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## Funding the “Creative Documentary”: An Art Cinema of Refugees

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Spending time with the closing credits of any contemporary Arab art documentary will quickly reveal one simple fact: that these works “come” from multiple places at once. Emerging from an intricate congregation of far-flung funding and co-production, the Arab art documentary of today demands examination according to the prerogatives of transnational funding regimes.

In order to better trace these out, this essay follows a group just as itinerant, although beholden to often radically dissimilar conditions: refugees. Films seeking to represent displaced peoples must often nest within the same geopolitical and financial structures that mould the legal and social framing of “the refugee”. The refugee is increasingly tracked by visualizing technologies, from drones and other militarized devices to online, shareable charity videos encouraging aid donations, to stereotypes from the popular press, with their emphasis on unstoppable tides of unwanted arrivals. As such, the refugee becomes a highly documented figure caught up in the cross-border currents of modern filmed culture. The focus for this essay, the Arab “creative documentary”, no less than any of these other depictions, arises out of, as part of, and helps constitute this surveilled and controlled landscape. Once they are completed, creative documentaries lead itinerant lives through distribution and exhibition circuits, comparable, in some ways, to those of refugees. However, this chapter involves itself more with their points of origin in terms of funding, which is at once regional and foreign or, more particularly, a telling and highly geopolitical amalgam of both.

Since the 2000s, the capital invested in producing and promoting documentary films in the Arab world has diversified, accruing from regional and private media groups, international

art cinema funds, international human rights foundations, and regional non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Symptomatic of a global tendency, the reconfiguration of Arab documentaries' economy has paralleled a trend in documentary filmmaking at large towards the more authorial and hybridized form of the creative documentary, a genre which increasingly experiments with innovative narrative structures allowed by access to new technologies. (de Jong, Knudsen, and Rothwell, 2012: 3-4) Deemed "not very common in the Arab world" (Ajroudi and Al Tahhan, 2014: 286) in comparison to more lucrative genres like commercial dramas or comedies, the traditional Arab documentary has readily been accused of lacking credibility altogether, oftentimes reduced to "either propaganda, or dull touristic docs [produced] under the thumb of the regime in each country." (Hamilton, 2014) In contrast, the emergence of the creative documentary in the international film market has provided new avenues for rebranding the unpopular genre in the Arab world and expanding the reach and penetration of the Arab media industries' financial networks.

If low profitability and lack of popular trust have shaped Arab investors' relationship to documentaries in the past, then it is significant that the intensification and the diversification of funding injected into Arab creative documentaries have coincided with a certain faith in the growing independence and democratization of the "new Arab public sphere," following the rise of satellite TV more particularly. (Lynch, 2006) We can also wonder what role the increased penetration of art cinema's financial networks into the region plays in this scenario. In what follows, we will examine the input of the Arab Fund for Arts and Culture (AFAC) and the Dubai International Film Festival (DIFF) in developing creative documentaries made by Arab filmmakers. On further inspection, the many works dedicated to the prominent figure of the

refugee that these institutions foster beg questions about their integration into broader streams of international capital and human movement.

To be specific, refugees support an entire economy of human rights organizations on the ground who strive to provide the care and freedoms these populations have been denied by their own national regimes (so the rhetoric goes). At the same time, refugees spark gestures of solidarity the world over. The international interest in learning about refugees' stories has thus pointed to the possibility for expanding markets. Taking refugee films as symptomatic of the current economy of Arab creative documentaries, the upcoming sections argue that local industries involved in developing non-fiction filmmaking are obliged to strategically negotiate an international politics of art cinema that is entangled within a broader Western politics of aid, most pressingly the "democratizing forces" of human rights organizations that propose to fully realize the potential of documentaries to beget social change.

### Negotiating Social Change Through the Creative Documentary

Founded in 2007, the regional grant-making project, non-profit and philanthropically-oriented Arab Fund for Arts and Culture (AFAC) emerged at the same moment satellite TV began to thrive, when the Al Jazeera Documentary channel and the Gulf-based film festivals were hitting their strides. Active in a variety of cultural fields (including cinema in general, literature, dance and music), the Fund's mission prevails, for executive director Rima Mismar, to "fill a gap in public funding and private investment" in the realm of cultural affairs. (Mismar, 2017) The Fund's primary objective with respect to documentaries was to balance out the investments of TV stations like Al Jazeera and Al Arabiya. According to AFAC's perspective, TV documentaries limit themselves to illustrating current affairs rather than exploring creative

expression. It deems these stations tainted by agendas deriving from their Qatari and Saudi funding, despite those networks' efforts to brand themselves as independent media. In contradistinction, AFAC declared "transparency in the grant giving process and independence through a diversity of funding sources" (AFAC, 2011: 6) as its guiding principles. In 2009, the Fund fashioned a program specifically dedicated to non-fiction filmmaking in partnership with the Sundance Documentary Institute: the Arab Documentary Film program (ADFP). In the first three years, the program supported forty-four documentaries, and then remodelled itself as the AFAC Arab Documentary Program (ADP) in 2013. That year, the ADP represented 10% of AFAC's budget (AFAC "6 years) and projected support of fifteen films per year with a maximum grant amount of \$50,000 each. (AFAC, "AFAC's Documentary Program.") Although the sum seems modest, this type of starting budget was intended merely to facilitate filmmakers' access to co-production, allowing them to negotiate agreements from a position of strength in exactly the sorts of film market contexts proliferating at events like the Dubai International Film Festival (which we discuss towards the end of this chapter). (Mismar, 2017)

