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CINEMA "OF" YEMEN AND SAUDI ARABIA: NARRATIVE STRATEGIES, CULTURAL CHALLENGES, CONTEMPORARY FEATURES

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Abstract: The definition of what constitutes Arab cinema has to-date privileged Egypt and the national cinemas of the former French colonies of the Maghreb, Levant/Mashreq countries such as Lebanon and Syria and Palestine. The countries of the Arabian Peninsula, a cultural location central to the historical formation of Arab and pan-Arab identities, have been grossly misrepresented through Hollywood stereotypes, and lacking in locally produced feature film representations. However, recently, film festivals and filmmaking activities in (and about) the region, have begun to offer alternative lenses, fresh points of view, and new markers on the world cinema map. Directed by non-native filmmakers of Arab heritage, the so-called first narrative feature films from Yemen (*A New Day in Old Sana'a*, 2005) and Saudi Arabia (*Keif al Hal*, 2006) diegetically reinscribe tensions between tradition and modernity. They also reflexively address dialectical insider/outsider perspectives and particular challenges of filmmaking within restrictive cultural contexts. Each film provides a narrative figure of an image-maker (a photographer or film director) as means to interface with culture and society. A textual/contextual examination of these contemporary Arab "first films" and related aspects of film history and culture, reveal narratives of discovery, invention, self-commodification, and cultural preservation in the face of globalization. These cases open up discursive possibilities of national cinema in Yemen and Saudi Arabia.

Introduction: The Outsider Way In

Films produced in countries without a fully constituted national cinema hold landmark positions within their own country, and within the international image market. The past five years or so have seen films from heretofore unacknowledged Arab filmmaking nations, screened

for the first time at prestigious festivals like Sundance or Cannes, in competition or as part of industry markets. Jordan, for example, offered up its first-ever entry for the Best Foreign Language Film category at the Academy Awards in 2009. Tropes of discovery of underrepresented nations are used prominently in fund-raising, marketing and distribution of contemporary Arab cinema.¹

So-called “first” film status has proven contentious on occasion, and has been contested by those who have pointed to a history of indigenous antecedents and/or debated questions of pedigree and agency: Can a film really be “authentically” representative of a country if the maker has never lived there? Further rhetorical qualifications of the “first film” have, in turn, included the following: “first full-length locally funded feature film,” “first feature film produced in [a given Arab country] in fifty-plus years,” “first contemporary independent feature,” etc. Despite such controversies and revisionist impulses, first film assertions have served the critical function of enabling the discursive existence of expanded new Arab cinemas. Drawing examples from Yemen and Saudi Arabia, this essay investigates some of the ontological challenges and possibilities for inaugural feature filmmaking made by outsiders, providing dialogic and contextually informed readings of these interstitial cultural productions.

Yemen: The Walled Architecture and Accented Narration of Nascent National Cinema

The story of the making of Yemen’s first feature is genealogically linked to nation-formation and geopolitics. The nation has a long history of colonialism; and during the period of cinema’s international inception, it was under Ottoman control (from the mid sixteenth to the mid-seventeenth century, and again from 1849-1918). Later, Yemen became a British Protectorate as Aden was a British Crown Colony, and South Yemen gained independence in 1967. The 1970s and 1980s were marked by conflicts, from border skirmishes to full-scale civil war, between the Yemen Arab Republic of the North and the People’s Democratic Republic of Yemen in the South. North and South Yemen were finally merged in 1990. Yemen’s first feature film, *A New Day in Old Sana’a* (2005) was directed and produced by British born Bader Ben Hirsi and Ahmed Al-Abdali, both children of Yemeni exiles with northern and southern aristocratic roots and connections to royal families and sultanates, and documentary filmmaking roots.

