

Lights, Camera, Education: An Overview of the Future of Film Education in the United Arab Emirates

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Abstract

Twenty years ago, there were barely any movie theaters in the United Arab Emirates, other than a handful of rundown theatres showing Bollywood films for the Indian male population. Today, there are cutting edge multiplex theatres playing to packed audiences. Unfortunately, there are virtually no UAE films taking up that screen time. But a huge unprecedented investment is being made into the film industry by a rapidly expanding number of government and private film production companies, such as the \$1 billion-funded Imagination. Just who is training, educating, and developing the workforce to sustain such an industry in a country that does not have a history in film, neither as a mode of expression nor as a business? This article examines the growing higher education visual communications education and programs in the United Arab Emirates in light of the cultural, social and financial opportunities and constraints that are a part of the UAE.

Keywords

Emirati films, City of Life, Dubai Film Fest, Abu Dhabi, Zayed University, visual media

This past year saw the release of *City Of Life* (Mostafa, 2010), the first feature-length film directed by an Emirati. Although it has not played theatrically anywhere else in the world, it is the first UAE-produced film to have a theatrical release in the country. The director, Ali F. Mostafa, has become a local celebrity, primarily because of the heavy push by the government since 2008 to make the UAE an international center for film production and finance.

In a country with almost no film history and a population with little knowledge of film history, production and expressing themselves through film, being a film mecca is a formidable goal around which a film education revolution is beginning, and opportunities available for young talent expand every day—in ways that film students in other countries could not even dream of.

Mostafa was not educated in the UAE but rather attended the London School of Film because until recently there were few options for training here. But is the training available in the UAE enough—and all that is needed-- to staff film productions from top to bottom, from producer to production assistant? Will it happen any time soon, in order for the UAE to claim, as it hopes, a feature film industry run by locally trained and educated filmmakers and businessmen?

Mostafa worked with an international cast and crew but this review from Time Out Abu Dhabi alludes very well to the educational issues the UAE faces, which involves not just training but also cultural and societal limits:

“To make matters worse, some of their scenes are edited together in such an amateurish ‘just out of film school’ style as to invite ridicule. Erase them from the film, though, and it’s an impressive effort. Bearing in mind this is the first time anyone has made a big-budget movie in the UAE, and that Mostafa must surely have had to be very careful with the material to get his film into cinemas here, *City of Life* tells two engaging stories filled with funny and genuinely affecting moments. The local talent on display,

too, is revealing of a rich home-grown resource ripe for picking.” (Chubb, 2010)

City of Life (Mostafa, 2010) initially had expectations from its producer, FilmWorks, that about 6,000 people would see it. “We were hoping for about 25,000 people, which would mean it was a financial success,” says Ali Mostafa (personal conversation, June 2010). “We managed to bring in over 80,000 people, so it’s beaten a lot of big Hollywood movies here in the UAE, hands down. It opened second in the box office on the first week and played theatrically for eight weeks.”

Matters of quality and sophistication aside, the appetite for Emirati films is there, but the UAE needs to develop enough creative talents to support the UAE film industry. So who will be nurturing this talent--or in other words, educating them? This article will examine this question in the framework of its importance to the UAE today and within the limitations of the current educational opportunities and cultural restraints.

Various film programs in the UAE are explored through an analysis of these programs curriculum, individual interviews with film educators, speaking confidentially (in which they were asked to answer either in persona or via e-mail a set standard of questions) and recorded interviews with film industry leaders. In particular, the structure of the film programs are examined through the curriculum and the student body of each program. Only programs that offer mass media programs and that are accredited by the Commission for Academic Accreditation of the UAE are included in the analysis.

It is important to keep in mind that Emiratis are a minority in their country. As of 2009, the population of the UAE stands at six million comprised of Emiratis and expatriates. What makes the UAE unique is the discrepancy between the numbers of Emiratis and expatriates. The National Human Resources Development and Employment Authority (Rasheed, October 2009) reports the

expatriate population is rapidly increasing and the percentage of the UAE nationals' increment to the population growth dropped from 24.4 per cent to 15.4 per cent from 1995-2006. Governmental and institutional efforts made at film education in the UAE are directed only towards Emiratis rather than the transient expatriate community. There are expatriate families that have been here for three generations, but they do not acquire citizenship, and so are not eligible for most of the free government programs. This article therefore primarily focuses on the Emirati population and the film education opportunities available to them as the UAE works to position itself into a global film center

Also worth noting is the UAE's place in the Middle East in regard to this subject. Qatar is the only other Gulf country that is actively pursuing a film industry, currently in production on its first major film about the oil industry. The only other country actively pursuing film education is Jordan, which offers up the University of Southern California's sponsored Red Sea Institute for Cinematic Arts, the only MFA in Film in the Middle East.

