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Introduction

Film and Visual Media in the Gulf

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Abstract

This special issue engages the historical and contemporary heterogeneity of the Gulf, which was a transcultural space long before the discovery of oil. Over the past two decades, Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates have actively begun to harness the media's power, while at the same time grassroots productions—online, through social media and in regional festivals—reframe assumptions about film and visual media. With resident expatriate population comprising up to 90 percent of the population in Gulf states, film and visual media complicate conventional frameworks derived from area studies, such as 'Arab media', 'Middle Eastern and North African cinema', or 'South Asian film'. These articles also unsettle the modernist divisions of media into distinct categories, such as broadcast television and theatrical exhibition, and consider forms that move between professional and nonprofessional media, and between private and semi-public spaces, including the transmedia spaces of theme parks and shooting locations. Articles examine the subjects of early photography in Kuwait, the role of Oman TV as a broadcaster of Indian films into Pakistan, representations of disability and gender in Kuwaiti *musalsalat*, tribal uses of social media, and videos produced by South Asian and Southeast Asian expatriates, including second-generation expatriates.

Keywords

Arabian Peninsula – Arab film and media – Indian film and media – Indian Ocean – migrant workers – migration – Oceanic studies – Persian Gulf – social media – South Asian film and media – transcultural media

Over the post-Gulf War decades, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) have begun to reframe assumptions about the Gulf, not only through news media, but also through film and visual media. British officers and their wives took the first images in the Gulf in the 1930s. Local production of images of the Gulf began in Kuwait during the 1940s, when official photographs of key events and figures were commissioned. Media production later expanded into film and television. Similar infrastructure developed in Bahrain, often under the auspices of European and US oil companies. As a conceptual framework, 'the Gulf' extends beyond the territorial spaces that surround the Persian Gulf to include those across the Arabian Sea, most significantly India and Pakistan. Film and visual media in the Gulf departs from frameworks derived from earlier focuses of area studies, such as 'Arab media', 'Middle Eastern and North African (MENA) cinema', or 'South Asian film', which scholars of critical area studies invite us to rethink.¹ Frameworks premised on discreet regions, nations, languages and cultures foreclose other questions.

Film and television production in the Gulf developed with historical connections to the Indian Ocean via precolonial trade routes, colonial connections to Britain and South Asia in the mandate era, imperial connections to Britain and United States through oil concessions and connections to Iraq, the Philippines, and the United States that were consolidated during the Gulf War in 1990–1991. Such connections, however, are more apparent in media that is typically excluded by conventional frameworks, particularly in Film Studies, which tends to overgeneralize based on feature-length narrative films and exclude short-format or non-professional films, and also in Television Studies, which tends to focus on national and pan-Arab audiences, ignoring the variety of channels in languages other than Arabic and English. Since films are more commonly exhibited on laptops or mobiles than in cinema or television, film and visual media moves beyond cinemas and broadcast into even more fragmented spaces of narrowcasting and social media.

1 For critiques of area studies frameworks, see Szanton (ed., 2004) and Bonine, Amanat, Gasper (eds., 2010).

This special edition develops out of the Gulf Film and Visual Media Conference held 28–30 October 2018 at New York University Abu Dhabi. The conference reconsidered frameworks inherited from area and film studies, so that images and stories from the Gulf might become more legible, both to Gulf residents and to the academic community. The conference was also an effort to reflect on the legacies of particular forms of British colonialism and US imperialism and how these institutions organized ethnic, racial and religious hierarchies (Vitalis 2009) that contribute to some of the blind spots in contemporary media, including uncritical nostalgia for a pre-oil era and racist stereotypes of Africans and South Asians, stereotypes that have become naturalized and today often pass unnoticed by citizens and expatriates. By looking at film and visual media more broadly and comparatively, the conference highlighted various parallel networks of media production, distribution and consumption and demonstrated that each offers part of a larger more complex history. While platforms like Instagram are dominated by social influencers, both citizens and expatriates, other platforms like YouTube convey a wider array of perspectives, including professionally produced Saudi and Indian comedies, as well as non-professional media by expatriates from Africa, South Asia and Southeast Asia.