The closely intertwined genres of documentary film travelogues and travel writing in particular have offered an appreciative cinematic "opening" onto the country of Yemen, and access to the place and people of Sana'a, Yemen's iconic jewel of a city. [Stevenson, 2003: unpaginated].² Ben Hirsi and Al Abdali carry the theme of the appreciative outsider through their own documentary work, into Yemen's first feature film.³ In *A New Day in Old Sana'a*, the fictionalized character of a European expat, a photographer figure, Federico, a kind of amalgamation of Macintosh-Smith and Ben Hirsi, provides the travelogue-style voiceover accompanying the film's first image of the city of Sana'a. This character and his camera forge a link with extra-diegetic enactment of nostalgic post-reunification return, through cinema that is "accented" by an insider/outsider dialectic (Naficy, 2000).⁴

A New Day in Old Sana'a was filmed entirely on location in the Old City of Sana'a's labyrinthine streets, gardens, and towered homes, with an international cast and crew. In this star-crossed romance, well-to-do Tariq (Nabil Saber) assists photographer Federico and is engaged to a wealthy young woman; and Ines (Lebanese actress Dania Hammoud) is a *nagsh* (henna tattoo) artist from a poor, orphaned background. Tariq unknowingly falls in love with Ines at first sight, when he catches a taboo nighttime glimpse of a mysterious woman wearing an exquisite dress he'd given to his ungrateful fiancée, who subsequently threw it away. The female lead was played by a Lebanese actress because local hopefuls reportedly feared repercussions. However, the filmmakers assured me in an interview, Yemenis assisted in each aspect of the filmmaking process (Ciecko, 2006). The movie fuses a wistfully lyrical tone with realistic scenarios, with a small sprinkling of almost slapstick bits such as those involving the Indian schoolteacher Ravi, another foreigner in this insular world, who regrettably disciplines a spoiled child in his English-language class. While resisting didacticism, the film still foregrounds class and gender-bound roles, rules, and expectations in Yemeni society.

A New Day in Old Sana'a had mainly British funding and initially received some limited support from state institutions in Yemen, although the production was beset throughout with major challenges, hurdles if not walls. According to the director and producer, there were debates and suspicions about a film with images of veiled and unveiled women, as well as some outright threats and violence, including incidents of a stormed set and an attack on the original actor who played the photographer/narrator (Ciecko, 2006). Yet the filmmakers prevailed *A New Day in Old Sana'a* was premiered as and Yemen's first feature film at the 2005 Cairo International Film Festival where it won the Best Arab Film prize.⁵

With so few films to-date (whether narrative features, shorts, or documentaries) actually created in Yemen by makers with cultural roots, those made by exilic/diasporic Yemenis have to bear an almost impossible burden of representation. These films replicate some familiar representational strategies, but also identify poignantly and powerfully with those who find themselves both connected to and on the outside of Yemeni culture. *A New Day in Old Sana'a*, made by a team of exilic/diasporic Yemenis from different parts of the formerly divided country, draws in its viewers with the diegetically inscribed tour-guide/photographer figure--a foreigner who identifies with Yemen--as a surrogate for the filmmakers. This figure models a sense of wonder and cultural appreciation for world cinema viewership, fully cognizant that the audience is accessing a rare glimpse into Yemeni culture via his mediation. Despite its setting in Sana'a, this is filmmaking that is aware of the barriers to reaching a domestic audience of Yemeni film-goers, as part of a national public sphere. However, it is wistfully hopeful of tapping into a location of cinephilic desire.

