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Revisiting Film History: Institutions, Knowledge, and Circulation

9 Historicizing the Gulf Moving Image Archives

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Abstract
This chapter aims to debunk presentist assumptions about film-making and cinema culture in the Gulf and excavate genealogies of the moving image rooted in the early formations of hydrocarbon modernity. It traces the history of film and visual representation in the countries of the Arabian Peninsula in multiple historical stages. Despite the increasing appeal of the turn to archival research in film studies, any attempt to historicize the moving image in the Gulf, however, immediately encounters significant methodological and empirical challenges. In order to produce such a history, one has no other choice but to start with the official colonial archives of the British India Office Records or corporate archives of the oil companies that operated in the Gulf. Reading these archives against the grain, however, could enable us to critically reveal the transcolonial, transregional, and transnational set of directions that the history of the moving image in the Gulf followed.

Keywords: history of film in the Gulf, colonial archives, industry-sponsored films, post-colonial national cinemas, film and petromodernity, cinema spheres

In what ways is the moving image a key source for tracing the cultural and political history of the Gulf in the aftermath of the discovery of oil? The historical and contemporary trajectories of cinema and film-making in the Gulf display a set of characteristics that are different from other formations in the Middle East and North Africa and do not follow the histories of post-colonial cinemas of Algeria and Morocco, the exilic cinema of Palestine, the state-monopoly cinemas of Syria and Iraq, or the commercial cinemas

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of Egypt and Lebanon.[1] Although film emerged in the last century as one of the most pervasive forms of aesthetic expression, its social, historical, and cultural role in the early formations of hydrocarbon modernity in the Gulf is yet to be explored.

Until the recent global rise of the region as a financial and political power, Gulf cinema has traditionally been an absent presence.[2] In the recent decade, however, the establishment of film industry—as the sum of various agents, activities, networks, and organizations involved in the making of cinema and film culture—has been a shared ambition across the Gulf. As emergent new players in the regional as well as global media landscape, the Gulf countries have not yet achieved a commercially successful and globally influential film industry but rather, have begun "laying the foundations for a more sustainable cinematic infrastructure."[3] These efforts toward the development of film industry and film culture in the Gulf not only vary from one country to another but also take place on a peculiar terrain, where financial capacity clashes with cultural conservatism; the backing of the rentier state with abrupt official interventions; commercial goals with the art house model of festival circuits; global ambitions with local constraints.

This chapter places the current Gulf cinema phenomenon in a historical context. The historical dimension, I argue, not only debunks presentist assumptions about film-making and film watching in the Gulf but also brings forth important genealogies of film culture that are rooted in the early formations of hydrocarbon modernity in the region. I trace the history of film and visual representation in the countries of the Arabian Peninsula—namely, Qatar, Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Yemen, Oman, and Saudi Arabia—in five stages: (1) the colonial emergence of cinema in the region in the 1930s under the regulation and monitoring of the British network of administrative personnel; (2) the use of film for publicity and propaganda purposes by British Empire's Gulf stations in the 1940s; (3) the production of documentary films by petroleum companies in the 1950s and 1960s to represent (make visible) "the magic of oil"; (4) visual ethnography and expedition films of the 1960s and 1970s; and (5) the emergence of indigenous film-making after independence. I argue that

1 See Roy Armes, *Arab Filmmakers of the Middle East: A Dictionary* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010), 23–25.

2 Kiki Kennedy-Day's article on "Cinema in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq and Kuwait," in *Companion Encyclopedia of Middle Eastern and North African Film*, ed. Oliver Leaman (London: Routledge, 2001), 364–419, for instance, devotes only one brief paragraph to Kuwait.

3 Viola Shafik, *Arab Cinema: History and Cultural Identity*, rev. ed. (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2016), 250.

the history of the moving image through these stages and beyond offers us an important critical lens to analyse the modern development of Gulf societies and cultures.

Despite the increasing appeal of the contemporary turn to archival research in film studies, any attempt to historicize the moving image in the Gulf, however, immediately encounters significant methodological and empirical challenges that are yet to be carefully considered by film scholars. In order to produce such a history, one has no other choice but to start with the official colonial archives of the British India Office Records or corporate archives of the oil companies that operated in the Gulf. Although this involuntary choice is a result of the petrocolonial origins of cinema and film culture in the Gulf, the limitations of having to rely on such official discourses and enterprises cannot be ignored. Reading against the grain, however, could enable us to critically reclaim the archives—something which I attempt to do in the following pages. In addition, we must take into account the "in-transit," mobile, "come-and-go," in-flux texture of the Gulf on many levels. This factor historically led to a plethora of "visiting lenses" in different periods of time: industry-sponsored directors, late imperial expatriates, travellers, expeditioners, military personnel, public relation officers, missionaries, revolutionaries, and government-hired experts, among others. Cinema culture in both non-theatrical and public commercial forms developed through films, entrepreneurs, and infrastructure that came from outside. In turn, the first generation of film-makers in post-independence Gulf went abroad to receive training, make films, participate in festivals, import films, and so on. From the very outset, the history of the moving image in the Gulf followed various transcolonial, transregional, and transnational directions.

The Colonial Prelude

Due to its ascendancy as the regional nodal point in the British colonial network in the early decades of the twentieth century, Bahrain became the first Arab Gulf country to experience cinema prior to the discovery of oil. In 1922, a Bahraini merchant, Mahmoud Lal Saa'ti, introduced the first impromptu theatre with about thirty seats and a makeshift screen in Manama near the traditional coffee houses by the sea, where merchants and families would gather to await the return of pearl-diving ships.[4] A few

4 See Mansoor Mohammed Sarhan, *Tārīkh al-sīnima fī al-Bahrāin* [The history of cinema in Bahrain] (Manama: AlAyam Publishing, 2005), 11.

years later, in 1927, another local entrepreneur, Ali Yateem, was granted permission to set up a public cinema with a three-year monopoly.[5] The founding figure of a major entrepreneur family in Bahrain, Ali Yateem emerged as a successful businessman, particularly keen on introducing novel media technologies such as gramophones and cameras by the 1920s.[6] Yet due to Bahrain's social unrest during the British-led administrative reforms of the 1920s, Ali Yateem's public cinema project did not materialize. The diary entries of Charles Dalrymple Belgrave (1894–1969), the British advisor (*al-mustashar*) to the government of Bahrain, suggest that cinema faced strong protest by some judges (*kadis*) on religious grounds.