Following a widespread ambivalence towards foreign funding in the region, AFAC has both criticized dependence on foreign donors<sup>1</sup> and encouraged cooperation with international artistic funds. In 2009, the Sundance Documentary Institute provided funding, consultation, networking and training opportunities for documentary filmmakers. (AFAC 2011) Many partnerships with art cinema institutions have also taken the shape of workshops, which both serve the interests of the foreign art funds and remain flexible enough to adapt to local infrastructures. Workshops have become markedly representative of the power negotiation between Arab cultural institutions and temporary foreign investments in art. They provide provisional training spaces sometimes attached to larger events, such as the film festivals (DIFF

included), that drive creative documentaries' economy; they provide a quick turnover of grantees; and they do not require a long-term investment from partners, although they do constitute a formidable tool to expand these partners' sphere of influence at a low cost through pedagogy.

In 2011, the AFAC workshop held at Leipzig's DOK Festival established networking opportunities for Arab filmmakers with Berlinale's World Cinema Fund and Berlinale's co-production market representatives, thus generating attachments that reinforced the centrality of European festivals as the institutions setting the creative standards for documentaries. The advisors animating the workshops hailed from both the Arab World and Euro-western countries. Throughout the programme's existence, advisor and jury membership has comprised film workers from regional organizations such as Lebanon's Beirut-DC, Tunisia's ATAC, and Egypt's SEMAT, with some also originating from TV. One example would be the director of the Al-Arabiya-backed company O3 Production, Mohamed Soueid, also a renowned experimental filmmaker. The Arab Documentary Program's network of Euro-western art cinema organizations and Arab TV producers thus reveals the continuing mechanisms of inter-dependence (rather than outright independence) at work in shaping a space dedicated to creative documentary in the regional film industry. This tension also points to the dual interest in catering to a thriving Western documentary market with film festivals as an endpoint, and the instrumentalization of that market for building a regional platform for funding and distributing documentaries.

The focus on refugees, furthermore, exposes creative documentaries' influence within the intersection of art cinema and human rights economies. The conjunction of these financial networks is not unique to AFAC; it persists, for example, in the conceptualization of creative documentaries by European funds that target "developing countries" and thereby perpetuate a

continuity of aid fed through national politics. Such a case is the prestigious IDFA Bertha Fund, embedded in the International Documentary Festival of Amsterdam, which defines creative documentary as, on the one hand, innovative and upholding cinematic quality and market potential, and, on the other, empowering films that tackle “controversial issues” including social and economic justice (or injustice), freedom of expression, human rights, poverty and education. (IDFA) In parallel, the National Film School of Denmark (NFSD) has inaugurated their own “Middle-East project” dedicated to documentary training in collaboration with national and non-governmental organizations already involved in capacity and institution-building in the region, such as the International Media Support (IMS), which helped establish the Arab Film Institution in Amman (now Screen Institute Beirut). (Hjort, 2013: 132) The bleeding of human rights discourse and its institutional apparatus into art cinema thus materializes in film fund partnerships. AFAC’s independence and diversifying endeavours very much rely on seed money provided by the Open Society Foundations, a US-based international grant-making network founded by the philanthropist George Soros. Apart from Open Society, AFAC’s main donors include the Netherlands-based DOEN Foundation and the Ford Foundation, the latter pitching into AFAC’s documentary program through its Just Films initiative, a fifty-million-dollar program that also funds the Doc Corner at Cannes’ Film Market. All three donors propose a vision for political change and a society based on “the rule of law; respect for human rights, minorities, and a diversity of opinions; democratically elected governments; and a civil society that helps keep government power in check,” (Open Society Foundations) consistent with AFAC’s mission of transparency and independence. AFAC’s and its partners’ emphasis on democratization processes – and a binary notion of independence which seems to unilaterally equate oppressive structures with authoritarian Arab regimes – is, however, also deeply rooted in some of these

organizations' imperialist histories and testament to a certain configuration of human rights politics, familiar from first the late 1970s, and then the fall of the Soviet Union. The Ford Foundation among others assumed a significant role in shaping an anti-communist "culture of freedom" during the Cold War (McCarty, 1987: 93-117), competing with the non-aligned interests of the third world.

