

FURROWS AND FORKS IN EMIRATI SHORT FILMS: *SABEEL* AND *DREAMS OF RICE*

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396 Although the first known Emirati feature film, *عابر سبيل* (*The Wayfarer*), dates back to 1988 (Yunis 55), there is still no established infrastructure for an actual film industry in the United Arab Emirates. In his extensive study of recent developments in the arts in the UAE, Salem Humaid observes that “movie-making movements [in Dubai] are still fresh and do not have sufficient experience and technology to reach the world’s standards” (99). While those standards are indeed diverse and also continuously changing, the results of approximately three decades of filmmaking in Dubai and other parts of the country can be considered “fresh” when compared to the century’s worth of output from Hollywood, Bollywood, or the Egyptian film industry.

Alia Yunis, co-founder of the UAE National Film Library and Archive, cautions in “Film as Nation Building: The UAE Goes into the Movie Business” that the short history of the country itself, which was founded in 1971, further complicates filmmaking efforts (Yunis 51). Cinemas did not become popular in the UAE until the mid-1990s, and Yunis notes that only three Emirati feature films had been screened in the multiplexes prior to 2013 (50): Ali F. Mostafa’s *City of Life* (2010),¹ Nawaf Al-Janahi’s *Sea Shadow* (2011), and Saeed Al Murry’s *Sun Dress* (2010). This list has grown steadily since 2013, with the theatrical releases of Ahmed Zain’s *Grandmother’s Farm I and II* (2013 and 2015), Mostafa’s second feature *From A to B* (2014), and Majid Al Ansari’s *Zinzana* (2015), among others that exhibit a great variety in production value.

With the exception of *Zinzana*, all the movies mentioned above depict various landscapes, urban and rural, throughout the United Arab Emirates, and feature characters who move through the country’s terrains along forking roads and furrowed paths. The aim of this essay is to examine the theme of the path in Emirati short films, focusing on short rather than feature films because the former better empha-

size the poetic element of the theme and lay the groundwork for a movement that has the potential to grow into an industry. The path is particularly significant because it highlights representations of landscape and maps a new screen setting. This mapping further claims a presence for Emirati film within the discourse of World Cinema.

سبيل (*Sabeel*) is the Arabic word not only for “path,” “road,” “way,” or “street,” but also for “striving” or “aiming.” *Sabeel* is also the title of one of the two films discussed in this article, and the road in this film symbolizes the striving of two brothers who commute on it daily. *Fee sabeel* (في سبيل) literally means “on the road/path,” but is also used to mean “for the sake of.” People build roads for the sake of convenient transportation, to reach previously remote regions, and to facilitate urbanization. In the United Arab Emirates, the best-developed roads are those connecting the large cities of Abu Dhabi, Dubai, and Al Ain; however, there are also wide arid areas completely devoid of any kind of construction. The short films analyzed here portray both the modern highways and the undeveloped paths in different parts of the country. In Emirati short films such as these, striving tends to be clearly defined, and it leads to a projected destination. In the process, various roads are mapping a landscape, which constitutes a new screen setting, and its exploration simultaneously celebrates and challenges the cultivation of this landscape.

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The path as trope is ancient. Examples, which show the persistent popularity of the image across genres, include texts as diverse as Robert Frost’s poem “The Road Not Taken” and the Beatles’ song “The Long and Winding Road.” Every epic hero has had to journey on a path and struggle with its development. The Swiss psychiatrist C.G. Jung cautions that “[w]e meet ourselves time and again in a thousand disguises on the path of life” (156). The “road of knowledge” is a related metaphor; in “An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding” (1748), the Scottish philosopher David Hume writes that “[t]he sweetest and most inoffensive path of life leads through the avenues of science and learning” (Hume 9). The image of an avenue of learning emphasizes the connections between movement or transportation and discovery. To relate this concept to cinema, the road movie typically presents characters who learn about themselves at least as much as they learn about the landscape they are exploring. Since this article discusses short films, I am not concerned with the “road movie” category as such, but in each of the films I focus on, certain vehicles allow the characters to pursue their goals as they navigate through different parts of the Gulf country that shares borders with Saudi Arabia and Oman.

