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*Encounters on the road to heritage and film in the UAE*

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## CONCLUSION: Film Down the Road

In January 2019, I was walking in Dubai with a friend who was visiting the UAE for the first time. We came upon several Emirati men, from around 40- to 70-years old, sitting outside a tented majlis in the Bastikiya area having tea. My friend wanted to join them, and so we sat and were promptly offered tea—and stories. They told us their families were the original inhabitants of Bastikiya and that the "wonderful rulers" had refurbished their houses so they could live in them again, and they had built this community majlis for them. They wanted us to go inside the tent, reminding us that their hospitality was at our disposal. The walls were covered with the history of the UAE: in other words, photos and texts about the ruling families. They proudly guided us around the tent walls, recounting the history and benevolence of the rulers. There was no display of the men's Persian origins, not in the stories, nor in the decoration of the majlis. As we left, they went back to chatting and smoking and drinking tea, and all I could think of was the *Truman Show* (USA,1998). In the Peter Weir film, actor Jim Carey lives on a reality TV set and every morning is cued on what to do on set and to ask no questions or disrupt the routine by trying to see life beyond the set. In this way, the UAE also feels like a film set, a simulacrum—one that will not break down unless someone wants to peek backstage. The architecture in the UAE has created a movie set, a sometimes-surreal set, for the action of modernity to take place, a *mise-en-scene* not so different from that of a film.

These men in Bastikiya will not become Jim Carey—they will not try to go behind the scenes. But unlike Carey, they are not clueless about what is beyond the set. The idea of a country born from a disparate tribal society brought together by a brave leader, Sheikh Zayed, has been the foundation of the national narrative (along with Bedouin tropes of

falcons, dunes, camels and palm trees) first imposed by the British and carried on by the government. But the ruling bargain has been good to this generation of Bastikiya men, and they can forgive it for ignoring the Ajami contribution to UAE identity in the heritage narrative that favors the Arab tribal heritage and for setting them up in an orientalized Arabia, ostensibly for them but also for passing tourists. For these men, patriotism comes before their own heritage.

But there will be a time when citizens will question the behind-the-scenes actions of this set. For these men's children, there is the anxiety that has come with modernity, cracks in rentier system, debilitating crashing oil prices during the COVID-19 epidemic, regional political instability, lower salaries, mandatory military service—and social media—all of which open doors to new questions, not to mention the deep underlying question of who decided the black gold belonged to the ruling families. Heritage building has become the replacement ingredient to building a cohesive society, swapping out money with collective identity as the binding force to avoid such questions. But questions are undercurrents, often answered through art, particularly the most popularly-consumed form –visual media.

In a country where Bakhtin's real and represented worlds overlap, often without distinction, today's citizens are actors, and the rulers are the directors. However, the editing is up for grabs, although still ruled by censorship and self-censorship.

The sense of Emirati purity, which has elements of both arrogance and naivety imbedded in it, not to mention anxiety, may explain why horror film is such a popular genre to both watch and create, particularly for first time Emirati filmmakers, as noted earlier about content of the UAE National Film Library and Archive. The horror movie, in its suspended reality of telling the tale of the modernity boogeyman, is relatively safe from

censorship, safe from having to pursue reality-based issues of modernity, which bring into question heritage and identity—and disturb purity. (Yunis, 2014:64)

But settling for low budget horror films is not national cinema. As we have seen in previous chapters, it is not easy to censor videos online or to punish the producer without causing international headlines. The easier solution is to counter-produce films that create a national heritage and memory.

Physical film is made of frames, and as a whole, a film can frame a society. The UAE government certainly must have believed this when it began the big push into creating a national cinema in 2008. But in 10 years, the UAE failed to produce even one national film, a film that creates spectatorship among the population and tells a national story that moves both local and international moviegoers. Today, the UAE government funding for Emirati filmmakers is hard to come by. But this is not for financial reasons, as there is still plenty of funding for tourism, an industry bolstered at the same time. In fact, the most noticeable removal from the tourism budget are the now-defunct film festivals. Nor is the slowdown in film funding due to a decline in interest in national identity, as the government continues develop new heritage sites and museums.