However, the focus is to get an understanding of the various ways to promote film education in the unique world of the UAE, where globalization, freedom of expression, gender issues and cultural identity often clash with the goals of business and education.

Film History in the UAE

While the film business is barely one hundred years old, the UAE is even younger, having been formed in 1971 by the late Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan. He created a federation of seven emirates that quickly developed into two business centers: Dubai, with a long shipping and trading history, and Abu Dhabi, the capital, which boasts one of the largest oil reserves in the world. Until

recently, there was no film business at all, but local television has forayed into *musalsalats*, the Arabic word for series. These types of series are specific to the Middle East and are soap operas that run weekly or daily, particularly during Ramadan, for a defined period of time, usually not more than three months.

While in front of the camera, most of the actors are Emirati, behind the scenes, most of the production work is done by Arabs from other countries, particularly Syria, Lebanon, and Egypt, countries whose *musalsalats* have been far more popular in the Middle East. Part of the reason is that the native population is not large enough to man all positions and, perhaps more importantly, is not as interested in relatively low-paying media jobs, when government jobs pay far more and come with better working hours. Emiratis make up just four per cent of the private sector workforce, compared with 52 per cent of the public sector and young graduates prefer unemployment rather than working in the private sector. (Forstenlechner & Rutledge, 2010). Of course, film production jobs fall under private sector.

Movie going is also a relatively new idea for Emiratis. While theatres for the largely male Asian population have existed since the 1970s, Emiratis mainly watched films at home until the late 1990s, when the first multiplexes began opening. Today there are 220 screens in the UAE with six exhibitors and attendance numbers at 10.6 million in 2010. (Abu Dhabi Media Company, 2010). There are no figures on the nationality of the movie goers.

A film culture began to develop in the mid-2000 with the launch of the Dubai International Film Festival (www.dubaifilmfest.com). With adequate financial means to go out and acquire top films and bring in well-respected directors, producers and other talent to town, DIFF has quickly become a festival of global repute. The opening of the festival was soon followed by the first major Hollywood film shot partly in Dubai, *Syriana* (Gaghan, 2005).

At the same time, in Abu Dhabi, the film business was not even part of daily conversation. Now it seems that it is the second most talked about industry in the Emirate after petroleum. However, neither the infrastructure nor an educated population is there to service these investments, which include most notably Imagination, the \$1 billion film fund from the government-owned Abu Dhabi Media Company. Since its formation in the fall of 2008, Imagination has invested \$250 million each with Participant Media and Hyde Park Entertainment, both Los Angeles based, and \$100 million with National Geographic Entertainment to finance feature films. None of the resulting co-productions have been box office hits locally or internationally.

Tim Smythe the CEO of Filmworks, one of the few Dubai-based production companies and the most internationally active declares "Syriana created an awareness that you can do a high-end movie in Dubai and that it's a new area where feature films can be shot but a lot is going to depend on the development of the industry. Right now, for a major international film, I would have to bring 40 to 60 percent of the people from outside the UAE, and within the UAE, the existing crews are mostly non-Emirati and often don't have enough work to keep them busy all year" (personal conversation, June, 2010).

Smythe has helped oversee the production of *Mission Impossible IV* (Brad Bird, 2011), *The Kingdom* (Berg, 2007) and *City of Life* (Mostapha, 2010). However, his words about it being an incomplete industry are a warning that the unprecedented funding for educational efforts is hoping to resolve.

Film Education

Founded 39 years ago, the UAE is a relatively new country, and higher education, like much of the Gulf, is a bit of a growth industry, with several private universities opening in recent years. Those private universities tend to be open to students from around the region and in fact the world, whereas the public federal

universities are predominately local in their student body and there are no tuition fees. These federal universities have students whose parents studied at the best universities abroad, but they also have students whose parents had very little formal education. There are also a few public universities that are owned by the local emirates, such as University of Sharjah. So for Emiratis, higher education in general is a new phenomenon, let alone the specifics of higher education in film.

