her husband, but an Emirati man can give his wife the nationality.

In another class, a female student pointed out that the actress playing Kaltham in *Sea Shadow*, Nevine Mahdi, was faking an Emirati accent, in case I was confusing her with a true Emirati.¹⁷⁰ To my ears, Mahdi's accent is likely very accurate: The Syrian actress has been in numerous UAE films and TV series, so one can assume that she has been well coached in the dialect. But the student's response to her reflected her attachment to the dialect. It's okay for western expats to study Emirati Arabic— that is amusing. Other Arabs speaking it is coming too close, stepping too close into the exclusive Emirati identity they cling to as a minority in their country.

I have spent some time discussing Emirati Arabic because it counteracts threats of Arab nationalism and Islam and has also proven to be a foundation of national identity, along with religion. It also folds into the story of the two directors of this film, both of whom don't come by Emirati Arabic as uncomplicatedly as the youth in this study.

¹⁷⁰ Many of the actresses portraying Emirati in film, TV and commercials are from other parts of the Arab world. Women as actresses, particularly in the Gulf, is still looked upon as a low-class profession by much of society, although that is changing in a globalized, celebrity-driven world that everyone has access to online.

The Filmmakers

When looking at these two films in terms of landscape and setting, we can consider the films to be impressionist paintings. They are the filmmakers' interpretation of Dubai and the northern Emirates, an impression rather than a story in depth.

As Shohat and Stam noted on spectatorship, it is important to know how films are being viewed, But for Lefebvre it is also important to know who is making the films, i.e. the role of the filmmaker in creating the landscape. "Both the artist and the critic share –each in their own way—the power to transform a setting into a landscape, which is to say, to move the setting away from the margin and into the center." (Lefebvre, 2006:28)

In both these films, landscape (people, places, mise-en-scene and geography) does supersede setting (story/action that is specific to the location), like an impressionist painting of what the UAE is imagined to be in the eyes of the filmmakers. The stories are generic, rather than unique, with limited character development. The characters play a secondary role to showing us what the UAE looks like, often through scenes of driving on the road, a theme I will return to shortly. Eventhood is secondary to landscape. The filmmakers' favor of landscape over story and character fits in with the nation's search for collective identity, and the landscape is one thing that all citizens share, no matter how they interpret it. But the filmmakers' own backgrounds may be relevant.

Both Mostafa, director of *City of Life*, and Al Janahi, director of *Sea Shadow* are *nus nus*, like the Emirati-Filipino character in the student film that caused so much debate at ZUMEFF. Mostafa grew up between the UK and Dubai and has a British mother. Al Janahi's father is the late Mohamed Al-Janahi, a well-known Emirati actor originally from

Bahrain, and his mother is Egyptian.¹⁷¹ Neither filmmaker wears the *kandoura*, Al Janahi not even on special occasions. Both were educated abroad. Mostafa lives in Dubai with a British Egyptian wife. Al- Janahi lives alone (a relatively rare thing in the UAE) in his family's old home. He could choose to live in an apartment, but in conversation is nostalgic for an old UAE, i.e. his relatively old 1980s childhood *freej* in Abu Dhabi, although he is extremely liberal in his lifestyle choices. Unlike the majority of Emiratis, both have an extensive network of expat friends. Not fitting into sanitized UAE identity, they are in some ways outsiders looking in, impressionist painters painting in broad strokes.

Indeed, as *nus nus*, they cannot be pure, sanitized Emiratis, thus they are inherently born with conflict. Conflict is the key to compelling storytelling, which is perhaps why these two were more comfortable with creating some societal conflict, albeit limited, that is missing in most of the other feature films that have been made since *City of Life* and *Sea Shadow*, including later films by Mostafa. Mostafa has gone on to make two more feature films, and Al Janahi has not made another, and both these trajectories are related to the rise and fall of government support for film.

City of Life was the first independent film nurtured in marketing by the government, and *Sea Shadow* was Image Nation's first Emirati feature film production. Up to 2018, Image Nation produced six other Emirati feature films, none of which did as well in terms of attendance in the UAE or abroad, and they have done even worse with critics. There has also been a shift from reality to horror and dystopia, such as in the thriller *Rattle the Cage*, (Image Nation, 2015), about a fantastical jail in an unidentified Middle Eastern location, based on a script written by two Americans and revised by its Emirati director Majed Al

¹⁷¹ I know them both, and consider Al Janahi to be a friend with whom I socialize.