Following the discovery of oil in 1932, Bahrain entered a new phase in its history. As hydrocarbon modernity generated new spaces of urban public culture in the form of clubs, associations, libraries, bookstores,[7] the interest in establishing cinema in Bahrain gained a new momentum, overlapping naturally with the rise of sound film as a globally popular phenomenon of entertainment. But in contrast to Europe and America, where people from all walks of life had relatively easy access to "talking pictures," in Bahrain and other Gulf countries film spectatorship remained restricted to a highly selective group of the British colonial administrative staff, members of the local ruling family, and foreign visitors from the West, especially through private screenings to end formal receptions. We learn from Belgrave's diaries that especially "the wives of the British administrative staff [were] fond of making movies" (amateur actuality films of local events and public spaces such as the Muharram celebrations and the *souq*) and that "they show[ed] their cinemas after dinner parties."[8]

A "public" cinema outside the confines of the private residences of local rulers and colonial officials arrived in Bahrain with the oil company. In 1935, the Bahrain Petroleum Company (BAPCO)—a subsidiary of Standard Oil of California (now Chevron)—acquired permission to equip its Club House with "a modern Talking Cinema." Under the conditions ratified by the British political agent, the company management was given freedom over the selection of films, with a nominal right of censorship by the government and

5 See "Bahrain Cinemas," R/15/2/817, File 32/7 (4/6) [3r], IOR, London.

6 See "Kingdom Mourns Death of Builder of Modern Bahrain," *DT News*, December 20, 2015, http://www.newsofbahrain.com/viewNews.php?ppId=11032&TYPE=Posts&pid=21&MNU=2&SUB=.

7 See Nelida Fuccaro, "Shaping the Urban Life of Oil in Bahrain: Consumerism, Leisure, and Public Communication in Manama and in the Oil Camps, 1932–1960s," *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 33, no. 1 (2013): 59–74.

8 Belgrave, *Papers*, 1099.

for non-commercial purposes.[9] Similarly, the first movies in Saudi Arabia arrived in 1937 with the "early ARAMCO pioneers," who were settled in the oil colony in Dhahran.[10] In addition to the oil company, the early years of cinema in the Gulf were also connected to the British military presence in the region. Cinema licences were granted to ships at HMS *Jufair* British Royal Navy Base and the Royal Air Force (RAF) base at Muharraq.[11] In the Emirates (then the Trucial States), too, cinema was introduced through the British Royal Air Force cinema in Al-Mahatta, Sharjah (c. 1945) to serve the military crew and their families.[12] In fact, by 1945, in order to meet the increase in the number of audience and showings across the club houses and military bases in the Gulf, BAPCO secured priority air freight from the British Overseas Airways Corporation to import 120 kilograms of film a week from Karachi.[13]

In addition to mediating film consumption in the Arabian Gulf, the oil companies took part in film production, too. The first visual narratives of the Gulf appeared in the form of industry documentaries commissioned to tell the story of oil. These documentaries—such as *Desert Venture* (California Arabian Standard Oil Company, 1948), *Petroleum and Kuwait* (Kuwait Oil Company, 1948), *Oil across Arabia* (The Trans-Arabian Pipe Line Company & ARAMCO, 1950)—promoted the companies' image as creators of new energy resources and jobs for the recovering economies of the West after the Second World War, on the one hand, and as developers of "primitive" lands and harbingers of wealth and economic growth, on the other. Replete with footage of actualities and spectacles of development, oil discovery and shipment celebrations, and initial encounters of "natives" and "pioneers," these documentaries aimed to lure their audience to a hydrocarbon utopia of modernity, where oil and technology performed its magic of creating a whole new place "out of nothing."

9 "Bahrain Cinemas," [6r], [8r]. In addition, the India Office Records contain a file on the cinema programmes of the BAPCO Club at Awali. The programmes include information on the date and time of screenings, film titles, principal actors, film production companies, and intended audience. The film repertoire consists of Hollywood films, with a small number of British-made films, ranging from Walt Disney animations, newsreels, and classics such as *Lassie Come Home*, *Arsenic and Old Lace*, *Saratoga Trunk*, and *The Lady from Shanghai*. "Cinema Programmes," R/15/2/1575, IOR, London.

10 See Robert Vitalis, *America's Kingdom: Mythmaking on the Saudi Oil Frontier* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007), p. 60.

11 "Bahrain Cinemas," [36r].

12 Ibrahim Al Mulla, "Cinema in the UAE: Beginnings, Memories and History," *Al-Ittihad*, January 28, 2006, http://www.alittihad.ae/details.php?id=47104&y=2006.

13 "Priority Air Freight for BAPCO Cinema Films," R/15/2/445, IOR, London.

Fig. 9.1. Sharjah Paramount open-air cinema at an RAF station in the Persian Gulf. © IWM CM 6015.

ARAMCO's first documentary, *Desert Venture* (1948) extended the limits of the American frontier. The film opened with a prologue that read:

> This is the story of a venture by American capital in a strange and ancient land.... A story of reawakening of a slumbering civilization.... It has to do with men who went among suspicious strangers and won their friendship.... Men who challenged heat and sand, and a multitude of obstacles.... And who won a victory which is serving the interest of the United States, of the country whose resources they are developing, and of a world that moves on wheels. It is the story of oil in Saudi Arabia.

