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### Coming soon

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

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**SUMMARY: English****Coming Soon***Encounters on the Road to Heritage and Film in the UAE*

This study looks at how film and other visual media have fostered and complicated the development of collective memory and heritage in the United Arab Emirates (UAE). It focuses on the decade between 2008 and 2018, a time period that began with the federal and local governments investing heavily in the film and ended with the eventual closure of many film entities and film festivals. This interdisciplinary research crosses the fields of heritage and memory studies, media studies, political science and anthropology to explore the inseparability of media from heritage, which is a dialogue between two fictions interpreting reality. In addition to the scholarly work of others, I developed my evaluation of this decade through extensive interviews with those in the film industry, as well as UAE residents of various socio economic, ethnic, religious and national groups.

Firstly, to give context to this study, I begin with a brief overview the UAE. The UAE is a relatively new nation with remarkable wealth and a very small citizen population, just over 10% of the population. The nation was formed in 1971 as federation of seven newly independent emirates: Abu Dhabi, Dubai, Sharjah, Ras Al Khaimah, Ajman, Um Al Quwain and Fujairah. The seven emirates had until then been part of the British Trucial States since 1824, a “truce” between the emirates’ sheikhs (rulers) and the British to help Briton control piracy along its vital Indian Ocean trade routes. Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan, dubbed the father of the nation, brought the other emirates’ sheikhs to the table to create the nation. He was from Abu Dhabi, and thus Abu Dhabi became the federal capital, and Sheikh Zayed’s son, Khalifa bin Zayed, became the new president of the country upon Sheikh Zayed’s passing in 2004. While Dubai is the commercial and trade hub of the UAE, Abu Dhabi is the UAE’s political and financial power center, as it is also the home of most of the nation’s vast oil reserves. Because of its small population, the UAE has relied on foreign workers since the discovery of oil. These expatriates come from around the world and all education backgrounds, but more than half of them are male laborers from South Asia.

The first chapter of this dissertation looks at the unique circumstances of UAE society and the issues that make this particular decade of 2008 to 2018 critical not only to the investment in film but the need for heritage. I do this by describing the UAE as what I call a *neoglobal* nation, an entity that until 2008 had minimized heritage in favor of hypermodernity, post modernism and a globalized outlook in business that seemed to say “we are open to all/” But in reality, the UAE is only on the very surface transparent and does not allow for anyone to look into its workings beyond that surface. This can be viewed through the banning of certain film productions and even in the case of a young filmmaker, six months in prison for producing a short film showing young adult males in Dubai having a mock gang war with slippers.

Since its inception, the UAE has relied on what political scientist Hazem Belbawi dubbed the “rentier system,” in which the government provides everything for its citizens from birth to death, including free medical care, education, and housing, as well as inflated salaries for government employees. In return for the government’s generosity, citizens do not question their leaders and enjoy the advantages of financially stress-free life. However, the rentier system began to develop cracks in 2008 with Dubai’s financial crisis and in 2010 with the start of the Arab Spring, both of which challenged for the first time the finances and political stability of the UAE. The UAE cracked down on any hint of dissent and became involved militarily and financially in the rebellions in Egypt, Syria and most especially in neighboring Bahrain (a fellow monarchy) and Yemen, a country to which many Emiratis can trace their origins. While, Abu Dhabi saved Dubai from financial collapse, the price the nation has paid has led to lower government salaries and the encouraging of Emiratis to join the private sector, with its longer hours and lower salaries. The government has actively attempted to fill these cracks in the rentier system with heritage. Today the very word “heritage” found everywhere, in the names of restaurants and other businesses but also in the development of numerous government organizations dedicated to preserving Emirati heritage through the promotion and/or creation of “traditions” such as embroidery, camel racing and cuisine to balance the hyperreality of Dubai’s malls, hotels and theme parks.

In the second chapter, I explore the inseparability of heritage and tourism through film, with tourism films being the most successful film productions in the UAE, in terms of viewership and industry recognition during this decade of study. Film and tourism are not mutually exclusive industries: Both are leisure activities and both are prisms for creating collective memory and a national narrative. Expanding on John Urry’s work on the “tourist gaze,” which is closely related to Laura Mulvaney’s “film gaze,” I look at UAE tourism films to show how they have evolved into the earliest film forms to create a heritage narrative, one geared towards potential tourists but also accessible to citizens. In looking at these films, I discovered that the main heritage tropes of the UAE—sand dunes, camels, dates, and national dress—were developed by the British petroleum companies and continued when the UAE became a nation. They are heritage tropes that speak to an isolated Bedouin culture that emerged out of the darkness only with the discovery of oil. These heritage tropes ignore the emirates’ long shipping and trade history, dating back 8,000 years. This heritage also ignores the non-Arab Emirati ethnic groups, as well as the expat population, which has been part of the heritage of the region for centuries and thus continues to be carried out in the tourism film, which are remarkably absent of the 88% non-national population.