For AFAC board member Oussama Rifahi, the philanthropic model is key, but it is crucial that it develops at the local level precisely because of the region's various histories of Western dependence. (AFAC, 2011) Drawing lessons from European philanthropy's "mixed-economy funding model" and the US' decentralized and corporate-driven imperatives, AFAC has devised its own "strategic philanthropy", which concurrently draws on a regional culture of charity and endowment. (Farouky, 2015) The Fund has thus striven to establish a sustainable regional culture of giving to the arts that can systematize local donations through lobbying, fundraising events, and media campaigns that valorize the impact of culture on society. (AFAC "6 years") The Fund's efforts also mean to attract the region's numerous wealthy donors, and, to a lesser extent, corporations, who often include charity in their branding strategy. By mobilizing, among others, topics such as the life conditions and histories of refugees, AFAC's Arab Documentary Program strategically bridges a regional tradition of charity to the destitute, pressing human rights issues, international marketing interests, soft power strategies, art cinema's interest in situated subjectivities, and documentary's claim on social change.

The Ford Foundation is now central to funding numerous initiatives that support Arab cinema in general, as well as isolated documentary film projects that address issues of freedoms and rights in contexts where the Foundation figures democratization as a central project. For example, British-Yemini documentary Fatherland (renamed The Mulberry House, Sara Ishaq,



2013) weaves together Yemen's attempt at emancipation during the 2011 uprising with the filmmaker's own emancipation from her father and grandfather in a self-defined effort to "challenge patriarchy" (Takeddine, 2012); through In The Last Days of the City (2016), Tamer El Said confronts the imminent exile and death of his loved ones, wandering the streets of Cairo in the search of a new apartment while the city sits poised on the brink of uprising. (Ford Foundation) These two films examine migrant histories, feelings of estrangement and the challenges of returning home, as such, cohering with AFAC-funded films that deal more directly with refugees experiences in the context of political unrest.

Mismar has defined creative documentary as akin to "an auteur film [promoting] an individualistic [and] unique gaze" (Mismar, 2017) and, correspondingly, AFAC's documentaries place the subjectivity of various scales of exile and homelessness at the center of their narrative. Mais Darwazeh's poetic account of her return to Palestine in Love Awaits Me by the Sea (2013) is also an ode to a fantasy lover; in Broken Record (2012), Parine Jaddo returns to Iraq in search of a Turkman song interpreted by her late mother; Tamara Stepanyan's Those From the Shore (submitted to AFAC as Limbo, 2016) stems from the filmmaker's own experience in exile and explores the welfare of Armenian asylum seekers upon their arrival in France; Samer Abu Qatmeh's 194. Us, Children of the Camp (2016) details the complicated politics of Palestinian refugees in Syria after the uprisings; in A Drowning Man (2016), Mahdi Fleifel continues his investigation of the hardships of Palestinian refugees' attempts at emigrating to Europe; Rami Farah's project, tentatively called A Comedian in a Syrian Tragedy (in development) observes the absurdity of exiled existence. All these films, by prioritizing a personal understanding of what it means to be a refugee, reclaim and redefine an appellation that has many times been used to dehumanize refugees at the expense of their human rights of shelter, dignity, and security. By

promoting social change and the empowerment of refugees, these films thus negotiate two distinct but seemingly compatible agendas: the artistic expression of individual experiences of forced displacement through the creative documentary, while also conforming to IDFA's claims and philanthropy's promises.

#### Marketing Refugee Subjectivity: Towards an Aesthetic of Relevance

Refugee films open a tappable market within the genre of creative documentary. We now turn to how refugee topics are articulated within the economics of art cinema aesthetics. Refugee films are in demand across various art cinema networks because they spotlight a population that makes the headlines. These works simultaneously convey unique experiences that challenge, and experiment with, common representations of forced migration. Creative documentaries on or by refugees thus potentially encapsulate three out of the four criteria set by AFAC in its evaluation process: quality, creativity (these two being inherent to the genre), and relevance to the Arab region. (AFAC, 2013) Highlighting AFAC's interest in "relevance" here points to the criterion's wider function as a marketing compass for art documentaries in general, and starts explaining why the "refugee subjectivity" has become a commercial asset for Arab documentaries internationally. We can wonder to what extent the festival-driven film market runs the risk of placing upon refugees, or Arab filmmakers by proxy, the burden of having to render their condition, and the context of what is readily called "the refugee crisis," legible to international audiences. These audiences in turn expect and request "human stories" that coincide with creative documentaries' interest in personal narratives. This tapering down to singular protagonists can be seen to close out the possibility of representing certain core dimensions of the refugee experience, most particularly the sheer magnitude of affected populations, or the

communality of, for instance, transit and camp life. Non-Arab filmmakers have also tapped into this market as a gesture of solidarity, while also at times dangerously flirting with an exploitation of their subjects, such as in the hyper-aestheticized Requiem for Syrian Refugees (Richard Wolf, 2014), and the intrusive investigation that spawned A Syrian Love Story (Sean McAllister, 2015).