Nor is the failure to create a national cinema merely about not having previous experience or about freedom of expression. Nearby Iran, despite a repressive government, has a strong body of film that it promotes domestically and internationally, in which metaphors like divorce represent the nation’s good and bad sides without upsetting the government, with the most notable examples being the films of Asghar Farhadi, whose internationally award-winning films criticize society and religion in Iran while still lensing

the nation with love. The former Soveit republics discussed earlier also have farily repressive governments but have created the beginnings of a popular national cinema.

What these countries share is the willingness to create a compelling narrative that shows a flaw or crisis in the nation that is overcome by heros. Most good natiaonl narratives revolve around victimhood that the population overcomes. The UAE has spent so much time and space sanitizing its past and turning the present into the hyperreal that it hasn't allowed for victimhood, and without victimhood there can't be something for the nation to rally around, as in Iran's government-supported, Rambo-esque hero films of the Iran-Iraq War, or even Iraq's small film industry today, which has produced several films about overcoming the post-war landscape, oddly enough many funded in part by the former UAE film festivals' grants. The UAE has a window for a war film through its participation in the war in Yemen, which has served as a form of nation building, albeit on the soil of another nation, like the USA's modern anti-terrorism films set in the Middle East. But unlike the USA stopping faraway Middle East terrorists, the Yemeni story is close to home and likely to open more controvery than unity, given the huge ethnically-Yemeni citizen population, which may find it hard to forget the large human toll that Yemen has paid.

Modernity seems to be the one thing UAE citizens and residents seem to feel they are victims of. They are aware of modernity and the anxiety and disruptions to the social order it has created. The past wasn't a long-ago, simple fairytale of a rags-to-riches story, and Emiratis want to remember, as shown by the appetite for nostalgia, old photos and videos online. But the UAE's victimhood cannot rely on modernity, the only victimhood allowed to tentatively flourish. In the national cinemas of other countries, the citizens are victims of fascism, communism, despots, things they must defeat to survive. Emiratis are

not only victims of modernity; they are benefactors of it. No would advocate for returning to the very harsh days before oil. Thus, any film about modernity would lack compelling victimhood, as evidenced in the existing UAE films.

Not to be ironic, that does not mean there is no opportunity for a victimhood in the UAE's past. The UAE's official national image is now mostly in the hands of the purposefully-named Image Nation. Image Nation's few Emirati films lack much appeal locally or aboard. However, a few filmmakers continue to make low budget films on their own. While these are not well-crafted films aesthetically and technically, they may in fact offer a tiny entry into a more engaging national cinema. I say "tiny entry" because most of them do not have stories with conflict. These filmmakers organize their own funding and theatrical releases. The most prolific of them is Ahmed Zain, finding funding for his horror films, (*Grandmother's Farm,* 2013) (*Grandmother's Farm 2*, 2015), with modernity being the monster invading the old farm, grounded by the aging figure of a grandmother, a key element of Emirati film as she stands in for lost heritage, as we have seen in Chapter Four. Zain's feature comedy, *Lisa* (2017), is about a visiting American 20-something taken in by an Emirati family—two cheery, fat young men and their smart grandmother, again with the grandmother embodying the inseparability of righteousness and tradition. The family teaches Lisa about Emirati culture. *Lisa* feels more like a tourism film, as it uses those same tropes, i.e. cue the camels (Figure 36). But the most successful independent Emirati film released domestically to date is *Hajwala: The Missing Engine* (2016), which according to Box Office Mojo (2020), made $832,186 in ticket sales. It is about *tafheet*, Emirati illegal

street racing that many young men engage in. It was followed by a sequel in 2018.[176] (Figure 37)