Ansari, who shot the film in Jordan with Palestinian actors, and *Djinn* (Image Nation, 2011), a horror film set in RAK and directed by the late American horror director, Tobe Hopper. Funding of Emirati feature films has indeed decreased in recent years. Both Mostafa and Al Janahi have publicly lamented this decline in support for film since they made their first features, as well as in interviews with me.

The two directors also diverge. Mostafa, also a commercial director, enjoys his celebrity status and the Dubai luxury lifestyle, including being Cartier's UAE brand ambassador. He has found a way to make films under the increasingly limited creative and funding options offered by Image Nation.¹⁷² While *City of Life* was privately funded, his next features were funded by Image Nation: *A to B* (2014), a road film set mostly outside UAE, based around camaraderie amongst pan Arab friends, and *The Worthy* (2016), a dystopian thriller. Al Janahi has meanwhile become the champion of a national cinema, lamenting its absence, running the Emirati Cinema Campaign as a volunteer to promote moviemaking and movie going in the UAE. Yet he has struggled to produce another feature film, not for lack of ideas but for lack of funding. His ideas, including a script about a *nus nus*, have not yet been funded. (Interview, 2019)

He is not alone. The abundant opportunities for students that greeted me when I arrived in 2008 are gone: New York Film Academy closed in 2014, the Abu Dhabi Film Festival shut down in 2014, and the Dubai International Film Festival went on essentially permanent hiatus in 2017, closing its offices. There was no warning for any of these closures nor any official explanation given. Many smaller film festivals have also come and gone—Tropfest, the Gulf Film Festival, Black Box Cinema (founded by Al Janahi), as well

¹⁷² For insight into his high-fashion celebrity lifestyle, see in bibliography *Esquire Middle East* (2018) and *Architectural Digest Middle East* (2019)

as several student film festivals, and perhaps most poignantly, the grassroots Emirates Film Competition. Film funding and mentorship from the Emirates Foundation is gone, and budgets have been cut at organizations such as the Abu Dhabi Music and Arts Foundation.

Rumors float that these are closures related to funding shortages, but that would seem unlikely given that money continues to flow for other nation building efforts, like the Sheikh Zayed Museum and Dubai's Expo 2020, two of the more high-profile projects. I would argue that film itself began to be an uncomfortable situation. The notion of nation building and creating collective memory through film began to be perceived as a risk rather than an opportunity.

National self-consciousness, generally seen as a precursor for nationhood, that is the shared values of disparate peoples that they have common origins, status, location and aspirations, become broadly linked to cinematic fictions. (Shohat and Stam, 2002: 368)

When it comes to building stories, which need some conflict, one can question, in light of the youth response to these two films, if the “shared values of disparate people” are solidified enough to comfortably build a national cinema. Image Nation seems to feel they are not, having shunned films about the UAE and Emiratis in exchange for producing dystopian films and lightweight films that in general feature Emiratis and expats hanging out harmoniously in relatively humorless comedies, creating a multinational landscape but one in which there is no conflict beyond superficial banter. Nationality and heritage do not come into discussion. There seemed some hope in *Ragab and Rashid* (2018), an Emirati film by the director of *Freej* about an Emirati man and Egyptian man who accidentally switch bodies. But it turns into a patronizing film in which the wealthy Emirati learns the

beauty of poverty from the Egyptian, subtly criticizing Emirati modernity but not enough to provoke any affect, mirrored by its limited success theatrically (Mojo Box Office, 2019). The decade of film we are looking at ended in 2018 with Image Nation producing *Shab Shabab* (2018), a flat comedy about four men of various Arab backgrounds “spending the latter years of their lives in a senior home down and dejected, until their world is turned around when one of them inherits 50 million dirhams and is able to support the dreams they had all but forgotten.” (Image Nation website, 2020)