Aaron Bady has raised these concerns about legibility with respect to depictions of the so-called Arab Spring that oftentimes did their utmost to impart upon the uprisings a “rhetorical consistency.” The convergence on Tahrir Square in particular promoted a vision of popular resistance that could be grasped by Western media and accorded with Western liberal values of non-violence, secularism, and technological liberation. (Bady, 2012: 129) Art cinema has indeed responded to the call for legibility, conjuring a space where refugees can tell their stories and share their individualized subjectivities through both the so-called “universal language of cinema,” and, in effect, the unproblematized cosmopolitan language of art cinema. This bears consequences for the way filmmakers’ work is defined. For humanitarian organizations such as the Ford Foundation’s Just Film program, legibility also increases the impact of a story’s message and becomes a distinguishing quality of leadership among filmmakers who are dedicated to social justice.

Because of the individual-driven refugee subjectivity that promises to guarantee the films’ legibility, the art refugee documentary also provides humanitarian organizations with the tools they need for their own promotional agendas. In a UNHCR (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees/UN Refugee Agency) and IEFTA (International Emerging Film Talents Association)-sponsored one-day conference on “Refugee Voices in Film” at the Cannes

Film Market's Doc Corner, UNHCR-Cairo representative Ragnhild Ek advocated for her organization's commitment to art cinema in the following terms:

The real lives of refugees are by far more dramatic than anything a fictional film script can provide. So it does not come as a surprise that filmmakers all over the world are taking up the issue in documentaries and fictional films. UNHCR seeks the cooperation of the cinematic world. We intimately know the issues and have experience in communicating with individual refugees without doing harm. The filmmakers bring their stories to an influential audience. It is a perfect match. (Levine, 2016)

Filmmakers' familiarity with dramatic structures is thereby necessary to communicate refugees' hardships and hopes. While the conference introduced itself as an invitation to "witness the diverse use of film in addressing the most pertinent global humanitarian crisis of our time," (Doc Corner) the marketing of refugee films in effect contributes to the mobilization of compassion through the global circulation of images, which translates into donations for humanitarian organizations, especially in a space like Cannes' Film Market whose very purpose is to stimulate investment. For an organization like the UNHCR, budgets can be counted in billions of dollars, the Middle East's being the second most funded refugee program in 2017 after Africa's and amounting to \$1,246,956,859, against the third largest program, Europe's, which stretches to around \$760,000. (UNHCR) The UNHCR's hunger for strong stories will therefore condition its systematic penetration of various cinema networks. Along with the non-credited short humanitarian film Raghad's Dream, the 2016 program included the aforementioned multi-award winning A Syrian Love Story, and Zahra Mackaoui's Hany's Story (co-produced by the

UNHCR, the BBC, and Channel 4), which documents the resettlement in Canada of a young Syrian blind artist after a long exile. Because the success story of Hany relies on his talent as a photographer and the eloquence with which he shares his suffering, the film hammers home the direct impact of telling stories.

In addition to encouraging new markets, the criterion of relevance, upheld by AFAC but articulated in distinct ways, for example, by the UNHCR, also functions as a counterpoint to TV's proclaimed biased and normative treatment of current affairs. However, such a definition of creative documentaries still promotes an engagement with contemporary politics, thus following John Grierson's 1930s credo that documentary film is the "creative treatment of actuality." Here, refugee subjectivity both proposes an intimate vision of an inherently political and situated experience, and potentially can become a vehicle for human rights' advocacy for the universalist and unquestionable value of human life. The experimental nature of refugee subjectivity, and its capacity to tell "good stories," function as a conduit for greater narratives of despair and hope in the face of a political crisis that is naturalized through the transfer of the political responsibilities onto refugees (when talking about a "refugee crisis," for example).

In this multifaceted context, the creative aspect of documentary risks functioning as a measure for good politics, all the while constituting artistic institutions' proclaimed discursive political neutrality. AFAC's grantees are free to tackle any topic, "without any limit or red lines related to politics, religion, [or] sex." (Mismar, 2017) However, AFAC's report on its AFAC Express program, which was tailored in 2011 to respond to the exceptional needs encountered by filmmakers willing to document and reflect upon the Arab uprisings, points to the challenges the program met at the moment of its implementation because it had no choice but to define how it would deal with politics. True to its promise of transparency, the report explicates the jury

selection process and justifies its choice not to support films that would show “overzealous patriotism” because such projects would carry “an unoriginal and propagandistic quality with little analytical or creative depth.” The report continues: “upholding openness and critical awareness in parallel with artistic creativity and authentic expression were important in the jury selection process.” (AFAC, 2012) Symptomatic of ongoing debates around film selection, the discursive displacement of good politics to good aesthetics, to what is “creative enough,” both provides a strategy to privilege proclaimed progressive narratives in the region and contributes to establishing creative documentary’s aesthetic relevance to international art cinema markets as an ethical and political compass.