The best-known book-length studies of Arab cinema, Viola Shafik’s *Arab Cinema: History and Cultural Identity* ([1998] 2007) and Lina Khatib’s *Filming the Modern Middle East: Politics in the Cinemas of Hollywood and the Arab World* (2006), emphasize that film production in the countries of the Arabian Peninsula, also referred to as Khaleeji cinema, is a very recent addition to the more established industries in the surrounding Arab countries. Roy Armes dedicates only a few pages at the end of *New Voices in Arab Cinema* (2015) to filmmakers from “The Gulf” (301-04). The paths I focus on in this essay are, therefore, largely of a literally *groundbreaking* nature. I

will briefly discuss three examples as representative of the many short films in which the trope has particular significance: Abdullah Al Junaibi and Humaid Alawadi's *The Path* (2012), Hana Makki's *The Journey* (2012), and Abdullah Hassan Ahmed's *Smaller Than the Sky* (2012). Like the first known Emirati feature film *Wayfarer*, Al Junaibi and Alawadi's and Makki's films explicitly address the significance of the path in their titles. My brief discussions of these three films are then followed by a more detailed examination of Khalid Al-Mahmood's *Sabeel* (2010) and Hana Alshateri and Yaser Alneyadi's *Dreams of Rice* (2011).²

THE PATH, THE JOURNEY, AND SMALLER THAN THE SKY

If you follow me,
Here, there, everywhere
You will arrive,
Anyway.

A way is away.

—Cees Nooteboom

In "Asphalt Nomadism: The New Desert in Arab Independent Cinema," an essay in Martin Lefebvre's *Landscape and Film* (2006), Laura U. Marks writes that "[t]here is precious little cinema produced in the Gulf countries" (135). Even at the time Marks was writing her article, this statement applied only to the quantity of Khaleeji films accessible abroad. While her article focuses on case studies from Lebanon and Iraq, as well as references to Egyptian cinema, Marks also refers to a short film program seen at a Beirut festival in 2003 in which Abdulla Al Junaibi, co-director of *The Path*, participated. *The Path*, a film about criminal potential and the spiral effect of crime, presents characters on the wrong path, unidentified paths that could be anywhere in the sand dunes. These paths are unconstructed, created by the tracks the car leaves at a given time, and the drivers choose the distance from constructions and other signs of civilization for good reason. The dunes in this film become the main crime scene in a drug-induced nightmare of the main character, the driver Humaid. His graphic hallucinations, always interwoven with images of childhood trauma, are extremely violent and frightening.

The desert, far removed from the city and constructed roads, represents a lawless space for the drug abusers in *The Path*, though it does not erase an awareness of their wrongdoing. Violent visions blur the borders between reality, hallucination and dream. They serve as effective reminders that crossing the boundary into unstriated territory does not imply an escape from the consequences of misguidance, though it may be what generates the confrontation with a memory of child abuse. The deliberate loss of an established path reveals itself as the wrong choice when the victim appears as perpetrator. The border between pavement and sand

dunes marks the “relationality of space” that Ian Robinson describes in “Cinematic Border Spaces: Translocality and the Moving Image” (242). Departing from a focus on cinema as “cartographic medium” (240), Robinson argues that films may emphasize “the fundamental instability of place as an indicator of identity and belonging” (240), especially in our globalized world. Robinson’s analysis of Courtney Hunt’s *Frozen River* (2008) serves to illustrate how journeys expose the “trans-territorial” nature of space (241). The “here,” in other words, becomes more accessible through the exploration of “elsewhere.” *Frozen River* is concerned with the official national border between Canada and the United States, while the border space in *The Path* takes on a more abstract nature, between cultivated and undeveloped or pristine landscape, and further marks the protagonist’s navigation between reality and his sub-conscious. In both *Frozen River* and *The Path*, however, the border is the goal in escaping from law enforcement, and the escape in both films fails not due to discovery but to individual character development. The protagonist in Alawadi and Al Junaibi’s film, having imagined himself as serial killer and rapist, appears at least as frightened by his visions in the end as the film’s audience. The return of a paved path, concurrent with the awakening from a nightmare, finally suggests that he and his friends will return to their community and its regulations.