1 Challenging Mono-cultural and Mono-linguistic Frameworks

Some of the greatest challenges in studying the Gulf are the legacies of western orientalism that predate even Cold War-era 'areas'. The reductivism and essentializations isolate particular populations and certain cultural practices as 'authentic', thereby shifting everyone else into a blur and denying alternative modernities, such as asymmetrical structures of multilingualism and multiculturalism, as realities.² Invented during the colonial era, orientalist fantasies of 'pure' Bedouin identities continue to appear in government-sponsored or financed cultural programming, thus extending the colonial divisions that produced ethnic, racial and religious groups through the institutions of 'map, census, and museum', as Benedict Anderson (2006) demonstrated. Scholarship on the Gulf film and visual media challenges such legacies by not limiting its scope to Arabic language media or to media by or about Arab cultures in isolation.

Media in the Gulf is not entirely defined only by Arabic-language media. Since feature-length narrative film production started in the Gulf later than it did elsewhere, it does not show the same preoccupations with the legacies of

² See Sabry (2010) on the significance of cultural encounters in the Arab world.

colonialism evident in 'auteur cinema' and 'art films' produced in MENA, South Asia and Africa during 1960s and 1970s, preoccupations that have long served as the primary object of study in much film scholarship.³ While auteur cinema and art films articulated important issues for debates on post-independence social problems, scholarship on them excluded what most audiences consumed, namely commercial film and television. Studies of popular Egyptian cinema (Armbrust 1996; Shafik 2006) and television (Abu-Lughod 2014) have focused on 'national' or 'pan-Arab' audiences.⁴ Less attention has been directed to other types of media that reached large audiences; these types of media include Lebanese, Syrian and Kuwaiti *musalsalat* (limited-run serial dramas). Other important forms are not legible through the lens of 'Arab media'. Scholarship on Gulf film and visual media should not be reduced, exclusively, to Arabic-language media on Gulf Arabs; doing so risks reinforcing limiting definitions. It particular, it erases historical and contemporary African, Persian/Iranian and South Asian—and even non-Gulf Arab—presences in the Gulf.

As a case in point, Khalid al-Siddiq's *Bas ya bahar* (Cruel Sea, 1972), considered the first feature film produced by a Gulf filmmaker, mobilizes elements of the political aesthetics in New Arab Cinema, but its drama explores the Indian Ocean's pre-oil connections to the Gulf and Indian Ocean through the pearl trade, rather than the effects of colonialism, as do other Arab films of the era, such as *al-Ard* (The Land, 1970, dir. Youssef Chahine) from Egypt or *Waqai sanawat al-djamr* (Chronicles of the Years of Embers, 1975, dir. Mohammed Lakhdar-Hamina) from Algeria. *Bas ya bahar* is concerned with creating a space for a different kind of Arab experience of the twentieth century, a space it presents as a 'cultural heritage'. The film, however, erases the presence of African slaves and their descendants, as well as Indian merchants.

Unlike many parts of the world, film and visual media in the Gulf is more directly informed by post-Cold War neoliberalism than by pre-World War II

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- 3 See, for example, Sadoul (1966), Barnouw and Krishnaswamy (1980), Malkmus (1991), Diawara (1992), Ukadike (1994), Armbrust (1996), Barlet (2001), Dabashi (2001), Leaman, ed. (2001), Tapper (2002), Gugler (2003), Virdi (2003), Sadr (2006), Dönmez-Colin, ed. (2007), Sakr, ed. (2007), Semati (2007), Mottahedeh (2008), Khiabany (2009), Zeydabadi-Nejad (2009), Diawara (2010), Gopalan and Akhtar, eds. (2010), Saul (2010), Mellor et al., eds. (2011), Naficy (2011–2012), Tcheuyap (2011), Talattof and Seyed-Gohrab (2013), Rastegar (2015), Armes (2015), Gugler (2015), Rahbaran and Mohajer (2015), Shafik (2016), Harrow (2017), and Armes (2018).
 - 4 Indian commercial film and television, as well as mass media, have been the subject of many more book-length studies, including Chakravarty (1993), Rajagopal (2001), Gopalan, (2002), Athique (2012), Ganti (2013), and Gokulsing and Dissanayake, eds. (2013), among others.

colonialism and imperialism.⁵ In this regard, the critical frameworks that have been developed from histories of anticolonialism and decolonization need to be reconfigured with critical frameworks on transnationalism and globalization. Thus, Gulf film and visual media demands comparative frameworks that navigate the deep knowledge of areas but do not exclude possibilities that might destabilize this knowledge.