Pre-unification, South Yemen/Aden and the Yemen Arab Republic/North Yemen had rather distinct, but ultimately convergent, trajectories in terms of the vicissitudes of public film culture. During its British Protectorate days, Aden was the site of one of the earliest movie houses in the Arab world (established in 1918), and is currently home to two of Yemen's three remaining theaters, the other located in Sana'a. The number of movie theaters in the country over the past four decades have been decimated, and this phenomenon has been linked with conservative forces impacting and regulating movie-going.⁶

Cinema in the Arabian Peninsula has been a paradoxical absent presence. In a 1960s UNESCO study in Georges Sadoul's pioneering text on Arab cinema, *The Cinema in the Arab Countries*, "[t]he condition of cinema" in North Yemen is described as being comparable to that of Saudi Arabia with prohibition of cinema (and photographic representations) on religious grounds until "the outbreak of the 1962 Revolution when the first film—an Arabic film, U.A.R. [United Arab Republic] production—was presented to the public in one of the big squares of the capital [Sana'a]." Additionally, the Crown Prince Imam Badr (1929-1996) was reportedly a film aficionado with his own private auditorium, and also made films himself to record his travels. Aden is described in the same report as "the center of Arabic film importation" in the Arabian Peninsula region including Aden, Oman, and Muscat.⁷

Although cinema activity in the Arabian Peninsula has been limited compared with other

parts of the Arab world, countries like Yemen and Saudi Arabia have historical status as an important market for Arab films within the United Arab Republic, and cinema (even if as a largely absent presence) is part of the respective national imaginary. The Sadoul UNESCO project identifies Saudi Arabia as a then-significant market with purchase of films (presumably mainly or all Egyptian) "meant not for public performance, but for presentation in the private auditoria owned by the Arabs, as it is highly doubtful that the Europeans and the Americans living there would ask for such films".⁸ There were movie theaters in Saudi Arabia during the 1960s and 1970s; but as the influence of Wahhabi Islamic conservatism in Saudi Arabia rose, they were closed by the early 1980s. Fundamentalist Saudi clerics have asserted that movies promote immorality. Until the recent brief lifting of related bans to show a Saudi-produced film, and subsequent reinstating of them, public exhibition of films in the Kingdom has been restricted on religious grounds. As of this writing, official movie theaters do not exist.

Non-Public Cinema and Cinephilic Desire: Saudi Arabia's Film Culture and First Feature Film

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, the largest and most populous country on the Arabian Peninsula, is home to two of Islam's holiest sites and to the largest entertainment company in the Arab world, Rotana, which produced what has been touted (some say erroneously) as the first Saudi feature film, *Keif al Hal (How's It Going?, 2006)*, directed by Palestinian Canadian filmmaker Izidore Musallam. Contrary to conventional wisdom that views KSA as a cinema-less nation since commercial film theaters are banned, films are being made (and watched)—albeit ones that cannot be widely exhibited in public contexts within the country. The phenomenon of what I call "non-public" film culture, an adaptation of the concept of the public sphere defined by Habermas (1991), has not closed down all opportunities for the development of national (and transnational/regional) film culture.⁹ In the absence of cinema halls and with recurring bans on film exhibition, the participation in a film-going public as a discursive space to congregate, is an embattled concept at best. Counter-publics of a sort have emerged with semi-clandestine filmmaking and screening groups, repurposed exhibition contexts, transnationally mobile spectators, new and expanded media technologies and formats, and everyday consumer subversions.

State policy and public exhibition of films in an Islamic monarchy, festivals, alternative

viewing modes, censorship, piracy, and transmedia celebrity all contribute to a composite of the complex film scene in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. In contrast, the country's representation in America media and Hollywood cinema tends toward the ultra-stereotypically simple; with Saudi Arabia, like Yemen, represented as home to the most dangerous of Arabs and terrorist activities in films like *The Siege* (1998) and *The Kingdom* (2007) [Shaheen 2001, 2008]. In KSA, films (including Hollywood movies) can be viewed on hundreds of satellite channels. Saudis can today experience films without going to the movie theater via television, DVDs and videos, and the internet. In addition to private homes, films are most often shown at cultural clubs. Recent limited "permitted" screenings suggest that a local audience exists for Saudi films even if the idea of public exhibition has not been fully embraced by the state and especially religious clerics. Additionally, substitutive nomenclature allows for the discursive existence of cinema in Saudi Arabia without calling it as such. According to Saudi filmmaker Abdullah Al-Eyaf in a 2008 article published in *The Washington Post* ("Coming Soon, Scorsese of Arabia"), film events have been advertised as educational screenings or "visual shows" to avoid the ire of anti-cinema groups [<http://www.washingtonpost.com/>, May 16, 2008]. In summer 2009, the 4th Jeddah Film Festival was abruptly cancelled, demonstrating, in the words of international journalist Caryle Murphy, "the arbitrary limits to the greater social freedom that Saudis have enjoyed in recent years" [*Global Post*, December 3, 2009].