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The Journey stands in clear contrast to the nightmarish rendering of “losing one’s way” in *The Path*. Hana Makki’s film begins with a young Ethiopian woman’s arrival at Abu Dhabi airport, and follows her taxi ride to Liwa, where she has found employment as a housekeeper. The taxi driver is from India, and during the long ride, they have a conversation about their individual goals and motivations. At the end of the film, they arrive at the Liwa household, and the viewer is assured that both characters are content with how their occupations and modest livings allow them to pursue their goals and support their relatives in their countries of origin. With their acknowledgement and welcoming of their responsibilities, Makki’s housekeeper and taxi driver are placed in contrast to the initially aimless and traumatized main character of *The Path*.

The Journey makes the rather unspectacular activity of a long drive through a desert landscape interesting by depicting the driver and passenger developing mutual respect for each other. They show just enough interest in each other’s backstories in order to avoid discomfort, and they give each other equal credit for the pursuit of their respective careers. In *The Journey*, a clearly defined and straightforward journey leads to a happy ending. *The Path* features a rather random drive, including repeated shots of the same turns, which still ends with the suggestion that the protagonist has come to terms with his trauma as he returns to the constructed roads leading to structured communities. In both films, the journeys take place among vast desert spaces, emphasizing the location of constructed cities and villages within the desert environment.

When comparing the setting representations of a film to maps, Robinson emphasizes that the difference lies mainly in the intended incompleteness: “The critical

potential of the image in this regard lies in its capacity for defamiliarization and the introduction of contingency into the ordinary” (249). While the map attempts to document the facts of a location, these facts become an instrumental contribution, at times equal to the significance of characters, to the fiction presented on film. In their introduction to *Cinema and Landscape* (2010), Graeme Harper and Jonathan Rayner further illustrate this observation. Pinpointing the parallel between mapmaking and “the cinematic endeavor” as the combination between the team effort and the director’s lead, Harper and Rayner identify movement, color, shape and sound as the main attributes of cinematic landscapes (18). In *The Path* and *The Journey*, these attributes establish the desert landscape as conducive to the film’s mood. The lack of pavement and the hectic movement give the dunes a discomfiting appearance in the former, while the smooth ride and the bright colours achieves the opposite effect in the latter.

Harper and Rayner’s collection includes discussions of an impressive range of cinematic landscapes in various European countries as well as China, New Zealand, Cuba, Canada, and Zimbabwe. The book’s index, however, does not include a single Arabic name, and there are only three references to deserts: specifically, to Kuwait, Djibouti, and the Australian Outback. None of the films Harper and Rayner examine give the desert the significance it has in *The Path* and *The Journey*, nor do they dwell on the versatility of the desert environment. The films discussed in this article are examples of mapping a variety of desert landscapes throughout the UAE, as the dunes in *The Path* and *The Journey* contrast with the mountainous arid scenery in *Sabeel* and *Smaller Than the Sky*.

Smaller Than the Sky is the most tragic of the three short films discussed in this section, depicting actual deaths rather than the imaginary murders in *The Path*. The brief epilogue of *The Path*, in the form of a radio announcement, closes the frame of the opening radio show in which listeners share their weekend plans and reminds the film’s audience that the crimes haunting Humaid’s nightmares did not actually happen. The deaths presented in *Smaller Than the Sky*, on the other hand, are neither imagined nor caused by criminals, but are the result of a car accident. The film’s respective director and screenwriter, the brothers Abdullah Hassan Ahmed and Mohammed Hassan Ahmed, belong to a group of artists based in the northern emirate Ras Al Khaimah, and much of their art deals with overwhelming and profound suffering. *Smaller Than the Sky* is no exception, as the plot revolves around the final moments in the life of a mother who is trapped in a car wreck with her dead husband and daughter. The viewer does not see the accident, but after the short scene of the small family’s drive on a mountainous deserted road, a jump cut represents the extent of the destruction. Close-ups of the mother’s scarred face, the two deceased passengers, and the damage done to the car mark the end of the current path for these characters.