The Public Universities

Higher education in film and video production in the UAE tends to aim at making students directors and producers-- if they have any aim in place at all with respect to this specific industry. The late Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan, the founder of the UAE, is often quoted as having said, "The real asset of any advanced nation is its people, especially the educated ones, and the prosperity and success of the people are measured by the standard of their education." In his lifetime, he saw the creation of the country's three federal universities, all exclusively for Emiratis and two of which today are beefing up their film education to meet the post-graduation opportunities for their students.

Zayed University

Eleven-year old Zayed University is an all-female (although there is a newly developed male campus), all-Emirati university and considered to have the toughest entry standards of the three federal universities (www.zu.ac.ae). It has both an Abu Dhabi campus and a Dubai campus, with approximately 1,500 students at each. Like all the federal universities, English is the primary language in the classroom, particularly in the communications fields. With rare exception, faculty is expatriates from around the world but dominantly from North America. The Zayed University's College of Communication and Media Sciences, which offers a Bachelor's of Science in Communication and Media Sciences on both campuses, has since its inception taught "broadcast media" but in the last two

years, what was once an emphasis on television news, has shifted to documentary and narrative videos. The college also recently revised its curriculum and now offers a specialization in “Visual Media” and the college’s overall curriculum includes several classes on “storytelling” as opposed to “news writing.” The college has invested in new HD cameras, microphones, Final Cut Pro software, and Final Draft software. Specific classes taught in the college are Visual and Audio Production, in which students work on short documentaries and one news story. In Advanced Video Production, the students develop short screenplays, learning the film structure from the writing stage to eventually the postproduction stage. In addition, film criticism and film history classes in the college and in the College of Arts & Sciences attempt to fill the lack of general cinematic knowledge amongst the students.

In 2011, Zayed University-Abu Dhabi will move to its new campus, where a state-of-the-art multimedia lab and studio are being built with the vision of being a center for Emirati film development. While the number of faculty has not expanded, as outgoing faculty with more of a television news background have left, they have been replaced by faculty with stronger backgrounds in visual media. “At Zayed University, we have had students win top honors at local competitions and festivals. However, in the past several years since the film boom began, we have only had one student take a job at a film company, although a handful, particularly in Dubai, have gone into television programming. The student working at a film company is working in development and not happy with the long hours of the job and relative low pay compared to what her classmates are getting their first year out of school. Film requires a great deal of passion and hunger, and there is little of that in the students. Long hours, lower pay than other fields, and family concerns about the acceptability of working in an industry that is considered morally ambiguous further hamper any ambition,” says a film professor at Zayed University.

Higher Colleges of Technology

Founded in 1988, the Higher Colleges of Technology (HCT) are a confederation of 16 campuses across the UAE, eight female campuses and eight male campuses (www.hct.ac.ae). The Higher Colleges of Technology is the largest higher educational institution in the UAE, with over 18,000 students, all UAE nationals. They are located in Abu Dhabi, Al Ain, Dubai, Ras Al Khaimah, Sharjah, Fujairah and the western region of Madinat Zayed and Ruwais. However, only the campuses in Abu Dhabi (men and women), Dubai (men and women), Sharjah (men and women), and Ras Al Kaimah's (women) have majors in the communications fields. HCT offers a Bachelor of Applied Science in Applied Media Studies. Originally set up as an associate degree institution, the HCT schools have a longer history and better facilities for video production than Zayed University, although that will change with the new media labs the later opening in 2012. In fact, HCT Women's College in Dubai is considered to have the best studio and media lab of all the public universities in the country. The emphasis is on documentaries with some work with animation.

The HCT campuses in Dubai and Abu Dhabi have particularly good studio facilities. "Our students are very tech savvy and easily take the initiative to learn new media software on their own. However, the students are lacking a strong liberal arts education to better tell stories covered in the media and our programme doesn't allow students to specialize in one aspect of Applied Communications. We should allow students to hone their skills a bit more and be more ready for the industry upon graduating," says a professor at an HCT women's campus.

Students coming out of HCT and Zayed University with an emphasis in video production should have at least two shorts that they can show as their portfolio and submit to competitions. However, the technical proficiency is often lacking in the Zayed University films, and the storytelling skills lacking in the

HCT films, perhaps a reflection of the difference in the faculty that teach them and the courses and facilities available to the students. HCT professors are not only being asked to prepare Emiratis for film but also several other fields. “Our programme is very general in nature. It covers a range of courses from graphic design to multimedia, from film/video to journalism and from English language to Arabic. On top of this we are supposed to integrate some liberal studies and general education courses. All this makes a mess of curriculum, and we end up creating ‘jack of all trades’. Since we have more focus on vocational training and transferable skills, we end up creating button pushers rather than critical thinkers. The strength of the programme is that most of the teaching takes place through project-based learning, but that in itself defeats the idea creating thinkers,” says a professor at one of the HCT male-only campuses.