While film may be viewed in/as other media, there appears to be a pervasive desire for the social public experience of cinema that is inflected by resistant engagement with global modernity. Films and filmgoers move: (Some) resourceful Saudi citizens have physically crossed national borders to neighboring countries to view movies in theaters, and Saudi films have travelled to international festivals, making them more desirable locally. A number of Saudis cross the border to watch movies in Bahrain, the location of the closest movie theaters to the capital city Riyadh, as revealed in Al-Eyaf's 45-minute documentary *Cinema 500 Kilometres* (2006).

Film-culture building initiatives with apparent state/royal endorsement and inter-institutional cultural partnerships have included the establishment of Saudi Arabia's inaugural cine club and the subsequent Saudi Film Competition (initially intended to be an annual event), sponsored by the Saudi Society of Arts and Culture and the Dammam Literary Club. Information Minister Eyad Madani attended the opening of the 2008 festival of free-of-cost, gender-

segregated screenings of approximately fifty Saudi films. Al-Eyaf's *Cinema 500 Kilometres* took the Golden Palm Tree Award, the first grand prize. According to Jeffrey Fleishman in *The LA Times* [September 16, 2009], the Gulf Film Festival in Dubai and other international festivals have become critical points on the maps and calendars of aspiring Saudi filmmakers.

Online social networking has helped to foster virtual film communities and cultivate film-related activities in real life as well. Critic-turned-filmmaker Al-Eyaf honed his craft writing about films on the Saudi movie buff website Cinemac.net, and later in a local newspaper; currently, regular weekly film columns run in several Saudi papers. Journalists Caryle Murphy and Jeffrey Fleishman both mention other local filmmakers including Abdulamusin Al Mutairi who have made a number of short films, after formerly writing and posting film reviews online and publishing them in the newspaper. As in Yemen, there is no formal film training institution in Saudi Arabia; Al Mutairi formed a cine-club with his fellow autodidactic filmmaking friends called "Talashi," or "Fade-out."

Saudi Arabia's full-length Saudi-funded feature film, which—like Yemen's first feature film—places a reflexive character (here an aspiring filmmaker) in a key narrative role. Opening after a logo sequence of a heavily kohled eye, a galaxy of stars and planets, and the Rotana Studios icon (rendered as a globe cut through with a swatch of clouds), a colorful but artificial looking CGI enhanced desert simulacrum provides the backdrop for credited names blown like sand in the wind. *Keif al Hal* features a cast of mostly Saudi actors (although all but one of the female roles are played by non-Saudis) and dialogue in a Saudi dialect, and a Saudi-based story. However the film was shot in the United Arab Emirates (masquerading as Saudi Arabia), with post-production work done in India. With a hyper-reflexive approach to cinephilia and filmmaking in this would-be cinematic Kingdom, the film begins as a film-within-a-film with comic sound effects and choreographed movement that is a cross between Michael Jackson's 'Thriller' video with black abaya and white disdasha-clad zombies, and Tony Montana-style moves by a smart-suited young Saudi man with perfect hair. This sequence is soon revealed to be a self-starring amateur film *Keif al Hal*'s movie fanatic protagonist is editing on his computer.