Just before the accident, a bird hits the front window of the car, and as the father and daughter reflect upon this sign of bad luck, the mother complains about a migraine. The bird thus becomes the first in a series of important symbols, which

take the place of dialogue. When the mother struggles with the awareness of her own approaching death, her fantasies revolve around representations of local tradition. A traditionally dressed drummer first appears in the distance, then on the roof of the car wreck. A boy's recital of an old folk song accompanies the drumming. The daughter sings a similar song just before the accident. The reoccurrence, in the final scene, of her singing while looking out the rear window emphasizes the cyclical nature of life. The ultimate symbol of this theme is the dead bird on the windshield, which also reappears in the dying widow's fantasy when her vision moves from the drumming man and the boy reciting the poem to a woman waving a coloured cloth, as if to fan and finally shroud her. The mother then imagines her daughter standing outside the car, holding the dead bird. The image that follows of a living bird, just as the car tips over with the mother still inside, represents the end of her agony and her journey to the afterlife. This film therefore presents the idea of unsuspected changes of paths as much as it presents a trip that does not reach its intended destination. In this regard, it contrasts with the other two films discussed in this section, as well as the two films that are the subject of the following sections.

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The two films discussed in the following section are also set in different parts of the country and characterized by different, though equally unique, aesthetics. *Sabeel* tells the story of two brothers caring for their grandmother during the final phase of her life. *Dreams of Rice* features six main characters whose communication and journeys on a variety of paths are presented via parallel editing. The brothers in *Sabeel* repeat the same commute daily on a modest motorcycle, while the vehicles used in *Dreams of Rice* range from a company pickup truck to an upscale off-road car. The brothers on the motorcycle are mainly looking after their ailing grandmother; the pickup truck in *Dreams of Rice* allows a worker to pursue his trade and helps two young sisters to fulfill their dream of owning pet pigeons. An older brother and sister each use different cars to reach their mother's house in time for the meal around which the plot of the film revolves. As these examples demonstrate, the driving in *Sabeel* and in *Dreams of Rice* is clearly motivated, and the inherent striving in both films is also successful. Both short films are examples of the symbolism of paths as progress in Emirati film, though not without occasional challenges.

SABEEL (2010)

Like *Smaller Than the Sky*, Khalid Al-Mahmood's *Sabeel* takes place in the northern emirate of Ras Al Khaimah. Both films were written by the same screenwriter, but have different directors, both members of the RAK writer's union activity group. Much of this group's work opposes and challenges stereotypes related to the region's oil wealth. The characters and their neighbourhoods tend to represent rural rather than urban life, or middle or lower rather than upper-class lives. Imagery of cultural heritage and references to old traditions serve as reminiscences of pre-oil communi-

ties. The brothers looking after their dying grandmother in *Sabeel* share a visibly modest motorcycle on which they commute every day. The brothers' motorcycle commute and their seemingly tedious sitting by the road to sell produce and earn money for their grandmother's medicine demonstrate their perseverance in pursuing a task that their family has most likely determined for them. Their activities are associated with housekeeping, such as tending the garden, cooking, and washing (Figures 1 and 2). One may regard the brothers doing these chores as a challenge of traditional gender roles, and although they may appear to be too perfect (Yunis 62), the film foregrounds their environment more than it does their personalities.

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Figure 1: hanging the laundry



Figure 2: washing the harvest

Screenshots from Khalid Al-Mahmood, *Sabeel* (2010).

The opening shot of *Sabeel* sets the scene for the prominence of the road. A cloudless sky takes up more than half of this shot, which depicts a tiny vehicle approaching from a far distance. Power cords line the left side of the narrow road, crossing it just above the vehicle towards the left side of the screen (Figure 3). Hills covered only by a few ghaf trees and small shrubs typical for arid landscapes line the right side of the road, vying with the sky for screen space at this point. The asymmetrical composition gives way to a chiasmus when the vehicle reveals itself as a small open truck, typically used to transport goats, camels, or furniture throughout the region. As the truck passes, the two brothers appear sitting with their produce in the lower right corner of the frame. As the power cords disappear from the upper right corner, the road's largest width underlines the title of the film blending into the upper left corner (Figure 4). This choice of composition establishes the viewer's sense that the characters fit into their environment and are in their proper place. The brothers are dressed in traditional white kanduras, with baseball caps instead of ghutras, suggesting a neorealist authenticity.



Figure 3: the concrete road

Figure 4: the protagonists of *Sabeel*

Screenshots from Khalid Al-Mahmood, *Sabeel* (2010).