#### Creative Subjects and Creative Workers: DIFF’s Circumscription of Refugees

We turn now to the film markets where these works circulate in order to examine the part these contexts also play in initiating similar brands of refugee-centred creative documentary. Since 2007, exactly the same year as AFAC’s birth, the Dubai International Film Festival has extended significant support, both professional and financial, to Arab documentary filmmaking. In this respect, it replicates, with a number of welcome alterations, the activities of its (mainly European) forebears, most particularly, the IDFA Bertha Fund mentioned previously, the Hubert Bals Fund, which is run out of the International Film Festival Rotterdam, and the Berlin International Film Festival’s World Cinema Fund. DIFF confers production and post-production bursaries (via the Dubai Film Connection and Enjaaz), while also hosting the region’s most attended opportunity for negotiating co-production deals, the Dubai Film Market. A decade into these initiatives, over three hundred film projects have benefitted, long and short, with documentaries numbering a good fifty to date. DIFF was born into an era when the national

(sometimes once nationalized) funding prospects of yesteryear had been decimated, where European support, at best, assimilates debilitating restraints on how Arabs are to present themselves for a foreign audience and, at worst, still harbours the embedded geopolitical hierarchies of their colonial heritage (France's discontinued Fonds Sud, now Aide aux cinémas du monde, for instance, has weathered this critique). Unsurprisingly, then, DIFF's regionally-grounded opportunities appear to offer succour and an alternative.

With an approach akin to AFAC's professed criteria, Jane Williams, DIFF's first Industry Office Director, once declared of their selection process "there are no restrictions on subject matter." (Williams, 2009) Yet a film festival, and one based in a very specific kind of city-state, is bound, consciously or not, to harvest documentaries of a particular persuasion. Firstly, as has been stated, festivals largely plough a certain kind of field, namely global art cinema. Then there are the local economic contexts to consider, digressing as they do from the aid prerogatives detailed above. DIFF runs through the Dubai Creative Clusters Authority, a grouping of economic free zones dedicated to ramping up the proportion of the Emirate's GDP deriving from the creative industries. As part of this mission, DIFF aims to place Dubai on the map, to route film production through a location that has never previously been considered a hive for (Arab) cinema, and to foster a space where ex-patriots of artistic persuasions can feel catered to by the city. The festival requires right of first refusal for the work it backs, thereby nourishing the quality of movies in its repertoire. And, as each of its winning films travels the world, the DIFF logo features in the opening credits, branding Dubai internationally. DIFF benefits from partnerships with already established sectors of its economy: transport (the Emirates airline) and tourism (the Madinat Jumeirah resort), both, like DIFF, government-owned concerns. All these

structural characteristics have a bearing on the types of documentaries that emerge from the festival.

A significant port for centuries, now a global shipping and logistics centre with some of the world's most trafficked airports in terms of people and freight, the theme of border-crossing runs strong within DIFF, in terms of the support it offers, the topics it champions and, as will become evident, in how it marshals an especially transnationalizing approach to cinematic production. We might start with some basics and practicalities. Dubai's sectorial strongholds allow flights and accommodation to figure easily as part of the packages winning filmmakers receive. With an eye to the fact that the most crucial help independent cinema requires is a leg-up in exhibition, rather than production, DIFF's branded Distribution Programme secures screenings for a select repertoire of its funded movies around the region.

In terms of film content, however, if its European competitors had, for years, all but insisted on output that was, to quote the Hubert Bals Fund stipulations "original, authentic and rooted in the culture of the applicant's country"<sup>2</sup>, DIFF's espousal of films that not only travel, but deal with mobility as a core concern comes as a welcome relief. Certainly, DIFF embraces material dealing with steadfast heritage, such as Nearby Sky (Nujoom Alghanem, 2014)'s treatment of an Emirati woman's entry into the circuits of camel beauty pageants. Yet no longer is Arab documentary funding shackled to provisos that insist upon falsely static and state-based snapshots conceptualized for, one could argue, primarily western delectation of a potentially exoticized locale. The authenticity of mass movement and migration figures too, and, moreover, comes as no surprise as a priority vision, in a country where an estimated 89% of the workforce are themselves non-nationals, DIFF personnel included. Thus, for example, Gate # 5 (Simon El Habre, 2011) and Guardians of Time Lost (Diala Kachamr, 2013) tackle displacement and



internal migration in Lebanon, while the portmanteau structure of Family Albums (Nassim Amaouche, Sameh Zoabi, Mais Darwazah, Erige Sehiri, 2012), via its fractured directorial stewardship, takes dispersal into the very heart of its exploration of four different sites within the region.