Embracing the potential of local/transnational transmedia stardom and audience identification, the character of Sultan, an unemployed college graduate and aspiring movie director, is played by Hicham Abderrahman, the Saudi winner of the second season of the popular pan-Arab version of the interactive "Star Academy" reality TV show on Lebanese Broadcasting

Corporation (LBC) which transformed him into an iconic figure and “adulated superstar in his homeland.”¹⁰ Sultan’s study has movie posters of *Saturday Night Fever* and *The Godfather* on the walls. As he tells his grandfather while gazing at the portrait of Marlon Brando as Don Vito Corleone, “I was born to be an artist, a director.” However, his western tastes and artistic aspirations mark him as an outsider. Sultan critiques and distances himself from localized attempts at audiovisual entertainment, and views the “Saudi” world of cultural contradictions and tensions between tradition and globalized modernity through viewfinder fingers. At one point he watches another director rehearsing with his actors with histrionic performances and an outrageous script; on another occasion he chides his grandfather for watching TV serials (His grandfather reveals that the commercials and video-clips between them—implicitly the sexy images of women-- are really what interests him). On another occasion, Sultan and friends sit around smoking sheesha, eating snacks, and watching what might well be pornography, and narrowly miss getting caught by raiding zealots—saved by Grandfather pretending to give a religious lecture. Abderrahman’s idol status is jokingly alluded to when Sultan’s grandfather teases him about his singing and “fame,” and shows him a newspaper article written about him (unbeknownst to him written by the woman he loves under a pseudonym).

Taken in by his extended family, Sultan is infatuated with his cousin, Sahar (Mais Hamdan, a Jordanian actress raised in the UAE). On the brink of college graduation, she is very materially comfortable but bored with hanging out at the mall and fending off male admirers and suitors, and wants to work outside the home and become a journalist. She chafes at maternal pressure to marry immediately after college, and sees Sultan with his casual western style and film obsession as appealing, if a bit immature. Her brother Khaled is extremely religious (alternately earnestly sensitive and rigidly brutish) and polices gendered rules and restrictions much more than her moderate-leaning parents with secular tastes. While Sahar’s mother sees Sultan as a “penniless loser,” Sultan’s biggest ally and co-conspirator is his slightly debauched grandfather played by Khaled Sami. Sahar’s wealthy businessman father defends her right to hold a party with music with her girlfriends, her need to not be coerced into marrying a man she doesn’t want, and even her desire to enjoy a joyride in the desert where the family is having a picnic (Her driving is an illicit skill which later allows her to take care of her father in an emergency.)

The film’s credits offer extra-diegetic recognition of female agency, and other “first” film

intertexts. The first female Saudi director, and the highest profile woman in Saudi cinema, Haifaa al-Mansour, has an associate producer credit on *Keif al Hal*. She has made several short films to-date including an acclaimed and controversial documentary about women in Saudi Arabia and the Gulf region titled *Women Without Shadows* that addresses gender politics and restrictive cultural attitudes.¹¹ The only Saudi actress in *Keif al Hal*. (thus called Saudi Arabia's first film actress), Hind Mohammed, plays a small role as Sahar's friend Dunya. The director of *Keif al Hal*, Izidore Musallam also informed me that the young Saudi actress Hind Mohammed approached the film extremely studiously, as a unique educational opportunity; although she only had three or four days of on-camera work, she followed the production "from A to Z" (Ciecko, 2009). According to US-educated Saudi businessman Ayman Halawani, head of production at Rotana's film division credited with conceiving the idea for the film (as quoted in a *Middle East Online* article by Sam Dagher), the filmmakers employed self-censorship strategies to attend cinematically to gender protocols: "We were very careful not to show anything offensive to Saudi society to the point we were watching the eyes of the actresses to decide if that is an appropriate look" [21 March 2006]. Indeed the entire film is edited so that matched looks between the young men and women underscore appropriately respectful distance in the filming process.