While *Hajwala* is a poor-quality film in terms of craftsmanship and is about something very contemporary, it may actually speak to national identity and heritage more than it initially it appears to. Nomadic Bedouin culture, at the heart of UAE government-supported heritage, is about transportation, traveling from place to place, about the unknown road ahead. Travel is also at the heart of the UAE's seafaring heritage, and Emiratis traditionally traveled between desert and sea during the changing of the seasons. So perhaps it is not a surprise that the most common trait of UAE feature films, whether made by Image Nation or independently, is the notion of the road or road trip. Media theorist Laura U. Marks dubbed the road movie as "the modern desert film" (Marks, 2006:127). The car has replaced the camel and, I would add, the dhow, but continues the heritage of moving from place to place. Indeed, in watching most Emirati films, you will see lengthy scenes of young men driving somewhere, with not much else happening. In any other filmmaking, we would call this gratuitous. However, in these films, these road trips become the national identity, separate from but in keeping with the local heritage—-people driving in cars going somewhere for some reason or for no reason. This happens in *Hajwala*, *A to B*, *Lisa, Going to Heaven*, *City of Life*, and to a lesser degree, *Sea Shadow*, in which the person who has the power is the brother who can drive into the village and, more importantly, out of it.

Travelling the roads allows these films to explore the landscape and define its identity and heritage in the face of modernity. On one hand, we can dismiss these films as not creating a national narrative in that they have banal stories and weak character

[176] For more about the film, https://gulfnews.com/entertainment/arab-celebs/hajwala-2-what-to-know-about-the-car-racing-sequel-1.60378733

development and minimal conflict, or we can say they are creating the beginning of a national narrative despite the obstacles of censorship and self-censorship and a lack of government funding.

Yet these are not films with story arcs, and are essentially buddy road trips that include only young Emirati males, thus they offer a narrow window into the nation, one that renders the few appearances of others as caricatures. In this way, they reinforce the sanitized heritage planned and implemented by the rulers. Indeed, the road movie is not necessarily at odds with the nomadic Arabia heritage tropes—-the desert is still there, the falcons and dates, too, but the camel, the symbol of nomadism, is replaced by, or shares the road,with the car. The road movie also easily supports the ruling bargain and patriotism—-a road movie in the UAE nearly always encounters images of the rulers on street posters, in the decals on the cars, not to mention the very names of the streets.

But the the road movie serves as a means of escaping the confines of modernity, the beginning of considering victimhood as a necessity for national cinema, as Zimmerman notes on amateur filmmaking (and these are essentially amateur films):

> The road, adventure, travel and quests into the unknown problematize the narrative as escape from the emasculating and paralyzing confines of professional middle-class conformity. The road and travel present the possibility of the unknown as that which can re-imagine and reconstruct the lost masculine. (Zimmerman, 1996:11)

While "middle class" might not be the word to describe the characters in these Emirati films, but rather "typical," as the word "middle class" often implies in Western discourse, the road movie could be seen as an escape path from the frustration with conformity, at the heart of much artistic expression everywhere, while still promoting heritage and identity.

Zimmerman refers to the road as the domain of masculinity, and all these UAE films share the idea of Emirati brotherhood, also important in the national cinemas of other countries.

But these films are still lacking two things which merely escaping modernity does not offer: a) a compelling narrative with an element of victimhood that is to be overcome b) acknowledgement of the multicultural identities and nationalities that make up the UAE.

In talking about the erasures of early Gulf architecture, Kuwaiti scholar Aseel Al-Ragum suggests "critical nostalgia offers creative solutions for a changing environment and encourages ideas that are complementary to a city's multiple historical narratives." (Al-Ragum, 2015:5). As shown in Chapter Three, critical nostalgia exists through the sharing of UAE images and videos online. While there is nothing to do about buildings that have already been torn down, critical nostalgia could be applied to film, which works with something that cannot be as easily erased: stories. Visual media supports memory in ways the landscape can't: It is unhampered by the need for physical buildings and spaces as proof of heritage. It just requires an image, real or imagined.