It is not until the end that we find out that the "ancient land" being spoken about is Saudi Arabia. The use of ellipses creates a space for viewers to speculate about where this place might be and to recall associations and preconceived notions they have about "ancient lands," "slumbering civilizations," "friendships," and "a multitude of obstacles." Through the use of a voice-over-narrator who made recourse to histories, cartographies

Fig. 9.2. Still shot from *Desert Venture* (1948).

and individual stories of influential figures to "empirically" substantiate the narrative claims being made, *Desert Venture* conjured up Arabia as a site in which fantasies of conquest, wealth, and patriotism could be realized.

The visual corollary to the voice-over narrative in Desert Venture was the use of numerous intersecting medium still shots that showed camels moving across the screen and towards the horizon at a slow pace. In contrast to a panning shot, which would have given a sense of movement and dynamism, the still shots affirmed a narrative of civilizational fixity and monotony. The pace of the camels and static shots visualized the civilizational decay that prevented that land of Bedouins from catching up to the accelerated pace of technological advancement. In short, *Desert Venture* universalized the dream, fantasy, and promise of oil, making it an unexpected possibility that was accessible to both the American worker and the Saudi Arabian nomad. The dream found its grounding in a narrative of an Arabian renaissance spearheaded by the oil company and the king.

The oil company films functioned as "foundational narratives" that were constructed through mytho-historic tropes borrowed from Orientalism. ARAMCO was the first oil company to stray from the documentary model and flirt with the possibilities of feature-length narrative film production.

It hired the Academy Award winning film-maker Richard Lyford (for his 1950 German documentary film *The Titan: Story of Michelangelo*) to direct the company's cinematic celebration of the founder of Saudi Arabia, King Abd al-Aziz. Lyford made a feature film, titled *The Island of the Arabs* (1955), which narrated the rise of the Saud family thanks to the discovery of oil in Arabia. The film aimed to craft a narrative of the peninsula's history as the story of Wahabi conquest and oil pioneers. As historian Robert Vitalis ascertains, "the firm began to market its story beyond the borders of the United States to Europe and, more significantly still, the Arab world."[14] One should recall that Arab audiences of this period were slowly being freed from the shackles of British and French colonialism, and that ARAMCO was facing a regional social and political trust issue that it needed to overcome to form long-lasting economic ties with the region.

The Island of the Arabs strategically referenced the history of the Middle East and Islam. Aiming to connect the film to its intended Arab audience, it regularly invoked known Islamic beliefs and texts. The director's most interesting use of Islam manifested in the Arab child character's recitation of a popular Quranic verse that encourages social tolerance and diversity, thereby invoking traditional Arab acceptance of foreigners. Hence, the Islamic historical references not only served the plot, but also conveyed an underlying political message that could be used as a safeguard against growing Arab anti-colonial sentiment and suspicion of the West.

The film's chronicling of a timeline of Middle Eastern history is predictably followed by scenes that depicted petromodernity as the culmination of Ibn Saud's vision of nation-building. Images of Arab and Western men flashed on the screen side-by-side and were accompanied by the following statement by the voice-over narrator: "This new discovery could mean many things." This scene aimed to signify the new political and economic East-West relationship that came about with modernity through the discovery of oil. Through successive scenes of machinery, the film projected modernity as a new historical epoch on the horizons of the Arabian Peninsula. The world premiere of *The Island of the Arabs* took place in the Cairo Palace, an art deco movie theatre run by 20th Century Fox.[15] It would also serve as

14 Vitalis, *America's Kingdom*, 123.

15 Ibid., 121. The original title, *The Island of the Arabs* (*Jazirat al-Arab*), was later changed to echo the popular box-office hit *Garden of Allah* (1936).

Fig. 9.3. Still shot from *The Island of the Arabs* (1955).

the first film to be aired on Saudi Arabia's first Arabic-language television station, founded by ARAMCO in 1957.[16]

Despite the ideological and pragmatic objectives outlined above, the cinemas of the oil companies and navy ships, however, remained "confined to British and American audiences" only.[17] Although the admission of the foreign workers was relatively less restrictive, we can infer from the British archival records that it was not always smooth. On April 25, 1950, for instance, a large group of Pakistani company workers (described in the report to be "a thousand," a figure that clearly implies limited access to an extremely large audience at a time) were brought into the Kuwait Oil Company's facility in Ahmadi. Apparently, there was a mix-up in the scheduling, for "the show was arranged for another group of workers." When the second group of workers arrived, the cinema manager ordered the first group outside. Upon the reluctant and slow departure of the first group from the movie theatre, the manager called in the police, who intervened forcefully, "using their

16 See ibid., 123. In 1969, Richard Lyford returned to the Gulf to produce a ninety-three-minute feature film in Bahrain in partnership with Khalifa Shaheen. *Hamad and the Pirates* appeared in 1971 on the *Wonderful World of Disney* television series and was subsequently shown across Bahrain's schools as an educational insight into the island's culture and way of life of the local community. Asma Salman, "It's a Pirate's Life for Bahrain Star," *Gulf Weekly*, May 30–June 5, 2007, http://www.gulfweekly.com/Articles/15559/It's-a-pirate's-life--for-Bahrain-star.