In addition to the Palestinian Canadian director Musallam, the film had on board other pan-Arab talent including Lebanese and Egyptian co-screenwriters. Perhaps its strongest claim to Saudi identity is its production pedigree and fiscal formula, linking royalty and film business practices. *Keif al Hal* was produced by the Riyadh-based company Rotana International (established in 1987), owned by Saudi prince al-Waleed bin Talal, King Abdullah's nephew. Given its success as the Arab world's largest entertainment group, a major player with Arabic music and satellite television, Rotana is well-positioned to manufacture, finance, and distribute movies. (Prior to *Keif al Hal* it had done just that with Egyptian films.) The final opening and credits of *Keif al Hal* indicate that Rotana is responsible for the film's production and distribution "over the world." While *Keif al Hal* could not be shown in theaters in Saudi Arabia, because of Rotana, it was released in theaters outside the Kingdom, on dvd, and on pay-per-view television. Thus it was seen widely by Saudis, who were apparently eager to see homegrown cinema.

However, *Keif al Hal*'s status as Saudi—and as a first Saudi film—has been a source of

debate. A peer production with more artistic aspirations, *Shadow of Silence* (2006, written and directed by Saudi filmmaker Abdullah al-Muheisen), a dystopic political espionage thriller set in an unnamed Arab country, is cited in the postscript in the new revised edition of Viola Shafik's landmark *Arab Cinema: History and Cultural Identity* as one of the "first time" productions from the Arabian peninsula.¹² In an interview in the pan-Arab English-language daily newspaper *Asharq Alawasat*, filmmaker Abdullah Al-Eyaf asserts,

To be honest, despite the fact that I appreciate the importance of this topic in the history of Saudi cinema, I do not like the conflict over the classification of "first Saudi film." Do you know what the first American, French, or Italian films were? However, on the other hand, you do know what the best films in the world are. I bet that the Saudis themselves will eventually forget what the first Saudi film was, and will remember whether it was *Kaif al Haal* or *Zilal al Samt* or any other film that were good or not. I remember someone telling me about a funny comment that was published in a British newspaper, in which one critic said, 'All the countries in the world launched the cinema industry by producing one film with the exception of Saudi Arabia that started it by making two films!' It is embarrassing that we are fighting over this nomenclature, while the rest of the world celebrates the passing of over a century since the beginning of cinema!

[“Interview with Saudi Film Director, Abdullah Al Eyaf” by Mirza al-Khuwaylidi, March 1, 2007].

Conclusion: Lens on the Past and the Future of Emerging Arab Cinemas

In the respective cases of Saudi Arabia and Yemen, there is actual evidence of a long history of film culture within the context of the nation, but it is marked by regulatory containment or attempted repression of the participatory public social experience of cinema, and limited domestic production to date. As nation-states, Saudi Arabia and Yemen are central to the Islamic Arab world and collective Arab identity formation, yet peripheral to Arab cinema. While Gulf and Arabian Peninsula capital and agency has contributed to the creation of an ever-expanding and interconnected Arab mediascape with conglomerates and televisual outlets such as Rotana, Al Arabiya (UAE-based, part Saudi-owned, the latter has become a forum for Arab documentary), Lebanese Broadcasting Corporation (co-owned by Saudi Prince Al-Waleed bin Talal and merged with Rotana), and the Middle East Broadcasting Center, film culture in Saudi Arabia and Yemen is currently circumscribed by barriers that restrict and disable links between filmmaking and mainstream theatrical exhibition. Cinephilia is thus fostered and fed through available alternative or transgressive modes of non-public film-viewing.