But the landscape can't just be covered up with the most identifiable—and implemented—heritage image, the cultural purity of the *abaya* and *kandoura*. If the UAE put everyone in jeans and t-shirts, Emiratis would be lost on their landscape. They would not stand out from the rest of the population. This literally makes heritage skin deep, mostly about a gaze, not a story—and excludes the heritage and past of the majority of the population, including citizens and non-citizens. In the shadows of the Arab Spring and economic woes putting strain on the rentier system, considering a wider definition of the UAE population offers the elements for a stronger UAE national identity and heritage, rather than the sanitized one that could come into question under political and financial

strain, a more inclusive heritage that could be interpreted through film. I consider acknowledgement of the heritage of these other groups, although mostly not entitled to citizenship, essentially to a healthy narrative that will actually be more about “tolerance” than choosing to ignore their stories in the national story.

I return to the road movie as pathway towards national cinema that can be more than skin deep. If allowed to step away from Emirati purity, the road movie opens up a window into the mosaic of UAE identies and can do so by acknowledging diverse Emirati ethnic groups. This is where what scholar Patricia Pisters calls the “mosaic film,” with its nomadic and transnational elements, could help foster national cinema. She describes one type of mosaic film as not a longing for elsewhere but “rather difficulties associated with a newly diverse population living together in close juxtaposition.” (Pisters, 2011:181). She cites as an example *Crash* (2004), which was the basis for *City of Life*. But in that Los Angeles-set film, the different groups interact with each other, confronting their prejudices and assumptions they have about each§ other. In *City of Life*, there is no connection between the different nationalities, even at the site of the crash. The transnationalism that happens on the UAE film landscape so far is only in passing by each othe. Even when crashing into each other, there is no interacting on screen. The only interaction with expats is one of threat—as in a South Asian expat posing as a danger to the purity of Emirati women and neighborhoods in several short films and *Sea Shadow*. In reality, the landscape Emiratis share with expats could not be maintained without the work of expats across all socioeconomic levels of employment. For example, it would not be possible for the 12% national population to run the tourism industry alone. The numbers are against them, not to mention that the salaries and lifestyle of the rentier system could not accommodate that.

This need for transnational workers was also true in the past, with the coming and going of merchants from the Indian subcontinent and present day Iran, many of whom had outposts in the present day UAE, and with slaves working on boats during the pearl trade. While focusing on the present may upset the ruling bargain, in a mosaic film set in the past, the non-Bedoiun Arabs and other "foreigners" can be in it together, part of fighing off a collective victimhood.

Indeed, since social media is already bringing Emiratis together with non-Emiratis in sharing the landscape's heritage, the government may well take the narrative back in its hands by supporting mosaic films that do allow for not just juxtaposing the different groups on the landscape but by showing how they came into contact with each other in the past to fight a common enemy, how they negotiated this landscape together and separately.

If we look at American Westerns, they are also road movies in some ways, a product of the landscape that became a national heritage. The Western developed into heritage that can include even those who feel disenfranchised from the national narrative. JoEllen Shivley discovered this in her study of white males and Native American males who were both asked to watch the American classic western, *The Searchers* (1956). Despite Native Americans being the "bad guys," Native American males, perhaps the most disenfranchised Americans of all, identified with the film as positively as the white males. Shivley discovered that what makes Westerns meaningful to Native Americans is the fantasy of being free and independent (American values, as mentioned earlier), like the cowboy. (Shively, 1992)

Similarly, the mosaic film could be a form of promoting the UAE's espoused values like "tolerance" without breaking up the idea of a dominant Emirati Arab Bedouin identity.

Multicultural film portrayals might better explain UAE's outspoken commitment to "tolerance" than tolerance festivals that feel like lip service. However, I would not use the word "tolerance," with its implications of tokenism, a critisim that US film and television has faced.