As we have argued in relation to the UAE 'movie business' as 'nation-building' (Yunis 2014) and the simultaneous difficulty in 'locating Emirati filmmaking within globalizing media ecologies' (Hudson 2017) since it is more a 'contact zone' than a region (Hudson 2020), the production and consumption of film and visual media in the Gulf does not necessarily conform to the frameworks of areas studies (e.g., Middle East, South Asia, Africa). Invented by western colonizers, area studies' 'regions' have often been defined by the violent expulsions of South Asian Muslims from India and South Asian Hindus from Pakistan in 1947; the dispossession of Palestinians by Israel in 1948; the migration of Arab Jews into Israel after 1967; among other forced migrations and dispossessions of religious and ethnic groups. In addition to racist media stereotypes of 'reel bad Arabs' in Hollywood, European and Israeli film and television that Jack Shaheen (2009) categorized, the Gulf has been reduced to imagery of pirates, oil, money-laundering and excessive consumerism. Hollywood films set in the Gulf (that is, presented as the Gulf, but shot elsewhere in MENA) invariably open with the requisite orientalist shots of camels blocking a highway to a distant modern cityscape to suggest that Gulf cities are somehow misplaced and unnatural.⁶

Taken as a whole, Gulf media is multilingual, multiethnic, multi-religious and sometimes even multicultural, and although it moves through segregated and segmented spaces, it often presents perspectives that are contained by these spaces. The question that arises, then, is why continue to use these regions as frameworks for cultural and social analysis, particularly since the 1990s when transnational corporations or trade organizations have often become more powerful in shaping daily life than regional alliances or individual states. Gulf governments and citizens mobilize their relatively stable political and economic situation to fuel nostalgia-infused nationalist projects, particularly after the Arab Spring in 2011; this mobilization includes visual media production alongside museums and heritage festivals. Film and visual media

5 On postcolonial and transnational filmmaking, see Shohat and Stam (2014), Nacify (2001), Ezra and Rowden (2006), Ďurovičová and Newman, eds. (2010), Marciniak and Bennett, eds. (2016), and Rawle (2018).

6 Shaheen's work is extended in Khatib (2006) and Shaheen (2012).

serve as a site for negotiations between nostalgia for a mythical 'pure' Arab Muslim identity that is specific to the Gulf—dhows, nomads and wadis—and preoccupations with the Gulf as a 'cosmopolitan' site for global business and tourism (Vora and Koch, 2015; Kanna 2011; Yunis 2020).

The articles in this volume also consider that media is multicultural in the Gulf and not confined to film alone, but also includes the more highly consumed formats of television and social media. Historically, visualizing the Gulf began when foreign photographers arrived and continued in the late 1940s when local photographers were commissioned to document current events and cultural heritage, particularly in Kuwait, which was the most rapidly industrializing Gulf country at the time. Badran Badran examines Kuwait's first professional photographer, A.R. Badran, and focuses on the subjects of his photographs and how they convey an official narrative that often obscures the role of African, Iranians and South Asians to present the Gulf as an exclusively Arab space with benevolent western advisers. Film production for non-private use began with the oil documentaries. Like colonial documentary elsewhere, these films advance narratives of a new modern world rising from empty deserts.⁷