Films like the commercially-modeled *Keif al Hal* and the earnest diasporic/exilic co-production *A New Day in Old Sana'a* variously employ re-commodification and narrativisation

of Arab pop and folk/heritage cultures; a dialectical insider/outsider relationship to the local and global (with embedded, diegetically-inscribed filmmaker or photographer figures); and strategic orientalisering, auto-ethnography, travelogue, melodrama, mimicry, parody and satire. As Malek Khoury has noted, a trend toward self-referentiality is a component of the evolution of the stylistically heterogeneous New Arab Cinema.¹³

The filmic examples "from" the Arabian Peninsula examined here raise vital questions regarding what constitutes a first film, and make cinema a critical topic of public debate. *Keif al Hal* and *A New Day in Old Sana'a* do not exemplify sustainable models of state-supported indigenous Arab cinema, but they are discursively significant as first film "functions."¹⁴ They circulate as exemplars of film from and about Yemen and Saudi Arabia, even while they raise questions of authenticity. These seemingly "one-off" cases offer limited evidence of practical catalysis of national, transnational/pan-Arab, post-national, and/or regional cinemas that appears to be emerging with film industries and filmmaking activities, festivals, and public viewing practices in Gulf states such as Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates. Yet "first film" status provides currency, in the sense of relevance and value and charge. At the very least, feature film landmarks are historical and material reference points, if not turning points. As I've suggested here, textual and contextual circumstances of public/non-public production and exhibition, modes of narration and dimensions of cinematic intertextuality and reflexivity, speak to the cultural moment that makes a first film possible--and future films probable.

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International Film Festival, and subsequently interviewed the director Izidore Musallam in 2008 during the Arab Cinema Panorama film series I coordinate biennially. Published versions of these interviews are indicated in my References. I presented earlier drafts of this essay at the Society for Cinema and Media Studies in Philadelphia in 2008 (“Constructing Yemen. Onscreen: The Walled Architecture of a Nascent National/Diasporic.Cinema”) and in Los Angeles in 2010 (“Non-Public Cinema: Challenges and Possibilities for Film Culture in Saudi Arabia”).

Notes

1. I have explored Jordan’s “first film” debates, local productions, and Hollywood’s claim-staking presence in the country elsewhere. See my articles “Digital Territories and States of Independence: Jordan’s Film Scenes,” *Afterimage: The Journal of Media Arts and Cultural Criticism* 36.5 (March/April, 2009): 3-6, and “Situating Jordanian Cinema: A Report on Contemporary Film Culture(s) in Amman,” *Asian Cinema* (Fall/Winter 2007): 303-309. I have also contributed related encyclopedia entries on Jordan, Yemen, Saudi Arabia, and United Arab Emirates, as well as filmmakers Bader Ben Hirsi and Izidore Musallam, the films *Keif al Hal? (How’s it Going?)*, and “*A New Day in Old Sana’a*, and other Arab cinema topics to *Historical Dictionary of Middle Eastern Cinema*, edited by T. Ginsberg and C. Lippard (Scarecrow Press, 2010)
2. A particular source of fascination in many of these texts is the spectacular ancient walled city of Sana’a, selected as a U.N. World Heritage City in 1984, and the officially designated Arab Cultural City two decades later. Italian filmmaker Pier Paolo Pasolini shot several of his Orientalist cine-fantasies in Yemen and made a short film as a plea to UNESCO to preserve Sana’a’s walls as architectural and cultural artifacts. Travel writing with a European accent also has a critical link to Yemen’s first feature film. Yemen is the subject of noted travel literature about the ‘Unknown Arabia,’ to quote the title of an influential tome on Yemen. Written by one of Ben Hirsi’s documentary subjects from a film he made before *A New Day in Old Sana’a* called *The English Sheikh and the Yemeni Gentleman* (2000), Tim Macintosh-Smith’s *Yemen: The Unknown Arabia* (aka *Travels in Dictionary Land*) is of special intertextual interest.
3. In addition to other Yemen-based themes including the disputed territory Socatra Island and Yemen and the “war on terror”, Ben Hirsi and Al Abdali have created other documentaries on transnational Arab subjects including the Saudi response to 9/11 and the Hadj pilgrimage.
4. In contradistinction, Hollywood movies offer particularly particularly vilifying images of “othered” Yemen (Shaheen, 2001; Khatib, 2006). The 1990 action film *Rules of Engagement*, for example, portrays a fictional attack by Yemenis (men, women, and children) outside the American embassy in Sana’a, actually filmed in Morocco.
5. Other Yemen film “firsts” have followed: The *Yemen Observer* reported that Yemen’s Ministry of Culture announced plans for the development of Yemen’s own first film festival to be called the Sana’a Festival of Culture, as well as training workshops for Yemeni filmmakers.[<http://www.yobserver.com/culture-and-society/10012573.html>]. Also, exiled Yemen-born memoirist and filmmaker Khadija al-Salami has been