The rare sprinkling of Emiratis in these tourism films, recognizable by their national dress, allow Emiratis to be tourists to their own heritage, learning what it is supposed to be through the commodification of heritage tropes in these films. It is a heritage without the memories of their own grandmothers or anyone else. But such heritage explorations cause friction in the ruling bargain. Local memory and national memory are not the same.

I explore the conflict between local memory and national memory in Chapter Three.

Expanding on Arun Appadurai’s consideration of the reshaping of neighborhoods to create and eliminate locality, I look at the how the local population has been reorganized out the

traditional *freej* (neighborhood in Gulf dialect) into new Emirati neighborhoods that break up tribal and geographical allegiances. Consequently, this has created a nostalgia narrative amongst citizens that breaks with the monolithic Arabian Bedouin heritage to create a much more complex one. I discovered patterns of this on official heritage blossoming on social media and in the handful of independent documentary films made over the past decade. These social media videos and documentaries speak of different heritage, one that is based on the lost *freejs*, and one that reveals the different nationalities, races and ethnic groups that have lived here. Rather than squash these narratives, the government has responded to this social media nostalgia with TV series that also show nostalgia for the *freej*. But these state versions, primarily comedies and animations, also show that it is the government saving the citizens from being diluted of their identity by the expats of their own identity. Some of these TV series acknowledge that there are Emiratis of many different backgrounds. On TV, these different ethnic groups live together in the same *freejs*, which was not true in the past or in the present. The actual heritage of the UAE has been one of separation by ethnicity, aside from those who were African slaves working in the house of Persians and Arabs. However, these shows go towards breaking the British-given heritage tropes amongst the local population while still keeping the camel and desert narrative for the expats and tourists: These shows are primarily accessed by Emiratis and are in the Arabic without subtitles, therefore making them inaccessible to the majority of the population.

Chapter Four is a study how Emirati youth respond to the depiction of Emiratis in UAE feature films supported by the government as national film. I frame the study through Martin Lefebvre's theory of landscape and cinema, in which the plot is just a device to explore the landscape. I focus on the two most viewed Emirati films, *Sea Shadow* (2011), set in the rural northern UAE, and *City of Life* (2009), set in urban Dubai. Emirati youths in this study evaluated the films through discussions and focus groups. Youth evaluated the films based on the depictions of religion, socioeconomic status and gender. This study was done with five different groups over two years. The results show that for these youths what makes them Emiratis in these films are their clothes and their Muslim religion. Religion actuality competes with nationality as an identity, with students viewing their heritage as Muslim more than anything else, whether personally religious or not. They also viewed themselves as having the same socioeconomic background, although not the case in reality, and defined socioeconomic status as being about what expat group you were from. But the youth ultimately opted for the same *neoglobalism* as the government, wanting only to have films that show Emiratis as flawless people. This negates conflict, which is at the heart of good cinema, and as such is one of the primary reasons the creation of national film has faltered. The other is that UAE doesn't have a struggle to become a nation, at the heart of most national cinemas. There was no war and there are no conflicts about national identity that would pass censorship at the script level. This is why the cinema effort began in 2008 had gradually diminished by 2018 to a whisper, with *Sea Shadow* and *City of Life* being stronger stories and productions than most of the film that would follow.

In the concluding chapter, I look at possible ways of creating national cinema that would not disrupt the government's national heritage narrative but would allow for some conflict that could create compelling cinema. I conclude that the road movie would serve that purpose. Most Emirati films, whether shorts or narratives, involve long car drives and/or chases. In

most other national films, this would be gratuitous. But in reality, Emiratis see their world through cars, by owning them and by traveling in them as the main way of getting from one place to another, much like the camel road trip of the manufactured Bedouin heritage. Despite the failure to create a national cinema so far, this research shows that in the UAE's post-cinema world, with the fraying of the rentier system and the surrounding political turmoil, an effort in reinvigorating efforts to create a national identity through cinema—with a little conflict on the road—would be well worth the investment in creating a national collective memory and heritage, as it has been in many other countries.