Amidst all this motion, though, what of the refugee? While AFAC-sponsored narratives negotiated from within the aid economy traverse this space, even supplement their start-up budgets within it, DIFF's prevailing objectives digress appreciably from AFAC's. How might a refugee figure in documentaries assisted by the government-supported festival of a country whose majority population are non-citizens, but which refuses to offer itself up, in declared and outright humanitarian terms, as a haven for asylum seekers? A healthy fifteen or so DIFF documentaries treat the topic of refugees – one of any number of possible themes filmmakers could have pitched. The broad historical span of the refugee experience and its legacies range across DIFF's output, from 23 Kilometers (Noura Kevorkian, 2014)'s foregrounding of an Armenian Lebanese protagonist to Taste of Cement (Ziad Khalthoum, 2017)'s examination of the contemporary conditions endured by Syrian construction workers displaced to Beirut. Palestinians and their complex and persisting experience of exile feature prominently in the corpus, including within The Council (Yahya Alabdallah, 2014)'s portrait of life in an UNRWA school for Palestinian refugees in Jordan and Off Frame AKA Revolution Until Victory (Mohanad Yaqubi, 2016)'s painstaking compilation of archive footage to reveal how Palestinian expulsion and liberation has been narrativized for screen. This latter initiative was simultaneously supported by AFAC, pointing out the interweave between the two institutions. Port of Memory (Kamal Aljafari, 2009), Searching for Saris (Jinan Coulter, 2013), Coffee for All Nations (Wafa Jamil, 2014) and Roshmia (Salim Abu Jabal, 2014) all, in their various ways,

detail the devastating impact of Palestinian dispossession within the homeland itself, a highly vulnerable status all its own, and with implications for the broader diaspora. Given that, globally, internally displaced people far outnumber refugees outside their country of origin, this contribution to discourses on refugee life is of crucial importance for nuancing what we have just highlighted as the mainstays of the aid-driven narrative. These representations rise above what asylum scholar Aime Claude Ndongezi rebukes as the sensationalist stereotype of “hungry refugees wandering with dying children along dusty paths in war-torn countries... [Images that] seek to shock rather than inform.” (Ndongozi, 2007: 269)

Yet, since migrants, but migrants who are treated exclusively as an economic and labour force and not welcomed as outright asylum seekers, are the principle demographic in the UAE, there is much to learn about this context from probing how refugee narratives are handled aesthetically and generically in DIFF’s film portfolio. Central to DIFF’s declared priorities for funding is, again, the “creative documentary,” defined by them as expressing “the personal vision of the maker... [highlighting] insights into the world around us; but... also characterised primarily by artistic qualities: innovation, originality, professional skill, expressiveness and cultural/historical value.” (Dubai International Film Festival) Jane Williams elaborates DIFF’s impetus to find:

the more personal voice.... to encourage filmmakers from the region to develop their work from being very issues-based and politics-based to stories that have emotional relationships in the foreground, rather than politics in the foreground.... the politics is of course an integral part of it, but the story that plays out in the foreground is much more to do with the characters than their beliefs or their politics. (Williams, 2009)

Within Williams' own and DIFF's more official definitions, creativity absorbs a number of additional characteristics that bear implications for migrant interpellation.

Firstly, and once more: the personal. It cannot go unacknowledged that a broad slew of the documentaries which garner financial assistance from DIFF are small-scale stories dealing with a sole protagonist, from The One Man Village (Simon El Habre, 2008), Red Blue Yellow (Nujoom Alghanem, 2013) and 23 Kilometers (Noura Kevorkian, 2015) to Uncle Nashaat (Aseel Mansour, 2011), Coffee for All Nations (Wafa Jamil, 2014) and Those Who Remain (Eliane Raheb, 2016). There is certainly a dignity to the characters distinguished by these sorts of documentaries, but one that speaks to the liberal bourgeois values of individual rights and even, ultimately, individualism itself. We have noted how this emphasis attracts foreign audiences and, with it, donations to the aid economy. In Dubai, such principles also buttress the Emirate's concerted drive to enlarge its creative economy; the UAE needs to foster this kind of worker self-conception in order to compete successfully within this sector.

These are exactly the sorts of tenets upheld within a policy document pivotal to this economic expansion. The UAE's "National Innovation Strategy" lays out that

Innovation is defined as the aspiration of individuals, private institutions and governments to achieve development by generating creative ideas and introducing new products, services and operations that improve the overall quality of life. Innovation is key to promoting economic growth, increasing competitiveness and providing new job opportunities. (United Arab Emirates Ministry of Cabinet Affairs, 2015)

“Innovation and professional skill”, it should be remembered, figure in DIFF’s official delineation of the “creative documentary.” Within the broader context of the UAE’s planned economy, initiatives such as DIFF clearly figure as cogs in the machinery of economic growth, powered by neoliberal principles such as competition and entrepreneurialism.