United Arab Emirates University

The University of the UAE (UAEU) is a co-educational institution and many of the students live on campus (www.uaeu.ac.ae). Founded in 1976, it is the oldest of the federal schools and has a student population of approximately 12,000, roughly 9,000 of which are women. Located in the historical city of Al Ain, about an hour and half from Abu Dhabi and Dubai, it is somewhat disconnected from the nearly daily announcements of new film initiatives in Dubai and Abu Dhabi, and that is reflected in its Department of Mass Communications, which has around 300 majors. UAEU only offers a concentration in Television Broadcasting. It offers classes in television production, rather than film and video or documentary and narrative film. The school has not announced any plans to change that.

It is important to note that none of these universities offer an academic approach to film, with almost no emphasis on research into film theory, comparison and criticism, and history, although these topics are addressed at a minor level. As for student activities, all the federal university students are

eligible to enter two competitions: The Noor Ali Rashid and Habib Reda Awards for Photography and Video. Both Noor Ali and the late Habib Reda are revered photographers in the UAE, known for having chronicled the life of Sheikh Zayed because of their close relationships with him. These legacy awards were primarily aimed at encouraging students in photography, but both have seen their categories expand. In 2009, the Habib Reda Awards for Media Innovation had one category for video production and it was limited to projects under three minutes. However, last year it was expanded to include narrative and documentary films and an animation category. Perhaps what best reflects how much in its infancy video and film public higher education is in the UAE is that the students did not seem to know the difference between the two categories, with many documentary films being submitted as narratives.

University of Sharjah

University of Sharjah in the emirate of Sharjah is the only local public university offering a bachelor program mass communication specializing either in Broadcasting or in Visual Media (www.sharjah.ac.ae). Similar to UAEU's curriculum, it strongly emphasizes television production with course such as "Introduction to Radio and Television", "Video Production and Editing", "Program Preparation & Presentation", and "Broadcast Directing." The only class more oriented towards film, "Documentary Film," even mentions television in its course description: "Film and television documentary script writing techniques and formats. Information search and writing. Sound and picture in television and film documentaries. Script format and style. Practical applications in documentary scripts on numerous topics like politics, the environment, science etc."

The Private Universities

Private universities in the UAE are growing so quickly that it is almost hard to keep track on them.

American University of Dubai

Founded in 1995, the American University of Dubai (AUD) started as a passion project of Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum, the ruler of Dubai (www.aud.edu). Today, it is accredited by the Commission on Colleges (COC) of the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS) to award Bachelor's and Master's degrees and has nearly 3,000 students, with approximately 20% of them being Emirati. The rest come from Europe and mostly predominantly from the other Middle Eastern countries and Southeast Asia, with many of the students having parents working in the UAE.

AUD saw the future before the other universities and has a well-established film-related Digital Production and Storytelling Program at the Mohammed Bin Rashid School For Communication. The words broadcast and television do not make much of an appearance on its curriculum, with classes entitled Digital Storytelling, Digital Production, and the Documentary, as well as final projects being short digital videos and internships at local production facilities. In addition, AUD addresses the need to be able to discuss film with the Cinematopia Club, "a place to facilitate students interested in film and film making. The club intends to bring together students who are interested in all aspects of film making, as well as offering the AUD community films of artistic and intellectual value."

American University of Sharjah

Like AUD, the American University of Sharjah (AUS) has a student body made up of only 20% Emiratis (www.aus.edu). Founded by the ruler of Sharjah, Sheikh Dr. Sultan Bin Mohammad Al Qassimi, in 1997, it bills itself as "consciously based upon American institutions of higher education. AUS is thoroughly grounded in Arab culture and is part of a larger process of the

revitalization of intellectual life in the Middle East.” AUS is accredited by the Commission on Higher Education of the Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools and is licensed in the United States by the Department of Education of the State of Delaware. It offers a Bachelor of Arts in Mass Communication with three concentrations: advertising, public relations and journalism. Unlike AUD, AUS does not emphasize digital storytelling in its Mass Communications major, perhaps in part because Sharjah itself is not involved in the film business and because of the more conservative outlook of that emirate. AUS has a production studio but it is geared towards television. AUS offers some film theory classes, such as “Introduction to Film Studies”, “Contemporary Popular Films”, “Scriptwriting for Film and Theater. However, they only offer a few production-oriented classes, such as “Principles of Media Production and Performance” and “Multiple Camera Studio Production” but again more oriented toward television.