Much like the American Western, the landscape itself could be the enemy—sandstorms, rough seas. Before I consider this for the UAE, I go back now to Guibernau's statement:

> 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" (Giubernau, 2013: 40)

Based on the responses I have received in interviews and oral histories, the UAE's fragmented communities, like the Native American males in the Shivley's study, do believe these are the shared values of the country, even if they themselves don't fit the definition exactly. They are bounded by the very all-encompassing founding moment in 1971, anchored by Sheikh Zayed, as well as religion and Emirati Arabic (language) and British-inspired heritage symbols. Additionally, Emiratis bond around believing in a heritage of purity, symbolized by warm, loving mothers and grandmothers. The other elements Guibernau refers to—-history, traditions, kinship, territory— are still in the making, not as easily resolved by relocating people from the *freejs* or enforcing a shiny state feminism and a happiness ministry. But traditions, kinship and territory are also elements of a national

cinema and thus film could be a precursor to the citizens sharing a bound along these elements.

Film and other visual media could actually be a way to stimulate a more complex, yet more compelling heritage that wouldn't be disruptive to patriotism, while creating parallel heritage narratives that complement the government narrative, rather than disturb it. The mosaic film would also allow for greater gender balance in film: While Emirati socialization is often gender segregated, the mosaic film would allow parallel and eventually colliding narratives of men and women. Women were also part of the road. They have a history of traveling the road, taking care of the camels, finding water, hunting, caring for the land while the men are at sea. They were much more than the camera-ready posing figure that state feminism has fostered today.

Similar to the US and most other countries, pre-nationhood, the UAE did actually have many internal rivalries that could make national stories.

The land of the UAE has been lived on for 8,000 years and has always known traumas surviving the landscape, which indeed could be the source of victimhood. It would be interesting to implement Shivley's research on Emiratis, to see how stories from the past would play as collective memory— not only stories of fighting off natural disasters, but Bedouin battles, pirates at sea, shipwrecks, famine, the perils of the pearl diving trade. Even if the stories of the past disturb purity and include identities along ethnic, tribal and family lines rather than national lines, if the tribal names were made up, then these past stories would be distanced enough from reality to become a national identity of struggle that Emiratis have overcome as a collective whole. This is similary to t the way the "West was won," in the US narrative, even though most Americans are not descendants of those early

settlers, and in the case of the Native Americans (and other minorities), are even the victims of them.

Emiratis and long-time residents also need to be given the chance to drive their own stories to get to narratives with compelling tales for the local population. Thsese could also work internationally, in keeping with the UAE's global business and tourism ambitions. However, most of the top executives at Image Nation and other government-supported media initiatives are Westerners. One could argue Emiratis do not have the experience to run their own film productions, but in my many encounters with Image Nation, most of these Western executives have limited relevant experience themselves, let alone a knowledge of the society.[177] Conveniently for the governement, I believe they have, without intending to, prevented national narratives from developing because they themselves are only fed the sanitized heritage and do not have personal connections within the UAE communities to see anything deeper.

This is why online platforms offer so much potential: They require creativity rather than technical knowledge. Scholar Faye Ginsberg established the category of indigenous media to refer to isolated native populations that could express themselves through cinema:

> More generally, I am proposing that when other forms are no longer effective, indigenous media offers a possible means -social, cultural, and political -for reproducing and transforming cultural identity among people who have experienced massive political, geographic, and economic disruption. (Ginsburg, 1995:4)

While one cannot call anyone in the UAE, citizen or otherwise, indigenous, given the nomadic Bedouin and dynamic trade route history of this land, you can call UAE citizens an

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[177] I have worked closely with Image Nation on some film projects, as well as having visiting my students interning there, as a required part of my job.