As noted earlier, the festival runs out of the Dubai Creative Cluster Authority, a grouping of economic free zones that comprises Media City, Studio City (which provides resources for film and broadcast production), and Internet City, to name a few. Each free zone is tailored to the particular needs of the sector in which it wishes to excel and often runs counter to the legislation governing the immediate outside world. Freedom of expression allowances, for instance, differentiate the free zones of the Creative Cluster Authority, prompting Williams’ declaration that “there are no restrictions on subject matter” presiding over the festival’s selection procedure. Be that as it may, the programme or the funding roster has yet to witness a documentary investigation of the migrant workers who underpin the functioning of the free zones – or the UAE at large – namely the close-to-indentured contract workers in sectors such as construction and domestic labour. These are the people who live nearest to the conditions we might associate with refugees, often within the cramped quarters of workers’ camps. In fairness, it may well be that such topics are not even proposed to DIFF, an absence which speaks to a broader recognition of what is and is not condonable in such a context, instead regulated by cautious self-censorship or comfortable obliviousness.<sup>3</sup>

These Creative Cluster free zones also promise (as Dubai’s free zones in general do) tax-exempt earnings and partial ownership to skilled foreign workers, as well as rapid work permit arrangement (within a mere day) for anyone a company wishes to hire from outside.<sup>4</sup> Such provisions stand in stark opposition to the refugee experience, with its typical suspension of life

in liminal zones like camps or migrant detention centers for any amount of time. Conversely, a precarious existence, albeit with diverging incomes, is common to all. Within the free zones and the festival's creative employee rosters, there work any number of migrants from countries that register a high refugee or stateless population – people from Syria, Iraq and Palestine. It should be stressed, though, that such personnel are welcomed into the UAE purely on an individual and competitive basis by dint of their training and skills, not at all in response to recognition of unbearable conditions elsewhere.

### Film Festival Markets and the Commodification of Refugees

This privileging of the entrepreneurial self is compounded further by the structures through which DIFF promotes a commodified film culture, most particularly via its Film Connection, which serves as an umbrella for its funding initiatives. While its Enjaaz scheme gives over money for production (for Gulf projects only now) and post-production, support provided under the rubric of the Dubai Film Connection points recipients most adamantly towards networking and hustling within the international media marketplace. Here filmmakers are presented with a tailor-made programme of meetings with industry professionals, including local and international buyers, best envisioned to realize their potential, either within the region or globally. They are also invited, as are other industry attendees, to the types of workshops familiar from AFAC's international festival activities. A level of professionalization that coalesces with the standards of the market is required by the application procedure, which demands a financial plan that foresees where funding can be secured (as for AFAC, it is not DIFF's job to provide the lion's share) and a signed-on producer who can adequately handle such investments.

DIFF's role here therefore becomes one of a broker, rather than a solid backer, an expertise long established in Dubai, courtesy of its status as an entrepôt port, a meeting point of commercial cultures for centuries, cinema simply a newcomer recipient of this treatment. Within this matrix, film's significant monetary requirements are not so much delivered by the Emirate. Rather, DIFF logistically draws together within its borders the necessary international backers, thereby benefitting its flourishing transportation and tourism industries. Jane Williams pictures the festival as similar to a clearing-house, a physical space where deals are negotiated without the host taking on an active role in the exchange of goods, services or capital. She explains the comparison thus: "we go through over a hundred, 120, 150 projects and we select fifteen to twenty. We're like a clearing-house; we do a selection. And we have an international group of people who do that selection, who are operating in the international marketplace, so they have an idea of what to look for and what might find partners on the international market." (Williams, 2009) What, then, are the leading priorities engendered by the brokerage occurring in this particular space and, in the end, what sorts of documentary projects rise to the top?

The terms of selection become decisive in this instance given that, as scholars of festivals have contended, these events increasingly assume curatorial duties that, at the same time, shape cinema's financing, their traction augmented if their "brand" comes to be associated with the quality of selection and end product.<sup>5</sup> How this understanding of "quality" plays out in terms of advantage and disadvantage for particular documentary endeavours places them within the tides of the international art film festival and sales circuit's prerogatives, which are governed by their own specific laws and power relations.

The international-film-festival-as-broker not only abides by the competitive ambits of the market, but also concomitantly prides itself on a rhetoric of "discovery" that arguably carries

with it the taint of imperialism. The festival might be likened here to an updated World's Fair where the spoils of far-flung and mysterious nations are gathered in one space for the delectation of a curious and comfortable clientele. Wealth enshrines the status of arbiter, who is also framed as a benefactor; when the relationship becomes one of dependence, the financier's presumed elevation is also materialized and bolstered by the participation of a subordinated other. Within such a picture, Dubai's magnanimity reigns supreme. At the very least, a filmmaker will have to reach a deal at the DFC with its assembled financiers, most likely pandering to these co-producers' inclinations, tastes and priorities. A project will not be green lit if it cannot conform to any number of their stipulations, including, often most centrally, those in step with the aid paradigms outlined above. Film festival scholar Tamara Falicov itemizes often-told stories of this nature, all easily overheard from directors as they play the Dubai Film Market. In her experience, these encounters readily become:

one of neo-colonialism, and one of the filmmakers having the "burden of representation" to write storylines about marginalization for the benefit of wealthy viewers or what has been deemed "poverty porn (pornomiseria)". Others have catalogued instances where producers have been asked to make their films look more "authentic" (e.g. "more African") and examine a kind of "global art house aesthetic" that Global South filmmakers may conform to. (Falicov, 2016: 218)