Tuition at AUS and at AUD are AED 36,770 (about \$10,000) per semester AED 33,000 (about \$9,000) per semester respectively. Both schools tend to attract students from wealthy families, i.e. students who are the product of private secondary education. However, those students do not include that many Emiratis for two main reasons: The UAE government funds higher education abroad, and so Emirati male students with the higher academic standards required to get into the UAE’s private universities are more likely to choose an abroad option for the experience. Meanwhile, for women, there are still family and cultural issues with co-education and mixing too closely with other cultures, which limits how many of them will be able to attend these private universities. Because of their limited number of Emirati students, these private universities are not so diligently pursued by organizations offering special film programs, financing, and internships as compared to the federal universities.

Private and International Universities of the Capital

Aside from the boom in film initiative, Abu Dhabi, as the capital of the UAE, is also positioning itself as the cultural mecca of the Middle East, most auspiciously with the opening of Saadiyat Island, which when partially completed in 2013 will include the first Louvre outside of France, designed by Jean Nouvel, and a Guggenheim Museum designed by Frank Gehry.

The two educational institutes most geared towards the cultural initiative are both exported from New York: The New York Film Academy (NYFA) and New York University (NYU).

New York Film Academy

NYFA, sometimes referred to as the Abu Dhabi Film School, opened in 2008 under the Abu Dhabi Authority for Culture and Heritage (ADACH), a government arm which also oversees the Abu Dhabi Film Festival (formerly the Middle East Film Festival) and the Abu Dhabi Film Commission (www.abudhabifilmschool.com).

NYFA was formed in 1992 with several satellite campuses around the world. NYFA is regarded in the USA as a training school rather than an institute of higher learning, but it arrived in Abu Dhabi with much fanfare and has brought in an impressive roster of celebrity speakers, including actors David Hasselhof and Glenn Close and director Mira Nair. Its faculty is primarily North American working professionals, and the curriculum is based on total immersion rather than classroom-based education, with students working on their projects, as well as assisting their classmates with their films. Courses include acting, scriptwriting, 3D animation, narrative film production and documentary film making, and students can choose from a wide array of time frames, from two-year programs to one-week intensive acting classes. One semester at NYFA-Abu Dhabi costs \$15,000, and one month and one week classes are \$3,000 and \$1,000 respectively, and it is the most expensive of the institutions that offer production classes.

Because of the high tuition NYFA-Abu Dhabi is able to afford top of the line 16mm, HD, Red One, Super-16mm and 35mm cameras that are indeed comparable to the top film schools in the US. NYFA-Abu Dhabi bills itself as the “the first accredited film school in the Middle East,” and advertises “the school holds intensive hands-on programs for Emirati and international students in filmmaking and acting for film... Students at NYFA-Abu Dhabi will learn about all aspects of the film industry – creative and technical... Programs and short-term workshops have an open enrollment. Serious students from all backgrounds are welcome to apply. No previous experience is required” (www.abudhabifilmschool.com). This should be ideal for Abu Dhabi. However, very few Emirati males and almost no Emirati females are enrolled in the school, in part due to its coed status and the cultural norms in the UAE that look down upon girls acting on camera or working behind in the scenes in an industry with a tarnished Hollywood image. Most of the student body is comprised of the children of wealthy expatriates and NYFA-Abu Dhabi gears them to view themselves as directors and producers, rather than training them to be experts in camera, sound, and editing, all sorely needed fields in the UAE to which expatriates are likely to be given entry as positions such as these require long hours, hold less prestige than producers and directors, and offer less pay than government jobs, giving them considerable less appeal to Emiratis. “It’s true that everyone does want to be a director or producer, but this is a great place to be learning film. I see this industry growing and growing and to be here at this time is a great opportunity in itself,” says a top administrator at NYFA-Abu Dhabi.