As David Commins (2012) argues, Gulf history reveals overlapping and indirect forms of power. The Gulf is a space with historical connections via maritime and terrestrial trade routes that connect Central Asia, East Africa, East Asia, Europe, the Middle East, North Africa, South Asia and Southeast Asia. It also connects the peoples across the Arabian Sea, Indian Ocean, Red Sea and Mediterranean Sea. Generations of African, Iranian and South Asian families call the Gulf home, as do Arab families for the *mashriq* ('east') and *maghrib* ('west'). Today, expatriates constitute between 40 and 88 percent of Gulf populations—with the UAE and Qatar having the highest numbers and Saudi Arabia and Oman the lowest numbers (CIA 2021). The historical and present need for skilled and unskilled labor drives Gulf economies and consequently contributes to its more heterogeneous population—in terms of nationality, ethnicity, religion and class. The Gulf is 'produced' partly through the migration of people and culture, as is evident in use of songs from India and Zanzibar, in the construction of cultural heritage by Gulf Arabs, and in the hardships migrants face as they endure eleven-month absences from family and experience racism, particularly South Asian and African laborers and sailors (Hudson 2019).

By expanding the conventional scope of scholarship on Gulf film and visual media to include media produced by non-citizen residents, we can open debates in directions that have not yet been widely examined.

7 Scholarship on oil documentaries include Damluji (2013) and Reisz (2018).

2 Television

While film production was slim, by the mid-1970s, all Gulf countries had one government-run channel in Arabic and another in English. In terms of original programming, Kuwait pioneered the Gulf *musalsalat* in the 1970s, successfully competing for local audiences with the more established production centers in Egypt and Syria. Other Gulf countries also began developing serials, particularly in the 1990s for Ramadan; they also produced talk shows and children's cartoons, but Kuwait remains the dominant producer of Gulf *musalsalat*, providing a window into the issues of marriage, work and identity in the modern Gulf, whether through melodrama or comedy. Many of the 1980s productions have been revived on YouTube, and today are consumed by three generations of Gulf audiences, as Shahd Alshammari and Abrar Alshammari discuss in relation to the representations of gender and disability in Kuwaiti *musalsalat* that were part of what is often called the 'golden era' of Kuwait cultural production. They look for moments of agency by women on- and off-screen as they navigate Kuwaiti modernity.

Television in the Gulf shifted substantially in 1996 with the launch of Nile-sat, which allowed for the creation of satellite channels accessible worldwide; many of these were accessed by new Arab media organizations based in the Gulf. Today, Nilesat is based in Egypt and hosts over 700 television channels; its best-known channels internationally are Qatar's Al Jazeera and Al Jazeera English. Other pan-Arab channels, including BBC Arabic, CNN, and the channels of Middle East Broadcasting Company (MBC), have established 'Middle East hubs' in the Gulf, specifically in the UAE.

Television providers have become savvy at responding to new markets. Just as in the period from the 1950s to the 1980s popular Hindi films found large non-South Asian audiences across the Middle East, Africa, Central Asia and South-east Asia, Bollywood films and Indian serials are now finding large non-South Asian audiences in the Gulf, though these audiences are not necessarily fluent in Hindi, as earlier generations were. Sreya Mitra examines the practice of dubbing Hindi media into Arabic for Arabic-speaking audiences in the context of 'parallel modernities' (e.g., alternatives to western modernity, often conveyed by Hollywood) and experiments with dubbing foreign-language media in different Arabic dialects that are imagined as suitable for the original cultures. Darshana Mini argues that the proliferation of Malayalam satellite television demonstrates how media industries in India are being shaped by diasporic communities in the Gulf. To appeal to Non-Resident Keralites (NRKs), a category like Non-Resident Indians (NRIs), the figure of the 'Gulf-Malayali' emerges as a site where ethical and social justice issues can be inserted into television programming.