Such constrictions regularly recur when cinema is configured first and foremost as a commodity and thus the obligation to unravel the geopolitical implications of the selection and funding processes endure. The makeup of the international presence at DIFF is illuminating. In

the earlier years of its Film Market, Jane Williams observed that attendees came “particularly from Europe. That’s still the biggest market and the potential for finding money from some of the schemes that run in Europe and also from some of the broadcasters etc.” (Williams, 2009) This much we garner from AFAC’s international dealings, meaning both institutions have elected to get into bed with an art cinema that would see its core audiences, backers and standard-setters based in that continent. It is telling that Dubai’s hallmarking of its emerging creative industry aspires to these registers and accepts the ramifications for documentarians hoping to gain from such delimiting provisions.

Triggered by exactly these kinds of critiques, the DFC, like AFAC, has been motivated to appeal to more local revenue streams. As Williams continued,

If you spoke to most of the Arab filmmakers, they’re desperate to raise money from this part of the world. Because as soon as they have a European partner on board, then the perspective of the film changes and then they have to say “in my country we do it like this”. That’s the kind of voice that goes on a lot of the time when they’re developing their projects for an international audience. (Williams, 2009)

Given the burgeoning media market of the MENA region, particularly across the wealthier Gulf states, avoiding backers who insist on so much cultural translation was easily within the realms of possibility.<sup>6</sup> In search of more Arabic language content for their audiences, it has been the region’s commercial broadcasters, networks often based in the Gulf, like ART and Rotana, who have invested most. These stations’ own movement away from cultural and economic dependency upon western production centres such as Hollywood pairs well with the policy aims



fuelling the acceleration of a creative economy in countries like the UAE. Although such networks' support can figure as pleasingly "local", more attuned to Arab values, it is still necessary to be cautious about the capitalist models all these institutions absorb, including, as stressed, their attendant marshalling of migrants, both on screen and off.

These new, largely Gulf-headquartered corporate arrivals on the media scene, moreover, proclaim significant disparity from historical precedent. In the period just after many Arab nations' postcolonial liberation, cinema had been nationalized to one degree or another. Such was the case, for example, in Syria, Egypt and Algeria. Massive public divestment from this sector mutates the period in which DIFF and the Gulf broadcast networks ascend, their commercial priorities standing in stark contrast to the funding regimes of old, distinguished as they were by secure employment, not-for-profit agendas, and dedication to local concerns. International aid agencies have also filled the gap across a plethora of sectors, including basic provision of housing and food, as well as, as we have noted, national cultural production. Frequently based outside the creative team's country of origin, the brokers and traders of the international festival circuits conversely manoeuvre national designation first and foremost as marketplace differentiation and advertising ("a new discovery from Syria," or such like). The inclination to screen a funded documentary where it might have started its life becomes minimal.

Given the impossibility of even entering a country like Dubai unless as a worker, or of accessing somewhere as glitzy as Cannes, where AFAC has made a home for itself, a refugee cinema easily becomes a genre that is about, but not necessarily for its subjects. A careful dissection of how aid, creativity and "the refugee" are geopolitically circumscribed both inside and outside film culture exposes the motivations for this exclusive and excluding state of affairs.

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<sup>1</sup> Board member and former executive director of AFAC Oussama Rifahi acknowledges Arab filmmakers' precarious position, as they "compet[e] for funding from the Western non-profit sector and [are] frequently forced to tailor their creative output to the wishes of far-flung donors." AFAC, "The First Four Years," March 2011, 10.

<sup>2</sup> The Fund was restructured in 2017, but the old criteria remain available at: Hubert Bals Fund, "Selection Criteria," <http://archive.dokweb.net/en/documentary-network/producers-calendar/hubert-bals-fund-3785/>

<sup>3</sup> That said, DIFF did support the Emirati fiction feature, City of Life (Ali F. Mostafa, 2009), many of whose protagonists are foreign workers. For a fuller discussion of this narrative, see Kay Dickinson, Arab Cinema Travels: Transnational Syria, Palestine, Dubai, and Beyond (London: BFI Palgrave, 2016), 134-5.

<sup>4</sup> So run the claims of the free zones' promotional materials, although such speed is certainly not afforded personnel whose affiliations are considered "troubling" by the state. At time of writing, for instance, a worker with identification papers labeling them as *shi'a* (however secular they may actually be) are unlikely to pass through so easily.

<sup>5</sup> For an elaboration of this argument as it plays out in film festival studies, see Tamara L. Falicov, "The 'Festival Film': Film Festival Funds as Cultural Intermediaries," in Film Festivals: History, Theory, Method, Practice, eds. Marijke de Valck et al. (London: Routledge, 2016), 210.

<sup>6</sup> For an impressively thorough analysis of this regional market, see Nolwenn Mingant, "A Peripheral Market?: Hollywood Majors and the Middle East/North Africa Market." Velvet Light Trap 75 (Spring 2015): 73-87.