isolated minority, with subgroups within that citizenship being somewhat disenfranchised. Like an indigenous community, Emiratis also have the need to tell their own stories, which exist apart from both the government heritage narrative and the nostalgia narratives revolving around the modernity trauma shared with expats online. It is also important to remember that some families, particularly from the other Arab countries and South Asia, have been in the UAE for generations, and yet remain disenfranchised. Thus, in a world of Black Lives Matter, their stories also need to be included in the road movie mosaic—they are not citizens, nor entitled to become citizens, but they make the economy run. Without them, the rentier system would not be possible, and post-rentier system, the economy will still not be possible without them. Because the USA has been for so long a country of disenfranchised groups welcomed into a dysfunctional melting pot, I refer to Hollywood films as a source of study for Emiratis when considering how to incorporate other groups. Most of the Hollywood films have done this by either showing minorities as token characters, often buffoons in period pieces, including Blacks, Latinos and Native Americans (*Gone with the Wind*, 1932 serves as a good example of this) or as the benefactors of the white savior (*The Help*. 2011, for example, funded notably in part by Image Nation). While these are not positive renditions, they at least put the other groups on the landscape. As John B. Thompson notes, this can be the beginning of good film:

> In the sphere of literature or popular music, of art or cinema, the weaving together of themes drawn from different traditions—this continuous hybridization of culture—is the basis of some of the most original and exciting work. (Thompson, 1995: 209)

In the UAE, minority characters are, in comparison to the the Arab Bedouin Emirati numbers, the majority.  It is important to consider their stories in the mosaic because

otherwise, the stories could be made in the expats' countries of origin, with little mercy for a positive portrayal of the Arab Bedouin citizen population. This is much like Spike Lee's films' attitude to whites, as an example in the USA, but for which Hollywood has a white savior counterbalance. Indeed, films made about the Gulf by others have not been kind, as noted earlier in Jack Shaheen's work. While I am in no means comparing the cruelity of colonialization and slavery to the history of the UAE, it is better for a nation to claim its heritage rather than let someone else do it. Another reason for the government to do so is because of Islam, the great competitor to nationhood, as show in Chapter Four. The Quran is rich with heroic stories, like in all other religions, of good overcoming evil and. In the case of the Quran, the stories take place in the same region as the UAE is situated. For example, the story of Bilal, the slave the prophet Mohamed asks to the do the first call to pray as a way of ending slavery has been featured in several Arabic language films, including *The Messenge* (1976), starring Anthony Quinn, and the animated Saudi film, *Bilal* (2015). It's a moving story that is at the level of emotional power of a good national film.

With the present waning government support, the pathway to national cinema could develop in the UAE through amateur filmmaking that includes a mosaic of the population. Emiratis have untold stories and unlike the indigenous people Ginsburg writes about, in a *post cinema* world, they have far more means to produce visual media. But digital production and social media platforms disrupt the financial fears of making films, much as modernity disrupted the society. Visual media in the hands of residents is a means of negotiating heritage and identity, with social media creating the platform to share it.

There are three lines of parallel heritage narrative that could co-exist. First, there is the government hero narrative, which is not so different from the narrative of other nations, whether it centers on William of Orange, George Washington, Nelson Mandela—or Sheikh Zayed. The other two potential heritage film vechicles are the "indigenous" UAE citizen/resident narrative and the mosaic road trip narrative feature.

Such stories would allow for heritage and identity to be fluid in space and time, not stuck in one fantastical, undefinable time period in history provided by the British. In order to protect Abu Dhabi's supremacy among the other emirates, as it is the financial and political capitol, these heritage stories do not need to name a specific location, just an assumption that the story happened in the land that is now the UAE. This would give all the Emirates a unifying image, as opposed to each emirate for itself, as in the tourism films. We have seen in those tourism films, in Chapter Two, that such separation is rather pointless as all the emirates share the same tropes, and none are tapping into their diverse and unique histories.