17 "Bahrain Cinemas," [4r].

belts to give weight to their efforts." In response, the workers defended themselves with chairs, and the cinema manager and the policemen had to take refuge in the projection room. The workers ("the mob which was by now unruly") were eventually scattered by the deployment of further police forces. The incident left sixteen people hurt.[18]

The local Arab workers were still barred from access to the oil company cinemas. One of the iconic figures of ARAMCO's early "discovery" years, Tom Barger, records in one of his letters to his family that "Arabs were forbidden to attend" movies, although "they were about five deep all about the outside of the house peeking in the windows."[19] In fact, local employees were not given access to ARAMCO's cinema facilities even in the later decades. In a letter addressed to ARAMCO's president, Abd al-Aziz Abu Sunayd, one of the leaders of the first workers' strike against the oil company in 1953, would complain about this unfair treatment, narrating how he was denied entry to the senior staff theatre in Dhahran to see Charlie Chaplin's *Limelight* (1952).[20] More strikingly, he criticized the company for implementing the Jim Crow system in his own native country, recalling how he was banned from entering a movie theatre while he was training in the United States due to the colour line that was in place during that time.[21] Three years later, in 1956, the ARAMCO workers once again held a general strike for better working, living, and union rights. Col Eddy, an undercover CIA agent serving as an ARAMCO consultant (also known as "Eddy of Arabia"), expressed the Manichean division between the local workers and Western expatriates with a pronounced Orientalism. "The labor unrest," he told the US embassy in Saudi Arabia, "was the result of the dissatisfaction of the workers who compared this primitive land of low pay, slaves, eunuchs, and harems to the comfortable conditions of US residents in Dhahran, plus probable Red stimulation."[22] On June 14, 1956, the Saudi workers' resentment against their exclusionary, discriminatory and unequal treatment by the company culminated in the storming of the cinema in the Intermediate Camp—which housed middle level foreign employees—in Ras Tanura.[23] The movie theatre,

18 Sd. J. A. F. Gethin Political Agency, Kuwait, to Sir Rupert Hay, Political Resident, Persian Gulf, Bahrain, May 26, 1950. *Records of Kuwait, 1899–1961: Volume 5: Petroleum Affairs*, ed. Alan de Lacy Rush (London: Archive Editions, 1989), 445–48.

19 Quoted in Vitalis, *America's Kingdom*, 60. The film that Barger refers to in his letter is Gregory La Cava's pre-code melodrama *Gallant Lady* (1933).

20 See Vitalis, *America's Kingdom*, 153.

21 See ibid., 16.

22 Quoted in Vitalis, *America's Kingdom*, 152–53.

23 Ibid., 159.

along with other elements of modern leisure and lifestyle available to whites only, exposed the uneven and segregated structure of the oil town. As the tensions rose, the workers tried to enter the movie theatre as a symbolic claim for the amenities that they demanded from the company. Storming the cinema was an act of transgressing the system of segregation and the racial colour line of exclusion. Not surprisingly, the oil company responded harshly to the strike, fearing in particular that it could spread to other oil conurbations. The workers were severely beaten, leaders were jailed, and unions were banned.[24]

Throughout the early decades of hydrocarbon modernity in the Gulf, the British administrators were not at all positive about requests to establish a public cinema for local citizens as well as foreign immigrant workers. These requests were treated with suspicion or flat rejection. Indeed, the first document in the "Bahrain Cinemas" file of the India Office Records, a confidential letter (dated April 7, 1934) from Lieutenant-Colonel Percy Gordon Loch, the British political agent in Bahrain, to Charles Belgrave, reflected this sentiment as follows:

> I hear a rumour that an "Arab" is arranging to establish a cinema here. [...] If the rumour is true, I think that prohibiting the establishment of a cinema should be carefully considered, and in any case that censorship should be provided for.[25]

The "Arab" that Loch referred to was none other than Ali Yateem's son, Hussein Yateem, who, together with his business partners, approached the government of Bahrain to obtain a licence to operate a public cinema.[26] Charles Belgrave, however, was not convinced that "Bahrain [was] sufficiently advanced for a cinema."[27] He flatly refused other petitions that the British administration received from abroad, too. In 1935, an entrepreneur from Iran, who introduced himself as the owner of Kuh-i Nur Cinema in Khorramshahr (then Muhemmarah), sought approval to establish a public cinema in Manama. A public cinema in Bahrain, argued the entrepreneur, would not only fit the rising image of the country as "the most progressive" and "much more modern" nation, but would also provide a leisure outlet for

24 See Toby Matthiesen, "Migration, Minorities and Radical Networks: Labour Movements and Opposition Groups in Saudi Arabia, 1950–1975," *International Review of Social History* 59, no. 3 (2014): 473–504.

25 "Bahrain Cinemas," [2r].

26 See ibid., [3r].

27 Ibid., [15r].

the increasing "influx of large numbers of foreigners who are migrating to Manamah day in and day out."[28] We learn about the British advisor's response to this request from his diaries: "A M… from Abadan came & asked if he could open a cinema here—I said no."[29] Roughly one year later, an Indian named M. A. Sam, a sound mechanic in a movie theatre called "The Paramount Talkies" in Bangalore, wrote a letter to the political resident in the Persian Gulf to petition for a licence to establish a public cinema. He also made his case from a labour-leisure point of view: "After a day's hard work," he wrote, "one requires some sort of amusement and diversion from the humdrum routine of life, in common with the rest of the world."[30] Hence, the general public as well as immigrant workers in Bahrain should have access to the movies. But M. A. Sam was not granted a licence of operation, despite a "clear" background check by the British resident in Mysore.[31]

The British administrators' strong resistance against the opening of a public cinema in Bahrain, in fact, reflected a set of anxieties that were circulating in the late colonial period. They shared the same concerns with, for instance, colonial governor Sir Henry Hesketh Bell in Northern Nigeria, expatriate journalist George Bilainkin in Malaya, and writer Aldous Huxley in Malaya. Look at how Belgrave's remarks strongly echoed Huxley's reflections on the local cinema audience in Java:

> The violent imbecilities of the story flickered in silence against the background of the equatorial night. In silence the Javanese looked on. What were they thinking? What were their private comments on this exhibition of Western civilization? I wondered. In North Africa, in India, I have also wondered. [The "untutored mind" of the poor Indian] sees the films, he thinks they represent Western reality, he cannot see why he should be ruled by criminal imbeciles.[32]

Bilainkin's reflections in Penang were hardly different:

> Many dancing girls shown on the screens in Penang had so little clothing as to excite the audible surprise not only of white people but of the

28 Ibid., [9r]; [10r].

29 Belgrave, *Papers*, p. 1099.

30 "Bahrain Cinemas," [28r].