3 Film

Film is more important as a generator of revenue for a post-oil economy than it is as art or soft power. Perhaps nowhere is the financial component of the Gulf media more apparent than in the production facilities for feature-length narrative films (Dickinson 2016). Millions in US dollars have been spent in building world-class infrastructure and supporting foreign filmmaking, but little of the resources are allocated directly to Gulf filmmakers. Offering attractive tax incentives, the UAE has lured high-profile Hollywood and Bollywood productions, including *Race* (Abbas-Mustan, 2018), *Dabangg* (Abhinav Singh Kashyap, 2010), *Mission: Impossible—Ghost Protocol* (Brad Bird, 2011), *Happy New Year* (Farah Khan, 2014), *Bang Bang* (Siddharth Anand, 2014), *Star Wars: The Force Awakens* (J.J. Abrams, 2015), *Furious 7* (James Wan, 2015), *Baby* (Neeraj Pandey, 2015) and *6 Underground* (Michael Bay, 2019). Substantial investment has also been made on multiplex cinemas. Box office receipts in the Gulf are the highest in the UAE, averaging USD 2.2 million to USD 5 million per week. By comparison, data from Box Office Mojo indicates that during the second week of August 2018, Egypt (the most populous Arab country with 97.4 million people) had box receipts of USD 132,400, while the UAE, with a population of 9.4 million (less than 10 percent of Egypt's), took in USD 4 million. Even allowing for differences in ticket prices, the UAE has the highest movie theater attendance, not only in the Gulf, but in the Middle East. Unlike Egypt, however, most films are foreign productions primarily from Hollywood, India (Hindi, Malayalam, Tamil, and Telugu), and the Philippines. Moreover, theatrical distribution has had little impact on local production, distribution, or exhibition. Nonetheless, Gulf filmmakers have found new ways to distribute their films, whether uploading them to YouTube for free access, as in the case of many films from Oman, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE, or by selling them on DVD-R on-demand, as in the case of several feature films from Bahrain that are available through Amazon in the United States. More recently, popular films produced in the UAE have become available on OSN Play, Netflix, and iTunes.

In order to understand film in the Gulf, it is essential to first understand the political economies of distribution, production and exhibition. By thinking comparatively about media that is often divided into narrow categories, such as Arab media or Indian cinema, the presence of the Gulf in film history becomes more apparent. In fact, Walter Armbrust (2008) traces the fascination with the idea of 'India' in Egyptian popular cinema and fan magazines, suggesting that Arab and Indian media have been entangled since the 1930s. Yet these entanglements have largely been ignored in film studies, partly due to the dominance of frameworks from area studies rather than comparative studies.

Claire Cooley's analysis of Hindi cinema superstar Amitabh Bachchan in Egypt (2019) is a notable exception. Historically, the Gulf has served as an entrepôt, both in formal and informal economies. During the 1970s and 1980s, regardless of national import/export policies, broadcasts by Oman TV were available across the Middle East and South Asia, as Samhita Sunya's research makes clear. She focuses in particular on the availability of popular Hindi films to Pakistani audiences via Oman TV, which bypassed an official ban on them that dates to 1965.

Targeting middle-class Indian expatriates, middle-class Indian tourists, and Gulf Arabs, R. Benedito Ferrão situates Bollywood Parks Dubai (BPD) in a longer and broader history of world's fairs and with reference to the popularity of Indian films among Arab audiences. Visitors to BPD can recognize stars, songs, dialogues and plots from popular Hindi films like *Sholay* (Ramesh Sippy, 1975) and relatively recent Bollywood hits like *Dabangg* (Abhinav Singh Kashyap, 2012), which was partly shot in the UAE; thus, BPD rejects the idea that the United States is the only source of global culture for export. At the same time, BPD serves as a site to understand the re-orientalism, alongside caste- and religion-based mores and prejudices among Indians, against the backdrop of neoliberal globalization.

4 Digital Media

Digital media includes amateur vlogs published by expatriates from India, Nigeria, Pakistan, the Philippines and elsewhere to help newcomers navigate life in the Gulf; in addition, vlogs are published by second-generation expatriates from Arab states, Iran and South Asia. Digital media also includes a variety of films and visual media produced by media companies in India. At times, the diversity of media informs locally produced media, which is sometimes considered too multicultural (e.g., affected by multidirectional assimilation) to register as 'authentic' Arab cultural productions for international festival programmers and distributors.

Although film distribution and exhibition remain a challenge, some Gulf films that played in these film festivals have been purchased for streaming, where they are accessed on laptops and smartphones. According to Northwestern Qatar's biannual study *Media Use in the Middle East*, the Gulf has the highest penetration of smartphone usage in the world with UAE and Saudi citizens at 100 percent and Qatari citizens at 98 percent (NW-Q 2019). In fact, many of the television series and *musalsalat* on MBC channels are consumed on smartphones rather than traditional television sets; much of this consumption takes

place on its free online platform, Shahid (shahid.net). The Northwestern study revealed that Emiratis spend 39 hours per week online.