Image Nation also produced Saeed Al Murry’s *Going to Heaven* (2015), a boy’s journey across the UAE to find his grandmother, again the noble woman of the past, a film steeped in the purity of Emirati life, highlighting the beauty of each emirate. This is not Al Murry’s first film. He released his self-funded film *Sun Dress* theatrically in 2010, about a deaf girl in love with her cousin, but whose family refuses the marriage because she might pass on her deafness to her children. It’s a slow film, set in a rural landscape, with the same nostalgic feel of *Sea Shadow*, but it has more weight to it than *Going to Heaven*.¹⁷³ Lightweight has become the moniker of Image Nation films, opting out of conflict in its storytelling, settling for either a perfect landscape or a story set outside the borders of the nation state or its heritage.¹⁷⁴

Conclusion

This chapter examined the attitude of youth to two theatrical films marketed as Emirati national cinema and why consequent attempts at national cinema have faded away.

¹⁷³ Nevin Mahdi, the actress who plays Kaltham in *Sea Shadow*, stars in this film also.

¹⁷⁴ Over the past decade, Image Nation has had various Emiratis in the top ranks, but the CEO has remained consistent: Michael Garin, a retired Hollywood studio executive with no previous experience in the Gulf. I would make the argument he is a safe figure—no ambitions to create a national cinema, but only eager to please the UAE leadership with Hollywood deals. I base this commentary on having met him on several occasions.

The former Soviet republics discussed earlier, Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan, have not hesitated to explore heritage. Their films make the past something that was conquered for a present whole. This doesn't require producing scores of films. It takes just a few—even one really good one that can unify the landscape as part of a nation's heritage, making it uniquely its own landscape. But the youths' response to *City of Life* and *Sea Shadow* indicate that in the absence of a plot of victory over the landscape and people connected to it, landscape alone can only create minimal affect.

Both these films were recognized as being Emirati, giving them effect, but they failed to have much affect. The emotional responses were limited and tended to be about things the youth did not feel were Emirati, like an older woman flirting with a teenager, than they were about things that were Emirati.

City of Life looked upon the UAE as a multinational place, with people living together but separately, and this was viewed as modern, although the UAE has always been multicultural and indeed, less divided between nationalities. Meanwhile, *Sea Shadow* was viewed as the past because it showed an insular place with the only hope for salvation being to get away from village life to the city.

Consequently, *City of Life* did create one nearly unanimous affect in all the students, regardless of their gender or socioeconomic background: What is good about their heritage is under threat by too much mixing with other cultures' unpleasant behaviors, perceived as primarily ignoring family and religion, disobedience to elders and drinking. The good expat in *City of Life* is the poor one, the taxi driver with big dreams, someone they felt benevolent towards, someone not a threat to their way of life, even in modern times.

In *City of Life*, the expats were shown favorably or at least in keeping with what the youth in the survey expected them to be, but in *Sea Shadow*, the expat was the source of evil, something most of the youth either did not mention or disagreed with. Considering the short films housed at the UAE National Film Library and Archive, this blaming of the expat for society's breakdown is a common theme, and I view the students' responses as in keeping with the *neoglobalism* of the government: A part of a national identity is to give the image that everything is perfect. This then makes national cinema difficult. Audiences go to see more than just landscape. They need conflict. But for these students, patriotism, a loyalty to the current leadership by not allowing the UAE to be shown in a bad light, holds more power than digging deeper into identity and the multicultural heritage the government has downplayed in favor of an Arab tribal identity.

In this dissertation's conclusion, we look at how conflict can be created in film without disturbing the ruling bargain, but for now it is we can acknowledge that *City of Life* and *Sea Shadow* films do begin to break the cycle of the tourism and government heritage tropes. We don't see camels, desert, falcons or date palms in either film, and these were the three most mentioned UAE symbols by the students at the beginning of the study. The *kandoura* created affect and effect—but it was the only item on the students' list of symbols that actually appears in these films. In this way, *City of Life* and *Sea Shadow* are promising starts to national cinema—in that they are not limited in their definition of national identity to some pure notion of “Emirati,” as in the tourism films.

These films also hold up to Shohat's and Stam's theory that films “are also experiential grids or templates through which history can be written and national identity figured.” (Shohat and Stam, 2002:154). While these two films have not created a national

identity (and no two films need necessarily do so on their own), they allow for the discussion of what is collective identity may or may not be: *City of Life*, with its panorama of Dubai's multinational life, or *Sea Shadow*, which focuses on the quieter, more rural UAE landscape, a film which more than 50% of the students thought was set in the past, although the director set it in the present.