31 Ibid., [41r], [42r].

32 Quoted in Brian Larkin, "Circulating Empires: Colonial Authority and the Immoral, Subversive Power of American Film," in *Globalizing American Studies*, ed. Brian Edwards and Dilip Gaonkar (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 173.

> usually silent Asiatics. Again and again I have looked from my seat to see people turning their heads to one another in astonishment. [...] What is the average Asiatic [...] to think of the white people in his home town?[33]

These instances of what Larkin calls "visual ventriloquism" reflected an increasing discomfort about how native subjects viewed and interpreted films.

Only after a long series of deliberations and through the mediation of two nephews of the Shaikh of Bahrain—Ali bin Mohamed al-Khalifah and Ali bin Abdullah al-Khalifah—did Hussein Yateem and his business associates acquire permission to open a cinema theatre in Manama in 1937, with a licence granting a five-year monopoly. Despite their earlier reservations, the British colonial administrators admitted that it would not be possible to prevent the coming of public cinema. In his letter to the government of British India, the political resident wrote: "If we cannot prevent a cinema being started and I do not see how we can, the only thing to do is to try and censor the films."[34] Once again, for the colonial elite, the question of cinema was about exerting control over the film experience of "native" spectatorship. To this end, the British administration in the Gulf adopted the manual of the Bengal Board of Censors of the government of India for film and cinema house regulations.[35] In 1937, the first public cinema in the Gulf, named the "Bahrain National Theater" ("The National," in short), opened in Manama with an Egyptian film titled *Wedad* (1936), a musical based on a story from *The One Thousand and One Nights*.[36] This film, we must note, was the Egyptian icon Umm Kulthum's debut and Studio Misr's first international success on its path to becoming the leading force in the Egyptian film industry under the directorship of German expatriate Fritz Kramp. By the late 1940s, the number of commercial public theatres in Bahrain reached four, including the "Pearl Cinema" of the merchant Gosaibi Brothers with seating for over 700 persons and an air conditioning unit.[37] In 1954, the Kuwait Cinema Company, now known as Cinescape-Kuwait National Cinema Company (KNCC), opened the first movie house, called the "Eastern Cinema" (Al-Sharqiah), to show imported films from Egypt,

33 Quoted in ibid., 172.

34 Ibid., [18r].

35 See "Bahrain Cinemas," [19r].

36 See Sarhan, *Tārīkh al-sīnima fī al-Bahrāin*, 15. "The National" continues to exist as Al-Hamra Cinema. During the Second World War, it was used to show newsreels on the Allies' war effort and their victories over the Axis powers. Ibid., 18.

37 "VII Annual Administration Report for the Year 1948," R/15/2/304, [150r], IOR, London.

Fig. 9.4. Doha Gulf Cinema in the 1970s.

India, and the United States. In the 1960s and early 1970s, cinema as an affordable popular medium of entertainment spread to other Gulf cities, including Dubai ("Al-Nasr," "Plaza," and "Deria"), Muscat ("Al-Hamra" and "Rivoli"), and Doha ("Gulf"). During its heydays prior to television and video, the Muscat cinemas attracted as many as 500 movie watchers at a time, who would come to see Arabic and Hindi films. Similarly, Dubai cinemas gained popularity as a low-budget family entertainment. According to Ahmad Golchin (a merchant of Iranian origins and founder of the first privately owned distribution company in the region, Phars Film, in 1964), because of the logistical and economic difficulties of getting Hollywood films in the 1960s and 1970s, Dubai cinemas depended on Bollywood films (with questionable print quality) brought by gold merchants who traded with India.[38]

In the period between the 1950s and the 1970s, which corresponds to the decline of British imperial hegemony and the rise of Arab nationalism in the post-colonial Middle East, the oil companies and the British political agencies in the Gulf began to make use of film as a public relations instrument geared toward what film historian Rosaleen Smyth calls a "new post-war policy of developmentalism."[39] The Kuwait Oil Company (KOC) established

38 See Manjari Sexana, "A Walk down Cinema Lane in the UAE," *Gulf News*, November 30, 2011, http://gulfnews.com/leisure/movies/a-walk-down-cinema-lane-in-the-uae-1.940086.

39 Quoted in Todd Reisz, "Landscapes of Production: Filming Dubai and the Trucial States," *Journal of Urban History* 44, no. 2 (2018): 299.

its public relations office in Kuwait in 1956 in the aftermath of a significant spike in public criticism of the company, mounting around local support for Colonel Gamal Abdel Nasser's historic move to nationalize the Suez Canal. KOC's public relations office planned efforts to reach local and regional populations through news broadcasts, lectures, magazine features and films that linked the company and its partnership with the state to the progress and modernization of Kuwait, often focusing on images of urban modernity in Ahmadi and Kuwait City.[40] KOC launched *Risalat al-Naft* (The oil newsletter), and in 1957 shifted the focus of its existing English-language magazine *The Kuwaiti* to feature articles and photographs illustrating modern architecture and urban planning projects in the capital, Kuwait City.[41] Established in 1961, the Arabic-language sister magazine *al-Kuwayti* showcased KOC's contributions to modern living conditions of Kuwaiti employees in Ahmadi.

In Bahrain, BAPCO's public relations department set up mobile cinemas in villages and towns to educate the nation on health, hygiene, education, and other aspects of modernization. In addition, Khalifa Shaheen (a local director and an employee of BAPCO) oversaw a newsreel project called "The Bahrain News Bar," which included Arabic and English recordings that were between ten and thirty minutes long, covering main events on the island. The series comprised sixty-eight recordings over a time period from 1960 until 1971. The tapes were distributed to all the cinemas in Bahrain.[42] Mobile cinemas were used by ARAMCO in Saudi Arabia, too. The company, moreover, commissioned Richard Lyford to make educational films on sanitary measures to fight the spread of malaria, titled *The Fly* (*Al-Thebub*) and *Water* (*Miyyah*), both circa 1952. These films were screened in the towns and villages of today's Eastern Province.[43]

Visual narratives of development, which strongly echoed the classical modernization theory of Daniel Lerner in *The Passing of Traditional Society: Modernizing the Middle East* (1958), circulated in the Emirates as well. The first film that depicted the oil company as an economic, and the British protectorate as a political catalyst of the teleological of transition from traditional life to modern society in the Emirates was *These Are the*

40 See Farah Al-Nakib, *Kuwait Transformed: A History of Oil and Urban Life* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2016).