Today, amateur media-makers have access to the means of production, distribution and exhibition. Gulf citizens and residents independently produce visual media for YouTube, Instagram and WhatsApp, redefining conventional understandings of media forms. Gulf residents produce visual media addressed to marginalized audiences for whom information on human rights is vital and to privileged audiences for whom 'self-care' (holidays, fashion, makeup, shopping, yoga and 'staycations') is a primary concern. Local productions find audiences online, starting with social media, but these productions are not commercial films and television series; rather they are mostly amateur or independently produced media. Much reflects the 'post-cinema' and 'post-narrative' moments of visual media today.

Many of the most followed people on social media in MENA live in the Gulf, particularly Dubai, where they use both photography and video to tell their stories. Most notable among them are the Iraqi American Huda Kattan with 30 million followers and the Lebanese Joelle Maradian with 9.1 million followers. Both social media influencers focus on beauty. Influencers are not, however, without controversy, particularly in Kuwait where debates have been sparked by beauty blogger Sondos Alqattan's Instagram post against new laws that require one day off for Filipino workers (BBC 2018), makeup artist Ghadeer Sultan's Instagram post of herself in what critics called blackface (AJE 2020), and television actor Hayat al-Fahd's demand on Twitter that migrant workers be deported because they allegedly transmitted COVID-19 (Marie 2020). These debates received less attention from western media than protests against the prohibition of Saudi women driving; this points to the essentialism of western new media.

As quasi-public debates erupt on social media and infiltrate the news media, young political leaders in these countries highly-curate their own images through social media, particularly the visually-driven Instagram, the most popular social media platform in the Gulf for citizens and socioeconomically privileged expatriates. Hamdan bin Mohammed, the Crown Prince of Dubai, for example, has 7.2 million followers in a country with a total population of 9.4 million (2019 figures). These forms of digital media extend official photography practices of states and rulers before and after independence, as well as colonial photography and filmmaking by state officials (and their official photographers), oil companies, and private families. In December, Dubai also hosts the annual Arab Social Media Influencers Summit, with the ruler of Dubai, Mohammed bin Rashid, bestowing honorary awards. This love of social media is not surprising: The World Bank estimates that 60 percent of the Arab pop-

ulation is under 25 years old, meaning the majority do not remember a world without social media and the internet.

This intersection of class and religion also emerges in censorship and self-censorship in the development of visual storytelling, including news media, as Mohammed Ayish explains in his essay. He also reveals ways in which the Gulf states are often at the forefront of using visual media, and discusses how this might create a virtual public sphere for open debate and discussion. While the word 'tribal' is shunned in official discourse in much of the Gulf (because it is thought to undermine national identity and reinforce perceptions of inequities), Hassan Hussein examines ways in which tribal identities in southern Iraq are constructed and debated in photos and videos and photos shared in Facebook groups. He even notes that these tribes often have more in common with tribes in Saudi Arabia than with official Iraqi state identity in the capital of Baghdad.

Censorship plays a role in creative online production. The effective ban on public cinema in Saudi Arabia after the seizure of the Grand Mosque in 1979 and the rise of Wahhabism, followed by the increased censorship of television following the Arab Spring that began in 2010, has contributed to a vibrant YouTube presence among young Saudis. The digital media company Telfaz11 has produced web series with loyal followings of 20 million and an estimated 2 billion views (Foley 2019). Satirical music videos like Hisham Fageeh's *No Woman, No Drive* (2013) and *Ana mafi khof min kafeel* (I'm Not Afraid of Kafeel, 2015), alongside Meshal al-Jaser's *Taz bi-l-kuffar* (Screw Infidels, 2015), convey a media savvy and transnational perspective that reject the limiting framework at most international film festivals; namely, that Gulf media is only about Gulf Arabs. Series are often structured as situation comedies or interviews, sharing the social comedy style of the Kuwait *musalsalat* for a younger audience. They align with state 'strategic goals' of post-oil economic diversification and creative industries (Vadehra 2018). Narrowcasting platforms like YouTube also allow civil society to emerge between the gaps in censorship laws and social conventions devised for analogue media and broadcast.