The purity, or using the less arrogant word "uniqueness," of being Emirati could be of value when considering the UAE's neighbors. Aside from a foreign woman marrying an Emirati man, one cannot become Emirati. You are either born Emirati or not. This goes back to the UAE leaders' view of the nation as a brand. The Emiratis in this research branded their landscape: They never referred to images as "Gulf" culture or heritage on screen—it was always "Emirati." But when I asked, young Emiratis couldn't define anything on the landscape in the films as being exclusively their identity versus that of Kuwait or Saudi Arabia, other than to say, as one male student said in class, "We are more advanced. There is more to do here." But this speaks to the collective present, rather than collective memory.

What makes the UAE different from the other Gulf countries is not its heritage but its hyper-reality, which is not grounding for Emiratis dealing with the anxiety of rapid change.

But creating a genre of films around conflict/victimhood with the landscape, like Abu Dhabi's 2017 tourist video portrayed, could give a distinction between the UAE and the other GCC countries on screen and off screen, like the US did with the Western. Canada and much of Central and South America have cowboy and Indian stories, too, but the USA has already claimed that narrative for film. Just like heritage sites have been created and camel racing traditions invented, perhaps so can a national film culture in UAE in this new media landscape. The UAE would be the first in the Gulf then to create a national cinema. Kuwait seemed on the verge of that with the pearl diving tragedy *The Cruel Sea (*1972). Although that film was a huge hit internationally, it is largely forgotten at home, where some of its content, including a marriage rape scene, were cut out for being offensive, and no other Kuwaiti feature films were made for years. Qatar tried with the much-lampooned big budget film, *Black Gold: Day of the Falcon* (2011), starring Antonio Banderas as an oil-rich sheikh, but it has since also stepped away from national feature film.

Film also allows the UAE to drive its own narrative beyond the region. The UAE is not a nation of listless, mindless people squandering their wealth, nor are they religious fanatics, as they are portrayed in Western film defining the Gulf region. Under all the scathing Western portrayals are multicultural individuals and communities with very rich stories to share, and it is better for the government to embrace them than to ignore them and let them fester online independently.

Films based on diverse heritage would allow the UAE, concerned about its international reputation, to counter the Gulf narrative depicted Western visual media. But

for that, the UAE government needs to give more freedom to artists to pursue a "noble heritage" on their own. As documentary filmmaker Nujoom Alghanem put it:

> We are part of a conservative society but cinema is art –cinema needs strong stories, needs emotional stories, and real stories. If we take into consideration our conservative society and the censorship and that you are not allowed to tackle this issue or that issue, this can make the films almost like corporate films. I compromise not only on quality but on topics and the issues I discuss in my films. I'll find something that is so critical for the film, very strong and I can't include it…sometimes you also need to have the freedom of going securely straight forward on certain issues…If you don't show the truth, what are you going to show? (Interview, 2017)

Because of the benefits of the rentier system, remaining apolitical is a big part of Emirati collective identity today, the literal reward for forgoing creative storytelling and critical thinking. But film by nature is story, and a well-developed story is rarely apolitical, which may be the toughest challenge for film. What motive is there really to tell a good story? Making a film is also very hard work.There is not enough political instability or financial woes to want to face the consquences of questioning the ruling bargain, as show in Chaper One during the Arab Spring. Even Alghanem, whose works may be the most nuanced stories of lost heritage, stays in a relative safe zone.

While the truth is not always as pristine as a freshly pressed *kandoura*, film is a relatively new medium for this nation, and there is a particular audience discomfort at seeing films that portray local people and events in an unflattering light, as stated in Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid's poem in Chapter One, repeated here:

> The heat of flames in my heart over you prevailed,
>
> And I conceal the hell, fearing people may know.[178]

Seeing themselves on screen under their own direction is still a novelty for Emiratis, a novelty that, based on the research in this dissertation, is still an uncomfortable feeling. It goes against the *neoglobalism* of this place, which wants to be visited and marvelled at for its hyper-reality and for its endeavours in other countries and for its embracing of tolerance and global icons, but doesn't really want to be seen beyond that façade.