41 See Reem Alissa, "The Oil Town of Ahmadi Since 1946: From Colonial Town to Nostalgic City," *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa, and the Middle East* 33, no. 1 (2013): 43.

42 See Sarhan, *Tārīkh al-sīnima fī al-Bahrāin*, 25.

43 See Tim Barger, "The Island of the Arabs," *Aramco Ex-Pats*, August 28, 2012, https://www.aramcoexpats.com/articles/the-island-of-the-arabs/.

Fig. 9.5. Still shot from *These Are the Trucial States* (1958).

Trucial States (1958), conceived by Dubai's political agent, Peter Tripp. Tripp's pitching of the film project serves as a case study to exemplify the overlap between colonial discourse and modernization theory:

> This film would attempt to illustrate [...] the ways in which the Rulers of the Trucial States spend the money so generously provided by their old friend and benefactor H. M. G. [Her Majesty's Government]—in order to promote the well-being of their peoples.[44]

Tripp's project would be followed by other films, including Kuwait Oil Company's *Close-up on Kuwait* (c. 1960), David Holden's *Farewell Arabia* (1967), and British Petroleum Company's *Abu Dhabi: The Beginning* (1970).

Film scholars such as Lee Grieveson have shown that in the formative decades of North American and European cinemas, the discourses and regulatory practices of cultural and political elites were geared toward containing cinema as "harmless and culturally affirmative entertainment," catered to "the common interest."[45] In the Gulf context, "policing cinema" not only extends into the post-World War II era but was also linked to the question of managing the forces of hydrocarbon modernity that the

44 Quoted in Reisz, "Landscapes of Production," 304.

45 See Lee Grieveson, *Policing Cinema: Movies and Censorship in Early-Twentieth-Century America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004).

discovery of oil unleashed and was entangled with multiple modalities of circulation of individuals (colonial personnel, expatriates, labourers, entrepreneurs, and missionaries), texts (censorship manuals, inspection guidelines, confidential reports, circulars, and petitions), regimes of segregation ("coolie" from British Raj and "Jim Crow" from American south), conurbations modelled on colonial and industrial settlements, accommodation types (Victorian residence, California ranch, local *barastis*, or makeshift huts), and, of course, cans of film. The emergence of cinema in the Gulf, in other words, took place in a segregated and uneven world built through colonial practices, expansionist oil capital, and international labour.

The National Era

The end of the British protectorate in the Gulf in 1971 marked an important shift in the culture of cinema. Government ministries took the leading role in the sponsorship of film. In Kuwait, the ministries of education, public affairs, and information and guidance created cinema divisions to produce educational 16 mm films—at some point called "Encyclopaedia"—for television broadcast on a broad range of topics concerning national welfare. In addition to cinema departments, Gulf states began to establish film distribution companies. In Bahrain, the first such company appeared in 1968 and was put in charge of building new cinemas, importing and distributing films, and initiating the first steps towards a local film industry.[46] In 1970, the Qatar Cinema and Film Distribution Company was established to fulfil the same purposes.[47] During this period, we also witness the proliferation of cinema clubs and societies, which generated new public spheres through screenings, particularly of Arabic-language films, and paved the way for the development of a culture of film criticism.[48]

46 See Sarhan, *Tārīkh al-sīnima fī al-Bahrāin*, 26. In 1972, the Bahrain Cinema and Film Distribution Company was also commissioned to build the first cinema in the Sultanate of Oman.

47 See Mahmoud Al-Hakeem, "Qatari Cinema: Steps towards a Global Outlook," *Al Raya Newspaper*, June 27, 2013, http://www.raya.com/home/print/f6451603-4dff-4ca1-9c10-122741d17432/649628c4-df7b-4d96-8203-eba7f7ad0468

48 The Bahrain Cinema Club was established in 1975 and its Kuwaiti counterpart in 1976. The former also launched a magazine called *Cinematic Papers*. In 1986, both branches joined the Pan-Arab cinema clubs union. See Sarhan, *Tārīkh al-sīnima fī al-Bahrāin*, 42.

The most distinguishing feature of the first decade of independence was the emergence of indigenous film-making. Alongside documentaries and made-for-TV films such as Mohammed Al-Sanousi's *Al-Asifah* (*The Storm*, Kuwait, 1965), a group of directors began to produce narrative feature films, despite deficiencies in technical infrastructure and cultural reservations not conducive to the growth of a local industry. The first feature film that is credited for cementing this shift is Kuwaiti director Khalid Al-Siddiq's *Bas ya bahr* (*Cruel Sea*, 1972). Recruiting local Kuwaiti talent (mostly employed in various governmental offices), the film relied on limited theatrical and technical training as well as funds and equipment needed to carry out production in a timely manner. The opening frame of *Cruel Sea* signalled a conscious attempt at periodization, aiming to capture the harsh realities of the Gulf littoral communities by telling its audience that the story was set in "Kuwait before oil." Shuttling between family romance and social realism, the film saw the arrival of petromodernity as a historically decisive break in the history of Gulf societies, which depended on pearl-diving as the primary economic activity. The film's sense of historicity placed entry into Gulf modernity as one of death, destruction, and despair (similar to every country that struggled to create industry out of their available natural resources). Although the film shied away from any nostalgic feeling for pre-oil life (for all its economic, patriarchal, and traditional constraints), it also refrained from invoking a hydrocarbon futuristic utopia. In a sense, Al-Siddiq's *Cruel Sea* echoed the Gramscian philosophy of history: the old was dying; yet no one knew what the future held.