The narrative time of *Sabeel* covers three days, but the nature of the brothers' routine suggests that it has been going on for longer than that. Some minor distractions include their playing football with a small plastic bottle on the first day, and their sharing water with a boy who suffers from carsickness on the second. Most of their activities, such as counting their revenue, maintaining their motorcycle, or administering their grandmother's medicine, relate to their labour rather than to entertainment. The close-ups of the boys' harvest, including bright red tomatoes and bell peppers, green beans and zucchini, and purple eggplants, foreground the vital role of the vegetables and present them as a colourful treasure that contrasts with the brownish-grey landscape of the desert.

Although the setting of *Sabeel* is not near any busy highways, the film depicts two different kinds of roads. The paved road used as a trading place consists of two lanes. To reach the grandmother's remote location, however, the boys must transfer onto a mountainous sand path. The grandmother's home is a one-story shack; her only companions are her two grandsons, and her old age and illness confine her to a mattress on the floor. The brothers mark her death at the end of the second day with the stretching of the blanket over her body. The following morning, the motorcycle becomes a hearse, and the final shot shows the boys driving with their grandmother's corpse in between them.

Although this shot suggests that the brothers' upcoming challenges are yet unknown, they have clearly arrived at the destination projected in the story at hand. The final scene is preceded by a close-up of green leaves dripping water, usually a symbol of fertility in arid landscapes, and in the context of the death in the film, a signal of an anticipated birth. According to Ibn Al Arabi, "The origin of existence is movement. Immobility can have no part in it, for if existence was immobile it would return to its source, which is the Void" (qtd. in Nooteboom 1). Viewers expect the brothers to bring the grandmother's corpse to its burial place, and a family gathering

will most likely accompany the funeral. Afterwards, however, the brothers will continue on a previously uncharted path, leaving from a new point of departure.

In comparison to the brothers' focus on their grandmother's house in *Sabeel*, four children, a son-in-law, and a worker gravitate around a mother's house in *Dreams of Rice*. The larger number of characters, vehicles and paths or roads in *Dreams of Rice* requires a faster-paced plot development than what is seen in *Sabeel*. Both films, as do the three films discussed earlier in this article, illustrate a fascination with mobility that Dimitris Eleftheriotis uses as a point of departure in *Cinematic Journeys: Film and Movement* (2010). Two introductory questions best summarize the aim of Eleftheriotis's investigation of mobility in film: "How do the pleasures of frame mobility and those of the narrative interact? How do different cinematic journeys construct distinctive affective relationships with their spectators?" (2).³ His references to key thinkers of industrialization serve to recall the potential for transformation and liberation as core elements of the urge to travel. When Eleftheriotis describes the nineteenth century as "a period of unprecedented obsession with both movement and vision" (29), it is the latter that accounts for the novelty. The persistent obsession with movement is perhaps most obvious in the many forms of nomadism, whose legacy is ancient; however, the visible documentation of movement is more recent. Tracing the development of motion pictures throughout the twentieth century leads to the conclusion that the obsession Eleftheriotis describes has not diminished, but rather has accelerated. Paths invite journeys, and both are vital elements of the stories told in the films discussed here. Viewers follow the journeys of two brothers looking after their dying grandmother in *Sabeel* as carefully as they follow those of the siblings on their way to the family dinner in *Dreams of Rice*. In the former, the movement is centered on the activity of two brothers and their modest vehicle, while the plot in *Dreams of Rice* takes a more omniscient perspective via different kinds of vehicles on a variety of roads simultaneously.

DREAMS OF RICE (2011)

In *Sabeel*, everything from the cast to the props and the lack of dialogue follows a principle of minimalism. *Dreams of Rice*, on the other hand, experiments with the traditional concept of protagonists, featuring six rather than one to three main characters. To do so in a short film of less than half an hour, with the narrative time limited mainly to a single day, accounts for an extraordinary plot structure. The main similarity between both films is the centrality of family dynamics. In *Dreams of Rice*, a mother prepares a meal to share in the evening with her four children and a son-in-law, with the married couple driving in from another city. The sixth character is not a family member but still related to the household: he is a worker who trades with the mother and lives on a farm outside Al Ain, the country's third largest city. The staple rice symbolizes every character's problems, with this technique playing on the sym-

bolic meaning of the local word for *rice*. عيش originally means *life*, and is thus closely related to the trope of the path, but it is also applied to the life-sustaining staple food. In Egypt, for example, the term refers to bread, but in the Gulf countries, it refers to rice.