But there is also the question of time. How long can the UAE rely on heritage tropes given by the British before unerasing erased landscapes? Identity and memories are always being collected. Now is the opportunity to allow visual media to grow into a body of national heritage. We can see this has happened somewhat as the government responds to nostalgia on social media that is shared by Emiratis and expats. For example, the Year of Tolerance in 2019, the year after this window of study, acknowledged the expat, celebrating contributions of expat communities in the UAE through numerous media outlets.[179] But tolerance means tolerating, not embracing. The UAE needs a good mosaic road movie set in different time period that encompasses different ethnic groups amnd histories without negating all the wonder—and unique identity—that its hyper-reality has brought. If the government chooses not to pursue collective heritage narratives, it risks waiting for the rentier system to collapse, at which point, the citizenship will have less to lose in portraying the nation's heritage divisively.

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

[179] The UAE also announced in January 2020 plans for a large scale survey of co-existence in the UA. See "The UAE Launches National Coexistence Survey," *The National*, January 21, 2020.

In creating visual media today, it is also important to note that it is being made for all sorts of screens, as well as for audiences of one, particularly in the mobile phone-loving UAE. These audiences of one turn to social media to discuss what they see. Visual media as nation building in this *post cinema* world relies on the individual viewers and online chats inspired by viewings of film or TV or online productions.

Because we no longer watch TV or films as primarily a group experience, in the anxiety and loneliness of rapid modernity, sadness can also develop in the solitude of watching a heritage story alone in the face of the isolation of modernity. But sadness can also be seen as an advantage, something to be embraced. In Japan, *natsukashii* – which derives from the verb "*natsuku"*, which means "to keep close and become fond of" and is roughly translated in English into nostalgia–indicates joy and gratitude for the past rather than a desire to return to it. In Japan, *natsukashii* is a reminder that you are fortunate to have had the experiences you've had in life, and they are sweet, but we are lucky to be able to move on. (Pieri, 2018). This subtle emotion, not the slapstick one of UAE state television, could enliven the UAE heritage serials by giving a moving story about heritage and its loss, making its rediscovery wonderful for the collective whole but in no way a replacement with what the present day UAE offers.

Indeed, UAE film began developing in the era of virtual communities and media. Morely argues that "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." (Morely, 2003:72). With social media, curation is now in the hands of the creators and consumers, bypassing censors and perhaps limiting self-censorship–and giving the

government something to respond to through national film.

To use social media language, if there is a trending buzzword in the UAE in recent years, it has been “heritage.” I will conclude with Sheikh Zayed’s oft quoted "A nation without a past is a nation without a present or a future. Thank God, our nation has a flourishing civilization, deep-rooted in this land for many centuries.”[180] We are not seeing that flourishing heritage in the UAE’s visual media, although there are hints of the government narrative expanding to go beyond Sheikh Zayed. For example, Qasr Al Hosn’s new permanent displays highlight positively the life of the once-ridiculed Sheikh Shakhbout. It would be worth learning a lesson from Sheikh Shakhbout’s refusal to change with the arrival of money and oil and how that refusal to change cost him his position: You can’t fight the future today either. The UAE has embraced the future fully in terms of visual media technology. But it would be wise to also be on top of creating a strong heritage through visual media, rather than letting the story falls into other hands. This is not the time for the government to have decreased spending on filmmaking but rather a time to reframe spending to create a marriage between enforced and public collective memory. The UAE’s landscape through film can become “a subtle yet powerful tool for dissemination” (Yunis:2014:50) of its heritage and culture domestically and internationally. In other words, to reference Pratt (1990) again, film could create what we could call a valuable “contact zone.” This means shying away from expressing homogeneity in favor of showing how past conflicts have resulted in a happily diverse present with shared values formed in the collective past. That is the ideal combination of the invented space and time of both heritage and visual media for the *post cinema*, *neoglobal* UAE. Time will tell if that is coming soon.

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[180] In addition to being quoted at several festival and events, as of this writing, it also hangs as a poster in the Abu Dhabi International Airport.