Al-Siddiq was followed by several other directors. Hashim Muhammad joined with another Kuwaiti feature, *Al-Samt* (*The Silence*, 1979). In 1974, Mohamed Nabih produced the first Qatari feature film titled *The Sad Sail*, along with a short film titled *The Lighthouse*.[49] In Saudi Arabia, Abdullah Al-Muhaisen directed the first Saudi film, a documentary titled *Development in the City of Riyadh* (1975). In Bahrain, Khalifa Shaheen, Bassam Al-Thawadi, the Ali Abbas and Majed Al-Shams duo, and Khalid Al-Tamimi used short fiction and the documentary form to explore vernacular idioms in film. Despite oil wealth, we must add, Gulf auteurs had to cope with financial constraints in their efforts to make films. Ali Abbas and Majeed Shams often found themselves seeking financial help from their own actors and they had to learn how to do special effects makeup for their films themselves.[50]

49 See Al-Hakeem, "Qatari Cinema: Steps towards a Global Outlook."

50 See Sarhan, *Tārīkh al-sīnima fī al-Bahrāin*, 74–77.

Fig. 9.6. Khalid Al-Siddiq shooting *Cruel Sea* (1972).

Between 1975 and 1977, Bassam Al-Thawadi produced a series of 8 mm and 16 mm films: *Addiction* (1975), *The Blind* (1976), *The Two Brothers* (1976), and *Generations* (1977).

The most important point to emphasize about these early generation of film-makers in the Gulf is the extent to which they joined and interacted with the larger trends of Third World and pan-Arab cinema. For instance, in addition to receiving his film training at the Pune Film and Television Institute in Hyderabad, India,[51] the Kuwaiti pioneer Khalid Al-Siddiq made *Urs al-Zayn* (*The Wedding of Zein*) as his second film in 1976—adapting a novel by the Sudanese author Tayeb Saleh, who is better known for his iconoclastic post-colonial Arabic novel *Season of Migration to the North*. Ali Abbas and Majeed Shams, who produced four short films (*The Stranger*, *Revenge*, *The Three Men*, and *Oh, Treacherous Time*) and a documentary (*Memories*) between 1972 and 1978, were greatly inspired by Indian cinema, primarily films that dealt with issues of colonialism and independence, such as Mehboob Khan's Bollywood epic *Mother India* (1957).[52] These film-makers showcased their films in regional "Third cinema" festivals of the 1970s in Carthage, Cairo, and Tehran, which positioned themselves

51 See Roy Armes, "The Arab World," in *The Oxford History of World Cinema*, ed. Geoffrey Nowell-Smith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 666.

52 See Sarhan, *Tārīkh al-sīnima fī al-Bahrāin*, 74–77.

against Hollywood's cultural hegemony.[53] Khalifa Shaheen even went beyond the regional circle and screened his documentary work that he produced between 1967 and 1977 (*Pictures of an Island*, *People on the Horizon*, and *The Black Wave*) at the New Delhi, Manila, and Krakow film festivals.[54]

Furthermore, while offering a realist lens to the social issues of the nation and a critical approach to the promises of oil modernization, the Gulf directors of this generation also engaged with larger political events in the Middle East. A graduate of the Higher Institute of Cinema in Cairo, Bassam al-Thawadi made two short films on the Camp David Accords between Egypt and Israel (*The Mask*, 1981) and the Sabra and Shatila massacres (*Angels of the Earth*, 1983). In the same spirit, Abdullah Al-Muhaisen produced *Ightiyal Medina* (*Assassination of a City*, 1977), a documentary narrative on the Lebanese civil war. In 1982, Al-Muhaisen made another film titled *Islam Is the Bridge to the Future*, in which he portrayed Arab-Muslim history as centuries-long effort to endure a series of foreign invasions. Reflecting the pan-Arab cultural orientation during this time period, in the early 1980s Qatar commissioned a series of documentaries and a feature film from Egyptian directors, including Khairy Beshara, one of the forerunners of realism in Arab cinema.[55] These early post-independence experiments in Gulf film have unfortunately been forgotten in the cultural memory as well as national media archives. Except for palimpsestic "antiquarian" interests in the past by certain Gulf citizens, this period has been conveniently kept outside the official commemorations of cultural heritage.

Finally, in the case of Oman, although Sultan Said Bin Taimur's tight control over the country prohibited the emergence of national cinema,[56] anti-colonial film-makers made "solidarity" documentary films celebrating the Dhofar rebellion against British imperialism and its regional allies. Journalist and documentary film-maker Gordian Troeller and his partner Marie-Claude Deffarge's *The Revolt of the Slaves* (*Die Revolte der Sklaven/*

53 On Carthage Film Festival's de-colonial vision, see Gideon Bachmann, "In Search of Self-definition: Arab and African Films at the Carthage Film Festival," *Film Quarterly* 26, no. 3 (1973): 48–51.

54 See Sarhan, *Tārīkh al-sīnima fī al-Bahrāin*, 57.

55 These titles are *Fine Arts in Qatar* (Khairy Beshara), *Fishing in Qatar* (Ibrahim Madkour), *Dive* (Ibrahim Sabbagh), and *Dana* (Ibrahim Sabbagh). The last one is a feature film and was shown at the 1982 Carthage Film Festival. See Mahmoud Al-Hakeem, "Qatari Cinema: Steps towards a Global Outlook."

56 See Ḥamīd S. ʿĀmirī, *Laqatāt Min Al-Sīnimā Al-ʿumānīyah* [Snapshots from Omani cinema], 2015.

Fig. 9.7. Film Poster of *The Hour of Liberation Has Struck* (1974).