New York University

Switching to an elitist academic approach is New York University which began in Fall 2010 with its first group of 132 full-time students in its temporary campus until its new campus is completed on Saadiyat Island (nyuad.nyu.edu). Under the patronage of H.H. Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan, the crown

prince of Abu Dhabi, NYU, unlike most of the American universities that have opened in the Gulf region, agreed only to open its door in Abu Dhabi if it could maintain the same, if not higher standards than those in its home city. As such, it has spent much of the past year recruiting top students from around the world, offering to all full scholarships, room and board, and a student-teacher ratio of 8 to 1. NYU offers a Bachelor of Arts in Film and New Media as one of its 18 majors. It includes both practical and theoretical approaches, with classes such as Sound, Image and Story, The Language of Film and Television, Comparative (Post)Colonialism Media, Documentary Production, Introduction to Animation, and The History of Editing. NYU-AD has spared no expenses in bringing top notch visiting faculty, such as famed film theorist and historian Ella Shohat, who teach a film criticism class entitled “Postcolonial Memory: Representing Cultures of Displacement.”

However, NYU’s high academic profile will not necessarily translate into a more sophisticated or trained work force. Because of its high entrance requirements, less than five percent of the student body is Emirati and as the rest of the students, unlike at the other private universities in the UAE, have no family relationships in the country, they are unlikely to stay beyond graduation, particularly as they are being taught under an American system which would facilitate them continuing their studies or beginning their careers in the U.S., a place likely to have more appeal to them socially and career wise after four years of school in Abu Dhabi. Above all, unless they acquire a job here while in school, they will be required to leave the country, under its visa laws, as soon as they finish school.

Vocational Education

One educational program not accredited by the Commission for Academic Accreditation but worth mentioning is the School of Audio Engineering (SAE).

This institute offers a film production diploma. On large-scale film production, which the UAE has set its sights on, most of the workforce requires skilled labor, and yet there are few Emiratis on that career path for the reasons mentioned earlier.

To date, the SAE Institute is the only film-related vocational type school in the UAE (www.dubai.sae.edu). The SAE Institute was founded Australia in 1976, and it now spans over 50 locations around the world, of which Dubai is one of two in the Middle East (the other SAE is in Jordan but does not offer the certified degree programs). The 24-month degree program costs AED 116,000 (a little more than \$31,000) in total, making it expensive but far less so than NYFA-Abu Dhabi, the only other school with similar classes, although SAE is much more geared towards training people for a wider range of positions in the industry. In fact, when it lists post graduation career opportunities, director is just one of many options on a list of positions that are not even part of the vocabulary for all the other institutions in the UAE: editor, gaffer, key grip, director of photography, art director, production manager, and post production supervisor to name a few. However, because SAE has less cache than the other film schools, it is not surrounded by as much fanfare and government support, and so could be viewed as playing a smaller part in educating locals for the industry.

Being fostered to one day be the regional Arabic vocational training center in the Middle East, TwoFour54 Tadreeb currently offers limited classes, but the emphasis is on television and news production with BBC and Thomson Reuters Foundation providing the training (www.tadreeb.twofour54.com). It also opened the Cartoon Network Animation Academy in Fall 2010. It offers free training programs to the federal universities, on its own and in conjunction with government-funded organizations such as the Abu Dhabi Music and Arts Foundation. But so far these have been classes like basic video production, classes covered by the faculty at these schools, and so not enhancing education

but rather repeating it. TwoFour54 Tadreeb does offer classes under its partnership with Apple for training on Final Cut Pro—however, Emirati participation is limited, as again they do not view themselves as editors but rather directors and producers.

Off Campus Opportunities

Over the past three years, the possibilities for students and filmmakers in general to get funding for their projects is unprecedented in the UAE or anywhere else in the world. The UAE boasts three significant film festivals, all of which offer prize money for student films: The Dubai International Film Festival, the Gulf Film Festival, and the Abu Dhabi Film Festival. They also offer plenty for aspiring filmmakers after graduation. The Anasy Documentary Awards provide AED 1 million (about \$272,000) in prize money, including awards for documentary treatments, and free student workshops. The Dubai Film Connection, which is the market arm of the Dubai International Film Festival, “is spearheading a new wave in Arab cinema, with 46 projects in production including 10 completed titles. Arab directors compete for \$120,000 in cash, while the shortlisted director/producer teams will be matched with producers, sales agents and sources of funding and distribution. Winners receive three awards each” (www.dubaifilmfest.com). Most of the films awarded these prizes are international co-production with companies in the US and Europe funding them in part, such as *Amreeka* (Dabis, 2009).