In both films, students recognized their identity as a thing to be preserved, defining collective heritage in these films as a) power of the noble mother b) separation of the sexes in non-family homes d) national dress and e) most especially, religion.

The latter, the most unifying element in their identity based on their responses, is at pull with nationalism. But neither of these films advocates for Islamism over nationality or even elaborates on Islam. Islam is not necessarily a threat but rather a given part of the script, whether spoken or unspoken.

One can look upon this young nation as a film script itself, especially if we look at how architect and scholar George Katodrytis described Dubai in 2008, at the start of the decade this research covers. He saw the city as a simulacrum:

The city has ceased to be a site. Instead it has become a condition. It tends to be everywhere and nowhere. It is more like a diagram, a system of staged scenery and mechanisms of good time. (Katodrytis, 2008:39)¹⁷⁵

Indeed, the students responded to the films in the same way as Katodrytis describes the city. Even their responses were staged as times to make sure that they themselves sanitized Emirati heritage. They were torn between what is the past and what is the present

¹⁷⁵ Katodrytis has since written multiple articles along this statement, using the same words. His teaches architecture at the American University of Sharjah.

and what is ok for non-Emiratis to see. They were also more engaged in the staged scenery of their landscape than with a narrative whole.

In one way, this is how we can describe a good national film: as a diagram of staged scenery. A national film then becomes not just a collection of images, but a condition, and in the UAE, a condition in the making.

But Katodrytis “mechanisms of a good time” does not include a plot, which is key to both a film and a national narrative. Despite Ministries of Happiness, Tolerance and Possibilities and unlike when Katodrytis wrote in 2008, even unlike Halima’s tour bus in 2009, youth today are aware they are not guaranteed high paying government jobs when they graduate, that males must do military service and that the country is openly involved in military conflicts abroad, which has resulted in martyrs. So “good times” are not the only option anymore, which one might assume would open the door for stronger filmmaking to unite them. Yet the opposite has happened.

Indeed, UAE’s strong support of film starting in 2008 likely stifled a creative exploration of national identity: Money from the state limits the storyline options and narrative direction. However, the government, in choosing to withdraw from this funding or limiting the storylines it funds, may have inadvertently opened the door for daring filmmaking, particularly if cracks in the rentier system grow. Today, film doesn’t need that much money. UAE film began developing in the era of virtual communities and media.

Morley rightly argues that new digital formats open up new ways of developing narrative:

...the creation of new kinds of image spaces or cultural identities ...need to be better grounded in analysis of the everyday practices and domestic rituals through which

electronic communities of various sorts are daily contracted and reconstructed.

(Morley, 1998:72)

With the advent of digital media modes of production and distribution, contemporary feature films can draw upon formats developed for social media platforms, such as Saudi filmmaker Mahmoud Sabbagh's *Barakah Meets Barakah* (2016), which extends the kind of comedic social critique developed in his Telfaz.11 web series. Sabbagh began his career as a director of the popular YouTube series *Cash* (2014) before directing *Barakah Meets Barakah*, demonstrating that film and visual media in the Gulf can develop as an independent transmedia product, rather than rely upon state financing.

Barakah Meets Barakah is a parody about young men and women trying to date in present day Jeddah, while the main character laments the freedom his parents and grandparents had before the formation of Saudi religious police in the late 1970s, a lost recent past which he imagines from old photos.

After the film screened at Warehouse 421 in Abu Dhabi in 2016, I ran into Mariam and Shaima, two of my most talented and driven former students. They asked, "Miss, why can't we make films like this in the UAE?"

If I would have been comfortable giving them an honest answer, it would have been that *Barakah Meets Barakah* isn't afraid to talk about the past identity of Jeddah or multiple layers of identity—or even the hypocrisy of identity—and this is partly because the filmmaker had the freedom of having not to answer to a government funder. This meant that the filmmaker could look at Saudi heritage and identity as flawed, rather than as without conflict. It is engaging because it lets go of patriotism in favor of identity exploration, something that UAE citizens have limited motivation or courage to do, given the ministries

of possibilities and happiness that the government rentier is still able to promise them, albeit less strongly.