With the advent of digital media modes of production and distribution, contemporary feature films can draw on formats developed for social media platforms, such as Mahmoud Sabbagh's *Barakah yoqabil Barakah* (*Barakah Meets Barakah*, 2016), which extends the kind of comedic social critique developed in Telfaz11 web series. Sabbagh began his career as a director of the popular Saudi YouTube series *Cash* (2014) before directing *Barakah Meets Barakah*; thus he demonstrated that film and visual media in the Gulf can develop as an independent transmedia product, and need not rely on state financing. Economically and socially privileged young Gulf producers are thus taking control of their

own images and stories, long defined for them and the rest of the world in broad stereotypes from Hollywood, Bollywood and Egyptian films.

YouTube and Instagram are also sites where middle-class and migrant-class Indian, Filipino/a, and other expatriate communities share video stories of transnational hardship and opportunity through comedy and other means. These images circulate in ways that private photographs and home movies do not.⁸ In several Gulf states, media consumption has also been defined by majority South Asian expatriate communities. Although the news media focuses on images of migrant workers (i.e., 'bachelors', 'maids', 'nannies') from Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Pakistan, or Sri Lanka, much of the South Asian expatriate community is middle class and professional. The presence of middle-class expatriates makes the Gulf an important market for consumer goods, including fashion, jewelry, television serials, and films, particularly from India. Middle-class South Asians, however, do not share the same cultural and economic privileges as Arab and western expatriates, but can also align themselves with exclusionary state policies to secure personal benefits, such as higher salaries.

Bindu Menon investigates amateur videos and vlogs produced by expatriates from India, Nigeria, Pakistan, and the Philippines; she sees in them visual cartographies of affective citizenship in the absence of legal citizenship. Many of the videos offer self-help or do-it-yourself solutions, whereas others offer tours of sites that convey a sense of pride and a kind of belonging to the broader community of the Gulf. As a counterpart, Nele Lenze analyzes a selection of comedy videos, including some professionally produced by Indian media companies and other amateur productions by Indian expatriates in the Gulf. All navigate the complex identity formations produced by generations of migrants from India to the Gulf. In commercial and 'home' films produced in various Indian states, new transnational and transcultural figures of Gulf NRIs visiting India complicate earlier histories of Indians who returned to the Gulf.

5 Conclusion

This special edition offers insights into an understudied and underappreciated part of the world that might open similar lines of inquiry in relation to other places. Film and visual media challenge and provoke us to rethink—or even

⁸ For a study on private photographs by Gulf Malayalis, see Karinkurayil (2019).

unthink—some of our underlying assumptions. By unsettling conventional frameworks, the articles in this volume engage the historical and present complexities of the Gulf, demonstrating how inserting the Gulf into frameworks developed for the Middle East and North Africa, as is conventionally done, not only marginalizes the Gulf, but potentially misrepresents it. The Gulf is connected to Africa, South Asia, Southeast Asia and elsewhere in ways that preceded western colonialism and imperialism and continues after them. The articles focus on inequities and injustices present in these connections, not only under the employer sponsorship (*kafala*) system, but also as part of the system of free zones of neoliberalism. Diverse yet segregated media ecologies reflect these diverse yet segregated communities. The articles also unsettle conventional divisions of media into distinct categories, such as broadcast television and theatrical exhibition. Film and visual media are exhibited in private spaces in homes, oil company towns, and embassies; they are also shown in the semi-public spaces of commercial cinemas, cultural institutions, and theme parks, where segregation is unofficially enforced through ticket prices and comfort with security guards; and finally, they appear in quasi-public online platforms, such as Facebook, Instagram and YouTube, which produce self-selecting segregated audiences. By looking at historical and present moments in film and visual media in the Gulf, this special issue offers a series of provisional frameworks for posing questions about Gulf film and media.

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