TwoFour54’s Ibtikar Creative Lab provides grant funding in the range of \$1,000 to \$50,000. The rules are fairly straight: “We are interested in backing locally originated, Arab-led initiatives that demonstrate unique and exceptional creativity. You must convince us about the long-term potential of your project. If we like your project and believe it is a potential success, you will be provided

with a working space and environment here at twofour54 for you to develop your idea.”

In 2010, the Abu Dhabi Film Festival announced the launch of Sanad (www.adff.ae). Every year, Sanad will allocate a total of \$500,000 in development and post-production grants to outstanding regional filmmakers. At the same time, the Abu Dhabi Film Commission, which runs numerous free workshops in screenwriting, directing and producing during the year, announced the Shasha Award, which gives a \$100,000 screenwriting award to a young director whose script will be judged by Hollywood development executives.

Conclusion

Unlike in most countries, where the question is what awaits students in the brutally competitive film business when they graduate, the question in the UAE is what awaits the film business from the country’s students as they step into the future.

In a phenomenon completely alien to Western film educators and students, the opportunities for UAE students far surpasses the number of them willing to search for them. Faculty at federal institutions are accustomed to these organizations contacting them, begging for them to send students to attend small workshops with director James Cameron or intern on the set with director Tobe Hooper, who is shooting an UAE-set horror movie funded by Imagination. TwoFour 54 is willing to provide production assistance to young Emirati who come to them with ideas but little knowledge of how to execute them.

Issues such as gender roles, questions of morality and values, and prestige weigh heavily on students contemplating careers in film. Recently two promising film students from Zayed University opted for positions at the Abu Dhabi Police Department, where they were told they would be given a starting salary of approximately AED 30,000 a month (\$8,000) to watch surveillance videos and get some training at the FBI. As Emirati females, these two students would have

went to the head of the class, so to speak, with any of these many organizations offering funding for student films. However, because they have never known things to be different, they assume money will be there whenever they want to make a film. The hunger to tell stories doesn't outweigh the societal norms of having a high paying desk job with a title in a field that is not morally ambiguous to their families and neighbors.

The industry depends on importing this skilled labor from the UK, US, and Canada--and the Levant countries and India on a lesser degree. The evidence coming from various film programs show that it doesn't seem likely to change. However, students are interested in the film festivals, particularly the event planning of them, as evidenced by the success of the Zayed University Middle East Film Festival, now in its second year. It is a well-produced event but the top films, gathered from universities around the Middle East, are not from the UAE. Perhaps exposure to these are films will inspire Emiratis to embrace the opportunities before them.

For now, many of the aspiring filmmakers competing for the plethora of student awards open to all people in the region are non-Emiratis, as they understand already the importance of funding and production partners, a concept that is still new to Emiratis. None of the film programs teach the business of film and funding in general is not something high on Emiratis minds, as government funding has almost become a given in so many aspects of their lives.

“So far, the oil-rich countries have proved more able to pay for fancy media productions and to build expensive film facilities than to actually lure production to the Middle East, as economic efforts run up against their traditional values and censorship.” (Stelter, 2009). This statement, which tends to be the general consensus, is not a reflection of no cash to back up their words, but rather no takers. While most of the grants and funding say they are open to all Arabs, the reality is that many of the people overseeing these funds are non-Emiratis and feel

pressure amongst themselves to focus on Emirati films as to appear true to the country they are serving. A case in point may be Imagenation, which this May in Cannes Festival announced with much fanfare its funding of its first non-Hollywood film, the first of five Emirati films to be green lit this year. The first to have gone into production is *Sea Shadow*, director Nawaf Al-Janahi's second full-length feature following *The Circle* (2009), which did not have a theatrical release. Al-Janahi, 33, was born in Abu Dhabi, but studied filmmaking in the United States. In an interview on the Imagenation Abu Dhabi website, Mr. Al-Janahi remarked "When I came back from the USA, there was no film industry here, not even the concept of Emirati film, but now it is starting to happen which is great news for all of us. It's encouraging that companies like Imagenation Abu Dhabi have a strategy to develop the industry, rather than just doing one movie or two movies."

Now what remains to be seen is if the educational system in the UAE can help feed the industry by creating a new generation of diverse filmmakers—a task that is not just about faculty and classes but also about ingraining in the society film language and changing perceptions of the industry to meet the cultural demands of the UAE.

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