The mother uses rice in the meal she cooks. Her older, married daughter includes rice in the bag used to fake her pregnancy. The younger sisters accidentally kill their pet pigeons by feeding them raw rice; this happens on the same day that they get these pigeons, behind the mother's back, from the farm on which the worker lives (Figure 5). In turn, the latter asks the sisters to make a rice necklace to give to a pastry vendor with whom he has fallen in love, and who already has a lover, as the end of the story reveals. The mother's son, presumably slightly younger than the married daughter, has a painful experience with rice in a film studio during his attempts at acting. This experience leads to a nightmarish vision in which he drowns in a glass of rice (Figure 6).



Figure 5: the sisters on Naeem's farm



Figure 6: Abdulla with his film director

Screenshots from Hana Alshateri and Yaser Alneyadi, *Dreams of Rice* (2011).

A variety of different vehicles, carrying the characters on different kinds of roads, appear in the film. In the beginning, after the worker has paid the mother for the ingredients for the date syrup he produces on the farm, the two younger sisters are hiding in the back of the pickup truck as it leaves the city. The viewer observes a flat terrain, very different from the mountainous region the brothers drive through in *Sabeel*, seen mostly from inside the vehicle. The worker's pickup truck leaves the city on a well-constructed road, which divides the screen horizontally in one shot. A different scene later in the story repeats this shot, emphasizing the prominence of the road (Figure 8). The truck moves onto gravel as it arrives at the farm (Figure 7). This drive at the beginning of the film presents the contrast between rural and urban parts of the country. The paths allow the worker to pursue his trade, and they also allow the sisters to pursue their goal of owning pet pigeons. They ultimately present the stages of the landscape's cultivation, a process the only male member of the family observes

in light of fictional representation.

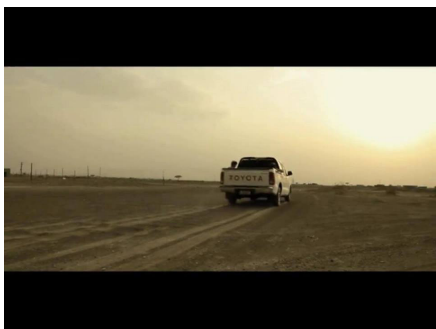


Figure 7: the gravel road to the farm



Figure 8: hitchhiking on a concrete road

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Screenshots from Hana Alshateri and Yaser Alneyadi, *Dreams of Rice* (2011).

Abdulla, the brother, picks up his younger sisters on the farm. During the ride home, he promises not to mention the pigeons to their mother, while the sisters in turn keep his acting ambitions a secret. As mentioned above, Abdulla has not been very successful as an actor. When he first arrives home from Abu Dhabi to his complaining mother, a flashback depicts his failure to throw rice in the required way. Later in the day, a glimpse into Abdulla's subconscious shows him holding an imaginary conversation with his studio director (Figure 6). The latter is slowly throwing rice into a champagne glass, inside which Abdulla is drowning, while their conversation tackles philosophical questions revolving around the relation between acting and reality, about concepts of truth, fiction, and lies. Part of this argument revolves around Abdulla's struggle with modernization. His drowning in the rice seems related to his fear of the indigenous culture's drowning in foreign influences, which underscores the fact that once roads exist, they generally become available to anyone. The cultivation of landscapes by forging paths and building roads, in this context, raises the question of post-oil developments.

The freeway on which Mahra, the married sister, is driving with her husband, as well as the type of vehicle they drive, signify both post-oil wealth and the modernization it has generated. The couple is on one of the busy freeways connecting either Abu Dhabi or Dubai to Al Ain. Four-wheel drives are very common in the region, not only because they allow mobility on unfortified terrain and provide better safety, but also because they have become a status symbol. As such, this couple's car strongly contrasts with the brothers' motorcycle in *Sabeel*. In light of Abdulla's imaginary dialogue with his director, this contrast raises questions about the effects of road construction and the dimensions of modernization. Although Abdulla does not resolve his conflict with the director, his restlessness disappears in the company of his arriving family members, and he secretly obtains new pigeons for his younger sisters.

The mother discovers that Mahra is not pregnant, but keeps her discovery a secret, and when the family finally shares the meal of rice, everyone finds comfort in the reunion.