La Revolte des esclaves, 1969) documented the rebellion of the Dhofar Liberation Front (DLF) against the Sultanate in Muscat in the framework of national liberation struggles across the global South. Similarly, the Lebanese woman film-maker Heiny Srour's *The Hour of Liberation Has Struck* (*Saat al-tahrir daqqat*/*L'Heure de la libération a sonné*, 1974) presented everyday revolutionary life inside the "liberated territories" and showed how the People's Liberation Army in Dhofar gained ground among the people through communal practices of education, inter-tribal peacemaking, farming, and household management.[57]

57 See Heiny Srour, Salma Baccar, and Magda Wassef, "For the Self-expression of the Arab Woman," *Cinéaste* 9, no. 4 (1979): 37. Also see Abdel Razzaq Takriti, *Monsoon Revolution:*

These multi-sited attempts to institute film culture and cinema publics in the Gulf could not be carried forward. One can speculate on several factors. The first one had to do with the rise of cultural conservatism across the region. Especially in Saudi Arabia, following the Grand Mosque seizure of 1979, the government withdrew its policy of gradual progressive liberalization and in an effort to mitigate religious concerns about "over-Westernization," it shut down commercial cinemas.[58] Furthermore, instead of supporting independent directors, the Gulf states chose to grant some resources for film projects conducted through ministries of information, culture and heritage or state-owned television and radio corporations.[59] The critical lens of the first generation of directors on questions of tradition, modernization, social relations, and cultural identity was largely replaced by visual narratives that celebrated and promoted national development and film was eventually subsumed under the category of media and information. As such, until the global rise of the Gulf in the 2000s, feature film production remained confined to a handful of individual exceptions: Khalid Al-Siddiq's *Shahin* (Kuwait, 1985), Ali Al-Abdul's *Wayfarer* (*Abr Sabeel*, UAE, 1988), and Bassam Al-Thawadi's *The Barrier* (*Al-Hajiz*, Bahrain, 1990).[60] Equally important, the proliferation of video technologies and satellite channels in the 1980s diminished the already feeble public film culture and gave rise to the phenomenon of "non-public film culture" that congregated in private spaces.[61] The absence of a full-fledged national cinema tradition increased dependence on more powerful regional industry markets as well as pirated masters of popular Hollywood blockbuster genres (thriller, mystery, romance) shipped from Asia.[62] Egypt's so-called "contractors'

Republicans, Sultans, and Empires in Oman, 1965–76 (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 242–44.

58 See Robert Lacey, *Inside the Kingdom: Kings, Clerics, Modernists, Terrorists, and the Struggle for Saudi Arabia* (New York: Viking, 2009).

59 In 2010 and 2011, the Ministry of Arts, Culture, and Heritage and several other institutions worked together with the Organizing Committee of Qatar National Day to produce documentary films that portrayed the traditional understandings and cultural values of Qatari society. One of the films that emerged from this endeavour was *Sons of the Sea and Sons of the Desert*.

60 See Anne Ciecko, "What the Sea Brings: Cinema at the Shoreline in Bahrain's First Feature Production and Film Culture," *Continuum: Journal of Media and Cultural Studies* 27, no. 5 (2013), 704–14.

61 See Anne Ciecko, "Cinema 'of' Yemen and Saudi Arabia: Narrative Strategies, Cultural Challenges, Contemporary Features," *Wide Screen* 3, no. 1 (2011): 5.

62 See Douglas A. Boyd, "Home Video Diffusion and Utilization in Arabian Gulf States," *American Behavioral Scientist* 30, no. 5 (1987): 544–55. For a parallel case during the same time period in the Nigerian film industry, see Jonathan Haynes, ed., *Nigerian Video Films*, rev. ed. (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2000).

cinema" (*sinimat al-muqalawat*) filled the gap by producing feature films in video format that were specifically catered to the cultural sensitivities and privacy expectations of consumers in Saudi Arabia and other Gulf countries. By 1986, the number of productions reached ninety-five video films.[63] In the 1990s, contractors' cinema acquired a new label: "clean cinema" (*sinima nazifa*), or a cinema that applies self-censorship regarding moral codes. These pre-censored films made for the Gulf countries at some point reached 25 per cent of Egypt's film exports.[64]

As in all other aspects, the rise of the Gulf in the global economy and politics has shaped the direction of the region's film industries and cinema culture in significant ways. Different from the earlier auteur attempts at establishing national cinema, the new direction has led to a more complex and globalized terrain. Gulf countries—United Arabic Emirates, Saudi Arabia and Qatar, in particular—have invested in the film industry as a way of generating soft power and making the national brand more visible in the global cultural landscape.[65] Yet Gulf film industries are still very much dependent on the fortunes of the rentier state in the global oil economy. Although the narrative presented in this chapter is linear and chronological in so far as it carries us from past to present, colonial to post-colonial, the contradictory and uneven mode of development of the Gulf cinematic spheres needs to be acknowledged and explicated in order to avoid a disingenuous presentation of the Gulf's film history as simply one of colonialism versus post-colonialism, but rather, to weave historical inquiry together with filmic analysis in order to better understand the constitutive relationships among hydrocarbon industry, nation-building, and modernization in the Gulf. While being cautious of Gulf exceptionalism,[66] it is important for film historians to attend to the specific cultural semantics that temporal and spatial terms (colonial, post-colonial, national, transnational, and so on) acquire in constructing a history of the moving image in the Gulf.

63 See Rebecca Hillauer, Allison Brown, Deborah Cohen, and Nancy Joyce, *Encyclopedia of Arab Women Filmmakers* (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2005), 40.

64 See Shafik, *Arab Cinema*, 215–16.

65 See Axel Scoffier, "Qatar, from Black Gold to the Big Screen," *INA Global: The Review of Creative Industries and Media*, December 13, 2012, http://www.inaglobal.fr/en/cinema/article/qatar-black-gold-big-screen.

66 For a critique of exceptionalist frameworks in Gulf studies, see Ahmed Kanna, Amélie Le Renard, and Neha Vora, *Beyond Exception: New Interpretations of the Arabian Peninsula* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2020).

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