described as Yemen's "first woman filmmaker." She made an impressive short documentary in her hometown Sana'a with an autobiographically-inflected voiceover narration called *A Stranger in Her Own City* (2005) about a heroic contemporary young Yemeni girl. Najmia refuses to wear the veil and wander the city freely, and shouts back defiantly and good-naturedly at the many men and women who chastise, lecture, and hurl insults at her.

6. Film exhibition poses yet another challenge in Yemen. In a *Yemen Observer* article "Movie theaters struggle to keep box office open" by Sahar Mahyoob (Jan 23, 2010), the author asserts that forty years ago there were more than fifty movie theaters in the country [<http://www.yobserver.com/culture-and-society/10018036.html>]. The contemporary crisis of Yemen's closing film theaters and the seeming non-existence of a film industry was a subject of a recent public symposium at al-Afif Cultural Foundation, also reported in the *Yemen Observer*: "Yemeni Cinema gets a second look," by Ragda Gamal (January 23, 2010) [<http://www.yobserver.com/culture-and-society/10018035.html>]. At this conference, journalist Jamal Jobran linked the disintegration of the movie industry in Yemen to conservative crackdowns that restricted female access to movie theaters
7. See "The Cinema in the Arabian Peninsula," in Georges Saddy's *The Cinema of the Arab Countries* (Beirut: Interarab Centre of Cinema and Television, 1966), pp.191.
8. Ibid, 189.
9. For an application of Habermas in a different national context, see the questions raised about Indian film exhibition, audiences, and publics in S. V. Srinivas' essay, "Is There a Public in the Cinema Hall?" http://www.sarai.net/research/media-city/resouces/film-city-essays/sv_srinivas.pdf
10. See Marwan Kraidy, "Contesting Reality: Star Academy and Islamic Authenticity in Saudi Arabia," in *Reality Television and Arab Politics: Contention in Public Life* (Cambridge University Press), 91. Kraidy discusses how incredibly controversial Star Academy's second season was in Saudi Arabia because of its representation of liberal mores such as gender-mixing, and how actively the show's Saudi winner was supported by Prince al-Waleed bin Talal (who cast him in the Rotana production *Keif al Hal*). According to Kraidy, the show's popular reception and status as fodder for debate demonstrated contrasting perspectives on national identity.
11. See the interview by Danna Harman with Haifaa Al-Mansour in *Christian Science Monitor* (February 15, 2008), "In the Middle East, women directors unspool social commentary." Al-Mansour's own interstitial position as a wife of an American diplomat living abroad and her sense of making films for a Saudi audience are addressed. <http://www.csmonitor.com/The-Culture/Movies/2008/0215/p13s01-almo.html>
12. See Viola Shafik's discussion of "Arab Cinema: Old and New" in her postscript on Arab cinema today, in the revised edition of her book *Arab Cinema: History and Cultural Identity* (Cairo: American University Press), p.218.
13. Malek Houry, "Origins and Patterns in the Discourse of the New Arab Cinema," *Arab Studies Quarterly* (Winter/Spring 2005): 14.

14. I am adapting and applying Foucault's "author function" concept from "What is an Author?" Trans. Donald F. Bouchard and Sherry Simon. In *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice*. Ed. Donald F. Bouchard (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press), pp. 124-127.

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