Each of the films discussed in this article presents various paths or streets and various goals sought by the characters travelling on them. The mother's home in *Dreams of Rice* and the airport in *The Journey* are located in urban outskirts and centres; the latter takes viewers to Liwa in the south of the country, while the brothers in *Sabeel* look after their grandmother in her rural home in the country's north. The mountainous paths of Ras Al Khaimah's landscape also provide the setting of *Smaller Than the Sky*, while most of the scenery in *Dreams of Rice* consists of the sand dunes in the Eastern Region. The dunes are most prominent in *The Path*, whose setting remains more abstract than those of the other films mentioned here, in consistency with the goals of its characters. While Humaid and his friends appear battered and hung over in the beginning, they seem to have slept off the consequences of drug abuse in the end. It is left to the viewer to imagine that the protagonist would not want to return to the scenes of his nightmare. His awakening, therefore, can itself be considered a destination reached. Such a success is more obvious when the taxi driver drops his passenger in Liwa, and when Abdulla and Mahra's family share the meal provided by their mother; similarly, in *Smaller Than the Sky*, a symbolic resurrection of the bird accompanies the tragic death of the last surviving passenger in the car wreck.

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CONCLUSION

Marks's observation of a lot of driving and not getting anywhere does not apply to the Emirati short films discussed here; a closer look at accessible feature films suggests that it may not apply to Emirati cinema in general either. The grandmother is taken care of and finally buried in *Sabeel*; the Ethiopian housekeeper arrives confident at her new job in Liwa in *The Journey*; the protagonist rejects drug abuse in *The Path*, and the majority of characters reach their goals in *Dreams of Rice*. These films also provide material for future discussions of "Asphalt Nomadism," with more potential films to be added to lists such as William V. Costanzo's in *World Cinema through Global Genres* (2014). Ali Mostafa's second feature film, selected to open the last Abu Dhabi International Film Festival, incidentally, is a road movie titled *From A to B*, referring specifically to the actual point of departure, Abu Dhabi, and the destination, Beirut.

For the time being, Costanzo's list of more than 100 road movies does not include a single Khaleeji film, and only one from the Arab world at all: the Moroccan-French co-production *The Wind Horse*. Such selections are necessarily limited, but the inclusion of a film such as *Baalbeck* or *Baghdad On/Off* would add to the diversity of his otherwise impressive list. Although I find it difficult to generalize, as Khatib does, the ways in which "different cinemas understand space" (15), all the films discussed in

this essay clearly favour the outdoors. The Emirati feature films mentioned here likewise stand in strong contrast to the popular Egyptian melodramas in this context, as outdoor mobility is a crucial element in all of them. As a better known Khaleeji co-production, the Jordanian “Bedouin Western” *Theeb* (2014) may signal a tribute to the nomadic heritage of this part of the Arab world.

Though the Gulf countries no longer produce “precious little cinema” (Marks 135), even in the sense of internationally accessible cinema, this field of studies is certainly not abundant either. The trope of the path ultimately emphasizes an urge to claim an existence in that it allows the mapping of a previously unscreened setting. This setting, in the various parts of the UAE, has a very different sociohistorical background than equally crucial paths, such as in the Lebanese film *Where Do We Go Now?* (2011) or in the Palestinian film *Omar* (2013), but the common grounds of the journeys on all these paths are the aiming or striving of specific characters, their indebtedness to a faint nomadic heritage, and their reaching certain goals. Inasmuch as it symbolizes the progress of modernization in the context of the United Arab Emirates, however, the imagery of the path also questions the benefits of cultivating the landscape. The growing number of screen representations of these particular desert environments does require new critical approaches, mainly because of their unique sociohistorical contexts.

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NOTES

1. Manfred Malzahn provides an excellent geocritical study of this film in “Mapping the United Arab Emirates” (2014).
2. Whenever possible, I follow the transcription of Arabic names on the *Internet Movie Database*.
3. In his concluding chapter, Eleftheriotis considers the movie’s own potential for movement and proposes “an understanding of ‘foreign spectators’ as characters encountered in the travels of films” (179). Having lived in the UAE for only nine years, and writing in a language other than that of the films studied, I clearly belong to this category of foreign spectators.

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